

---

## Review Essay: The Black Arts Movement and the Aesthetic Framing of 21st Century Anthologies of African American Poetry

---

⊙ James Smethurst

University of Massachusetts Amherst

**Abstract:** When considering anthologies of African American poetry in the 21st century, it is noteworthy how much the legacy of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s both positively and negatively shapes their aesthetic politics, framing, and reception. This essay considers how these anthologies use the Black Arts Movement to frame their version of Black poetry and the way they come at questions of literary and cultural lineage, the relationship of Black poetry to African American experience, and formal tradition and innovation.

**Keywords:** African American poetry; Black Arts Movement; 21st century poetry anthologies

**CLC:** I712

**Document Code:** A

**Article ID:** 2096-4374(2020)02-0047-10

When considering anthologies of African American poetry in the 21st century, it is noteworthy how much the legacy of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s shapes their aesthetic politics, framing, and reception. Of course, these anthologies grapple with other questions, such as the responsibility of African American poetry to represent Black experience and struggle, the relation of Black music and other forms of Black popular expressive culture to Black poetry, the relation of the oral (and the performative) to the printed poetic text, the relation of African American literature to modernism (and various notions of artistic avant-gardes), and literary ancestry. However, to a significant extent the ways that these anthologies frame their version of Black poetry and the way they come at these questions are positioned in terms of their take on Black Arts. The goal here, then, is not to interpret, judge, or parse particular selections in these anthologies, but to consider their framing and their sense of the arc of Black poetry, especially with respect to Black Arts, a goal resulting provoked by thoughts on the important new anthology by Joanne Gabbin and Lauren Alleyne, *Furious Flower: Seeding the Future of African American Poetry* (2020).

Perhaps it is not so surprising that the presence of Black Arts, both positively and negatively, would be felt in anthologies of the last decade of the 20th century, such as Clarence Major's *The Garden Thrives: Twentieth-Century African American Poetry* (1996), Jerry Ward's *Trouble the Water: 250 Years of African-American Poetry* (1997) and Michael Harper and Anthony Walton's *The Vintage Book of African American Poetry* (2000). These anthologies appeared only a generation after the movement and in the cases of the three mentioned were edited by poets and teachers whose literary

and pedagogical careers began in the 1960s and 1970s, though Ward was far more positive about Black Arts than Harper with Major somewhat between, valuing what he saw as the more formally radical side of the movement. But that Black Arts would continue to be a point of inspiration and contention decades later might seem more remarkable. Of course, the Harlem / New Negro Renaissance as both a positive and negative model can be found in Black Arts criticism, theory, and anthologizing. No doubt Amiri Baraka's and Larry Neal's key Black Arts anthology *Black Fire* played on the name of the journal *Fire!!*, which in its brief life was posed by Wallace Thurman and its other editors and contributors as in the formal and social vanguard of the New Negro Renaissance. Still, for the most part earlier periods and formations did not generate quite the heated debate as did (and does) Black Arts. Interestingly, often the anthologists' takes on Black Arts are not seen so much in their choices of what to include in their anthologies, though sometimes that is the case, as in how they frame their choices.

Black Arts was a politically and aesthetically vanguard arts movement that successfully sought to reach a mass Black audience rather than a small coterie. Black Arts activities and institutions appeared in almost every community and every college campus in the United States where there was an appreciable number of Black people. While there was communication and often cooperation between these various regional and local manifestations of Black Arts (workshops, theaters, bookstores, galleries, schools, poetry readings, murals, concerts, dance companies, visual arts galleries, museums, journals, newspapers, and so on), each community had its particular character.

There was also usually some common notion of the development or recovery of an authentic national Black culture that was linked to an existing African American folk or popular culture. In short, this culture was to be mass, revolutionary, and paradoxically traditional. Black Arts put an emphasis on performance as both practice and a textual resource. In particular, many Black Arts poets posed Black music, and the relationship between Black popular music artists and their audiences in live performances, as models for Black poetry. As Larry Neal famously wrote in the afterword to *Black Fire*, "Listen to James Brown scream. Ask yourself, then, Have you heard a Negro poet sing like that, of course not, because we have been tied to the texts, like most white poets. The text could be destroyed and no one would be hurt in the least by it. The key is in the music. Our music today has always been far ahead of our literature." (Neal 653).

