Publishing Blackness

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The paratext of the first book, in African American literature, with the title “Black Power”—Richard Wright’s 1954 travel narrative—reframes the frame of slave narratives and makes readers wade in the water before entering the text proper. Instead of the typical words “as written by himself” or “as written by herself,” and the former slaves’ signatures that almost make the texts legal documents of the mastery of literacy, the paratext of Wright’s *Black Power* deforms mastery.¹ The layered framing of *Black Power* includes:

- two photographs of Kwame Nkrumah (one with traditional Ghanaian clothing, one with a business suit);
- a letter written by Nkrumah, certifying that Wright is “a fit and proper person to be allowed to visit the Gold Coast”;
- a map of Northwest Africa;
  - a dedication to “The Unknown African”;
  - the question “What is Africa to Me?” from Countee Cullen’s poem “Heritage”;
- one line from Walt Whitman’s poem “To a Common Prostitute”;
- and one sentence, written by Robert Briffault, explaining that all human development is “transmitted social heredity.”²

The layers in this paratext dramatize a long passageway into the inner space of the text. I indent the middle section because, in this center of the paratext, Wright makes readers move to the unknown, to that which cannot be mapped and framed in the manner of the photographs of Nkrumah and the map of Northwest Africa. As Richard Wright writes about his travel to Ghana, he foregrounds the lack of “Black Power” in Africa and his own discovery that he is African American, not African.
The paratext introduces the pivot, in this travel narrative, between what is known and what is unknown. The unknowing and skepticism may make the title “Black Power” very different from the meaning of “Black Power” in the 1960s and early 1970s Black Power movement. The common ground, however, between Wright’s *Black Power* and the textual production of the Black Arts Movement (the artistic counterpart of the Black Power movement) may be the framing of the physical book itself in terms of what it contains and what it cannot contain. The tension between the *bound* and the *unbound* propels readers’ travel into the interior textual space.

The 1960s and early 1970s Black Arts Movement remains the first African American cultural movement that performed the production of books written specifically for black people. In order to gain a fuller grasp of the role of textual production in the creation of the specific literary traditions that are understood as “African American,” we must appreciate the Black Arts Movement’s explicit framing of the book as “Black.” Even the color of the cover of Black Arts literary texts was often black. The founding of black-owned publishing houses was a vital part of this production of the black book. Dudley Randall founded Broadside Press in 1965, when he created a broadside of his poem “Ballad of Birmingham” that responded to the 1963 church bombing that killed four young African American girls. Third World Press (which remains the largest independent black press) began in Chicago in 1967, when the young poet Haki Madhubuti (Don Lee), with the help of the poets Johari Amini and Carolyn Rodgers, created the first publication with a used mimeograph machine.

How did the Black Arts Movement understand the idea of the black book? The movement made the black book a type of counterpublic, a particular type of public space that aimed to offer a privacy for the ideal black readers.³ The movement hailed ideal readers and created desire to “think black” (one of the very titles of one of Haki Madhubuti’s poetry volumes). One of the movement’s most dramatic examples of the hailing of ideal black readers was the textual production of Amiri Baraka and Fundi Abernathy’s *In Our Terribleness* (1970). The book begins with a full-page mirror image that demands that readers see their face, and the title “In Our Terribleness,” inscribed on the face, as readers enter this “long image story in motion.” Readers enter black, urban, 1960s, South Side Chicago. The “Black Book,” during this movement’s reenergizing of black urban space, was the textual production of African Americans’ rec-
lation of the city as their intimate dwelling place. Toward the beginning of *In Our Terribleness*, Baraka shapes the book into a guide for ideal black readers’ new way of moving through the city. He counsels, “Who inhabits the cities possesses the thrust of life to power. . . . Man woman child in a house is a nation. More than them we become large cities that shd have, domes, spires, spirals, pyramids, you need somethin flashy man. Some red and bright green or yr black self. The cities the cities our dominion.” As Baraka’s words interact with Fundi’s photographs, there are “domes” and “spirals” of words becoming more concretely visual and photographs gaining more abstract dimensions. The book itself becomes the binding, bursting at its seams, trying to hold this large “dominion” of black urban style.

This book’s interplay of words and images is framed specifically as a “black book” mission in a letter that the Chicago photographer Fundi Abernathy sent to Baraka as they were struggling to expedite Bobbs-Merrill’s publication of *In Our Terribleness*. Abernathy met Baraka when he and wife Laina temporarily left Chicago in order to be a part of the Spirit House collective in Newark, New Jersey. After Abernathy returned to Chicago and he and Baraka had already completed the manuscript for *In Our Terribleness*, he sent Baraka a letter expressing his frustration with the publisher Bobbs-Merrill and his commitment to the “Black Book.”

