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**“SUPERREAL IMAGES FOR SUPERREAL PEOPLE”.  
BLACK SELF-REPRESENTATION AS SELF-INVENTION  
IN POETRY AND VISUAL ART  
OF THE BLACK ARTS MOVEMENT:  
THE WALL OF RESPECT**

This article focuses on the problem of the representation of African Americans by poets and visual artists involved in the Black Arts Movement, understood by them as black self-representation. Having rejected the idea of cultural white supremacy, and making an energetic attempt to put in practice W.E.B. Du Bois's dream of “self-conscious manhood” and a “better and truer self” for American blacks, the artists of the black cultural revolution in the 1960s had to confront some fundamental questions pertaining to their creation of an image of new black people. Among those questions there must have been such as: How does the gaze function outside the racist dynamics of whites looking at blacks? How do black people represent themselves without being treated as an object to the white gaze? What happens when black people as a collective subject become the bearer of the gaze? Here I try to infer their answers from their work by examining the history, the legend, and – more specifically – the poetic component of the Wall of Respect, a Black Power mural created in 1967

in Chicago, which I approach as a multimedia Poem of the People, whose materiality is transcended/extended by merging various forms of artistic expression. Analysis of the poems which organically belonged in the project reveals that the act of politically motivated liberation of the image of American blacks from the white gaze resulted in self-representation as self-invention that avoided situating this image in the recognizable historical and social contexts of “here and now” and became essentially an act of self-imagining situated in the realm of fantasy and myth. In order to explain the profound reasons for black myth-making, in the final part of this article I also reflect briefly on some philosophical aspects of such an artistic strategy.

In one of his essays, one of the luminaries of the Black Aesthetic, Larry Neal, made a demand on the new black artists to join forces in order to create a “Vision of a Liberated Future,” pointing out that such a “[l]iberation is impossible if we fail to see ourselves in more positive terms.” “[W]ithout a change of vision,” he continued, “we are slaves to the oppressor's ideas and values”<sup>1</sup>. As Ralph Ellison<sup>2</sup> had shown almost two decades before, blackness in racist America equalled *invisibility*: historical absence, social transparency, political powerlessness, and a human void. Now Neal responds: “We know who we are, and we are not invisible, at least not to each other. We are not Kafkaesque creatures stumbling through a white light of confusion and absurdity. The light is black (now, and get that!) ...”<sup>3</sup> Thus, the liberation of American blacks from a controlling White Gaze, letting them see themselves *in the black light*, and empowering them to communicate this new image to the world became the most urgent task for the Black Arts Movement.

Arguably, in the case of African Americans the logics and dynamics of self-perception had been analogous to those pertaining to women in Western culture as described by John Berger in his classic work *Ways of Seeing*, an insightful study of the power of gaze. If we replace the words ‘women’ and

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<sup>1</sup> Larry Neal. “Any Day Now: Black Art and Black Liberation.” *Ebony* 26. 10 (1969): 54.

<sup>2</sup> Ralph Ellison. *Invisible Man*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1968 (1952).

<sup>3</sup> Larry Neal. “And Shine Swam On.” *Black Fire: An Anthology of Afro-American Writing*. Ed. LeRoi Jones and Larry Neal. New York: William Morrow, 1968. 652.

'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]”<sup>4</sup>. 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. That oppressive power relation had to be altered by political activism and art.

Truly Black art, as it was repeated in mantra-like style for the whole decade after 1965 when BAM was launched, must be functional, collective, and engaging,<sup>5</sup> which defines it as an instrument for and witness of political and cultural change and transformation, an instrument whose role is to transcend 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,” whose purpose is to produce “[i]mages where the real and the overreal ... meet”<sup>6</sup>. As a result, the “truly black” artists merge “images which deal with the past ... images that relate to the present” and, which is absolutely essential, “images that look into the future,” hence providing “Definition,” “Identification” and “Direction”<sup>7</sup>; “superreal images for SUPERREAL people”<sup>8</sup>. This attitude is seen both in the works of all major and minor representatives of black poetry of late 1960s/ early 1970s, and in the visual arts of the Black Aesthetic period: in the latter category, most specifically in the interventionist

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<sup>4</sup> The original quotation reads: “Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between women and men but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is man, the surveyed woman.” John Berger. *Ways of Seeing*. London: The British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, 1972, 47.

<sup>5</sup> Ron Karenga. “Black Cultural Nationalism.” *The Black Aesthetic*. Ed. Addison Gayle, Jr. Doubleday & Company: Garden City, New York, 1971. 32-38.

