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## **“Try to SEE your OWN face”: Black Visibility through Poetry and Photography in Amiri Baraka and Billy Abernathy’s *In Our Terribleness***

The aim of this article is to demonstrate that there exists a salient interrelationship between poetry and the visual arts – here represented by photography – in the Black Aesthetic period, as both forms of creative expression have complemented each other in the act of black people consciously re-visualising, re-imagining and re-defining themselves within the cultural context of American racism. Analysis of *In Our Terribleness*, a volume co-authored by Amiri Baraka and the photographer Fundi (Billy Abernathy) provides some social, political, and philosophical commentary on the “reality” of black image(s) in the United States.

As early as 1964 in his second – still pre-Black Arts Movement – collection entitled *The Dead Lecturer*, published under his real name LeRoi Jones and remaining under the conspicuous influence of High Modernist and Beat Generation poetics, Amiri Baraka placed several poems that arguably express his growing Black discontent with both white art and politics. The most blatant and simultaneously sarcastic example of this bitter disillusionment turning into anger – the poem “The Politics of Rich Painters” – discredits “white” aesthetics by labeling its practitioners as “marauders of cheap sentiment,” and scorning them for “[s]o much taste / so little understanding” (*Transbluesency* 75). Baraka implies that there exists a strict connection between the sophistication of high art and its arrogance-cum-ignorance in terms of social and political consciousness. He himself demands turning artistic attention towards “lives ... hideously real” (*Transbluesency* 75).

The poem can be regarded as a signal for the necessity to separate Black art from white aesthetic norms and as an early seed of the Black Aesthetic sewn on a soon-to-be-fertile soil. Truly Black art, as was repeated in a mantra-like style a few years later, must be functional, collective, and engaging, which

defines it as both instrument and witness of political and cultural change and transformation, an instrument whose role is to confront the limitations and oppressions of the present moment and to project a better future for African Americans. In consequence, its documentary-cum-visionary quality is inseparable from – in Jeff Donaldson’s words – “our image-making” (85). This attitude is seen both in the works of all major and minor representatives of Black poetry of the late 1960s / early 1970s, and in the visual arts of the Black Aesthetic period: in the latter category most specifically in the ‘interventionist’ paintings of radically race-conscious politically involved artists such as Faith Ringgold and Dana Chandler, collective projects realised in the public space of black ghettos – e.g. murals such as *The Wall of Respect* in Chicago and *The Wall of Dignity* in Detroit, and in the photographs by Billy Abernathy which accompany Baraka’s *essentially Black* text in *In Our Terribleness*. These works demonstrate that, in the case of African Americans, the issues of self-perception and of the ways of being perceived by the dominant, racially oppressive white gaze are interdependent on each other in a positive and negative sense, and that they provide a springboard for redefining collective and personal identity.

The question of negative representation of black people and blackness as such has always been part and parcel of both America’s spontaneous racism and its ideology of discrimination. In the predominant white discourse on race, blackness has been systematically equated with ugliness, animality, brutality, primitivism, stupidity, inhumanity, aggression, imperfection, flaw, absence and more, something to be ashamed of and gotten rid of. Ralph Ellison in the “Epilogue” to his breakthrough – from the point of view of understanding and reflecting on blackness – novel *Invisible Man*, lends its narrator the authorial voice to briefly consider “striv[ing] towards colorlessness” (465) as, according to him, “Blackness” signifies invisibility in America – i.e. social transparency, political powerlessness, historical absence, human void. Mark Lawrence McPhail comments on Ellison’s idea of “invisibility,” taking it as an erasure of black presence from American social materiality:

It has been more than half a century since Ralph Ellison articulated his definitive discussion of one of the fundamental preoccupations of the African American experience: the need to assert one’s existence – one’s visibility – in a culture suffering from a certain kind of blindness, an inability to see the humanity of others and ultimately of self. (99)

In its consistent choice of words and phrases McPhail’s acute observation reveals the reciprocal character of the relation between visual presence, social

significance, and human status granted to one in a given culture: visibility is directly identified with existence; racism and discrimination against blacks operate through “a certain kind of *blindness*,” and “an *inability to see* the humanity of the others” leads to the final erasure of humanity as a working category for social interactions in a multiracial culture. Moreover, the phrases used also suggest Ellison’s refashioning of “I reflect, therefore I am” into “I am visible and I reflect, therefore I am,” a dictum which revises the Cartesian concept of dualism so as to maintain that physical materiality necessarily provides a pre-condition for spiritual presence, that it cannot be perceived as inferior, and that, as a result, in the black body’s experience in America, the material and the spiritual must be kept inseparable. Ellison’s *Invisible Man* shows that “I reflect” alone does not change the black subject’s status: “striving toward Whiteness” signifies “becoming quite dull and grey” (465), clearly a figure of non-existence.