Like many Black Arts poems, the letter works written language for its most visual and oral possibilities. The full letter reads:

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TO IMAMU
DIG TO SUE BOBBS-MERRILL NO MATTER WHAT GON DO THAT BOOK AND FINISH IT CLEAN NO MATTER IT MEANS LATER FOR ANY SLOW-MOTION ideas of any bodies THE BLACK ARTIST MOVE SPEEDY DOING WHATSINEVER is NEEDY FAST PASS PAST MOVIN METEORITE
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BLINDING THE PACE OF LITE
WE GO WE OUT O SIGHT
WE BLACK BLACK & RIGHT
WE GIT TA GETHER GIT OUR GAME UPTIGHT
WE SUE WE SUE WE SUE
& do & do the SACRED BOOK
WITH OR WITHOUT ANYBODY YOU DIG!
& ITS CREATION WILL SIGNAL THE WORLD
ITS GREATEST BIRTH BEGINNING—A NATION
SO BLACK
A NEW WORLD OF IMAMU AMEER BARAKA’S
BEAUTIFUL BLACK CONCEPTION A WORLD
BLACK ART FILLED BLACK WORLD
YOU CAN DIG IT
ITS REAL
Our BLACK BOOK WILL BE THE
WORLD’S GREATEST CREATION
FOR BLACKNESS
MIND MIRROR MAGIC
the Hypnotic force of BLACK LOVE will
conquer UGLINESS AND endure for sure as
do sue do sue do sue do sue do do do
MASTERS sue due do due sue we we WEEEEEEEEEEE
BANG! BANG! BANG! Love (Billy Abernathy) Fundi May 5
1969

This letter is similar to the performance poems and broadsides created
during this movement, and, like these Black Arts poetic and visual texts,
the letter includes a play with the atypical arrangement of words on the
page and the use of capitalized letters that make the words approach
“poster art,” one of the tenets of the movement’s central visual arts collec-
tive AfriCobra (African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists). Abernathy’s
emphasis, in the letter, on the mirror and “hypnotic” effect of the “black
book” explains why he and Baraka decided to frame this “black book”
with a full-page mirror. The opening title page of the book includes a
silver mirror surface (that appears to be pasted in an intentionally home-
made manner) with the words “In Our Terribleness” engraved in the
center. The Black Arts Movement shaped the reading of the black book
into ideal black readers’ process of imagining that they were looking into
a counter-mirror, a mirror that countered a dominant, hegemonic lens—the white gaze. Instead of the slave narrative paratext (the documents that authenticate that the narrative “was written by himself,” or “written by herself”), this Black Arts Movement paratext replaces the slave narrative’s opening certificate of the slave’s literacy with the mirror certification that an actual face is reading a book, that the reading process has a materiality.

This materiality is also dramatized in Toni Morrison’s preface to the legendary African American text that was given the literal name “The Black Book.” This text was published, in 1974, by Random House. It is a collection of words and images that explain the historical trauma and the cultural production of African Americans. Henry Louis Gates Jr. has aptly referred to it as the “the ultimate treasure chest of the black experience.” What matters most about The Black Book is the framing of a specifically black book as a book that contains an archive, that creates that “treasure chest” effect described by Gates. The Black Book is a surreal collection of slave auction ads, folklore, music lyrics, photographs, minstrelsy posters, a huge range of newspaper stories, color photographs of quilts and other examples of art created by enslaved Africans, and many other texts and images. In the preface to The Black Book (the original preface that also appears in the 2009 new edition), Toni Morrison begins with the words “I am The Black Book” and ends with the 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.”

With these last words, Morrison channels the words of the slain Black Arts Movement poet Henry Dumas. Six years after his murder (by a white police officer), Morrison makes his poetic words the beginning and the end of The Black Book. His words are not only the last words in the preface; they are also the final words framing (on the last page of the book) an untitled, undated photograph of an elderly African American man, wearing a tattered suit, sitting on a porch chair, and looking at the camera’s lens with an expression that is difficult to read. Is it contempt, expectancy, or simply unknowable? The unreadability of this facial expression performs the lack of closure of The Black Book. Morrison’s prefatory words linger: “I am not complete here.”

The Black Arts Movement “Black Book” also has this lack of closure. Consider the final words of In Our Terribleness: “Now get up and go.” It matters that The Black Book is published as the Black Arts Movement is ending. The editors of The Black Book collected words and images that
define the “black” experience. The Black Arts Movement was invested in a similar collection process and also in black collection of blackness, as opposed to what the movement saw as the dominant (white) culture’s collection of African American culture. The black books, produced by the Black Arts Movement, were the textual performance of the antitext, the performance of writing and producing books that would be too action-oriented to be held as a precious object of highbrow capital.

Unless we remember the word and image interplays in the Black Arts books, we forget the role of process-oriented conceptual art in these books that were performing antitextuality. The inclusion of the images allowed the Black Arts Movement to dramatize the pictures embedded in words and words-as-pictures, as the movement attempted to situate the black aesthetic as that which W. J. T. Mitchell refers to as the “image-text.” When the visual arts collective AfriCobra made “mimesis at midpoint” one of their prime tenets, in addition to “lettering” (the need to add words to murals and other visual art), the movement was conceptualizing the hybrid form of the imagetext as the collective mission of creating an alternative understanding of text. The use of the mirror at the beginning of In Our Terribleness makes readers see themselves as a part of the black book. The black book incorporates the black body. We see this same emphasis on the intertwining of book and body when Baraka writes the word gesture on the right-hand margin of one page. The word gesture appears at the very edge of the page where readers would turn the page. The black book not only hails black readers; it also incorporates the bodily gestures of readers. The open text produced by readers is dramatized in Black Power coloring books. These coloring books (published by Black Arts Movement presses, such as Third World Press) emblematize the counterliteracy. These coloring books echo Morrison’s words in The Black Book, “I am not complete here.” The coloring process, the filling in, and the collaboration required from the readers made these coloring books antitext acts of becoming like Black Arts performance poetry. Black Arts poets, as well as Black Arts visual artists, made words into visual signs. The poets and visual artists dramatized the visual shape of language but they also used the visual to dramatize how lines that create clear shapes also morph into the shapes that cannot be named.