<sup>6</sup> Jeff Donaldson. “Africobra 1: African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists.” *Black World* 19.12 (1970): 85.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

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 and the Wall of Dignity, and in photographs by Fundi (Billy Abernathy) which accompany Baraka's blackness-saturated prose poem-essay in *In Our Terribleness* (1970). These works demonstrate that in the case of African Americans the issues of self-perception and of the ways of being perceived and objectified by the dominant, racially oppressive white gaze are interdependent, and that they provide a springboard for redefining collective and personal identity.

Nowhere did a positive vision of African Americans and a positivist attitude to visual arts emerge more powerfully than in the so-called Black Power murals, collectively designed and collectively painted projects realized in the public space of black ghettos in several American cities. The murals, also intended sometimes as a “protest against the lack of representation for Black artists in...museums”<sup>9</sup> and art galleries, and hence understood as “out-door museum[s] of functional art,” can themselves be perceived as visible signs of black invisibility in America. As a result, their impact is far from being merely aesthetic: their didactic orientation and educational aspirations, which go together with emotional/ spiritual purification and inspiration, must be emphasized in any critical discussion. This aspect of Black Power murals can be briefly demonstrated by referring to two examples. The first one is a mural painted by Dana Chandler and Gary Rickson in 1968 on Massachusetts and Columbus Avenues in Boston, where in the top section we can discern a hanging white figure, and below it we can see Stokely Carmichael, the leader of the radical black organization SNCC, in the act of transforming black youth with his spiritual visionary powers, suggested by a bright light flooding them from his outstretched hands, and by the words “Peace Power” written below. The second example is provided by the Wall of Dignity in Detroit, in which the top panel represents the African connection of American blacks as it reminds them of their cultural roots by referring back to “their” history from ancient

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<sup>9</sup> Elsa Hong Fine. “The Black Arts Movement.” *The Afro-American Artist: A Search for Identity*. New York: Holt, Reinhart and Winston, Inc., 1971. 201.

Egypt to the Kingdom of Benin. The middle panel contains the faces of contemporary black cultural and political heroes, whereas the bottom panel depicts angry black faces wearing accusing and hostile stares. As Chandler says in an interview with Maura E. Greaney, one purpose of these collective artistic endeavors was to paint “murals that were the most threatening to the European psyche”<sup>10</sup>, which suggests that they should have a disquieting or even disturbing effect when looked at by a white(-minded) passerby and, simultaneously, create a sense of identification and belonging for black viewers who can recognize them as theirs. Painted in vivid and raw primary colours, in strip-cartoon style with flat planes and shapes surrounded by hard, unbroken lines, they blatantly emphasize their anti-art establishment, anti-art gallery character. This sort of artistic awareness is the kernel of the Black Arts Movement's concept of art as “not decoration” that requires contemplation, but as a “revolutionary force” that alters social and cultural reality<sup>11</sup>; in essence: a people's art.

The ideological, aesthetic, political and philosophical aspects of Black Power murals are worth addressing in more detail as they provide an important insight into the question of Black (in)visibility in America and the issue of self-representation. Such a short discussion can be carried out on the example of the Wall of Respect created in Chicago in summer 1967, an impressive example of the potential of the collective action-art of the people. In the process of its execution a special role was reserved for poetry: Gwendolyn Brooks and Haki Madhubuti each wrote a poem on the Wall, thus launching the vision, celebrating the project, and establishing/explaining its spiritual, political and aesthetic dimensions; Amiri Baraka's poem “SOS,” which was “calling all black people to come on in”, was embedded in the mural itself.

For the people involved in the production of the mural, i.e. both artists working within various media and the South Side locals, the Wall of Respect was to become something much more than just a work of art. From its very

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<sup>10</sup> Maura E. Greaney. “The Power of the Urban Canvas: Paint, Politics, and Mural Art Policy.” *New England Journal of Public Policy* 18.1 (2002): 18.

<sup>11</sup> Eva Sperling Cockcroft, James Cockcroft, and John Pitman Weber. *Toward a People's Art: The Contemporary Mural Movement*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1977. 31.

inception it symbolized black pride, dignity, and resistance against the racist order – a Black Fist made out of a plethora of individual black fists raised in the gesture of victory at Black Power rallies. According to Jeff Donaldson, one of the artists who launched the project, the mural is an example of “guerilla art” in action, when the borders of what was permitted within an artistic undertaking were trespassed – he emphasizes the fact that the owner of the building on which the mural was painted was not asked for permission, and as a result, the illegal group action was “revolutionary” in itself.<sup>12</sup> Thus the “how” of the project moved beyond typical aesthetic-technical decisions since its execution primarily demanded the breaking of the law.

