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Dirty Concrete Poetry and Dace: The Visual Texts of

Steve McCaffery

and

Douglas Kearney

Steven McCarthy

Abstract

Concrete poets Steve McCaffery and Douglas Kearney created exuberant graphic compositions of their words, almost a half century apart, using the typewriter and desktop publishing software on a personal computer, respectively. Because of the gritty, energetic, expressionistic quality of their work, this style is referred to as "dirty concrete poetry." They also approached white space in their poems with a mix of compositional and conceptual intention, although for Kearney, a Black man, the term "white space" takes on additional meaning. This paper explores the visual similarities and differences between the poets and considers how they bridge the verbal, vocal, and visual in their intermedia artform. Because these poets are not well known in the world of visual communications, this paper seeks to bring exposure to a new and relevant audience.

Keywords

Steve McCaffery Douglas Kearney concrete poetry white space visual text



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Introduction

Poets Steve McCaffery and Douglas Kearney share an intermedia triangulation. Although their seminal creative works are separated by half a century, these poets have staked out a territory that sits within the literary traditions of poetry, the visualizations of text as art, and the sonic performances of these pieces as a form of theater. McCaffery and Kearney's works break down conventional discursive boundaries – whether through media, intellectual domain, or artistic genre – into an innovative and integrative whole that challenges, delights, and provokes readers, viewers, and listeners.

The term "verbivocovisual," an alliterative albeit awkward mouthful, attempts to singularly label these three modes of communication and expression. The neologism appeared initially in James Joyce's Finnegan's Wake in 1939, influentially in Augusto de Campos' "Concrete Poetry: A Manifesto" in 1956, and finally in Marshall McLuhan's 1967 book title Verbi-Voco-Visual Explorations (Emerson, 2014, p. 90). Referring to his own process, Kearney describes this overlapping verbal, vocal, and visual trio as "thinking about sonic composition, at the same time I'm thinking about typographic composition, at the same time I'm thinking about lexical composition" (Opera America, 2021, min. 00:33). Although the integrated qualities of McCaffery and Kearney's approach to "intermedia" – a termed coined in the 1960s by Fluxus artist Dick Higgins (Rinaldo, 2018, p. 151) – are inseparable, this paper will focus on the visual aspects.

The limiting term "poet" for McCaffery and Kearney is both professional title and primary academic affiliation – McCaffery was Professor and David Gray Chair of Poetry and Letters at the University at Buffalo (State University of New York system), and Kearney is Associate Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Minnesota. Kearney adds "performer" and "librettist" (writer of operas) to his poet identity on his website douglaskearney.com (2023) while McCaffery is often referred to as a sound poet, performer, and critic. Accolades for both poets have come primarily from within this literary arts community. Kearney received the Foundation of Contemporary Arts' Cy Twombly Award for Poetry, the Poetry Society of America's New American Poet Award, and the Theodore Roethke Memorial Poetry Award, and his recent book *Sho* was a 2021 National Book Award Finalist in the poetry category. McCaffery was twice honored with the Gertrude Stein Award for Innovative North American Poetry.

To the question "What are their poems about?" in terms of literal content, Kearney's topics include "politics, African-American culture, masks, the Trickster figure, and contemporary music" (Poetry Foundation, 2023) as well as his family, his identity, and in light of America's heightened race consciousness, being a "professional Negro" (Foundation for Contemporary Arts 2019, min. 00:15). Kearney uses expressive visual form to amplify and comment on his subject matter. McCaffery's "poetry is

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interested in exploding the habits of language use, and he has consistently tried to release the sound and emotion of poetry from the intellectual control of language," (Boyd, 2015) while some of his poems address topics of spirituality and philosophy. McCaffery's work asserts that form as content can contest the very nature of language, less "about something" and more a deconstruction of vocabulary, syntax, and semantics.

An expansive definition of authorship is required for both poets considering their wide-ranging creative practices, which have resulted in unorthodox graphic artifacts. Indeed, to the "designer as author" theories and self-referential projects that emerged from the discipline of graphic design in the 1990s (Burdick, 1995 & 1996; McCarthy & de Almeida 1996; Lupton, 1998; Poynor, 1998; McCarthy, 2013), one might consider the inversion "author as designer" to describe the process and products of these two artist-poet-performers.

The aim of this paper is threefold: one, to site McCaffery's and Kearney's works within a chronology of concrete poetry as impacted by each poet's milieu; two, to show how technological affordances (the typewriter and the personal computer) contributed to their aesthetic and conceptual approaches to "dirty concrete poetry" and "white space" – both visual and sociocultural; and three, to expose those in the discipline of visual communications (graphic design, typography, advertising, art, art history, etc.) to the lively and innovative visual works of heretofore un- or little-known artists working primarily in the allied fields of literary and performance arts.