This emphasis, of course, had a long foreground, going back to, at least, Paul Laurence Dunbar, James Weldon Johnson, and Fenton Johnson through Langston Hughes, Helene Johnson, and Sterling Brown to Black Arts. In that sense, Sonia Sanchez's "on seeing pharaoh sanders blowing" is a direct descendant of Hughes's "The Weary Blues" and Brown's "Ma Rainey." Also, one can overstate the anti-textuality of Black Arts literature. After all, radical Black journals, such as *Black World*, *Liberator*, *Journal of Black Poetry*, and *SoulBook*, and Black publishers, such as Broadside Press and Third World Press, were essential to the development of Black Arts and the distribution of Black Arts poetry. As Melba Boyd points out, Broadside alone released more titles by African American poets between 1965 and 1975 than all publishers combined did in the previous decade, putting more than a half million copies of those titles in circulation (Boyd 3-4). Sanchez's "a / coltrane / poem" existed on the printed page long before she ever performed it to an audience. Still, performance as a practice that enabled Black Arts poets to reach a Black audience outside the usual circuits as well as a model

of imagining a Black textuality that, perhaps paradoxically, did not fetishize texts and, like many writers in the New American Poetry circles in which many Black Arts poets had previously moved, emphasized process over product.

Despite these common concerns, there was no absolute political or aesthetic center of Black Arts (or Black Power). There was no pope or chairman of Black Arts. The political beliefs of Black Arts participants varied from revolutionary Marxism to neo-Africanist cultural nationalism—and, sometimes, combined those stances in seemingly unlikely ways. Black Arts (and Black Power) activists frequently criticized each other sharply. Even within organizations and clearly defined currents of Black Arts/Black Power, cultural politics could differ considerably. For example, Amiri Baraka and New Orleans Black Arts poet and playwright Kalamu ya Salaam were both strongly influenced by Maulana Karenga's cultural nationalist, neo-African Kawaidaism, but neither ever accepted Karenga's pronouncement that the blues and other forms of Black popular music were defeatist and to be eschewed. Similarly, Haki Madhubuti, another important Black Arts poet and publisher whose work was marked by Kawaidaism, never really embraced Karenga's paternalist approach to gender. The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense (BPP) in California mocked cultural nationalists like Karenga for adopting African and Muslim names; the BPP in New York featured leading members with such names as Jamal Joseph, Dhoruba bin-Wahad, Sekyiwa Tabul, Afeni Shakur (mother of hip hop legend Tupac Shakur), and Assata Shakur.

Despite this varied and contested character, a widely circulated vision of Black Arts emerged, largely from the outside, but also embraced by some artists who had been a part of the movement to one degree or another, that cast Black Arts as narrowly nationalist, homophobic, misogynist, and aesthetically conservative and with an instrumentalist view of art. Some of this vision had to do with the emergence of Black feminism (and a revitalized feminist movement generally) and Gay Liberation, questioning Black Arts and Black Power notions of gender and sexuality in the reconstructed, liberated (or becoming liberated) Black family that were at the heart of many concepts of Black self-determination. As noted above, in these things, as in most aspects of Black Arts, there was no consensus, but much debate. The influential Kawaidaist philosophy of Maulana Karenga was unquestionably masculinist and homophobic, but, as previously noted, that doesn't mean that every tenet of Kawaidaism was universally accepted, even by its adherents. Certainly, major Black Arts writer and editor Toni Cade Bambara, whose anthology *The Black Woman* was a landmark of the era, saw no contradiction between being a feminist and a Black nationalist. Audre Lorde received much abuse from some Black Arts and Black Power participants when she came out openly as a lesbian (something that, like *Black World* editor Hoyt Fuller's identity as a gay man, was widely known in the movement before its public announcement), but other leading Black Arts writers, notably Sonia Sanchez, made a point of standing in support of Lorde.

A more straightforwardly literary critique of Black Arts can be seen as a return to the primacy of the text, contesting the notion that performance (and the work of the musical artist) is the model to which Black poetry should aspire. This tendency has been sometimes referred to as the "new Black formalism," riffing on the idea of a "new formalism" in U.S. poetry generally in reaction to the literary countercultures of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, beginning in the 1980s. However, it might be more accurate to think of this critique and the practices that flowed from it as the "new Black textualism."