The project, whose material aspect took the form of an external mural 30 by 60 feet in size on the front wall of a building at 43 Langley Street in South Side in Chicago, assumed the turning of this economically impoverished part of the city into a culturally rich and spiritually inspiring location of black visibility. It also captures the spirit of the moment: Baraka’s “Nation Time” of elation when African Americans rose to create their own image by breaking the boundaries of legitimate (i.e. white-defined) language and forms of (self-) expression. It is important to underline that such an attitude does not have to be perceived as a sheer fantasy, as it was meant as an inspiring action with the purpose of raising consciousness. On one section of the Wall of Respect Edward Christmas painted a pensive profile of W.E.B. DuBois, out of whose closed mouth come out the words of Baraka’s short poem “SOS” – a key Black Arts Movement poem:

Calling black people  
 Calling all black people, man woman child  
 Wherever you are, calling you, urgent, come in  
 Black People, come in, wherever you are, urgent, calling  
 you, calling all black people  
 calling all black people, come in, black people, come  
 on in.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Donaldson, Jeff. “The Rise, Fall, and Legacy of the Wall of Respect Movement.” *International Review of African American Art* 15:1 (1991), 22.

<sup>13</sup> LeRoi Jones, “SOS.” *Black Magic Poetry 1961-1967*. Indianapolis and New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1969. 115.

The simplicity of its cable-like form and content guarantees directness of the communicated message which, caught by the eye and immediately decoded as a sort of pleasant command, is not obscured at the recipient's end, and, as a result, maximizes the text's perlocutionary force. Moreover, the SOS in the title insists that there is no choice but to follow the order. As Crawford states, the appearance of Baraka's poem on the Wall reveals that "within the Black Art's ethos, poetry should be concrete enough to be painted and visual art should be concrete enough to articulate the 'call'"<sup>14</sup>. Yet, "concrete enough" they can never become, even if they join forces, unless the *call* provokes a *response* which is simultaneously both individual and communal.

In the case of the Wall of Respect, Baraka's / Du Bois's call to "all black people...man woman child" to come black (sic!) together, think black together, work black together, and have black fun together was answered, and this response can be perceived itself as a form of co-operation and, by extension, as part of the dynamic, not-wholly predictable, improvisatory artistic process of making the mural and creating a locus of Black visibility. The painting of the Wall of Respect, which itself consisted of two separate phases, was accompanied by a variety of cultural activities that included dance, theater and music performances, political speeches, poetry readings, and photographic documentation and exhibitions that involved artists at work, visiting public figures, and the participation of people from the neighborhood as the audience, witnesses and advisors. This interdisciplinary and inter-class collaboration and merging of the arts allowed not only a breaking of the boundaries between artistic genres and forms, but also the temporary crossing of boundaries between black people of different educational, economic and social status themselves. Arguably, the whole undertaking of the making of the mural, taken in its complexity and variety of ways of participation, can be perceived as a conspicuous and impressive example of art-ing, a term coined by Baraka in order to emphasize the dynamic, improvisational essence of "truly" Black art. In

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<sup>14</sup> Margo Natalie Crawford. "Black Light on the Wall of Respect: The Chicago Black Arts Movement." *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement*. Ed. Lisa Gail Collins and Margo Natalie Crawford. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2006. 30.

his essay entitled “Hunting is not those heads on the wall” the poet argues that the distinctive feature of Black art is its concern with the process rather than the final product. Instead of investing her/his craft in the manner of the European tradition, into making a perfect final thing that aspires to occupy a place in eternity, which verges on achieving the level of the Platonic ideal form, the Black artist concentrates on performance, the dynamics of the creation itself, focusing more on impromptu creative decisions, interaction with the audience, impermanence, and the inherent imperfection of artistic endeavors.<sup>15</sup> Never has this process-oriented quality of black art taken more impressive and astonishing form than during the painting of the Wall of Respect.

Members of the OBAC Visual Workshop<sup>16</sup>, who were responsible for making a design and the actual painting of the mural, decided collectively to put together images of selected black heroes and high achievers in seven categories: music (jazz and rhythm 'n' blues), acting (theater and film), dancing, sport, religion, politics, and literature. In the very center of the mural they placed the image of heavy-weight boxing champion Muhammad Ali at his moment of triumph. In the music section we can see Billie Holiday, Nina Simone, Charlie Parker, Ornette Coleman, Muddy Waters, James Brown and others; among the few writers depicted on the wall are Gwendolyn Brooks, James Baldwin, and Amiri Baraka; the political section is represented by “radicals” such as Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, and Stokely Carmichael. The essential criterion for the selection, as Donaldson recalls, was clearly defined: these had to be black individuals who, through their activities and involvement, uncompromisingly and unquestionably served the whole black community.<sup>17</sup> The mural had a

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<sup>15</sup> Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones). *Home: Social Essays*. New York: William Morrow, 2009 [1966]. 197-204.