Black Arts word and image interplays show that the writers and visual artists were thinking about lines (verbal lines and drawn or painted lines) as the means for the literal production of more space between the lines. The 1968 Third World Press broadside of Don Lee’s poem “for
black people (and negroes too): a poetic statement on black existence in America with a view of tomorrow” is one of the most pronounced examples of this play with the space between lines. The cover of this broadside was designed by the AfriCobra artist Omar Lama. The cover image is a profile of a woman. Geometric shapes (an array of lines) form the profile and the area surrounding the profile. The force of this drawing derives from the artist’s ability to create the aura of stained glass without using any colors other than the black lines and the white paper. This thick paper broadside is folded so that the cover image opens up to two pages of Don Lee’s poetry. The poem, like many Black Arts performances, performs the purging of the dominant ideology that the movement ties to whiteness. When the poem is framed by Lama’s drawing, the poem’s “view of tomorrow” may seem much more concrete than the abstract geometric forms in the drawing. If the drawing is comparable to a pre-coloring template for a stained-glass design, Lee’s poem delivers concrete words that aim to shatter the glass of Catholicism (and the whiteness it signifies in the poem). Lee’s worrying of the lines of the Catholic prayer “Hail Mary” into “Hell Mary” drains the color out of the stained glass Catholic church image, and the form discovered after the purging can be visualized through the broadside cover image of the pre-stain. When connected to the drawing, the poem’s “view of tomorrow” is a shape waiting to be colored, the Black Arts Movement hailing of more lines that can enclose areas and create space. Half of the woman’s profile (the darker part of the image) is foreground but the other half merges with the background. The profile of the woman could tilt outward or inward, away from or deeper within the background of geometric forms. The tilt to the left would make the real face emerge, outside of the abstract forms. The tilt to the right would make the real face become entirely abstract. Lama was practicing the AfriCobra aesthetic principle of “mimesis at mid-point.” Lee’s poem also has this mid-point tension.

As the Black Arts Movement made “Black” into such a powerful sign, it became an abstract sign, like the shape of a traffic stop sign that can be recognized in the distance even if the color of the sign cannot be seen when visibility is poor. Signs become abstract shapes when they are silhouetted in order to make the shape of the sign matter more than the details in the interior. In Nelson Steven’s 1973 mural “Work to Unify African People,” the map of Africa is the abstract sign that is the center of the mural.10 The northeast part of this map is a black silhouette, and the rest of the map is red. Like Lama, Stevens was an AfriCobra member. His de-
piction of “mimesis at mid-point” is a stunning coloring of the black and white “stained glass” in Lama’s drawing. Lama shows the woman’s profile that is a realistic sign tilted as if it is in the process of entering the outer space of the abstract (that which the AfriCobra manifestos describe as “superreal”).

Stevens shows what might appear when the profile turns into the full facial view. The two faces painted by Stevens are realistic and abstract. The clear facial features are the signs of realism but the explosion of colors (red, light blue, yellow, green) are signs of the abstract. The color black is most prominent around the hair line and the eyes. The mural captures the tension between black as a sign of race and black as an abstract sign (the “koolaid colors” embraced by the AfriCobra collective). The faces in the mural depict the mimesis at mid-point. The circle with the map of Africa is painted in between the faces. The aspects of realism in the faces are not only under siege by the nonblack “koolaid” colors; the realism is also under siege by the partial silhouette of the map of Africa. This circle makes viewers focus on the abstract shape of the map of Africa as they contemplate the message in the painted words “Work to Unify African People.” Abstract shapes become powerful signs when they deliver a message without the need for words. Nelson Stevens’s in-

Fig. 1. “Work to Unify African People.” Nelson Stevens.
clusion of the words follows the AfriCobra rule of “lettering” (the collective’s decision to make the message explicit through words) but Stevens’s multicolor painting of some of the letters underscores that the letters, like the image of Africa, are shapes. The movement pivoted on an investment in words as images; the new literacy was a performance of word pictures. The movement needed word pictures because words that were not treated as images would have been too private. The public language that the movement demanded was an insular blackness made public. The word pictures were tied to AfriCobra’s “mimesis at mid-point” in the sense that they were public like graffiti (literally in the painting of the outdoor murals) and private like coded hieroglyphics. The flow, layering, and rupture that Tricia Rose ties to the graffiti of Hip Hop also explain the graffiti of this earlier movement—the Black Arts outdoor murals and the symbolic writing on the “walls and in the streets” of the entire cultural movement. The Black Arts writing “on the walls and in the streets” was the flow, layering, and rupture of visual and poetic lines.

Ted Joans’s poetry volume Afrodisia (1970) highlights the Black Arts word pictures’ conversation with the larger 1960s conceptual art movement. This poetry volume intersects in complicated ways with the word and sign (and word as sign) layer of the 1960s conceptual art movement as well as the experimental typography layer of conceptual art. Joans mixes the pages with poems with pages of collages of cutout photography and other images (what he called “outagraphy”). Some of the cutout parts of photographs are used as silhouettes. The cover image is a collage that includes a cutout silhouette image of a phallus. The boldface black letters also have this cutout silhouette effect. Joans’s word and image collages and the collages without words (placed on a separate page after particular poems) are conceptual art, in the sense that Joans makes readers/viewers think about the process of cutting and creating the collage of word and image as opposed to encountering the poems or collages as fully formed or complete. Joans’s term outagraph signals that his poems and collages are an acting out, a type of conceptual art poetry.