That is to say that there was an emphasis, with apologies to Roland Barthes, on the pleasures of the text and a related argument that contemporary Black writing primarily derives from a written tradition not music or speech in the street rather than advocating a particular formally conservative aesthetic or set of aesthetics in the way the “new formalism” was said to do. This stance also tended to dismiss hip hop and hip hop-influenced performance poetry, though more often by ignoring hip hop than through outright attack.

A related strand was the undervaluing of the poetry of Langston Hughes, seeing that work as relatively unreflective, unchanging, and sentimental uses of “folk” sources as opposed to a deeper engagement with Black music and other forms of Black popular and folk expressive culture, often as represented by the poetry of Sterling Brown. (Black Arts participants, while almost universally admiring Brown and his poetry and pedagogy, often saw Hughes as a key, if not the key literary ancestor.) Basically, Hughes was accused of being insufficiently hip to both the depths of African American music and modernism generally. This view was not particular to some African American critics, but was widely shared among scholars of 20th-century U.S. poetry. (On a personal note, I once gave a conference paper on bebop and Langston Hughes’s *Montage of a Dream Deferred*. In the discussion after the paper presentations, a leading critic of post-World War II U.S. poetry asked me if Hughes really understood the music of Charlie Parker, obviously implying that he didn’t.) Of course, such criticisms of Black art and literature as lagging behind white invention, stuck in a tired, naïve mimeticism are older than the Republic dating back at least to Thomas Jefferson and his comments on Phillis Wheatley and “mockingbird” poets. Nevertheless, despite this long negative foreground, Black Arts poetry and art was (and in some quarters still is) seen as particularly outside literature, outside aesthetics, representing a sort of anti-literary rupture in African American letters, indeed in U.S. writing.

One of the higher profile examples of the take on Black Arts as a sub-literary or non-literary rupture in African American writing in the 21st century is contained in Helen Vendler’s biting review, “Are These the Poems to Remember,” of the *Penguin Anthology of Twentieth-Century American Poetry* edited by Rita Dove. Vendler, long a leading critic and skilled close reader of poetry, takes issue with the framing of and selection of the verse in the anthology for a number of reasons, but one of her chief complaints is the inclusion of Black Arts poems, particularly those by Amiri Baraka:

As “the melting pot was simmering,” the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War rise into Dove’s essay: “The old Euro-American literary standards were rejected, and African culture (or rather, an idealized idea of Africa)...became the rallying cry of the New Black Aesthetic.” Why should the precious and ever-rare concern for words and for their imaginative alignment be abused as “the old Euro-American literary standards”? It would have been useful if Dove had departed from her once-overlightly historical summaries to explain the “literary standards” of “the New Black Aesthetic” as they appear in one of the poems she reprints, Amiri Baraka’s “Black Art.” (Vendler web).

Vendler sees Black Arts poetry as self-evidently sub- or non-literary, requiring only the reprinting of an infamously anti-Semitic passage of Baraka’s “Black Art” to demonstrate without any real

argument. One might object that the passage cited by Vendler distorts the formal character of the poem, which, among other things, is full of non-verbal vocalizations and surrealist imagery. She also implicitly argues that such a brief quotation of a single poem can stand in for the entire body of Black Arts poetry. Other commentators, notably Dove herself, contested Vendler's piece, arguing among other things that Dove's selections did not necessarily reflect her taste or her own poetic practice but an informed sense of what poetry was important, and so it is not necessary to lay out counterarguments here in detail. However, it is worth noting that this view of Black Arts as narrowly instrumentalist, far more unitary than was the case, and essentially non-literary both antedated and postdated Vendler's review.

While it has not gotten sufficient credit outside of African American / Africana/Black Studies, the key force in the presentation, anthologizing, and study of post-Black Arts poetry inside and outside the U.S. academy in recent decades is the Furious Flower Poetry Center (the first U.S. academic center devoted to the study and support of Black poetry), its three conferences devoted to Black poetry in 1994, 2004, and 2014, and the videos and anthologies that emerged out of those conferences, including *Furious Flower: African-American Poetry from the Black Arts Movement to the Present (2004)* and *Furious Flower: Seeding the Future of African American Poetry (2019)*. Led by the scholar Joanne Gabbin, *Furious Flower* has been scrupulous in its inclusion of different moments, movements, and schools of Black poetry.