Reflecting on visibility inevitably involves the question of the gaze – an abstract term which stands for the act of looking and, more importantly, for the representation and interpretation of the act of looking. The concept of the gaze in its classical Lacanian form refers to such issues as autonomy and control. Art historian John Berger in his *Ways of Seeing* applies these categories to explain the close connection that exists in Western culture between the gaze and women: “From earliest childhood she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually ... . The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female” (46-7). This connection can also be discovered in American power/race relations founded on the respective superiority and inferiority of the observer and the observed (master and servant, overseer and field-hand, etc.). Arguably, like women in Western culture, blacks in America have been persuaded, trained, and even forced to survey themselves permanently. W.E.B. Du Bois’ concept of “double-consciousness” refers to this internalisation and “naturalisation” of the rules of self-perception and the resulting surveillance:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife – this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He does not wish to Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He wouldn’t bleach

his Negro blood in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face. (12-13)

Certainly the above-quoted extract deserves detailed analytical commentary, yet for the sake of brevity and mindful of the topic of this article, it will only be pointed out that Du Bois leaves no doubt that in the permanent state of “two-ness,” constantly experienced by “the American Negro,” the American component is white and controlling to the extent that it exercises covert and overt violence (amused contempt and pity; cursing and spitting; closing the doors of opportunity roughly in the face) in refusing the “darker brother,” to quote Langston Hughes, a place to “sit at the table when company comes.” As the visual metaphors implemented by Du Bois in his opening sentence testify, this double-consciousness is constructed out of and constantly supported by the acts of perception whose rules are enforced by the white gaze. As a result, in the case of African Americans the logic and dynamics of self-perception are analogous to those pertaining to women in Western culture as described by Berger – if we replace the words “women” and “men” in the original quotation with “blacks” and “whites” respectively, we arrive at the following conclusion: “[Whites] look at [blacks]. [Blacks] watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between [whites] and [blacks] but also the relation of [blacks] to themselves. The surveyor of [black] in [her/himself] is [white], the surveyed [black]” (47). Thus, the final outcome is not a zero-sum game: the split in self-perception results in the loss of autonomy of the black component, in its objectification and subjection to the white Big Brother’s controlling power of vision. The deflation of blackness guarantees the inflation of whiteness – to paraphrase Virginia Woolf’s observation in the context of historical black-white race relations in America, we could say that one role of blacks is to serve as “magnifying glasses” to their white countrymen and countrywomen. Three important questions arise here that pertain to (self)-perception and (self)-representation of African Americans in a racist society: Can a black person be represented without being treated as an object to the white gaze? Can a black person be the bearer of the gaze? How does the gaze function outside the racist dynamic of whites looking at blacks? I will address these questions in my analysis of Baraka and Abernathy’s *In Our Terribleness*, keeping in mind Du Bois’ longing for “self-conscious manhood” and a “better and truer self” that would guarantee full participation in a culture founded on pluralism.

Nonetheless, Du Bois must have been aware of the fact that the American Negro's "wish" would not be simple to fulfill. All representations – visual, verbal, mental – of people belonging to a racial group historically discriminated against by law, economy, everyday practice, and the personal attitudes of members of the mainstream majority society, are products of ideology. Here the term "ideology" is used in its general, not specific, meaning, and refers to "that vast scheme for showing forth the world and justifying its dealings" (223), to use Catharine R. Simpson's phrase. The radicalization of black politics, the escalation of black protest, and the emergence of the Black Power Movement in the second half of the 1960s produced a black cultural consensus which involved a conscious effort to alter the perception of African Americans and, in spite of the fact that this consensus quickly turned out to be a myth of unity founded on wishful thinking and visionary politics married to and marred by short-sightedness and sectarianism, it managed to generate positive new representations of black people.

Generating, launching and promoting positive images of American blacks was perceived by Black Power activists not only a necessary but an urgent task, as the widespread stereotypical and simultaneously dominating images of black people were blatant misrepresentations, essentially racist at that. These negative images are dangerous in double sense: they are deeply instilled in white perceptions of African Americans and, as a result, are widely treated as 'transparent' and 'natural'; they have also been internalised by blacks themselves, hence they obstruct the project of achieving a self-conscious humanity. Omnipresent and enormously powerful, they have appeared in history, law, medicine, psychology, sociology, philosophy, religion and myth, private conversations, personal opinions, media, literature and the arts. Moreover, these negative images of blacks result from a combination of omission-*and*-commission: they remain silent or extremely selective about black great realities (historical and present-day), and, when necessary, discreetly fabricate or even overtly lie about them.