This peculiar form of conceptual poetry is even more dramatic in the “neglphics” section of Larry Neal’s Black Boogaloo. In “Neglphics: Or Graffetti Made Respectable,” Neal lists propositions (such as “Bird Lives!!!” and “Black Power / Every Hour”) that could be spray painted as graffiti. The propositions are separated by short lines, formed by asterisks (**************). After two pages with these graffiti tags, Neal then, in the next three pages, creates conceptual poetry that gives
instructions for black poets, black painters, black musicians. These conceptual poems have the shape of prose poems-in-progress. The conscious engagement with conceptual art is most apparent when Neal includes a marginal note, after the “Notes for Black Painters,” that is entitled “Idea for a Mural” (43). This same focus on the idea for a work, and not the completion of a work, shapes Larry Neal’s manifesto “Some Reflections on the Black Aesthetic.” In the first edition of The Black Aesthetic (1971), which includes this manifesto, the following words preface the beginning of this most visual verbal manifesto: “This outline below is a rough overview of some categories and elements that constituted a ‘Black Aesthetic’ outlook. All of these categories need further elaboration, so I am working on a larger essay that will tie them all together.”

14 This manifesto is printed in such a manner that readers must rotate the book and read this work in process horizontally, with a counterliteracy gaze that literally changes the normal orientation of the textual object. When we consider “Some Reflections” as conceptual art, the “idea,” the black aesthetic, emerges as pure assemblage. Neal shows that one vital layer of the movement was the commitment to not textualizing the ephemeral.

In Taking It to the Streets: The Social Protest Theater of Luis Valdez and Amiri Baraka (1997), Harry Elam recognizes that urgency “by definition is ephemeral.”15 Elam’s insight is as crucial as Kimberly Benston’s claim that the Black Arts Movement staged the “essential gesture of authentic blackness” (italics mine).16 We may initially think the opposite—that the urgency of a movement that was performing black nationalism, collective black consciousness, and Black Power would demand that which is profoundly solid, not that which is ephemeral. When we connect the movement’s critique of the text as an object (and the critique of art itself as an object of cultural capital) to the movement’s emphasis on institution-building, we gain a new way of understanding the urgency of process and the ephemeral as coterminous with the urgency of Haki Madhubuti’s insistence that black nationalism “means publishing our own books.”17 In order for the “Black Book” to not become an object, it needed to somehow remain open; it had to make readers feel that it was not a monument but a happening, an event. Indeed, in the opening essay in the anthology Black Fire (1968), James Stewart framed this pivotal Black Arts text as “fragile” and “not fixed.” He wrote, “The work is fragile, destructible; in other words, there is a total disregard for the perpetuation of the product, the picture, the statue, and the temple.”18 In order to understand why and how this movement made the evanescent matter,
we must remember the explicit theorizing about process as the highest aesthetic value. In the opening essay of *Black Fire*, Stewart warns readers to not transform this grassroots process of consciousness-raising into a frozen object of study. Stewart asserted, “Art goes. Art is not fixed. Art can not be fixed. Art is change, like music, poetry and writing are, when conceived” (4–5).

The movement’s critique of the treatment of text as object was deeply connected to the movement’s critique of the white power structure. In the play *Malcolm: ’71, or Publishing Blackness: Based Upon a Real Experience* (1971), Ed Bullins critiques the academy’s production of books that collect and frame the movement in a manner that crushes the spirit of black self-determination at the core of the movement. This play dramatizes the problem of who frames whom and who collects whom. In this short play, “WHITEGIRL” calls “BLACKMAN” in order to ask him to “collect a section” in an anthology she is editing. The play ends when “BLACKMAN” ends this conversation once he hears the woman address her dog named “Malcolm.” The final lines read:

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BLACKMAN: Hey . . . could I ask you a question?
WHITEGIRL, beaming: Oh . . . why surely.
BLACKMAN: Is your dog named “Malcolm”?
WHITEGIRL: Yes.
BLACKMAN: Who is it named after?
(Pause. Dog barks.)
WHITEGIRL, hesitant: After Malcolm X.
(The BLACKMAN gently hangs the phone up.)
Lights down.
Blackness. (136)
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Bullins connects the taming of Black Power to the white collection of the black sources. The play shows that an archive controlled by the dominant (white) power structure aimed to absorb the movement and the repertoire of black self-determination. Bullins recognized that short plays could stage the revolution in a manner similar to performance poetry. In his manifesto “A Short Statement on Street Theater” (1968), he explained, “Short, sharp, incisive plays are best . . . Each individual in the crowd should have his sense of reality confronted, his consciousness assaulted” (288). Just as Diana Taylor counsels, “The live can never be contained in the archive,” Bullins warns, in *Malcolm: ’71*, that the textual production
of blackness cannot remain on the “leash” of those who produce books that intentionally or unintentionally claim ownership of experiences they have not lived.20 Another Black Arts writer, Kalamu ya Salaam, uses the image of the leash as he thinks about what is at stake in black textual production. As he describes the role of white patronage during the Harlem Renaissance, he argues that Harlem Renaissance writers “were always on the leash of white patrons and publishing houses.”21 Salaam, Bullins, and the other aestheticians of Black Power were hyperconscious of the fact that the textualization of subaltern knowledge (each textual production that claims knowledge of the subaltern) can reinforce a dominant culture industry that often becomes White Power.

