

The Nation Within
The Black Arts Movement in Chicago

BY

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THESIS

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SUMMARY

This dissertation examines collaborative and collective Black Arts projects produced in Chicago between 1967 and 1974 that reimagine the meaning and potential of the city as a site for Black liberation in the wake of the so-called urban crisis. By examining the ways artists engage actual and imagined urban space, it elaborates how Black Arts practitioners envisioned Black life in relation to and beyond their lived reality in the modern city. This dissertation challenges the idea that Black Arts practitioners were primarily concerned with illustrating political messages with an aesthetic of realism. In re-articulating the meaning and the significance of the city to Black consciousness, these artists presented more fluid notions of Black subjectivity, envisioned eschatological and spatialized ideas of history, and developed complex visual modes for representing Black life.

Chapter One examines the Wall of Respect, a collaborative mural project installed on the South Side of Chicago in 1967 that depicted portraits of important Black figures. By examining this historically important Black Arts project, I demonstrate how the mural's installation in the so-called Black ghetto complicates its message of racial pride and uplift. I argue that the Wall of Respect synthesizes the impoverished material conditions of the Black ghetto with a radical revision of Black subjectivity to critique and disrupt established modes of Black representation. I conclude by considering a multi-part mural program installed in the newly built and reconstituted Malcolm X College, a victory for youth activists who sought to remake an important civic institution in their image. When considered together, the Wall of Respect and the Malcolm X mural program demonstrates a more complex dynamic between Black institutionality—the intentionally constructed spaces, networks of support, and forms of knowledge production—and the city's low-

income, Black urban population; whose relation to the modern city and its rationally organized grid was much more contingent and irreconcilable.

Chapter Two presents muralist Mitchell Caton's visions of the city that merge metaphysical imagery, jazz culture, and psychedelic color abstractions into images of Black nationalistic longing. I demonstrate how Caton's innovative mural imagery of Black life in the city exceed the protest and realist aesthetics commonly associated with community muralism at the time. I use Afrosurrealism as a critical framework to analyze the iconography, mixed media collaborations, sites, and social processes in several mural projects for the early 1970s. I argue that Caton's complex visual and spatial metaphysics signals imaginative realms beyond everyday life in the city where new Black futures can be imagined.

Chapter Three considers the collaborative poster-print project by the Black Arts collective AFRICOBRA during its early years in Chicago. By examining this early iteration of collective artistic practice, I demonstrate the meaning and importance of the socio-political culture of urban streets to the development of their initial shared aesthetic principles. By examining the material and visual properties of their screenprints, I argue that the artists ultimately turned away from direct references to city streets towards a more abstracted urban space. As such, the contours of the city began to dissolve as they began to delineate the contours of a Black interior consciousness and its longing for freedom.

Chapter Four examines photographs by Billy Abernathy published in *In Our Terribleness: (some elements and meaning in Black style)*, his 1970 photo-text collaboration with Black Arts poet Amiri Baraka. I demonstrate how Abernathy reworked familiar photographic genres and modes of presentation and distribution—street photography, social documentary, and the photographic essay—to rearticulate the relation of Black subjects to the modern city and articulate

a Black collective, or an immanent Black nation. Abernathy frames his Black male subjects within and against the urban built environment in a way that emphasizes his subjects' expressive bodily comportment and sartorial style while obscuring and abstracting the urban environs which had come to overdetermine their Black identities. Challenging the notion that Black street photographers were primarily interested in depicting Black experience and revaluing Black representation, I argue that Abernathy's photographs are poetic narratives of Black national formation that present an eschatological vision of the Black nation that has not yet appeared but feels everywhere at once.

Returning to the Black Arts movement today poses complex questions about the intersections of art and politics, and the difficulties posed by closed ranks racial essentialism for articulating solidarity. Though some of the more strident proclamations of movement theorists tend to overshadow the artistic work that was forging new visions of Black life, a careful consideration of the visual moves these artists were making within and against the binaries of self and collective, figuration and abstraction, past and future can illuminate the movement's more experimental and visionary claims.

Introduction

When a sign was placed atop the lintel of a doorway of a burned-out building, its declaration resonated: “We the people of this community claim this [building] in order to preserve what is ours” (fig. I.1). The building stood in the heart of the Low End, at 43rd & Langley on Chicago’s South Side, where the blues clubs on the 43rd Street commercial corridor reminded residents of a once thriving Black Metropolis. The sign was part of a mural titled The Wall of Truth whose claim to truth was in the painted scenes depicting struggles facing the surrounding community—children living in poverty, violence suffered at the hands of the police—as well as portraits of Black leaders and Black people marching in unity. This claim to the ghetto counters what many in Chicago would have heard from civil rights leaders during the Freedom Summer just a few years before in 1966.¹ The movement targeted segregation in housing and schools in the city. Andrew Young, executive director of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, stated:

Negroes who are jammed into ghettos are people who are forced into violent ways of life... I’m saying the ghetto has to be dispersed, that this city must be opened up, and this high concentration ended, or we will have violence whether there is a movement or not.²

The same year, Black Power activists began using the language of decolonization to refer to the underdeveloped ghetto as an “internal colony” where its Black residents were locked out of jobs, adequate housing, schools, and political power. While ideas of self-defense, economic independence, and community control had roots in previous decades of Black activism, Black Power activists argued that urban centers with large Black populations and a growing youth

¹ I use the term ghetto here in accordance with how it was used by Black Power activists at the time, to signify segregation as an institution constructed by white supremacy.

² Alan B. Anderson and George W. Pickering, *Confronting the Color Line: The Broken Promise of the Civil Rights Movement in Chicago* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986), 249.

militancy, along with the perceived and real failures of liberal policies to address the social impacts of the so-called urban crisis, would be a new ground for political struggle. Detroit-based activists James and Grace Lee Boggs argued in their 1967 essay “The City is the Black Man’s Land” that Black urban residents should take control of cities, not just their own neighborhoods, in order to “reorganize the structure of city government and city life from top to bottom.”³

Amidst the contested discourse of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, Black artists in Chicago were laying new claims to their neighborhoods and seeking to reimagine what the city could signify for Black people. The Wall of Truth and its sister mural across the street, the Wall of Respect, came to delineate the streets of the Low End as a place to gather for Black activists and residents. The city would become a space to narrate history, disrupt urban order, articulate new forms of sociality, and begin to imagine transhistorical Black spaces free from the oppressive histories of urban control and containment. “The city, and especially the street,” argues sociologist Saskia Sassen, “is a space where the powerless can make history.... Becoming present, visible, to each other can alter the character of powerlessness.”⁴ Officials in Chicago certainly agreed that concentrated and organized Black activism had the potential to remake the city and, in doing so, threaten their monopoly on power. As such, they condemned and demolished the Walls of Truth and Respect just a few years after they were installed. In light of the ongoing urban contestations and crises in Chicago, what new meanings could Black artists ascribe to the city?

This dissertation examines the ways collaborative and collective Black Arts projects in Chicago from 1967 to 1971 reimaged the meaning and potential of the city as a site for Black liberation in the wake of the so-called urban crisis. By examining the ways that artists engaged the

³ James Boggs, *Pages from a Black Radical's Notebook: A James Boggs Reader*, ed. Stephen M. Ward (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2011), 163.

⁴ Saskia Sassen, “Does the City Have Speech?” *Public Culture* 25, no. 2 (March 2013): 221.

city as a symbolic and actual space, it seeks to elaborate how Black Arts practitioners envisioned Black life in relation to and beyond their lived reality. It is especially concerned with the artists' engagement with contested discourses of Black history, community, and representation. This dissertation explores how the city became a site of symbolic contestation in Black Arts movement, a spatial definition of Blackness, and a new grammar of liberation for its visual artists. In so doing, it considers how Black artists drew from but also exceed the Wall of Truth's seemingly straightforward claim to the building on 43rd and Langley and by extension to the city itself. Such claims to the city in the murals, prints, and photographs discussed here were in fact much more tenuous. In re-articulating the meaning and the significance of the city to Black consciousness, these artists presented more fluid notions of Black subjectivity, envisioned eschatological and spatialized ideas of history, and developed complex visual modes for representing Black life.

The Black Arts Movement: Scholarship and Criticism

Recently, curators and scholars in mainstream art institutions have turned their attention to the artists and collectives working in the 1960s and 1970s who explored the possibilities of a Black aesthetic movement connected to the broader struggle for Black liberation. Despite this recent interest, primarily Black artists, curators, scholars, and institutions have conducted research, published scholarship, maintained collections and oral histories, and exhibited the works of this generation. Often, they did so in smaller community-based institutions or in the galleries and collections of historically Black colleges and universities. My ability to access and research the artworks discussed in this dissertation is a result of their careful maintenance and documentation of these objects and histories. The more recent exhibitions and scholarly accounts have brought the political and community efforts of the movement into focus at a time when Black activism has

again seized our attention with the Black Lives Matter movement. As literary scholar Houston A. Baker states, revisiting the Black Arts movement will provide “a vital scholarly bridge toward a productive future” for a creative and politically engaged younger generation.⁵

Major exhibitions have explored the relation between Black artists and 1960s and 1970s socio-political movements, including two exhibitions at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, *Witness: Art and Civil Rights in the Sixties* in 2014 and *We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965–85* in 2017; and *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power*, opening at the Tate Modern in London in 2017.⁶ Other exhibitions have examined the regional character of the movement, such as *Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles 1960–1980* in 2011 and *The Time is Now! Art Worlds of Chicago’s South Side, 1960–1980* in 2018.⁷ These regional examinations of the Black Arts movement have been further bolstered by book-length studies that focus on major urban centers in the U.S. as well as more capacious surveys of the movement nationally, such as two issues of the journal *NKA: Journal of Contemporary African Art* on the Black Arts movement from 2011 and 2012, which republished some of the movement’s central historical texts.⁸

⁵ Houston A. Baker, Jr., “This Bridge Called ‘Our Tradition’: Notes on BlueBlack, ‘Round’midnight, Blacklight ‘Connection’” in *New Thoughts on the Black Arts movement*, ed. Lisa Gail Collins and Margo Natalie Crawford (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 370.

⁶ Teresa A. Carbone and Kellie Jones, ed., *Witness: Art and Civil Rights in the Sixties* (Brooklyn, New York: Brooklyn Museum, 2014); Catherine Morris and Rujeko Hockley, ed., *We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965-85, New Perspectives* (Brooklyn Museum, 2018); Mark Godfrey and Zoé Whitley, *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power* (New York: D.A.P/Distributed Art Publishers Inc, 2017).

⁷ Kellie Jones and Hazel V. Carby, *Now Dig This!: Art & Black Los Angeles, 1960-1980* (Los Angeles: Hammer Museum, 2011); Rebecca Zorach and Marissa H. Baker, *The Time Is Now!: Art Worlds of Chicago’s South Side, 1960-1980* (Chicago: Smart Museum of Art, 2018).

⁸ Important scholarly studies include Lisa Gail Collins and Margo Natalie Crawford, *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement* (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 2006); Kellie Jones, *South of Pico: African American Artists in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017); Jo-Ann Morgan, *The Black Arts Movement and the Black Panther Party in American Visual Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2019); Daniel Widener, *Black Arts West: Culture and Struggle in Postwar Los Angeles* (Duke University Press, 2009); Rebecca Zorach, *Art for People’s Sake: Artists and Community in Black Chicago, 1965-75* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019); *NKA: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, vols. 29 (2011) and 30 (2012).

The renewed interest in the Black Arts movement, however, has not resolved major points of contention for critics, especially its under-developed articulation of aesthetics and politics and crude contours of racial authenticity. When Black Arts scholar Larry Neal declared the Black Arts movement the “aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept” in 1968, he laid claim to the movement’s political project in terms of self-determination: to define Black art on its own terms, to make art relevant to Black people, and to affirm and define a Black racial consciousness.⁹ Unfortunately, the evocation of revolutionary politics has tended to shroud the more visionary role that aesthetics played in the movement. One notable example is a review of *Now Dig This!* by Ken Johnson published in the *New York Times*. For Johnson, the exhibition presented a paradox: the modernist aesthetics of the artworks were misaligned with their explicit or implicit political content steeped in the social upheavals of the 1960s. John Riddle’s raised fist is a “social realist cliché” over and against Johnson’s preferred Duchampian gestures of “deracinated, intellectual mischief-making.”¹⁰ Perhaps unsurprisingly, a wave of responses criticized Johnson for, in their estimation, finding the art by Black Los Angelenos lacking for its inability to transcend the particularities of identity and speak to broader audiences.¹¹ Responding in *Art in America*, fellow critic David Levi Strauss called for a “new critical language” that recognizes the way formalist criticism, per Johnson’s article, unconsciously supports racial hierarchies.¹²

In his call, Strauss returns us to a familiar debate, one that played out between curator Edmund B. Gaither and critic Hilton Kramer over forty years earlier regarding the 1970 exhibition

⁹ Larry Neal, “The Black Arts Movement.” *The Drama Review* 12, no. 4 (1968): 29.

¹⁰ Ken Johnson, “Forged from the Fires of the 1960s,” *New York Times*, October 25, 2012, C24.

¹¹ For an overview of the criticism and Johnson’s response, see M. H. Miller, “Times Critic Ken Johnson Responds to Petition,” *Observer*, November 29, 2012, <http://observer.com/2012/11/artists-and-critics-sign-petition-against-recent-reviews-by-the-times-ken-johnson/> (last accessed May 22, 2022).

¹² David Levi Strauss, “When Formalist Art Criticism Fails,” *Art in America*, April 2, 2013, 38.

Afro-American Artists: New York and Boston. In his review, Kramer described the artworks on display along a continuum of “elegantly executed color abstractions” to “crudely conceived social realism.” Clearly favoring the former, his complaint against the so-called social realist artworks was not that they “impart a more explicit social or political message” or even that they possessed a “vehement illustrational character,” but rather that they lacked *aesthetic affect*.¹³ Gaither responded to Kramer by calling for a “new criticism” that

must recognize the total matrix in which, and out of which, the art comes. Sensitively attuned to the necessary dialogue between art and society, the new criticism would distinguish between effete social realism of the Old Left and the socio-political art of current nation builders.¹⁴

Despite the forty years that separate them, Johnson’s and Kramer’s reviews demonstrate how opposition between aesthetic and social commitments continues to play out in the familiar antimonies of modern art: ambivalence and protest, abstraction and figuration, universal and identitarian. For his part, Gaither acknowledges that though the “socio-political” is integral to Black Arts, we lack the critical frameworks to attend to the more complex Black Arts visual modes.

Chicago-based Black Arts critic and movement leader Hoyt Fuller argued that the standards that many white critics relied upon demanded the erasure of Blackness from the work. His critique was more than an accusation of prejudice. Fuller argued that the definitions of artistic or aesthetic merit were structured to exclude any mark of Black particularity. This fundamental antagonism, which Fuller traces to the structural dependence of white privilege on Black oppression, impedes the recognition of Black life and reception of Black art, resulting in misinterpretations and exclusions from the art historical canon and mainstream institutions.¹⁵

¹³ Hilton Kramer, “Black Artists’ Show on View in Boston,” *New York Times*, May 22, 1970, 34.

¹⁴ Edmund B. Gaither, “A New Criticism is Needed,” *New York Times*, June 21, 1970.

¹⁵ Hoyt W. Fuller, “Toward the Black Aesthetic,” *The Critic* (April-May 1968): 70-73.

Though scholars have characterized the Black Arts movement—its practitioners and its historiography—as primarily a project of racial separatism, their critique ignores Fuller’s astute argument that modern aesthetics are always already structured by racial difference, and that the imperative to erase markers of Black identity does not merely deny Blackness, it obscures the ways that whiteness gains power through its own invisibility.¹⁶ The lack of visibility for Black artists was certainly a concern, as evidenced by the activism aimed at mainstream art institutions for greater inclusion and participation; however, many Black artists were also seeking new forms of art and experience, rather than integrating into existing aesthetic categories and institutions.¹⁷

Though the aesthetic debates of mid-twentieth century seem tired today, their reappearance indicates that high modernist discourse has framed and continues to frame our understanding of the Black Arts movement. For instance, recent scholarship has shed light on long-ignored Black artists working in abstraction. For curator Adrienne Edwards, abstraction offers what “figuration and realism” (associated with “transparency, immediacy, authority, authenticity”) cannot: Blackness as contingent and transformative. Blackness, in this sense, is abstracted from the body and becomes material, chromatic, and sensorial. This critical work reframes the relation between Blackness and modernist aesthetics by moving beyond the racial identities of the artists to a more expansive notion of Black aesthetics that is open and imaginative rather than reductive or essentialist. However, I suggest that rather than rehashing the debate, we need to reexamine its terms to fully consider the particular challenges that raced bodies pose to modernist aesthetics, or

¹⁶ See for instance, Darby English, *1971: A Year in the Life of Color* (University of Chicago Press, 2016).

¹⁷ For accounts of Black activism in response to museum representation during this period, see Susan Cahan, *Mounting Frustration: The Art Museum in the Age of Black Power* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016); and Bridget R. Cooks, *Exhibiting Blackness: African Americans and the American Art Museum* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011).

what Huey Copland describes as the “messy entanglements of Blackness.”¹⁸ Doing so will help us develop a more critical framework for understanding the complex visual experiments of the Black Arts movement practitioners. Black Arts visual aesthetic practices were much more complex than mere affirmation or “racialist representation;”¹⁹ they demonstrated that Black social life could be the material of art and the progenitor of a transformational aesthetics.

Black Aesthetics for a Black Nation

Published in 1971, *The Black Aesthetic* presents a collection of politico-aesthetic treatises that constitutes much of the discourse on Black Arts aesthetics and is emblematic of the contradictions and disagreements among its theoreticians. In fact, the collection does not present a coherent definition of the Black aesthetic. Despite this, critics have received the movement as an artistic expression of the closed ranks essentialism of modern Black nationalism. According to literary scholar David Lionel Smith, defining the Black aesthetic burdened the movement with an ahistorical and untenable racial essentialism rather than a more nuanced and pluralist Black aesthetics.²⁰ The desire for a singular definition parallels the emphasis on Black unity in defense against white supremacy by movement theoreticians; however, as Wahneema Lubiano argues, Black nationalism necessarily entails the “delimiting and representing [of] acceptable or liberatory forms and images.”²¹

¹⁸ Huey Copland, “One Dimensional Abstraction: Review of *1971: A Year in the Life of Color*,” *Art Journal* 78, No. 2 (Summer 2019): 118.

¹⁹ English, *1971*, 9.

²⁰ David Lionel Smith, “The Black Arts movement and Its Critics,” *American Literary History* 3, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 93-110.

²¹ Wahneema Lubiano, “Standing in for the State: Black Nationalism and ‘Writing’ the Black Subject,” in *Is it Nation Time? Contemporary Essays on Black Power and Black Nationalism*, ed. Eddie S. Glaude, Jr. (University of Chicago Press, 2002), 160.

Black Arts nationalism challenges analysis and arguments as to the relevance of the movement today; however, my aim is not to excuse the more problematic aspects of the movement but to consider the ways that visual artists contributed to and reconfigured nationalist rhetoric. By examining specific examples of visual art, I show that Black Arts practitioners did not directly translate the strident proclamations of movement theoreticians. Such an assumption misunderstands artistic movements as a one-way relation in which theoreticians define the project and artists implement it. Rather, artists theorize, test, and negotiate movement ideas when they produce their work. In this sense, the artists were not merely picking sides in an aesthetic debate; they were forging its terms. As literary scholar James Smethurst states, the Black Arts movement was a “series of debates linked to ideological and institutional conflict and conversation rather than a consistent practice.”²² Examining the visual art of the movement will demonstrate more complex narratives of Black nationalist imaginings.

The search for a Black aesthetic was not to define actual territorial or political claims of modern Black nationalism; rather, the artists sought a transformation of Black consciousness that could portend new forms of Black life. In his essay, “Looking Back on the Black Aesthetic,” Simon Gikandi argues that the nationalist impulse underlying the Black aesthetic points to a criticism of the failures of the state to ensure freedom for Black people and signals “the ability to imagine communities outside the domain of the state and to propose the production of subjects who could function in alternative communities.”²³ As such, the project to redefine Blackness was about the psychological liberation of Black people living behind the DuBoisian veil of double consciousness,

²² James Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 57.

²³ Simon Gikandi, “Looking Back on ‘The Black Aesthetic,’” *PMLA* 131, no. 1 (2016): 17.

but in doing so, it promised to create new worlds and aesthetic experiences connected to and affirming Black life. For these artists, those new worlds were imminent in the streets of the city.

Chicago and Modern Black Consciousness

By focusing on Chicago, a midwestern industrial city with a long history of Left labor organizing and Black institution-building, I demonstrate how the city's Black Arts public projects intersected with urban political culture but also exceeded politics proper to engage the city as a spatial imaginary. Though Black artists and cultural workers lived and worked across Chicago, the artists and artworks I examine here originated from the city's largest concentration of Black residents on the South Side. The sites of Black artistic production include the neighborhoods of the historic Black belt, or what is now called Bronzeville, as well as the neighborhoods to the south where Black residents Washington Park and Grand Boulevard, and Hyde Park, a more racially integrated neighborhood.

Among other northern urban centers, Chicago was a complex symbol and site for the formation of a modern Black consciousness. The Great Migration, in which approximately seven million Black Americans left the Southern United States, was a collective form of resistance to the economic obstacles and racial terrorism.²⁴ Their urban destinations in the north and west of the country came to represent "the promised land" as they escaped from the Jim Crow South.²⁵ The arrival of Black Southern migrants transformed northern cities such as Chicago providing new labor for its industrial and service economies and enriching the cultural life of the city. Decades

²⁴ On the Great Migration as an act of resistance, see Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* (New York: Random House, 2010).

²⁵ James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (University of Chicago Press, 1989); Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992).

before the Black Arts movement began, Alain Locke, the intellectual father of the New Negro Renaissance, argued that migration north signaled a spiritual awakening of Black people and the development of an urbane, cosmopolitan racial consciousness.²⁶ Historian Davarian Baldwin describes Chicago's emerging "Black Metropolis" on the South Side in the early decades of the twentieth century as a space where the dynamic social and economic processes of constructing the New Negro played out in public, especially on the "Stroll," Bronzeville's commercial and entertainment district.²⁷ While the most well-known aspects of northern New Negro culture were defined by movement leaders Alain Locke and Charles Johnson as sophisticated and cosmopolitan, securing racial uplift through education and the attainment of property, it was in the civic, community, and commercial spaces of Chicago's State Street Stroll where notions of race pride were negotiated among "old" and "new" migrants.²⁸ Economic and communal autonomy met leisure and pleasure in the Stroll's night life, captured in the surreal style and electric colors of painter Archibald Motley—a predecessor of the Black Arts visual explorations of the city—where Black "expressive behavior" in city streets signaled a new found freedom and articulation of Black modern subjectivity (fig. I.2).²⁹

Despite this newfound economic and communal autonomy in the Black Metropolis, old and new migrants faced difficult living conditions. The Black enclave was hemmed in by the

²⁶ See Alain Locke, *The New Negro* (New York: Atheneum, 1992, original 1925) and Albert Murray on Harlem in *The Omni-Americans: New Perspectives on Black Experience and American Culture* (New York: Outerbridge & Dienstfrey; distributed by E. P. Dutton, 1970).

²⁷ Davarian L. Baldwin, *Chicago's New Negroes: Modernity, the Great Migration, and Black Urban Life* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

²⁸ Henry Louis Gates, Jr. "The Trope of the New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black," *Representations*, no. 24 (Autumn 1988): 129-155.

²⁹ Davarian Baldwin, "'Midnight was Like Day': Strolling Through Archibald Motley's Bronzeville," in *Archibald Motley: Jazz Age Modernist*, ed. Richard J. Powell (Durham, NC: Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, 2014) 47-81; Shane White and Graham J. White, *Stylin': African American Expressive Culture from Its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit* (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1998).

perpendicular streets of Chicago's rationally ordered grid. Sociologists St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, in the 1945 study *The Black Metropolis*, describe the Black belt as a thriving yet segregated and self-sustaining world of its own.³⁰ During the decades of the Black Chicago Renaissance, artists and writers explored Black life in the city shaped and organized into spatial containers such as the kitchenette apartment, the streets and alleys, and the underground.³¹ These explorations tended to emphasize that the confined and crowded spaces of the Black Belt were more than a metaphor for the lack of access to economic opportunity or adequate living conditions, they were expressive of the psychological states of Black people in the city. For instance, painters Charles White and Eldizer Cortor combine figurative social realism with abstract and surreal styles to express the existential angst of Black Chicago residents. The everydayness of confinement is particularly evident in White's 1939 painting *Kitchenette Debutantes* in which two sex workers are framed by the windowsill where they present themselves to passersby we cannot see (fig. I.3).³² The cramped home collapses with the space of work and the social life in the street. Cortor's painting *The Room No. VI* from 1948 depicts four Black figures laying on a bed in a cramped apartment (fig. I.4). Cortor's use of heightened color, layered patterns, and compressed space emphasized the surreality of living in small rooming houses in Bronzeville. In a later interview, Cortor connected the scene in the paintings to the settings of Richard Wright's 1940 novel *Native Son*, which chronicles the undoing of the young Bigger Thomas whose social degradation is

³⁰ St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (University of Chicago Press, 2015, original 1945).

³¹ For an analysis of a similar set of spatial containers—home, street, and underground—in the photography of Roy DeCarava, see Richard Ings, "A Tale of Two Cities: Urban Text and Image in The Sweet Flypaper of Life" in *Urban Space and Representation*, eds. Maria Balshaw and Liam Kennedy (Sterling, VA: Pluto Press, 2000), 39-54.

³² For the most thorough examination of Charles White to date, see Sarah Kelly Oehler and Esther Adler, *Charles White: A Retrospective* (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 2018).

produced through broader structures of confinement and discrimination.³³ In these works, the city came to resemble the confinement and disciplining of Black bodies in the agrarian and anti-modern South on the plantation and chain gang. However, unlike Wright's novel, the vibrant color and expressiveness of the visual works signal a resistant beauty existing simultaneously with the experience of physical and psychological confinement.³⁴

As Chicago's Black population grew in the post-World War II era, the borders of the Black Belt flexed and groaned.³⁵ Returning Black veterans and Southern Black migrants faced housing shortages exacerbated by mid-century slum clearance, urban renewal projects, and federally-funded expressway construction.³⁶ Feeling threatened by an encroaching Black population, working-class white ethnic residents in adjacent neighborhoods sought to shore up claims to their communities, either by enforcing restrictive covenants, popular appeals to homeowners, or through violence.³⁷ All the while, many white families left for newly developed suburbs or neighborhoods on the outskirts of the city where alderman successfully fought the construction of public housing.

Black residents also faced existential threats to their neighborhoods but faced entrenched racism and structural challenges to address them. Urban renewal projects, commonly referred to

³³ Eldzier Cortor and Liesl Olson, "An Interview with Eldzier Cortor," *Chicago Review* 59/60, no. 4/1 (2016): 130–142.

³⁴ I am grateful to my Odyssey Project student, Jajwina Myles, for sharing her insights on this artwork.

³⁵ Arnold Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960* (University of Chicago Press edition. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998); Dominic A. Pacyga, *Chicago: A Biography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

³⁶ The federal government encouraged cities to build interstates as barriers between Black and white neighborhoods. See Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2017).

³⁷ Street gangs had been an active presence in ethnic communities in Chicago since the nineteenth century. They were ethnically-identified neighborhood organizations that operated within the realms of petty to violent crime, extortion, the Democratic political machine, and corruption, became enmeshed in local political machinations. While Irish gangs may fight among themselves, but when they turned east to the Black neighborhoods, they were united. Violence against Black people was both a political tactic and a tactic to stop the integration of ethnic white working-class neighborhoods. Pacyga, *Chicago*; Natalie Y. Moore and Lance Williams, *Almighty Black P Stone Nation: The Rise, Fall, and Resurgence of an American Gang* (Chicago Review Press, 2011).

as “Negro removal,” displaced thousands of Black residents who already faced difficulty finding housing. Michael Reese Hospital and the Illinois Institute of Technology, to the north of the Wall of Truth on 43rd and Langley, and the University of Chicago, to the south, pursued urban renewal projects to buffer their institutions from the Black ghetto. The Lake Meadow redevelopment project (completed in 1960) in the northern part of the historic Black Belt, for example, displaced 15,000 Black residents. Though strong and organized, opposition by Black leaders and residents to the projects failed, and there was a growing sense of a conspiracy (much of which was accurate, to be sure) by white developers and city officials to grab desirable land close to the Loop, dilute Black political clout, and reduce the number Black property owners.³⁸ Along with the construction of the Dan Ryan Expressway and clearance of the Federal Street slum to make way for the construction of the massive high rise public housing complexes Stateway Gardens (built in 1958) and the Robert Taylor Homes (completed in 1962) on the eastern edge of the neighborhood, it would not be surprising if the residents who lived on and around 43rd Street felt besieged from all sides and, in at least some ways, lacking control of their neighborhood’s fate.

Despite persistent if not violent efforts to control the borders of the Black ghetto, Black residents seeking adequate housing pushed south.³⁹ By the 1960s, as those working and middle class residents most able moved farther south, the community areas of Bronzeville became the known as the “Low End,” as in low life, low rent, low street numbers.⁴⁰ Rival street gangs established their presence in the area in the 1960s, and together with concentrated poverty and

³⁸ Arnold R. Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983): 252. Far from passive victims of a changing city, Black civil rights leaders and activists protested overcrowded, segregated Black schools as well as inadequate housing in Black neighborhoods.

³⁹ Mary Pattillo, “Coloring Outside the Lines,” in *The Time Is Now!: Art Worlds of Chicago's South Side, 1960-1980*, eds. Rebecca Zorach and Marissa H. Baker (Chicago: Smart Museum of Art, 2018), 78-89.

⁴⁰ See Mary Pattillo, *Black on the Block: The Politics of Race and Class in the City* (University of Chicago Press, 2014).

joblessness came crime and illicit drug use.⁴¹ The harsh realities of Black ghetto, made vivid in many sociological narratives from the 1930s and on, became the fodder for and confirmed racist notions of Black social disorganization and psychological pathologies, which in turn informed popular opinion and consequential public policy imperatives.⁴² In making the residents of the Black ghetto a constant object of study and analysis, much of social science discourse identified the “Negro problem” as just that: the problem to be solved was the residents of the Black ghetto rather than the larger political and economic systems that structured their oppression. While Black Arts and Black Power activists had a clearer understanding of the political and economic systems that kept Black people oppressed in ghettos, addressing the psychological toll of racism was also crucial to their work, no doubt informed as much by a longer history of ideas about Black psychology—from WEB DuBois and E. Franklin Frazier to Richard Wright and Frantz Fanon—as the contemporaneous cultural narratives in social science.⁴³ Mining urban space as a psycho-

⁴¹ See Pattillo, *Black on the Block*, and Moore and Williams, *Almighty Black P Stone Nation*. University of Chicago researchers identified the corner of Forty-Third and Langley as active and long-standing drug market and hang out for heroin users. See P. H. Hughes, *Behind the Wall of Respect: Community Experiments in Heroin Addiction Control* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977).

⁴² The discourse on poverty and urban Black communities during the twentieth century included a range of methods and frameworks that taken together constitute a series of debates rather than a coherent agenda. See Alice O'Connor, *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy and the Poor in Twentieth Century U.S. History* (Princeton University Press, 2001), especially chapters 3 and 8; and Michael B. Katz, ed., *The Underclass Debate: Views from History* (Princeton University Press, 1993); Robin D. G. Kelley, *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional!: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997). *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (1965), known more commonly as the Moynihan Report after its author Daniel Patrick Moynihan, is the most notorious and controversial example of the “culture of poverty” framework, and was criticized and debated among academics, policy makers, intellectuals, activists, and citizens at the time it was published. The backlash, according to O'Connor, resulted in a shift away from the cultural approach for many social scientists. Also, sociologist Mary Pattillo argues against Wacquant's description of Chicago's Black neighborhoods, or “hyperghettoes” as he terms them, as a “despised and loathed space.” Her “two unreconciled responses” in 2009 to Wacquant's assessment of Chicago as hyperghetto exemplar—“It's not really *that* bad” and “It's much worse and getting more so”—would be appropriate today as well. Mary Pattillo, “Revisiting Loïc Wacquant's *Urban Outcasts*,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 33, no. 3 (September 2009): 859.

⁴³ Daryl Michael Scott, *Contempt and Pity: Social Policy and the Image of the Damaged Black Psyche, 1880-1996* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

social landscape of Black consciousness would take on different valences as the expanding Black ghetto expanded on the South Side.

My aim is not to cite the historical condition of Black communities in Chicago to point to the failure or inevitability of loss; rather, I propose a more complex reading of the relation among Black residents and urban space that follows Katherine McKittrick's formulations of Black geographies in which Black people can claim space in the city but "albeit on different terms that we may be familiar with."⁴⁴ Scholarship that brings together urban geography with surveillance and prison studies has demonstrated the ways that Black communities are subject to confinement and control, providing a critical framework for abolitionist politics.⁴⁵ Scholars have also demonstrated ways that Black urban communities struggle against these spatial controls and articulate Black urban spatial imaginaries. These spatial imaginaries were linked to but also distinct from the projects of institution building.

To claim a burned-out apartment building located in an historical space of segregation and confinement with a guerilla mural project like the Wall of Truth this building suggests what Katherine McKittrick describes as "a sense of place [that] does not neatly correspond with traditional geographies."⁴⁶ Traditional geographies of the Black ghetto resonate with "dislocation and displacement" (34) rather than the ability of Black residents to claim ownership. Narratives of urban modernity have rendered Black subjects outside of or incompatible with its rationalizing and

⁴⁴ Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), ix.

⁴⁵ Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015); Rashad Shabazz, *Spatializing Blackness: Architectures of Confinement and Black Masculinity in Chicago* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017); Brandi Thompson Summers, *Black in Place: The Spatial Aesthetics of Race in a Post-Chocolate City* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019); Loïc J. D. Wacquant, *Urban Outcasts: A Comparative Sociology of Advanced Marginality* (Cambridge, MA: Polity, 2008).

⁴⁶ McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, 35.

efficient forms. These narratives claim that the breakdown of the urban built environment in Black neighborhoods speaks to and parallels the breakdown of social norms among its residents, matriarchal families, loss of moral values, and insufficient work ethic. In response, for Black residents to claim a burned-out building is not merely a defiant if not desperate act in the face of eviction and displacement; rather it is a revision of city as the promised land of Black migration, or the city as a Mecca for Black culture, the place where Black business and intellectual leaders could carve out a sense of autonomy. It is the rejection of traditional geographies of urban modernity, or what McKittrick describes as an "alternative imaginary and real formulations of space and place [that] disrupt and augment existing geographic narratives and maps." (10)

Structure of the Dissertation

This dissertation examines collaborative and collective Black Arts projects produced in Chicago between 1967 and 1971 that engage actual and imagined urban space. Chapter one examines the Wall of Respect and the uses of Black history in relation to and within the city. I challenge the narrative that the representation of historical figures on the Wall aligns it with the social realism of the past. By considering the social processes, materiality and facture, and iconography of the Wall within the context of the built environment of the Black ghetto, I argue that the Wall surpasses earlier examples of Black public history and presents a rupture in modernist ordering of aesthetics and urban space that challenges teleological narratives of history and Blackness. I also consider how the appropriation of the Wall by young activists and a later mural project by Eugene "Eda" Wade's at Malcolm X College demonstrate how historical and racial consciousness can challenge and inform institutions.

Chapter Two follows muralist Mitchell Caton who worked as part of the Chicago Mural Group after the Wall of Respect. I examine Caton's early murals made from 1968 to 1974 to consider how his visions of the city shifted from admonitions against anti-social behaviors towards more abstracted images of Black sociality. I use the Afrosurreal as a critical framework to analyze Caton's murals that merge metaphysical imagery, jazz culture, and psychedelic color abstractions into images of Black nationalistic longing. Chapter Three examines the early printmaking practice AfriCOBRA artists in Chicago. AFRICOBRA artists drew inspiration from the spaces of urban social life to make art for Black people. The collective's early poster-print project was central to their ability to distribute their images more broadly for Black audiences. In translating individual works into poster-prints, the images became more abstract and signaled a realm beyond the confines of the city found in a Black interior consciousness.

Chapter Four examines street photography by Billy Abernathy published in a photo-text collaboration with Black Arts poet Amiri Baraka, *In Our Terribleness*. I challenge the idea that Black Arts street photography communicates ideas about the Black experience that privilege images of young, Black male hipsters and street toughs. Instead, I demonstrate how Abernathy reworks familiar photographic genres and modes of presentation and distribution to reimagine and re-inscribe the so-called Black ghetto as a space of freedom. By interpreting Abernathy's use of abstraction as a strategy to resist realism, I argue that Abernathy's photography imagines the arrival of a city more amenable to the beauty of Black life.

The artists I explore here were reevaluating the meaning of the city for Black life. They questioned whether the conditions of degradation in the modern city could be redeemed through a revision of Black subjectivity and communal life. The works discussed here indicate that the city is not a foreclosed condition but rather malleable in the hands of Black artists.

1. The Wall of Respect, Black Modernism, and the Urban Grid

The black aesthetic will not be handed down from some secluded mountaintop, intact and ready to be used. It will be hacked out of the ghetto, milked from life among the rats, roaches, and tenements that spell reality to our people.

Sheryl Fitzgerald, *Chicago Daily Defender*, 1968

In his 2005 tome on the U.S. Black Arts movement, literary scholar James Smethurst argues that Chicago's Black cultural and educational institutions—publishing houses, art centers, theaters, schools, and workshops—supported the city's burgeoning Black Arts movement and gave it a national reach. He ties Black Chicago's capacity for building institutions to the grassroots political organizing of Leftist trade unionism and Black nationalist organizations.¹ However, Black Arts practitioners in Chicago also explored more experimental and improvisational creative practices in the streets of the so-called Black ghetto, suggesting that a more revolutionary Black collective might form outside of, even if supported by the city's Black institutions. In the following, I explore the intersection of institutional form and the open processes of the street in the Wall of Respect, a collectively produced mural on Chicago's South Side that became a locus and gathering place where Black Arts practitioners engaged the surrounding Black community (fig. 1.1).

In 1967, the Visual Arts Workshop of the Organization of Black American Culture (OBAC) installed the mural on the side of a tavern at the corner of 43rd Street and Langley

¹ James Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), chapter 4.

Avenue.² The initial program painted by OBAC artists heralded a pantheon of Black heroes in a range of fields representing the expressive arts, religion, sports, and politics. In the 1960s, depicting or narrating the lives and accomplishments of Black historical figures would have been a familiar form of Black public history proffered through community efforts and enshrined within Black institutions and organizations. Despite the seemingly didactic subject matter and OBAC's careful planning, the Wall became more than it materially was. During its production and after, the streets around the Wall became a space charged with the presence and activities of musicians, poets, dancers, photographers, street gangs, political leaders, student activists, passersby, hangers-on, and idle children. While OBAC's closed ranks resisted revisions to their initial project, these social processes also activated the mural as an art object open to revision and expansion. Producing the Wall in the street meant accepting and responding to criticism from neighbors. Despite their openness to community input, the Visual Workshop fractured only a month after the mural was initially installed when William Walker invited Eugene "Eda" Wade to repaint Norman Parish's section—an affront that spurred suspicion and hurt feelings. Despite the retreat of the OBAC artists, the mural continued to outgrow its initial scope under the guidance of Walker and Eda with the contributions of non-OBAC artists, sign painters, school children, and neighbors who became involved, often contributing panels or painting on the storefront next door.

Building on philosopher Frank Kirkland's socio-historical framework of "modernism in black," I argue that the Wall synthesizes a positive realization of Black identity (heroes as a form of Black history) and the historical condition of segregation in the modern city (the material realities of the Black ghetto) to create a rupture in urban form where Black people (artists and

² Pronounced oh-bah-see, the name is based on the Yoruba word *oba* meaning royal leader or chief, OBAC "All Purpose Handout" in Abdul Alkalimat, Romi Crawford, and Rebecca Zorach, *The Wall of Respect: Public Art and Black Liberation in 1960s Chicago* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2017), 127.

audience alike) can construct a modern self-consciousness “in black.”³ As such, it operates as both a “self-conscious disenchantment” of Western epistemic and aesthetic paradigms and an affirmation of Black life in the modern city.⁴ Kirkland disagrees with Black intellectuals such as Booker T. Washington and Alexander Crummel who argue that becoming modern requires Black people to turn away from their past of racial enslavement because it is irreconcilable with modernity’s future orientation. Rather, he contends that the legacy of racial enslavement is a historical condition of modern Black experience that is reconcilable with a future vision for Black people. For Black Chicagoans, among other Black urban residents in the north and elsewhere, that legacy is instantiated in the racial segregation that produces the material conditions of the built environment in the Black ghetto. The Wall then constitutes a response to the historical condition of modern Black life in the city that attends to the dignity of Black people while acknowledging their historical experience of racism. The social processes that were generated from the Wall build on, respond to, push against this synthesis demonstrating the tenuous nature of articulating a collective Black self-consciousness.