Concrete Poetry: A Very Brief Background

The category of "concrete poetry" is the obvious label for graphic works that consider page layout, typographic composition, typeface personality, letter, word, and line spacing as core to the poet's literal and figurative intentions. Concrete poetry has a multifaceted history that emerged during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as the following examples demonstrate.

French poet Stéphane Mallarmé's seminal work "Un Coup de Dés Jamais N'Abolira Le Hasard" ("A Throw of the Dice will Never Abolish Chance") from 1897 considered voluminous white space as a key element. Guillaume Apollinaire's poem from 1916 "Il Pluet" ("The Rain") showered words diagonally across the page. He created the neologism "calligramme" (Apollinaire, 1918 in Apollinaire, Greet & Lockerbie, 1980) – combining the French words for calligraphy and ideogram – to describe his visual poems. Filippo Marinetti and the Futurists created frenetic visual-verbal compositions in the nineteen-teens, as governed by Marinetti's philosophy of "Parole in Libertà" ("Words in Freedom") (McCaffery & Nichol,

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1978), which advocated for an unmooring of text from traditional structures and conventions like parallel lines, congruent typography, rational hierarchies, and linear syntax. The collages of printed material in *Merz*, a Dadaist magazine edited by Kurt Schwitters during the 1920s, championed a juxtaposed arrangement of found words that was visually and conceptually a first cousin to concrete poetry.

Concurrent to the development of concrete poetry at the turn of the previous century, although separate intellectually and artistically, the new technology of the manual typewriter led to creative impulses. Called "art-typing," examples exist from the 1890s and beyond of typists exploring the machine's rectilinear and monospace engineering to produce purely visual geometric shapes, patterns, decorative borders, and illustrative designs (Tullett, 2014, p. 20). Layering several glyphs over one another created a dense arrangement of strokes that was novel and newly enabled by the act of inventive typewriting. These experiments were embraced by neither the mainstream art nor the literary communities of the time, however, and seem to have had little bearing on avant-garde practice.

Concrete poetry came in to its own as a formal movement in the 1950s and '60s with several key contributors: the Brazilian Augusto de Campos, Scottish poets Ian Hamilton Finlay and Edwin Morgan (to whom the 1963 coining of the term "typestract," a mashup of typewriter and abstraction, is attributed) (Thomas, 2017, p. 11), and Dom Sylvester Houédard, a British poet and Benedictine monk. Unlike the more free-ranging and explosive graphic compositions of the earlier concrete poets, the work of these mid-century creators was cooler, cleaner, more controlled, and more conceptual.

An alignment with the era's Swiss Modernist graphic design can be found in their use of rectilinear grids, generous white space, sans serif typefaces, and rational geometries. Tools these poets used, like the letterpress and the manual typewriter, had built-in 90° grids with X and Y axes and were exploited graphically to achieve a certain look. Houédard's work in particular veered closest to pure abstraction with its flatness, fields of color, acute angles, moiré patterns, and textures. Regarding his poem's page layouts, "the counterspace of the white page ... is frequently contemplated" (Simpson, 2012, p. 44). Design critic Rick Poynor establishes "that the connections between concrete poetry and graphic design, in the 1960s and later, were in pressing need of investigation, and that Houédard's text was an essential starting point for this research" (2012).

The Visual Poems of Steve McCafferv

Houédard's concrete poetry preceded and overlapped Steve McCaffery's in the 1960s, with both using typewriters as tools of creation. Houédard used a august . 2023

manual Olivetti Lettera 22, an inexpensive and popular machine released in 1950, while McCaffery used a "sky-blue Smith Corona typewriter" (McCaffery, 2021, unpaginated preface) initially and an IBM Selectric, an electric machine from 1961 with its innovative typeball instead of discrete keys. McCaffery, however, took the typewritten poem into uncharted territory with his unorthodox compositions, his novel use of typewriting technology and the oral performances of his poetry. He made concrete poetry dirty.

"Dirty concrete poetry" was a term in circulation between McCaffery, his contemporary bp Nichol, and others in the Toronto-based poetry scene of the 1960s and '70s. It referred to the grittiness, the layering, the messy expressiveness of McCaffery's poetical typestracts – "those [poems] with amorphous visual shape and complex and involute arrangements of linguistic elements. In dirty concrete there can be no immediate to the whole, only a cumulative interpretation gained by painstaking labor" (Emerson, 2011). "Dirty" applied to the non-syntactical, to asemic writing, to the abstract expressionistic designs of the poems, and possibly to the printed material as well – smudged ink, bleeding colors, cheap paper worn through from the persistent hammering of metal keys.