Fight the Power! From the Harlem Renaissance to the Art of Black Power

The danger tied to the textualization of movement, gesture, sound, and performance is dramatized during the Black Arts Movement. As writers in the Black Arts Movement fought against the textual taming of radical black processes and actions, they produced texts that performed the packaging of the unpackageable. Many of the differences between the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement are tied to the different collection practices during these movements. The Black Arts Movement staged the black collection of blackness.

In Signs and Cities: Black Literary Postmodernism (2003), Madhu Dubey argues that the 1970s is the beginning of African American literary postmodernism. She bases this argument partly on the fact that by the 1970s the majority of African Americans, whether Southern or Northern, are urban. She sets up black postmodernism as an urbanity that is, in many cases, set apart from the “face to face” imagined communion in the rural South. She also defines black literary postmodernism as embodying a skeptical stance toward print literacy. The beginning of the Black Arts anthology Black Fire dramatizes this skepticism about the book. The opening note reads:

It is obvious that work by: Don Lee, Ron Milner, Alicia Johnson, Carl Boissiere, Katibu (Larry Miller), Halisi, Quincy Troupe, Carolyn Rodgers, Jayne Cortez, and Jewel Lattimore Shd be in this collection. Various accidents kept this work from appearing
Dubey’s theory of skepticism about print literacy gains new dimensions when we remember this opening note in *Black Fire*. This anthology blurs the boundaries between Dubey’s theory of African American postmodernism and Houston Baker’s theory of African American modernism as “deformation of mastery.” The postmodern is then, as many have recognized, that continuation of the most radical aspects of modernism. The collaborations and conflicts that shaped both the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement are finally a steady reckoning with one of the key tenets of literary modernism and postmodernism—the difference between process and object. The critical questions about blackness, during these movements, were questions about blackness as *process* and blackness as *object*.

Comparing anthologies shows that the Black Arts Movement staged blackness as both object and process, whereas the Harlem Renaissance lacked any real focus on what the Black Arts Movement imagined as an ideology that could be named “black.” Indeed, in the latest edition of *Black Fire*, Baraka, in the new introduction, explains that BARTS (Black Arts Repertory Theater School) “self-destructed” because “Black’ is not an ideology.” During the Harlem Renaissance, there were clearly celebrations of racial and cultural pride, but this cultural movement, unlike the Black Arts Movement, did not boldly and consistently attack whiteness as a dominant cultural aesthetic. The Black Arts Movement fought against a white dominant culture industry that constantly transformed grassroots culture into the capital of dominant culture institutions. James Stewart, in the first essay in *Black Fire*, argues that white art depends on matrixed art that requires an object, as opposed to nonmatrixed black art. In the very first pages of *Black Fire*, there is great emphasis on the different aesthetic criteria that shape Western, white art and black art. Stewart asserts that white aesthetics depends on the precious, enclosed art object in contrast to the openness of black art. This essay, entitled “The Development of the Black Revolutionary Artist,” is a call for black art that resists the enclosed nature of the “white models” and the transformation of culture into capital. In the opening essay of the Harlem Renaissance anthology *The New Negro*, Alain Locke presents art as the gift
that the Negro offers, the gift that proves that Negroes should be treated as worthy, fellow citizens. These two movements, in these anthologies, were literally packaged as having very different understandings of the relation between African American art and dominant culture capital.

Grassroots collaboration can differ greatly from the modes of production of the dominant culture industry. The collaboration embodied in the anthology *Black Fire* was grassroots. The poetry in the anthology was performed in outdoor and indoor community centers and rallies. Its oral and performative nature enabled this poetry to circulate widely among people who were not usually reading poetry or buying poetry books. The slim broadside poetry volumes were sold at public gatherings and community poetry readings. Standard single-page poetry broadsides enabled this grassroots poetry to become entirely portable, as captured in the following words in a poetic tribute to Gwendolyn Brooks, written by Haki Madhubuti: “pee wee used to carry one of her poems around in his back pocket” (*Don't Cry, Scream*, 1969). Protest and cultural movements such as the Black Arts Movement rely on an everyday type of collaboration between community leaders, writers, organizers, visual artists, event participants, and audience members. This organic collaboration is fully the zone of *process* as opposed to the textual collaboration archived in anthologies (in books that are inevitably an *object*). To what extent are literary and cultural movements inevitably reconstructed and remembered as textual collaborations, as opposed to process-oriented, anti-object collaborations? Through the texts, how do we recover the seams, the processes of collaboration and conflict?