I conclude this chapter with a consideration of a mural program installed at the newly constructed Malcolm X College on Chicago’s West Side to consider how an insurgent art project in the streets can resonate within civic institution that seeks to affirm Black culture and its heroes. In so doing, I demonstrate how community murals were part of a radical project to construct a Black historical and cultural lineage to challenge the distinction between revolutionary and cultural

³ Frank M. Kirkland, “Modernity and Intellectual Life in Black,” *Philosophical Forum* 24, no. 1-3 (Fall-Spring 1992-1993): 136-165; Frank M. Kirkland, “Modernisms in Black,” in *A Companion to African-American Philosophy*, ed. Tommy Lee Lott and John P. Pittman (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 67-86.

⁴ Kirkland, “Modernity and Intellectual Life in Black,” 81.

nationalisms in the Black Power era. In so doing, I acknowledge the tenuous promise of a modern Black consciousness and its conflicting senses of past and future Black life in institutional spaces.

Community Murals as Material, Iconography, and Social Process

The Wall of Respect instigated a community mural movement in urban centers across the United States that grew out of the urgency of 1960s grassroots political movements and the desire of artists “to regain a sense of relevant interaction with society,” according to the movement’s earliest practitioners.⁵ Since the 1970s, however, the discourse of community muralism has shifted towards a celebration of cultural democracy and the accumulation of iconographies of cultural difference. Chicago-based muralist and educator Olivia Gude criticizes the “conventional ‘cultural pride murals’ that have been diluted and detached from the larger movements of social action.”⁶ While murals can articulate a culturally distinct heritage and identity that carries important symbolic resonance for unified struggle against oppression, too often the culturalist approach to the politics of representation tends to depoliticize critical multiculturalisms and the radical aesthetic practices of community muralism.⁷ As such, the representation of Black heroes on the Wall in particular may be relegated to racial uplift rather than political consciousness.

⁵ Cockcroft, Eva, John Weber, and James Cockcroft, *Toward a People’s Art: The Contemporary Mural Movement* (New York: Dutton, 1977), 19.

⁶ Lucy Lippard quoting and paraphrasing Gude in “Forward to the 1998 Edition,” in *Toward a People’s Art: The Contemporary Mural Movement*, ed. Eva Sperling Cockcroft, John Pitman Weber, and James D. Cockcroft (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998).

⁷ On murals and communal, socio-political identities, see Guisela Latorre, *Walls of Empowerment: Chicana/o Indigenist Murals of California* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008) and Margaret R. LaWare “Encountering Visions of Aztlan: Arguments for Ethnic Pride, Community Activism, and Cultural Revitalization in Chicano Murals,” *Argumentation and Advocacy* 34, no. 3 (Winter 1998): 140-153; and James Prigoff and Robin J. Dunitz. *Walls of Heritage, Walls of Pride: African American Murals* (San Francisco: Pomegranate, 2000). On the genealogy of multiculturalism, see David Theo Goldberg, *Multiculturalism: A Critical Reader* (Cambridge, Mass: Blackwell Publishers, 1994).

Further, critic Lucy Lippard argues that the omission of murals from the discourse of public art signals its incompatibility with the marketplace, which perhaps explains why community muralism has found its academic and pedagogical home in progressive art education programs.⁸ This shift in discourse threatens to erase the radical politics that Black artists in the 1960s and 70s centered and developed in their practices. Re-examining the origins of the mural movement in the Wall of Respect will help recover a more radical history of community muralism and its connections to the Black Arts and Black Power movement, especially in relation to the histories of the so-called urban crisis and efforts to gain self-determination through Black political control of in cities.

Much recent scholarship on the Wall of Respect has given an account of its iconographic program of Black heroes as well as the collective and social aspects of its production.⁹ However, these two aspects of the Wall potentially present an inherent tension in the Wall's meaning and importance. For many scholars, the most compelling aspect of the Wall has been its social processes. The interest is understandable since the hero iconography harkens back to Popular Front muralism (an impediment to its modernist credentials) while the social processes point to more open and experimental artistic practices of participation that are more commonly acknowledged in contemporary art.¹⁰ Along these lines, Rebecca Zorach has effectively argued that the

⁸ The relegation of muralism to the fields of communication or education originated in the movement's early years. According to John Pitman Weber, co-founder of the Chicago Mural Group, several muralists were involved in teaching a practicum course on mural painting at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago that was offered several times in the early years of the group. According to Weber, the painting department at the school was not interested in the course so they offered it through what he remembers as the design department. Interview with the author, August 21, 2015.

⁹ For the most comprehensive account of the Wall including archival materials, see Alkalimat, *The Wall of Respect*. See also, Rebecca Zorach, *Art for People's Sake: Artists and Community in Black Chicago, 1965-1975* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), chapter 1; and Margo Natalie Crawford, "Black Light on the Wall of Respect" in *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement*, ed. Lisa Gail Collins and Margo Natalie Crawford (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2006).

¹⁰ On participation in contemporary art, see Maria Lind, "The Collaborative Turn" in *Taking the Matter Into Common Hands: On Contemporary Art and Collaborative Practices*, ed. Johanna Billing, Maria Lind and Lars

community practices of the Chicago Black Arts movement should be considered part of the genealogy of what today we call social practice art.¹¹ Black Arts practitioners and theorists certainly understood this work to be part of an avant-garde sensibility of the 1960s that critically engaged the everyday spaces of the city. In the months after its installation, *Ebony* magazine referred to the Wall as a “Black hap,” a riff on Allan Kaprow’s experimental art form “happenings,” open-ended, participatory events unfolding often within constructed or delimited “environments” (fig. 1.2).¹² The artists of OBAC’s Visual Workshop included the surrounding community through various avenues of participation: local children guarded paint and scaffolding; Black Arts colleagues, including theater troupes, musicians, and poets, performed at the Wall; activists convened rallies and demonstrations at the Wall; children gave tours and explained the Wall to visitors; street gangs gave their approval and held truces because of the Wall; neighboring shopkeepers shared electricity and eventually offered their storefronts for further painting. These are just some of the rich responses to the production of the Wall, indicating that it was a locus and catalyst for broader articulations of Black expression and identification. However, I also suggest that we need to understand it as a project of Black modernism, which necessarily includes different senses of time and chronology, especially within art historical narratives.¹³

Nilsson (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2007), 15-31; Grant H. Kester, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); Claire Bishop, ed., *Participation* (London: Whitechapel, 2006).

¹¹ Zorach, *Art for People’s Sake*.

¹² “Wall of Respect,” *Ebony* 23, no. 2 (December 1967): 49. According to art historian Judith Rodenbeck, Kaprow’s early environments were constructed as spatial and temporal extensions of urban space and architecture. Kaprow’s created contingent structures and urban detritus as a “critique of consumption and planned obsolescence” in the modern, postwar city (51). OBAC and Black Arts practitioners were similarly critical of technocratic urban planning especially when it involved bulldozing their neighborhoods in the name of urban renewal. In this case, the artists are much more critical of how modern urban space is produced through expropriation (of labor and property) rather than “creative acts of consumption” (49), hence the invocation of Black in Black hap. Judith F. Rodenbeck, *Radical Prototypes: Allan Kaprow and the Invention of Happenings* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2011), especially chapter 2.

¹³ Michael Hanchard notes the “temporal disjuncture” facing Black subjects rendered absent from Western historical narratives. Even in efforts to recover their historicity, Black subjects must grapple with the legacies of racial slavery

Photographers participated in the Wall by installing photographs in its sections and documented the various activities surrounding its production. This documentation is crucial to our understandings of the Wall's social processes, but they are also important as artistic productions in their own right. Literary scholar Margo Natalie Crawford argues that these photographers created layered images of Black people in front of the Wall that juxtapose the coolness and easy lean of street style with the heat of the Wall's impassioned imagery.¹⁴ Crawford's attention to the photographic practices at the Wall reminds us that the mural was a visual artwork connected to acts of self-representation. These photographs demonstrated how integrating the Wall into the everyday sociality of the street, created a resonance with the people who came to stand before it (fig. 1.3). Such visual expressions and performances of collective identification are important for marginalized communities to reimagine and claim urban space.¹⁵ While muralists and their community collaborators certainly thought in these terms, the claim that low-income Black urban residents had to their neighborhood was provisional at best. Though the Black Metropolis in Chicago was framed as a place where Black Southern migrants became modern through the creation of autonomous economies and communities, by the 1960s when the Wall was installed in the historic Black belt, the so-called urban crisis had become evidence of the incompatibility of

and imperialism—a mode of historical time that necessarily enlists them as adjunct to Western modernity. Hanchard argues that theorizing an Afro-modernity requires new conceptions of time and history. Most notably for my discussion here, Hanchard describes eschatological notions of racial time that break with teleological narratives of progress and instead imagine a final confrontation in which injustice is eliminated. Michael Hanchard, "Afro-Modernity: Temporality, Politics, and the African Diaspora," *Public Culture* 11, no. 1 (1999): 252.

¹⁴ Margo Natalie Crawford, "Black Light on the Wall of Respect," 33.

¹⁵ Much of these types of arguments about community muralism combine empowerment rhetoric with some version of Paulo Freire's liberatory pedagogy. I think this is partially the reason that community muralism is taken up more readily in pedagogical discourses rather than artistic ones. For one example of this, see Timo Schrader, "The Colors of Loisaída: Embedding Muralism in Community Activism," *Journal of Urban History* 44, no. 3 (2018): 519-532. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 30th anniversary ed (New York: Continuum, 2000 [first published in English, 1970]). For the ways that Black Chicagoans sought to claim public spaces, see Rebecca Zorach, *Art for People's Sake*, chapter 1.

Black people with the modern, rational city.¹⁶ For Black Chicagoans to occupy, much less claim, urban space requires attention to the ways they sought to affirm their existence within those spaces and the requisite struggle to maintain any semblance of autonomy within them. However, the degraded conditions of the Black ghetto by 1967 begged the question as to whether residents should claim the city or burn it down.

The claim to urban space is also contradicted in the material realities of the Wall, its facture, and the building on which it was installed. In a later account, Jeff Donaldson emphasized that OBAC's appropriation of the building at 43rd and Langley, neglected by the absentee owner, was a revolutionary act itself, as important as the other effects it had on the community.¹⁷ As such, OBAC redefined ownership of the building and the ghetto extralegally. However, the demolition of the building in 1972, just less than four years after it was installed, demonstrates that the artists' claim was an act of contestation met with surveillance and resistance by the political establishment and aided by the police.¹⁸ Romi Crawford and Rebecca VanDiver have suggested that the Wall's

¹⁶ On Chicago's Black Metropolis, see St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (University of Chicago Press, 2015, original 1945); Davarian L. Baldwin, *Chicago's New Negroes: Modernity, the Great Migration, & Black Urban Life* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Christopher Robert Reed, *The Rise of Chicago's Black Metropolis, 1920-1929* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011; and Adam Green, *Selling the Race: Culture, Community, and Black Chicago, 1940-1955* (University of Chicago Press, 2009). The "Moynihan Report" is the most famous document that describes the Black family as a "tangle of pathology." US Department of Labor. Office of Policy Planning and Research, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, by Patrick Moynihan, Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1965). More nuanced studies of the challenges faced by Black Americans in cities include Kenneth Bancroft Clark, *Dark Ghetto: Dilemmas of Social Power* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967). See also, Mitchell Duneier, *Ghetto: The Invention of a Place, the History of an Idea* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2017).

¹⁷ Jeff Donaldson, "The Rise, Fall, and Legacy of the Wall of Respect Movement," *International Review of African American Art* 15, no. 1 (1998): 22-26.

¹⁸ "Wall of Respect' Tumbles Down." *Chicago Daily Defender (Daily Edition) (1960-1973)*, March 29, 1972, 2. The OBAC Visual Workshop dissolved shortly after the controversy over the repainting of Normal Parish's section, just one month after it was installed. The rallies and protests that occurred at the Wall in the fall of 1967 and after attracted the attention of city politicians and police, especially the Chicago Red Squad who engaged undercover police officers and informants to surveille the events and its production. Many people believe that the city targeted it for demolition because of its impact on the political consciousness of the local Black community and its associations with Black Power activists and organizations. Artist's Roundtable, Wall of Respect Symposium, April 18, 2015, School of the Art Institute of Chicago; Eugene Eda Wade, interview with Rebecca Zorach and the author, April 17,

short-lived existence points to how impermanence and ephemerality are inherent to its aesthetic, meaning, and legacy. VanDiver argues that the ephemerality of the Wall as “street art” enabled it to be responsive to the activist politics of the local community and the Black Power movement more broadly.¹⁹ Crawford similarly argues that the Wall “instructs against ...permanence” and has recently proposed that its conceptual legacy counters the static and heroic public monuments that occupy civic squares and represent official narratives.²⁰ In this sense, the Wall embodies the lived experience of community in that it contains the conflicts, negotiations, and investments of multiple stakeholders. I would like to further these arguments about the Wall as ephemeral and anti-monumental by considering a more dialectical relation between its materiality and its social processes. The materiality of the Wall—the panels, mounted photographs, layers of paint that adhere to the architectural contours and improvised, idiosyncratic adaptations of the building—is inextricably tied to the breakdown of the built environment in the Black ghetto as a sign of the incompatibility of Black life in the modern city. The city, not just as site but as material, is central to the understanding the Wall and the ways it was revised and resisted revision.

How can we reconcile the Wall’s experimental social practices and radical public intervention in urban space with its figurative and historical content? It is the iconographical program of the Wall—Black heroes—that challenges its inclusion in the narrative of modern art.

2015; Coordinating Council for Black Power files, Chicago Red Squad, Chicago History Museum archives; Zorach, *Art for People’s Sake*.

¹⁹ Rebecca VanDiver, “Before the Wall Come Tumbling Down: Ephemerality and Chicago’s *Wall of Respect*, 1967-1971,” *Space and Culture* 18, no. 4 (2015): 411-420. VanDiver relies on a definition of street art in her article from Nicholas Riggle that emphasizes ephemerality: “artists willingly subject their work to all of [the street’s] many threats—it might be stolen, defaced, destroyed, moved, altered, or appropriated” and “they relinquish any *claim* on the work’s integrity” (italics in original). The controversy that led the break-up of the Visual Workshop clearly demonstrates that OBAC artists did not intend for the Wall to be open for appropriation or revision. The revisions and ultimate destruction of the Wall certainly reflects the more contingent nature of the street, but the relationship between monumentality and ephemerality shifts (sometimes uncomfortably) throughout its existence.

²⁰ Romi Crawford, ed. *Fleeting Monuments for the Wall of Respect* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota/Green Lantern Press, 2021), 17.

In many ways, the iconography of the Wall is emblematic of what critics charge as retardataire: figurative rather than abstract, populist rather than personal, illustrative and didactic rather than personally expressive.²¹ A desire for affirming representations of Black people is understandable on the face of it, and the study and teaching of Black history as a strategy of racial uplift is an enduring tradition in Chicago, which I discuss further below. However, for critics, Black Arts visual works that represent historical figures or narratives seemed incompatible with contemporary (to the 1970s) painting and instead were associated with the “pastiche of some earlier historical style,” as Hilton Kramer alleged in the *New York Times*.²² Black Arts murals in particular were associated with the WPA and social realism, pitting expedient politics against aesthetic affect.²³ Art historian Elsa Honig Fine, writing in 1971, stated: the “young, militant artists” of the Black Arts movement, “with their boldly patterned murals painted on the decaying walls of ghetto buildings” are:

unlike the middle-class oriented Black artist who has been painting in the mainstream of American art since the 1920's...his major concern is not the aesthetic but the political—to inspire ‘Black unity, Black dignity and respect.’ His paintings are often crude, obvious and primitive—but this is deliberate, for with this approach, the artist believes he is speaking directly to his people.²⁴

²¹ Hilton Kramer, “Black Experience and Modernist Art,” *New York Times*, February 14, 1970, 23.

²² Hilton Kramer, “Art: Portraits by Richard Yarde Evoke Black Heroes,” *New York Times*, March 6, 1976, 13.

²³ This was a common refrain in the late 1960s. Muralist and co-founder of the Chicago Mural Group, John Pitman Weber recalled an exchange with Richard Loving, a professor at the School of the Art Institute where Weber was a graduate student earning an MFA, in which Loving expressed his concern that Weber “following is a very bad path” that will “lead...right back to the WPA.” Weber, interview with the author, August 21, 2015. Similarly, Henri Ghent compared the “polarization of Black culture” to the political and aesthetic failings of Soviet Socialist Realism and Nazi Germany’s strict Aryan aesthetic standards. “The Black Artist, the Black Community, the White Art World,” *New York Times*, June 29, 1969, 129.

²⁴ Elsa Honig Fine, “Mainstream, Blackstream, and the Black Art Movement,” *Art Journal* 30, no. 4 (Summer 1971): 374. Fine’s history of art by African Americans was roundly rejected by Black artists according to AfriCOBRA artist Gerald Williams (conversation with the artist, June 29, 2013). See also, Romare Bearden’s review of *The Afro-American Artist: A Search for Identity* by Elsa Honig Fine in *Leonardo* 8, no. 1 (Winter 1975): 82-83.

In this bald statement, Fine makes clear the ways that the antimonies of modern art—aesthetics and politics, the self and the collective—are structured by class and racial difference. But even more so, Fine asserts that the supposedly crude, illustrative quality of the Black Arts murals was an intentional strategy to make their work accessible to Black audiences. The populism, or “the ‘storefront’ primitivism,” of the Black Arts Movement challenges its status as an avant-garde movement because, according to Fine, the aim of “popular art” is to “educate, manipulate and control the tastes and thinking of the masses.”²⁵

Indeed, Black arts practitioners often embraced didactic and functional forms of art aimed at rousing a Black political consciousness especially among Black urban audiences. However, a closer examination of the Wall of Respect and the early years of the community mural movement led by Black artists in Chicago demonstrates that the murals were not such literal sites of communication or mere protest. Fine’s and Kramer’s comments lay bare the problematic relationship Black artists have to modernism proper. Using African forms to critique and reinvigorate Western aesthetics has been foundational to modernist formal experiments, but reconfiguring aesthetic experience according to the embodied lives of people of African descent and their art forms threatens the purity of its operations as art (or rather, as fine art or modern art).²⁶ Examining the Wall of Respect will help complicate the historiography of modernism by demonstrating how the complexity of its social processes, materiality and facture, and iconography signal the possibility of a rupture its social ordering.

²⁵ For Fine, the “potential danger in the Black Arts Movement” is that “the politicization of art to glorify a people often leads to a society with no art at all” (195) Rather than celebrate, art should point to “a more general crisis, a more universal message” (196). She uses Picasso’s *Guernica* as an example of art that “conformed to prevailing aesthetic standards” (196). Fine, “Mainstream, Blackstream.”

²⁶ Simon Gikandi, “Picasso, Africa, and the Schemata of Difference,” *Modernism/modernity* 10, no. 3 (September 2003): 455-480.

The OBAC Visual Arts Workshop and Black Public History in Chicago

In the fall of 1966, Negro Digest editor Hoyt Fuller, sociologist Gerald McWorter (now Abdul Akalimat), and poet Conrad Kent Rivers gathered in Fuller's Lake Meadows apartment on Chicago's South Side to discern the current state of art in "Afro-America." They would go on to establish the Committee for the Arts, which was later renamed the Organization of Black American Culture (OBAC).²⁷ OBAC was part of a cluster of cultural activities culminating in Chicago in the late 1960s that broadly constituted the landscape of the city's Black Arts Movement.²⁸ These collectives were part of a historical lineage of Black institutions in Chicago meant to support Black artists in a segregated art world. Through this cultural infrastructure, artists could exhibit their work, collaborate with other artists, debate pressing questions, and provide training in art to youth and members of their community.²⁹ OBAC continued this legacy of community engagement inflected with currents of 1960s Black Power politics to theorize a particular version of cultural nationalism, as historian Jonathan Fenderson points out, invested in creative artistic practices (literature, visual art, theater) that did not always intersect with politics proper.³⁰ As membership

²⁷ Other early members were Arna Bontemps, Terry Callier, Margaret Danner, Jeff Donaldson, Ronald Dunham, Brenetta Howell, Bennett Johnson, E. Duke McNeil, Joe Simpson, Diana Slaughter, Donald Smith, George Ricks, and Val Gray Ward. Abdul Akalimat, "Black Liberation: OBAC and the Makers of the Wall of Respect," in Akalimat, *The Wall of Respect*, 97.

²⁸ On the Black Arts movement in Chicago, see Zorach, *Art for People's Sake*; George Lewis, *A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2009); and Rebecca Zorach and Marissa H. Baker. *The Time Is Now! Art Worlds of Chicago's South Side, 1960-1980* (Chicago, Illinois: Smart Museum of Art, 2018).

²⁹ Robert Bone and Richard A. Courage, *The Muse in Bronzeville: African American Creative Expression in Chicago, 1932-1950* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011); Bill Mullen, *Popular Fronts: Chicago and African-American Cultural Politics, 1935-46* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015).

³⁰ Jonathan Fenderson, *Building the Black Arts Movement: Hoyt Fuller and the Cultural Politics of the 1960s* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2019), 7-10.

grew, OBAC instituted four workshops for writers, visual artists, community workers, and dramatists, with each workshop taking a different shape.³¹

The Writers' and Visual Arts workshops were spaces for participants to test out and refine the meaning of art for Black people. The workshops were a forum for presenting and critiquing one another's work as well as for developing a criterion for Black art free from the standards of white criticism.³² In his essay, "Towards a Black Aesthetic," Fuller characterizes their workshops as "deliberately striving" to define the Black aesthetic based on everyday life in the ghetto.³³ Jeff Donaldson joined OBAC in its early days and took the lead of the Visual Arts workshop. In an invitation to artists from June 14, 1967, Donaldson proposed a list of questions for the artists to discuss:

1. Do you consider yourself a Black visual artist, an American visual artist, or an artist, period?
 2. As you were growing up, did you experience a conflict in terms of identity between being a Black man and an American?
 3. Does your work have an intended social purpose or function?
- What do you believe should be the role of the arts in changing the relations between oppressor and oppressed in this country?
- Do you believe that an artist's ethics should be separable from his aesthetics?³⁴

The questions are premised on a debate over the role of the artist in politics of racial equality, and the place of the artist's identity and social commitments in their work. Donaldson poses the questions as an invitation to discuss the terms under which Black artists might unify to shape the

³¹ The Visual Arts and Community workshops did not last beyond 1967, while the drama workshop functioned mainly between 1968 and 1970. The Writers' workshop lasted the longest into the 1980s. See Hoyt W. Fuller, "OBAC—A Year Later," *Negro Digest* (July 1968): 93-94 and Fenderson, *Building the Black Arts Movement*, chapter 2.

³² According to Fuller, there was a persistent awareness that white critics misrecognized Black art and writing because they had incorrectly held it to white cultural standards. Hoyt W. Fuller, "Towards the Black Aesthetic," *The Critic* (April-May 1968): 70-73.

³³ Hoyt W. Fuller, "Towards a Black Aesthetic," in *The Black Aesthetic*, ed. Addison Gayle, Jr. (New York: Doubleday, 1972), 9.

³⁴ Jeff Donaldson, Invitation to OBAC Visual Arts Workshop Meeting (n.d.), Jeff Donaldson papers (unprocessed), 1918-2005, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

answers. According to Donaldson, the artists in the Visual Arts Workshop agreed on a guiding ideology: that the role of art was to uplift Black people through creating images that inspired pride and call them to revolutionary action.³⁵ Coming to an agreement on the terms of an aesthetic philosophy, however, was difficult. Though they found similarities among their artworks, the group was unable to translate individual works by each artist into a stylistic consensus. Unlike theater, dance, and musical ensembles, for example, which require collaboration as a basic condition of production, the visual artists and their methods were steeped in the modes of individual production in which they were trained. Photographer Billy Abernathy invited William Walker to attend the OBAC meetings. Around that time, Walker had been in contact with writer Al Saladine and artist Mitchell Caton about painting a wall at 43rd Street and Langley Avenue.³⁶ He shared his plans with OBAC to paint a mural on the site and invited the other artists to join him. The question as to what a collective of visual artists would produce was answered in the Wall of Respect.

The proposal for a collaborative mural project was embraced by the other OBAC leaders. The project would come to exemplify OBAC's aim to reunite the Black artist with the Black community as it existed in the streets of Chicago's Black ghetto. McWorter, OBAC's self-proclaimed "resident angry theoretician," articulated much of the group's philosophies on "Black experientialism" and "culture and consciousness."³⁷ Black experientialism, as Rebecca Zorach has shown, was the idea that Black people across class lines shared similar experiences of racialization

³⁵ Donaldson, "The Rise, Fall, and Legacy of the Wall of Respect Movement;" Jeff Donaldson, "Upside the Wall: An Artist's Retrospective Look at the Original Wall of Respect," in *The People's Art: Black Murals, 1967-1978* (The African American Historical and Cultural Museum, Philadelphia, 1986, unpaginated).

³⁶ William Walker, interview with Victor A. Sorrell, (Washington DC: Archives of American Art/Smithsonian Institution, 1991).

³⁷ Abdul Alkalimat, "Black Liberation: OBAC and the Makers of the Wall of Respect," in *The Wall of Respect*, 96.

that could become the basis for political and cultural solidarity. To achieve that solidarity Black artists needed to attend to the perspective of the Black community “from below.”³⁸ Only by turning away from integration into an art world controlled by white people and interests, can the Black artist reunite with the Black community and embrace a “Black sensibility” and revalorize Black as beautiful.³⁹

OBAC saw the ghetto, with its already-present expressive culture in the nearby jazz and blues clubs, as an urgent site for intervention. Indeed, the harsh realities of Black ghetto, such as it existed on 43rd Street and made vivid in many sociological narratives from the 1930s and on, became the fodder for and confirmed racist notions of Black social disorganization and psychological pathologies, which in turn informed popular opinion and consequential public policy imperatives.⁴⁰ In making the residents of the Black ghetto a constant object of study and analysis, much of social science discourse identified the “Negro problem” as just that: the problem to be solved was the residents of the Black ghetto rather than the larger political and economic

³⁸ See Zorach, *Art for People's Sake*, 16-22.

³⁹ Jeff Donaldson would later re-articulate McWorter's “Black sensibility” in relation to visual art as “expressive awesomeness” in his 1970 AfriCOBRA manifesto, discussed in Chapter Three. Both concepts draw on the notion that Black people inflect socio-cultural performances (from music, dance, sports, religious worship, walking, and talking) with a kind of style that then transforms that performance for everyone. Jeff Donaldson, “AfriCOBRA 1 (African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists): 10 in Search of a Nation,” *Black World* (October 1970): 85.

⁴⁰ The discourse on poverty and urban Black communities during the twentieth century included a range of methods and frameworks that taken together constitute a series of debates rather than a coherent agenda. See Alice O'Connor, *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy and the Poor in Twentieth Century U.S. History* (Princeton University Press, 2001), especially chapters 3 and 8; Michael B. Katz, ed., *The Underclass Debate: Views from History* (Princeton University Press, 1993); and Robin D. G. Kelley, *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional!: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997). *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (1965), known more commonly as the Moynihan Report after its author Daniel Patrick Moynihan, is the most notorious and controversial example of the “culture of poverty” framework, and was criticized and debated among academics, policy makers, intellectuals, activists, and citizens at the time it was published. The backlash, according to O'Connor, resulted in a shift away from the cultural approach for many social scientists. Also, sociologist Mary Pattillo argues against Wacquant's description of Chicago's Black neighborhoods, or “hyperghettoes” as he terms them, as a “despised and loathed space.” Her “two unreconciled responses” in 2009 to Wacquant's assessment of Chicago as hyperghetto exemplar—“It's not really *that* bad” and “It's much worse and getting more so”—would be appropriate today as well. Mary Pattillo, “Revisiting Loïc Wacquant's *Urban Outcasts*,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 33, no. 3 (September 2009): 859.

systems that structured their oppression. While OBAC and other Black Power activists had a clearer understanding of the political and economic systems that kept Black people oppressed in ghettos, addressing the psychological toll of racism was also crucial to their work, no doubt informed as much by a longer history of ideas about Black psychology—from WEB DuBois and E. Franklin Frazier to Richard Wright and Frantz Fanon—as the contemporaneous cultural narratives in social science.⁴¹

In OBAC’s unpublished “all-purpose handout,” McWorter argues that OBAC’s main goal is to create a “Black process” in which the Black artist creates art with a “Black sensibility out of their relationship with the Black community, who then receive the art within a ‘Black context’” (by which he may mean an autonomous Black space or Black aesthetic discourse).⁴² OBAC realized these directives in the Wall of Respect by choosing Black heroes as its iconographic theme. OBAC defined Black heroes as:

...any Black person who:

1. honestly reflects the beauty of Black life and genius in his or her life style;
2. does not forget his Black brothers and sisters who are less fortunate;
3. does what he does in such an outstanding manner that he or she cannot be imitated or replaced.⁴³

While the criteria indicates a more capacious category that could include any Black person regardless of renown (and in this way the category was aspirational for the Black community), the heroes chosen for the Wall were individuals of note including both historical figures, such as Nat Turner (1800-1831) and Marcus Garvey (1887-1940), and contemporaneous heroes active in their

⁴¹ Daryl Michael Scott, *Contempt and Pity: Social Policy and the Image of the Damaged Black Psyche, 1880-1996* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

⁴² Gerald McWorter, “OBAC: Organization of Black American Culture (‘all-purpose handout’)” in Alkalimat, *The Wall of Respect*, 130 and 149.

⁴³ “What is a Black Hero?” Jeff Donaldson papers (unprocessed), 1918-2005, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

careers at the time, such as Black Power movement leader Stokley Carmichael (1941-1998) and jazz great Miles Davis (1926-1991) (see Appendix A for complete list). OBAC organized the heroes according to categories—Rhythm and Blues, Religion, Literature, Theater, Jazz, Blues, Sports, and Statesmen—that indicate that the liberatory contours of Black history are articulated as much in the expressive arts as in the leadership of the Black church or socio-political movements.⁴⁴ The emphasis on cultural fields, especially music, points to OBAC’s promotion of artists who, as McWorter explains, express a distinctly Black sensibility by “combin[ing] the communal experience and folk culture with technique (disciplined craftsmanship) and a special insight.”⁴⁵ In this sense, the portraits of Black heroes as emblems of Black achievement for the community achieve the “dynamic of synthesis” of high and low culture.⁴⁶

For many Black cultural workers in Chicago, circulating and promoting Black public histories was meant to instruct and acknowledge Black contributions to the United States to compensate for its exclusion from mainstream historical narratives, especially those taught in public-school classrooms. And on the face of it, the Wall participates in this lineage of affirmative historical reconstruction. More recently, Alkalimat suggested that the curricular text *Great Negroes, Past and Present*, first published in 1964 as a primer on historical African American leaders in various fields, was a precursor to the Wall of Respect (fig. 1.4).⁴⁷ In the preface of the

⁴⁴ Lisa Gail Collins perceptively notes the absence of visual artists on the Wall of Respect: “At the same time they signaled their presence through the creation of the mural, the *Wall of Respect* artists missed representing cultural workers like themselves on the mighty and heroic wall.” Lisa Gail Collins, *The Art of History: African American Women Artists Engage the Past* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 7. It’s not clear what conversations, if any, addressed the depiction of visual artists on the Wall.

⁴⁵ Gerald McWorter, “OBAC: Organization of Black American Culture (‘all-purpose handout’)” in Alkalimat, *The Wall of Respect*, 143.

⁴⁶ Gerald A. McWorter, “OBAC Position Paper: Some Ideological Considerations,” in Alkalimat, *The Wall of Respect*, 120.

⁴⁷ Abdul Alkalimat, “Roundtable Discussion with Curators and Artists,” *The Wall of Respect: Vestiges, Shards and the Legacy of Black Power*, Chicago Cultural Center, February 25, 2017.

third edition (1976), the editor David P. Ross situated the initial publication within the context of a growing awareness of the absence of African Americans from text books and the mounting pressure to “implement the teaching of ‘Black History’” in schools. As such, the text was offered as a useful supplement to the established curriculum. Ross emphasized the concern of educators gathered at a meeting of the American Federation of Teachers in Washington D.C. in January 1967 (just months before the Wall was installed in Chicago) on the “historical significance of ‘Black Pride’” as it related to an “Integrated Education” or an education that “reflect[ed] the multi-ethnic composition of the country.”⁴⁸

Words such as “pride” and “respect” certainly intone a concern for putting Black history in its proper place for Black school children whose self-esteem might suffer without its recognition. According to historian Ian Rocksborough-Smith, cultural workers and advocates of teaching Black history in Chicago public schools, such as school teacher and founder of the Museum of Negro History and Art (now the DuSable Museum of African American History) Margaret Burroughs, argued forcefully that “integrating” public school history curriculum will bolster Black children’s positive self-image by affirming Black contributions to U.S. society, which would in turn refute white supremacy and Black inferiority (an important lesson, she notes, for white students as well).⁴⁹ As Rockborough-Smith demonstrates, Black history activism in Chicago included a diverse range of political projects that also included radical-left nationalists, including Burroughs herself, whose many associations with the Communist Party caused friction

⁴⁸ David P. Ross, Jr, ed. *Great Negroes, Past and Present*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: Afro-Am Publishing Company, Inc., 1969), IX.

⁴⁹ Margaret S. Burroughs, “Identity for the Negro Child: Integration of Learning Materials...Now!,” *Negro Digest* (March 1966): 30-36. Discussed in Ian Rocksborough-Smith, *Black Public History in Chicago: Civil Rights Activism from World War II into the Cold War* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2018), chapter 3. Burroughs parallels her argument for integrating public school curriculum with the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education Supreme Court decision that regarded segregation of public school to have “detrimental effects” on Black children.

with the Board of Education.⁵⁰ For this reason, it is important to note that racial uplift and radical politics were not necessarily in conflict but worked together within broader cultural-political projects in the city. In this sense, the Wall encompassed but also exceeded what might seem like mere pedagogical or ameliorative uplift.

At the same time, there was a tension between the impulse to integrate Black history into, or distinguish it from, American history more broadly, and that tension is inherent to the Wall's iconographic program and form. Though parallels between the Wall and earlier WPA precedents like White's mural are apparent, they also differ in important ways that indicate a more complex approach to history and its relation to a modern Black self-consciousness. Historian E. James West, among others, has demonstrated that the renewed interest in Black history in the 1960s spurred an increasing number of scholarly and popular publications and programs that introduced Black history into the mainstream of American discourse.⁵¹ However, historians and intellectuals aligned with modern Black nationalism also articulated, according to Robert L. Harris, Jr., a desire to "extricate" Black history and demonstrate a "distinctiveness that would not be overwhelmed by or submerged to the American saga."⁵² OBAC's Wall of heroes tracks along the latter program of a nationalist, separatist historiography that seeks to define a distinctively Black cultural field. The inclusion of many living heroes on the Wall indicates the movement's sense of urgency around

⁵⁰ For more on Burroughs and radical Left politics, see Mullen, *Popular Fronts*; Oral history interview with Margaret Taylor Burroughs, 1988 November 11-December 5, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Despite Burroughs Leftist political credentials, she did not embrace Black nationalist politics and was openly critical of the cultural nationalist inflections in poetry of the younger generation. According to Smethurst, Burroughs critical support did not hamper her close relationship with Black Arts poet Haki Madhubuti, but rather demonstrates "the continuation of a very personal Old Left-new Black dialogue." Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement*, 198.

⁵¹ E. James West, *Ebony Magazine and Lerone Bennett Jr.: Popular Black History in Postwar America* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2020). See also, Pero Gaglo Dagbovie, *African American History Reconsidered* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010).

⁵² Robert L. Harris, Jr. "Coming of Age: The Transformation of Afro-American Historiography," *Journal of Negro History* 67, no. 2 (Summer 1982): 109.

the arts, culture, and politics of the present moment, but it is not a disengagement with the past or historical figures.

Black Arts practitioners repeatedly expressed the urgency of creating new images to revise aesthetic paradigms dominated by Western cultural values, yet the Wall's program seems to follow a long precedent of narrating history with portraits of notable individuals.⁵³ For instance, an older generation of Black Chicagoans would have recalled Charles White's 1939-1940 mural *Five Great American Negroes*, initially exhibited at the first annual Artists and Models Ball fundraiser for the South Side Community Art Center, a WPA-funded art center and hub for Chicago's Leftist Black cultural front (fig. 1.5).⁵⁴ The mural presented five of the most influential Black leaders, according to a *Chicago Defender* newspaper survey, arranged in a chronological procession that illustrates Black history as a progressive march towards freedom.⁵⁵ White's interest in painting Black history followed the arguments of early twentieth-century Black historians Arthur A. Schomburg and Carter G. Woodson, who established Negro History Week and the Association for the Study of African American Life and History, an organization that spurred and supported local Black history clubs. White believed that the documentation and study of Black history will illuminate the causes

⁵³ In the 1960s in U.S. academe, scholars developed a "new social history" that considered the experiences non-elite people and groups, especially women, racial minorities, and the working class. However, this methodology shifted away from biographies of individuals in favor of examining social processes and utilizing new forms of evidence, such as quantitative data and material culture. Notably, historical biography did not diminish among some feminist historians interested in the unexamined lives of prominent women. A more recent interest in historical biographies (aptly termed "the new biography") informed by feminist and queer theory has revised notions of individual personality to consider the ways that the self is constructed, and how embracing the performativity of identity can challenge as much as confirm normative categories of gender, race, and sexuality, among others. See Werner Conze and Charles A. Wright, "Social History," *Journal of Social History* 1, no. 1 (Autumn 1967): 7-16; Lois Banner, "Biography as History," *American Historical Review* 114, no. 3 (June 2009): 579-586; and Jo Burr Margadant, "Introduction: Constructing Selves in Historical Perspective," in *The New Biography Performing Femininity in Nineteenth-Century France*, ed. Jo Burr Margadant (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 1-32.

⁵⁴ Mullen, *Popular Fronts*.

⁵⁵ See Bone, *Muse in Bronzeville*, 149-150; Sarah Kelly Oehler, "Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow: Charles White's Murals and History as Art," 21-37 in *Charles White: A Retrospective*, edited by Sarah Kelly Oehler and Esther Adler (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 2018).

of current conditions and point the way to a future for Black people. And *Five Great American Negroes* celebrated the five figures pictured as contributors “to the progress of the Race,” indicating that Black historical heroes, so to speak, are those who act in the interests and for the liberation of Black people more broadly.⁵⁶ The Wall’s heroes echo those historical figures, yet while White arranges the figures horizontally to give a sense of linear historical time, the Wall appears more as a capacious grid that can expand in all directions.

Smethurst argues that the Wall eschews narrative as depicted in earlier murals, as in Hale Woodruff’s sweeping *Amistad* murals, or even White’s snippets of narrative framing each figure in *American Negroes*, in favor of portraits of individuals that take on a mythic status.⁵⁷ In comparison, Smethurst argues that the literary arm of the Black Arts movement was largely indifferent to the nationalist inflected interest in Black history. Rather they sought an “escape from history into a mythical counterhistory.”⁵⁸ To transcend the traumatic history of enslavement, Black Arts poetry and drama evades “the fall into history” by conjuring an “ahistorical and transhistorical symbolic African space.”⁵⁹ In a similar sense, the Wall spatializes history as a transhistorical Black subjectivity (or personality, or style) in order to transcend a history rife with both denigrating representations of Blackness and traumatic experiences of enslavement and racism. As OBAC

⁵⁶ “Washington Tops List of Race Leaders,” *Chicago Defender*, October 14, 1939, 23, quoted in Oehler, “Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow,” 26.

⁵⁷ Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement*, 77. In several sections, such as Jazz or Theater, the artists arranged the individual portraits to imply interaction or collective performance, however, they do not elaborate a narrative or context beyond these implied gestures of communing.

⁵⁸ Smethurst, 77. Smethurst notes that Amiri Baraka’s play *Slave Ship*, for instance, resists historical reconstruction in favor of a ritualized, participatory “pageant.” In the play, Baraka transforms the theater into the space of performance, bringing the audience into the production. Through their participation, the audience clarifies their shared Black identity through the cathartic ending in which the audience assists in the decapitation of their white oppressors. On *Slave Ship*, see Kimberly W. Benston, *Baraka: The Renegade and the Mask* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 243-248.