There are (and have been) other important Black literary institutions and groups inside and outside the academy, such as the Dark Horse Collective, Cave Canem, the Affrilachian Poets, *Callaloo*, and the Center for Black Literature at Medgar Evers College, but none has consciously focused so closely on Black poetry in all its schools and regional manifestations. Also, none, with the exception of the Center for Black Literature, has been so devoted to presenting the commentary of scholars and the poets themselves interpreting and contextualizing the arc of African American poetry from Phillis Wheatley in the Colonial Era to our contemporary moment, but particularly from Black Arts on, in a manner that is accessible to campus and community. Consequently, the *Furious Flower* anthologies feature prose essays, reminiscences, and interviews as well as verse. One can see the *Furious Flower* anthologies as overlapping, but complementary projects, almost volumes of the same anthology, the first looking from the present back to the immediate and more distant literary ancestral past and the second gazing from the present into a Black future.

*Furious Flower* has also insisted on the importance of Black Arts as a central node of Black literature and art, a fundamentally positive one that connects strands of Black tradition and innovation in poetry. From the very beginning with the first conference dedicated to Gwendolyn Brooks and her work to its most recent activities, such Black Arts veterans as Sonia Sanchez, the late Jayne Cortez, the late Amiri Baraka, Haki Madhubuti, Askia Touré, and Nikki Giovanni, have been prominently featured in *Furious Flower* conferences and other activities, even as younger, post-Black Arts poets and scholars with a wide variety of aesthetic and political stances have been embraced. One result has been that quite a few of these younger (and by now veteran) poets have come to a new appreciation of Black Arts as a literary / social formation that valued ancestry and a future-looking innovation. In this it is useful to consider Margo Crawford's concept of a "Black Post-Blackness," an update of Baraka's "changing same" in which the past is never past even as one looks unflinchingly at the present and

imagines the future—or in the words of poet and critic Nathaniel Mackey, “lingering while moving on” (Crawford 2). For example, the poet Rita Dove, who some initially posed unfairly as a Black formalist in opposition to what might be thought of as the ideological and aesthetic philistines of Black Arts came to publicly articulate her sense of the importance of Black Arts, both in defense of her *Penguin Anthology of Twentieth-Century American Poetry* and its legacy in the introduction to the 2019 *Furious Flower* anthology, as promoting Black political and literary self-determination. (Dove xxii).

Similarly, historian John Bracey’s essay in the 2019 *Furious Flower* anthology presents a very personal account of the complexities of Black Arts and Black Power through the lens of his experience in the Black radical circles in Chicago during the 1960s. His essential purpose beyond giving readers a sense of the felt experience of that moment is to contest notions that Black Arts represented a radical rupture with what went before *and* after it. He argues that the Black Arts poets were both inheritors and progenitors, something that was very obvious in Chicago where you had veteran high profile poets and artists like Gwendolyn Brooks and Margaret Burroughs who were very much present and a part of the Black Arts moment and movement. In this, Bracey’s essay can be seen as a metonym for one of the larger objectives of the *Furious Flower* anthologies.

Black Arts also figures prominently in Arnold Rampersad’s and Hilary Herbold’s *The Oxford Anthology of African-American Poetry* (2006) since poems by Black Arts era and immediate post-Black Arts writers form the bulk of the anthology. In some ways, despite being edited by academics, it is the most studiously non-academic anthology of Black poetry published so far in the 21st century. That is to say that the apparatus of the book is more or less non-existent. The editors quite straightforwardly say that they wanted to avoid footnotes, headnotes, and chronological presentations of literary movements, periods, and poets. Really the only concessions to such a historical/scholarly approach are a barebones history of Black poetry in the introduction and a section of poets’ biographies in the back of the book. Instead, the organization of the volume is a series of thematic categories “designed to paint a portrait of African-American life and culture.” The selections within these categories are not organized chronologically, but alphabetically by the authors’ name. The other major principle of selection is that, contrary to Rita Dove’s selection process, the poems were not chosen with a sense of their importance, but of their aesthetic achievement—in some cases aided by the judgment of trusted advisors to the editors. In other words, while the poems had to fit within the various thematic categories, they also had to be “good” in some fashion or another. Also, while the selections included poems from as far back as the late 19th century as well as from the turn of the 21st century, again, the great majority of the poems were from the Black Arts era of the 1960s and 1970s and its immediate aftermath. The editors really provide no clear sense of their standards of aesthetic judgment. However, it is noteworthy that at least implicitly the anthology, contra what Helen Vendler would later aver, puts forward such poems as Amiri Baraka’s “Return of the Native” and “Poem for Half-White College Students” as being achieved or good on some level.