*The New Negro* bursts apart at the seams when one attempts to reconcile the editor’s celebration of transformation and racial uplift and many of the younger poets’ depiction of an everyday living that is, as Langston Hugheswrites, “beautiful and ugly too.” *The New Negro* was Locke’s first book. He had published essays, but the editing of the anthology was his newfound currency. As he gathered the voices of the younger poets, he gave names and definitions to a movement in the process of unfolding. He announced, “In the very process of being transplanted, the Negro is becoming transformed.”24 His anthology was also a site of transformation. The anthology gave national, transnational, and interracial visibility to the poets and sought to transform their individual poetics into the poetics of the New Negro aesthetic. The young poets, in *The New Negro*, sometimes use *black* in their poems, instead of *negro*. The words *the new negro* carried very different connotations from the everyday feel-
ing tied to the word *black* in the 1920s, pre–Black Power period. In the poem “Dream Variation,” written by Langston Hughes, the word *Black* is used in the following manner: “Dance! Whirl! Whirl! / Till the quick day is done. / Rest at pale evening, / A tall, slim tree, / Night coming tenderly / Black like me.” Whereas Locke, in his editorial framing, makes the term *New Negro* signify a cultural awakening and the shared consciousness of those who are participating in this cultural renaissance, Hughes makes the word *Black* a bodily state of rest after the whirlwind of identity maneuvers. Locke’s introduction attributes considerable motion to the “New Negro”; Hughes’s poem imagines “black” as a state of tender rest. In the very beginning of Locke’s introduction, the “old Negro” is figured as the troubling state of fixity. Hughes’s use of “black” as tender rest, following a dance whirlwind, mediates between Locke’s “New Negro” com- motion and his “Old Negro” lack of motion. This mediating term signals that African Americans can travel *and* dwell, that the standing still need not be shameful, that a most local and grounded type of being need not be shameful nativism. In Locke’s editorial frame, he celebrates the internationalism tied to the “Negro world in Harlem.” He writes, “The pulse of the Negro world has begun to beat in Harlem” (633). This transna- tional pulse is quite different from the individual pulse of the resting black body that Hughes presents in the poem “Dream Variation.”

Does the book (the textualization of this “pulse”) crush the “beat” of it? As Locke curated the exhibition of “The New Negro” writers, he used one particular caption that reveals how the object status of the book can objectify the subjects described in the book. This telling “caption” appears in the essay “Youth Speaks.” Locke writes, “Our poets have now stopped speaking for the Negro—they speak as Negroes. Where formerly they spoke to others and tried to interpret, they now speak to their own and try to express. They have stopped posing, being nearer to the attainment of poise” (659). It matters that Locke describes the young poets’ seeming refusal of the external audience even as he (in the book he edits) presents the poets to the external audience. As Locke plays the role of the interpreter, he reveals, in this passage, that some of the young artists are aiming to stop the interpretation, the translation for “others.” The sub- title of the first edition of *The New Negro* was indeed “An Interpretation.” The posing that occurs in the editorial framing (to twist Frantz Fanon’s words, the “Look, a New Negro” moments in Locke’s editorial frame) is very different from the “attainment of poise” he sees in the anthologized literature.
In the one published issue of *Fire!!* there is a move against this exhibition. The younger artists collaborate in the creation of *Fire!!* The title itself anticipates the Black Arts title, *Black Fire*. Instead of the opening essay, in *The New Negro*, *Fire!!* begins with a poem written by Langston Hughes. In this poem, fire is an image of becoming. The language of becoming and process is remarkably different from the object of study in Locke’s framing of *The New Negro*. The riotous tone of this poetic epigraph fully anticipates the poetics of the Black Power movement. This magazine, with a red and black cover, aimed to burn the packaging of the New Negro. Hughes ends this poem with the vernacular words “Fy-ah, / Fy-ah, Lawd, / Fy-ah gonna burn ma soul.” Whereas Locke argues, in *The New Negro*, that the final value of folk forms derives from their ability to be transformed into high art, Hughes makes the folk vernacular into the end product (the final product) of the process of becoming represented by the metaphor of fire. The entire poem, before the final vernacular black dialect, pivots on the present participle: “flaming, searing, penetrating, warning, revitalizing, melting, poking, weaving, satisfying, blazing.” The present participle, in this poem named “Foreword,” frames the final black dialect words and the entire magazine as a meditation on a black folk form that can exist on its own terms, not as raw material for a different register of New Negro folk art that would separate low brow and high brow, or, in Locke’s terms, old Negro and New Negro. The most compelling image in this poem is of the “livid tongues [poking] between stone apertures.” After an image of “steel and iron” bars of a gate, Hughes presents this image of the bruised tongue penetrating the small opening of a keyhole or decorative artwork on the gate. The gatekeepers of the New Negro movement are critiqued as Hughes’s opening words frame *Fire!!* as a crude alternative to the polish of *The New Negro* anthology. The note of the crude is rendered directly in Hughes’s reference to “beauty unadorned.”

After this poetic Foreword, “Cordelia the Crude” is the first text included in this anthology. Wallace Thurman, in this short story, not only foregrounds the same grittiness as the poetic foreword (the grit created when the stone gates and walls are destroyed), but also a certain resistance to the transformation of culture into capital. Cordelia, the protagonist in this short story, is a sixteen-year-old “potential prostitute.” This potentiality, not inevitability, is set up through Wallace Thurman’s focus on Cordelia’s assumption of the prostitute role when she happens to walk into the theater “simultaneously” with the narrator. She begins, as
they sit in this movie theater, to perform the role (through her words) of an experienced prostitute, but the narrator does not play the role of the typical male client. He “had not even felt her legs” (6). When they leave the theater, he walks her home, they kiss, and he then gives her “two crumpled one dollars bills.” At the end of the short story, we learn that he had given Cordelia her “firs’ two bucks.” His assumption that she is a prostitute, that their intimacy cannot be separated from the power relation of the money exchange, spurs Cordelia to begin living the life of a prostitute. It matters that this depiction of prostitution is included as one of the opening frames in Fire!! The note of prostitution resounds as writers in the Black Arts Movement accuse the Harlem Renaissance artists of pandering to white audiences and being controlled by white patronage. Fire!! did not last; this magazine only had one issue. As Thurman anthologized the more “crude” aspects of sexual politics, neurotic obsessions with lighter-skinned blackness, queer desire, and black love of the black primitive, he worked within the master’s house with the great desire to destroy the master’s house and create a less packaged space of black art. On the page that thanks the patrons of Fire!! there is a list of patrons, ending with Carl Van Vechten. At the end of the page, the “Board of Editors” write, “For the second issue of Fire we would appreciate having fifty people subscribe ten dollars each, and fifty more to subscribe five dollars each.” Since the journal never had a second issue, the questions about culture and capital embedded in the art in Fire!! are as noteworthy as the literal lack of enough capital to sustain the journal.