⁵⁹ Smethurst, 79. Here Smethurst uses “space” figuratively; he is not implying that Black Arts practitioners were seeking to establish a bounded territory.

notes, the people who stand before the Wall are joined with the heroic program: “We pay respect to our heroes, we are proud of them, we are proud of you, we are proud of ourselves,” and in so doing invoke a Black collective based in celebratory and affirming images of Black subjects.⁶⁰ The Black viewer can recognize their Blackness heralded on the Wall as a collective image of Black beauty and excellence and, in so doing, “escape” a history or Black identity marked by enslavement. In this sense, the Wall enacts multiple, and seemingly contradictory, ideas about the meaning and use of a Black past in the construction of a Black subjectivity: it simultaneously constructs a Black public history and seeks to redeem it through a radical break with a diachronic Black identity.

However, I argue that the imbrication of the Wall in the built environment of the Black ghetto complicates the possibility of historical transcendence. As noted above, the location for the Wall was proposed by Walker whose motivations for installing it on 43rd & Langley differed from OBAC’s and likely contributed to some of the frictions among the artists.⁶¹ Returning to the

⁶⁰ OBAC, “What is a Black Hero?” in Alkalimat, Crawford, and Zorach, *The Wall of Respect*, 165.

⁶¹ Jeff Donaldson was the leader of the OBAC workshop, and McWorter’s connections to SNCC activists and other militant groups were important, but Walker’s ability to connect with people in the neighborhood was certainly crucial to the success of the project. Unlike many of the artists who contributed to the Wall, he continued to paint murals in urban neighborhoods long after OBAC dissolved. Walker’s approach to muralism was less about discerning a Black aesthetic from the everyday life of the ghetto. He was more interested in a dialogue, or what he frequently described as “artist-to-people communication,” with people in the surrounding community beyond just facilitating the logistics of production. He developed this idea when he was working on murals in West Memphis in 1954. He went out to see a cotton plantation with a photographer from Johnson Publishing (based in Chicago). Upon seeing the laborers chopping cotton, he felt an affinity to them and thought of his own experience growing up poor in Alabama. In a later interview with Margaret Burroughs, Walker describes a strategy of participant observation: “I am constantly observing, listening, talking and learning, trying to understand ghetto street life, realizing that to do so, one has to be there, exposed to the everyday perils of ghetto street life.” Poet Haki Madhubuti calls Walker a “*cultural scientist*, and his images are *footprints* on a road of serious research and production.” For Walker, the public artist lacked the mystique of the avant-garde visionary separate from society. Rather, his labor is visible as he works in the street climbing up and down scaffolding, while the neighborhood watches the creation of the mural proceed step by step. Throughout the process of working in the street among the passersby, the public artist refined his ideas about art through interacting with the people, understanding their concerns and ideas about the current situation, and responding to it in his art. Several artists involved acknowledged that the Wall would have been unthinkable without Walker. Darryl Cowherd in “Wall of Respect Symposium, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, April 2015” in Alkalimat, Crawford, and Zorach, *The Wall of Respect*, 335; Carolyn Lawrence, interview with the author, Chicago, June 30, 2015; Jeff Huebner, “The Man Behind the Wall,” *Chicago Reader*, August 28, 1997; William Walker, “Face to Face: Margaret Burroughs Interviews Bill Walker,” in *Images of Conscience: The*

epigraph for this chapter, Sheryl Fitzgerald describes OBAC's source for a Black aesthetic: "hacked out of the ghetto, milked from life among the rats, roaches, and tenements."⁶² Such a formulation reflects the reality of the lives of the artists who do not have the means to withdraw from society to create, but also their commitment to making work that resonates with their most important audience, the Black community. As noted above, for OBAC, the Black ghetto was not where the "authentic" Black community could be found, but rather the place to begin to build it. As such, it was a richly generative material and discursive site for these artists to innovate forms of Black identification. By siting the Wall in the Black ghetto at 43rd Street and Langley Avenue, OBAC artists produced an early iteration of what art historian Miwon Kwon has described as site-specific forms of public art that mediate the "broader social, political, and economic processes that organize urban life and urban space."⁶³ The Wall is imbricated in the build environment of the Black ghetto; its material and meaning implicates the social, economic, political, and historical processes that constitute the material realities of the ghetto.

Though affirmative in its imagery, the Wall was received outside the ghetto as an antagonism. The stories of surveillance shared by the artists are confirmed by the archives of the Chicago Red Squad.⁶⁴ Armed agents and undercover police surveillance accompanied gatherings

Art of Bill Walker, edited by Victor A. Sorell (Chicago State University, 1987): 4; Haki Madhubuti, "Footprints of a 'Cultural Scientist': The Art of Bill Walker," in *Images of Conscience*, 29 (italics in original); John P. Weber in Eva Cockcroft, John Pitman Weber, and James D. Cockcroft, *Toward a People's Art: The Contemporary Mural Movement* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998); William Walker in Eugene Eda, William Walker, John Weber, and Mark Rogovin, "The Artists' Statement," 1971, Museum of Contemporary Art Archives. See also, Jeff Huebner, *Walls of Prophecy & Protest: William Walker & the Roots of a Revolutionary Public Art Movement* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2019).

⁶² Sheryl Fitzgerald, "Chicago's Black Artists: A New Breed," *Chicago Daily Defender*, August 17, 1968, 2.

⁶³ Miwon Kwon, *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2002), 3. In many ways, the Wall does not easily fit into the discourses of public art as discussed by Kwon, the vocabulary for which draws on notions of democracy and egalitarianism, or the very institutions and processes from which residents of the Black ghetto have been historically excluded. Meanings of "the public" shift when Black people claim space in it or protest in ways that is coded as criminal.

⁶⁴ The Chicago Red Squad files are notoriously filled with inaccurate, conflicting, biased, and even banal information about Black street gangs, artists, and other cultural workers. Additionally, the ethics of using such

at the Wall called for by civil rights or Black Power organizations.⁶⁵ The city government understood the Wall to be a flashpoint not merely for Black racial pride but of Black Power activism. In this sense, the Wall is another indicator of the ways that Black subjects and forms of Black collective life are perceived as incommensurable with democratic citizenship and participation in the public sphere. OBAC was certainly seeking a coherent Black constituency of its own (the inherent contradictions of which become clearer in the end) and in this sense re-constituting the street, what urban sociologist Saskia Sassen describes as an unruly and un-ritualized urban space, as a site where Black people can become visible to one another.⁶⁶

The Wall: Structure and Material

Looking closely at the structure and materiality of the Wall, it is apparent that rather than treating the building as mere surface, the design for the mural incorporated the building's features: the jutting oriel window, side door, boarded-up windows, and vertical-horizontal contrast of post and lintel.⁶⁷ OBAC chose the design by Sylvia Abernathy (Laini), a graphic designer who also

materials as a source for academic research are complex. What these records mostly confirm is that the Chicago Police infiltrated and surveilled U.S. citizens without just cause or warrants, violating their rights and seeking to cause dissension in their ranks. Here the records are useful to understand the occurrence of certain activities of the groups under surveillance (often corroborated by contemporaneous newspaper accounts) even if they provide little accurate and useable information about the groups themselves. Chicago Red Squad, Chicago History Museum Research Center. For more on Red Squads and FBI surveillance in Chicago and elsewhere, see Frank J. Donner, *Protectors of Privilege: Red Squads and Police Repression in Urban America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

⁶⁵ Many participants recalled police surveillance, harassment meant to sow discord in the group, and snipers on the rooftop around the Wall during events. Eugene "Eda" Wade, interview with the author, April 17, 2015; Cockcroft, *Toward a People's Art*.

⁶⁶ Saskia Sassen, "Does the City Have Speech?" *Public Culture* 25, no. 2 (2013): 209-221.

⁶⁷ The attention to architectural features is not necessarily unique to the Wall or Abernathy's design: "The postulate from which the mural painter starts is not of his own choice; he is bidden to work inside the mineral landscape sung by Baudelaire, where organic forms and the *"beau désordre"* of nature or of passion have given way to a rational order, grooved to architecture. Architecture, as its habitat, conditions mural painting." Jean Charlot, "Public Speaking in Paint," *American Scholar* 10, no. 4 (Autumn 1941): 456. I am grateful to John Pitman Weber for sharing this essay with me.

created jazz album covers for Delmark Records and the layout for the photo-poem book *In Our Terribleness* (discussed in Chapter Four). Her design effectively addressed the practical challenge to create a coherent artwork that incorporated OBAC's long list of heroes and a contribution from each OBAC artist. In a schematic of the Wall's layout by art historian Georg Stahl, Abernathy's overall strategy appears to divide the façade by blocking out sections with solid fields of color, dividing the wall horizontally at the story level (fig. 1.6). According to Wadsworth Jarrell, Abernathy's use of color in the layout informed the colors the artists were to use in their sections:

We had colors going all the way through it. Just breaking it up into sections in colors. Just lines, you know. And then she would sort of suggest which colors go in each spot. You know, and some was full color, some was limited color and this kind of thing. And we just got up there and started painting.⁶⁸

The second story is primarily painted in a wash of white paint, except the oriel window that alternates in blue and green, and the window at the right painted blue. The undulation in the building's surface created by the slight recession of the boarded-up windows at the second story level creates a rhythm that punctuates the stark white background.

In the overall design, Abernathy also used blocks of color to divide the wall into sections but also to connect them. The blocking divides the first story program into four sections and creates different relationships among them. Interestingly, the sections are not equal in size or format—the Theater section has a vertical orientation while the Religion section is lower and has a horizontal orientation, for instance (fig. 1.7). The color blocking allows the viewer to see the sections as distinct and the entire program integrated into one, as well as sections in relation to each other. On the right side, a large block of red delineates the Theater section and then appears again below the

⁶⁸ Wadsworth A. Jarrell, Sr. (The HistoryMakers A2001.044), interviewed by Julieanna L. Richardson, May 20, 2001, The HistoryMakers Digital Archive. Session 1, tape 3, story 1, Wadsworth Jarrell continues his discussion about the Wall of Respect.

second story level to the left just above the Religion section. The read appears again on the far left in Rhythm and Blues, effectively unifying the first-floor program. At the same time, the darker tone of the red and the black background of the Literature section to the left, in contrast to the lighter white background on the left side, splits the composition in half. However, the register of alternating black and grey squares simultaneously connects the two middle sections (Religion and Literature) which demonstrates the ways the design negotiated the need to make the program coherent while also allowing the viewer to look at individual or groups of sections together. In this sense, the blocking is a kind of *quadri riportati* that organizes the mural sections within a mix of contending architectural elements (windows, doors) but in a much more complex relation between each part and the whole. As such, the spatial organization of the mural responds to and incorporates the architecture, and in so doing, it does not efface the building but rather reorders it. The underlying geometry of the building that coheres the mural despite each section's distinct style.

Each artist approached the organization of their section differently, responding to its architectural features. Several of the artists played off the windows in their compositions, using them as framing devices that help to organize and delineate separate portraits. On the first story, Barbara Jones-Hogu used the large window recession on the first story to frame a large portrait in the Theater section (fig. 1.8). To the right, she groups the remaining six figures into two groups; one group seems to be standing in front of the Wall in conversation, indicating a way for the Wall's viewers to engage with the Wall as a conversation piece. The Rhythm and Blues, Religion, and Literature sections were painted on flat uninterrupted surfaces on the first story (fig. 1.9). Jarrell reinforces the flatness of the wall by playing with scale depth to create a densely packed composition of figures. He deftly unifies the composition by repeating painterly lines throughout to give the scene the energy of a musical performance. In Religion to the right of Jarrell's section, and in

contrast to its flatness, Walker uses overlapping figures and receding lines to organize his figures in a sense of space that dissolves the wall even as he paints architectural elements to organize the composition (fig. 1.10). The Literature section was smaller than the others on the first story. Edward Christmas suspends portraits of writers in a field of black paint, below them the blackness blurs with painterly brushstrokes and becomes the text of LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) poem, *S.O.S.*, on a white ground; it begins: “calling Black people / calling all Black people...” (fig. 1.11). A large profile of W. E. B. DuBois brackets the section on the left, and a photograph of Jones by Darryl Cowherd is affixed above the painted section. Armed raised on a lectern, his head is pitched forward towards a microphone as if he is reciting the poem painted below.

The second story level includes the densely packed Jazz section with twelve portraits, including a photograph of Sarah Vaughn by Billy Abernathy (fig. 1.12). Donaldson and Elliot Hunter surround the recess of the window frame with painted portraits. The windowsill and side of the window mimic the keyboard and frame of an upright piano played by Thelonius Monk. He seems to play along with a band—drums, trumpet, upright bass, and saxophone—whose figures dissolve into abstract shapes reminiscent of Donaldson’s watery gouache paintings. The Sports section is installed across the oriel window. The main panel includes Muhammad Ali, arms raised triumphantly, around him fans and on-lookers are gathered next to him to emphasize the spectacle of his athletic mastery (fig. 1.13). In the second panel, the athletes’ bodies are in motion, turned in different directions as if to assume their place of triumph in a silhouette that mirrors Ali. The Statemen section is one of the largest on the Wall (fig. 1.14). Though it contains multiple windows, it lacks the color block painting of the other sections, however Norman Parish staggered portraits in varying sizes, within and between the window frames, connected by areas of color.

Zorach has described the collective composition of the Wall as a kind of collage, a compositional aesthetic that resonates with accumulating fragments of Black life to reconstruct a historical narrative, for instance, in the collecting practices of Burroughs at the Ebony Museum or in the collaged “5,000 Year Negro History and World Pictorial Packet” of pan-Africanist F. H. Hammurabi.⁶⁹ The Wall’s accumulation is truly multi-media, incorporating painting, photography, and poetry on its surface as well as the performances and community responses to the mural.⁷⁰ I want to extend the idea that the Wall is a kind of accumulation of Black imagery, however, I argue it is not delimited by the edges of a representational space but rather extends that space, registering as a kind of rupture, but is ultimately expansive. This expansion of the Wall beyond the building is inherent to the Wall’s design, execution, and revisions. Abernathy attends to the structure and design of the nearby buildings by integrating them into the design of the Wall. Abernathy incorporates elements of the one-story storefront façades to the south in the layout of the Wall of Respect. The non-descript design of the three stores is typical of early twentieth-century facades in Chicago. As with many commercial corridors that sprung up during the 1910s building boom in Chicago, 43rd Street commercial spaces wrapped around onto Langley, a residential street. Originally, the storefronts would have had windows framed to the top of the door, and then a continuous row of clerestory windows below the cornice. In a photograph taken when the painting of the Wall was just getting underway, the three storefronts on Langley adjacent to the mural—a repair shop, the unmarked home of the Southside Community Relations and Projects Organization (4307 S. Langley), and a church—show signs of minimal upkeep (fig. 1.15). The clerestory

⁶⁹ Zorach, *Art for People’s Sake*.

⁷⁰ Literary scholar Daniel Punday argues that BAM multimedia practices, similar to other 1960s “intermedia” practices, resist categorization and assimilation by art critics and institutions, but also that multimedia more vividly expresses the experience “out of how one lives” forestalling the alienation between audience and art inherent to the technical specialization of medium-specificity. Daniel Punday, “The Black Arts Movement and the Genealogy of Multimedia,” *New Literary History* 37, no. 4 (Autumn 2006): 791.

windows have been replaced with opaque (possibly plywood) panels, a cheaper alternative to replacing glass. Abernathy includes a register of alternating Black and grey squares at the top of the first story of the building, incorporating a small window on the Wall and echoing the square clerestory windows from the neighboring façades. In this sense, Abernathy utilizes the geometry of the grid, as architectural and infrastructural form, to integrate the Wall into the built environment and vice versa.⁷¹

The newsstand, painted by Carolyn Lawrence after most of the OBAC artists finished their sections, is notable as one of the first innovations on OBAC's initial design for the mural.⁷² It is not accounted for in Abernathy's design and the late addition meant that Lawrence had to work primarily alone and rather quickly to finish her section.⁷³ For the dance theme, Lawrence decided to paint abstract, silhouetted figures and designs inspired by African sources. The straightforward composition allowed her to complete her section in a few days.⁷⁴ Lawrence, like many of the OBAC artists, did not live in the neighborhood, but had met Donaldson when she was a substitute teacher at Marshall High School where he was an art teacher.⁷⁵ The newsstand then was part of the extension of the original plan and one of the contributions by artists and neighbors alike that connected its process of production to the sociality of the street but also to other networks of Black Chicago artists (fig. 1.16). Other additions to the mural linked it to the surrounding environment.

⁷¹ For more on the grid, see Hannah Higgins, *The Grid Book* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009).

⁷² Though the newsstand was not part of Abernathy's original design, OBAC later included it in their documents pertaining to the Wall. These documents only note the artist's name and not the subject. "Black Heroes" handout, in Alkalimat, *The Wall of Respect*, 166.

⁷³ In addition to Lawrence's newsstand, Roy Lewis installed a photograph of choreographer and dancer Darlene Blackburn in the Theater section. Alkalimat, *The Wall of Respect*, 59.

⁷⁴ Carolyn Lawrence, interview with the author, June 30, 2015. Exhibition forms show that AfriCOBRA members who worked on the Wall lived in neighborhoods south of Bronzeville. Box 2 of 14 (unprocessed), Jeff Donaldson papers, 1918-2005, bulk 1960s-2005, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

⁷⁵ Carolyn Lawrence, interview with the author, June 30, 2015.

Donaldson helped Johnny Ray, the owner of a neighboring shop, for instance, repaint his façade with the assistance of Florence Hawkins, who added a portrait of Duke Ellington and Dick Gregroy (fig. 1.17).⁷⁶ In this sense, it merged with and heightened the street's rich visual landscape filled with hand-painted commercial signs and murals on storefront churches.⁷⁷ With the artistic contributions of non-OBAC artists, sign painters, school children, and neighbors who became involved, the mural outgrew its initial scope.

Ultimately, the disagreements that led to the dissolution of OBAC's Visual Workshop happened somewhat quickly, just weeks after the artists finished painting it. There are multiple versions of how the disagreements unfolded and led to the end of OBAC. According to accounts by Donaldson, Wadsworth Jarrell, and Norman Parish, the split occurred when Walker invited Eda to repaint Parish's Statesmen section—a unilateral action that signified Walker's appropriation of the collective work.⁷⁸ Perhaps more visibly, Eda's revision of the Statesmen section was graphically more striking, breaking with Abernathy's original design that balanced high-key and low-key scenes. He repainted the section black with a raised fist with flickers of paint like light emanating from above and around the portraits of H. Rap Brown and Stokely Carmichael (fig.

⁷⁶ Alkalimat, *The Wall of Respect*.

⁷⁷ Photographer Bob Crawford recalled that at the time, the streetscape in the area was more visually rich, filled with hand-painted storefronts. Bob Crawford and Margo Natalie Crawford, "Intergenerational Dialogue," *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 30 (Spring 2012): 135.

⁷⁸ The tension over who can speak for and claim the Wall reverberated when Eda's Malcolm X painting appeared on the Wall with his signature. The OBAC artists had decided that none of the artists would sign their work to emphasize its collective production. Eda claims that the painting of Malcolm X was created and exhibited at Myrna Weaver's gallery before he was invited to paint on the Wall, so he signed it as he would any other individual painting he made. After it appeared on the Wall, other artists returned to the Wall to add their signature, purportedly to deny other artist's claim to their work and protect it from meeting the same fate as the Statemen section. Though Walker expressed regret about how the situation was handled, he later rejected the above account, recalling in 1971 that the OBAC artists "split from the community" while he stayed and asked Eda to repaint Parish's section which he believed to be unfinished. "William Walker Discusses the Wall: Chicago Mural Group Conversation, 1971," Alkalimat, Crawford, and Zorach, *The Wall of Respect*, 310; Donaldson, "The Rise, Fall, and Legacy of the Wall of Respect Movement;" Donaldson, "Upside the Wall;" Eugene Eda Wade, interview with Rebecca Zorach and the author, April 17, 2015. Norman Parish III, "Wall of Respect: How Chicago Artists Gave Birth to the Ethnic Mural," *Chicago Tribune*, August 23, 1992, 10.

1.18). Such a powerful and striking image broke with the more affirming version that OBAC initially planned. Walker also repainted his section after Elijah Muhammed requested that his image be removed from the Wall.⁷⁹ With these initial revisions, the imagery of the Wall shifted from heroes to more militant imagery in connection with the struggles facing the community on 43rd Street, and affront to OBAC original intention.

In many ways these disputes indicate the difficulties inherent to collaborative, community-based projects. Consensus is often elusive. Despite intensive planning, the Wall was susceptible to intervention and became a much more open and unwieldy project than OBAC's bureaucratic documents and processes would suggest. While careful plans were made to integrate contributions from different artists, there was less of a sense of how the community might participate and contribute other than as a receptive audience. Though neighbors surrounding the Wall felt empowered to speak back to the artists about what they are making—the most direct example came from a neighbor instructing Donaldson to repaint his depiction of Nina Simone: “I got to look at that ugly mothafucka you just painted every day”—there was no structured engagement with surrounding neighbors.⁸⁰ Regardless, many felt and still feel they have their own claim on the Wall. The ongoing disagreements among the artists were more recently on display at a 2015 symposium at the Art Institute of Chicago that gathered most of the surviving participants to discuss its legacy and their disagreements over how its history is told continues today. My task here is not to resolve these disagreements, but to point to the multiple meanings that the Wall came to hold for the Black Arts practitioners in Chicago.

⁷⁹ “William Walker Discusses the Wall: Chicago Mural Group Conversation, 1971,” in Alkalimat, Crawford, and Zorach, *The Wall of Respect*, 307-312.

⁸⁰ Jeff Donaldson quoted in Margo Natalie Crawford, “Black Light on the Wall of Respect,” in *New Thoughts*, 26.

Despite the dissolution of the Visual Workshop, Walker and Eda continued working on the Wall, returning to repaint sections several times before the building was demolished by the city in 1972.⁸¹ Before the Wall was demolished, Walker and Eda expanded the project to a building across the street following a fire that rendered the apartments uninhabitable. Titled the Wall of Truth, Walker and Eda, along with other artists and school children, focused more on the struggles facing people in the community—poverty, hunger, police surveillance and brutality, and racist violence (fig. 1.19). The Wall of Truth would meet the same fate as the Wall of Respect. Before its demolition, Eda helped move some panels to the newly constructed facilities for a city college on the West Side that primarily served Black students.⁸² Among other artists across the city, Eda would continue painting murals in the city, spending two years in the city college on an ambitious program of murals doors.

From Revolutionary Art to Institutional Culture

To conclude my analysis, I want to briefly consider the mural program installed in Malcolm X College by Eda following his work on the Walls of Respect and Truth. The connections between the two projects—one insurgent and the other institutional—demonstrate how an affirmative iconography of Black history and culture functions in different contexts. To do so requires understanding the role of youth activism in both projects. The social processes that occurred around the Wall during its production and in the months after, inform how we understand its meaning and importance to its intended audience. During the summer and fall of 1967, the streets around the Wall became a gathering place for a range of activities including performances, political

⁸¹ See also, Rebecca Zorach, “Conflict and Change on the Wall,” in Alkalimat, *The Wall of Respect*, 272-281.

⁸² “Wall of Truth moved to a new site,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 4, 1971, W11.

rallies, protests, tours, and visits from Black cultural dignitaries.⁸³ These engagements with the Wall activated its visual and material facture, and 43rd Street and Langley Avenue became the locus and expression of a community identity. That street corner, and others like it, was already the site of an existing social network of neighbors, street gangs, nightclubs, and the formal and informal commercial activities centered on 43rd Street. In this sense, the Wall became part of and amplified an already-active collective social life where residents negotiated identities and senses of belonging. The Wall's existence depended also on local support of street gangs and militant Black youth organizations who authorized the Wall, drew truces to ensure its protection, helped secure the paint and scaffolding and determine which heroes were acceptable and those which were not.⁸⁴ The Wall also became a significant gathering point for activist groups, which sometimes included the youth affiliated with street gangs. As an emblem of Black pride and insurgent occupation of the city, the Wall became the perfect backdrop for rallies and street protests. This also heightened a sense that the Wall would be place where residents would challenge the power of the city's political establishment.

For Black youth in Chicago, the Wall was more than a site of protest; it dovetailed with youth activism that drew on Black racial pride and the study of Black history. Historian Andrew Diamond notes the prevalence of Black student groups that formed "history clubs" that merged

⁸³ Performances by AACM, Darlene Blackburn, Kuumba Theatre occurred during the Wall's production and at its dedication. Poetry was written for and read at the Wall by Gwendolyn Brooks and Haki Madhubuti. Valerie Maynard, Nina Simone, and Larry Neal visited the Wall. After its installation, the Wall was a stop for mural tours such as those organized by the MCA in conjunction with the 1971 *Murals for the People* exhibition. "Mural Tour," Murals for the People folder, Exhibition Records, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago Library & Archives.

⁸⁴ Herbert Colbert, a former gang member and leader of the 43rd Street Community Organization primed the Wall for the OBAC artists. Photographs of Herbert at the Wall by Roy Lewis are in Alkalimat, *The Wall of Respect*, 223, and by Billy Abernathy in *In Our Terribleness: (some Elements and Meaning in Black Style)* Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970). According to several artists, militant factions in the area would not allow Martin Luther King, Jr. on the Wall. Eugene Eda Wade, interview with Rebecca Zorach and the author, April 17, 2015; William Walker, interview with Victor A. Sorrell, June 12 and 14, 199, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

the study of Black history with political education and a Black racial consciousness 1960s Chicago.⁸⁵ One such group was the Young Militants, a local youth organization that OBAC acknowledged for their support of the Wall.⁸⁶ Just a few weeks after the OBAC artists finished painting the Wall, Amar Yaree, a leader of the Young Militants and direct action coordinator for SNCC, organized a rally at the Wall on September 14, 1967 in response to an incident of police brutality at nearby Forrestville High School, after which one student went to the hospital with injuries and several others were arrested.⁸⁷ Appearing together before the Wall, the young activists articulated their struggle—related to current conditions facing Black youth, especially racism, poor conditions in majority Black and brown high schools, and police brutality—in ways that expressed a Black historical consciousness.

As historians Dionne Danns and Martha Biondi have shown, Black youth movements in Chicago included students affiliated with a variety of organizations including school-based student organizations including “Afro-American history clubs,” Black Power organizations such as SNCC and the Black Panthers, and street gangs, with members having multiple, coexistent memberships and leadership roles.⁸⁸ Despite the diversity of these organizations, some rivaling others in terms of organizing and prominence, student-led activism in high schools and community colleges on the South and West Side emphasized community control informed by the political rhetoric of Black Power. Disaffected with the failures of the Civil Rights movement in the North, most

⁸⁵ Andrew J. Diamond, *Mean Streets: Chicago Youths and the Everyday Struggle for Empowerment in the Multiracial City, 1908-1969* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 286.

⁸⁶ Alkalimat, *The Wall of Respect*, 165 and 169.

⁸⁷ Diamond, *Mean Streets*, 285. Dave Potter, “Gangs, Militants Spark Street Melee at School: Trouble Follows a ‘Wildcat’ Boycott at Forrestville High,” *Chicago Defender (National Edition)*, Sept. 16, 1967, 1.

⁸⁸ Martha Biondi, *The Black Revolution on Campus* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); Dionne Danns, *Something Better for Our Children: Black Organizing in Chicago Public Schools, 1963-1971* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

recently by Martin Luther King Jr.'s failed 1966 campaign in Chicago to support local efforts to desegregate schools and housing, Black student activists consolidated their advocacy around community control and funding for schools in their neighborhoods, including hiring Black administrators, teachers, and counselors and expanding the curriculum to include Black history. High school student leaders coordinated protests, walk-outs, sit-ins, boycotts, and marches to the Board of Education downtown beginning in September 1968.⁸⁹

Even though students were fighting for curricular and institutional changes, the emphasis on Black history and racial consciousness seemed superfluous to an older generation of Black activists who focused on economic and political gains for Black Americans. However, political mobilization by groups like the Young Militants, who defined their aims as primarily pedagogical, alongside their participation with the Wall and its subsequent use as a symbol and space for their protests, suggest that the distinction between culture and politics are not so clear.⁹⁰ For these students, Black history was a defense against the official histories that excluded them and served as an indicator of what the possibilities for their future might be. It was a tool of identity-formation, to define Blackness as part of a lineage of greatness as well as struggle. For organizations like the Young Militants, the Wall was a visual, material, and spatial articulation of Blackness that could produce “presence,” as sociologist Saskia Sassen argues, or the way Black activists engage power in the streets enables them to become visible to one another and practice new forms of politics

⁸⁹ Diamond, 291. See also, Davarian Baldwin, “‘1968 was Such a Pivotal Year’: The Art and Activism of Black Power Chicago,” in Rebecca Zorach and Marissa H. Baker, *The Time Is Now! Art Worlds of Chicago's South Side, 1960-1980* (Chicago, Illinois: Smart Museum of Art, 2018), 46-59.

⁹⁰ Baynard Rustin famously argued that Black Power was a psychological solution to an economic problem. Diamond, 293. For more an overview of political and cultural liberation in the Black Power Movement see Peniel E. Joseph, “Black Liberation Without Apology: Reconceptualizing the Black Power Movement,” *Black Scholar* 31, no. 3-4 (Fall/Winter 2001): 2-19; and Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), chapter 6.

beyond the integrationist investments in citizenship in a nation that has historically and continually marginalizes them.⁹¹

If, according to Diamond, most high school students participated in protests in response to the day-to-day indignities experienced at the hands of school administrators and police rather than due to any ideological commitment to Black cultural pride, the young activists at the city's junior colleges were much more informed by revolutionary rhetoric in their articulation of their demands.⁹² Student activists at Crane Junior College on the West Side demanded more than high school students who wanted an expansion of Black history courses and the addition of Black faculty: Crane students wanted Black history integral to the curriculum of the entire school. Their activism remade Crane into Malcolm X College, an institution that would support its majority Black student body in their academic success. To become more relevant and accessible to the surrounding community, the college instituted a policy of open enrollment, provided support for remedial skills while students took courses for credit, and offered courses that would keep students on track to earn an associate's degree and enable them to transfer to a four-year institution.⁹³ With new Black leadership under president Dr. Charles G. Hurst, Jr., a new school song composed by Phil Cohran, a founding member of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians and the director of the Afro-Arts Theater, and a student handbook that announced "Education, Liberty, Unity" illustrated with a pen, a gun, and two hands clenched together in solidarity, the

⁹¹ Saskia Sassen, *Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006), 276.

⁹² Biondi, *The Black Revolution on Campus*, chapter 3.

⁹³ Chesly Manly, "Dr. Hurst's 'Revolution' at Malcolm X," *Chicago Tribune*, January 4, 1970, A1.

college appeared to meet student demands for cultural competency, even if Hurst resisted student demands for shared governance (fig. 1.20).⁹⁴

The construction of Malcolm X College's new building on West Van Buren Street coincided with the impending demolition of the Wall of Truth.⁹⁵ Eda worked with Rosa Moore, projects coordinator at Malcolm X College, to install more than 35 painted panels from the Wall of Truth in front the college (fig. 1.21).⁹⁶ That same year, Moore invited Eda to paint the inner-staircase doors in the new building. Following the 1971 *Murals for the People* exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Eda spent the next two years as an artist-in-residence at the city college painting sixteen sets of doors in the interior staircases of the building. The new building was designed by Gene Summers, a protégé of Mies van der Rohe, and the staircases were located within the central core of its modernist design.⁹⁷ The interior spaces of the building (designed with a larger 24 x 24 module) would have felt expansive for returning students who had to navigate the junior college's overcrowded buildings at its two former locations on Harrison Street and 14th Place.⁹⁸ Even the staircase doors were monumental, reaching ten feet high and together spanning eight feet. The mural doors were not only part of the building's central core, but also part of the path by which students would move among its floors. Eda painted the same imagery on either side

⁹⁴ Student Handbook on display at *Eugene Eda's Doors for Malcolm X College*, Chicago Cultural Center, January 21–June 25, 2017. Biondi, *Black Revolution*. Dr. Hurst would later resign from his position, and seven of his close associates would be fired, after concerns over his alleged mismanagement of federal funds. Jack Houston, "Akins Acting President: Hurst Replaced at Malcolm X College," *Chicago Tribune*, January 31, 1973, 3.

⁹⁵ Eda stated that panels from the Wall of Respect and the Wall of Truth were installed at Malcolm X College. Eugene Eda Wade, interview with Rebecca Zorach and the author, Malcolm X College, April 17, 2015.

⁹⁶ "College Without Walls Gets \$20,000 Grant," *Chicago Daily Defender*, March 27, 1971, 13.

⁹⁷ The building was demolished in 2016 as part of the controversial transformation of the City College system.

⁹⁸ Chesly Manly, "Dr. Hurst's 'Revolution' at Malcolm X," *Chicago Tribune*, January 4, 1970, A1; Clarence Page, "Students Stampede to Malcolm X College," *Chicago Tribune*, November 7, 1971, A14; "New Malcolm X College Opened," *Chicago Tribune*, April 4, 1971, 2; Vince Michael in "As Chicago celebrates architecture, modernist gem is doomed," *Architecture 360*, Rivet Radio, <http://www.smartaudio.com/share/280166>

of the doors, so they could be viewed whether opened or closed. However, as the doors open or close, the composition of the diptych changes as the door pivots on its hinges—for instance, figures that face one another when the doors are closed turn away as they open. This points to the ways that the functionality of the doors was less an impediment to invention than an opportunity. As part of students' daily use of the building, the program is more integrated into the everyday processes of pursuing an education tied to constructing an historical racial consciousness. Eda's mural program, which merges Black Power and Afrocentric imagery, was intended as a visual analogue to the college goal to "help our children and people rediscover their identity and thereby increase self-respect."⁹⁹

The mural program was organized thematically and stylistically by stairwell so that each floor contained a diverse, almost contrasting, set of images. Stairwell D stands apart from the other sets for its painterly style (fig. 1.22).¹⁰⁰ Like doors in the other stairwells, some of the scenes correspond to the subject matter taught in the academic departments on each floor (music, the arts, medicine, and so on). Each shows Black people active in their professions, prefiguring the students' success. Stairwells A and B use past and present African artefacts and ceremonial objects as the basis of its graphic imagery. Stairwell A doors draw from Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs, and Stairwell B doors are painted with designs drawn from West African masks, statuary, and textile patterns (fig. 1.23). A set of doors in Stairwell D depicts a pair of figures turned towards each other with fists raised in warm tones with painterly naturalism, signifying a coming into Black consciousness, for instance (fig. 1.24).

⁹⁹ School bulletin quoted in Alex Poinsett, "Dr. Charles G. Hurst: The Mastermind of Malcolm X College," *Ebony* 25, no. 7 (March 1970): 36.

¹⁰⁰ The stairwells were labeled A, B, C, and D in the original building. Exhibition didactic, *Eugene Eda's Doors for Malcolm X College*, Chicago Cultural Center, January 21–June 25, 2017.

Stairwell C contains perhaps the most inventive and compelling set of imagery because it merges imagery inspired by African artefacts and designs and contemporary Black figures in bell-bottomed pants, larger afros with references to Black Power mobilizations—raised fists, determined gazes, and mouths crying out (fig. 1.25). Eda uses more starkly graphic designs to seamlessly merge Black figures with African statuary in ways that suggest a slippage between body and artefact. His references to African cultural imagery and artifacts reflect careful study and historical recitation instead of any longing for an African imaginary and, in so doing, proposes an Afro-diasporic visual aesthetic unbroken by the Transatlantic slave trade.¹⁰¹ The composite figure shifts along a central axis between patterned and figurative forms, animating the vertical format of the doors. At its most basic, the oscillation within the work between disparate styles gestures toward a reconciling of the tired debate between figuration and abstraction, yet the iconographic play suggests a more provocative relation between past and present, and Africa and America. In this recombinant gesture, Eda pictures Black American revolutionary consciousness as part of an international anti-colonial struggle in which the maintenance of culture and consciousness cannot be set aside in favor of more expedient politics.

Taken on its own, Eda's mural program at Malcolm X College visualizes the continuity of African culture in the diaspora as the basis for developing a modern Black consciousness in a kind of semi-autonomous Black space that has been won through organized struggle.¹⁰² The "Black culture-oriented curriculum" at Malcolm X College signals the remaking of a civic institution by

¹⁰¹ Eda stated that his African references were based on extensive study and in this way surpass mere inspiration as the exhibition materials suggested. Eugene Eda Wade, interview with Rebecca Zorach and the author, Malcolm X College, April 16, 2015.

¹⁰² Larry Neal: "we want to comprehend history totally" (8) "affirmation of the connection between man and his ancestors" (16) Larry Neal, "And Shine Swan" in *Visions of a Liberated Future: Black Arts Movement Writings*, 7-23, by Larry Neal, Imamu Amiri Baraka, and Michael Schwartz (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1989).

its Black student body.¹⁰³ As such, it breaks with the historical conditions of racial injustice instantiated in segregated urban form where Black students are relegated to the crumbling, left-over city spaces for their education. However, understood in relation to the Wall of Respect, the “escape from history” (to return to Smethurst) into a Black autonomous or transhistorical African space, can be understood as more of a redemption of history than its transcendence. As such, Eda’s mural program at Malcolm X College gestures toward a future of Black liberation without acknowledging the history of racism unlike the Wall of Respect.

At its most basic, the Wall asserted the existence of a vital and proud Black community despite the stigma of poverty and disfunction. But the material realities of the ghetto, which often put Black life at risk and against which the portraits of Black heroes were viewed, complicates a straightforward narrative of racial uplift. Despite this, the imbrication of the Wall of Respect in the built environment of the modern city suggests a more complex dynamic between Black institutionality—the intentionally constructed spaces, networks of support, and forms of knowledge production—and the city’s low-income, Black urban population; whose relation to the modern city and its rationally organized grid was much more contingent and irreconcilable. As such, the Wall’s political import for valorizing Black history and culture moves beyond what has been understood as an uncomplicated and affirming cultural nationalism. The relation between the program of heroes and the Black ghetto—as material reality and sign—is not merely pitting positive against negative signs of Blackness; rather, it proposes a dialectic that exposes the dyadic nature of Black subjectivity that necessarily contains the trauma of Black history and the future of Black life. The development of the mural program at Malcolm X College demonstrates the gains of youth activists to gain control of an important civic institution and remake it in their image. The

¹⁰³ Clarence Page, “Students Stampede to Malcolm X College,” *Chicago Tribune*, November 7, 1971, A14.

recent demolition of the Malcolm X College building and removal of the mural doors signals the ways that these gains are always provisional.

2. The Mystical Caton the Stranger¹

The Wall of Respect sparked a community mural movement in urban centers across the United States. The Wall demonstrated the radical organizing potential of occupying and transforming urban space through art. William Walker would continue to paint murals on 43rd Street and collaborate with other artists to build the community mural movement. Along with John Pitman Weber, a recent graduate from the School of the Art Institute, Walker formed the Chicago Mural Group (CMG), initially a loose association of artists that would eventually become the more formalized Chicago Public Art Group still active in the city today. In the late 1960s and 1970s, the community mural movement attracted artists, including those with little training or experience as well as formally-trained easel painters, to work on large- and small-scale public projects in city streets, alleys, community centers, and schools.² Importantly, CMG was a community-oriented, interracial organization that included Black, Chicano/a, Asian, white, and ethnic white immigrant artists in its ranks. Though not all the muralists considered themselves activists, many of them collaborated with Chicago's multiple energized social movements, community organizations, and their coalitions.

Regardless of their political motivations or goals, community muralists centered the active participation of their local audiences. Walker described community muralism as "artist-to-people communication," in which the artists' labors are visible to their audience as they work in the street,

¹ Description of Mitchell Caton taken from Jeff Donaldson, Notecard #8 for presentation at OBAC's Inaugural Program, May 28, 1967, Jeff Donaldson papers (unprocessed), 1918-2005, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

² For a broader history of the national community mural movement, see Eva Sperling Cockcroft, John Pitman Weber, and James D. Cockcroft, *Toward a People's Art: The Contemporary Mural Movement* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998).

creating the conditions for their work to be demystified and accepted as part of the community.³ According to Weber, by working in the streets directly with people, muralism reimagined the possibilities for artistic production outside of the studio.⁴ The emphasis on process and interaction with local audiences and participants made muralism a more open process than other public art practices at the time.⁵ Community murals were understood as a way for communities—often delineated by their marginalized status within neighborhoods with little resources or political clout to address crumbling infrastructure and inadequate housing—to use art to express their concerns, articulate a shared cultural identity as a basis for solidarity, and make explicit demands to the city power structure.

In contrast to the New York-based Smokehouse painters who installed abstract murals in Harlem during the same time, for instance, Chicago muralists embraced the communicative power of public walls to get the message out, prompting criticism for their use of figuration and the aesthetic strictures of social realism.⁶ Melvin Edwards, a sculptor and Smokehouse member, argued against the messages in a mural like the Wall of Respect: “it would be better if the work were not figurative in order to...let the message be the change rather than put the information out

³ William Walker, et al. “The Artists’ Statement,” 1971, File 1638: Four Muralists–Wall Paintings ’71, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago Archives.