As this paper's author put it in another publication:

Using a typewriter to create typestracts, McCaffery applied letters to paper in the way an abstract expressionist painter applies paint: energetically and freely, but not without purpose. While the definition of typestract refers to the creation of abstract forms with a conventional typewriter, McCaffery must have enjoyed the double entendre of type's tract – with type referring to categories of things in common and tract referring to an area of indefinite extent. This is conceptually and graphically evident in his works Carnival, the First Panel created in 1967–1970 (McCaffery, 1973) (Figure 1) and Carnival, the Second Panel from 1970–1975 (McCaffery, 1975). Carnival, the First Panel was imprinted with red and black ink solely from the typewriter's ribbons, while Carnival, the Second Panel added larger rubber-stamped letterforms. (McCarthy, 2013, pp. 72–73)

McCaffery states that "Carnival is planned as a multi-panel language environment, constructed largely on the typewriter and designed ultimately to put the reader, as perceptual participant, within the center of his language" (McCaffery, 1973). The Panel series exist as perforated book pages that can be torn from their bindings and assembled into 16-panel grids, with the result a "visual performance of type" (McMahon, 2007, p. 139) akin to a painting or print (McCarthy, 2013, p. 73). That Kearney refers to his own approach as "performative typography" (Poetry Foundation, 2023) is revealing of these poets' similar interests in words as kinetic elements.

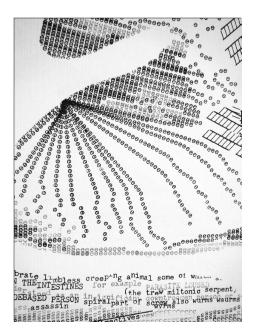
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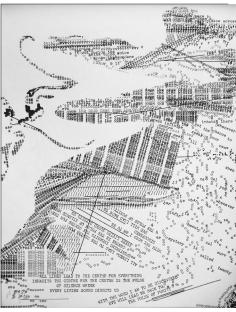
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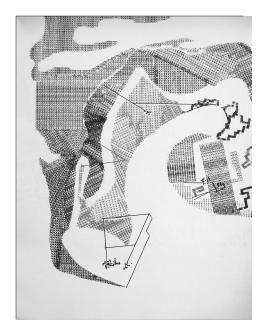
Selection of unpaginated pages from Carnival the First Panel by Steve McCaffery, 1973 (photos courtesy the author).



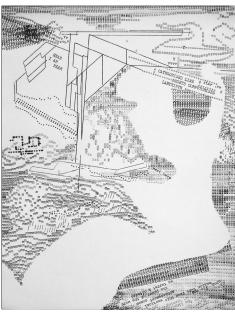


Carnival draws upon the work of earlier concrete poets, but operates less at the level of text or word and more at the level of the discrete phoneme. Rows of individual letters - oooooooooooo for example – invite readers to decode as "oh oh oh oh..." or as the "u" sound of moon, or as a chain, a string of pearls, open mouths, and so on. McCaffery explains: "Above all it is a structure of strategic counter-communication designed to draw a reader inward to a locus where text surrounds her. Language units are placed in visible conflict, in patterns of defective messages, creating a semantic texture by shaping an interference within the clear line of statement" (McCaffery, 1973).

In this kaleidoscopic, overlapping, textural field, words and phrases do emerge "filtered through paragramatic play to arrive at multiple variables" (McMahon, 2007, p. 139). Wordplay is central to McCaffery's work with slanting rhymes and morphing words, as is evident



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in this particular example from Carnival the First Panel. He uses the typewriter's mono-width alignment of characters and spaces effectively: "exist" loses its "s" to become "exit" which loses the "e" but adds a space, creating the phonetically identical "x it." A biblical reading posits the snake-like "s" as the cause of Adam and Eve's expulsion from paradise, with the "x" as a cross symbolizing Christianity and redemption. An existentialist interpretation might be that one simply exists before exiting, before being crossed out where x marks the spot 2 (Figure 2).

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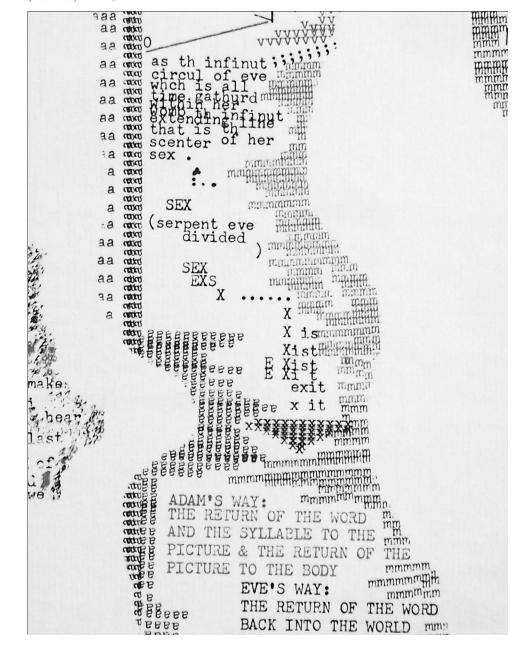
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Page (detail) from Carnival the First Panel by Steve McCaffery, 1973 (photo courtesy the author).



