

Introduction to *A Different Image: The Legacy of Broadside Press*, Broadside Press/University of Detroit Mercy Press, 2004; Michigan Notable Book, 2005

A Different Image

*The age
requires this task:
create
a different image,
re-animate
the mask.*

*Shatter the icons of slavery and fear.
Replace
the leer
of the minstrel's burnt-cork face
with a proud, serene
and classic bronze of Benin.*

Poem by Dudley Randall

In a 1970 article published in the *Black Academy Review*, Broadside Press founder Dudley Randall wrote the following concerning his vision and mission as a writer and publisher: "We (Africans in the United States) are a nation of twenty-two million souls, larger than Athens in the age of Pericles or England in the age of Elizabeth. There is no reason why we should not create and support a literature which will be to our own nation what those literatures were to theirs" (no. 1: 40 – 47). Though Randall never imposed his politics on the poets he edited and published, this statement and the consistency of his editorial practice over the years, reveal his nationalist passion to cultivate the work of African American creative writers, to bring their poems into the homes of African American people by making the publications affordable, and further, to extend this literature to the hearts of people around the world.

Randall created Broadside Press "by trial and error," he said, as a solitary project at first, perhaps not realizing how demanding the work would become, all the while continuing to work full-time in his profession of reference librarian. During those early days, the late Pulitzer prize-winning poet, Gwendolyn Brooks, a close friend of Randall's, wanted to know his title within the Broadside Press organizational structure. He replied: "Since I in my spare time and in my spare bedroom, do all the work, from sweeping floors, washing windows, licking stamps and envelopes, and packing books, to reading manuscripts, writing ads and planning and designing books, just say that Dudley Randall equals Broadside Press."

Operating in this modest manner, Randall began by producing 8 ½ x 11 inch broadsides on which single poems were printed in attractive formats, an idea he borrowed from the Russians, whose tradition of making popular poems and songs available to the people at minimal cost he had learned of during a trip to the Soviet Union. The first broadsides sold for under a dollar and subsequent books were priced as reasonably. For example, Audre Lorde's collection, *From a Land Where Other People Live*, published by Broadside in 1973 and nominated for a National Book Award in 1974, sold for only \$1.50.

“Ballad of Birmingham,” Randall’s poem on the bombing deaths of four little girls in a Birmingham church during the civil rights movement, was the first Broadside, published in 1965. In the decade following, Broadside Press grew into one of the world’s finest literary collections, with over 100 titles, most of which were poetry. However, Randall had also developed the excellent *Broadside Critics Series* of literary criticism by outstanding scholars such as Addison Gayle and Houston Baker, as well as the *Broadside Voices* series, which featured recorded performances by Haki Madhubuti, Sonia Sanchez and others, precursors to the contemporary performance poetry movement.

The Broadside Collection included some surprises: a cookbook, *Safari of African Cooking* (1972), a play for television by Detroit writer, Regina O’Neal (1974), and several children’s books. Significant prose works in the inventory included Haki Madhubuti’s first book of political analysis and commentary, *From Plan to Planet* (1973), and Ms. Brooks’ *Report from Part One* (1971), the first part of her autobiography. Randall also distributed the works of 30 African diasporan poets of the Paul Breman Heritage Poetry Series, published in England.

By the mid ‘70’s, the Broadside repertory – more than a hundred single broadsides, as well as books, audio tapes, LP’s and posters – were in demand by individuals, bookstores, libraries and universities around the world. For example, over 80,000 poetry books of Don L. Lee (now Haki Madhubuti) were in circulation during this period, and Randall struggled to keep up with demands for new editions.

The work involved in building the Press had been a monumental effort, which, one might have foreseen, finally exhausted Randall as it enriched all of us. He needed to rest. Through the interventions of Haki Madhubuti, whose own Third World Press was thriving by then, Broadside Press came under the guardianship of a religious and cultural organization in Detroit, the Alexander Crummell Center for Worship and Learning. I coordinated a collective of volunteers at the Crummell Center, and we relocated the inventory to the Church basement, began to fill the mail orders, and with the cash flow, paid off the debt to Harlo Printing, a local company, where most Broadside books had been produced. The Crummell Center collective also ensured ongoing visibility for the Press by organizing regular cultural programs for the community, including writing workshops, readings by poets of national prominence such as Nikki Giovanni, and a Broadside Lecture Series that welcomed scholars such as Harold Cruse, author of *Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, Dr. Safisha Madhubuti and many others. In keeping the Press alive in this manner, we showed Randall that the community treasured his work, and awaited his return to health, factors that we believe contributed positively to his recovery.