⁴ Eva Sperling Cockcroft, John Pitman Weber, and James D. Cockcroft, *Toward a People’s Art: The Contemporary Mural Movement* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998).

⁵ The so-called Chicago Picasso is often named as a point of contrast to community muralism, especially the Wall of Respect. The Chicago Picasso was identified with boosterism, international prestige, and civic pride versus the Wall of Respect’s more local and militant form of public art. See Daniel Punday, “The Black Arts Movement and the Genealogy of Multimedia,” *New Literary History* 37, no. 4 (2006): 777–794; Rebecca Zorach, “Art & Soul: An Experimental Friendship Between the Street and a Museum,” *Art journal* (New York. 1960) 70, no. 2 (2011): 66–87; and Rebecca Zorach, *Art for People’s Sake: Artists and Community in Black Chicago, 1965-75* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 65-70.

⁶ Elsa Honig Fine, “Mainstream, Blackstream and the Black Art Movement.” *Art Journal* 30, no. 4 (1971): 374-375.

which said why the world needs changing.”⁷ This notion of creating new images of and conditions for Black life rather than merely representing the world as-it-is would become a familiar refrain in the Black Arts movement. Beyond a proposal to imagine the city differently, Edwards argues that Smokehouse murals transform actual urban space. He describes the impact of painting a mural near a city park taken over by the illegal drug trade:

We did the walls on this corner...and people started to come back; and the city did the seats. The guys dealing drugs went somewhere else. It was a wonderful microcosmic idea. The arts can be used to change places, not to decorate, but to *change* places. Then it has a much more dynamic function.⁸

Edwards and his Smokehouse colleagues had a keen sense for the ways that murals, imbricated in urban form, can transform the way space is seen and used. Their insights were not lost on future city planners who would utilize art projects for community development and “urban revitalization.”⁹

Among these competing concepts about how community muralism should reclaim and re-signify urban space to make it more amenable to a shared social life, there was an alternate vision of the city offered by muralists and cultural workers in Chicago who used a complex and often

⁷ Melvin Edwards quoted in Michel Oren, “The Smokehouse Painters, 1968-70,” *Black American Literature Forum* 24, no. 3 (1990): 513.

⁸ Melvin Edwards quoted in Lydie Diakhaté, “Melvin Edwards: The Poetics of the Blacksmith,” *Black Renaissance* 16, no. 1 (Winter 2016): 133. Among his notes for a presentation on the Wall of Respect, Jeff Donaldson jotted down: “unprofessional, anti-nationalistic, and above all counter-revolutionary. Art is but microcosmic.” Though it is unclear whether Donaldson was referring to Edwards’ comments about the Wall of Respect or not, it indicates that Donaldson’s vision for a revolutionary Black art would not accommodate the small-scale ambitions of the Smokehouse painters. Jeff Donaldson papers (unprocessed), 1918-2005. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

⁹ Literature on art and urban revitalization spans several fields including urban studies, community development, and cultural policy. See, for example, Carl Grodach, “Art spaces, public space, and the link to community development,” *Community Development Journal* 45, no. 4 (2010): 474-493; Joanne Sharp, Venda Pollock, and Ronan Paddison, “Just Art for a Just City: Public Art and Social Inclusion in Urban Regeneration,” *Urban Studies* 42, no. 5/6 (2005): 1001-1023; Mark J. Stern and Susan C. Seifert, “Culture and Urban Revitalization: A Harvest Document,” *Culture and Community Revitalization: A SIAP/Reinvestment Fund Collaboration—2007-2009*, https://repository.upenn.edu/siap_revitalization/7; and Sean Zielenbach, *The Art of Revitalization: Improving Conditions in Distressed Inner-City Neighborhoods* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

opaque visual iconography drawn from a mix of Black nationalism, Black folk and spiritualist practices, and a bohemian counterculture. Though scholars have parsed the mix of political and cultural imaginings found in the music and performances of Sun Ra, an experimental jazz musician who spent the early years of his musical career in Chicago, there has been little exploration of the intersection of visual art and the alternate “sciences” and cosmologies circulating on street corners, in storefront churches, and in Afrocentric bookstores in the city.¹⁰ The revisions of mythic histories, eschatological themes of redemption of the city, and heralding of new worlds (which for Sun Ra would later be imagined in outerspace) offered another way to challenge the degradation of Black life in the modern city. Yet, the connections between these ideas and the more experimental forms of the Black Arts movement have largely been ignored.¹¹ In the following, I examine murals by Mitchell Caton (Theodore Burns Mitchell, 1930-1998) and his collaborators in Chicago in the late 1960s and early 1970s at the beginning of the community mural movement. By revisiting specific examples of Caton’s visionary murals, I argue that Caton used the visual language of alternate cosmologies to re-signify urban space as a potential home for a redeemed Black community. In his murals, Caton engages the existent structures that inform and deform Black life in the city but also point to the “dynamic relationship between the existent and the imagined;” that is, what literary scholar Mike Sell describes as the process of “continually coming

¹⁰ William Sites, *Sun Ra’s Chicago: Afrofuturism & the City* (The University of Chicago Press, 2020); John Corbett, Anthony Elms, and Terri Kapsalis, *Pathways to Unknown Worlds: Sun-Ra, El Saturn and Chicago’s Afro-Futurist Underground 1954-68* (Chicago: White Walls, 2006); John F. Szwed, *Space Is the Place: The Lives and Times of Sun Ra* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1998).

¹¹ An exception to this absence in the field is Jane H., Carpenter, *Betye Saar* (San Francisco, Calif: Pomegranate, 2003). For an account of Chicago murals and Christian religious imagery, see Kimberly N. Pinder, *Painting the Gospel: Black Public Art and Religion in Chicago* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016).

into being, a revolutionary *becoming*,” at work in the Black aesthetic.¹² In doing so, I trouble the distinctions between communication and transformation, and figuration and abstraction, in the discourse of Black Arts community muralism.

Multiple factors contribute to the lack of scholarship on murals by Caton and his collaborators. Most of his murals are no longer extant and can only be studied through photographic documentation. There is also little archival evidence available to trace the sources of his complex iconographic programs. While some of Caton’s sources are straightforward, including references to Black street culture, jazz, and African cultural signs and artifacts, others are more difficult to discern. These challenges to interpretation compound, for example, in Caton’s 1973 mural *Revelation*, installed on a commercial billboard at 33rd Street and Calumet Avenue in Bronzeville on the South Side (fig. 2.1).¹³ The right side of the mural depicts an apocalyptic scene in which a black sun hovers over a dark city skyline as it burns. The source of destruction seems to be a disembodied head wearing a fiery helmet, who is followed by the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, variously appointed with sword, scales, bow, and a skeleton signifying conquest, war, famine, and death as described in the Christian bible in the revelation to John. A small figure runs from the scene, but he seems caught in a ray emitting from the head’s monstrous mouth. Another figure lays prostrate across the bottom of the mural, pointing in supplication to a monumental figure, an almost messianic Black elder surrounded by seven candles who seems to control the cosmos around him. His head is encompassed by a sun, out of one hand stars emerge, and his third

¹² Mike Sell, “The Black Aesthetic,” in *Encyclopedia of the Black Arts Movement*, eds. Verner D. Mitchell and Cynthia Davis (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 27, 26, italics in original.

¹³ The mural is attributed to Caton, but there is photographic documentation of Blackburn’s contribution to the project. Victor A. Sorell, *Guide to Chicago Murals: Yesterday and Today* (Chicago: Chicago Council on Fine Arts, 1978).

eye emits a beam that encompasses another earth. The mural depicts a scene of cosmic confrontation, and possibly the rebirth of another world after the end of this one. But its mix of Christian eschatological imagery, symbols of the occult, and numerology seem to reference a complex system of signs whose meaning is not immediately apparent.

Whether Chicago residents in 1973 would have recognized and understood the imagery in *Revelation* is also uncertain. However, Caton was not concerned with the legibility of his murals. Later, in his report on a nearby mural, he wrote:

Sometimes an Individual has to go to the wall many times before they see the message there, then the message or art becomes there (*sic*) property, something great to them, because they know everything within the pattern fits. Artists are not to know when this happens, how could they? The job of painting the mural is over and the artist has gone only the painting remains, an idea, or several ideas, some real other unreal, to give one complete message to the people.¹⁴

While the complex layers of signification in Caton's metaphysical murals may never be known, they suggest an imaginative vision of the city that exceeds its material form to signal the contours of a future world for Black people. To explore how these visions intersected with the actual space of Black life in the city, I examine Caton's murals from the late 1960s and early 1970s, focusing on two projects: *Rip-Off/Universal Alley* from 1970 to 1974 and *Nation Time* from 1971. I argue that Caton's murals ask the viewer to see the city in a new way, and that in reorienting their vision, viewers can be liberated from their perception of the world as it is. As such, I consider Caton's metaphysical murals to be visual iterations of the Afrosurreal. The Afrosurreal, an Afrodiasporic orientation toward surrealism, is less a stylistic or iconographic program than an approach to representation that is, what Franklin Rosemont and Robin Kelley describe as, "an *open* realism

¹⁴ Mitchell Caton, "47th and Calumet—the Wall of Daydreaming and Man's Inhumanity to Man," The Chicago Mural Group Report, the Fifth Year, 1974, CPAG archives.

[that] signifies *more* reality, and an expanded *awareness* of reality.”¹⁵ Scholar and experimental filmmaker Terri Francis similarly evokes the Afrosurreal as that which lies underneath or beyond the real; it is:

a realism so real, so contrary to the norms of publicized blackness, that it represents a rupture, a radical break from ordinary understanding such that the old feels new—because it was never known. When what seemed real is revealed to be a farce—that disjuncture, this sudden crash with a reality realer than accepted truths forces a total reorientation to self and society.¹⁶

That is, the Afrosurreal does not present new information as much as it reorients the viewer to be attuned to the world according to a renewed set of values and transformed social order. The opaque, mystical imagery in Caton’s mural points to a rejection of Western forms of knowledge that seek to reveal, measure, and control the social and natural world.

Black Arts leader and poet Amiri Baraka first proposed “Afro-surrealist expressionism” as a critical practice of Black cultural production in a 1988 essay on the Black Arts writer Henry Dumas; however, the connections among the visual aesthetics of Black Arts practitioners and surrealism have yet to be fully explored. Curator and critic Tempestt Hazel recently argued that attributing Afro-surrealism to the Black Arts movement undermines the artists’ project of self-determination because attaching the suffix Afro- means that it is merely derivative of a European or Western artistic movement.¹⁷ On the contrary, I suggest that Baraka’s re-appropriation of the concept with the “Afro” suffix creates a more explicit connection between surrealism’s critiques

¹⁵ Franklin Rosemont and Robin D. G. Kelley, *Black, Brown, & Beige: Surrealist Writings from Africa and the Diaspora* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), 3, italics in original.

¹⁶ Terri Francis, “Close-Up: Afrosurrealism: Introduction: The No-Theory Chant of Afrosurrealism,” *Black Camera* 5, no. 1 (Fall 2013): 101.

¹⁷ Tempestt Hazel, “On Self-Determination and the Construction and Remembering of Black Aesthetics,” in *The Time Is Now! Art Worlds of Chicago’s South Side, 1960-1980*, eds. Rebecca Zorach and Marissa H. Baker, 200-211 (Chicago: Smart Museum of Art, 2018).

of imperialism and positivism and the art, life, and rebellion of the African diaspora. Surrealism as a set of critical ideas and aesthetic principles was developed extensively by artists, writers, and thinkers of the African diaspora and continues to be today.¹⁸ Since surrealism's inception in the early twentieth century, Black philosophers, artists, and poets from Africa, the Caribbean, South America, and the United States have contributed to the international surrealist movement. As Kelley and Rosemont note in *Black, Brown, & Beige: Surrealist Writings from Africa and the Diaspora*, during the 1960s and 70s, a renewed interest in African cultures and cosmologies and the publication of English translations of Negritude writers, many of whom identified as surrealists or embraced its aesthetic principles, set the stage for what Baraka would later describe as a Black aesthetic that can accommodate new knowledges of Black life.¹⁹

Literary scholar Aldon Lynn Nielsen demonstrates the lasting impact of the connections between Negritude poets and thinkers and Black poetics, especially at Howard University, in the twentieth century. Black American poets found the techniques of surrealism to resemble Black folk oral and musical traditions, but even more so found alliance with the radical political critique of the movement that challenged how Western humanism excluded Black subjects.²⁰ Similarly, Caton draws on the signs and imagery of Black folk mysticism and cosmologies as a visual grammar to imagine the city as a spiritualized realm of freedom.

Despite these broader connections between Afrodiasporic surrealism and Black Arts experimentation, there is little documentation of connections among surrealist practitioners and

¹⁸ On surrealism in Africa and African diaspora, see Rosemont and Kelley, *Black, Brown, & Beige* and Michael Richardson and Krzysztof Fijałkowski, *Refusal of the Shadow: Surrealism and the Caribbean* (London: Verso, 1996). For an account of the movement's international scope, see the more recent exhibition catalogue, Stephanie D'Alessandro and Matthew Gale, *Surrealism Beyond Borders* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2021).

¹⁹ Rosemont and Kelley, *Black, Brown, & Beige*, chapter 7.

²⁰ Aldon Lynn Nielsen, "Will Alexander's 'Transmundane Specific'," *Callaloo* 22, no. 2 (Spring 1999): 409-416.

Black visual arts in Chicago. Surrealism had many adherents in Chicago, such as Hyde Park painter Gertrude Abercrombie and the Chicago Surrealist Group, but the movement's influence on the Black Arts movement is unknown. Anthony Reed argues that the performances and films of Sun Ra—a jazz musician whose music and metaphysical writings in the *Them* broadsheets profoundly informed Chicago's countercultural scene before leaving the city in 1961—are an example of what Baraka termed Afro-surreal expressionism. According to Reed, Ra's Egyptography, space-age music, and futuristic aesthetic signal an “expansion of the concepts of the world to accommodate new information of the authentic being-in-the-world of blackness and black people.”²¹ With Caton's connections to the jazz scene in Chicago, it is likely that he was aware of Sun Ra and absorbed some of the musician's mystical orientation. Caton's later depictions of jazz musicians—the exaggerated scale of the keyboard and the disembodied hands amidst the swirl of abstract, colorful swells in *Universal Alley* (fig. 2.2), for instance and which I discuss more in depth below, are reminiscent of album covers for Sun Ra's Arkestra designed by Claude Dangerfield, such as *We Travel the Spaceways*, issued in 1966 (fig. 2.3).

Rather than meticulously decoding the iconography of his murals, I consider how the relations among the city, jazz, and Caton's complex visual and spatial metaphysics reorients the viewer to see urban space differently. Beginning with his 1970 mural *Rip-Off*, I track how his engagement with urban social life develops across mural projects, from the dynamics of contestation to a vision of the city that exceeds its material form to signal the contours of a Black interior consciousness and a longing for freedom.

²¹ Anthony Reed, ““Close-Up: Afrosurrealism: After the End of the World: Sun Ra and the Grammar of Utopia,” *Black Camera* 5, no. 1 (Fall 2013): 128.

Caton and Community Muralism

Caton was an early participant in the Chicago community mural movement and was involved in the early planning and painting of the Wall of Respect.²² Though less visible than Walker and Weber in CMG, Caton was involved in many of the early projects that helped shape the program of the group.²³ In 1971, Caton also joined Walker, Weber, Eugene Eda Wade, and Mark Rogovin for the *Murals for the People* exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art.²⁴ For the exhibition, the muralists transformed the museum's lower galleries into a workshop where the public could come and engage with the muralists as they worked. Caton participated as a guest artist, painting on a smaller set of panels than the other artists. He painted a mural titled *Getting Out* that addresses the American war in Vietnam and was meant to be installed on 63rd Street for the Woodlawn Organization, which organized residents and protested unsafe housing conditions on the South Side under the rubric of Black self-determination—though whether the mural was

²² Caton's participation with the Wall of Respect is largely undocumented. Only William Walker has identified him as a participant. Oral history interview with William (Bill) Walker, June 1991, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

²³ Most notably, Caton is named as a potential artist for an ambitious plan in coordination with the Chicago Housing Authority to paint a series of murals at the high-rise Robert Taylor Homes on the South Side. The project was initially proposed in August 1970 with requests for funding submitted the following year to the Illinois Arts Council. The project eventually failed to garner the support of residents due to pressures, according to the artists, applied by the local politicians. "Public Art in Public Housing," Materials Mailed for Council Meeting June 11 & 12, 1971, Illinois Arts Council, RS 312.002, Illinois State Archives; John Pitman Weber, interview with the author, Chicago, September 11, 2015. See also, Jeff Huebner, *Walls of Prophecy and Protest: William Walker & the Roots of a Revolutionary Public Art Movement* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2019), 137; and Rebecca Zorach, *Art for People's Sake: Artists and Community in Black Chicago, 1965-75* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 237-239.

²⁴ "Second Year Report: The Community Mural Project," The Chicago Mural Group Report, Second Year 1971, The Community Arts Foundation, Chicago Public Art Group Archives. While the decision to work within the museum may seem like a compromise with the institutions the muralists also criticize for relegating art to a rarified and decontextualized aesthetic experience, it could be argued that the exhibition transformed the museum more than it compromised the main tenets of community muralism. As the muralists wrote in their manifesto for the exhibition, "The Artists' Statement," one of the defining aspects of community muralism is the interaction among the muralists and the people in the community. William Walker, et al. "The Artists' Statement," 1971, File 1638: Four Muralists—Wall Paintings '71, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago Archives.

installed or not is unclear and its current location unknown (fig. 2.4).²⁵ The tightly-packed composition overlaid Black figures—one in a military uniform—with imagery evoking entrapment and death—barbed wire, a skeleton wrapped in an American flag, cross-shaped tombstones.

Throughout his career as a muralist, he would continue to paint murals for local organizations in Chicago. For instance, Caton worked with high school students from Hyde Park on a mural at the 1972 Black Esthetics exhibition (fig. 2.5). He also worked with students on a mural for a West Side Chicago Public Library branch that depicts convention themes, such as Black historical figures and allusions to African cultural forms (fig. 2.6).²⁶ Despite these more conventional mural projects that involve community participants, communicate messages of protest, and celebrate Black history, Caton also worked individually and with like-minded collaborators to create a more personally expressive and improvisatory, process-oriented mural practice. Unlike other muralists who drew preparatory sketches to plan out their compositions before painting on the wall, Caton developed an improvisational technique drawn from jazz, what one critic described as “building a visual song of images one color at a time.”²⁷ Caton’s collaborators would have to adapt to his looser style of working. Walker later recalled working with Caton on the *Wall of Daydreaming and Man’s Inhumanity to Man* in 1975: Caton “works in

²⁵ "Second Year Report: The Community Mural Project," Chicago Mural Group Report, Second Year 1971, The Community Arts Foundation, Chicago Public Art Group Archives, 12.

²⁶ John Forwalter, "Into the work," *Hyde Park Herald*, February 13, 1974, 20. As of this writing, the mural remains installed in the Douglass Branch at 3353 West 13th Street, Chicago.

²⁷ Patrick Barry, "Artists are literally painting the town," *Chicago Sun-Times*, Friday, September 28, 1984, Chicago Artist Files, Chicago Public Library.

a way where he goes according to his feelings.... It was an interesting summer” (fig. 2.7)²⁸

Though community muralism and the urban counterculture may seem incompatible, Caton skillfully incorporated his unique blend of bohemia, jazz, and metaphysics into his art. This was also apparent in his easel paintings, many of which are unfortunately largely undocumented.²⁹ According to his son, Tyler Mitchell, Caton largely shunned exhibitions and sales of his works. He was a very private person, and his artistic practice was an expression of his anti-establishment, counter-cultural lifestyle. He seemed to paint more for the experience than to share it with anyone. He was also distrustful of sales of his work because he believed he would be “ripped-off” (a familiar and malleable theme he returned to in his murals).³⁰ In 1971, the *Chicago Daily Defender* artfully describes Caton as a “the Stranger” and “mystery man genius,” asserting that his talent comes in part from his rejection of formal education and a working-class life paired with his bohemian proclivities. This characterization suggests that his elusiveness was in many ways not just an intentionally cultivated quality but central to his practice and identity as an artist.³¹

As noted above, community muralism in Chicago during the 1960s and 1970s was a way for marginalized residents to claim spaces or express concerns related to their neighborhood similar to the ways social movements mobilized public protests in city streets. However, Caton’s unorthodox working methods, his rejection of conventional exhibition, and investment in

²⁸ *Wall of Daydreaming and Man’s Inhumanity to Man* was a collaboration among William Walker, Mitchell Caton, Santi Isrowuthalkul and John Pitman Weber. It is still extant at 47th Street and Calumet Avenue. Oral history interview with William (Bill) Walker, June 1991, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 84.

²⁹ Caton’s son, Tyler Mitchell, helped to coordinate an exhibition of some of Caton’s works at Gallery OM in Mexico City in 2007. Since then, Caton’s works have been stored variously in Chicago, New York, and Mexico City. Tyler Mitchell, phone conversation with the author, May 31, 2017.

³⁰ Tyler Mitchell is extensively quoted discussing his father in Daniel Kandell Zamudio, “Mitchell Caton: Still Life in Anonymity,” *La Jerga* 5, no. 42 (June 2007), http://www.lajerga.com/articles_issues/0-30/issue6/catoneng.html (Last accessed January 23, 2016).

³¹ “‘Caton—the Stranger’ tells of his latest creation,” *Chicago Daily Defender*, November 4, 1971, 22.

Chicago's bohemian counterculture suggests that organized movements and contesting claims to neighborhoods would have been far from his concern. Weber recalls that Caton and Walker would paint inside abandoned buildings before they were demolished—what claim can this gesture make on the city?³² A closer examination of Caton's mural projects indicate that he saw the city as a site open to transformation not just contestation. This new vision of the city could be attained through an altered sense of reality that could open new paths for Black social life. Caton creates visions of the city that move beyond the world as it appears and reveals what lies beneath and, at times, elsewhere.

I it is important to distinguish among the different ways that transformation can be understood in relation to the mural movement. Many muralists were invested in creating social change—in calling for unity and calling to account the actors in the city that disrupted urban life, whether through violence, crime, exploitation, or racism. Chicago's urban form has been historically produced through the on-going contestation of space among different interests and racial groups. This especially impacted the opportunities for the city's Black residents whose attempts to access adequate, affordable housing was often met with violent resistance from white residents. In the postwar years, Chicago residents witnessed dramatic changes to their city with expanding public housing initiatives, urban renewal projects, expressway construction that reshaped the South and West Sides. Interracial conflicts over space and resources often resulted in street level violence that led to the formation of Black street gangs as a collective form of self-defense.³³ By the late 1960s and early 1970s, contestations over urban space within Black

³² John Pitman Weber, interview with the author, Chicago, September 11, 2015.

³³ Natalie Y. Moore, and Lance Williams, *The Almighty Black P Stone Nation the Rise, Fall, and Resurgence of an American Gang* (Chicago, Ill: Lawrence Hill Books, 2011).

neighborhoods also occurred among rival street gangs (who increased in number and in their extralegal activities in the 1960s), as well as with local and federal government law enforcement agencies.³⁴ By installing murals in marginalized communities, the artists necessarily engaged debates over housing, neighborhood control and identity, and who has access to public space.

The city as a site of contestation appears in an early mural that Caton worked with poet and muralist C. Siddha Webber. The mural—which Caton titled *Rip-Off* even though he and Webber were never able to agree on the title—was located at 50th Street and South Lawrence Avenue (fig. 2.8).³⁵ Caton painted the mural at the opening of the alley now known simply as “The Alley.” It was a “landmark in the history of jazz,” according to Chicago Defender reporter Ethan Michaeli, where musicians and DJs would play music for people who would “gather in the passageway and listen to the latest musical innovations on many a warm spring and summer evening.”³⁶ Later in 1974, Caton would return to extend the mural into the alley, eventually encompassing Pop Simpson’s garage where the musicians gathered to play.

Rip-Off depicts a robbery, or possibly an argument over a dice game resolved with a gun. Large dice tumble below two hipsters’ feet, suggesting a game in which money is waged and exchanges hands. Two figures dressed in bell bottom pants and caps overlay the barrel of a large

³⁴ See Frank J. Donner. *Protectors of Privilege: Red Squads and Police Repression in Urban America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Moore and Williams. *Almighty Black P Stone Nation*; and Rebecca Zorach, “Art & Soul: An Experimental Friendship Between the Street and a Museum.” *Art journal* (New York. 1960) 70, no. 2 (2011): 66–87.

³⁵ Webber stated that he and Caton started working in the alley in 1969 after their participation with the Wall of Respect. The murals they painted, what is often referred to as “the Alley,” were painted between 1969 and 1974. *Rip-Off* was likely completed in 1970. C. Siddha Webber, interview by Rebecca Zorach, *Never the Same*, 2013–2014, <https://never-the-same.org/interviews/c-siddha-webber/>

³⁶ Ethan Michaeli, “Weekend Music Fills Chicago Neighborhoods,” *Chicago Defender (Daily Edition)*, September 13, 1993.

revolver. They stand facing away from the viewer, helpless but alert with hands raised in the air. Streaks of colorful smoke waft from the gun as if it has recently been discharged and merge into other abstract shapes that delineate the ground and the handle of the gun. A large clock face without hour or minute hands appears to indicate that someone's time is up. Further into the alley, painted along a pillar, a poem admonishes the viewer against the sort of violent encounter suggested by the colorful swirls of the mural's smoking gun:

NAW
 NAW- little Brotha
 U-Dont Shoot no Brotha
 Don't Care WHAT
 he said/U-said/nobody said
 he DONE – DONE
 Brotha NEVER
 ripped U OFF
 a con-ti-nent
 brotha wouldnt
 Think to snatch
 yo youth

The poem is an admonition against interracial violence, suggesting that there is a bigger rip-off that a Black "Brotha" needs to consider before turning his gun on another Black man.

In this sense, Caton's mural could be characterized as what scholar Caitlyn Bruce describes as a "negative-content mural" that "inspire[s] anger, worry, frustration, and disgust" and can "offer resistance to the presumed coherence of community itself, encouraging groups to interrogate challenges within as well as without."³⁷ The mural challenges the kinds of anti-social behavior that can cause division within a community, but also serves as a warning for those who enter urban

³⁷ Bruce also acknowledges that not all murals are either positive or negative. Caitlin Frances Bruce, "Public Art, Affect, and Radical Negativity: The Wall of Daydreaming and Man's Inhumanity to Man," *Subjectivity* 10 (2017): 224.

alleys looking for illegal diversions. Hidden from the main flow of street traffic, alleys are out of the way spaces where illicit activities can easily occur away from the watchful eye of neighbors, on-lookers, and the police. The imagery of the mural hints at what might transpire if passersby enter the alley. However, since the mural was painted near a place of communal gathering delineated by the pleasure of musical performance, the meaning of the mural may be more ambiguous.

For his part, Webber disagreed with Caton over his emphasis on the antisocial aspects of life in the city in *Rip-Off*. The street and the alley were important spaces for Black sociality where Webber saw people gathering, “com[ing] together, thousands... [to] just enjoy the spirit of being a community.”³⁸ Though meant for efficient transit for goods and people through the city, people often used alleys against these purposes. Here the alley was a space to stop and linger, to be seen and to see neighbors and strangers. Caton also understood the city as a space of Black sociality. In a later report for a mural project completed with the support of the Chicago Mural Group; he wrote:

Early in my life as an artist I had the idea of finding a technical approach which would enable me to capture what especially interested me in the city. The threading traffic, its lights, the river of humanity chartered and flowing through and around its self-imposed limitations. Who knows consciously what they are doing when creating?³⁹

Imagining the modern city as a circuit of movement and exchange recalls an earlier movement in American art: Precisionist paintings that heralded the power and scale of the American industrial city.⁴⁰ Yet, Caton focuses on the people who move through the city, responding and improvising

³⁸ C. Siddha Webber, interview by Rebecca Zorach, *Never the Same*, 2013-2014, <https://never-the-same.org/interviews/c-siddha-webber/>

³⁹ Mitchell Caton, “Philosophy of the Spiritual,” 1972 Projects file, Chicago Public Art Group Archives.

⁴⁰ See, for example, *Precisionism in America, 1915-1941: Reordering Reality* (New York: Abrams, in association with the Montclair Art Museum, 1994); and Wanda M. Corn, *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity, 1915-1935* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

with its form as they pass through it.

For Chicago's Black residents excluded from, or at parts of the formal economy and public sphere in the modern city, the "confidence scam" was one way to access the good life through taking advantage of the opportunities the city has to offer.⁴¹ *Rip-Off* then was an admonition against the temptation to take advantage of (or violently respond to) other Black people. It represented the kinds of activities happening in this alley and others, but even more so it was a complex image that acknowledged the types of social interactions and alternate infrastructures and economies that emerge parallel to formal ones that enable Black life and sociality. In a recent interview, Webber mentions shooting dice as both part of the social space created when they engaged neighbors in painting the wall ("So then as the painting took on more and more people during the week, they'd come back, shoot dice") and the dangers associated with the area ("it was a rip-off environment at the time, in the alley you had kids shooting each other, and dice and drugs and stuff like that"), indicating the ambivalence of some activities.⁴²

The above poem admonishes the reader to "be cool" in the face of the confidence scam, and possibly to keep in mind the real rip off, the actual poverty that will "snatch yo youth." This poem takes on another layer of significance with addition of a poem commemorating Fred Hampton, leader of the Illinois Chapter of the Black Panther Party, after his assassination by the Chicago police in 1969. Taken together these poems imply that the rip-off is not from the con man in the ghetto, but the white power structure enabled by police:

today is yesterday
and I see tomorrow

⁴¹ John Jeffries, "Toward a redefinition of the urban: The collision of culture," in *Black Popular Culture*, ed. Michele Wallace (New York: New Press, 1998), 153-163.

⁴² C. Siddha Webber, interview by Rebecca Zorach, *Never the Same*, 2013-2014, <https://never-the-same.org/interviews/c-siddha-webber/>

with sore ears
 years of tears
 an old song
 of the constant
 is REALITY
 of RIGHT NOW
 [...]

wouldju believe
 in something more
 than cars and clothes
 that last year FRED
 was here, his last
 year that was for
 US TO UNDERSTAND
 more about
 UNIVERSAL ALLEY
 a short cut
 in our reality [...]

As the viewer moves down the alley toward the music played in Pop Simpson's garage on Sundays, there is also the reminder of what other possibilities the streets and alleys of the city hold for Black people when they gather. Caton would return to the Alley to continue painting, working with Webber to complete an extension of *Rip-Off*. After completing *Rip-Off*, Caton produced a mural titled *Nation Time* in 1971 that would inform how he approached the remaining imagery in the Alley.

Nation Time

Nation Time is a pivotal mural in which Caton crystallizes his complex visual style that incorporates elements of abstraction, jazz and hipster culture, and urban street life. The all-over, densely packed composition in *Nation Time* suggests urban space as a psychic landscape for the formation of a Black consciousness. As such, Caton presents an Afrosurreal vision of the city as the formal structure of Black social life and its potential future.

Caton painted *Nation Time* under the auspices of the newly-formed Chicago Mural Group. The group was initially a loose association of artists committed to painting murals in Chicago neighborhoods. Around the time the *Murals for the People* exhibition opened in 1971, James Shiflett, head of the Community Arts Foundation based on the North Side, submitted a proposal to the Illinois Arts Council requesting funding for the Community Based Mural Project (later the Community Mural Project and the Chicago Mural Group) listing Caton along with Walker, Weber, and Ray Patlán as artists committed to the program that summer.⁴³ For that project, Caton would paint *Nation Time*, a large scale mural installed on the side of the A. A. Raynor Funeral Home on Cottage Grove Avenue on Chicago's South Side (fig. 2.9). Caton secured the site through a recommendation by Oscar Brown, Jr., a local activist and playwright, to Sammy Rayner, a local politician and owner of the funeral home.⁴⁴ The long side of the masonry building where Caton was to paint his mural had been sealed with tar, giving Caton a Black ground on which to work—this seemingly incidental design element would reappear in Caton's later murals.⁴⁵ Beyond its

⁴³ Community Based Mural Program Proposal, Materials Mailed for Council Meeting June 11 & 12, 1971, Illinois Arts Council, RS 312.002, Illinois State Archives.

⁴⁴ I have not found any documentation of the agreement between Caton and Rayner regarding the mural, but the 1971 report by the Chicago Mural Group states that Rayner supplied the scaffolding for Caton. The Rayner family had a reputation and history for supporting civil rights and Black politics in Chicago. A. A. "Sammy" Rayner, Jr. was elected as Alderman of Chicago's Sixth Ward in 1967, one of the few successful candidates to run against the Daley-Dawson political machine as part of an organized effort by South Side Black leaders and politicians to elect independent Black representatives to local government with the support of an organized Black voting bloc. While many of Chicago's young activists were skeptical of gaining advances in civil rights through electoral politics, there was generally a shared disdain for Black elected officials who supported Mayor Daley in exchange for doling out patronage positions and free turkeys for Thanksgiving in their ward. Contrary to this "plantation politics," Rayner was an independent politician and supported the Illinois Black Panther Party and leased them their West Side offices at 2350 West Madison Street. According to historian Dempsey Travis, Rayner was "in the forefront of those seeking to know the truth" about the assassination of Black Panther Party leader Fred Hampton in 1969. A. A. Rayner & Sons later conducted the funeral services for Hampton. "Second Year Report," Chicago Mural Group, 13, CPAG archives; Dempsey J. Travis, *An Autobiography of Black Politics* (Chicago: Urban Research Institute, 1987); A. A. Rayner & Sons Funeral Home, <https://aaraynerandsonsfuneralhome.com/about-us/> Retrieved July 16, 2021.

⁴⁵ Though the black ground in *Nation Time* is striking visually and thematically, the material provided an unstable surface for Caton's chosen paints, which Weber predicted would lead the mural to degrade over time. "Second Year Report," Chicago Mural Group, 18, CPAG archives.

material conditions, the building and the neighborhood have multiple resonances for the South Side Black community in ways that drew attention to the dramatic changes occurring in the surrounding neighborhood where many Black Chicagoans made their homes. The 1971 Chicago Mural Group Report, authored by Weber, describes the area surrounding the mural as “somewhat of a wasteland—being in between heavy demolition and eventual redevelopment.”⁴⁶ In *Nation Time*, Caton brings together a conflict between the desire for belonging and eviction in a city undergoing aggressive demolition and redevelopment.

The mural depicts a monumental figure, only partially visible, whose head tilts back, mouth open crying out, and raised fist grasps lightning bolts. The figure is constructed from tessellated forms that encircle nostrils, articulate the ridges of ears, and stretch as cheeks pull back around the taut mouth. The body-as-surface flexes as the anguished scream reverberates out from the wall. Yet such emoting seems to produce real physical effects: tears gather under a strained eye, spit swirls on the teeth, and sweat dampens the temple. To the right, a large fist made of similarly fractured shapes clenches lightning bolts. The figure is a silent scream emanating from the brick wall of the funeral home. In 1955, Raynor funeral home provided services for the family of Emmett Till, the 14-year-old boy from Chicago who had been lynched while visiting family in Mississippi. The solemn viewing of his disfigured body was a highly publicized reminder of the ongoing violent injustices facing Black Americans.⁴⁷ The figure painted on the funeral home over twenty years later transforms a cry of grief into one of longing. Above the forehead of the figure (and partially obscuring his eyes) is the word “HOME” in which the stars and stripes of the American flag have

⁴⁶ “Second Year Report,” Chicago Mural Group, 13, CPAG archives.

⁴⁷ Jorge Casuso, “Washington’s Undertaker Part of Civil Rights History,” *Chicago Tribune*, November 30, 1987, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1987-11-30-8703300089-story.html>

been recast in Pan-African colors: red, green, yellow, black. On the other side of his head, shapes emerge like fists punching through the air, through the red, white, and blue stripes of the American flag. They are also like figures with Afro-haloed heads marching together, merged into a collectivity in their abstraction. The cry for a home for Black Americans indicates a longing for a place where Black life can exist and thrive.

Near the cornice, there is an image of a Kota reliquary figure affixed to the mural (fig. 2.10).⁴⁸ The source of the image is not known; however, Chicagoans had many opportunities locally to view or read about African art objects. The Field Museum of Natural History had a significant collection of African artifacts from Central Africa—one of which was a Kota reliquary figure reproduced in an article in *African Arts* by anthropologist Leon Siroto in 1968. The Art Institute of Chicago increased their collection of “so-called primitive art” in the 1960s, including acquiring a Kota reliquary figure in 1968 (identified as “Bakota”). Allen Wardell, curator of “primitive art” at the Art Institute at the time collaborated with the South Side Community Art Center and the Illinois Arts Council to organize exhibition entitled “Black Heritage: An Exhibition of African Sculpture and Artifacts” at the Center in 1968 (though there is no mention of a Kota reliquary figure on the exhibition checklist). In addition to the city’s museums, many private collectors, including William McBride and Edna Moten Barnett who contributed to the 1968 exhibition at the Center, were examples of the ways that Black South Siders cultivated knowledge

⁴⁸ Leon Siroto, “The Face of the Bwiiti,” *African Arts* 1, no. 3 (Spring 1968): 22-27, 86-89, 96. It is not known whether or not Caton referenced this article; however, if he did, it would require a kind of oppositional reading in which Caton could contest and confront problematic concepts, such as “witchcraft” and “primitive” (following’s bell hook’s essay, “The Oppositional Gaze: The Black Female Spectator,” in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones (New York: Routledge, 2003), 94-105). And while his knowledge of this scholarship is unknown, if one could speculate, it would be tempting to think of his invocation of the Kota reliquary as seizing on the kind of protective or intercessory power that the Kota peoples may have called on the object to similarly demarcate a sacred community space. Allen Wardell, “New Acquisitions of African Art at the Art Institute of Chicago,” *African Arts* 4, no. 1 (Autumn 1970): 14, 19. Checklist for “Black Heritage: An Exhibition of African Sculpture and Artifacts,” Email correspondence with Bart H. Ryckbosch, August 2, 2021, Art Institute of Chicago Archives.

of the African continent. In this sense, Caton shared with other Black artists at the time an interest and strategy of appropriation of African art and culture, especially for aesthetic and philosophical inspiration, but also a community practice of the study of the arts of Black Africa for the purposes of developing a shared racial consciousness.

As such a small part of the mural, it may initially seem unimportant, however by unpacking the connections to the mural's site (the funeral home specifically and the city more broadly) it points to a deeper interpretation of the mural's visual imagery and possible ideas about the connections between home and the city. The Kota image was among other images affixed to the mural including two photographs by Bobby Sengstacke discussed below.⁴⁹ In photographs that document the original work, the image appears in high contrast so a viewer on the street would have been at some distance from the image, but the silhouette of the graphic shapes—the inverted crescent, the oval face with darkened eyes, the thin outline of a diamond—would have been readable standing out against a white background, which then stands out against the Black field of the mural's surface.

A photograph of the mural in-progress shows that the Kota image was affixed to the mural further to the right but was moved closer to the head, eventually occupying a space between the figure and the cityscape in the center of the mural (fig. 2.11). As noted above, Caton was known for his improvisatory approach to mural painting, so the change is less important than the fact that it was part of the mural's design from its early stages. In their original cultural context, Kota reliquary figures are ideal images of ancestors inserted into the top of a packet or basket that contains the bones of deceased family members. The Kota people, who occupy much of present-

⁴⁹ "Second Year Report: The Community Mural Project," Chicago Mural Group Report, Second Year 1971, The Community Arts Foundation, 13, CPAG archives.

day Gabon, are slash-and-burn farmers who migrate every few years; the reliquary baskets are mobile graves that help them maintain a connection to the deceased as they migrate. The funerary connection between the Kota image and the Rayner funeral home is straightforward, however, within the context of displacement facing the surrounding community in the face of aggressive demolition and redevelopment plans, it creates a more complex meaning that points to the real precarity facing the local community. By affixing an image of the Kota reliquary to the side of the Rayner funeral home, Caton performs two related gestures: first, he invokes the desire for a tangible connection to those who came before—the ancestors that constitute the Afrodiasporic family—especially in the face of migration (forced or otherwise) or a violence that takes a child from his mother like Till. Second, he acknowledges the pain of grief and transforms it into resolute struggle. Looking at the photographs of Mamie Till Bradley collapsing in grief as she receives the body of her slain child, her head is turned up and her hand is open (fig. 2.12). In *Nation Time*, the hand of aggrieved is a closed fist from which lightning strikes.