After the list of patrons and the call for subscribers to the second issue, the following words appear: “We make no eloquent or rhetorical plea. Fire speaks for itself.” These words suggest a refusal to perform, a refusal to make a dramatic appeal. These words also signal that the board of editors (Thurman, Hughes, Gwendolyn Bennett, Richard Bruce, Zora Neale Hurston, Aaron Douglas, and John Davis), as they collaborate in this production, decide to not give Fire!! any rigid frame. It is much more open than The New Negro. The title “Fire” is not a racial designation; it unnames. Through the lens of one of the poems in Fire, Edward Silvera’s “Jungle Taste,” this unnaming in the title “Fire” can be connected to the power of naming embedded in the word black. Silvera, in “Jungle Taste,” uses the word black as he depicts the songs of men and faces of women. Within this troubling gender divide between male sound and female embodiment (awfully similar to Jean Toomer’s “She does not sing; her body is a song”), Silvera repeatedly uses the word black as he refers
to the identity of the men singing and women being viewed. The racial identity of the speaker in the poem is not given in the first stanza. He is initially the unnamed speaker who can unname the songs as he rewrites the “weird strangeness” that outsiders hear as “not strange to me.” In the second stanza, the speaker moves from the power of the unnamings to the power of renaming. He (the speaker) is identified as “Black” when “Black” emerges as the name given to subjects who can see what outsiders cannot see: “Dark hidden beauty / In the faces of black women / Which only black men / See.” This shift from the unnamings (the first step when the old name must be canceled out, the impulse to add not to the standard word) to the renamings (the next step of a self-determination set apart from the outside gaze) fully anticipates the poetics of the 1960s and early 1970s Black Arts Movement.

When some of the young poets in the Harlem Renaissance used the word black, not Negro, they were being transgressive since they knew that the bourgeois, racial-uplift types did not approve of the term. In the 1920s, in the United States, the term black was very multivalent. For some African Americans in the 1920s, the term black simply meant dark skin. Overall, African Americans in the 1920s did not use the term as a reference to the race. In “What Are We?”, an article published in 1926 in The Messenger, George Grant argues that the term Black American satisfies “a long felt want.” As he explains the difference between the name Black American and the name Negro, he writes, “The argument for it begins with the fundamental assertion that we are not Negroes (niggers) or colored people (cullud fellahs) but Americans; if it is necessary to distinguish us from the white Americans, then we are BLACK AMERICANS; not all of us are black, not all of white people are white, but ‘black’ and ‘white’ are used here to classify rather than to describe.” This rationale, during the Harlem Renaissance, for using black was different from the argument used in the Black Arts Movement. Grant insists that black may only be necessary as an addition to American; the term American is the base term, in his view, and black signifies a secondary racial classification. During the Harlem Renaissance, the term Negro was often equivalent to the term Black in the Black Arts Movement. Negro as opposed to colored was a source of pride. The term black, when used in the poem “Jungle Taste” in Fire!!, signals a kind of cultural and racial pride that has a different valence from the pride tied to the word Negro. The very title of Silvera’s poem—“Jungle Taste”—emphasizes that the blackness depicted is not tied to the racial uplift of the New Negro discourse. Silvera names
the beauty that only “black men” can see; his use of the term black is anchored in the difference between the gaze of those in the “jungle” (a term he is clearly reclaiming) versus the outsiders’ ways of seeing. During the Black Arts Movement, the word Black (in a capitalized form, not the lowercase version in Silvera’s poem and many other Harlem Renaissance poems) is staged as a name that explicitly rewrites the sensibility tied to the word Negro.

Black Fire begins with the call for nation building and ends with the inner space of consciousness. Black Arts poetics constantly crossed the boundary between black inner space and black public grassroots space. The anthologizing of the movement, in Black Fire, performs this movement through public and inner space. The editors, Larry Neal and Amiri Baraka, through their foreword and afterword (written by Neal), move from the call for black nation building and liberated minds to Neal’s celebration of the space created by the destruction of double consciousness. Larry Neal uses the words “the destruction of double consciousness” as he explains, in the Afterword of Black Fire, that the young Black Arts writers are refusing to see themselves through the eyes of others. Du Bois’s theory of double consciousness finally pivots on the binary between “self-consciousness” and “the eyes of others.” As Neal channels and expands Du Bois’s theory, he revels in the “peculiarly black sensation” of suddenly breaking out of the binaries by experiencing the entire world as “black.” There is a fundamental difference, in this anthology, between the setting of boundaries between black and white and Neal’s final move to the celebration of an aesthetic that makes blackness “contain multitudes.”26 Like the journal Black World (edited by Hoyt Fuller), Black Fire was the textual production of a counterworldview, hence the focus on the precise meaning of the word cosmology, in the anthology’s opening essay.