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McCaffery's Carnival project is described with arcane terms that reference the open range: "acoustic paragramatism," "textual cartography," "psychogeographic wandering," "post-bop jazz" (Cox, 2007), and a "phonetic semantic allegory" (McCaffery in McMahon, 2007). McCaffery is referred to as a "post-concrete' poet" (Perloff, 1991) because of his emphasis on the page and book rather than the individual poem. One could also use this term to recognize his exploitation of the visual over the literal, and the letter, as micro element over the word and text as macro elements. Scholar Johanna Drucker claims that "he uses visuality as an integral element of textuality, not as a decorative surplus or afterthought" (1999).

The Visual Poems of Douglas Kearney

Contemporary poet Douglas Kearney's work also fits the definition of dirty concrete poetry for reasons both similar to and different from McCaffery's. Kearney creates his compositions on a personal computer using Microsoft Word and the Adobe suite of software: Illustrator, InDesign, and Photoshop. Although he uses an industry-standard QWERTY keyboard (relatively unchanged since Remington designed its typewriting machines in the 1870s), Kearney's computer key strikes are not percussive onto the paper, physically transferring a character via an ink ribbon. He creates using a range of digital tools, techniques and processes: cut, copy, paste, layer, rotate, select, delete, undo, scan, save as, print... (Kearney, 2021, min. 48:43).

Working solely in black and white and in modest resolution, his high-contrast images have certainty, unlike greyscale's compromised gradation. Often made from found snippets of text, graphic shapes, and images, Kearney's concrete poems' overlaps, angles, crops, repetitions, fragments, and mix of type fonts and sizes give the work a gritty, punk-rock affect. The overall graphic look is that of a third-generation photocopy of a collage sourced mostly from generic food packaging, deaccessioned library books, and 1970s-era, dry-transfer lettering used on cassette mixtapes. They are raw and profound (Figure 3).

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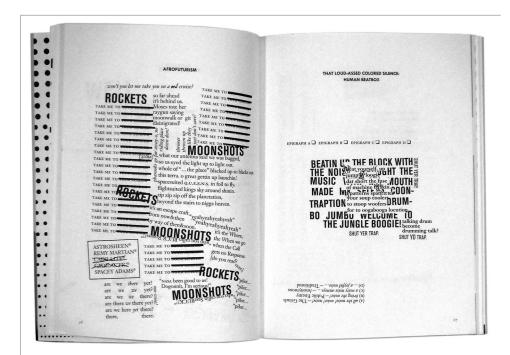
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Figure 3.

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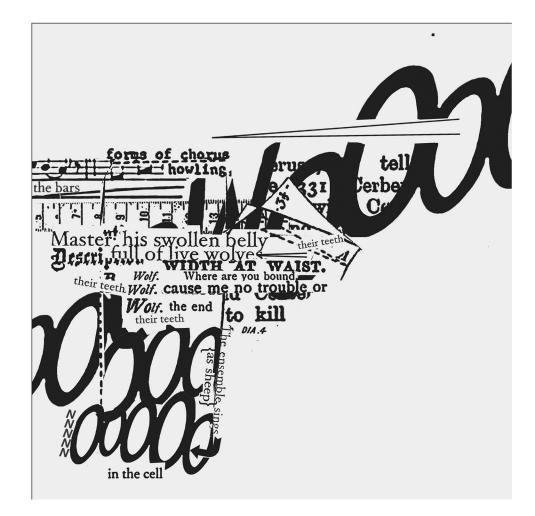
Spread from book Buck Studies by Douglas Kearney, 2016 (photo courtesy the author).



As mentioned earlier, Kearney uses the term "performative typography" (Poetry Foundation, 2023) to describe his approach to designing his poems, explaining through active verbs, "I follow an association, put a line down, move a collaged piece of text between two others and half-bury a fourth" (Kearney, 2021). In his poem "Wolves," rows of elliptical shapes – condensed, italic letter "O"s perhaps – touch to the point of merging their black strokes and foregrounding the white toothlike counterspaces within (Poetry Foundation, 2020). Kearney's poem reveals the digestive detritus of words and word fragments in its "swollen belly" as the wolves gnash "their teeth," (text that is repeated three times) and the whole composition lunges at the reader (Figure 4).