The Black Arts Movement, treating culture and politics as inseparable, took as one of its most important educational, ethical and aesthetic tasks to confront these false representations in order to reveal their mechanisms – and by exposing end them in order to replace them with new and 'true' ones. The artists and writers who carried out the movement's aesthetic concepts and ideological doctrines understood this task as a threefold undertaking: first, the past must be restored – especially black America's glorious African past, a historical and cultural anchoring of present-day racial identity, dignity, and pride; second, there must be generated accurate and uplifting images for

the present moment and the future, replacing white lies with black truths and vision; and third, black people must be represented in their diversity in terms of ethnicity, tribalities, gender, body and age. The former two strategies are present in various artistic works and undertakings such as interventionist paintings and the so-called Black Power Murals containing symbolic representations of the entrapment of blacks within America's oppressive racist culture, and of black figures of resistance and inspiration for the black masses. The latter can be found in Billy Abernathy's photographs of ordinary black Chicagoans, accompanied by Amiri Baraka's Kawaida-inspired prose poem, which make up their co-authored volume entitled *In Our Terribleness*.

The volume was graphically designed, including the layout and selection of pictures, by the photographer's wife Laini (Sylvia Abernathy), also responsible for the layout of images on the Wall of Respect. Its first page is a mirror made of a thin metal sheet with the title of the volume printed in embossed letters in its center. The mirror, because of the low quality of the reflecting surface, simultaneously reflects and deforms. As, undoubtedly, the book demands a black reader/viewer, (s)he immediately experiences a distortion of her/his image; the mirror represents the internalized white gaze. The book has unnumbered pages, and is described by Baraka as “A LONG IMAGE STORY IN MOTION / PAPERMOTION / PITCHAS ABOUT THE SON OF BLACK MAN ...” (*Terribleness*, n. pag.). There is a promise of metamorphosis, too; that through confronting the “pitchas” of black people in this volume and reading the spiritually-inspired text, the reader/viewer's perception of her/himself will be transformed in a positive way, as the somewhat Whitmanish words say: “Some terrible / folks/ there inside here ... LOOK AT THEM / force / at YOU / the living force” (*Terribleness*, n. pag.).

The quality of “terribleness” itself is valued here positively, the word's standard dictionary meaning reversed, according to the authors, in a similar manner to the way the meaning of “blackness” has been reversed in the Euro-American culture which sets the standards of correctness, accuracy, beauty, humanity:

*Terribleness* – Our beauty is BAD cause we bad. Bad things. Some bad bad bad ass niggers.

...

Our terribleness is our survival as beautiful beings, any where. Who can dig that? Any where, even flying through space like we all doing, even faced with the iceman, the abominable snowman, the beast for whom there is no answer, but change in fire light and heat for the world

To be bad is one level  
 But to be terrible, is to be  
 badder dan nat

Terribleness  
 Terribleness  
 Terribleness  
 Terribleness

(capable of terror  
 Producement

...

...  
 Pray that we are not part of the Western  
 Empire, in soul.  
 We know we are not.  
 In Our Terribleness  
 We know exactly  
 Who We Are.

...  
 We must rise ourselves. O holy people.  
 In our terr bul ness

(*Terribleness*, n. pag.)

The above excerpts, taken from various pages in the initial part of the volume, demonstrate Baraka's and Abernathy's intention and effort to de-construct, re-define, and trans-form black people's self-perception. They claim that – since “We a BaaddDDD People,” to use Sonia Sanchez's famous phrase, are not part of the Western World at the fundamental, spiritual level – the concept of “terribleness” (meaning “Black is Beautiful,” which involves super-human physical, psychological and spiritual strength to survive any hostile conditions – hence the reference to the Flying African and slave suicides that were believed to be escapes to freedom back in Africa) must be discovered, not devised. The first step towards this self-discovery “[i]n our terr bul ness” is freedom from the defining / controlling white gaze symbolized by the “ice-man, the abominable snowman for whom there is no answer” (*Terribleness*, n. pag.) This state of self-consciousness and insight cannot be achieved without the assistance of art which, in turn, gains its inspiration and energy directly from black people. In his authorial spiritual-cum-philosophical confession Baraka clarifies the metaphysical function of his and Abernathy's “imagnetext” and its circular dependence on the salt of the earth:

These are mostly portraits here. Portraits of life. Of life  
 being lived. Black People inspire us. Send life into us. Draw



it in. Lead more energy in. From themselves Thru to the Being  
 From the Being to The Being. In Our Terribleness. We wanted to  
 conjure with Black Life to recreate it for our selves. So that the  
 connection with you would be a bigger Self. Abernathy has many  
 many photos each “bad” in some aspect. Abernathy is himself, a  
 terrible terbul dude. The way the terribleness of us gets thru  
 thru him to us, again. The artist completing the cycle recreating.  
 (*Terribleness*, n. pag.)