The anthologies of the 21st century most clearly in the spirit of *Furious Flower* are Aldon Lynn Nielsen’s and Lauri Scheyer’s (Ramey’s) *Every Goodbye Ain’t Gone* (2006) and *What I Say* (2015). As with the *Furious Flower* anthologies, the editors, both leading scholars of African American poetry, here see the two volumes as comprising a single project, with *Every Goodbye* focusing on the Black

poetic avant-garde of the 20th century and *What I Say* giving far more weight to poets whose work emerged in the 21st century. Nielsen and Scheyer focus on what they call Black “innovative poetry,” which could be seen as the experimental or avant-garde strand of African American poetry since World War II. They vigorously reject the notion that the Black literary avant-garde has been a weak and imitative current. They have an expansive notion of Black poetic innovation and its relation to Black tradition—though, oddly, they avoid poetry obviously influenced by hip hop and do not mention hip hop in their preface except, perhaps, obliquely through a passing mention of “spoken word.” Like *Furious Flower*, their basic stance is that formal innovation is, in fact, a Black tradition in the arts. Like Russell Atkins before them, they insist that Langston Hughes was a progenitor, practitioner, and tireless supporter of such innovation, contradicting notions of Hughes as a static and sentimental (in the worst sense) “folk” poet. They, too, see Black Arts poets (nearly all of whom claimed Hughes as an ancestral figure and many of whom had been directly aided and encouraged by Hughes before his death in 1967) as pivotal in the conjunction of tradition and innovation, of past and future in the present, in African American poetry. Nielsen and Scheyer make a clear distinction between notions of influence and ancestry and of unreflective imitation:

The contributors to the first volume can be seen as members of organized poetry groupings, or as independents. Thus we have representatives of the Dasein group (Percy Johnston), the Beats (Bob Kaufman and Amiri Baraka), The Free Lance group (Russell Atkins), the Umbra poets (Ishmael Reed, Lorenzo Thomas, Calvin Hernton) and The Black Arts Movement (Baraka). Alongside these poets we have those who belonged to groupings that were predominantly white (Steven Jonas, who was part of the Boston New American Poetry grouping), or who operated almost entirely independently, though their work shows affinities with the other groupings (Clarence Major, Elouise Loftin, June Jordan, Jayne Cortez, William Anderson etc.) We witness a somewhat different landscape in the second volume. The elder poets in this collection, poets such as Nathaniel Mackey, C. S. Giscombe, Will Alexander and Ron Allen, are poets who came of age during the period of the Black Arts and were greatly influenced by that movement, but whose own experiments took them in newer directions in no way derivative of Black Arts influences. (Nielsen and Ramey [Scheyer] xiv).

While Nielsen and Scheyer do aver that the younger innovative Black poets of the 21st century are mostly not interested in late 20th century debates between Black Arts defenders and the “new Black formalism,” they certainly do not claim that the work of those younger poets is absolutely disjunct from Black Arts. In that sense, it is worth remembering that if the Black Arts poets were, in fact, instrumentalist in intending their work to aid in the liberation of Black people in particular and the great mass of humanity in general, the common sense among many of them that freedom in form was a correlative of political freedom complicates any judgment that such instrumentalism necessarily constrained aesthetic adventurousness. As Nielsen has investigated at length in his critical work, Black Arts poets like Amiri Baraka, Jayne Cortez, Sonia Sanchez, Askia Touré, and Haki Madhubuti made a direct connection between the “free” in “free Jazz” and political liberation, a connection that they took as authorizing and modeling their approaches to poetry.