Figure 4

Poem "Wolves" by Douglas Kearney, 2020. https://www. poetryfoundation.org/ poetrymagazine/poems/152480/ wolves august . 2023



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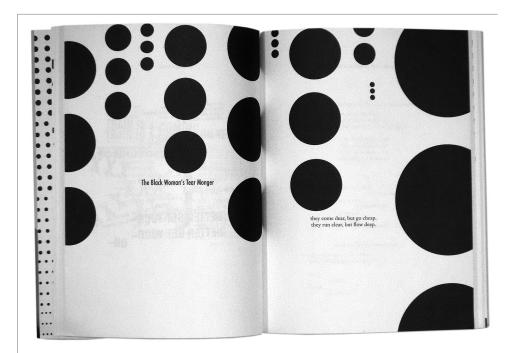
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Figure 5

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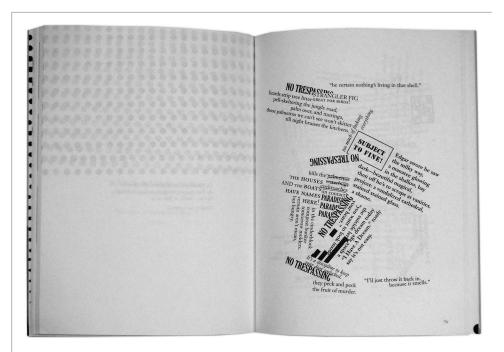
Spread from book Buck Studies by Douglas Kearney, 2016 (photo courtesy the author).



Kearney does not stop at artfully designing his poems. He designed all 108 pages of his 2016 publication *Buck Studies*, which consists of both "dirty" and classically typeset poems (in the typeface Janson Text). Operating at the level of the book, Kearney considers page sequencing, flow, pacing, and transitions. Graphic shapes serve as illustrative elements. A black circle repeated becomes ellipses in one context, a pattern not unlike perforated sheet metal in another, and when large and isolated, the high-noon shadow of a lost baseball (Figures 5 and 6).

Figure 6

Spread from book Buck Studies by Douglas Kearney, 2016 (photo courtesy the author).



On White Space in Dirty Concrete Poems

Because Kearney and McCaffery use blank white paper as substrate, the ink color – black in Kearney's work or black, blues, and reds in McCaffery's – establishes figure/ground contrast. The graphic build-up of letters, words, shapes, patterns, and textures exists as positive form while the remaining area exists as negative space. One can interpret the positive printing of the poems as the "dirty" area while the unsullied white space remains, conversely, clean.

McCaffery's *Carnival* series used masks cut from paper to create – in their negative shapes – amorphous white space that delineates the curvilinear edges to the fields of type. To achieve this effect

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ligure 7.

Page from Carnival the First Panel by Steve McCaffery, 1973, showing white areas created by masks (photo courtesy the author).

say like the red outline of beginning ADAM TRUE GAMES

of crisp delineation, McCaffery would have had to type over the masks and remove them to preserve the white space beneath. In this regard, the typestract bleeds into the curvy white shape, as well as off the edge of the letter-sized paper. The mask method is subtractive; the inked letterforms are additive. The masks conceal and then reveal the white space (Figure 7).

Regarding white space in concrete poetry: "One of the most influential of the first generation of visual poets was the Swiss artist Eugen Gomringer, who, in seminal compositions such as "Silencio" (1954), made bold use of blank page space in order to highlight its potential as a metaphor for the reader's contemplative silence" (Powell, 2013). Could white space also be a metaphor for a pending avalanche, threatening and oppressive? Or an absence – nothingness, loss, lack? Or an opportunity, an invitation, a blank canvas, a tabula rasa?

Kearney's white space is a framing device. His compositions are almost always contained with the paper, asymmetrically arranged and roughly centered without bleeding off the page. The white space around his concrete poems acts like a generous matboard on a framed artwork: it surrounds, protects, and separates the work from competition, from unwelcomed association through proximity. The white space is not accidental or leftover, however – Kearney considers its void as a presence. The compacted, gnarled white spaces within Kearney's dirty concrete poems behave differently. They're crushed, they're overwhelmed. But the white still defines the blackness of the ink, via the highest possible contrast, a symbiosis of achromatic polarity (Figures 8 and 9).

The poem "That Loud-Assed Colored Silence: Modernism" (Kearney, 2016, p. 28) in *Buck Studies*, reads:

who among us has not entertained a silence,

standing there loud-assed and colored besides the white chickens?

Kearney then leaves the other 90% of the page blank – not blank empty, but blank white. The phrase "besides the white," protruding farthest right, describes the space; modifying "chickens" is only a partial role. If considered with the poem's subtitle – "Modernism" – the white page becomes a rectilinear gallery, invoking the white boxes of modern artists, architects, and designers: Malevich, Le Corbusier, Gropius, Rauschenberg, Rams, and Esslinger. Writing the poem, typesetting the poem, composing the poem on a page in a book of his own comprehensive design gives Kearney unfettered authorial control. McCaffery masked and revealed white; Kearney tempts it, taunts it, and tames it.