For Baraka the moment of Black People discovering themselves in their Terribleness equals experiencing Heidegger’s *Lichtung*, the moment when The Being manifests itself and the condition for an exchange of life energy between them and higher levels of Being: “Thru to the Being / From the Being to The Being” (*Terribleness*, n. pag.). Simultaneously, this energy is the source of power for Black Art(ists): in its-and-their pursuit of “a bigger Self” the circle becomes closed: “the artist completing the cycle recreating” (*Terribleness*). One hundred and twenty pages later he repeats this blow-up metaphor when he declares:

I love you black people  
 because I love my  
 self.  
 And you are that self. thrown big  
 against the heavens.  
 (*Terribleness*, n. pag.)

The volume contains forty-four photographs by Abernathy, “each bad in some respect” (*Terribleness*, n. pag.) As Baraka says, mostly they are portraits – usually of individual men and women at various ages, and children, sometimes of groups of people ranging from pairs of friends to a few larger casual and formal gatherings. Especially important in the latter category are two pictures: one of a crowd of women from the Nation of Islam, dressed in white, and the other of uniformed members of the elite guard called the Fruit of Islam. A number of pictures portray men dressed chicly in different styles – in a few cases quite flamboyant – from white suits to leather jackets to African robes. Sometimes these pictures are directly briefly commented on in a casual or slightly didactic manner, but also they are systematically accompanied by or framed in Baraka’s Kawaida-inspired<sup>1</sup> moralistic poetic text. In accordance

1 As defined by Baraka, Kawaida is a “value system ... which is customary, or traditionally adhered to, by Black people.” See: Imamu Amiri Baraka, “7 Principles of US. Maulana Karenga & the Need for a Black Value System.” *Raise Race Rays Raze. Essays Since 1965*. New York: Random House, 1969: 136.



with the artists' intention, a simultaneous reading of the text and looking at the photographs, whose combined purpose is to make black people 'come true' "thrown big / against the heavens" in their Black-is-Beautiful visibility, makes one bathe in and appreciate blackness as "ideology and style" in their "terrible" (read: perfect) harmony. In this respect the discipline and consistency of *In Our Terribleness* makes it a great artistic-cum-didactic success.

However, experiencing Baraka's and Abernathy's "imagetext" should also inevitably lead to reflection of representation itself. As Stimpson observes:

[A] representation can be an image – visual, verbal, or aural ... A representation can also be a narrative, a sequence of images and ideas ... Or, a representation can be a product of ideology, that vast scheme for showing forth the world and justifying its dealings. (223)

In the case of *In Our Terribleness* it is all three simultaneously; moreover, they are applied in a thoroughly self-conscious manner. By combining photographic images with an overtly ideological text, not only do the authors make powerful use of the fact that, as Linda Hutcheon maintains, "photography ... is one of the major forms of discourse through which we are seen and see ourselves" (42), but they also consciously and purposefully neglect its fundamental ambivalence: that "it is in a very real sense technically tied to the real, or at least, to the visual and the actual" remaining "in no way innocent of cultural formation" (44).

The critic also reminds us of the fact that "[a]s a visual medium, photography has a long history of being both politically useful and politically suspect" (42). Abernathy's "bad photos" are both of these. Undoubtedly, they are determined to change perceptions and perhaps even succeed in convincing the black viewer of the 'naturalness' of black beauty, visualized here as apparently classless, genderless, and ageless – although the young "sisters" in the photographs are referred to as "beautiful in your mind," "[b]urnt full of light" and physically "perfect," whereas the old women are complimented for their "endless patience" and "unkillable, undiscourageable endurance" (*Terribleness*, n. pag.) Black beauty, represented mostly by pictures of people whose skin is deeply black, is unquestionable and undebatable here.