After a few years, Randall was ready to resume an active role. He published *Song for Maya* by Melba Boyd (1982), and my first book of poems, *Blood River* (1983). He also instituted the *Broadside Poet’s Theatre*, which still runs every third Sunday of the month under the direction of Willie Williams, a Broadside Press board member.

In 1985, Hilda and Don Vest purchased the Press from Randall. Hilda Vest -- a poet who was a friend of Randall’s and involved in the Broadside Press activities at the Crummell Center - - and her husband Don, an experienced businessman and cultural activist, moved the Press office to Lafayette Street in downtown Detroit. They continued the Broadside Poet’s Theater, won state funding to institute the successful Poets-in-Residence Program in collaboration with the Detroit Public Libraries, and secured additional grants to fund poetry projects for various underserved populations in the City. The Vests published 14 new titles: Two first books by young poets, Ray Waller (*Abstract Blues*, 1988) and Leslie Reese (*Upside Down Tapestry Mosaic History*, 1987); *Sorrow’s End*, poems by Mrs. Vest (1993); *Wine Sip and Other Delicious Poems* by Sharon

Knight-Smith (1989); *Watermelon Rinds and Cherry Pits* by Murray Jackson (1989); *Patches on Mainstreet* by Albert Ward (1989); a children's coloring book on Grenada, *Island Images* (1989), and a poetry collection, *Riffin' to a Maroon Tune* (1996), both by Michele Gibbs; *Hipology* (1990), an anthology of poems by Detroit metropolitan area writers, edited by Stella Crews and Ron Allen; two plays by Bill Harris, *Riffs and Coda* (1990); *Reflections: An Oral History of Detroit* by Irene Rosemond (1992); poems by well-known Detroit medical doctor, William Chavis, *Designs/Lines* (1995); a collection of poems by Paris-based poet, James Emmanuel, *Jazz from the Haiku King* (1999), and my second poetry collection, *Rainrituals* (1989). Under the Vests' direction, Broadside Press reclaimed its key role as publisher of excellent writings by African Americans, while continuing its legacy as a cultural haven for writers excluded from mainstream publishing opportunities. The Vests sold the Press to a collective of cultural activists in 1998: Richard Donelan, Ed.D., Sondai Lester, Lindiwe Lester, Aombaye Ramsey, Ph.D., Tene Ramsey, and Willie Williams and myself, both of whom had been Broadside Board members during the Vests' direction of the Press, and volunteers during the Crummell Center guardianship years.

As a whole, the Broadside Collection represents three generations of poets: Randall, Gwendolyn Brooks, Margaret Walker, Margaret Danner, Robert Hayden, Sterling Brown and their peers in the Black literary community, whose works laid the foundation; the younger poets of the Black Consciousness era, including Sonia Sanchez, Willie Kgositsile, Nikki Giovanni, Haki Madhubuti, Etheridge Knight, and Audre Lorde, all of whom later won national and international acclaim; and a still younger generation whose works emerged in the 80's. The poetry of these three generations comprises a repository that reflects the important political and cultural issues of African American society from the first world war to the end of the Century, expressed in diverse literary forms – including revolutionary manifestos, exquisite love songs, humorous toasts and yearnings for freedom. The entire enterprise is a testament to Randall's editorial acumen and respect for artistic differences within the African American community.

Beginning with Randall's investment of genius and hard work, continuing through the years at the Alexander Crummell Center, the tenure of Hilda and Don Vest and the subsequent assumption of ownership by the collective identified above, Broadside Press has promoted the works of African American writers in the United States and throughout the world over a period of 40 years. This anthology is meant to cast new light on this exceedingly valuable literary tradition, and to acquaint contemporary poets with the literary gold mine of their Broadside predecessors.