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Pages from Patter by Douglas Kearney, 2014 (photo courtesy the author)

ABRAHAM, JHVH, JOSEPH: FATHERS OF THE YEAR

I think I LOVE you. amen amen show Me what you can do! mountain with Daddy's Heat across his neck. sharp stone

at his son as the Sun's shanks go down, go his.

Daddy the Almighty Mountain, Neck full

1 2 3— stop! you better save it!

of sharp Heat, His Sonyou better save it! shanked. on the Mount,

mounted. across go sun,

sun, sun: the stone gone.

never could say goodbye...

no! daddy the stone. full
"...you better_no!
...you better_no!
almighty necks. shake of sharp at his sons almighty necks. shake,

cross, down. till the sun

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lil monkeys! curlicued tails troop queries on my babies. curious lil monkeys and the uniformed overseer—who can tame them? unruly

lil monkeys no ways tired with new IDS and bipedal reveries. musing

lil monkeys's pointless—stick them with sticks! big leaps from their green tenements, angry lil monkeys: go chew on the saw of "fruit-falls-when-ripe." wait! hungry lil monkeys! smiling lil monkeys climbing pajamas. lil monkeys pincer the cribs, bent senators, y daughter's onesie. leering hissing in lil monkeys beards.

monkeys shot. love for monkeys?! humans over i S over babies, bucking on the lamps,

7 shadows on my son's face. jibber from the narsery,

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Another interpretation of "white space" – especially deserving mention considering that Blackness as racial identity is a recurring topic in Kearney's poems – is that of a culturally and racially unwelcoming place. Scholar Elijah Anderson (2015) described white space restaurants, clubs, schools, stores, events and so on as social places "in which black people are typically absent, not expected, or marginalized when present. In turn, blacks often refer to such settings colloquially as 'the white space' – a perceptual category – and they typically approach that space with care" (p. 10).

Perhaps Kearney's approach to white space in his poems' layouts reflects a similar sensitivity and awareness, even as his presence is seemingly bolstered by the confidence of belonging. Doubt persists, however, as Kearney extends this foreignness of occupying white space beyond race and into disciplinary and cultural transgression: "The poetry wants to claim the secrets of other arts. To steal them away. To take them and make them work in strange fields of white space. Ain't this a failure of character?" (Kearney, 2011, emphasis added). To fail one's character acknowledges, through Kearney's code switching into African-American Vernacular English, that succeeding in white spaces might require too much of a moral and artistic compromise.

A Cameo Appearance by John Baskerville

Not all of Kearney's performative typography poems are dirty. Designs in his book *The Black Automaton* use a more classical approach to layout and typography. Many employ a graphic device from scientific exposition, humanities lectures, and corporate PowerPoint presentations: the flow chart. Brackets, lines, arrows, and typographic hierarchies (change of type weight, size, caps, alignment, and so on) are propel the reader's eye along pathways both syntactical and visual (Figure 10). One poem, titled "The Black Automaton in de Despair ub Existence #2: Our New Day Begun," uses the typeface Baskerville for the text, in a lively mix of Roman, italic, and small caps in several point sizes (Kearney, 2009) (Figure 11).

Figure 10.

Page from book The Black Automaton by Douglas Kearney, 2009 (photo courtesy the author). august . 2023

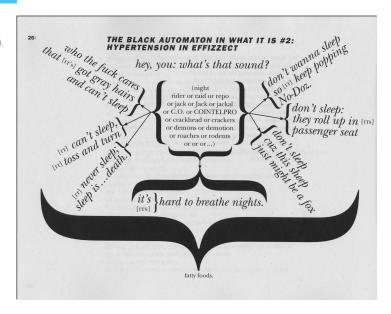
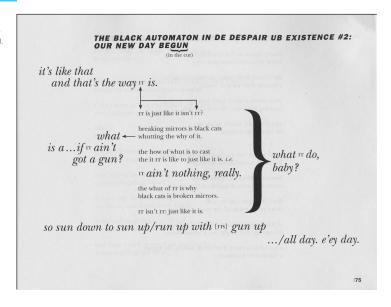


Figure 11.

Page from book The Black Automaton by Douglas Kearney, 2009 (photo courtesy the author).



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Designed by Englishman John Baskerville in the 1750s, this bookish font was radical for its time – crisper, more contrasting serif letterforms printed with blacker, denser ink of Baskerville's own formulation, and onto smoother, whiter paper achieved through a method called calendering, again a technological advance by Baskerville. In a 2012 article in *The New York Times* about a study of typefaces and the perception of truth, the Baskerville font won over all others tested as the most credible font when readers were asked to rate the veracity of the same text set in different types. Whether this is due to Baskerville's so-called "starchiness" (a classical formality) (Morris, 2012) or familiarity, one cannot be certain, but Kearney's use of the font in this context adds intrique.