It is notable that Caton placed the Kota image in relation to the Chicago cityscape that unwinds as the background layer for the mural. The reliquary is placed near four Black men who encounter the recently installed (as of 1967) public sculpture locally known as the “Chicago Picasso,” a large public sculpture donated to Chicago by the famous artist. Caton creates a visual correspondence between the curve of the crescent form at the top of the reliquary and the curve of the Picasso sculpture in profile, and it’s echoed again by the curve of the skyline above it. The four figures, dressed similarly in blue shirts and white bell-bottoms, don Afro hairstyles; their backs are turned as they confront the Picasso sculpture, arms raised, limbs bend at angles similar to the reliquary’s diamond-shaped base as if made from the same metal. In this way, Caton’s use of the reliquary operates in two ways: it appears to provide inspiration for formal innovation, but it does

so without setting aside its ritual function (in this case in a funerary context). Further, with this move, Caton critiques Picasso's appropriation of African forms his transmutation of living artifacts and traditions into a dead formalism, by reanimating the artifact in the gesture of the men's bodies.⁵⁰ For Caton, it appears, the Kota image exists as an object and aesthetic simultaneously stolen and reappropriated, a malleable symbol for a lost and reclaimed Blackness.

To the right is a vignette in which a woman in a geometric print headwrap and dress with the silhouette of the African continent instructs young children at a table in their lessons. It is an image of the transmission of knowledge and identity from one generation to the next, from mother to child, from Africa to America. The boy in the center of the group wears an orange shirt that reads from top to bottom: Know, Knower, Known (fig. 2.13).⁵¹ In the same vignette, a poem is painted above the head of a child:

Men
to create new
worlds from
darkness inside
unknown souls
Timelessness of Truth
Life is pain is
BLACK

The poem speaks of men, but it is the hard slope of the woman's shoulder who tends to the children that also speaks to the labor required to build new worlds, to a way to heal the pain of Black life.

⁵⁰ Patricia Leighton, "Colonialism, *L'Art Nègre*, and *Les Demoiselles D'Avignon*," in *Picasso's Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, ed. Christopher Green (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 77-103. Leighton specifically references and reproduces (79 and 81, respectively) the Kota reliquary figure Picasso viewed at the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro in Paris.

⁵¹ This phrase matches one from a poem by C. Siddha Webber in his self-published collection *Public Poet* (n.d.) (copy in author's possession). Based on handwritten notes in the book, it is possible that the poem was originally painted on another mural in 1969, but I have not found documentation to verify its existence or location. On Webber and Caton's frequent collaborations, see C. Siddha Webber, interview by Rebecca Zorach, *Never The Same*, 2013-14, <https://never-the-same.org/interviews/c-siddha-webber/>

This gendered distinction in labor was common in the Black Power and Black Arts movements in which the rhetoric of a broader Black racial family made community ties more tangible even though they often relied on gendered and heteronormative ideas of family. Yet, in comparison to the woman in the scene, the large, tessellated figure—who signals the embodied pain and struggle of the Black nation—does not necessarily read as a gendered body. The colors of the abstract forms that constitute the body echo the colors of the layers of imagery behind it—the orange of the child’s shirt, the blue, grays, and reds of the buildings, the Black of the silhouettes. The correspondence between Black embodiment and the Black people who live in and move through the urban environment collapses distinctions between interiority and the sociality of the street.

The cityscape that winds through the mural bends and twists. The unstable ground seems to pulse. Caton combines a wrecking ball crane with what appears to be an excavator digging bucket; its menacing claws empty out Black bodies as it demolishes the side of a building. Larger Black silhouetted figures seem to both move through the warped grid of buildings, but also in some places are too large to be a part of the cityscape. The figures are delineated as an opaque black silhouette, whose profiles indicate Black physiognomy and the round coif of Afros. They wear hip streetwear—heads cocked, hands on hips—as they move through the streets, the patterned prints of their clothing seem to merge with the geometry of the built environment and at other points clash with it. A large figure on the far right of the mural is more upright than the buildings around her.

Two photographs by Bobby Sengstacke affixed to the wall resonate with the silhouetted figures.⁵² Collaboration among painters, photographers, and poets to develop a complex visual

⁵² The practice of incorporating photographs in murals began with the Wall of Respect when several photographers, including Sengstacke, incorporated their photographs into different sections. The following year, three photographers—Bobby Sengstacke, Roy Lewis, and Bob Crawford—were awarded grant monies to install

aesthetics for murals began with the Wall of Respect.⁵³ Romi Crawford describes the relation between photography and murals as a “generative layering” which registers multiple participants and mediations of subject matter, and which at times create dissonant visual aesthetics (in terms of scale, color or lack of color, surface) within a work even as they operate synchronously as visual explorations of Blackness.⁵⁴ The size and placement of Sengstacke’s photographs (small and affixed high on the mural) do not facilitate legibility. Rather, as layers of representation, the photographs and painted imagery echo one another in the “coolness” of the gestures and postures of both registers of Black figuration. In one of the photographs, young Black men gather in a group around, and leaning on, a pillar (fig. 2.14). Though it is difficult to discern the actual space they occupy, the figures seem to align themselves according to the geometry of the building in front of which they stand. Though they survey the street scene one can imagine is unfolding before them, they are clearly presenting themselves to be seen as they stand at ease or lean with a hand on hip. It is the kind of self-assurance that signals an “attitude, born of an understanding that they are

photomurals on walls in different areas of the city. Both photographs contributed to *Nation Time* by Sengstacke were published in the *Chicago Daily Defender*, reporting on their inclusion in the 1972 *Black Esthetics* exhibition (co-sponsored by the *Defender*) at the Museum of Science and Industry in 1972. Taken together, this demonstrates the ways that photographers were thinking about multiple modes of public distribution for their work. “New Walls for City,” *Chicago Daily Defender*, October 22, 1968, 14; “The Black experience—on film—from *Black Esthetics*,” *Chicago Daily Defender*, February 16, 1972, 16; Romi Crawford, “Black Photographers Who Take Black Pictures,” in *The Wall of Respect: Public Art and Black Liberation in 1960s Chicago*, ed. Abdul Alkalimat, Romi Crawford, and Rebecca Zorach (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2017), 193-211.

⁵³ By 1970, incorporating found advertising or photojournalistic images into fine art aesthetics was an established strategy of Pop artists, among others. As a public art form, muralism hemmed much more closely to the popular cultural forms that other artists appropriated in their “fine art” practices, so much so that the lines between the mural and those forms were much more blurred. Daniel Punday argues that the multimedia experiments of Amiri Baraka and in the Wall of Respect point to the desire to connect aesthetic practice to lived experience to exceed established artistic categories and avoid the “alienating technical specialization of a single medium” (792). Punday, “The Black Arts Movement and the Genealogy of Multimedia.” For Margo Crawford, a Black Arts mixed media aesthetic is a counter-literacy that challenges textual power itself. Margo Natalie Crawford, *Black Post-Blackness: The Black Arts Movement and Twenty-First-Century Aesthetics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017), especially chapter 3.

⁵⁴ Romi Crawford, Opening address, Wall of Respect Symposium, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, April 18, 2015, published in *The Wall of Respect: Public Art and Black Liberation in 1960s*, eds. Abdul Alkalimat, Romi Crawford, and Rebecca Zorach (Chicago Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2017), 324-335.

spectacular,” as Dayo Olopade suggests in his definition of the hipster who embodies a “Black cool.”⁵⁵

The evocation of Black style or Black cool that coexists with or responds to the threat of displacement by aggressive urban renewal projects in some ways signals a resignation to symbolic politics, but in Caton’s vision we are asked to see the ghetto differently. The coolness of the street hipster is a stark contrast to the violence of the ghetto, and the threat of the eruption of urban rebellions. Wrecking balls and excavators and Picasso’s appropriation of African forms alike engender indifference of passersby, mockery of hipsters, and the resolve of the strained neck of Mother Africa. Baraka argues that the Afrosurreal evokes a “different world organically connected to this one,” that is, a different way of seeing the world and responding to it that continues to reconstruct home among Black people in the city.⁵⁶ In this vision, the city transforms from a “zone of non-being” for Black subjects—that is, what Jeffries describes as the simultaneous invisibility and visibility of Black people in the city who are excluded from the formal economy, participation in the public sphere, and therefore the “good life” but also hypervisible through forms of surveillance or scrutiny. In response to this existence, Black subjects must find informal ways to create a good life. For Caton, the good life was a negotiation between the struggles over space, housing, enfranchisement, and the potential experiences of autonomy and creative response in the city.

⁵⁵ Dayo Olopade, “The Hipster,” in *Black Cool: One Thousand Streams of Blackness*, 38–45, edited by Rebecca Walker (Berkeley, CA: Soft Skull Press, 2012), 45.

⁵⁶ Amiri Baraka, “Henry Dumas: Afro-surreal Expressionist,” *Black American Literature Forum* 22, no. 2 (Summer 1988): 164.

Return to Universal alley

In the final segment of the mural by Caton in the Alley, the imagery transitions from the *Rip-Off* street-scene with a poem-prayer written for the alley by Webber to a jazz quintet, titled *Universal Alley* (fig. 2.15). Webber describes the poem as a prayer for the space and the mural to help “create an environment;” that is, the act of painting in the alley would, according to Webber, “create this energy and vibration, whereby when you finish, people from all over the world will come and see this Wall.”⁵⁷ Webber described the dedication event the first summer after they painted in the alley as a similar manifestation of presence: “And it was a very spiritual activity. People would come together, thousands, and just enjoy the spirit of being a community. And being with each other.”⁵⁸ Webber notes that community organizers from CAN (Community Action Now) attended and among them included “militant type guys” (including the Fred Hampton who, as noted above, would be honored by the mural after his death).

This mix of community togetherness and revolutionary politics was not unusual. The Wall of Respect, a touchstone for the murals in the alley and the community mural movement that it inspired, became an expression for political movements and Black cultural identity simultaneously. However, as Webber would later write, the Wall of Respect (and we can infer murals that followed) “became a place of power where spiritual energy empowered the community to interact with forces of natural and supernatural worlds.”⁵⁹ Urban geographer William Sites has demonstrated the ways that jazz music, Black and Pan-African nationalist movements, and

⁵⁷ C. Siddha Webber, interview by Rebecca Zorach, *Never the Same*, 2013-2014, <https://never-the-same.org/interviews/c-siddha-webber/>

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ C. Siddha Webber, “Recapturing the Spirit and Soul of Community Through Art as a Means of Creating Sacred Space,” DM diss., McCormick Theological Seminary, 2003, 13.

spiritualist practices in Chicago came together in ways that reinscribed Black cultural identity and urban space with profound and critical meanings that resisted the negative connotations of Black urban existence.⁶⁰ Though Sites uses theories of the city and utopian imaginings to analyze Ra's and Abraham's music and cultural projects, I want to assert the religious and metaphysics of these musicians and the counterculture in which they operated on Chicago's South Side. For Webber, communal gathering focuses the spiritual energies of Black people to bring about consciousness and eventual redemption. Caton's work then connects the political imaginings of Black nationalism and the calls to revolution with these Black folk and countercultural practices. In so doing, he presents a different vision of an autonomous Black life in the city.

Despite Caton's reported resistance to Webber's spiritual approach, the mural reflected the connections between jazz music—as it would have been played or performed in the garage, or in the nearby clubs around Washington Park—and a complex metaphysics popular among Chicago jazz musicians and Black folk astrologers. The closely packed composition depicts a jazz quintet playing keyboard, saxophone, trumpet, upright bass, and drums (fig. 2.16). A microphone labeled “JAZZ” and a table littered with coupe glasses indicate they may be performing in a jazz club, but the intense colors, busy patterning, and exaggerated scale of some of the musicians suggest a less tangible setting. On the left, two monumental, disembodied hands—the left blue and the right yellow—play a keyboard that dominates the left foreground as it pitches at various angles and snakes through the composition, finally gently wrapping around the wide-brimmed hat of the drummer on the far right. A dashiki-clad saxophone player turns toward a trumpeter wearing a pinstripe suit. Swirls of color seem to emerge from the mouth of the saxophone filling the space

⁶⁰ William Sites, *Sun Ra's Chicago: Afrofuturism & the City* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2020).

between the musicians and at times obscuring them. The diagonals of the trumpet and keyboard and the strong verticality of the thin white strings of the upright bass on a brick pilaster anchor the otherwise disorienting composition. The space between the musicians is filled with abstract forms of swirling color in bending and punctuated patterns that compress space, confusing figure and ground. In contrast to the space above the musicians where a mosaic of cool blue tones provides a visual rest, the density of color, pattern, and form that surrounds and constitutes the jazz band suggests listening to live jazz music is an immersive experience. The complexity of the composition is striking in comparison to an earlier mural by Caton opposite the garage where Caton painted a “music mural” consisting of abstracted musical instruments and notation along with more ambiguous shapes (fig. 2.17). The forms are clearly differentiated against a zigzag of Black and white triangles. Opposite this more simplified though imaginative composition, the jazz club seems to vibrate.

Caton was a regular in the jazz scene where a Pan-African spiritualism, which drew from elements of ancient history, Black Christian theology, astrology, Theosophy, numerology, and the occult.⁶¹ In one of two epic poems about John Coltrane, entitled “The Coming of John,” Chicago Black Arts poet Amus Mor recounts a spiritual transformation after Coltrane visits KeRa Upa, a local spiritualist known as the Cosmic Speaker.⁶² In the poem, Mor alludes to a painting by Caton

⁶¹ Daniel Kandell Zamudio, “Mitchell Caton: Still Life in Anonymity,” *La Jerga* 5, no. 42 (June 2007), http://www.lajerga.com/articles_issues/0-30/issue6/catoneng.html (Last accessed January 23, 2016). According to Zorach, Caton was a regular at the Cellar Boheme, an after-hours club in Hyde Park. Zorach, *Art for People's Sake*, 171.

⁶² Known by several names, KeRa Upa was born James Pettus. He was also a musician and visual artist, painting under the name Shetha Upa. Amus Mor, “The ‘ghetto psychic’ expanded Black thought: KeRa Upa, S. Side cosmic speaker,” *Chicago Daily Defender* (Big Weekend Edition), February 26, 1972, 6. See also, Rebecca Zorach, “The Positive Aesthetics of the Black Arts Movement,” in *The Freedom Principle: Experiments in Art and Music, 1965 to Now*, ed. Naomi Beckwith and Dieter Roelstraete (Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago in association with the University of Chicago Press, 2015) 95-107. For more on his visual art, see Marissa H. Baker, “New

present the night of Coltrane's renewal:

it was autumn 1961.....
 and john coltrane went to sleep
 in the butterfly chair at the front of the room
 under the color eruption caton had
 crucified himself on
 with trumpets bell stuck through his
 head
 with shango puts on African bass
 the poet takes his cue
 and john Coltrane awakes
 showing us the way to listen to his music...really⁶³

Mor's mythic poem demonstrates the ways that Chicago's Black artists and cultural workers were informed by local Pan-African spiritualist pursuits of community and racial-consciousness.⁶⁴ For artists such as Webber, art could also create spaces that linked spiritual freedom and self-consciousness with a communal racial consciousness. Caton's densely-packed abstractions and bold "color eruptions" in *Universal Alley* then correspond to a visual articulation of spiritual realms and individual and group consciousness rather than merely as visual analogies to jazz syncopations. Correspondences between Black American music and Black visual arts are not

Worlds," in *The Time Is Now! Art Worlds of Chicago's South Side, 1960-1980*, eds. Rebecca Zorach and Marissa H. Baker, 240-245 (Chicago: Smart Museum of Art, 2018).

⁶³ Amus Mor, "The Coming of John," in *SOS-Calling All Black People: A Black Arts Movement Reader*, ed. John H. Bracey, Sonia Sanchez, and James Edward Smethurst (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014), 344-348. According to Smethurst, even though Amus Mor's (born David Moore) poetry is largely unpublished, his use of jazz phrasing and rhythms, as well as scatting and R&B singing, had a profound influence on other poets, such as Amiri Baraka. James Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 211. Kimberly W. Benston identifies the Coltrane Poem in modern Black poetry as a project of cultural redefinition in response to his death. He does not address Mor's poem specifically (and perhaps unsurprisingly considering he has published little), but Mor's poem seems distinct from the poetic form Benston describes since Mor speaks to Coltrane's rebirth rather than the event of his death. Kimberly W. Benston, *Performing Blackness: Enactments of African-American Modernism* (London: Routledge, 2000).

⁶⁴ Elsewhere Mor recounts that Coltrane visited KeRa Upa and left "renewed" and healed from his addiction (presumably his heroin addiction that he overcame in 1957). Amus Mor, "The 'ghetto psychic' expanded Black thought: KeRa Upa, S. Side cosmic speaker," *Chicago Daily Defender* (Big Weekend Edition), February 26, 1972, 6. Coltrane's spiritual explorations as early as 1961 are well-documented by his biographers, including Lewis Porter, *John Coltrane: His Life and Music* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998).

uncommon, however, as Graham Lock and David Murray suggest, they tend toward “vague, rhetorical allusions to ‘spontaneity’ and ‘improvisation’.”⁶⁵ Rather, Caton’s synesthetic aesthetic—in this case, the correspondence between color and sound (visuality and aurality)—corresponds with the aim of Black Arts projects more broadly to bring their audience into consciousness. This consciousness required another way of seeing and hearing, a critical consciousness of the modern city as a rational, atomizing form that regulates Black social life and as a malleable space that can be seen anew, occupied against its intended uses, to create spaces for Black social life. The mural both frames the actual communal gathering in the alley and represents it pictorially. Universal Alley then is a social space aligns more with what Punday describes as a “genealogy of multimedia” in the Black Arts movement in which the merging of music, visual art, sartorial expression is constituted in the street, in a social space demarcated by the mural.⁶⁶

In his murals, Caton imagines the city in a way that moves beyond contestation. Rather, his methods, imagery, and visual style indicate that he saw the city as a site open to transformation. The materiality and actual spaces of the city were not meant to be transformed but transcended, to find a new reality where Black life can thrive. Black artists in Chicago often pictured liberation realized in “new worlds,” or imaginative alternate realities in which diachronic time breaks down

⁶⁵ Graham Lock and David Murray, *The Hearing Eye: Jazz & Blues Influences in African American Visual Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 6. A recent exception is George Lewis’s argument for the historical, formal, and sociocultural parallels between AFRICOBRA’s visual aesthetics and free jazz in the 1960s. Though Lewis largely relies on paintings by Donaldson produced in the 1980s, he argues that they are guided by the same principles AFRICOBRA developed in the 1960s. His analysis also demonstrates the ways that language often used to describe visual art and music relies on analogy and metaphor to communicate an abstract concept, whether using polyrhythm to describe patterns in visual art or color to describe timbre in music. George E. Lewis, “Purposive Patterning: Jeff Donaldson, Muhal Richard Abrams, and the Multidominance of Consciousness,” *Lenox Avenue: A Journal of Interarts Inquiry* 5, (1999): 63-69.

⁶⁶ Punday, “The Black Arts Movement and the Genealogy of Multimedia.”

and elements of the past and future exist simultaneously.⁶⁷ These new worlds were born or invoked through the transformation and expansion of the Black consciousness that sought to rend the DuBoisian veil through communing with Black life.

This new vision of the city could be attained through an altered sense of reality that could open up new paths for Black social life. Caton creates visions of the city that move beyond the world as it appears and reveals what lies beneath, and at times elsewhere. He elaborates his images of Black life in the city with stylized and exaggerated forms and non-naturalistic colors and as such resists the empirical production of racialized knowledges that tends to represent the gritty realism of Black life. His work signals Black life as simultaneously a negated existence in the anti-Black modern city—a space where the humanity, agency, and autonomy of Black people is constantly thrown into question—and a revolutionary affirmation of Black being and Black social life in the city.

⁶⁷ Marissa H. Baker, “New Worlds,” in *The Time Is Now! Art Worlds of Chicago’s South Side, 1960-1980*, eds. Zorach, Rebecca, and Marissa H. Baker, 240-245 (Chicago: Smart Museum of Art, 2018).

3. AFRICOBRA Poster-Prints and “Superreal” People in the Streets

The Black Arts collective AFRICOBRA, then named COBRA, formed in Chicago in 1968.¹ That same year Chicagoans witnessed a devastating urban uprising on the West Side following the assassination of civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. At the end of the summer, dramatic confrontations between antiwar protestors and police during the Democratic National Convention would further demarcate city streets as a space of confrontation and resistance. In recounting the collective’s origins, Jeff Donaldson—a founding member of AFRICOBRA—references the urban uprisings following King’s assassination:

And the atmosphere of America became more electrically charged... And then the dreamer’s dreamer had his balloon busted on a Memphis hotel balcony... And it was Chicago again and Harlem again, and San Francisco and D.C. and Cleveland and everywhere. And COBRA was born.²

In this passage, Donaldson acknowledges that political violence—protest, resistance, and so-called riots—shaped the moment out of which AFRICOBRA emerged. Art historian Nicolas Miller, in his discussion of the paintings Donaldson produced during the early years of AFRICOBRA, emphasizes the violence and militancy that informed AFRICOBRA’s aesthetic and political program. He argues that Donaldson appropriates African forms and aesthetics, such as sculptures and syncopated (visual) rhythms, to articulate a Pan-African identity that is “an abstracted

¹ The orthography of the collective’s name appears differently in historical materials as AFRICOBRA, AfriCOBRA, AfriCobra, and Africobra. I acknowledge that this is a matter of disagreement among members, and I do not claim to resolve those here. In the following, I use AFRICOBRA to be consistent with the exhibition and archival documents from the years covered in this chapter. I have not altered its appearance in the original sources I cite or directly quote.

² Jeff Donaldson, “Africobra 1: African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists: 10 in Search of a Nation,” *Black World* (October 1970): 82.

Blackness, where Black identity is always vulnerable to violence.”³ Revolutionary violence, in turn, is required of oppressed peoples of African descent to recover their lost cultural heritage and reconstruct “the African family tree,” joining the diaspora in the U.S. in solidarity with the decolonization efforts on the African continent.⁴ Violence in the form of self-defense of Black urban neighborhoods was similarly embraced by the Black Panthers who issued calls to “defend the ghetto” through armed resistance.⁵ In the years before 1970, the rhetoric of the Black ghetto as an internal colony in the U.S. would animate their analysis and response to local conditions in Black urban neighborhoods.

However, for many Black Chicagoans city streets promised more than violence. For instance, while the West Side burned following the assassination of King in April of 1968, about two thousand members of the Blackstone Rangers and East Side Disciples, two rival South Side street gangs, gathered on the Midway in Hyde Park as a form of nonviolent protest, showing the power of their numbers and organization.⁶ As discussed in Chapter One, Black artists with the Organization of Black American Culture (OBAC) had also tapped into the energy of protest and performance on the South Side with the Wall of Respect the previous year. These peaceful, though no less radical, expressions of solidarity have been overshadowed by the dramatic crises playing out in Chicago streets and amplified by national media accounts, however, resistance can take

³ Nicholas Miller, “Vulnerable to Violence: Jeff Donaldson’s *Ala Shango* and the Erasure of Diasporic Difference,” *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 36 (May 2015): 42.

⁴ Donaldson quoted in Miller, “Vulnerable to Violence,” 46.

⁵ See James A. Tyner, “‘Defend the Ghetto’: Space and the Urban Politics of the Black Panther Party,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 96, no. 1 (March 2006): 105-119.

⁶ Henry De Zutter and Edmund J. Rooney, “Rangers, Disciples: Gang Chiefs Bury Hatchet in Ceremony on Midway,” *Chicago Daily News*, April 8, 1968, 10. NewsBank: Access World News; Natalie Y. Moore and Lance. Williams, *The Almighty Black P Stone Nation: The Rise, Fall, and Resurgence of an American Gang* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2011).

different forms. Black artists understood the city to be an actual and symbolic Black space, an imminent home for Black sociality where Black Chicagoans could make themselves visible to one another. Despite repeated characterizations of the Black Arts movement as an art of protest, much of the Black Arts landscape in Chicago would, in fact, take shape through the collective efforts of artists in multiple disciplines seeking to articulate a distinctive Black cultural field animated by familiar forms of Black sociality in the city's public spaces.⁷ Though born from the violent protests in 1968 as well as their own activism to resist cooption by white mainstream institutions, AFRICOBRA would develop an artistic practice that engaged the city as a space of sociality and creativity.

Consider, for example, two prints by Barbara Jones-Hogu (then Jones), *Be Your Brother's Keeper* and *Unite* that demonstrate the ways that AFRICOBRA artists sought to distance themselves from the confrontational street protests. Jones-Hogu was a founding member of AFRICOBRA and a leader of their early print project. She studied printmaking at Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT) under Misch Kohn, head of the Graphics Workshop in the Institute of Design, earning a master's degree in 1970.⁸ In her *America* series, which she began before joining AFRICOBRA and would become the bulk of her thesis project at IIT, Jones-Hogu created powerful indictments of American racism, manipulating the patterns and colors of the American flag into hooded Klansmen alongside swastikas as an indictment of the racial violence that undergirds U.S. society. *Be Your Brother's Keeper* refers to the violent police response to

⁷ Donaldson, "Africobra 1."

⁸ See also, Marissa H. Baker, "Printmaking" in *The Time Is Now! Art Worlds of Chicago's South Side, 1960-1980*, 190-194, edited by Rebecca Zorach and Marissa H. Baker (Chicago: Smart Museum of Art, 2018).

protesters during the DNC (fig. 3.1).⁹ Surrounding a central swastika, she arranges closely cropped images reminiscent of the visual structure of split-screen films popular in the 1960s and 1970s. The fragmented adjacency of discrete images resembles the flickers of action broadcast on television news.¹⁰ The police appear as faceless soldiers, identifiable by their riot helmets and rifles, running alongside tanks or confronting empty-handed but defiant protestors. The images are punctuated at the edges of the print with more stark silhouettes of Black faces, fists raised in unison, and a low-contrast silhouette that suggests the beret and leather jacket of Bobby Seale (the Black Panther who would be bound and gagged during the trial of the Chicago 8 the following year). Jones-Hogu makes clear her alliance with the protestors through text that reads “Resist...Law and Order in a Sick Society.” The collage of images resists synthesis, recalling the feeling of the fast-paced and hectic protests unfolding in Chicago’s streets more than narrating its events. However, between the swastika and text from which she takes the title, she includes the most legible image in the print: a row of closely cropped Black figures in profile, their faces determined with chins jutting out. It is an image that defines a defiant Black solidarity.

Jones-Hogu later recounted that the imagery of her prints changed when she joined AFRICOBRA. She moved away from an indictment of American racism to follow AFRICOBRA’s dictum to create “positive images,” as she stated, “in making statements, in directing and

⁹ Rebecca Zorach, *Art for People’s Sake: Artists and Community in Black Chicago, 1965-75* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), chapter 4.

¹⁰ I am also thinking here of the fragmented adjacency of discrete items in the newspaper, that is perhaps more closely aligned with the materiality of the print. See, Rosalind Krauss’s analysis of “adjacency” in the newspaper as a visual structure of disarray produced within a capitalist commodity production. Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Picasso Papers*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998); also referenced in Steve Edwards, “Cubist Collage,” *Art of the Avant-Gardes*, ed. Steve Edwards and Paul Wood (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press in association with the Open University, 2004), 184-226.

motivating [our people] with particular thoughts, attitudes, and postures.”¹¹ (I discuss AFRICOBRA’s “positive images” further below.) As Rebecca Zorach demonstrates, her 1969 print *Unite* signifies her shift toward positive, and what she called “actionary” images, or images that direct viewers toward action to solve problems rather than merely react to them (fig. 3.2). In this sense the images were not documents of current events, but “oriented more toward the future than the present.”¹² The print shares the same bold graphic quality as her earlier *America* prints, but only the profiles of Black faces and raised fists remain. Two lines of Black figures face one another as they recede into an ambiguous space articulated by the overlapping repeated text—UNITE—emerging and echoing like shouts. Though representing an important shift in Jones-Hogu’s oeuvre, *Be Your Brother’s Keeper* and *Unite* share a keen sense that for Black people to unify against oppression, they need to make themselves visible to one another by standing together. However, by removing the representation of potential violence from *Unite*, such as the encounter with police brutality and state power in *Be Your Brother’s Keeper*, the print no longer refers to the actual space of confrontation, the street. Instead, the space of Black unity and resistance becomes abstract and ambiguous, suggesting that the future-oriented images meant looking to a space beyond the city.

For the artists who would form AFRICOBRA, protest was not entirely absent; they understood that it could also engender and defend autonomous artistic spaces that would create opportunities to move beyond it and construct a distinct Black visual aesthetic. Many of the founding members of AFRICOBRA also participated in OBAC, and after its Visual Arts

¹¹ Barbara Jones-Hogu, in Rebecca Zorach, “Interview with Barbara Jones-Hogu,” in *Barbara Jones-Hogu: Resist, Relate, Unite*, ed. Julie Rodrigues Widholm with Mia Lopez (Chicago: DePaul Art Museum and Candor Arts, 2018), 29.

¹² Zorach, *Art for People’s Sake*, 190.

Workshop dissolved, several of the artists came together along with other Black Arts practitioners to protest a conference at Columbia College titled “Arts and the Inner City” the next year. Ostensibly, the conference was convened to bring together multiple stakeholders concerned with the lack of quality and local engagement with arts programming aimed at low-income urban communities. However, Chicago’s Black cultural leaders, such as OBAC leader Hoyt Fuller and Donaldson, noted that the conference organizer assumed a central role in discussions about the direction of arts programs in Black neighborhoods. Donaldson, an imposing figure at six feet-six inches, served as spokesperson for the group who adopted the moniker COBRA, the Coalition of Black Revolutionary Artists. The protest actions pursued by COBRA upended the conference, asserting that Black artists were not only capable of building and nurturing audiences for art in the “inner city” without input from white-run institutions and academic elites, but they were already doing so. The artists rejected interference from outside the Black community, or more pointedly, what they aptly characterized as the usurpation of Black self-determination.¹³ After the conference, Donaldson sought to develop COBRA into a collective that would forge a new visual art movement. Donaldson joined with Jae and Wadsworth Jarrell, Jones-Hogu, and Gerald Williams to form AFRICOBRA, a collective of Black artists committed to developing a self-determined Black aesthetic. Not only did AFRICOBRA artists acknowledge and value the already-vibrant culture in majority Black neighborhoods, but it was also the material from which their aesthetic theories would take shape.

Though the membership, location, and aims of the collective has changed over time, AFRICOBRA’s founding in Chicago shaped its initial aesthetic philosophy. As such, I

¹³ For a thorough account of the events at the conference, see Rebecca Zorach, *Art for People’s Sake: Artists and Community in Black Chicago, 1965-75* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 118-122.

demonstrate the ways that the early years of the collective were informed by the political culture of Chicago's city streets. Though Pan-African aesthetics and American jazz culture continue to be important referents for the collective, I aim to reassert the meaning and importance of urban space to their aesthetic project in the late 1960s. To do so, I examine AFRICOBRA's early poster-print project in which they collectively translated individual artworks into poster-prints for wide distribution among Black audiences.¹⁴ The collective began working together in 1968 in search of common aesthetic principles that would define a Black aesthetic. Ultimately, in their desire to reach beyond the difficult living conditions in Black urban neighborhoods, AFRICOBRA artists further abstracted urban space. The poster-prints show how abstraction came to dominate their representation of the city. As such, the contours of the city began to dissolve as they began to delineate the contours of a Black interior consciousness and its longing for freedom.

AFRICOBRA Poster-Prints

AFRICOBRA began their collective poster-print project in March 1971 after their first exhibition outside Chicago, *AFRICOBRA I: Ten in Search of a Nation*. The exhibition debuted at the Studio Museum in Harlem and then later opened at the National Center for Afro-American Artists in Boston. The exhibition included ten AFRICOBRA members, including the addition of Sherman Beck, Napoleon Jones-Henderson (then Henderson), Omar Lama, Carolyn Lawrence, and Nelson Stevens to the original five members. Afterwards, the collective turned their attention to producing new work.¹⁵ By this time, Donaldson had left Chicago to become chair of the

¹⁴ I use the "poster-print" to identify the prints produced by AFRICOBRA in accordance with the artists' usage of the term. AFRICOBRA meeting minutes, July 11, 1971, Gerald Williams Collection.

¹⁵ Wadsworth Jarrell, *AFRICOBRA: Experimental Art Toward a School of Thought* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), chapter 8. Jarrell notes that all the members of the collective signed each poster-print.

Department of Art at Howard University in Washington D.C. The collective continued to meet regularly in Chicago, communicating with Donaldson through letters and occasional phone calls.¹⁶ The collective poster-print project in Chicago was led by Barbara Jones-Hogu whose technical knowledge of the process helped the members translate their individual artworks into screenprints. That spring, Jones-Hogu, Williams, Wadsworth Jarrell, Jones-Henderson, and Lawrence were joined by Howard Mallory in Wadsworth's studio in Hyde Park, which he also shared with other AFRICOBRA artists. They worked together, pulling prints and reusing screens, to collaboratively create editions of fifty poster-prints based on an artwork made by individual AFRICOBRA artists.¹⁷

The first print produced in Wadsworth's studio by AFRICOBRA in 1971 was Carolyn Lawrence's *Uphold Your Men* based on her painting by the same title (fig. 3.3).¹⁸ The central figure—a resolute woman with arms crossed, natural hair, and wearing an ankh necklace—is emblematic of AFRICOBRA's emphasis on Black figuration. Surrounding the figure in *Uphold Your Men* are brightly colored patterns and abstract forms that resemble the fluid-yet-geometric, interlocking designs of West African textiles.¹⁹ Lettering appears on either side of the figure, bending with and emerging from the abstract forms around and behind her. It reads: "Uphold your men, unify your families." According to AFRICOBRA's 1973 statement authored by Jones-Hogu:

¹⁶ Meeting minutes, Gerald William Collection; Zorach, *Art for People's Sake*.

¹⁷ AFRICOBRA meeting minutes, July 11, 1971, Gerald William Collection; Wadsworth Jarrell, *AFRICOBRA: Experimental Art Toward a School of Thought* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), chapter 8; Rebecca Zorach, "'Dig the Diversity in Unity': AfriCOBRA's Black Family," *Afterall* 28 (Autumn/Winter 2011), 103-111.

¹⁸ Jarrell, *AFRICOBRA*.

¹⁹ Lawrence has indicated her interest in African patterns: "I liked shapes and I like abstract shapes as well as figurative shapes. I would say that the figure is my favorite. I feel more at home working with figures, but I also like pattern and shape and I think it's a kind of an echo from African patterns that works and I enjoy that." Interview with the author, June 30, 2015.

“The lettering was to be incorporated into the composition as a part of the visual statement and not as a headline.”²⁰ Lawrence carefully integrates the lettering into the background design to balance its legibility with the overall visual impact of the patterning. The color and pattern seem to make the print vibrate. AFRICOBRA used the term “Cool-ade” to describe their emphasis on bold colors. The term artfully appropriates and revises the commercially available powdered drink Kool-Aid and the “cool” street styles worn by Black people.²¹

In comparison with the painting from which Lawrence’s print was derived, the screenprint appears more flattened (fig. 3.4). The figure appears even more embedded in the swirl of color and pattern. The visual qualities of a screenprint—which lends itself to bold colors, graphic patterning and lettering—was a suitable medium for realizing AfriCOBRA’s aesthetic and philosophical principles. The flatness of the poster-prints pushes the artists’ works further toward abstraction from real space. Though Black men do not appear in the print, Lawrence presents what interracial solidarity requires: the resolute posture of the Black woman in defense of Black dignity.

Zorach argues that AFRICOBRA’s early poster-print project was a way the artists “generated and re-generated the collective itself.... they were, as a group, shaping revolutionary relationships.”²² As a collective the artists committed to exploring an agreed-upon set of aesthetic principles, but they did so without losing their individuality as artists. As Donaldson notes, “We can be ourselves and be together, too.”²³ In this sense, the shared labor and costs of printing the poster-prints was a tangible way for them to articulate and represent their collective commitments.

²⁰ Barbara Jones Hugu, “Inaugurating AfriCOBRA: History, Philosophy, and Aesthetics” *NKA Journal of Contemporary African Art* 30 (Spring 2012): 92.

²¹ *Ibid.*, Donaldson, “Africobra 1.”

²² Rebecca Zorach, “‘Dig the Diversity in Unity’: AfriCOBRA’s Black Family,” *Afterall* 28 (Autumn/Winter 2011): 110.

²³ Donaldson, “Africobra 1,” 86.

Yet working as a collective served several purposes. It functioned as a kind of critique group in which members evaluated each other's works to define and refine a Black aesthetic practice. AFRICOBRA artists shared the labor of mounting exhibitions and coordinating with like-minded organizations. As such, they functioned as what has been since described as a "support network," an informal organization enabling their cultural work outside of traditional institutions.²⁴ The collective also set out to develop those revolutionary relationships among their imagined audience, the broader Black community, and their poster-prints were central to developing that audience. More than their individual artworks, the poster-prints would allow them to introduce their art into the everyday lives of Black people who did not necessarily visit art exhibitions. As historian Chris Dingwall notes, the poster-prints were created to be "pasted on the side of buildings, and tacked on apartment walls" as well as posted in school classrooms or even in motels.²⁵ AFRICOBRA meeting notes from the spring and summer of 1971 indicate that members pursued selling their prints in book shops and other local businesses as well as art fairs and gallery exhibitions in Chicago and other cities such as Pittsburgh and Los Angeles.²⁶ That is, they were meant to be out in the world where people lived, in the streets they traversed, and accessible to broad audiences in the everyday spaces of work, commerce, and school.

At the time, AFRICOBRA was becoming known through art fairs, exhibitions, and conferences, but they were aware of the limits of a singular set of art objects for exhibition that had to travel from venue to venue. They also received exposure through national publications, such as Donaldson's essay published in *Black World* quoted above, but they believed that exhibiting

²⁴ See Abigail Satinsky, ed., *Support Networks*, Chicago Social Practice History Series (Chicago: University of Chicago Press and The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 2014).

²⁵ Chris Dingwall, "The Political Economy of AfriCOBRA," *Archives of American Art Journal* 60, no. 2 (2021): 30.

²⁶ AFRICOBRA meeting minutes, April 14, 1971, and June 13, 1971, Gerald William Collection.

poster-prints would multiply the places they could exhibit their work, reaching more people.²⁷ Dingwall argues that AFRICOBRA's poster-prints were central to developing an "alternative political economy" that could ensure their autonomy to define a Black aesthetic and to circulate their work outside the mainstream (white-controlled) art world.²⁸ Their collaborative printing was in part due to financial constraint—the high cost of professionally printing Donaldson's work in D.C., for instance, would cause tension in the group—but it also helped them maintain their financial and aesthetic independence.²⁹ Though each artist retained their authorship of the images, the poster-prints produced in AFRICOBRA's name were shared property—the cost of production and any profits from their sale belonged to the group. To ensure the prints remained affordable despite the possibility of a secondary market, they included AFRICOBRA's logo—a Gelede mask wearing a pair of sunglasses next to the collective's name—and the price (\$10) so that "everyone who wants one can have one."³⁰

While poster-prints are a readily distributable commodity form that aided in AFRICOBRA's goal to articulate and speak to a broader "African family," their production was labor intensive. However, screenprinting was best suited to their purposes since they did not want to sacrifice the visual richness of saturated color by utilizing more cheap and efficient means of mass printing. As Dingwall notes, the vibrancy of their original artworks was lost in the black-and-white reproductions in mass market magazines such as *Black World*. Creating poster-prints

²⁷ AFRICOBRA meeting minutes, August 1, 1971, Gerald Williams Collection.

²⁸ Dingwall, "The Political Economy of AfriCOBRA."

²⁹ For Wadsworth's account of the tensions that emerged around the costs of Donaldson's print, see Wadsworth A. Jarrell, *AFRICOBRA: Experimental Art Toward a School of Thought* (Duke University Press, 2020).

³⁰ Jones-Hogu, "Inaugurating AfriCOBRA."

Later, the collective would create editions of 100 and print prices would be increased to \$15 so commercial galleries could keep a \$5 commission. AFRICOBRA meeting minutes, June 20, 1971, Gerald William Collection.

helped them challenge the idea of the art object as an authentic and singular work of an individual, but they were not interested in producing mere facsimiles. Dingwall refers to AFRICOBRA prints as “poster-sized reproductions,” however, the artists discussed what to call their poster-prints in 1971 and ultimately rejected this nomenclature.³¹ Wadsworth recalls an AfriCOBRA meeting in November 1968 during which Donaldson made a proposal to “make posters of our work. We need to refute the idea of an original.”³² As such, AFRICOBRA poster-prints were not intended to be reproductions of original artworks (whether paintings or textiles, as in the case of Jones-Henderson’s fiber works). Rather, they were a new work collectively produced by AFRICOBRA, either through shared labor or shared finances. They chose printing processes that would allow them to retain the “*expressive awesomeness*” of their “Coolade colors” and “Shine.”³³ In this sense, the vibrancy of AFRICOBRA poster-prints was meant to reimagine art in terms of the revolutionary cultural life of Black people as well as to remake the visual landscape of everyday Black life.