<sup>16</sup> The Organization of Black American Culture (OBAC) was launched in May 1967 by Hoyt Fuller.

<sup>17</sup> The OBAC used the following definition of a “Black hero”: “OBAC declares that a Black hero is any Black person who: 1. Honestly reflects the Beauty of black life and genius in his or her 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.” (<http://www.blockmuseum.northwestern.edu/wallofrespect/main.htm>; access: August 30, 2016).



decidedly hagiographic character – the heroes whose images appear on the Wall of Respect represent the greatness of the black American community, and their individual achievements inspire and stimulate the imagination, but also demand emulation, sending the message: “you can make it, too” or “we can make it collectively.” It is important, however, not to overlook two interesting omissions: in the politics category the mural does not feature either Martin Luther King, Jr., or Elijah Muhammad – the leaders of the Civil Rights Movement and the Nation of Islam, respectively. The former was not approved by Herbert and other local gang leaders, as “[t]he people in the neighborhood didn’t believe in nonviolence”<sup>18</sup>, whereas the latter demanded not to be featured since his ideological rival and “traitor” Malcolm X was included. This suggests that the artistic project of blacks trying to see their OWN face and making themselves visible through the Wall of Respect was far from unproblematic: on the ideological level it involved clandestine censorship and sectarian conflict. In a visual representation of Black America not all individual faces were welcome.

The creation of the Wall of Respect, with the substantial involvement of the South Side community, was turned into a legend of black unity in the process of the production of its self-image. Anecdotes about subsequent stages in the realization of the project have it that the OBAC artists had to receive permission from the local gangsters as to the black heroes to be depicted on the mural; that Herbert bought the paint and himself painted the wall white, preparing the background for the portraits; that when doing it, Herbert fell off the ladder from a height of three meters above the ground but was not hurt; and that a year later he was found dead at the Wall. Donaldson also recalls that when he was painting the image of Nina Simone, an old lady from the neighborhood bluntly criticized the quality of his work, saying that she would have to “look at that ugly muthafucka you just painted every day,” which made him paint the singer anew<sup>19</sup>. There are also stories about infiltration by the FBI, which suggests that the authorities perceived the project as a potential threat to public order. All such incidents – heroic, tragic, and comic – powerfully appeal

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<sup>18</sup> Jeff Donaldson interviewed by Margo Natalie Crawford, *op. cit.*, 25.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 26-27.

to the imagination and emotions; taken together, they constitute a founding myth of the new and truly black community. This myth is rooted in a new self-image which makes the claim that here and now a black “free separatist” replaces an old Negro “integrated citizen.”

Poets also participated in this myth-making endeavor which led to establishing a new image of African Americans, envisioning and making that image visible. Except for Baraka's “SOS”, which featured materially in the mural, the two most important poems praising and co-making the Wall of Respect were written by two Chicagoans: Gwendolyn Brooks, an outstanding poet of the older generation and the first black Pulitzer Prize winner, and Haki Madhubuti (Don L. Lee), one of the young lions of the Black Arts Movement.

In the manner characteristic of poetry written according to the prescriptive rules of the Black Aesthetic, Madhubuti's poem, entitled “The Wall”, is openly confrontational and provocative, angry in tone, it uses non-standard English in the form of black speech patterns, and strongly stresses rhythm. From the outset of his poem Madhubuti makes a clear-cut distinction between “negro /toms” and the new Black people:

sending their negro  
toms into the ghetto  
at all hours of the day  
(disguised as black people)  
to dig  
the wall, (the weapon)  
the mighty black wall (we chase them out--kill if necessary)

whi-te people can't stand  
the wall,  
killed their eyes, (they cry)  
black beauty hurts them--  
they thought black beauty was a horse--  
stupid muthafuckas, they run from  
the mighty black wall<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Don L.Lee (Haki Madhubuti). “The Wall.” *Directionscore: New and Selected Poems*. Detroit, Michigan: Broadside Press, 1971. 66.