In founding the Press as an independent cultural institution with the writing and publication of "Ballad of Birmingham," a protest against the inhumanity of Southern racism, Randall conjoined Broadside Press and the African American freedom fight during a period when liberation struggles were being waged throughout Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Colonized people worldwide, some of whom were engaged in armed struggle against European powers, were consolidating their national, cultural and political movements, and working to build international solidarity as the *Third World* – rejecting alignment with both the Western camp and the Soviets, perceived as the first and second "worlds." The African American civil rights and Black power movements of the 60's and 70's constituted a significant flank of this global uprising of oppressed peoples, with many viewing these movements as a national liberation struggle, as they began to think of African Americans as an internal colony of the United States.

The tenacity of racial prejudice, the relentlessness of organized violence against Blacks throughout American society, and the intransigent segregation prevalent in all major arenas of American life – the courts, housing, education, employment – had convinced many in the generation that came to young adulthood in the 60's that African Americans would never win equal treatment as citizens of the United States. Alienated by the closed door of American

whiteness and racial oppression, persistent for four centuries, African American political activists, intellectuals and writers of the period sought their true identity elsewhere. They turned to Africa, the Motherland. With unprecedented intensity, Black artists and writers in all parts of the Diaspora attempted to wrest themselves psychologically from the hold of Eurocentric conventions, to forge a new aesthetic based on African arts, cultural practices and spiritual traditions. This shift in focus resurrected latent nationalist sentiment of Blacks in the United States, and generated the powerful Black Consciousness and Black arts movements of the '60's and '70's.

Identification with Africa reconfigured all aspects of daily life for the “conscious” of this generation – including acceptance of one’s own African physical features, reclamation of African clothing, art and artifacts, music, dance and religion, commitment to the freedom struggle within the United States, and solidarity with the national liberation fighters on the African continent. There were other important concerns as well: African American women, who played major roles in the Black Consciousness movement, were redefining gender relationships and the goals of women’s liberation-- towards greater equality and respect between themselves and their men, and towards a clear articulation of the ways in which their own political aspirations differed from those of Euro-American feminists. Protest against the war in Vietnam, which ranged from street demonstrations to draft resistance, expressed consistent solidarity of African American artists and activists with Third World independence struggles. All these political developments may be traced in the recurring themes of the Broadside poetry featured in this anthology.

Fundamental to the Black Consciousness movement was the project of retrieving precolonial African history in order to reassert the role of African civilization onto the world stage, for therein lay fulfillment of the quest for personal and collective African American identity. Emerging African and African American scholars brought to light the magnitude of African history buried by Western cultural supremacist scholarship. They exposed the unprecedented horrors of the European trade in human beings and pointed out the direct relationship between this human exploitation and the accumulation of capital that would ensure European and American powers their subsequent imperialist stature in the world. This intellectual work laid the ideological basis for African American political resistance that took many forms. It also planted the seeds of the student demands of the '70's and '80's to bring Black Studies into the academy.

This anthology features six Broadside Press writers of the Black Consciousness era whose works we here refer to as classics: Gwendolyn Brooks, Etheridge Knight, Sonia Sanchez, Audre Lorde, Haki Madhubuti, and Dudley Randall, all of whom are recognized as major 20th Century poets. Though they came to prominence in the 1960's and 1970's, the issues that preoccupied them are still pertinent to our communities today, and their writings continue to enjoy worldwide demand. They articulated the deepest longings of their people – to express their African identity, and to assume their place in history. Moreover, they demonstrated a quality of craftsmanship that would set new literary standards. While improvising on traditional literary forms, they also initiated unique uses of English to render it truer to African American speech patterns and rhythms, an intimation of the affirmation that Black English would garner years later.

A new generation of poetry writers and lovers have now created the phenomenal “slam” poetry competitions and hundreds of new poetry performance venues throughout this country. At Broadside, we celebrate the emergence of these young writers, cultivating and supporting their work in our monthly Broadside Poets’ Theatre and Workshop. We hope this Broadside Legacy anthology will be for them and others a source of inspiration for continued creativity and literary production.

Aneb Kgositsile (Gloria House, Ph.D.)
Detroit. May 9, 2002