Coda

During the Black Arts Movement, “Black” is bound as the unbound. The Black Arts impulse to make art that defied the dominant norms was tied to the impulse to make art that was too excessive to be contained in books. The dreams of artists to find more room to breathe within oppressive structures made them yearn to break out of the rules that defined painting, murals, sculpture, poetry, drama, and prose. In each of the genres, the artists moved to what the AfriCobra collective named
“mimesis at mid-point,” the shift from the mimetic (“black is”) to the abstract and the layered (“black might be. . .”). Mimesis at mid-point is also a way of thinking about the relation between the black mirrors (in this movement’s love affair with blackness) and the state of suspension and pauses that occurred as people stopped and began to analyze the movement that was unfolding. The experimental art of the movement was bound by the ideological frames of the movement, but the experimental art also created the movement’s contours and frames. African American cultural movements settle in books and keep moving. “Gon do that book [. . .] Our Black Book”—those words from the visual artist to the writer (in Abernathy’s letter to Baraka) were the words of a photographer who, like the other Black Arts photographers, was consciously attempting to document a movement as it unfolded. The photographers’ impulse to create the visual archive as the movement was unfolding was the impulse to capture that which was beginning and that which was always already beginning to end. The flash of their cameras offers a vivid way of understanding the “black book” as imagined by the Black Arts Movement; the black book was the container of the evanescent, an archive of the ephemeral. Those telling last words of In Our Terribleness—“Now get up and go”—signal the Black Arts Movement’s refusal to allow the black book to be a still object of cultural capital that could be appropriated by an external, non-black dominant structure. The Black Arts Movement was a movement to build black cultural institutions, but this institution-building was not disconnected from a critique of texts as objects, commodities, or monuments. Abernathy’s epistolary appeal to Baraka “To Imamu DIG [. . .] NO MATTER WHAT / GON DO THAT BOOK [. . .] LATER FOR ANY SLOW MOTION / ideas / of any bodies” echoes the call for words that embody movement in the poem “Black Art”—“live words of the hip world live flesh & coursing blood.” The black book, in the Black Arts imagination, is a peculiar container, an open container of “live words.” Interstices, an architecture journal, frames the call for papers for a special issue on “unsettled containers—aspects of interiority” with the question “When is a set of walls an interior, when is an object a container, and when is a container a world?” In a similar manner, Baraka insists, in “Black Art,” that “We want a black poem. And a / Black World. / Let the world be a Black Poem.” This probing of the difference between the object that is a container and the container that opens up to a “world” explains the Black Arts rage against reproducing books of highbrow capital and the Black Arts belief in books that would resist closure. Indeed,
after the publication of *In Our Terribleness*, the book transformed into a travelling four week “photographic exhibition.” In a 1971 issue of *Black World*, this post-book exhibit was advertised in the following manner.

Jihad Productions sponsors ‘A Photographic Exhibition/ In Our Terribleness,’ featuring photos by Fundi from the book, *In Our Terribleness*, by Fundi and Imamu Amiri Baraka. The exhibit is made available to museums, universities, schools, churches, galleries and other institutions. The approximate shipping weight of the framed 43 photos in the exhibit is 500 pounds. Cost for a four week exhibition is $125.00, plus shipping charges.27

The physical book was not supposed to contain the fire. The book was not a post-exhibit catalog; the traveling exhibit was the post-book event.

Notes


2. Richard Wright, *Black Power* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1954). The complete dedication “To the Unknown African” is: “TO THE UNKNOWN AFRICAN who, because of his primal and poetic humanity, was regarded by white men as a ‘thing’ to be bought, sold, and used as an instrument of production; and who, alone in the forests of West Africa, created a vision of life so simple as to be terrifying, yet a vision that was irreducibly human . . .” (n.p.).


4. Imamu Amiri Baraka and Billy Abernathy, *In Our Terribleness (Some Elements and Meaning in Black Style)* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970). This text is unpaginated.

5. Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Amiri Baraka papers, Box 12.


9. In the catalog for the 1973 AfriCobra III exhibit at University of Massachusetts Amherst, the “aesthetic principle” of “mimesis at mid-point” is described in the following manner: “B. MIMESIS AT MID-POINT, design which marks the spot where the real and the unreal, the objective and the non-objective, the plus and the minus meet. A point exactly between absolute abstractions and absolute naturalism.”
10. This mural was created in 1973 at United Community Construction Workers Labor Temple, Roxbury, Boston, Massachusetts.

11. In the 1973 AfriCobra catalog, the principle of lettering is described in the following manner: “The subject matter must be completely understood by the viewer, therefore lettering would be used to extend and clarify the visual statement. The lettering was to be incorporated into the composition as a part of the visual statement and not as a headline.”


23. Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal, *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing* (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 2007), xviii. The full passage reads: “The Black Arts Repertory Theater School self- (and FBI) destructed because ‘Black’ is not an ideology and so the unity gained under that finally nationalist but reductionist label, though it was an attempt to locate & raise the National Consciousness, could not hold. In that emotional spontaneity there was not an advanced enough unity to maintain the eclectic entity that ‘Black’ had brought together, Nationalists, Muslims, Yoruba devotees, Marxists, under the cover integrationists, Christians, all the above-ists.”


26. I am echoing Walt Whitman’s famous words in “Song of Myself”—“Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes.).”