For Madhubuti, the category “negro tom” refers to those African Americans who have forgotten their cultural and spiritual roots, become integrated with the white mainstream society, and accepted unthinkingly its discriminatory racist rules and norms. The poet identifies them with the figure of Uncle Tom – an epitome of a perfect servant without his own face, deprived of his own identity and individuality, who submits to white definitions and never questions his inferior position, taking it for granted as natural and permanent. In spite of the fact that the “negro toms” look like all other African Americans in terms of “racial” physical features, they are only “*disguised* as black people” (italics mine). In Madhubuti’s presentation the “negro toms” do not belong in the black community: they are outsiders sent “into the ghetto” by the whites in order to spy, and try to understand and interpret for their white masters the phenomenal power of the Wall of Respect, since, in a manner similar to the situation described in Henry Dumas’s story “Let the Circle Be Unbroken,” where the truly black sounds produced by a black saxophonist kill white people in the audience, the Wall (“the weapon”) injures white eyes through exposure to the “black beauty” it generates.

In this way, within the limits of the Wall's black energy, the critical and controlling white gaze falls apart and loses its self-proclaimed, pseudo-universal, solipsistic power to define. But that is only the initial step, a necessary precondition yet insufficient in itself for political-cum-metaphysical metamorphosis. In Madhubuti's vision the might of the Wall springs from its proclivity to enlighten and function as a catalyst for the process of change – stimulating a profound apprehension and simultaneous internalization of the message communicated by Blackness. As a cause of the new black community, the Wall of Respect initiates a spontaneous process of (self-)transformation and (self-)consciousness raising:

negroes from south shore &  
hyde park coming to check outstanding  
a black creation  
black art, of the people,

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for the people,  
 art for people's sake  
 black people  
 the mighty black wall  
 ...  
 the mighty black wall/about our business, blackness  
can you dig?  
 if you can't you ain't black/some other color  
 negro maybe??<sup>21</sup>

Thus, the power of the mural resides in its enlightening and awakening potential: by stimulating a deeper understanding of the message of “our business, blackness” and its simultaneous internalization it instigates a spontaneous consciousness-raising process. Madhubuti suggests that the distinction between these two states of mind, or more precisely: levels of self-awareness, allows the identification of the point at which a color-line connected with power and identity within the African American community must be drawn. Such a way of thinking was characteristic to the late 1960s – in an essay published in 1968 Sarah Webster Fabio makes a similar point:

Scratch a Negro and you will find a nigger and a potential black man; scratch a black man and you may find a nigger and the remnants of a Negro. Negro is psychological, sociological, and economical fabrication to justify the status quo in America. Nigger is the tension created by a black man’s attempt to accommodate himself to become a Negro in order to survive in a racist country. Black is the selfhood and soul of anyone with one drop of black blood, in America, who does not deny himself.<sup>22</sup>

In Fabio’s explanation, unlike “nigger-hood” and “Negro-ism,” Blackness – not being a result of fabrication and accommodation – stands for genuine

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 66-67.

<sup>22</sup> Sarah Webster Fabio, “Who Speaks Negro? What Is Black?” *Negro Digest* 17. 9-10 (1968): 33.

African American identity. This leads to a somewhat Bolshevik distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’ (as Lenin famously said: “each man must choose between joining our side or the other side. Any attempt to avoid taking sides in this issue must end in fiasco”<sup>23</sup>), which remains essentially entirely conservative and exclusive. In Madhubuti's poem “we”- the common folk (and this category includes artists metaphysically integrated with their community) are the guardians of pure Blackness, whose duty is to “chase them [i.e. the “negro/toms”] out – kill/ if necessary.” The union based on co-operation between the politically correct artists and their audience is emphasized:

black artists paint,  
 du bois/ garvey/ gwen brooks  
 stokely/ rap/ james brown  
 trane/ miracles/ ray charles  
 baldwin/ killens/ muhammad ali  
 alcindor/ blackness/ revolution  
 our heroes, we pick them, for the wall<sup>24</sup>

Thus, “the mighty black wall” provides a threat not only for the whites, who are as if genetically incapable of “digging it,” but also – being “the weapon” – it punishes Negroes who resist the Blackness it is saturated<sup>25</sup> with. Here self-representation turns into self-imagining, and a Brave New Black World is engineered.

On August 27, 1967, the day of the official opening of the mural, Gwendolyn Brooks read on the spot her poem entitled “The Wall,” which had

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<sup>23</sup> Vladimir I. Lenin, “Speech Delivered at an All-Russia Conference of Political Education Workers of Gubernia and Uyezd Education Departments.” *On Culture and Cultural Revolution*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1966: 160-161.

<sup>24</sup> Madhubuti. “The Wall.” op. cit., 67.