What does it mean when Kearney sets the line "what it do, baby?" in Baskerville, menaced by the sharp point of a bracket (Kearney, 2009)? It brings to mind an eighteenth-century critic of Baskerville's printed typeface – as revealed in a letter from Baskerville's fellow printer and supporter Benjamin Franklin – who claimed that it could "hurt the [reader's] eye" (Franklin, 1760) due to the heightened contrast between acutely rendered letters, blacker ink, and whiter space. From a memory of Kearney's junior high school weekend course in graphic design – perhaps in a prescient quest for literary credibility – he discloses: "Baskerville was actually the first typeface I ever identified and used by name" (Kearney, 2022).

In spite of, or perhaps because of, McCaffery's radically interdisciplinary work and the concrete poems by others – dirty or clean – Johanna Drucker (1991), a book artist and experimental writer herself, claimed that "the attitude of contemporary poets and editors toward typographically manipulated works... has been one of suspicion bordering on hostility" (p. 255). Perhaps these editors' eyes "hurt" from the radical work of these intermedia innovators. Once-edgy Baskerville – initially shunned, remember – is now solidly credible. Since then, in the era of digitization, desktop publishing, and expanded notions of authorship, attitudes have changed. Kearney's performative typography poems are widely published and well received through book sales, frequent invitations to poetry readings, critical acclaim, and numerous prestigious awards.

Kearney's Background

Douglas Kearney earned his Master of Fine Arts degree in creative writing at the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) in the decade after Drucker's criticism. By then, CalArts was a leading program in graphic design graduate education and at the vanguard of deconstruction and other theories that encouraged experimentation and boundary breaking with graphic form and language. The faculty roster during Kearney's time on campus, including

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his dozen years as a CalArts professor of writing, reads like a who's who of influential graphic design educators and practitioners: Jeffrey Keedy, Louise Sandhaus, Michael Worthington, Lorraine Wild, and Ed Fella. The confluence of Kearney's poetry writing and interest in oral performance was surely cross-pollinated through exposure to what was going on with CalArts graphic design faculty and students, and through local access to influential graphic design work.

The CalArts Library has a copy of playwright Eugene Ionesco's 1965 book *The Bald Soprano*, one such influential work. The book is legendary for Robert Massin's radical approach to its graphic design, and it is canonical to the field of visual communication history. By innovatively combining text typography (the script), high-contrast images of people (the actors), and the temporal and spatial aspects inherent to books (the stage performance), Massin's design exemplifies the terms introduced earlier: *verbi-voco-visual* and *intermedia*. *The Bald Soprano* is also "dirty" in the most complimentary way; further, given its publication date, one wonders about the congruence with and influence on McCaffery's work. Exposed to a copy in graduate school, Kearney tracked down *The Bald Soprano* for his personal library via Amazon Germany – "it smells every bit of mildew" (Kearney, 2022) – where it may have languished in a root cellar next to the sauerkraut.

Well before CalArts and his bachelor's degree in English from Howard University, Kearney was exposed to visual communication and expression. He recalls:

I started learning about graphic design in middle school when I went to a weekend class put on by a student from Pasadena's Art Center College of Design. This was all hand drawn illustrations and lettering copied from type collections. I am so grateful I got some analog before it all went digital! (Cordero, 2014)

This analog grounding shows up in Kearney's journals as rough drafts: hand-rendered type that is not just written, but sketched of the fonts he's thinking of using, with lines, shapes, boxes, and illustrative elements. Even the white spaces are considered essential to these loose, in-progress compositions. For one poem, however, Kearney laments, "I tried typesetting it and couldn't stand looking at it, but I love the way it looked in my journal, all scrawled out" (Smoking Glue Gun, 2012) (Figure 12).

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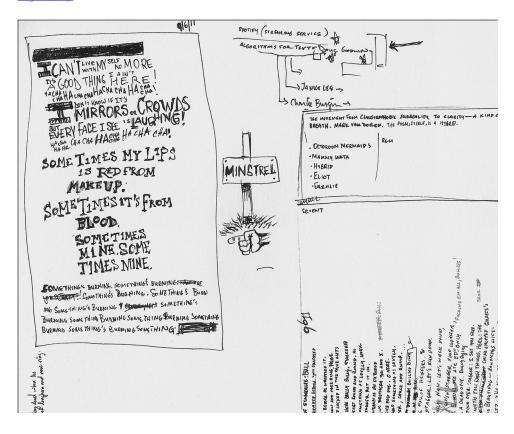
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Figure 12