Nonetheless, it still remains to some extent dependent on white standards of evaluation by taking them as a negative point of reference and intentionally contradicting them. A good example may be the close-up of a boy strongly emphasizing those physical features that white anti-black racism had stigmatized. The subtitle to this photograph reads: "You shd been there man / like you shda been eatin sun." As Margo Natalie Crawford (31) observes, "[t]

he reclamation of racial primitivism embedded in Baraka's celebration of the black 'sun people' leads Baraka to fetishize the darkest shades of blackness. If fetishism is always the huge compensation for a notion of lack that has often been naturalized, the dark skin tone of the subject photographed in the image ... is the huge overcompensation for the lack of whiteness." The boy, seen in a "white light," is the embodiment of human ugliness; when seen in a "black light" he epitomizes beauty. The same pertains to some other pictures that reveal and expose human ugliness, pain, estrangement and terribleness. Presented in a different context they could be easily taken for Diane Arbus' work. This contextual relativity of the images makes black visibility in these pictures problematic and sometimes utterly disquieting, as we realize how strongly propagandistic or at least ideologically-coded they are (much like Arbus's photographs for that matter).<sup>2</sup>

Also, paradoxically, Abernathy's photographs of black "terribleness" fall prey to the same forces they initially turned against and successfully challenged. But perhaps this could not be otherwise, as it may result from what the very relationship between photography and reality is about. As Susan Sontag maintains:

Photography implies that we know about the world if we accept it as the camera records it. But this is the opposite of understanding, which starts from not accepting the world as it looks. All possibility of understanding is rooted in the ability to say no. Strictly speaking, one never understands anything from a photograph ... [T]he camera's rendering of reality must always hide more than it discloses ... In contrast to the amorous relation, which is based on how something looks, understanding is based on how it functions. And functioning takes place in time, and must be explained in time. Only that which narrates can make us understand. (23)

Baraka's and Abernathy's imagetext comes out of the black ability to say no both to white norms of beauty and definitions/divisions of humanity; in this way, it efficiently challenges the white gaze. On the other hand, the implosion of a black gaze dependent on seeing things in a "black light" (i.e. the "look-inside yourselves" attitude) inevitably ends here in the "amorous relation" that debilitates perception and understanding. As John Lechte (358) underlines, "In contrast to perception, an image is never partial, but is always a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. Thus, with the perception of a cube, there will always be one or more hidden sides, or parts. The image of a cube is the cube itself." Baraka, who in "The Politics of Rich Painters" accuses white art of "so little understanding" and demands from art representations of "lives ...

2 See Susan Sontag's comments on Diane Arbus's work (27-48).

hideously real,” in *In Our Terribleness* collaborates with Abernathy in putting a (perfect) image in place of an (imperfect) perception which must, as a rule, yield itself to narration. What the camera hides here is the social, historical, and economic context in which black Americans lived at the time. Although Baraka’s text assures that style must not be reduced to “the way they stand, the way they dress” (*Terribleness*, n. pag.) and promotes adherence to the seven principles of Kawaida, and the pictures themselves show ordinary men and women, the volume does not contain representations of black people in a family context, at work, in protest, at moments of victory or failure. The subjects are doing nothing in particular in these photographs – they walk, stand, sit, talk as if they existed in some everlasting leisure time. Here the idea of “Black is Beautiful” removes blackness from the frame of its material and historical actuality. The focus is on being rather than doing things. This becomes especially striking when the work is compared with other black narrative photographic undertakings such as *12 Million Black Voices* (1941), with Richard Wright’s prose and photographs by Edwin Rosskam and Russell Lee; *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* (1955), co-authored by Langston Hughes and Roy DeCarava; Eudora Welty’s, *One Time, One Place: Mississippi in the Depression, A Snapshot Album* (1971); or *Amerikanske Billeder* (1977) by Jacob Holdt, a Danish radical leftist and anti-racism activist.

As a result, it come as no surprise then that the final words in the book read:

... try to see your own face,  
 when you close your eyes. Now call that name, of the figure  
 you see, call that name the real sound your substance is.  
 Call it deep inside yourself. The beginning. We all need to  
 do the same. Then get your hat. i. e., get up and go  
 (*Terribleness*, n. pag.)

In spite of the above-mentioned limitations, drawbacks, and reservations pertaining to self-representation of black Americans as individuals and as peoples, as well as to representation of blackness itself, it would be a grave mistake to discredit Baraka and Abernathy’s collaborative work. Such a focus on being rather than doing things does not necessarily promote passivity and self-satisfaction. The artists’ concentration on ordinary, anonymous people rather than heroes or accomplished individuals – such as those represented on the Wall of Respect and other Black Power murals – must be perceived as an important part of a group “ocular therapy.” Such a therapy could be a process that begins with a “visualisation” exercise (“try to SEE your OWN face,

/ when you close your eyes”) and ends in becoming truly visible, which leads to activity: “get your hat. i.e., get up and go” to participate in public life. For this fundamental reason *In Our Terribleness* remains, as Crawford says, “one of the unsung masterpieces” (24) of the Black Arts Movement.

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