<sup>25</sup> The category of “saturation” is defined by Stephen Henderson as “chiefly (a) the communication of Blackness in a given situation and (b) a sense of fidelity to the observed and intuited truth of the Black Experience.” Stephen Henderson, “Introduction: The Forms of Things Unknown.” *Understanding the New Black Poetry: Black Speech & Black Music as Poetic References*. New York: William Morrow, 1973. 62.

also been written specifically for this occasion. Brooks's poem has a quasi-panegyric character, and commemorates the Wall of Respect, praising its power to unite and explaining its spiritual significance for the whole black community in America. Because of the poem's almost reportage-like attention to a concrete event, which is achieved through evocative details pertaining to the place, the people involved, and the artistic undertakings, the poem may be classified as an example of “occasional verse.” Nonetheless, it should also be perceived as a visionary projection of a positive image of the black community, as well as of blackness itself.

The opening of the poem, which uses onomatopoeic representation of the sound of a snare-drum, forcefully establishes the right and determined will of poor urban black people to listen to and follow Thoreau's “different drummer.” Brooks talks about a gathering that took place at the wall in terms of a colourful people's festival, a ritual with Val Gray, a poet and dramatist, and Phil Cohran, a saxophonist, as the masters of ceremony:

A drumdrumdrum.

Humbly we come.

South of success and east of gloss and glass are  
sandals;  
flowercloth;  
grave hoops of wood or gold, pendant  
from black ears, brown ears, reddish-brown  
and ivory ears;

black boy-men.

Black

boy-men on roofs fist out „Black Power!” Val,  
a little black stampede  
in African images of brass and flowerswirl,  
fists out „Black Power!”--tightens pretty eyes,  
leans back on mothercountry and is tract,  
is treatise through her perfect and tight teeth.

Women in wool hair chant their poetry.  
 Phil Cohran gives us messages and music  
 made of developed bone and polished and honed  
 cult.  
 It is the Hour of tribe and of vibration,  
 the day-long Hour. It is the Hour  
 of ringing, rouse, of ferment-festival.

On Forty-third and Langley  
 black furnaces resent ancient  
 legislatures  
 of ploy and scruple and practical gelatin.  
 They keep the fever in,  
 fondle the fever.

All  
 worship the Wall.<sup>26</sup>

A striking feature of Brooks's poem is its capacity to capture the feverish atmosphere and energy which accompanied the opening of the Wall. Brooks achieves this effect through a virtuoso implementation of phonetic qualities of consonants in combination with the strong rhythm of "speech," and regulating the tempo of the utterance through manipulation of the lengths of the lines, phrases, and individual words. The poet as if allows us to participate in the event, as she demonstrates how the interplay between performance, poetic slam, and jazzy improvisation evoke in the people present a sense of racial pride and hope for a change for the better, which found conspicuous expression in the ecstatic chanting of "Black Power!" accompanied with the simultaneous raising of fists in a gesture of power and triumph.

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<sup>26</sup> Gwendolyn Brooks, "The Wall," *In the Mecca*. New York, Evanston, and London: Harper & Row, 1968. 42-43.

Nonetheless, here Brooks is not merely a poet-observer/reporter. In “The Wall” she manages to transcend the physical limitations of the historical moment when she refers to the opening of the mural as “the Hour of tribe and of vibration” and “the Hour /of ringing, rouse, of ferment-festival.” These and similar phrases that appear in the poem establish the opening of the Wall of Respect as the H-time of Black America, the moment when: firstly, the hitherto widespread racist order is successfully rejected (“On Forty-third and Langley / black furnaces resent ancient / legislatures”) and secondly, the newly-generated spiritual energy provides an impulse and becomes fuel for a better future (“They keep the fever in, / fondle the fever”). The interconnection and interdependence of the concrete and the metaphysical reaches a climax at the end of the poem, when Brooks introduces herself into the text (in the manner that David Lodge, in his discussion of authorial presence in postmodernist fiction, identifies as “short-circuit”<sup>27</sup>) – now she stands facing the black crowd at the moment of reading this very poem on “the day of its dedication”:

I mount the rattling wood. Walter  
says, „She is good.” Says, „She  
our Sister is.” In front of me  
hundreds of faces, red-brown, brown, black, ivory,  
yield me hot trust, their yea and their

Announcement  
that they are ready to rile the high-flung ground.  
Behind me. Paint.  
Heroes.  
No child has defiled  
the Heroes of this Wall this serious Appointment  
this still Wing  
this Scald this Flute this heavy Light this Hinge.

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<sup>27</sup> David Lodge, *The Modes of Modern Writing: Metaphor, Metonymy, and the Typology of Modern Literature*. London: Edward Arnold Publishers, 1977. 240, 243-4.



An emphasis is paroled.  
 The old decapitations are revised,  
 the dispossessions beakless.