The Aesthetic Principles

Despite the seemingly programmatic approach to defining the Black aesthetic, AFRICOBRA’s principles were not strictly defined in visual terms; rather, the collective developed broad principles that could be expressed variously by individual members. Donaldson notes that “each member of the family is free to relate to and to express our laws in her/his

³¹ Dingwall, “The Political Economy of AfriCOBRA,” 29. AFRICOBRA meeting notes indicate that they discussed whether to call their prints “posters, prints, poster-prints, or reproductions,” and later decided on poster-prints. AFRICOBRA meeting minutes, June 20, 1971; and July 11, 1971, Gerald Williams Collection.

³² Jeff Donaldson quoted in Jarrell, *AFRICOBRA*, 100.

³³ Donaldson, “Africobra 1,” 85, 86.

individual way.”³⁴ As such, the realization of AFRICOBRA’s aesthetic principles were the subject of discussion and debate in the group’s critique sessions where they sought to develop and refine their aesthetic principles. As the group became more established, artists continued to bring in work and other members provided feedback on how they could better emulate the collective’s shared principles.

Williams recounted an early session when the collective rejected his rendition of their first theme, the Black family. The collective had decided to work together on a shared theme, and the Black family was chosen because of a perceived lack of images of Black people in mainstream media and due to the negative portrayal of Black families in sociological narratives, especially the infamous Moynihan Report published in 1965, characterizing Black families as “a tangle of pathology.”³⁵ The other artists critiqued Williams’ rendition of the theme because he depicted the figures in perspectival depth, which for the group was a decidedly Eurocentric visual aesthetic.³⁶ A guiding principle for AFRICOBRA in articulating a Black aesthetic was to break away from the dominance of images organized according to European visual aesthetics, and this required new sources of aesthetic inspiration to which they looked to Black street culture and style, African aesthetics and cultural forms, and Black American music, especially jazz. Each of these sources informed different members of the group differently. Ultimately, the artists understood each of these cultural sources to share the same underlying aesthetic principles that they traced back to the African continent. Music especially was held up as an unbroken link between Africa and America, whereas Black Americans had little to no trace of visual or material African cultural forms to draw

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 86.

³⁵ Jarrell, *AFRICOBRA*, 99.

³⁶ Zorach, *Art for People’s Sake*, 173.

from. As such, the translation of African aesthetic principles into visual art relied on innovation and often musical analogy.

Art historian Tobias Wofford argues that Africa was the “core aspect of AfriCOBRA’s revolutionary aesthetic,” and it is clear from their manifestos that AFRICOBRA artists shared an interest in African aesthetics and art forms.³⁷ The resurgence of interest in African cultural forms in the 1960s was connected to a cultural nationalism articulated by adherents such as Maulana Karenga, the controversial founder of the US organization and proponent of an Afrocentric lifestyle for Black Americans, and the anticolonial independence movements on the African continent.³⁸ African cultural forms and aesthetics proved an important source for artists seeking to displace western aesthetic standards. As a graduate student in art history at Northwestern University, Donaldson studied African art with Frank Willis.³⁹ Wofford argues that Donaldson and AFRICOBRA artists sought to reconnect with their African heritage through an implementation of African aesthetic principles in their artwork.⁴⁰ Kirsten Ellsworth has noted the correspondence between AFRICOBRA’s aesthetic principles—their references to shine, free symmetry, and “mimesis at midpoint”—and art historian Robert Farris Thompson’s scholarship on Yoruba aesthetic criteria from the early 1970s.⁴¹

³⁷ Tobias Wofford, “Afrofutures: Africa and the Aesthetics of Black Revolution” *Third Text* 31, no. 5-6 (2017): 639.

³⁸ Ausbra Ford, “The Influence of African Art on African American Art” in *The Visual Arts: Plastic and Graphic*, World Anthropology, ed. Justine M. Cordwell (The Hague: Mouton, 1979), 513-534. On Karenga and the US organization, see Scot Brown, *Fighting for US: Maulana Karenga, the US Organization, and Black Cultural Nationalism* (New York: New York University Press, 2003).

³⁹ Donaldson completed his dissertation on the artists from the Harlem Renaissance in 1974. See Jeff Richardson Donaldson, “Generation ‘306’: Harlem, New York,” (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 1974).

⁴⁰ Tobias Wofford, *Africa as Muse: The Visualization of Diaspora in African American Art, 1950-1980* (PhD diss. University of California, Los Angeles, 2011).

⁴¹ Kirsten L. Ellsworth, “AFRICOBRA and the Negotiation of Visual Afrocentrism,” *Civilizations* 58, no. 1 (2009), 21-38. Ellsworth attributes AFRICOBRA’s aesthetic principles to Thompson’s 1973 essays in *The Traditional Artist in African Societies*. However, elements of these Yoruba-inspired aesthetic principles (mimesis and shine, for instance) also appear in AFRICOBRA’s earlier manifesto written by Donaldson and published in 1970 in *Black*

West African culture and aesthetics were especially influential on Jeff Donaldson's artistic practice. In paintings from the late 1960s, Donaldson references West African conceptual systems and deities in his approach to representing the fulfillment of Black American life. In *Ala Shango*, Donaldson arms one of his protagonists with an *osé Sàngó* (dance wand), a visual representation of a powerful Yoruba deity used in ritual performance (fig. 3.5). According to art historian Moyosore Okediji, they are "intricately composed into objects of power, embodying the potency (*àse*) of the divinity."⁴² The object depicts a woman kneeling in supplication, with a headpiece that resembles the double axe. The young man in the painting grips the object tightly but remains calm, as he and his companion raise and place their hands flatly on the picture plane labeled "GLASS." In so doing, Donaldson evokes the dual and sometimes contradictory meanings on Sàngó, whose power is expressed as destruction, rendered as a judgement on the wicked, and protection of his people. Nicolas Miller and Okediji associate the sheets of glass with the actual glass of storefront windows shattered along Madison Street during Chicago's 1968 uprising and with a metaphor for the "restrictions imposed by the system" (or, the exclusions that keep Black Americans from sharing in prosperity), respectively.⁴³ In contrast, Zorach offers Jones-Hogu's assertion that glass is a productive metaphor for whiteness, an empty and transparent material that absorbs other colors.⁴⁴ The two figures appear to be enveloped by the milky white paint, but the *osé Sàngó* seems to emit luminous color that echos the tones in their skin and begins to fill the ambiguous space they occupy.

World. As such, the more likely source is Thompson's 1968 essay in *ARTNews*. Robert Farris Thompson, "Esthetics in Traditional Africa," *ARTNews* 66, no. 9 (1968), 44-45, 63-66.

⁴² Moyosore B. Okediji, *The Shattered Gourd: Yoruba Forms in Twentieth-Century American Art* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003), 70.

⁴³ Miller, "Vulnerable to Violence."

⁴⁴ Zorach, *Art for People's Sake*, 297.

AFRICOBRA's interest in African aesthetics went beyond iconography. While in Chicago, with students from his African American art history course at Northwestern University, Donaldson convened a national conference of Black artists, critics, and art historians from across the nation. The convening, CONFABA (Conference on the Functional Aspects of Black Art), focused on collating resources to support instruction in Black art but also defining its proper function. Part of the conference program included a visit to WJ Studios and Gallery in Hyde Park, where AFRICOBRA artists presented their work and answered questions.⁴⁵ The conference was divided into six task forces that drew up recommendations that would further the study and production of Black art. Their findings articulated a vision of art that connected aesthetic practices to the lives of everyday people: "Black art proposes to establish, not only in the sphere of art—but also in the sphere of human behavior—an ethical attitude toward human existence."⁴⁶ The idea that art should be humanistic was central to AFRICOBRA's philosophy. One of their philosophical concepts outlined in 1973, states a "commitment to humanism" envisioned as "IMAGES performing some function that African people can relate to directly and experience."⁴⁷ Though "functional" in the Black Arts is often associated with agitprop, the idea was connected to traditional African art that was understood to be more integrated into everyday life.⁴⁸ In the introduction to the second volume of *Black Artists on Art* (1971), artist and historian Samella Lewis contrasts "utilitarian art" from traditional African cultures that is responsive to its audience with "Western art" whose purpose is

⁴⁵ Jarrell, *AFRICOBRA*, 122-126.

⁴⁶ Cherilyn C. Wright, "Reflections on CONFABA: 1970," *International Review of African American Art* 15, no. 1 (January 1998): 36-44.

⁴⁷ Jones-Hogu, "Inaugurating AfriCOBRA," 93.

⁴⁸ Ausbra Ford also argues that the pedagogical function of art embraced by Black community muralists in the 1960s and 70s is an example of African influence on Black artists even if the imagery does not resemble African cultural forms visually (though many muralists such as Eugene Eda Wade incorporated African imagery and symbols in their murals as well). Ford, "The Influence of African Art on African American Art."

to maintain the power of those in control of social and government institutions.⁴⁹ In this sense, Black Arts practitioners were directly rejecting Western bourgeois-humanist high art that separates and elevates art as a rarefied category of culture. Functional art is part of a lineage of African and Afro-diasporic anti-Eurocentric avant-gardes who sought liberation not by issuing ideological or polemical missives but by developing new forms of aesthetic experience that merges, as James Smethurst notes, “the popular and the vanguard.”⁵⁰ This humanistic posture towards the people required an engagement with a local Black community.

The Jarrells left Chicago and moved east the month after AFRICOBRA’s first print run in Wadsworth’s studio. They lived in Connecticut and Massachusetts before settling in Washington D.C. where Wadsworth would eventually accept a teaching position at Howard.⁵¹ Williams would also move to D.C. in 1973. Stevens, who joined the collective in 1969, would create and print his own poster-print edition, reusing the collective’s screens at Northern Illinois University in Dekalb where he was teaching. Stevens would later leave Chicago to take a position at University of Massachusetts Amherst. AFRICOBRA would eventually become established in Washington D.C., and more specifically at the art department at Howard University, after Donaldson arrived to lead the department in 1970. Though the dispersal of original AFRICOBRA members to D.C. and

⁴⁹ Samella S. Lewis and Ruth G. Waddy, *Black Artists on Art* (Los Angeles: Contemporary Crafts, 1971), ix. As several scholars have argued, the connections between African American and African art are not natural but related to the historical condition of the African diaspora. Tobbias Wofford argues that contemporary African American artists incorporate or reference forms of African art to variously express their racial difference or critique the assumption of a natural affinity to Africa. Tobias Wofford, “Feedback: Between American Art and African Art History,” *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 41 (November 2017): 154-164.

⁵⁰ Smethurst, 66. Smethurst is mainly referring to Black Arts literary and theoretical articulations of a “popular avant-garde” in relation to Black music (specifically bebop, free jazz, and blues). For an important account of African and Afro-diasporic anti-Eurocentric avant-gardes, see also Franklin Rosemont and Robin D. G. Kelley, *Black, Brown, & Beige: Surrealist Writings from Africa and the Diaspora*, 1st ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009).

⁵¹ Zorach, *Art for People’s Sake*; Jarrell, *AFRICOBRA*.

elsewhere helped to spread the collective's presence resulting in a geographically broader membership, it would eventually weaken its base in Chicago. Donaldson's departure from Chicago signaled the beginning of the dissolution of AFRICOBRA's Chicago contingent and, as Zorach notes, the eventual resignation of the collective's few female members.⁵² Zorach argues that AFRICOBRA's female members addressed issues concerning Black women and the everyday lives of Black people in their community. While it is not clear why there were no full female members of AFRICOBRA outside of Chicago, Lawrence recalled in 2015 that she joined AFRICOBRA because Donaldson invited her, and she was unsure why no women were invited to join in D.C.

While Wofford argues that D.C. "became a space where the principles of AfriCOBRA were solidified" in relation to African aesthetics, then it also represented a growing distance between the artists and their community in Chicago streets and beyond, as the collective became more closely associated with Howard University where they would develop a more professional and intellectual ambitions.⁵³ In *Building the Black Arts Movement*, historian Jonathan Fenderson demonstrates how universities and colleges, in response to campus protests and broader social upheavals in the 1960s, sought faculty that could address Black topics and racial aesthetics in higher education curriculum, drawing Black Arts practitioners away from Chicago. Though in their new positions, Black Arts writers and artists were well-positioned to advance their own work as well as instruct a new generation of students in the political and aesthetic priorities of the Black aesthetic, the turn toward traditional careers posed challenges to maintaining their connections to

⁵² According to Zorach, the female members in D.C. were only affiliated, not full members. Lawrence and Jones-Hogu, the remaining female members in Chicago, resigned from AFRICOBRA in 1975. Zorach, *Art for People's Sake*, 338 n99.

⁵³ Tobias Wofford, "Jeff Donaldson's Howard: A Center of Trans-African Art," *Callaloo* 40, no. 5 (2017): 31.

community-based work.⁵⁴ Later, Donaldson noted that once he and other AFRICOBRA members (the Jarrells, Stevens, and Jones-Henderson) left Chicago in 1970 and 1971, it was no longer possible to continue making screenprints as a collective, though individual artists continued to issue editions of prints themselves.⁵⁵ This change signals that the later AFRICOBRA collective was not resistant to the ways professionalization can further individualize artists in the collective. Wadsworth later commented that he left the collective after thirty years because his interests diverged from the other members who were primarily college professors and unconcerned with showing in commercial galleries like him.⁵⁶

While it would be unproductive to assign greater importance to AFRICOBRA's early years in Chicago than to its years in D.C. and its connections to Howard, it is important to acknowledge that AFRICOBRA has changed over time—in location, membership composition, and aesthetic priorities. The extent to which multiple aesthetic sources informed their work at varying times demonstrates the dynamic nature of collectivity. As such, it is difficult to assign a coherent aesthetic approach to all members of the collective despite how clearly those principles are dictated in their statements. What it demonstrates is that the move from Chicago to D.C. changed the nature of the collective, and that AFRICOBRA's early poster-print project hews more closely to a community-focused artistic practice developed in Chicago, with its roots in OBAC and the radical defense of artistic and cultural autonomy of Black neighborhoods, than its later iteration that

⁵⁴ Jonathan Fenderson discusses this issue in relation to the OBAC Writers' Workshop in *Building the Black Arts Movement: Hoyt Fuller and the Cultural Politics of the 1960s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019), chapter 2.

⁵⁵ Alice Thorson, "AfriCobra—Then and Now: An Interview with Jeff Donaldson," *New Art Examiner* (March 1990): 26-31.

⁵⁶ Wadsworth Jarrell and Graham Lock, "Wadsworth Jarrell and AFRICOBRA: Sheets of Color, Sheets of Sound: Interview with Graham Lock," in *The Hearing Eye: Jazz & Blues Influences in African American Visual Art*, eds. Graham Lock and David Murray, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 150-170.

helped engender a new generation of professional Black artists and critics.⁵⁷

For AFRICOBRA, the move to D.C. and close affiliation with the faculty of the Howard art department facilitated a shift in emphasis in the thematic, symbolic, and formal elements of Afrocentric aesthetics. In a 1980 essay, Donaldson narrates a history of Black American visual aesthetics that argues “TransAfrican art” was born from a “national consciousness” (per Frantz Fanon) that developed in the wake of African anti-colonial struggles as well as the Civil Rights and Black Power movements in the U.S. Interestingly, he writes that these “struggle[s]...[were] only the initial thrust. From this point of common concerns, the Afrocentric art movement has moved upward and outward.”⁵⁸ He goes on to articulate a set of formal properties and styles of TransAfrican art that distances it from “the role of art in the ‘Struggle’,” or “taking art to the streets and making it accessible to the millions.”⁵⁹

While African aesthetics were significant to the early years of AFRICOBRA while in Chicago, they became more central to the AFRICOBRA contingent in D.C. The centrality of Black street culture and urban life is more apparent in the collective’s early artworks, especially its poster-prints. This is also apparent in the 1970 manifesto authored by Donaldson in which he acknowledges “African music and African movement” in defining free symmetry, however, references to Black life and culture predominate: the “*expressive awesomeness*” of “the Hip walk and the Together talk,” “*Shine*” in the “rich lustre of a just-washed ‘Fro,” and “The surreality that is our every day all day thang.”⁶⁰

⁵⁷ For instance, artist Bisa Butler cites AFRICOBRA’s influence on the art department at Howard as an important touchstone for her textile works. “Bisa Butler: Quilting for Culture,” Art Institute of Chicago, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dCkNMK2QtUY>

⁵⁸ Jeff Donaldson, “TransAfrican Art,” *Black Collegian* 11, no. 2 (1980): 96.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 94.

⁶⁰ Donaldson, “Africobra 1,” 85 and 86, italics in original.

For Wadsworth Jarrell, for instance, jazz heavily influenced his aesthetic framework. He later recalled that AFRICOBRA adopted jazz musician John Coltrane's technique of creating "sheets of sound" translated into "sheets of color" filling up his canvases.⁶¹ Before joining AFRICOBRA, Wadsworth's paintings were filled with images of city life such as city streets, bar scenes, musicians playing in clubs, and even horse races. His contribution to the collective's second theme, *I am Better Than Those Motherfuckers and They Know It*, shows a Black figure playing what appears to be a guitar (fig. 3.6). The instrument is transformed by concentric loops of color that appear like abstractions of resonant sound from the instrument, but also seem to morph into lettering surrounding the figure. The figure also flickers between foreground and background, at once in front of painterly fields of color and obscured by them. The painting asserts the creative contributions of Black musicians in American popular music; the title reminds the viewer that white imitators of Black musical styles always pale in comparison to the Black musicians innovating its form.

Though Jae Jarrell did not produce a poster-print, her textile-based works engaged city walls as an expressive space. Her 1969 *Urban Wall Suit* extends the connection among Black bodies and the urban built environment (fig. 3.7). In the 1960s, Jae designed furniture and bespoke clothing for customers at her boutique, Jae of Hyde Park. Though her commercial endeavors blurred the lines between fashion and art, those lines became more clearly drawn when she embraced AFRICOBRA's emphasis on images and began painting more representational imagery on her designs and exhibiting them along with the group's paintings and prints. Jae's *Urban Wall Suit* is simultaneously image, object, and potential performance. According to artist D. Denenge

⁶¹ Graham Lock, "Wadsworth Jarrell and AFRICOBRA," 155.

Duyst-Akpem, who has had extensive access to the artist's personal archives, "Jae Jarrell frames her work as sculpture, as building, whether with needle and thread and hole punch, with three-dimensional works including embellishment and text affirmations, and multi-media furniture-based pieces of blown-glass pendants, dancing chain, and hand-wrapped beads."⁶² Perhaps more than the African-inspired fashion of the 1960s or the militant leather jackets and black berets of the Black Panthers, Jae's handmade designs proposed that signifying Black revolutionary unity did not need to set aside individualism, and instead suggested the innovation of given cultural forms animated by Black bodies could transform their meanings.⁶³ The two-piece suit is composed of fabric piecework; at places the sections are united by the painted off-set grid that implies a brick wall. The grid aligns or cuts through the fabric pieces, playing with the varying design of each, such as the dark crosshatch of a plaid or the check of blue gingham. Across the top is the semblance of posters affixed to the wall advertising jazz concerts and political campaigns. The posters are painted on the suit and Jae has taken pains to imply the ways that posters are posted and then partially peeled away before another one is placed on top slightly askew. Beneath them she layers the coded identifications of graffiti tags—"MISS ATTITUDE" and "LIL BUB"—along with "BLACK PRINCE," a popular moniker for Malcolm X after his death (and the title of Wadsworth's 1971 portrait of the slain leader). In this way, Jae's urban wall is a palimpsest of popular and consumer culture as well as Black nationalist rhetoric. The slippage between the surface of the soft fabric suit and of the cold brick city wall indicates the ways that both city and

⁶² D. Denenge Duyst-Akpem, "N'Vest-ing in the People: The Art of Jae Jarrell," (Chicago: Kavi Gupta, 2019), unpaginated; and D. Denenge Duyst-Akpem, "Women of AFRICOBRA: Highlights and Reflections on Art, Motherhood, and Community" (presentation, Midwest Art History Society Annual Conference, Chicago, April 7, 2016).

⁶³ Betty Luther Hillman, *Dressing for the Culture Wars: Style and the Politics of Self-Presentation in the 1960s and 1970s* (Lincoln: Nebraska, 2015), 61-69; Robin D. G. Kelley, "Nap Time Historicizing the Afro," *Fashion Theory* 1, no. 4 (1997): 339-351.

Black body can be the ground on which Black consciousness is negotiated and articulated. When worn, the suit becomes the city animated by the Black body.

In this sense, Africa was one source of aesthetic inspiration that did not displace their engagement with the expressive culture of Black American life as culturally distinct, even if they sought to articulate it as part of an Afro-diasporic continuum. Understanding the collective as a historically dynamic organization through which individual artists could develop their own individually varied artistic practice, even if within an agreed upon framework for what constitutes Black art, allows the early years in Chicago to be both significant in the history of the collective but also an important moment for understanding the collective's emphasis on audience and community outreach.

Define, Identify, Direct

In his 1970 *Black World* essay, Donaldson defined three categories of AFRICOBRA images that would later be developed into their philosophical concepts: definition, identification, and direction.⁶⁴ The definition of Blackness (whether Black people or Black art), for Donaldson, was to be created with "images that deal with the past."⁶⁵ Whether this refers to an imagined African past or Black American history more specifically is unclear, however, by their 1973 statement, authored by Jones-Hogu, "definition" refers more directly to Blackness as an expression of political solidarity: "to define and clarify our commitment as a people to the struggles of African peoples who are waging war for survival and liberation."⁶⁶ Donaldson's original structure for the

⁶⁴ Donaldson, "Africobra 1," 83.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁶⁶ Jones-Hogu, "Inaugurating AfriCOBRA," 93.

three categories was progressive: defining the past, identifying the present, and directing to the future Black nation. In this conception, the artists are pointing the way to the future Black nation and have already arrived there, as he states, “look for us there, because that’s where we’re at.”⁶⁷ As discussed in Chapter One, reconstructing Black American history was an important project taken up by Black activists and educators in Chicago and elsewhere, but by 1973 AFRICOBRA redirected their focus to the present struggle for liberation and its future realization in the Black nation.

Representation of the Black figure was an early imperative that would be central to their aims to define, identify, and direct. Their emphasis on the Black figure countered the high modernist embrace of abstraction to avoid politics or social commentary.⁶⁸ However, despite their aim to produce politically engaged work, they avoided depicting images of oppression and structures that marginalized Black people and threatened Black life. Wadsworth recalls a discussion among the AFRICOBRA artists about *Be Your Brother’s Keeper*, the Jones-Hogu print discussed above, in which they came to an agreement that they should avoid negative images, or “protest art” that merely depicts the oppression of Black people without offering solutions.⁶⁹ Instead they wanted to create “positive images” that would lead to solutions. Later, Jones-Hogu would elaborate this point in the 1973 statement: “We were aware of the negative experiences in

⁶⁷ Donaldson, “Africobra 1,” 83.

⁶⁸ Among other Black Arts practitioners, AFRICOBRA artists made pointed statements that indicated an explicit rejection of aesthetic autonomy and its associations with elite and white culture. For instance, Donaldson writes in *Black World*: “Art for people and not for critics whose peopleness is questionable” (83). See also, Hoyt W. Fuller, “Toward the Black Aesthetic,” *The Critic* (April-May 1968): 70-73.

⁶⁹ On critiques of the Black Arts practitioners as militant, angry, or engaged in protest, see “Object Diversity,” Special issue, “Black America: 1970,” *Time* 95, no. 14 (April 6, 1970), in *The Soul of a Nation Reader: Writings by and About Black American Artists, 1960-1980*, eds. Mark Godfrey and Allie Biswas (New York: Gregory R. Miller & Co., 2021) 202-205; Melvin Dixon, “White Critic – Black Art???” in *Black Art Notes*, ed. Tom Lloyd (1971), 1-3.

our present and past, but we wanted to accentuate the positive mode of thought and action.”⁷⁰ In this framing, “positive” is not merely a criterion for representation of the Black figure, but models the revolutionary posture the art-viewer takes in response to the representation. This is not to say that affirming representations of Black people that counter negative stereotypes were not important to them. They were especially aware of the sympathetic but moralizing accounts of Black urban residents by sociologists and social workers that Donaldson described as “restricted, convicted, or evicted.”⁷¹

However, Donaldson was especially attuned to the ways that seemingly “positive” representations of Black people on television, for instance, did little to challenge the existing racial order. In his 1969 essay “The Role We Want for Black Art,” Donaldson argues that the proliferation of Black actors in television programs serves “an insidious subliminal message... ‘Let bygones be bygones—all is forgiven—let’s work together in the spirit of law and order for the protection of private property....’” What is absent from television, he argued, are “new programs [that celebrate] the beauty and dignity of Black people.”⁷² AFRICOBRA images were meant to achieve just that. Armed with an improved self-image and racial self-consciousness, the imagined Black viewer would be freed from the social, cultural, and political dictates of a white-dominated society and defined as Black. This rending of the DuBoisan double consciousness, as Black Arts theoretician Larry Neal described it, went beyond affirmation: “just being beautiful is not enough.”⁷³ Neal continues:

⁷⁰ Jones-Hogu, “Inaugurating AfriCOBRA,” 92.

⁷¹ Jeff Donaldson, “The Role We Want for Black Art,” in *Black Art Notes*, ed. Tom Lloyd (1971), 13.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 16.

⁷³ Larry Neal, “And Shine Swam On,” in *Visions of a Liberated Future: Black Arts Movement Writings*, ed. Michael Schwartz (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 1989), 20.

what we are asking for is a new synthesis; a new sense of [art] as a living reality. But first, we must liberate ourselves, destroy the double consciousness. We must integrate with ourselves, understand that we have within us a great vision, revolutionary and spiritual in nature, understanding that the West is dying and offers little promise of rebirth.⁷⁴

In this sense, “positive” images were not merely affirming; they would articulate new aesthetic norms that could undergird Black life.

Many Black nationalist projects in the 1960s shared a challenge to political and social institutions and re-evaluation of cultural and aesthetic norms. For many Black Americans in the 1960s, the need to challenge negative stereotypes and affirm Black people was deeply entwined with the celebration of Black phenotypical bodies as well as their sartorial style and comportment.⁷⁵ However, according to scholar Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., the 1960s “politics of the transvaluation” prescribed a “revolution of the mind” to confront the socialization of Black subordination.⁷⁶ Transvaluation was more than simply a re-valuation of Blackness, or making high what was brought low; rather, it was a reconsideration of its meaning and value in the struggle for liberation. The transvaluation of Blackness then can produce a solidarity that enables Black people to struggle for themselves, to determine “what constitutes the good for [them].”⁷⁷ As Zorach argues, “Positive images would (their proponents believed) present positive models to shape Black viewers’ consciousness and actively bring about the new and better reality they depicted.”⁷⁸ The goal was to transform the viewer, who would then take action to solve problems facing Black

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁷⁵ On the awareness and appreciation of Black beauty and its connections to Black Power in the 1960s, see Maxine Leeds Craig, *Ain’t I a Beauty Queen? Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race* (Oxford University Press, 2002) and Tanisha C. Ford, ed. *Kwame Brathwaite: Black Is Beautiful* (New York: Aperture, 2019).

⁷⁶ Eddie S. Glaude, Jr. *Is it Nation Time? Contemporary Essays on Black Power and Black Nationalism* (University of Chicago Press, 2002), 4.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁷⁸ Zorach, *Art for People’s Sake*, 190. Zorach also notes the problems that positive images pose for Black people.

people in U.S. society.⁷⁹ Their artworks did not depict the problems, but instead defined Black subjects who would unite to solve them. In this sense, the task for AFRICOBRA artists was not merely to produce affirming images of Black people (though that was certainly important to them), but to remake a Black subject that can imagine its own future.

Despite the emphasis on direction in AFRICOBRA's tripartite program, the destination—liberation found within the Black nation—was not clearly defined. Their images centered the Black figure and in doing so they articulate Blackness as an embodied political and cultural identity rather than political program. The visual and stylistic signs of 1960s and 70s Black cultural nationalism ranged from dashikis, bubas, and natural hair to Black berets and leather jackets. However, if the Black figure served as a visual mode of identification to propose, as Dingwall states, “revolutionary social relations” among Black people, then they were not necessarily the typical representations of “revolutionary chic” associated with Black Power activists such as the Black Panthers.⁸⁰ This is not to say that their works were absent these familiar Black cultural nationalist signs—raised fists and Black men and women armed with rifles appeared in several works by Donaldson and Jones-Hogu. Jae Jarrell, meanwhile, adorned her *Revolutionary Suit* with a colorful bandolier, (fig. 3.8). However, their work rejects the opposition of politics and culture—an opposition that had violent consequences in the feud between the Black Panthers and Karenga's Afrocentric US organization—instead the artists layered signs of Blackness drawn from African

⁷⁹ Carolyn Lawrence connected AFRICOBRA's “problem-solving approach” to the curriculum at the School of Design at the Illinois Institute of Technology where she, Jones-Hogu, and Donaldson studied. Though it may seem overly simplified to us today (as Carolyn noted, “now we don't talk to problem solving, we talk about issues”) to describe white supremacy as a “problem” (versus a structure, system, or institution), for these artists in the early 1970s naming it as such meant that they could work towards a solution. Interview with the author, June 30, 2015.

⁸⁰ Dingwall, 30. For more on revolutionary chic and the fashion of Black Power, see Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar, *Black Power: Radical Politics and African American Identity* (Baltimore, Md: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 116-122.

aesthetics, jazz music, psychedelia, and Black street culture to define a revolutionary Blackness. Ultimately, AFRICOBRA's Black figures were drawn from the everyday spaces where Black people defined and identified themselves in city streets and were amplified through an elaboration of vibrant color, syncopated patterns, lettering, and ambiguous spaces to create what Donaldson referred to as "coolade images for the superreal people."⁸¹

The term "superreal" appears in Donaldson's 1970 essay in *Black World* but is absent from Jones-Hogu's 1973 revision of the collective's statement.⁸² Superreal was not a common term in the 1960s, however, "super-realism" was initially a revision of surrealism when European surrealists first exhibited in the United States in 1931. The exhibition, *Newer Super-Realism*, opened in 1931 at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut, and was renamed *The Super-Realists* when it traveled to the Julien Levy Gallery in New York City the following year. By the late 1930s, surrealism had superseded the term in popular usage in the U.S.⁸³ It is not clear if AFRICOBRA artists were familiar with this early usage, however, it is possible that Jeff Donaldson encountered this history while researching his dissertation on Studio 306, a gathering place and intellectual forum for Black artists in New York during the same decade.⁸⁴ Though AFRICOBRA was never formally associated with surrealism (that is, if there were such a way to formally join what scholars have described as a "spontaneous association" rather than a movement), AFRICOBRA's use of the superreal term appears to be at least an innovation of its

⁸¹ Donaldson, "Africobra 1," 86.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 86.

⁸³ Lindsay A. Freeman, "James Agee and the Southern Superreal," in *The Bohemian South: Creating Countercultures, from Poe to Punk*, 73-88, edited by Shawn Chandler Bingham, Lindsey A. Freeman (University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

⁸⁴ Donaldson, "Generation '306'." For more on 306, see Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists: From 1792 to the Present* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 234-238.

name.⁸⁵ Further, the Chicago Surrealist Group, who were organizing as early as 1962 in the city, would have been a visible presence in the 1960s when AFRICOBRA was active. The group participated in the explosive protests during the Democratic National Convention and organized direct actions against a surrealist exhibition curated by William Rubin that opened at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1968. Despite the participation of Ted Joans, a Black artist, the Chicago Surrealist Group had a mostly white membership. It is possible, and perhaps unsurprisingly so, that if AFRICOBRA artists were aware of this majority-white group then they might choose to innovate superreal rather than adopt the term surrealism in order to distinguish themselves.

In her essay “Black Aesthetics Unbound,” Margo Natalie Crawford connects the superreal to AFRICOBRA’s principle of “mimesis-at mid-point,” or the evocative play between realism and abstraction.⁸⁶ She demonstrates the ways that Black Arts practitioners abstracted realistic images into silhouettes so they could become easily readable signs, for instance, chromatic Black as a political sign, or a silhouette of the African continent as a sign of the unity among African and Afrodiasporic peoples. She describes the superreal as a “realistic sign tilted as if entering the outer space of the abstract” in which representations are simultaneously referencing the “the real” and the flattening into signs so that AFRICOBRA’s “word pictures” could constitute a “public language” of Blackness. I push back on this literary reading of AFRICOBRA’s imagery to assert the complexity of their visual operations as more akin to the imaginary forms of surrealism. In fact, I argue that their images are not so easily decoded. Zorach similarly argues that the superreal

⁸⁵ Abigail Susik, “Chicago,” in *Surrealism Beyond Borders*, 108-111, ed. Stephanie D’Alessandro and Matthew Gale (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2021); Franklin Rosemont and Robin D. G. Kelley, *Black, Brown, & Beige: Surrealist Writings from Africa and the Diaspora* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009) (“spontaneous association,” 1).

⁸⁶ Margo Natalie Crawford, “Black Aesthetics Unbound.” *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 29, no. 1 (2011): 8–21.

is an extension of mimesis-at-midpoint, however, she emphasizes its visual complexity: it was “a form of surrealism that was not distortion but reality-plus.... art that filled up, added to, and exceeded reality—but was not apart from reality.”⁸⁷ In Zorach’s analysis, the reality elaborated is the “realism” of the Black figure (made superreal with “color and luminosity”), or in other cases, the addition of found materials such as newspaper clippings and photographs or other ephemeral print media stand for a “factual” realism.

I want to extend Zorach’s insights to consider how AFRICOBRA aesthetic experimentation complicates the realism of the Black figure, especially when the figure appears in the city in their early works. In his 1970 essay, Donaldson defines the superreal in relation to everyday life “on the streets of Watts and the Southside and 4th street and in Roxbury and in Harlem, [in] Abijan, in Port-au-Prince, Bahia and Ibadan, in Dakar and Johannesburg.”⁸⁸ If the Black figure in the urban landscape dominates the (mis)representations of Black modernity, AFRICOBRA artists push back against disempowering images that emphasize poverty and lack to elaborate and amplify their defiant comportment and sartorial expression.⁸⁹ To do so, the artists would ultimately resist the appeal of creating images that traffic in the truth-telling of realism by heightening color, animating the composition with rhythm, and collapsing and confusing space. Though Black Studies scholars would later challenge the idea of Black life as an “ethnographic phenomenon” and critique the liabilities of realism and representation, AFRICOBRA artists were

⁸⁷ Zorach, *Art for People’s Sake*, 269.

⁸⁸ Jeff Donaldson, “Africobra 1,” 86.

⁸⁹ For more on the defiance of conservative fashion and social conventions, see Emily Lordi, “The Radical Experimentation of Black Psychedelia,” *New York Times Style Magazine*, February 10, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/10/t-magazine/Black-psychedelia.html>, last retrieved May 19, 2022; and Richard Powell, “Sartor Africanus,” in *Dandies: Fashion and Finesse in Art and Culture*, ed. Susan Fillen-Yeh (New York University Press, 2001), 217-242.

similarly dissatisfied with the positivist knowledge of Black life that reduced it to sociological facts. It is important to note that, despite their colorful elaborations of the figure, the artists still expressed a commitment to realism as an important form of visual communication that could reach Black non-art audiences, and figuration persisted as a main element of their compositions, evidence of their desire to reformulate what Black identity might be and become.⁹⁰

In their early works, the Black figure is integral to the visual landscape of the city. Gerald Williams recounts the ways the city facilitated communal and self-expression: “When you looked at walls all over the city, everywhere [what] you could find was some kind of graffiti or somebody expressing themselves on a wall.”⁹¹ This notion was shared by other Black artists working in Chicago. Black Arts photographer Bob Crawford, who worked alongside other photographers at the Wall of Respect and across Chicago in the late 1960s and early 70s, recalled the importance of the urban environment in his photographs of Black subjects in the streets: “in those days it was just, communities were much more colorful and interesting, you know, there were painted storefronts on every street, so it was a much more colorful environment.”⁹² Crawford’s photographs of Black subjects in front of the Wall of Respect demonstrate the ways that Black Chicagoans were aware of the signifying power of street murals and what it meant to appear before one (fig. 3.9). In Williams’s 1969 painting *Nation Time*, several Black faces appear before a brick wall donning natural hair styles, some with goatees and others hoop earrings (fig. 3.10). Among the faces, words address the imagined Black spectator: “We Don’t Be Jivin...Unite” and “Nation”

⁹⁰ On realism in AFRICOBRA and the Black Arts movement, see Wadsworth, *AFRICOBRA*, chapter 4; James W. Phillips, “It’s a Black Thing--You Wouldn’t Understand: The Wall of Respect, Africobra, and the Birth of a New Aesthetic,” Master’s thesis, University of British Columbia, 2000.

⁹¹ Zorach, *Art for People’s Sake*, 254.

⁹² Bob Crawford and Margo Natalie Crawford, “Intergenerational Dialogue,” *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 30 (Spring 2012), 135.

appear in different sizes like a chant composed of many voices. The letters emerge from and echo hard-edge graphic forms of brightly colored concentric circles and the sharp corners of zig zags. In other places, the hard edges blur into soft fields of painterly color that shift between the flatness of the canvas and the articulation of cool-toned Black skin. The colorful abstractions and confusion of actual space signals a retreat from realist representation.

Williams's 1969 mix media painting *Wake Up* suggests the aural harangue of pamphleteers that Williams encountered on South Side streets (fig. 3.11). In the original painting, Williams attaches an actual pamphlet that he received to the canvas that describes the "King Alfred Plan," a fictional account of a CIA plan to round up Black Americans in concentration camps in the event of an armed conflict with Black nationalists.⁹³ Williams fills the canvas with words and phrases that surround and obscure the man's body: "Check This Out...Can You Dig...Wake Up." The words seem to vibrate through the concentric elaboration of the letters as though hearing them fills up one's field of vision. Urban geographer William Sites argues that the intellectual culture of the postwar Black South Side included more than artists and writers; it encompassed the Black nationalist bookstores, soapbox preachers on street corners and in the public forums in Washington Park, and storefront churches where Black identity and politics were espoused and debated.⁹⁴ We can understand Williams's painting engaging the city street as a space of such exchanges where

⁹³ Conversation with the artist, 2013. The King Alfred Plan was taken from a fictional novel by John A. Williams, *The Man Who Cried I Am* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967). A draft of the plan was distributed in New York City separate from the novel supposedly as part of a PR stunt by the author to create excitement for the book. The plan circulated widely when it was picked up by Black newspapers. The widespread belief among Black Americans in the veracity of the plan reflects how closely it matches current and historical treatment of Black Americans, Jews, and Japanese Americans in the United States and Europe. Merve Emre, "How a Fictional Racist Plot Made the Headlines and Revealed an American Truth," *New Yorker* December 31, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/books/second-read/how-a-fictional-racist-plot-made-the-headlines-and-revealed-an-american-truth> Last accessed March 2, 2022.

⁹⁴ William Sites, *Sun Ra's Chicago: Afrofuturism & the City* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2020), chapter 5.

everyday people were confronted with powerful rhetoric meant to wake them up to the alleged plans that the U.S. government has for the containment of Black people's resistance and activism.

Creating a visual language to express the urban aural landscape was also important to Wadsworth Jarrell. His 1971 painting titled *Revolutionary* depicts Black Power activist and philosopher Angela Davis (fig. 3.12). It is likely based on a photograph of her speaking at a rally published in *Life Magazine* in 1970.⁹⁵ The painting does not depict the locale of her speech, instead it uses the idea of the resonance of her voice to animate the surface of the painting with tessellated colors and letters. The contours of her face and hand are the most carefully delineated form with the letter B (which Wadsworth uses to reference Black and Beautiful), repeated and wrapping around her cheekbones, the bridge of her nose, and the edges of her fingers.⁹⁶ In contrast, the lettering becomes looser in her in a high-collared jacket with wooden bullets aligned in a bandolier. Similarly, the background seems to expand out from her mouth; the lettering at times abstracts even more into patterned forms, filling the space as if with the powerful resonance of her voice. In the print, the lettering that articulates her figure is looser and almost dissolves into the intense patterning that surrounds and articulates her (fig. 3.13) The print loses its focal point and threatens to slip into a diffuse collection of forms instead of a cohesive image, further loosening its connections to actual space.

Examining the early works by AFRICOBRA artists in Chicago demonstrates the ways that the city streets were imagined to be an important space for the transformation of Black

⁹⁵ "The Making of a Fugitive," *Life*, September 11, 1970. The photograph was also circulated on posters in support of her release from prison.