In part because of an upsurge of studies of the Black Arts Movement in the 21st century expanding our sense of the ideological, geographical, and aesthetic variety of the movement, scholars, anthologists, and writers who had significantly rejected, dismissed, or ignored Black Arts revisited their earlier opinions. In this, it is instructive to look at the various iterations of the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Nellie McKay, and Valerie Smith. The third edition in 2014 contained a much larger selection of Black Arts writing than the first volume in 1996. In part, this was due to the fact that the anthology as a whole had been greatly expanded. Nevertheless, the framing and selection of Black Arts era work was noticeably more positive and varied than in earlier editions.

Still, there are major anthologies edited by African American scholars well into the 21st century that continue to see Black Arts as a sort of interruption or break in the Black literary tradition. Charles Rowell's 2013 *Angles of Ascent* is no doubt the clearest example of this stance:

The poets who dominated the African American literary scene during the 1960s and 1970s are those who subscribed to and wrote poems that reflected the dicta of the Black Aesthetic, which was derived, in part, from the ideology of the Black Arts Movement, the cultural wing of the Black Power Movement. But the poets of the next generations who have ascended great literary heights of the North American literary scene, are not direct aesthetic and ideational descendants of the poets of the Black Arts Movement; they are more akin to Robert Hayden and the poets contemporary to the movement who wrote outside the Black Aesthetic, e.g., Lucille Clifton, Clarence Major, Jay Wright, Ed Roberson, Michael Harper, and Audre Lorde. In fact, the work of major post-Black Aesthetic poets does not bear any traces of the poetry whose authors devoted their art to the social and political ideology of the Black Arts Movement, which was committed to the Black Power concept. (Rowell xl)

Interestingly, other than a more limited selection of Black Arts poetry, the actual poets contained in *Angles of Ascent* do not vary that much from the *Furious Flower* anthologies except in the general avoidance of writers most directly influenced by hip hop, perhaps because such poetry is seen as insufficiently textual and too bound up in a performance ethos—again, connecting too closely to Black Arts poetry in which performance and the idea of the performative (especially as connected to Black music) was generally a prominent feature. Missing, too, is any real consideration of Langston Hughes as an ancestor of contemporary Black poetry. One might also question Rowell about his definition of who was inside and outside the Black Arts Movement—as did Amiri Baraka in a scathing review of *Angles of Ascent* in *Poetry* magazine. *Angles of Ascent* includes such poets in the section “Outside the Black Arts Movement,” such as Jayne Cortez, Etheridge Knight, June Jordan, Ntozake Shange, and Lorenzo Thomas, who themselves would have probably been surprised to find out they were outside the movement. To some degree it would seem that often “outside” here means poets of the Black Arts era whom the editor admires or who complicate his schema of the “Black Aesthetic” and the Black Arts Movement. The fact is that many Black Arts activists did agree that there should be a “Black Aesthetic” by which Black art could be evaluated. There was a general sense that a failure to do so would inevitably leave a “white aesthetic” in place as the yardstick of artistic achievement. There was



no faith in any existing “universal” set of aesthetics—and certainly not in the precepts of the “New Criticism” that still dominated the U.S. academy in the 1960s. However, there was no real agreement in Black Arts as to what a “Black Aesthetic” should be or when it would be practical to put such an aesthetic code in place. The activists of BLKARTSOUTH in New Orleans, for example, argued that it would take years of new radical Black artistic work before such aesthetic guidelines might be devised.

For that matter, Rowell’s list of Black Arts contemporaries, Lucille Clifton, Clarence Major, Jay Wright, Ed Roberson, Michael Harper, and Audre Lorde, whom he cites as the literary progenitors of Black poets who have “ascended great literary heights” would not seem to be a very coherent group formally in ways that clearly distinguished them from those that Rowell considers adherents of the Black Aesthetic. While Harper certainly made his attachment to Robert Hayden very public, not the least in the *Vintage Book of African American Poetry*, it is hard to see the claimed filiation of the work of the other poets listed, other than perhaps Ed Roberson, to Hayden’s poetry over the work of other Black predecessors. Even Harper’s work owed a considerable debt to the very different poetics of Sterling Brown. In the cases of the others listed, though some retrospectively declared themselves (or were judged by some critics) to be outside Black Arts, their early careers were significantly nurtured by Black Arts presses, journals, and anthologies, such as *Broadside* and *Third World*, *Journal of Black Poetry* and *Black World*, and *Black Fire*. For that matter, the beginnings of *Callaloo*, the journal of African American literature and arts that Rowell has long edited, was very much in the Southern Black Arts Movement, however much it departed from its origins later.