And we sing.<sup>28</sup>

A striking thing is that despite its title, the poem does not contain a description of the mural; instead the mural is only mentioned in passing: “Behind me. Paint. / Heroes.” As her poetic strategy Brooks chooses a *refusal of ekphrasis* precisely at the moment when the reader expects a verbal representation of the images of the heroes in the mural (or at least a list of their names, as in Madhubuti's poem); and she does not provide it not only because the original audience could see the mural in front of them, but also, and most importantly, due to the fact that the Wall of Respect was not simply a mural, but the whole black community united – hence the metaphorical phrase “this serious Appointment” used in reference to the Wall, and the emphasis placed on the pronoun “we” at the very opening and closure of the poem (“Humbly we come” and “we sing,” respectively).

In both Madhubuti's and Brooks's poems the Wall of Respect becomes thoroughly de-materialized, and remains more a symbol or metaphor than a physical object (i.e. a wall or a mural). As mentioned above, Madhubuti makes it a “weapon” against the white controlling gaze, whereas Brooks's poem abounds in metaphors referring to the Wall of Respect, in which nouns are consistently capitalized: “this serious Appointment,” “this still Wing,” “this Scald,” “this Flute,” “this Hinge,” “this heavy Light.” It is worth reflecting briefly on the philosophical underpinning of this poetic decision, especially because Black Arts Movement poetry was vital for launching a new image of blackness.

It must be emphasized that in the case of the murals we deal with the situation of their almost organic belonging in a particular site, as they cannot be transported and exhibited elsewhere. As Jonathan Lohman soberly states, “*you*

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<sup>28</sup> Brooks, “The Wall.” op. cit., 43.

*can't have a mural without a wall*<sup>29</sup>. Simultaneously, a striking feature of the Wall of Respect is its capacity to create a strict connection between immanence (or its illusion) and transcendence, in which the latter leads to the former, functioning as its pre-condition: when the images of the black heroes “emerged” from the Wall of Respect, the dilapidated wall “disappeared,” which suggests that the social terribleness and despair of living in the ghetto was substituted – at least temporarily – by a spiritually profound, “truly black” reality. As a result, the wall becomes indispensable for carrying out an act of symbolic transcendence of material existence and discovering/revealing the immanent Black Beauty.

Not only is this process consistent with Plato’s terms of understanding visual representation, where *eikon* (the image) is a copy of the *eidos* (the true reality), which assumes the pre-existence of such an ideal order, but also entails Heidegger’s phenomenological observation on the “nature” of an image. Pondering on a postcard of the Weidenhauser bridge, the philosopher observes:

What is now bodily given is the postcard itself. This card itself is a thing, an object, just as much as the bridge or a tree or the like. But it is not a simple thing like the bridge... [I]t is a picture-thing. In perceiving it, I see through it what is pictured, the bridge. In perceiving a picture, I do not thematically apprehend the picture-thing.<sup>30</sup>

If we replace the word “postcard” with “the wall,” we can see that in the case of the Wall of Respect mural, the wall must be “seen through” as it is only a vehicle for the depiction of the true black reality (the “thing”), whereas the

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<sup>29</sup> Jonathan Lohman, “The Walls Speak: Murals and Memory in Urban Philadelphia” (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2001). Quoted after: Maura E. Greaney, “The Power of the Urban Canvas: Paint, Politics, and Mural Art Policy,” *New England Journal of Public Policy*, Vol. 18, issue 1 (2002), 10.

<sup>30</sup> Martin Heidegger. *History of the Concept of Time: Prolegomena*. Trans. Theodore Kisiel. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press. 42.

image(s) painted on it become(s), according to Sartre's "imagining attitude," the "presence of the thing in its absence"<sup>31</sup>. As John Lechte points out,

the imaged is *in* the image precisely because the image is a "nothingness" and a mode of making the imaged present. To experience an image is to experience the "presence" of the imaged itself... or certain kind of significance – as with a symbol..., which is motivated (not conventional) and opaque (like the imaged itself) and is close to the image.<sup>32</sup>

As a result, transcending the materiality of the wall on which the heroes were painted leads to a revelation of immanent Blackness and to black visibility. "[T]his heavy Light," to draw on Brooks's metaphor once again, becomes the Heideggerian *Lichtung*, a sort of absolute opening, which allows the Being to reveal itself and shine. In this way the Wall of Respect may also be regarded as an embodiment of, to apply Houston Baker Jr.'s term, "the Black (W)hole"<sup>33</sup>, which – through a reversal of the physical laws of racist America – pulses with „Black Light" and emits Black energy, generating a perfect, truly Black Reality.