⁹⁶ Jarrell, *AFRICOBRA*, 181.

consciousness. By examining the city as a conceptual space and source of aesthetic inspiration, I argue that their imagery exceeded mere celebration of an Afrodiasporic cultural lineage. Rather, the artists reimagined how images might function in the everyday lives of Black people in ways that both drew from and reflected the forms of expression already evident on and against city walls. In so doing, they reimagined Black subjects as separate from the oppressive realities and cultural strictures of white society and fully transformed into other realities. Ultimately, their elaboration of this imaginative space, though based in the city, abstracts urban space and the Black figure, signaling a more tenuous relation between this new Black identity and the city. These abstracted spaces signal a transcendence of the modern city, and the realization of a trans-historical Black space. That Black space is difficult to represent indicates that the occupation and acquisition of urban space is not a straightforward proposition for Black subjects. Rather it is a space of struggle that requires new senses of location.

4. Billy Abernathy's Street Photography of the Black Nation

His pictures speak of reason and rule, of women and children, Beauty and Death and War,
and the Great Yet to Come.

Kathy Slade, *Chicago Daily Defender*, 1967

The first photograph published in the photo-text collaboration *In Our Terribleness: (some elements and meaning in Black style)* by Billy Abernathy depicts a man—arms open, smiling wide, hat pushed up on his head and coat flapping open—as he dances forward enacting the photograph's title, *Flight (The Glory of Hip)* (fig. 4.1). The man flies before a monumental but non-descript masonry wall whose solidity blurs through the tonal play of light and shadow. The man seems to emerge from his inscrutable environs into the light and in motion, an apt beginning for the book, or what Amiri Baraka, Abernathy's collaborator, terms the "LONG IMAGE STORY IN MOTION."¹ In carefully constructing the photograph, Abernathy lets the urban milieu fade from sight, refocusing our attention on the central figure as he takes flight. Abernathy continues to develop this relation between figure and ground, Black subject and the modern city, throughout the photo-text and in so doing signals not just current life in the so-called Black ghetto, but the possible transcendence of its material conditions to realize a future arrival, or "the Great Yet to Come."²

In the following, I examine Abernathy's photographs of Black subjects in the city in *Terribleness* to consider how Black Arts photographers reworked familiar photographic genres and modes of presentation and distribution—street photography, social documentary, and the

¹ Amiri Baraka and Fundi (Billy Abernathy), *In Our Terribleness: (Some Elements and Meaning in Black Style)* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1970), unpaginated. Further references will be cited in text as *IOT*.

² Kathy Slade, "'HIP WORLD' ...A Photographic Statement," *Chicago Daily Defender*, October 9, 1967, 14.

photographic essay—to rearticulate the relation of Black subjects to the modern city and articulate a Black collective, or an immanent Black nation. Abernathy collaborated with Black Arts poet Amiri Baraka and designer Sylvia Abernathy (his wife) on *Terribleness* in the late 1960s, and the photo-text publication remains today the most extensive presentation of his street photography available to date. Though Abernathy's photography in *Terribleness* has received scant scholarly attention, examining his street photography will help to reassess the assumption that Black Arts street photographers were primarily compelled to create realist descriptions of Black experience.³

Terribleness is one of the most ambitious interdisciplinary experiments of the Black Arts movement. It merges the movement's vanguard aesthetics, Black cultural nationalism, and affinity for Black street style to present a mytho-poetic vision of the immanent Black nation. The book weaves Abernathy's images of urban street life with Baraka's mythological verse drawn from Kawaiida, a philosophy promoted by Maulana Karenga that emphasizes African philosophies and cultural values as the basis for a renewed Black consciousness.⁴ Despite its experimental form and narrowly defined Black audience, the book was published by Bobbs-Merrill, a mainstream publishing house. This made it unique among other photo-poem collaborations associated with the Black Arts movement which were typically published by Black-owned presses or local Black Arts local organizations. Though Abernathy travelled to Newark to visit Baraka at Spirit House, likely between 1967 and 1969, many of the photographs were taken on the South Side of Chicago. In the

³ Most scholarly attention to *Terribleness* focuses on Baraka's poetry, and more recently Sylvia Abernathy's design of the book. On Baraka see, Kimberly Benston, *Baraka: The Renegade and the Mask* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976). On Sylvia Abernathy see, Kinohi Nishikawa, "Reframing Blackness: The Installation Aesthetic of *In Our Terribleness*," *Chicago Review* (Summer/Fall 2019), 144-165. Though active alongside other prominent Black photographers in Chicago in the 1960s, Abernathy remains largely undocumented. He worked for the *Chicago Defender*, photographing human interest stories and local news on the South and West Side of Chicago during the 1960s. He made photographs of local jazz musicians that were used on album covers for Delmark Records designed by his wife, Sylvia Abernathy.

⁴ For more on Maulana Karenga, Kawaiida, and the US Organization, see Scot Brown, *Fighting for US: Maulana Karenga, the US Organization, and Black Cultural Nationalism* (New York University Press, 2003).

fall of 1967, after the installation of the Wall of Respect, Abernathy opened an exhibition at Shepherd's Gallery, a small storefront space in Bronzeville entitled *Live Flicks of the Hip World*. Photographs of the exhibition taken by Abernathy's colleague Robert Sengstacke indicate that the exhibition at Shepherd's Gallery was well-attended and included photographs that were later published in *Terribleness* (fig. 4.2).⁵ One of the photographs, *Original Hipster with Herbert in Background*, identifies Herbert Colbert, a local figure in the 43rd Street Community Organization who worked with the artists and local street gangs to install the Wall of Respect (fig. 4.3).⁶ Abernathy contributed two photographs to the Wall and made photographs in and around the Wall during its installation, capturing not just the artists as they worked, but also the passersby who constituted an immediate manifestation of its audience.⁷ Thus, Abernathy's street photography correlates to the Wall's representation and consolidation of a Black public in city streets.

Sylvia Abernathy, who also designed the Wall of Respect discussed in Chapter One, created the layout for the book that creates a rhythmic play between text and photograph across over approximately 160 unnumbered pages. Her achievement is especially notable considering the volume of Baraka's writing, which shifts back and forth from sparse poetic lines to denser blocks of essay-like text.⁸ In her layout, photograph and verse punctuate one another rather than operating

⁵ See also, Rebecca Zorach, *Art for People's Sake: Artists and Community in Black Chicago, 1965-75* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 220.

⁶ "Wall Neighborhood Vexed by Black Power Connection," *Chicago Daily Defender*, November 1, 1967, 8; Betty Washington, "'The Wall' Community Plans for Progress," *Chicago Daily Defender*, November 16, 1967, 5; Jeff Huebner, "The Man Behind the Wall," *Chicago Reader*, August 28, 1997. Colbert's organization variously appears as the 43rd Street Organization, the 43rd Street Community Relations Project, and the Southside Community Relations and Projects Organization.

⁷ Abernathy's photographs on the Wall of Respect were portraits of Stevie Wonder and Sarah Vaughn. See Abdul Alkalimat, Romi Crawford, and Rebecca Zorach, *The Wall of Respect: Public Art and Black Liberation in 1960s Chicago* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2017), 53 and 64.

⁸ Several poems reproduced in *Terribleness* were previously published indicating that Baraka, similar to Abernathy, created a large segment of the work before the collaboration was arranged. It's not entirely clear if *In Our Terribleness* is one poem or a collection of poems. The book reproduces four poems that were previously published (at least one with minor revisions). "All in the Street" was published in *Black Dialogue* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1969): 18-20. "Answers in Progress" was published in *Tales* (Grove Press, 1967) and as part of the Jihad Productions poster

in opposition. The relation between image and text created by Sylvia Abernathy is what W. J. T. Mitchell has described as a “dialectic exchange and resistance between photography and language” in the photographic essay.⁹ In this way, there is no straightforward relation between the photographs and poems in which they merely explicate the other. Rather at times, Baraka addresses Abernathy’s photographs directly, at other times the connection between word and image, other than their spatial arrangement on the page, is less clear.

In the early pages of the book before the first sequence of photographs appear, Baraka anticipates and addresses the photographs directly: “There are mostly portraits here. Portraits of life. ...Abernathy is himself, a terrible terbul dude” (*IOT*). Later, beneath a photograph of a young woman with natural hair and hoop earrings, he addresses the (male) viewer directly about the photograph: “Hey, man, look at this woman. / She is fine. Fine” (*IOT*, fig. 4.4) In other instances, the words address the photograph more obliquely. Next to a photograph of a group of young children sitting on the stoop of an apartment building, trash gather around their feet on the sidewalk, is the spare statement, “All the cities are for rent” (*IOT*, fig. 4.5). In the photograph, some of the children look at an older boy laughing, arms draped over his knees with a baseball glove on his left hand; other children look around or are absorbed in thought. The group is framed by a doorway and its tall slender columns that hint at another time when they would have lent a stately appearance to a better-kept building. Only after taking in the lively scene of childhood

series in 1969. I have not found original publication information for “Jihad” and “Dazed out of their Wool Heads.” Some poems listed above were reproduced in *Terribleness* with their titles in all capital letters, indicating that its possible other phrases that appear in the text in all capital letters are also poem titles, however, it is not clear. For the most part, scholars have not parsed the book into separate poems, see for instance William J. Harris, *The Poetry and Poetics of Amiri Baraka: The Jazz Aesthetic* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1985) and Kimberly Benston, *Baraka: The Renegade and the Mask* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976). Letitia Dace, *LeRoi Jones (Imamu Amiri Baraka): A Checklist of Works by and About Him* (London: Nether Press, 1971).

⁹ W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 289.

comradery, does one notice the sign cropped on the edge of the photograph: “[AP]PARTMENT / [F]OR RENT.” Baraka’s verse plays of the image of the for-rent sign, but poetically describes the city as a contingent and available space for Black people to occupy.

While there is no narrative sequence to the photographs—or to the poems and prose for that matter—the beginning introduces the Black nation through the frame of the Black family as its basic unit. The Black family is intoned by Baraka (“The family unit. The man will get his woman. [...] Man woman child in a house is a nation,” *IOT*), followed by Abernathy’s photographs of children and women. There is a discernable shift to a more nationalistic theme in the poem and photographs in its longest section “Prayer for Saving” in which the poem becomes an emphatic chant: “Survive and Defend. / Survive and Defend” and the subject of the photographs shifts to Black men, for the most part, in city streets (*IOT*). This masculinist rhetoric is not unfamiliar in Black Power, Black Arts, or the era’s Black cultural nationalism, and though Abernathy’s male subjects are not as sensational as more militaristic images of Black Power figures, it makes visible the contours of the era’s fraught gender politics. The agents of Black liberation, for Baraka and Abernathy, were decidedly Black men. While this limited vision of liberation cannot be easily set aside, I will explore the ways that Black men in Abernathy’s photographs were able to contest racial typecasting associated with urban deviancy and social pathology through their appearance and expressive male embodiment in urban space.¹⁰ To be sure, appearing in urban streets is coded differently for women than men. For Black women, whose role in Black families had been stigmatized by the Moynihan Report as morally loose and emasculating Black men, the narrative

¹⁰ James Smethurst makes an important case for the participation and leadership of Black women in the Black Arts movement, and similar arguments have been made about the role of women in the leadership of Black Power organizations such as the Black Panther Party. While Sylvia Abernathy’s contribution to the design of *Terribleness* is significant, it does not excuse the way gender politics is at work in the body of the photo-text. See James Edward Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 84-89.

of the Black nation in *Terribleness* firmly places them in the Black family and within the keeping of men even as Baraka claims a mutuality that resounds with Karenga's conservative gender politics: "They are our mothers and sisters and wives that we pledge to protect and love. The sisters. What we to them and they to us, will be the definition of our nation to be" (*IOT*).¹¹ After the initial introduction of the family unit, the photo-text turns to Black men as the "day to day always continuous exercise of astonishing grace" who truly know themselves even against the "screens of negative description," as Baraka's words weave together the everyday gestures and movements of Black men in the streets pictured in Abernathy's photographs with his nationalistic mytho-poetic chant.

However, Abernathy's photographs in *Terribleness* go beyond a transversal of the "screens of negative description" by rearticulating a vision of Black street cool. Rather, his photographs are key to the poetic narrative of Black national formation. Abernathy frames his Black male subjects within and against the urban built environment in a way that emphasizes his subjects' expressive bodily comportment and sartorial style while obscuring and abstracting the urban environs which had come to overdetermine their Black identities. Instead of fully embracing photographic realism then, Abernathy merged abstract and figurative imagery of Black subjects in relation to the city as a symbol of modernity—its rigid social order, rationalization of labor, and apparent breakdown in the Black ghetto—to reflect and refract Black experience into an eschatological vision of the Black nation that has not yet appeared but feels everywhere at once.

¹¹ Maulana Karenga's conservative gender politics have been well-documented. For a thorough account of how conservative gender politics in Afrocentric and Black nationalist discourses inhibits the liberation of Black women, see E. Frances White, "Africa on My Mind: Gender, Counter Discourse and African-American Nationalism," *Journal of Women's History* 2, no. 1 (Spring 1990): 73-97.

Black Arts Photography

Despite the growing body of scholarly reappraisals of the Black Arts movement, there are few critical examinations of its photographic engagements. Photographers provided crucial documentation of the collective and interdisciplinary cultural experiments in Chicago, such as the Wall of Respect, yet the meaning and significance of Black Arts photography still holds a somewhat tenuous place in narratives of the movement. An important exception is Erina Duganne, whose recent scholarship on the New York-based Kamoinge Workshop examines the collective practices and aesthetic explorations of its members. While Duganne resists any association between the Kamoinge photographers and the ideological strictures of the Black Arts movement, she acknowledges the group's ongoing debates over the appropriate aesthetic strategies for Black photographers: the social and political dimensions of realism or subjective feeling and modernist dislocations of abstraction.¹² The impetus to represent Black subjects was not new in the 1960s and 70s, but it took on a new urgency in relation to Black Power organizing and the "Black is beautiful" mantra.¹³ Scholars have since suggested the ways that artists mobilized abstraction as a politico-aesthetic practice, however, in the 1960s and 70s, the historical association of photographic realism with social content steered photographers toward Black life and Black subjects in city environs.¹⁴ As Duganne suggests, many of these photographers did not simply

¹² Erina Duganne, "Unlearning Street Photography from the Kamoinge Workshop" in *Working Together: Louis Draper and the Kamoinge Workshop*, ed. Sarah L Eckhardt (Richmond, VA: Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, 2020), 97-107.

¹³ See Mike Sell on the Black aesthetic and "Black is beautiful" in "Black Aesthetic" in *Encyclopedia of the Black Arts Movement*, eds. Verner D. Mitchell and Cynthia Davis (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2019), 24-29. For the broader discourse of "Black is beautiful," see Maxine Leeds Craig, *Ain't I a Beauty Queen? Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race* (Oxford University Press, 2002) and Ronald L. Jackson, *Scripting the Black Masculine Body: Identity, Discourse, and Racial Politics in Popular Media* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006).

¹⁴ Recent reconsiderations include, Adrienne Edwards, "Blackness in Abstraction," *Art in America* 103, no. 1 (2015): 62-69; and Darby English, *1971: A Year in the Life of Color* (University of Chicago Press, 2016).

rehash the conventions of social documentary, rather they sought to revise street photography with an eye toward making work relevant to the so-called Black experience. In so doing, they photographed scenes of Black life in the urban north where scenes of labor and leisure—from urban industrial districts to the front stoops and night clubs in Harlem and Bronzeville—unfolded. As such, the city remained an important site and metaphor for Black photographers to explore the relation between Black subjects and modernity.

The presumed paradox of interpretation for Black Arts movement more broadly—that the socio-political content steeped in the social upheavals of the 1960s is misaligned with the modernist aesthetics—becomes more acute when assessing Black Arts photography within our received histories of postwar photography.¹⁵ Perhaps more than other centers of Black Arts flourishing, Chicago's rich artistic and activist communities gave shape to its collectivist frameworks. In the 1986 exhibition *Two Schools, New York and Chicago*, Deborah Willis identifies similar interests among photographers in either city in the social realities of their Black residents, but determines that the “two schools” depart in politico-aesthetic terms: the New York school engages in more experimental image-making by incorporating “graphic abstraction and conceptual photography,” whereas the Chicago school is grounded in community-based activism and pedagogy, committed to “documentary and/or social landscape photography.”¹⁶ Such distinctions echo the more entrenched definitions of modernism in which aesthetic experimentation necessitated a distancing from political aims and community commitments, and become an endgame to interpretation. Literary scholar Sara Blair has argued that the narrative of

¹⁵ The paradox of the Black Arts was articulated by *New York Times* critic Ken Johnson in his review of the 2012 exhibition *Now Dig This!*. Ken Johnson, “Forged from the Fires of the 1960s,” *New York Times*, October 25, 2012.

¹⁶ Corrine Jennings, Deborah Willis, and Frank Stewart, *Two Schools, New York and Chicago: Contemporary African-American Photography of the 60s and 70s* (New York: Kenkeleba Gallery, 1986), unpaginated.

postwar photography as a shift from documentary projects to more subjective and abstract aesthetics “obscures the afterlives of documentary practice among African American image makers, for whom socially referential work continued to be not only a cultural imperative but a productive strategy for rethinking signifying logics inherited from Euro-American modernism.”¹⁷ Such a historiographic trajectory leaves an insufficient interpretive framework for Black photographers similarly suspicious of documentary strategies but seeking to make socially relevant work.

How then should we understand, as Romi Crawford artfully states, the Black photographers “who take Black pictures” such as Abernathy?¹⁸ Crawford argues that Chicago-based Black photographers in the 1960s and 70s were skeptical of social documentary and engaged in “a practice that is born from a social context, not just a practice that documents the social.”¹⁹ This subtle difference that Crawford identifies—that Black life is the progenitor but not necessarily the explicit subject of photography—is key to moving past a presumption that Chicago street photographers such as Abernathy were merely interested in straight reportage of a tangible Black experience. Similarly, by the 1960s, when Abernathy was working in Chicago, street photographers had shrugged off any claims to documentary realism and instead persisted in its fascination with the world but “without theorizing” according to Museum of Modern Art curator John Szarkowski.²⁰ As Szarkowski noted in his essay for the 1967 *New Documents* exhibition, for

¹⁷ Sara Blair, *Harlem Crossroads: Black Writers and the Photograph in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007), 49.

¹⁸ Romi Crawford, “Black Photographers Who Take Black Pictures,” in Alkalimat, Crawford, and Zorach, *The Wall of Respect*, 193-211.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 209.

²⁰ Despite such a pronouncement, photo-journalistic and documentary photography continued to inform public debate regarding the violence of the Vietnam-American War and the protests of the Civil Rights movement. See Simon Constantine, “From the Museum to the Street: Garry Winogrand’s Public Relations and the Actuality of Protest,” *Arts* 8, no. 2 (2019): 59.

a new generation of photographers: “The world, in spite of its terrors, is approached as the ultimate source of wonder and fascination, no less precious for being irrational and incoherent.”²¹ Yet the more modernist indulgent yet estranged encounters of street photography do not fit Abernathy’s approach to photographing Black subjects. Rather, Abernathy engaged the tensions between documentary and modernist street photography to complicate the tropes of the Black subject in city streets in northern ghettos, pushing them to the edge of abstraction to demonstrate how either sign (subject or city) is more malleable than otherwise thought to be.

To claim a racial identity at the center of one’s artistic production carries its own difficulties. As a Black photographer who refers to his subjects as “my people,” Abernathy’s project is freighted by the presumed intimacy of the insider speaking for the community.²² Duganne attempts to complicate the ways that the racial identity of the photographer is taken as confirmation of an authentic photographic vision of Black subjects. In *The Self in Black and White*, she argues that interpretations of work by Black photographers in the postwar era have been overdetermined by the photographer’s racial identity and perceived insider status in documenting Black life in neighborhoods such as Harlem. Whether or not photographers were linked to specific political movements, she argues, their work has been largely interpreted as speaking to political issues and seeking to recuperate Black subjects through positive or celebratory images. Duganne challenges this tendency toward essentialized interpretation by articulating the ways Kamoinge photographers queried the presumed authenticity of their representations of Black life by creating

²¹ Rosler disagrees with Szarkowski’s claim that the photographers in the show are inheritors of Progressive Era documentary photography; rather, they are more in the company of street photographers Brassai, André Kertész, and Henri Cartier-Bresson. Martha Rosler, “In, Around, and Afterthoughts,” in *3 Works / Martha Rosler* (Halifax, N.S.: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 2006 [1981]), 61-93. Press Release, Museum of Modern Art, February 28, 1967, https://assets.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press_archives/3860/releases/MOMA_1967_Jan-June_0034_21.pdf

²² Kathy Slade, “‘HIP WORLD’ ...A Photographic Statement,” *Chicago Daily Defender*, October 9, 1967, 14.

more complex photographs that express an “intersubjective exchange” between themselves and their subjects.²³

For Duganne, importantly, the maintenance of an individuated practice for the Kamoinge photographers, despite their participation in a collective workshop, is a way to evade the “burden of representation” for the Black photographer.²⁴ She carefully argues that their photographic practices cannot be easily aligned with the programmatic aesthetic strictures and prescribed racial representation of the Black Arts movement. In arguing that photographic meaning was created through an intersubjective exchange between artist and subject, Duganne challenges the notion of the creative genius of the photographer as sole determiner of meaning. Photographic meaning then is generated between photographer and subject as a social interaction in the street where Kamoinge photographers worked. The notion of intersubjective exchange both acknowledges and frees the photographs from interpretations based on any notion of the photographer’s essential racial identity.

Duganne’s careful attention to the ways that collective-based production does not guarantee a cohesive and undifferentiated body of work allows the intentions and works by individual photographers to stand on their own and convey “the personal and social dimensions of selfhood” rather than represent the workshop or Black people as a whole.²⁵ In this sense, Duganne’s desire to “unburden” representation for these photographers is an attempt to renegotiate the expectations for Black photographers on individualist grounds.²⁶ This argument seems

²³ Erina Duganne, *The Self in Black and White: Race and Subjectivity in Postwar American Photography* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press: 2010).

²⁴ I am borrowing the concept of the “burden of representation” from Kobena Mercer, “Black Art and the Burden of Representation,” *Third Text* 4, no. 10 (1990): 61-78.

²⁵ Duganne, *Self in Black and White*, 47.

²⁶ Tavia Nyong’o “Unburdening Representation,” *The Black Scholar: Journal of Black Studies and Research*, 44 no. 2 (2014): 70-80. Duganne emphasizes the imperative to interpret the work of Kamoinge photographers as

particularly urgent for the seemingly intra-racial conditions of artistic production at play for the Kamoinge workshop: Black photographers taking photographs of Black subjects in a Black neighborhood, Harlem. And as Duganne illustrates, the expectation for an unmediated and authentic representation of the Black community weighs heavily in interpretations of their work. Though, by the 1960s, postwar photographers had begun to challenge the medium's claim to documentary truth, the possibilities for Black artists to express a personal vision were summarily reconfigured as authentic racial trope, perpetuating the burden of representation in the reception of work by Black photographers. In many ways this representational conundrum is heightened when considering work by Black street photographers who chose to negotiate rather than reject the possibilities for socially referential photographs of Black urban subjects.

Black Art and Black Experience

In a 1972 *New York Times* review of *Terribleness*, Ron Welburn suggests that the collaboration signals how the Black Arts movement is refocusing its efforts on Black readers and viewers through an “embracement and celebration of Black experience,” rather than through protests aimed at white audiences. He continues, “It is an expression of soul, and soul is the kind of ‘terribleness’ that Black people have nurtured as they survived in America.”²⁷ That terribleness, as Baraka intones, “is to be badder dan nat” (*IOT*). As such, terribleness signals the epitome of

individuals even more directly in her 2006 essay, “Transcending the Fixity of Race.” Here, Duganne argues that the Kamoinge photographers did not “align their photographic practices with the ideologies or collective-based goals of Black Power or the Black Arts Movement,” and that any photographic engagement with Harlem or Black subjects was guided by a synthesis of individual circumstance and collective racial identity that set aside the movement’s prescription to a Black aesthetic. Smethurst, *Black Arts Movement*, 57.

²⁷ Ron Welburn, “Reviving Soul in Newark, N.J.,” *New York Times Book Review*, February 14, 1972, 10.

badness and rejection of what has been considered “good” (that is, the white world).²⁸ With this formulation, Baraka transvaluates Blackness from a sign of lack to that of the effortless cool of street hipsters imaged in Abernathy’s photographs. In his impassioned verse, literary scholar Kimberly Benston argues, Baraka “consecrates” the terribleness, as the strength of the Black collective (and inheritors of the future Black nation) in the darken streets and back alleys of the city.²⁹ Such a mythic and ritualized vision of Black life finds its grounding in Abernathy’s photographs who appear to make concrete and visible the material and embodied realities of Black life in Chicago streets.

Welburn’s review points to two common ideas associated with the Black Arts movement: that Black people have developed a distinct culture and style in many ways born from their experiences of oppression in America, and that Black art should reflect and affirm that experience. These characterizations of Black experience and Black art have been widely noted by the movement’s critics. On the one hand, such invocations of “soul” essentializes and homogenizes Blackness and affirms Blackness without questioning its coherence as an aesthetic or identity, on the other.³⁰ Critics have further noted that vague allusions to soul or “Black style” (as intoned in the photo-text’s title) by theorists of the Black Arts movement threatens to collapse Black experience into the evocative stylings of urban hipsters. Black Power activists were similarly invested in recuperating the image of the urban Black lower-class as the new political vanguard and sources of creative cultural production and crafting counterhegemonic meanings for the Black

²⁸ Baraka provides a poetic exposition on why Black people are not “good” in the introductory lines of *Terribleness*: “Since there is a ‘good’ we know is bullshit, corny as Lawrence Welk On Venus, we will not be that hominy shit. We will be, definitely, bad, bad, as a mother-fucker.” *In Our Terribleness*.

²⁹ Kimberly W. Benston, *Baraka: The Renegade and the Mask* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 142.

³⁰ David Lionel Smith, “The Black Arts Movement and Its Critics,” *American Literary History* 3, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 93-110.

ghetto. However, this identification with the urban underclass created a narrow and problematically hyper-masculine notion of authentic Blackness. In her important book, *Spectacular Blackness*, scholar Amy Abugo Ongiri argues that postwar Black culture has been largely informed by the visual rhetoric of Black Power that defined authentic Black experience and culture as urban, lower-class, and hyper-masculine expressions.³¹ She closely examines the resonances among popular music and film, the visual displays of the Black Panther Party's military macho, and the efforts of Black Arts movement intellectuals to craft a Black aesthetic based in identity, community, and cultural authenticity to demonstrate the ways that urban vernacular culture became sensationalized and eagerly consumed by different audiences in the 1960s and 70s.³² According to Ongiri, even in their celebration and empowerment of Black ghetto residents, the Panthers offer not only an image of Black ghetto residents that is lacking complexity, but also effectively erases any non-masculine Black subject.

Though *Terribleness* reinforces heteronormative gender roles, a close examination of Abernathy's photographs suggest that his urban Black subjects were decidedly unsensational. Their carefully coordinated outfits, shined patent shoes, jackets and hats, worn with self-conscious leans or cocked heads, indicate an intentional sartorial self-expression, yet it appears at such a low key that it is difficult to locate them within the schema of Black male representations as either powerful agents of Black Power macho chic or impoverished subjects of social concern which, by the 1960s, was standard evidence in documentary, journalistic, and sociological accounts of the

³¹ Amy Abugo Ongiri, *Spectacular Blackness: The Cultural Politics of the Black Power Movement and the Search for a Black Aesthetic* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009).

³² The performative politics of the Panthers, in which armed Panthers stood in formation on the steps of the Sacramento state capitol building or confronted police in the streets, was part of a strategy to empower and radicalize residents of Black ghetto, "the brother on the block," through identification with Panther actions. According to Ongiri, the Panthers effectively valorized the urban Black underclass as the vanguard of revolutionary action. Ongiri, *Spectacular Blackness*.

Black ghetto (fig. 4.6).³³ The subjects who appear in Abernathy's photographs anticipate the "player chic" aesthetic that was popularized in the 1970s entertainment industry and associated with illegal urban activities but, as art historian Richard Powell argues, before the corporatization of Black style in the 1990s, the expressive sartorial style of Black male subjects signaled a defiance of social convention and a refusal to conform to and affirm racial hierarchies. But it is also the self-consciousness (or attitude) of their bodily comportment that presents "an inward-looking,

³³ The collaboration of sociologists and photographers especially made the Black ghetto visible in ways that centered it as a site of social concern and stigma alike. Often photography served to confirm existing ideologies about Black inferiority and the conditions in which Black urban residents survived. Maurice Berger argues that documentary projects that seek to bring awareness to, and therefore provoke action to address, the difficult conditions in Black urban communities tend to selectively publish and caption photographs in ways that emphasize their impoverished living conditions at the expense of a more complex representation of Black life. Social documentary photography has had a central role in interpreting and communicating urban conditions, especially for industrial laborers. The practice emerged alongside the reform movements of the Progressive Era and was taken up as an important tool of the radical Left Cultural Front. The dual nature of social documentary photography in the early twentieth century—as a tool of the humanist "new social spirit" to improve the lives of the poor and as a "weapon in the class struggle" that not only to represented protest but sought to instigate it—indicates its ambivalent status as a social medium. In the hands of social reformers, photographers such as Lewis Hine produced journalistic portrayals of the social conditions for working class and immigrant communities in the early twentieth century's burgeoning U.S. cities. The photographs were framed in publications that were meant to generate support for progressive reform agendas and charitable causes. Photographs that depicted, for instance, labor strikes and child laborers were circulated in campaigns to mobilize public opinion in favor of reforms—many of which were successful in changing the way Americans thought about how consumer goods were produced in an industrial society. As Peter Seixas has shown, employers also understood photography as a useful tool in managing worker morale and labor conflicts. By emphasizing the dignity of workers and their important role in production despite the reality of deskilled labor, photographs of industrial laborers were meant to instill pride and encourage cooperation. Peter Seixas, "Lewis Hine: From 'Social' to 'Interpretive' Photographer," *American Quarterly* 39, no. 3 (Autumn 1987): 381-409. Despite its potential to impact public opinion (especially at a moment when photography's indexical quality encouraged its acceptance as objective evidence), critics of documentary photography question the limits of bourgeois sympathy, and in doing so, its ability to change entrenched social inequalities. Martha Rosler argues that such "liberal documentary" projects evoke sympathy while deflecting attention from the social and economic structures that produce poverty and exploitation. The spectacle of poverty then mainly confirms bourgeois viewers of their distance and difference from the represented powerless social set. Martha Rosler, *3 Works / Martha Rosler* (Halifax, N.S: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 2006 [1981]). Similarly, Abigail Solomon-Godeau asks "who is speaking thus?" in her eponymous essay in which she argues that the apparatus of the camera and the analogous pictorial vision of the photographic image conceals the ideological interests of the photographer, even as it renders the subject of the photography immobile as a sign of broader social conditions. Abigail Solomon Godeau, Solomon-Godeau, Abigail. *Photography at the Dock: Essays on Photographic History, Institutions, and Practices* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991). Berger argues that projects such as "Harlem Document," a series of photographs taken in Harlem in the 1930s by New York Photo League member Aaron Siskand, quite deliberately "stressed the community's misfortune while ignoring its rich history, cultural life and the many residents who endured, and even flourished, in spite of hardships." Such representations lack the "nuance and complexity" of the fullness of life in a neighborhood like Harlem. Siskand's representation of Harlem was contested at the time and since, contributing to a decades old debate over the representation of this Black urban community. Maurice Berger, "A Limited View of Boys from the Bronx," *New York Times* <https://lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/10/22/a-limited-view-of-boys-from-the-bronx/>.

contemplative side, a totally self-absorbed persona, as well as an aspect that acknowledges and indeed confronts us ever so slightly.”³⁴ Abernathy draws our attention to these gestures and poses that constitute the everyday signification of Black life in the city where an earlier generation of migrants could remake themselves through sartorial self-expression but that by the 1970s, as Powell suggests, becomes a necessary protective “psychological shield.”³⁵ In some ways, what these photographs contain is a moment pregnant with possible transformation: either the veil of double-consciousness will be torn (no more need to confront the white voyeur) or the need to adapt in order to forestall a psychological break in the face of oppression will become even more heightened.³⁶ As such, with the focus on the everyday, Abernathy’s photographs of Black urban subjects neither glorify the military macho of the urban lumpen nor indict desperate material realities; in fact, they do little to describe or narrate Black life in Chicago as we might expect from documentary realism. Black life instead appears moving through fragments of urban space, in the quiet pauses in conversation, and a certain familiar idleness in urban streets. His photographs capture moments of the transmutation of the common and everyday material of Black life in city streets in ways that signal a new Black self and Black life.

How does Abernathy represent the Black experience then? Welburn’s review reveals the internal contradictions of representing the Black experience in the movement’s literary and visual arts: that its attempt to signal the possibility of transformation into a future Black self and community yet to come was often overshadowed by its criticisms of current conditions. Along with vague allusions to a distinct Black identity that refer to “the rudiments of Blackness” or artists

³⁴ Richard J. Powell, “Sartor Africanus” in *Dandies: Fashion and Finesse in Art and Culture*, ed. Susan Fillen-Yeh (New York University Press, 2001), 233.

³⁵ Powell, “Sartor Africanus,” 229.

³⁶ See also, Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Billson, *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America* (New York: Lexington Books, 1992).

who “give the Black experience greater significance,” Welburn also quotes Baraka who intones “we want to conjure with Black life to recreate it for ourselves.”³⁷ In this sense, Black experience is at once tangible and representable—it describes concrete lived and material realities that have developed historically within the U.S.—and it is malleable, able to be transformed and seen anew.

Welburn elucidates Baraka’s verse in *Terribleness*: “A toothpick hanging from the lips of a Black man is transformed: ‘The dumb wood now vibrating at a higher rate. With the blood.’”³⁸ Though not reproduced with the article, the photograph placed on the page facing the verse in *Terribleness* shows the profile of a man, wearing a cap and apron, toothpick catching the light (as Baraka notes) in his mouth (fig. 4.7). The setting is largely out-of-focus, but its scale along with his apron suggests a factory or warehouse (as does the photograph’s title: *Toothpick In dus try Smiles*). But he is not engaged in his work. The man’s shoulder is rounded as if leaning, his eyes animate, and his mouth shows a slight smile as if he is in conversation with someone outside the frame. Strong verticals mimic the frame of the photograph but lean slightly towards him, framing him in a somewhat inscrutable space. The background blurs into a gridded pattern of dark and light, only hinting at a recession of space. Throughout *Terribleness*, Abernathy juxtaposes the Black figure and abstracted urban ground. The figures’ movement through or idleness in city spaces echo and play off Baraka’s verse. In this way, the photographs conjure with Black life (per Baraka): Black figures move and lean, transmuting the city’s material realities into spaces of freedom. His photographs present not merely a transvaluation of Blackness, but the city as a space of on-going tension between confinement and freedom, a ripe moment of possibility for a future yet arrived.

³⁷ Welburn, “Reviving Soul,” 10.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 12.

The Black Arts Photo-book and Collectivist Aesthetics

While neither the full checklist for Abernathy's 1967 *Live Flicks* exhibition nor the remaining body of his photographic works from the late 1960s and early 70s is available, *Terribleness* provides an opportunity to consider the ways that a Black Arts public might be constituted through recognition of the Black self/other in photographs that encode the everyday passages, gestures, and glances enacted in urban city streets. Certainly, such recognition is complicated by photography's ambivalent relationship to Black subjectivity and its proximity to modernity. Keeping in mind Okwui Enwezor's skepticism that photography lacks the capacity to translate Black subjectivity into forms of political sovereignty, I suggest that Abernathy's photographic "effort to know and appreciate himself through others," as he described his practice in 1967, ultimately demonstrates his interest in initiating Black collective identification that is recognizable to itself.³⁹ As Rebecca Zorach has demonstrated, Black photographers in Chicago understood their role to represent ordinary Black people as strategy to celebrate and uplift the image of the Black community. Abernathy's colleague, Roy Lewis, mounted an exhibition of his photographs at the South Side Community Art Center in 1968 entitled *Black and Beautiful* to counter the near "complete invisibility" of Black people.⁴⁰ Lewis planned to take the exhibition on tour indicating his understanding of the exhibition format as a viable tool for reaching broader Black audiences. Abernathy also sought to exhibit his photographs from *Terribleness* more broadly. Baraka's Jihad Productions sponsored "A Photographic Exhibition / In Our Terribleness" consisting of forty-three framed photographs ready to be exhibited in "museums, universities,

³⁹ Kathy Slade, "'HIP WORLD' ...A Photographic Statement," *Chicago Daily Defender*, October 9, 1967, 14.

⁴⁰ Roy Lewis, "Black and Beautiful Photographic Proposal," quoted in Zorach, *Art for People's Sake*, 221.

schools, churches, galleries and other institutions” for a nominal cost of \$125.00, though it’s not clear if or where it traveled.⁴¹

In addition to exhibitions, photo-murals inspired by the Wall of Respect were also important modes of public display for Chicago’s Black photographers. Greg Foster-Rice argues that the photo-murals installed by Black Chicago photographers Bob Crawford, Roy Lewis, and Robert Sengstacke on the South and West sides in 1968 were a localized form of public art that “addressed and activated community neighborhoods around images of Black pride.”⁴² Foster-Rice historicizes these projects within broader photographic responses to the city in the 1960s and 70s that sought to intervene in urban space. Such practices converged with protest demonstrations and urban political movements responding to 1960s social upheavals, especially in relation to urban renewal projects that threatened to displace Black residents even as they promised redevelopment of slum housing. In this sense, the photo-murals were interventions into the city’s social infrastructure and built environment in ways that challenged narratives of urban crisis with self-representations of vital communities.

Terribleness is emblematic of the national scope and interdisciplinary collaborations among writers, journalists, dancers, dramaturges, and visual artists characterized the Black Arts movement.⁴³ Publicity of Chicago’s Wall of Respect and burgeoning community mural movement inspired similar projects in other cities, and the city’s literary production and publishing

⁴¹ “The Art Scene,” *Black World* (December 1971), 50.

⁴² Greg Foster-Rice, “The Dynamism of the City: Urban Planning and Artistic Responses to the 1960s and 1970s,” 18-47, in *The City Lost & Found: Capturing New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles, 1960-1980*, ed. Katherine A. Bussard, Alison Fisher, Greg Foster-Rice, and Ken D. Allan (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Art Museum, 2014), 40.

⁴³ Lisa Gail Collins and Margo Natalie Crawford, “Introduction: Power to the People!: The Art of Black Power,” in *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement*, edited by Lisa Gail Collins and Margo Natalie Crawford (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 1-19.

infrastructure similarly connected Chicago to the movement nationally. Literary scholar James Smethurst, among other scholars, has argued that the Black Arts movement's emphasis on performance and street-based visual imagery was integral to building a Black Arts public sphere that was connected to the on-going struggles and activism in the Black community.⁴⁴ While these direct appeals through event- or experience-based sociality were central to the movement, it was the network of Black presses established in the 1960s that was understood to be essential to sustain a national and international Black Arts movement beyond local cultural spaces (art centers, bookstores, galleries, theaters, dance companies and other collectives). This demonstrates that movement practitioners had a sense of the role that Black Arts publications had in consolidating a broad-based Black Arts public.⁴⁵ *Terribleness* was among several other Black Arts publications that incorporated poetry and photographs of street life in the northern urban landscape.⁴⁶ While *Terribleness* stands out among other Black Arts publications because it was published by a mainstream press, the notion that a book could reach a broader, more national, audience was not

⁴⁴ James Edward Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (University of North Carolina Press, 2005). See also, Kimberly W. Benston, *Performing Blackness: Enactments of African-American Modernism* (London: Routledge, 2000) and Aldon Lynn Nielsen, *Black Chant: Languages of African-American Postmodernism* (Cambridge University Press, 1997).

⁴⁵ Benedict Anderson has convincingly argued that the circulation of printed texts contributes to the construction of the "imagined community" of the nation. Considering the subordinated position of Black people within the American nation, it would be more apt to describe the Black cultural sphere constituted by Black Arts publications as a kind of counterpublic. Michael Warner has also addressed the ways that counterpublics form and are defined by struggle against their subordinated status. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised edition (London: Verso, 2006). Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2005). W. J. T. Mitchell also identifies the potential for the photographic essay for subaltern groups to be an "internally directed representation" that can "address the people they represent, to help bring them into being as a people." W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 289. For Black subjects excluded from (or incoherent within) American national discourses, the photographic essay can potentially create an alternative discourse of belonging for the Black nation. For more on the photographic series and "discourses of belonging" see Blake Stimson, *The Pivot of the World: Photography and its Nation* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2006).

⁴⁶ Reproductions of artworks and photographs were often published as cover designs for Black Arts poetry publications, however, photographers, such as Detroit-based Gerald L. Simmons, Jr., also published photographs in small publications. Gerald L. Simmons, *Ex-Posures in Black* (Detroit: ULOZI Photographics, 1968). For an overview of artworks published in poetry collection at Broadside Press, see Julius Eric Thompson, *Dudley Randall, Broadside Press, and the Black Arts Movement in Detroit, 1960-1995* (Jefferson, N.C: McFarland, 1999).

unique within the broader movement.