Sketch (detail) from Douglas Kearney's journal, undated. https:// smokinggluegun.com/2012/03/01/ douglas-kearney/



Conclusion

Although this paper makes comparisons and offers contrasts between these poets, there is scant evidence of direct influence or of applied precedent. Kearney and McCaffery both appear in the book *Conceptualisms: The Anthology of Prose, Poetry, Visual, Found, E- & Hybrid Writing as Contemporary Art* (in separate sections – Kearney in "Architecture of the Page" and McCaffery in "Sound Writing") (Tomasula, 2022). Apparently, they both gave readings at a Los Angeles conference on experimental writing in 2008 called Untitled: Speculations on the Expanded Field of Writing (Kinnett, 2008). Otherwise, in one interview, Kearney says he was "conscious of experiments with type in poetry, advertising, comics, magazines" and credits "a great book

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called *Imagining Language* I got a hold of in grad school at CalArts" (Fife, 2015). That book was co-edited by Steve McCaffery, so perhaps a trail exists.

Does the long shadow of McCaffery and other twentieth-century concrete poets simply cast history upon Kearney? Or is it Kearney who is excavating, resurrecting, and reconfiguring this mother lode of material into contemporary times as heir apparent to the kingdom of dirty concrete poetry? What difference do their differences make, in era, in technology, in disposition, and in reception? One poet was part of the 1960s hippie counterculture, a white English-born Canadian, a typewriter percussionist and avant-gardist on the linguistic fringe, while the other is a social justice warrior, a humbled father, a Los Angeles-raised Black man, a Photoshop masseur, and riveting shamanic performer who summons rap and scat to critical acclaim. And yet keep in mind their similarities – the probing, questioning, asserting, border-defying integration of media to express and communicate. It wasn't dirt after all – it was gold dust.

To that end, this paper's definitions and interpretations of "dirty" (textural, free-ranging, messy, layered, gritty, expressive – McCaffery once used the term "entropy") and "white space" (clean, vacant, open, pure, intentional, unused, abandoned) are offered for interrogation. When applied to McCaffery's and Kearney's literary meanings or to their oral performances, the words might be appropriate concepts for research into their other media. For example, in live readings, are their pauses and silences, even their in-between-poems banter, "white space"? By contrast, do their words and sounds – inclusive of grunts, screeches, glottal stops, falsettos, and unorthodox prosody – make their recitations tonally "dirty?" As this paper's concern is with the visual, critiques of those intriguing aspects of oral performance are best left to scholars in allied fields like drama, performance art and media studies.

Media scholar Lori Emerson is the director of the University of Colorado's Media Archaeology Lab and a PhD graduate of the Poetics Program at the University at Buffalo – Professor Steve McCaffery was her doctoral committee chair. In her chapter "Typewriter Concrete Poetry as Activist Media Poetics," she stated that the digital descendant of the dirty concrete poetry of the 1950s–70s might be best realized through interactive software packages like Flash (now largely defunct) and Processing (Emerson 2014, pp. 87–127). Kearney's work, while also using computer software, shows a different path. His visual poems continue a trajectory from the 1980s–90s' graphic designs of magazines like David Carson's *Raygun*, Martin Venezky's *Speak*, and Rudy Vanderlans and Zuzana Licko's *Emigre*, and demonstrate that the DIY ways of desktop publishing have contemporaneous validity, and when applied to poetry, renewed impact.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WNa6UalnK0o]

³ See, for example, these videos – McCaffery performing "The White Pages" at https://media.sas.upenn.edu/app/public/watch.php?file_id=189866, and Kearney performing "Sho" at

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Of the trio of media that Kearney and McCaffery embrace – the verbal, the vocal, and the visual – this paper has focused on the latter using the lens of visual communication scholarship. These poets' iconoclastic oral performances, richly sonic and emotive, deserve deep analysis as well. A critical discourse around both poets' literal content – what the concrete poems' words mean – already exists by qualified scholars, and again, is beyond the purview of this paper. It is hoped, through this explication of their graphic choices, motivations, influences, and visual outcomes, that others can triangulate to the other two sides of the prism.

Returning to, and ending with, the term *typestract*, both McCaffery and Kearney used their pages, their canvases, as stages for performance and as geographic ranges for literary movement and graphic exploration. Their typographic choices give active voice – tone, dialect, accent, and volume – to their words. In one interview, Kearney (2021) declared, "The page is the stage and the stage is the page." He continued, referencing the notion of an open range: "A sense of space and movement and proximity and composition was something that I thought that the page could bring" (UMn College of Liberal Arts). This brings typestract back to "type's tract," or the place where dirty concrete poetry battles with, negotiates with, or coexists with white space to enable *terra incognita* to emerge from *terra firma*.

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