As quoted at the opening of this article, in his afterword to the seminal Black Aesthetic anthology *Black Fire* Larry Neal points at the strict connection between the sense of black identity, subjectivity and, to put it metaphorically, the optical conditions of a culture in which the perception takes place. By saying: "We know who we are, and we are not invisible, at least not to each other. We are not Kafkaesque creatures stumbling through a white light of confusion and absurdity. The light is black now..."<sup>34</sup>, Neal announces that those conditions have been altered. As implied by the critic, the alteration was effected not only by black political activism, but also by artistic efforts and projects concerned with the self-representation of new black people, such as

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<sup>31</sup> John Lechte, "Some Fallacies and Truths Concerning the Image in Old and New Media." *Journal of Visual Culture* 10.3 (2011), 357.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 356.

<sup>33</sup> Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature. A Vernacular Theory*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1984. 5.

<sup>34</sup> Neal, "And Shine Swam On", *op. cit.*, 652.

Black Power murals. However, the “True Black Reality” generated by the black light-emitting Wall of Respect leads to, to use Robert Stepto's nomenclature, “immersion”<sup>35</sup> in blackness and, simultaneously, to implosion of the black gaze (i.e. the “look-inside yourselves” attitude).

As Lacan explains:

In the scopic field, the gaze is outside, I am looked at, that is to say, I am a picture. This is the function that is found at the heart of the institution of the subject in the visible. What determines me, at the most profound level, in the visible is the gaze that is outside. It is through the gaze that I enter light and it is from the gaze that I receive its effects. Hence it comes about that the gaze is the instrument through which light is embodied.<sup>36</sup>

In the light of this observation, it seems that black self-representation turned into self-imagining, which is a form of self-invention, an act undeniably necessary for American blacks at that historical moment, even though verging on fantasy and myth. Still, the problem of the subject-object relationship inherent in the concept of the gaze, which involves such issues as control and autonomy, remained disquietingly present in the context of a new dynamics within the African American community in the late 1960s that juxtaposed “blacks” versus “Negroes.”

Nevertheless, among the acts of generating the black light, thanks to which at the end of the 1960s African Americans had invented their own image and became visible (and not only to each other) – i.e. historically present, socially and politically active, artistically and spiritually searching, the making of the Wall of Respect appears to have been an event of particular significance and importance. The history and legend of this most famous Black Power mural – the product of a collective effort and a multimedia poem of the people – demonstrates that a “proper” representation of blackness and generating the

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<sup>35</sup> Robert Stepto, *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979. 167.

<sup>36</sup> Jacques Lacan. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: W. W. Norton, 1998 [1973], 106.

“true” (i.e. one that guarantees visibility) image of black people demanded at that time – as a necessary condition – the presence of black light and black gaze, to “keep the fever in / fondle the fever” by embracing the illusion of immanence. Apparently, in the America of the late 1960s, in conditions of real racism, Black Beauty could visualize and embody itself only in the eye of the Black Beholder.

### Summary

The article entitled “Superreal images for SUPERREAL People.' Black Self-Representation as Self-Invention in Poetry and Visual Art of the Black Arts Movement: The Wall of Respect” provides an analysis of the representation of African Americans by Black Arts Movement poets and visual artists involved in making the Wall of Respect, the most famous Black Power mural. Resisting, challenging and rejecting the controlling white gaze, through their verbal and visual acts of self-representation, they made an attempt to achieve a “better and truer self” for American blacks, which resulted in black myth-making and self-invention. That phenomenon is explored here through an examination of the history, legend and aesthetics of the mural, which is approached as a multimedia Poem of the People, whose interplay of various artistic forms of expression is aimed at liberation from the oppressiveness of white cultural hegemony, achieving “visibility,” and practicing “truly black” image-making. More specifically, special attention is given to its literary component – Amiri Baraka's poem “SOS,” which is embedded in the mural, and two poems entitled “The Wall,” written for that occasion by Haki Madhubuti and Gwendolyn Brooks, the latter poem read at the opening ceremony by its author. Detailed reading of the poems demonstrates how the written/spoken word assisted and enhanced visual black self-invention and projected-cum-generated a sense of togetherness and collective identification by creating an ultra-positive image of “new blacks,” and stigmatizing “negro toms” who stood for old-fashioned integrationism. Also, through condensed references to theories pertaining to the nature of image, visual representation and the power of the gaze (by Plato, Heidegger, Sartre and Lacan), put together with concepts of African American culture and expression (Houston Baker Jr.'s “the Black (W)hole” and Robert Stepto's “immersion”), philosophical aspects of the Black Arts Movement's artistic strategy of black self-invention as well as its limitations are explored.

**Key words:** Black Aesthetic, black murals, Black Power, black self-representation, gaze, Gwendolyn Brooks, Haki Madhubuti, images of blacks, the Wall of Respect

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