Smethurst notes that the movement's journals, chapbooks, pamphlets, and broadsides often juxtaposed text (primarily poems) with visual elements in ways that emphasize the materiality of the publication as visual-textual object. For Smethurst, the interplay of image and text in these publications implies that the performance of a poem and its typographic appearance in a handheld, material book-object represent a distinct though related aesthetic form.⁴⁷ However, Smethurst does not address the potential importance of the visual components of these publications beyond their implications for understanding the significance of the publications themselves. Margo Natalie Crawford argues that the movement's mixed media projects are closely tied to their didactic approach to art and its role in awakening Black consciousness.⁴⁸ Baraka's poems, written with the cadences of Black vernacular, and Abernathy's photographs capturing the easy lean of streetwise hipsters may have been more accessible to lumpen Black viewers, but its formal innovations resist an easy read complicating its status as a straightforward primer for Black liberation. Approaching *Terribleness* as a more open-ended and experimental work of Black political imagining can help us to reconsider the relation between the movement's populist and visual forms and its attempts to define and represent a Black collective identification.

Despite its vanguard aesthetics, Abernathy and Baraka created the book for the Black viewers outside of the mainstream art audiences. Upon opening the book, the reader sees a "mirror page" with the title inscribed in the center: IN OUR TERRIBLENESS (fig. 4.8). Margo Natalie Crawford identifies the reflective, mirror page at the beginning of *In Our Terribleness* as the most

⁴⁷ James Edward Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 89-99.

⁴⁸ Margo Natalie Crawford, *Black Post-Blackness: The Black Arts Movement and Twenty-First-Century Aesthetics* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 82-83.

literal way in which the ideal Black reader will enter the “Black representational space” of the book.⁴⁹ That mirror image, according to Crawford, “demands that readers see their face” and in so doing will “imagin[e] that they [are] looking into a counter-mirror, a mirror that counter[s] a dominant, hegemonic lens.”⁵⁰ In this sense, the mirror both initiates them into the Black collective by aligning their image along with the others in the book, and produces a transversal of the Black image presumably through the acceptance of the self in the collective image of Blackness. The mirrored page of *Terribleness*, then, similarly transverses its founding operation within the “shadow archive,” or what Allan Sekula defines the corpus of pseudo-scientific images that position subjects in a social hierarchy according to their comparative features. Instead of the dynamic between reader and photographic subject that Sekula outlines in his essay “The Body and the Archive,” through which the middle-class, liberal-minded readers are assured by the “self-congratulatory mirror” of their distance from the phrenologically-delineated criminal specimens of reform era medio-social science, the mirror in *Terribleness* functions to reflect the Black viewer’s place within the collective image of the Black nation through recognition.⁵¹

While this function seems straightforward, the actual visual effect of the mirror page suggests a more complex relation between the reader and the Black nation called forth by the book’s pages. When handling the book and encountering the mirror page, one is confronted with its material reality that produces more of a mirrored effect than actual reflection. Perhaps due to the constraints of production, the metallic foil surface affixed to the page in fact obscures and warps the reflected face in contrast to the sharply focused photographs reproduced in the book. In this sense, the relation between the ideal Black reader/viewer and the Black subjects who appear

⁴⁹ Crawford, *Black Post-Blackness*, 60.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 89 and 91.

⁵¹ Allan Sekula, “The Body and the Archive,” *October* 39, (Winter 1986): 14.

in the photographs is not simply that of a physiognomic likeness. The Black viewer is confronted with their likeness distorted which ultimately suggests that the photographic archive of Blackness is initiated through the visual abstraction of the Black self-image.

For Abernathy, whose photographs display a similar interest in abstraction, this distortion is less a defeat of representation than an opportunity for a multifaceted engagement with Black experience. Abernathy alluded to the book's mirroring effect in a letter to Baraka ("Our BLACK BOOK WILL BE ... / ... MIND MIRROR MAGIC") but makes no claim to a representational realism of Blackness.⁵² In this way, the initiation into the Black collective via abstraction is a clever subversion of the ways that photographic shadow archives seek to make the external body into "readable, apparent, knowable" signs of racial identity.⁵³ Rather than present usable codes of racialized Blackness or narrative fragments of Black urban experience, I suggest that Abernathy is self-consciously revising the Black ghetto shadow archive—the familiar and spectacular images of Black urban life as impoverished, violent, or "hip"—referencing them all, not to counter positive images with negative, but to demonstrate how they are all contained within Black representation. I consider this corpus of images to be a kind of "shadow archive of Black representation," following Leigh Raiford.⁵⁴ In her assessment of photography in antilynching campaigns, Raiford argues activists understood photographs to have value in their campaigns as both factual evidence and as counter-images that reconstruct Black subjectivity and resist the full collapse of the Black body into constant victim. Abernathy's photographs are not merely affirming nor recuperative

⁵² Letter from Abernathy to Baraka, May 5, 1969, quoted in Crawford, *Black Post-Blackness*, 90.

⁵³ Shawn Michelle Smith, *American Archives: Gender, Race, and Class in Visual Culture* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999), 5.

⁵⁴ Leigh Raiford, "Ida B. Wells and the Shadow Archive" in *Pictures and Progress: Early Photography and the Making of African American Identity*, ed. Maurice O. Wallace and Shawn Michelle Smith (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 301.

images of the Black ghetto, rather they contain evidence of the contours of Black life in the city, and hints at how Black life can remake the city.

The City, Black Modernism, and Photography

Abernathy's photographs rearticulate the relation between Black subjects and the city. He finds the Black nation, emergent in the streets of the ghetto, in the style and bodily comportment of Black urban subject. To create such images, Abernathy reimagined Black urban subjectivity between confinement and freedom within the abstracted space of the city, and in so doing, proposed a different formation of Black modern consciousness. Such a revision is inflected with 1960s and 70s Black Power discourse that reconceptualized Black urban communities as internal colonies struggling for local control against the "white power structure." As historian Robert O. Self argues, this discourse of "a nation within a nation" acknowledged the persistence of racial segregation, the failure of liberal anti-poverty programs, and affirmed community empowerment.⁵⁵ Black Power resonated in cultural as well as political realms, and though they are often presented in opposition to one another, the cultural went beyond "the sleeve of the Dashiki" to give form to the political imagination of the Black nation.⁵⁶

Literary scholar Houston Baker offers a definition of Black modernism in *Turning South Again* as: "the achievement of a life-enhancing and empowering public sphere *mobility* and the

⁵⁵ Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton University Press, 2005), chapter 6.

⁵⁶ Fred Hampton, "You Can Murder a Liberator, But You Can't Murder Liberation," in *The Black Panthers Speak*, ed. Philip S. Foner (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014), 141. Hampton and the Black Panther Party were frequently critical of Maulana Karenga and the US Organization for promoting rhetorical forms cultural nationalism rather than engaging in activist politics.

economic solvency of the Black majority.”⁵⁷ Baker connects mobility to the Black flâneur. In contrast to the disciplining of the Black body under “white law” and its confinement on the Southern plantation, the Black flâneur exercises an agency that is marked by “excess, luxury, urbanity, book learning, and the accessorized body” (60). Such a conspicuous, public Black self appears in Chicago’s Bronzeville neighborhood in the early decades of the twentieth century. Studio photographers in urban centers collaborated with their New Negro subjects to fashion an evolving image of modern Black subjectivity. As art historian Amy Mooney demonstrates, William E. Woodward’s studios in Chicago produced photographs of chorus lines, graduating classes, portraits and headshots of club women and flappers alike that present “the collective imaginings of a modern Black consciousness.”⁵⁸ These studio photographs were particularly suited to express one’s individualism (as much as it was performed within different roles for the camera) but always with a sense of how the race was represented, what claims could be made for its new urban life, and the relation one’s image poses to the broader community as well as to the nation.⁵⁹ Indeed, these uses of photography among Black urban denizens indicates the ways that photographic images would both define individual and collective senses of race consciousness and circulate intra-communally as well as beyond local communities.⁶⁰

Even as photography was an important tool of self-representation for modern Black

⁵⁷ Houston A. Baker, Jr. *Turning South Again: Re-Thinking Modernism/Re-Reading Booker T.* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 33. Emphasis added.

⁵⁸ Amy M. Mooney, “Photos of Style and Dignity: Woodward’s Studios and the Delivery of Black Modern Subjectivity,” in *Beyond the Face: New Perspectives on Portraiture*, ed. Wendy Wick Reaves (Washington, DC: National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, 2019), 212.

⁵⁹ For more on multiple meanings and audiences in the photographs of James Van Der Zee, see Louise Siddons, “African Past or American Present? The Visual Eloquence of James VanDerZee’s ‘Identical Twins,’” *African American Review* 46, no. 2/3 (Summer/Fall 2013): 439-459.

⁶⁰ See Emilie Boone on James VanDerZee’s photographs circulating internationally in newspapers. “Reproducing the New Negro: James Van Der Zee’s Photographic Vision in Newsprint,” *American Art* 34, no. 2 (Summer 2020): 4-25.

subjects, it was also instrumental in constructing narratives of urban crisis that disavowed the compatibility of Black subjects with the modern city. By the 1960s, photography became standard evidence in documentary, journalistic, and sociological narratives of the so-called Black ghetto. Social reformers and documentarians sought to sway public opinion in support of government or charitable intervention to address the harsher conditions of impoverished Black neighborhoods, however, these representations instead sensationalized and stigmatized Black city dwellers as curious and tragic objects of urban crisis.⁶¹ As critic Maurice Berger has argued, the programmatic representational strategies of documentary photography tended to emphasize the impoverished living conditions of Black subjects at the expense of a more complex representation of Black life.⁶²

If the city was a temporal and spatial metaphor for Black modern consciousness, then the rural South lingered in U.S. photographic imagination as the origins of Black American life and culture. With the onset of the Great Depression, photographers and writers also began to articulate a vernacular and regional notion of American identity through the depiction of “common people” in rural landscapes. An early example of a photo-text that located Black subjects within that regional visual discourse was the 1931 project *Roll, Jordan, Roll*. New York-based photographer Doris Ulmann collaborated with Southern writer Julia Peterkin to produce a photo-text about the lives of former slaves and their enduring Gullah culture on Peterkin’s South Carolinian plantation.

⁶¹ Despite its potential to impact public opinion, especially at a moment when the indexical quality of photography encouraged its acceptance as objective evidence, critics of documentary photography question the limits of bourgeois sympathy, and in doing so, its ability to change entrenched social inequalities. Martha Rosler argues that such “liberal documentary” projects evoke sympathy while deflecting attention from the social and economic structures that produce poverty and exploitation. The spectacle of poverty then mainly confirms bourgeois viewers of their distance and difference from the represented powerless social set. Martha Rosler, *3 Works / Martha Rosler* (Halifax, N.S.: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 2006 [1981]).

⁶² In his essay, Berger was specifically responding to Aaron Siskand’s work in Harlem with the New York Photo League in the early 1930s. Maurice Berger, “Man in the Mirror: Harlem Document, Race, and the Photo League,” in *The Radical Camera: New York's Photo League, 1936-1951*, eds. Mason Klein and Catherine Evans, 30-45, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011).

As Caroline Blinder argues, Ulmann depicts rural Black workers as natural extensions of the plantation's pastoral agrarian landscape and the idiosyncrasies of Gullah culture as timeless and separate from a changing region.⁶³ Ulmann achieved this mainly through the soft-focus of her Pictorial aesthetics that allowed her to create a mystical and at times foreboding Southern landscape in which to locate her Black subjects (fig. 4.9). The stillness that Blinder astutely observes in Ulmann's photographs of the Gullah in South Carolina is at least in practicality due to the cumbersome large-format camera which required Ulmann to patiently construct each shot, yet it obscures the on-going migration of Black Southerners north during the first wave of the Great Migration.

Despite Ulmann's mystification of Black life through the trope of stillness, performance studies scholar Harvey Young argues that Black photographic stillness can be animated through looking critically, or what bell hooks has elsewhere termed the "oppositional gaze," to confront and contest the negation of Black subjectivity.⁶⁴ Young argues that the enslaved Black subjects of Louis Agassiz's 1850 daguerreotypes in South Carolina—one of the earliest examples of photography's role in anthropometric study in the United States—in being photographed, registered their presence in the historical record that today provides the viewer with a sense of their experience of captivity through a performance of stillness before the camera.⁶⁵ Young argues that

⁶³ Caroline Blinder, *The American Photo-Text, 1930-1960* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), chapter 1.

⁶⁴ Harvey Young, *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010); bell hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators" in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones (London: Routledge, 2003), 94-105.

⁶⁵ The popular emergence of photography coincided not only with abolitionist and anti-lynching movements, but also the use of anthropometry in polygenist racist discourse, especially in the American South. Louis Agassiz's daguerreotypes are one of the earliest examples of photography's role in anthropometric study in the United States. Their bodies, stripped bare and carefully posed before the camera, were ostensibly photographed for the purposes of scientific study to support the claims of American racial pseudo-science that African subjects were different and inferior from white Euro-Americans. Such desire for visual evidence of bodily difference aligns with photography's early instrumentalization in nineteenth-century European pseudo-science to produce typologies of the supposed deviant and pathological urban sub-proletariat subjects according to their physiognomy. Similar to this "juridical

there is a space for contestation within the degraded photographic practices of racist pseudo-science for agency through presence, and in particular the enslaved subjects' return of the camera's gaze. For the Black spectator of these photographs, identification with the enslaved does not necessarily cause the objectifying and dislocating psychic break caused by racialized forms of looking.⁶⁶ Rather, according to Young, there is the possibility of looking critically at these daguerreotypes in order to connect past experiences of captivity with one's own experience of oppression today. In this sense, the indexical realism of photography provides a point of departure for the reconstruction of historical experience and subversive construction of Black subjecthood.⁶⁷

These early renderings of stillness in photographic representations of Black subjects were later answered in the 1941 photo-text, *Twelve Million Black Voices* in which Richard Wright uses

realism," nineteenth-century racist discourse sought to categorize racial types as separate species which confirmed white superiority. Photography not only played an important role as a tool to make visible in perpetuity to "naturalists" such as Agassiz the postures of bodies, angles of the skull, and proportions of facial features, it also contributed to the shadow archive in which racial difference was constructed through a comparison of racial types veiled as science with photography's aesthetic of objective realism. See Maurice L. Wade, "From Eighteenth- to Nineteenth-Century Racial Science: Continuity and Change," in *Race and Racism in Theory and Practice*, ed. Berel Lang (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000), 27-44; Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," *October* 39 (Winter 1986): 3-64; and Brian Wallis, "Black Bodies, White Science: Louis Agassiz's Slave Daguerreotypes," *American Art* 9, no. 2 (1995): 38-61.

⁶⁶ Young engages these issues elsewhere in his study in relation to Frantz Fanon's psychoanalysis of Black subjugation in *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008); first English translation, 1967.

⁶⁷ Deborah Willis similarly thinks through the ways early photography can hint at the experiences of Black people who are largely absent in the historical record in her 1994 book *Picturing Us*. A photograph that depicts the self-conscious gaze of an unnamed, enslaved woman holding a white baby in a nineteenth-century daguerreotype, for instance, Willis sees as a fragment of the woman's identity, that hint at a sense of self which white supremacy and enslavement seeks to negate. Such a fragment of an identity stands in for all those unphotographed and undocumented. For bell hooks, photography was a medium through which Black families and communities could keep and maintain histories and memories. Importantly for hooks, photography is "a powerful location for the construction of an oppositional Black aesthetic," an aesthetic imperative that is primarily shaped through autonomous Black image production, display, and reception (46). The family photo-wall—maintained primarily in the home by the matriarchs of hooks's family—and the galleries of Black studio photographers are important "sites of resistance" where Black people not only maintain family histories but also critically position themselves in relation to the broader Black (in this case segregated) community. And, crucially for hooks, where Black people can learn to see and love themselves. Deborah Willis, "Introduction: Picturing Us" in *Picturing Us: African American Identity in Photography* (New York: New Press, 1994), 3-26; and bell hooks, "In Our Glory: Photography and Black Life," in *Picturing Us: African American Identity in Photography*, ed. Deborah Willis (New York: New Press, 1994), 42-53.

the Farm Security Administration files of documentary photography to narrate the northern migration of Black Americans, or Black subjects in motion, as fully-realized subjects of history.⁶⁸ Wright's photo-text project narrated the wave of internal migration in the early twentieth century that brought Black Southerners to northern cities in unprecedented numbers. Despite the difficult material realities of the urban ghetto, Wright presents a rhetorical vision of a semi-autonomous Black community within Chicago celebrated as a city within a city, or a proto-Black nation. Photographs appear in relation to the text variously as straightforward documentation that illustrates Wright's points and as more poetic meditations on what Wright describes as the "psychological island" that circumscribes Black life whether given material form in the northern kitchenette and factory or the southern shanty and cotton field (30).⁶⁹ In this sense, despite the documentary realism of the photographs, Wright's project is not meant to be descriptive; he is not

⁶⁸ Richard Wright and Edwin Rosskam, *Twelve Million Black Voices* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, [1941] 2000). Further page references will be cited in text. Wright's narrative hinges on who he identifies as "Black folk" made up of the lowest economic strata of society. As Maren Stange notes, Wright excludes images of class ascendancy that have come to define modern life in the northern Black metropolis: spaces of community and leisure. This omission, which he openly acknowledges, is a likely outcome of his ideological commitments to Communism. Maren Stange, *Bronzeville: Black Chicago in Pictures, 1941-1943* (New York: New Press, 2003). Overall, the project has received scant scholarly attention. However, an important exception is literary scholar John M. Reilly whose most thoughtful analysis of Wright's text argues for its aim to consolidate a Black nation among its ideal Black readers. He notes that Wright's text intones the cadences of the southern folk preacher and philosophy of a Marxist labor organizer which invokes the ideal Black reader to participate in its narration through a kind of call-and-response and use of the inclusive pronoun "we." John M. Reilly, "Richard Wright Preaches the Nation: Twelve Million Black Voices," *Black American Literature Forum* 16, no. 3 (Autumn 1982): 118. Regarding the photography, other than studies of FSA photographs independent from the project, Maren Stange briefly addresses the project in her essay in *Bronzeville: Black Chicago in Pictures, 1941-1943* (New York: New Press, 2003). Sara Blair considers the photographs closely, but she does not consider its relation to Black nationalism. Rather she argues that it demonstrates Wright's engagement with photography through modernist experimentation to set up her discussion of his later Pan-African work. Sara Blair, *Harlem Crossroads: Black Writers and the Photograph in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007).

⁶⁹ By stating that the photographs "appear" straightforward, I mean to suggest that they draw on a familiar aesthetic of objectivity even if we have come to understand documentary photography as more complex than mere indexical truth-telling. As the postmodern critiques of photographic truth have argued, and what Nicolas Natanson has convincingly demonstrated in relation to the selection, cropping, and erasure of the "Black image" in FSA photography more specifically, the FSA photographs selected, sequenced, and cropped by Rosskam and Wright are far from objective and disinterested. Nicholas Natanson, *The Black Image in the New Deal: The Politics of FSA Photography*, 1st ed. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992).

interested in the ethnographic representations of the “workings of a complex community.”⁷⁰ Rather, the photographic sequence narrates the coming into consciousness of the Black nation for the ideal Black reader who is initiated into it. As John Reilly notes, an ideal Black audience reads along with Wright, and in so doing they are “responding to [their] own experience, affirming [their] own authority, and acknowledging the continuous significance of Afro-American history in [their] consciousness.”⁷¹ The Black nation, then, will come into being through its own self-conscious articulation of its past and its potential future. Wright reconfigures the migration-as-uplift schema prevalent among New Negro literature into a narrative of oppression and struggle that has forged the metal and mirth of the Black nation. By putting Black subjects in motion—heading north, progressing through history, turning the page—he refutes the notion that Black subjects are inert: outside of history, immune to progress, and in need of regimentation under a “white order.”

Yet, in the book’s photographs, there is little difference between the Black subjects in the rural South and the urban North. In both locales, the material conditions of their homes are ad hoc and dilapidated. Large and impoverished families are photographed before their inadequate housing in both locales (figs. 4.10 & 4.11). As such, even as the essay propels Black readers into historical consciousness, the photographs fail to hint at the promised land; they are too steeped in photographic realism (however heavily edited to show one class strata of Chicago’s Black community). Significantly, the photographs depict a northern city, or a northern ghetto more appropriately, where Wright locates an emergent Black nation, yet it appears insufficient for Black life. The built environment of the city—tenements, streets, and the massive iron structures that support train lines—dwarf the Black subjects who live in and among it. Wide-angled shots of

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 148.

⁷¹ Reilly, “Richard Wright Preaches the Nation,” 118.

blocks show buildings tightly packed though appearing to rest on uneven land. Dirt lots appear as moments where the city infrastructure breaks down and makes surrounding structures appear near the edge of civilization. Despite this image of the city, Wright's prose makes it clear that though northern cities promise similar conditions and experiences of enclosure as the south, only under another name (redlining instead of Jim Crow), it is the city where a density of Black residents will transform neighborhoods into the Black nation. It is the presence, density, and transformation of Black subjects, not the city itself, that will usher in Black modernism.

That scene of collective arrival, which cannot yet be photographed but only imagined, is foreshadowed in the distant look of young subjects throughout the book depicted in moments of inwardness that hint at a desire for escape, for that movement forward, from the material conditions surrounding them (fig. 4.12). In the final section of the *Black Voices* entitled "Men in the Making," Wright shifts from historical narration to the urgency of a present moment that holds the promise of perpetual movement into a future: "There are millions of us and we are moving in all directions" (143). The evocative ellipsis at the end of the text implies at the next chapter still unwritten, the perpetual motion of "Men are moving! And we shall be with them...." (147). This final line appears above the last photograph of a young Black man, standing on the threshold of a door as if just stepping out into the light, looking up and beyond the strewn objects that signal his current meager material condition (fig. 4.13). Again, the realization of the Black nation is only foreshadowed in the historical consciousness of its Black subjects, and the reality of the urban detritus which constitutes the material conditions of Black life situates them on the threshold yet still in the ghetto. Despite Wright's text that impels Black subjects into historical consciousness and a future yet arrived, the realism of the photographs reproduced in *Black Voices* leaves open the question as to whether photography can image the immanent Black nation.

Margo Natalie Crawford has argued that the relation between text and image in *Terribleness* sets up an opposing dynamic between motion and stillness:

there is a great emphasis on stillness in the midst of collective motion. Subjects photographed by Fundi Abernathy pause on street corners and evoke a sense of melancholy even as Baraka's words signal the collective performance of freedom and the vulnerability that creates the 'terribleness' of the photographed subjects.⁷²

For Crawford then, Abernathy's photographs function as documents of actual material conditions in the Black ghetto—the immobility of segregation and poverty—while Baraka's verse (similar to Wright's) foresees and calls for those subjects to enact freedom. Further, Crawford elaborates contradictory moments of stillness and motion in *Terribleness* in the experience of turning the pages of the book forward and back while pausing intermittently to read or look closely. She posits Abernathy's photographs—still images that capture moments in which subjects are still long enough for their likeness to be captured (though the photographs are largely unposed and many are taken in the midst of action)—as a “Black melancholy of feeling stuck,”⁷³ while Baraka's “words are set in motion,”⁷⁴ representing “the Black Power of moving on.”⁷⁵ However, Abernathy's photographs revise the dynamic between stillness and motion in the photo-text to suggest that stillness, or a persistent presence and visibility in ghetto streets, points to another way of signaling freedom. Abernathy's subjects are indeed often stand idly in the streets (fig. 4.14).

⁷² Crawford, *Black Post-Blackness*, 84.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 39. Crawford is somewhat inconsistent with her characterization of Baraka's contributions to *Terribleness*. Earlier in her book (p. 25), she also characterizes part of Baraka's text as melancholic. Importantly, Crawford does not define or elaborate how she's operationalizing melancholy and its relation to the “Black Power of moving on” (39). Margo Natalie Crawford, “The Twenty-First-Century Black Studies Turn to Melancholy,” *American Literary History* 29, no. 4 (Winter 2017): 801. I find Kimberly Benston's arguments that Baraka was more informed by ideas of utopia and neo-Hegelian theories of history more convincing. Baraka was decidedly interested in being unstuck from a slave past. Kimberly W. Benston, *Baraka: The Renegade and the Mask* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976). For important works on race and melancholy see Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race* (Oxford University Press, 2001) and Ranjana Khanna, *Dark Continents: Psychoanalysis and Colonialism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

Rebecca Zorach discusses forms of idleness in relation to artistic practice and community organizing in her discussion of the Black Arts movement in Chicago. She complicates the idea of idleness as “a general term for bad things” associated with the misappropriation of resources (i.e. stealing or wasting) by associating it with imaginative play against a kind of capitalist instrumentalization (a clever riff on Greenberg’s “The Case for Abstract Art”).⁷⁶ Such idleness could also be understood in this context as an important strategy of refusal by Black subjects who have historically been forced to migrate and labor to accumulate wealth for their white owners and, in the context of the modern city, to subject their bodies to strenuous and mechanized industrial labor or the low-pay and subservience of domestic labor.

Abernathy and his colleagues largely distance themselves from the aesthetics and aims of social documentary especially, as Romi Crawford notes, in response to the sensational photojournalism of the Civil Rights movement that rendered Black subjects inert in the face of police brutality (as Margo Crawford notes elsewhere, the Civil Rights movement resounded with determined protest that insisted “We shall not be moved”).⁷⁷ Instead, they admired photographers such as Roy DeCarava who merged documentary and modernist aesthetics. Most notably, DeCarava’s Harlem portfolio depicts Harlem on a more human scale. The Black subjects who pause to lean inside doorways, sit on stoops or walk down sidewalks, are not overwhelmed nor in tension with the urban environs. DeCarava repeatedly finds correspondences between their bodies and the negative spaces of the city (fig. 4.15). Even in wider shots of streets and apartment buildings or vacant lots, the scale of urban life does not threaten to subsume its residents.

⁷⁶ Rebecca Zorach, “Art & Soul: An Experimental Friendship Between the Street and a Museum,” *Art Journal* 70, no. 2 (Summer 2011): 66-87. Cited in Zorach, Clement Greenberg, “The Case for Abstract Art,” *Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O’Brian, vol. 4, *Modernism with a Vengeance*, 1957–1969 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 75–84, 82.

⁷⁷ Romi Crawford, “Black Photographers Who Take Black Pictures,” in Alkalimat, Crawford, and Zorach, *The Wall of Respect*, 193-211; and Crawford, *Black Post-Blackness*, 84.

According to Maren Stange, DeCarava developed a photographic aesthetic of subjective feeling that utilizes abstract form and dark tonalities to articulate experience but also signals a rich interiority. DeCarava represents Black subjects in Harlem, but his more abstract photographs—in which the interior and exterior spaces of the city are defined by rich, dark tonalities of grey and black—reveal the experience or perspective of the Black subject in the city, transforming the act of looking into a profound act of empathy (fig. 4.16).⁷⁸

DeCarava's photographs of Harlem became the basis for a collaboration with writer Langston Hughes on the 1955 photo-text *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, a reprint of which was reissued in 1967 and known to Abernathy and his colleagues.⁷⁹ Romi Crawford states that, for Chicago-based Black Arts photographers, the collaboration “demonstrated the merits of interdisciplinary art making,” but it is also possible that DeCarava's photographic aesthetic informed Abernathy's photographic aesthetic more directly. One aesthetic corollary between their work is the lyrical tonal effects of shadow. Critic Teju Cole has described the darker tonalities of DeCarava's photographs as the interiority of Black life, or “an exploration of just how much could be seen in the shadowed parts of a photograph, or how much could be imagined into those shadows.”⁸⁰ The darkness of the shadows, those darker tonalities in his photographs, hint at a Black

⁷⁸ Maren Stange, “‘Illusion Complete Within Itself’: Roy DeCarava's Photography,” *Yale Journal of Criticism* 9, no. 1 (1996): 63–92.

⁷⁹ Roy DeCarava and Langston Hughes, *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* (New York, N.Y.: Simon and Schuster, 1955). The photo-text uses fictional narrative to weave together a portrait of the Harlem that celebrates its complexity and rich social realms. However, Stange argues that as fiction it is incorrect to refer to it as documentary work. Hughes thought of the project as an antidote to the decades of social documentary photography that categorized Black Americans as impoverished and unfit for modernity. As a kind of collective portrait, *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* utilizes text and image to narrate a relation between the main character, Sister Mary Bradley, and the broader sociological realities that shape the conditions of her life. The long-form narrative format of *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* evades over-simplifications by using the narrative of Bradley and her family as synecdoche to also represent the broader Black community in Harlem. Romi Crawford states that the 1967 reprint of *Flypaper* was in the possession of Chicago Black Arts photographers and would have been known to Abernathy. Crawford, “Black Photographers Who Take Black Pictures,” in Alkalimat, Crawford, and Zorach, *The Wall of Respect*, 193–211.

⁸⁰ Teju Cole, *Known and Strange Things: Essays* (New York: Random House, 2016), 145.

subjectivity that is not (or cannot) be made visible.

For photographers like Abernathy, this exploration of tonal effects of shadow took on metaphorical resonance in relation to their Black subjects. In a 1967 meeting of the Visual Arts Workshop attended by Abernathy, the group sought to discern a common visual language among their artworks that might help articulate the Black aesthetic. Notes from the meeting include an agreement that the photographers render their subject matter (Black people in urban environs) with “high value contrasts [that are] consistently used [to create] dominant dark patterns which emphasis (*sic*) the dignity, beauty and Blackness of the subject.”⁸¹ The artists may have seen in those passages of darker tonalities, not just a cognate to corporeal Blackness, but an abstracted space of possibility for representing the intangibility of Black subjectivity. In Abernathy’s photographs, those “dominant dark patterns” merge city spaces with Black figures in ways that confuse figure and ground. In *Abshalom*, the figure becomes almost completely indiscernible as his clothing and hat, even the hair along his jawline, blur into the inscrutable black background (fig. 4.17). The field of black focuses the viewer on his intent profile, brow furrowed as if looking at something outside the thin white picture frame. This leaves the viewer with only hints at context or narrative, the figure is visible and yet still unknowable.

By removing any reference to the built environment of the Black ghetto—as either a space of confinement or the shared sociality of urban streets that was a proscenium for Black mobility and public expression—Abernathy refocuses the development of racial consciousness on the Black figure. In *cats who are PEACOCKS strut*, for instance, four men walk through the street—their long strides, bent-arm gestures or slack-arms swaying, heads turned this way and that (fig. 4.18). However, Abernathy’s photograph tends toward abstraction with a high-keyed contrast that only

⁸¹ OBAC, “Visual Arts Workshop Report,” in Alkalimat, Crawford, and Zorach, *The Wall of Respect*, 125.

reveal glimpses of these gestures. The men's alternating Black and white forms punctuate a field of grey street asphalt. The abstraction of space and close cropping eliminates any referent to the actual street they traverse. Here the city as ground for the Black figure, dissolves into a field of grey in order to signal another space, a Black interiority, transformed into the raw material from which the Black nation will emerge.

In Abernathy's photographs, the spaces of sidewalks and streets, the thresholds, and darkened doorways, become abstracted fields of grid and grey in which Black figures appear. Building walls dissolve into ambiguous grounds of undulating tones. The repetition of lines, punctuated by silhouetted forms in Black and white, creates a rhythm.⁸² Abernathy similarly frames figures in doorways where subtle shifts or tilts breaks down the solidity of vertical and horizontal building lines. In "Man" the seated figure seems more stable than the building that skews to the left (fig. 4.19). His cocked head emphasizes the uneasy tilt of the building, the ambivalence of the space he occupies and with which he holds the knife as he holds the viewer's gaze. However, eschewing notions of Black men as sociological specimens of ghetto pathology, the subjects are clearly self-possessed. Throughout the book, Abernathy repeats the theme of the doorway as an interstitial space where figures are caught between inside and out (fig. 4.20). Here there is a sense of not time but space, though indeterminate space. Their liminal status in an ongoing moment locates them in the process of becoming, pivoting between the past and future of the Black land.

Black artists and cultural workers associated with the Black arts movement hemmed closely to activist movements and strategies, but also sought to carve out more nuanced approaches to Black representation. Though photographers like Abernathy rejected the instrumentalized truth-

⁸² Iain Anderson, "Jazz Outside the Marketplace: Free Improvisation and Nonprofit Sponsorship of the Arts, 1965-1980," *American Music* 20, no. 2 (Summer 2002): 137. Sylvia (Lani) Abernathy designed the cover for Roscoe Mitchell Sextet's *Sound* (Delmark, 1966) using similar high contrast design and a photograph of Mitchell by Billy (Fundi) Abernathy.

telling of documentary, they also sought to create an image of Blackness that did not reify Black victimization, especially within the hypervisible urban ghetto, but also avoided tropes of respectability and acquiescence to mainstream white society. Abernathy, among his colleagues, understood the ways that street and documentary photography from urban ghettos operated in the economy of Black representation and responded in a way that signaled their understanding that they were producing part of a “coded system of signs // complete with masks and mythology” (*IOT*). The city then dissolves in his image, an abstracted ground from which the Black figure can define itself rather than be defined by it. Such lightness and transcendence points to a way out of the city and the attempts of Black artists to defy the modern city and reimagine Black life.

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Figure 4.6 Billy (Fundi) Abernathy, *Saints Warriors & Heroes*, published in *In Our Terribleness: (some Elements and Meaning in Black Style)*, 1970.

Figure 4.7 Billy (Fundi) Abernathy, *Toothpick In dus try Smiles*, published in *In Our Terribleness: (some Elements and Meaning in Black Style)*, 1970.

Figure 4.8 Mirror page, *In Our Terribleness: (some Elements and Meaning in Black Style)*, 1970.

Figure 4.9 Doris Ulmann, *Swamp Baptism, South Carolina*, published in *Roll, Jordon, Roll*, 1933, p. 82.

Figure 4.10 Russell Lee, *Negro housing, Chicago, Illinois*, published in *Twelve Million Black Voices*, 1941, p. 115.

Figure 4.11 Russell Lee, *Sharecropper family, Oklahoma*, published in *Twelve Million Black Voices*, 1941, p. 60.

Figure 4.12 Jack Delano, *Interior of Negro Rural House, Greene County, Georgia, June 1941*, published in *Twelve Million Black Voices*, 1941, p. 76.

Figure 4.13 Carl Mydans, *Back yard of alley dwelling, Washington, D.C., ca. 1941*, published in *Twelve Million Black Voices*, p. 147.

Figure 4.14 Billy (Fundi) Abernathy, *Gaming*, published in *In Our Terribleness: (some Elements and Meaning in Black Style)*, 1970.

Figure 4.15 Roy DeCarava, *Boy walking between cars*, 1952, published in *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, p. 14.

Figure 4.16 Roy DeCarava, *Hallway*, 1953, gelatin silver print, $12^{15/16} \times 8^{9/16}$ inches.

Figure 4.17 Billy (Fundi) Abernathy, *Abshalom*, published in *In Our Terribleness: (some Elements and Meaning in Black Style)*, 1970.

Figure 4.18 Billy (Fundi) Abernathy, *cats who are PEACOCKS strut*, published in *In Our Terribleness: (some Elements and Meaning in Black Style)*, 1970.

Figure 4.19 Billy (Fundi) Abernathy, *Man*, published in *In Our Terribleness: (some Elements and Meaning in Black Style)*, 1970.

Figure 4.20 Billy (Fundi) Abernathy, *Living Proof*, published in *In Our Terribleness: (some Elements and Meaning in Black Style)*, 1970.

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APPENDIX A

The Wall of Respect, 1967-1972: Sections, Artists, and Heroes

Designer: Sylvia (Laini) Abernathy (*-2010)

1. Rhythm and Blues

Created by Wadsworth Jarell (b. 1929) and Billy (Fundi) Abernathy (1938-2016)

Muddy Waters (1913-1983)

Billie Holiday (1915-1959)

Dinah Washington (1924-1963)

Ray Charles (1930-2004)

James Brown (1933-2006)

Smokey Robinson (b. 1940)

Aretha Franklin (1942-2018)

The Marvellettes (all born in the 1940s)

Stevie Wonder (b. 1950)

2. Religion

Created by William Walker (1943-2017) and Robert A. Sengstacke (1943-2017)

Nat Turner (1800-1831)

Elijah Muhammad (1897-1975)

Albert Cleage (1911-2000)

Wyatt Tee Walker (1929-2018)

3. Literature

Created by Edward Christmas (b. 1941) and Darryl Cowherd

W.E.B. DuBois (1868-1963)

John Oliver Killens (1916-1987)

Gwendolyn Brooks (1917-2000)

James Baldwin (1924-1987)

Lerone Bennett (1928-2018)

LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka, 1934-2014)

4. Theater

Created by Barbara Jones (Jones-Hogu, 1938-2017) and Roy Lewis (b. 1937)

Claudia McNeil (1917-1993)

Ossie Davis (1917-2005)

Ruby Dee (1922-2014)

Cicely Tyson (1924-2021)

Oscar Brown, Jr. (1926-2005)

Sidney Poitier (b. 1927)

James Earl Jones (b. 1931)

Dick Gregory (1932-2017)

Darlene Blackburn (b. 1942)

5. Jazz

Created By Jeff Donaldson (1932-2004), Elliott Hunter (1938-2016), and Billy Abernathy

Thelonius Monk (1917-1982)

Charlie Parker (1920-1955)

Charlie Mingus (1922-1979)

Sarah Vaughn (1924-1990)

Max Roach (1924-2007)

John Coltrane (1926-1967)

Miles Davis (1926-1991)

Elvin Jones (1927-2004)

Eric Dolphy (1928-1964)

Ornette Coleman (1930-2015)

Sonny Rollins (b. 1930)

Nina Simone (1933-2003)

6. Sports

Created by Myrna Weaver (b. 1936) and Florence Hawkins (b. 1936)

Bill Russell (b. 1934)

Wilt Chamberlain (1936-1999)

Jim Brown (b. 1936)

Muhammad Ali (1942-2016)

Lew Alcindor (Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, b. 1947)

7. Marcus Garvey (1887-1940)

Adam Clayton Powell (1908-1972)

Malcolm X (1925-1965)

Stokley Carmichael (Kwame Ture, 1941-1998)

H. Rap Brown (Jamil Abdullah Al-Amin, b. 1943)

8. Dance

Created by Carolyn Lawrence (b. 1940)

VITA

Marissa H. Baker

Education

Ph.D., Department of Art History, University of Illinois at Chicago, 2022

M.A. Art History, University of Illinois at Chicago, 2011

M.A. Art Education, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 2006

B.A. Art, Wheaton College, Wheaton, IL, 2001

Fellowships, Grants & Awards

Ross Edman Award, Department of Art History, University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), 2021

NEH Summer Institute, "Art and Public Culture in Chicago," Newberry Library, Chicago, 2018

Dean's Scholar Fellowship, UIC, 2017-18

Special Collections and University Archives Fellowship, UIC, 2017

Henry Luce Foundation/ACLS Dissertation Fellowship in American Art, 2016-17

Travel Grant, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, 2016

Student Presenter Award, UIC Graduate College, 2016

Provost Award for Graduate Research, UIC, 2015

Graduate Travel Grant, Department of Art History, UIC, 2015, 2011

Graduate Student Council Travel Award, UIC, 2015, 2011

Grace Holt Memorial Award, Department of African American Studies, UIC, 2014

UIC Nominee, Distinguished Thesis Award, Midwest Association of Graduate Schools, 2014

School of Art and Art History Scholarship, UIC, 2013-14

Hilgos Fellowship, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 2004

Trustee Merit Scholarship, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 2003-2005

Publications

The Time is Now! Art Worlds of Chicago's South Side, 1960-1980 (exhibition catalogue) co-editor with Rebecca Zorach (editor). With authored contributions, "Getting the Message Out, Calling the People In: The Mural Movement on the South Side of Chicago," pp. 166-181; "AFRICOBRA" pp. 150-155; "New Art Examiner" pp. 182-185; "Printmaking" pp. 190-194; and "New Worlds" pp. 240-245. University of Chicago Press, 2018.

Review of *The Wall of Respect: Vestiges, Shards and the Legacy of Black Power* and *Eugene Eda's Doors for Malcolm X College*, Chicago Cultural Center, *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 3, no. 2 (Fall 2017), <http://journalpanorama.org/wall-of-respect>

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“Reflection on the Role of the Artists: A Case Study on the Hidden Visual Curriculum of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago” with Carol Ng-He and Maria Acaso López Bosch, *Teaching Artist Journal* 6, no. 4 (2008).

Teaching

Instructor, Art History, Odyssey Project, Illinois Humanities, 2022 - present

Lecturer, Art History, Theory, and Criticism, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 2020 - present

Instructor, Department of Art History, UIC, 2013 - 2021

Teaching Assistant, Department of Art History, UIC, 2011 – 2014

Professional Membership

Association of Historians of American Art