Carl Pope Jr.'s Poetics of Blackness: The Bad Air Smelled of Roses

By James Wehn

C arl Pope Jr. describes The Bad Air Smelled of Roses as a continuous writing exercise, a graphic essay, mapping the ubiquitous presence and function of Blackness in society and Nature. Begun in 2004, the work presently consists of 108 letterpress posters, each printed with a text selected by the artist in reply to the question, “What do I think of when I think of Blackness?” The answers spring from many sources, some predictable (Black literature, jazz and rap, Malcolm X), others less so (Descartes, Freud, Cubaniana, a 1970s TV commercial for bubble bath). Although the project draws deeply on African-American culture and a tradition of civil rights activism, the Blackness Pope cites is not, he explains, “only a hue associated with Africa, its population, and the African Diaspora,” but also “a narrative thread woven by those repressed or rejected.”

Pope’s use of letterpress broadsides lends the visual language of printed adverts, handbills and picket signs to Pope’s found and often conflicting messages about Blackness. Unframed and stapled en masse to the gallery wall (the artist’s preferred installation method), the posters oscillate between fine art and public notices. As in concrete poetry, juxtaposed fonts and colors enliven the imagery and cadences of the texts. There are lyrical and melodic passages—as in the poster Midnight Chords Darkly Swirl, Mumbo Jumbo, Reed contrasts “bad air” with the sweet smell of Jes Grew, a rap artist. Pope agrees that the project is poetic, but does not consider it a poem per se.

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The Bad Air Smelled of Roses alludes simultaneously to passages by novelists Ralph Ellison and Ishmael Reed. In the epilogue to Invisible Man, Ellison uses the “bad air” produced by Louis Armstrong’s good music as a metaphor for the inescapable nature of living, that despite all attempts to tame it, succeeds in existing human ingenuity: “With Louis Armstrong one half of me says, “Open the window and let the foul air out,” while the other says, “It was good green corn before the harvest.” Of course Louis was kidding, he wouldn’t have thrown old Bad Air out, because it would have broken up the music and the dance, when it was the good music that came from the bell of Old Bad Air’s horn that counted. Old Bad Air is still around with his music and his dancing and his diversity, and I’ll be up and around with mine.”

In Mumbo Jumbo, Reed contrasts “bad air” with the sweet smell of Jes Grew, a ragtime jazz movement that infected the nation like a “psychic epidemic.” Other passages were accompanied by bad air (malarial). Jes Grew victims said that the air was as clear as they had ever seen it and that there was the aroma of roses and perfumes, which had never before entranced the nostrils. Intertextuality does more than collect references, however; it re-enumerates original ideas in a different linguistic form, as when Pope transposes his sources into letterpress broadsides.

Take the trio of posters that quote from “Work It” by hip-hop artist Missy Elliott. It’s Worth It to Let Missy Work It!, the title is printed in bold red letters over gray ones that whisper, “SOUND MADE EVERYTHING POSSIBLE IN OUR DAYDREAM,” the underlying text of I Put That Thing Down is less legible, and viewers who decode the upside-down words find themselves interrogated: “IS IT TOO MUCH 4 U TO MANAGE MISSY?” The third poster poses a still greater challenge, it leads with a clue—“FLIP IT AND REVERSE IT!”—enabling the viewer to decipher the rapper’s chant.

Language in Pope’s hands is graphic, and it makes little difference whether we see his writing project as an essay, a map or poetry. His subject—Blackness—by nature will not be categorized. It is, as Grae Moreno observed, “exact in its inexactitude, in the multiplicity that it alludes to, in the definitions it refuses to deliver.”

Tracing and embracing its poetics, Pope may well lead us to an EPHANNY.


A Lie is Only a Lie and People Will Believe Anything Designed and printed for Carl Pope by Hatch Show Print.

Notes:
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Carl Pope, e-mail to author, 8 Jul 2018.
6. Ibid.
7. Julia Kristeva, Revolution in Poetic Language.
10. Ishmael Reed, Mumbo Jumbo (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1972), 5.
11. Ibid., 6.
12. Ibid., 69–69.