However, to be fair to Rowell, *Angles of Ascent* and his framing of it is obviously designed to be a sort of polemic or provocation, making an argument for the importance of Robert Hayden as the central ancestral figure for contemporary Black poetry as well as for the centrality of the text and the need to rethink the impact of “high” modernism on that poetry. In his promotion of Hayden and derogation of Black Arts, Rowell clearly knows that his claim will be controversial. In only including three “modernist” African American poets, Hayden, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Melvin Tolson, in a first section of “Precursors,” Rowell is pointedly leaving out Hughes, Brown, and Harlem Renaissance poets generally. It is telling that the three writers he selects are the Black poets who emerged in the first half of the 20th century most influenced by the “high modernism” of Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, and Hart Crane as well as by New Critical advocacy of this “high modernism” as the aesthetic apogee of U.S. poetry—though the politics of Hayden, Brooks, and Tolson (and Rowell for that matter) were quite different from the New Critics. Again, Rowell is aware that this is a claim that will cause debate, particularly within the circles of African American literary studies. It is also a pointed argument for the importance of the printed text and what might be thought of as the literariness of literature as well as a refutation of the notion that Black literature is subsidiary to, or lagging behind, other forms of Black expressive culture, including Black music, “While we can all agree that black music and black speech acts have been—and continue to be—significant to the work of some black poets, contemporary African American poetry is not defined by music and speech.” (Rowell xlix) In other words, to be tied to texts is no crime, but a strength.

Black Arts, then, becomes a sort of shorthand or metonym useful in framing the various Black poetry anthologies of the 21st century. It can be seen as yoking the avant-garde or innovative to the traditional, the “changing same,” to take Baraka’s famous formulation, as well the oral and the

performative to the written text. It can also be cast as anti-literary and anti-textual, interrupting the long history of Black textuality and literacy reaching back before the founding of the United States. For some, Black Arts is an opening of aesthetic and political possibility, of thinking about identity in new and urgent ways and how questions of race, gender, sexuality, class, region, and so on, intersect and manifest themselves culturally. For others, Black Arts represents a closing off of such thinking according to various ideological / aesthetic dicta, something that had to be transcended or reached around in order for Black poetry to flourish in the post-Black Arts decade. Interestingly, the latter take on Black Arts and its negative legacy for Black poetry itself tends to dismiss large sections of contemporary African American poetry, especially hip hop and spoken word and has a far more restrictive notion of what poetry is “major” or “achieved” than the more favorable take on Black Arts, particularly as manifested in the *Furious Flower* anthologies. One might say, then, that one of the biggest legacies of Black Arts is the debate about its legacy, shaping how we understand and contextualize Black poetry more than fifty years after the advent of the movement.

### Works Cited

- Boyd, Melba Joyce. *Wrestling with the Muse: Dudley Randall and Broadside Press*. Columbia UP, 2003.
- Crawford, Margo. *Black Post-Blackness: The Black Arts Movement and Twentieth-First Century Aesthetics*. U of Illinois P, 2017.
- Dove, Rita. Foreword. *Furious Flower: Seeding the Future of African American Poetry*, edited by Joanne V. Gabbin and Lauren K. Alleyne, Triquarterly Books / Northwestern UP, 2020.
- Neal, Larry. “And Shine Swam On.” *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing*, edited by Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) and Larry Neal, Black Classics, 2007. Rpt. 1968.
- Nielsen, Aldon Lynn, and Lauri Ramey (Scheyer), editors. *What I Say: Innovative Poetry by Black Writers in America*. U of Alabama P, 2015.
- . *Every Goodbye Ain’t Gone: An Anthology of Innovative Poetry by African Americans*. U of Alabama P, 2006.
- Rowell, Charles, editor. *Angles of Ascent: A Norton Anthology of African American Poetry*. W.W. Norton, 2013.
- Vendler, Helen. “Are These the Poems to Remember?” *New York Review of Books*, vol. 58, no. 18, 24 Nov., 2011, [www.nybooks.com/articles/2011/11/24/are-these-poems-remember/](http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2011/11/24/are-these-poems-remember/).