

*'Hammbone, Hammbone, Have You Heard?
The Subtle Shouts and Subversive Black Politics
In the Art and Life of Terence Hammonds'*

By Kathy Y. Wilson

This is a love letter.

For if “black love is black wealth,” as the great American poet Nikki Giovanni says, then we are made richer in the naming and the speaking of it. Black.

Love.

I have been thinking about Terence Hammonds' black ass for nearly a dozen years. Which means I have been writing this in earnest for as long.

This skinny, self-deprecating, quick-to-giggle, nappy-headed Blerd Punk fan; this brilliant manipulator and blender of black oppression and white opulence. This father. This husband.

This manchild of the Promised Land who grew himself up (black oppression) and married slightly up (white opulence), only to make two blended children sure to suffer the slings, swings and arrows of a petulant and very Trumpian future yet told.

However, in Hammonds' art—as in his life/as in his heart—there is hope.

In 2007 or 2008 on some sunny and warm late afternoon in Over-the-Rhine in Cincinnati when God's natural light makes even the trash in the

streets appear beautiful, I was driving Marlon, my dead mamma's Mercury, down thrice-gentrified Main Street.

(Thinking back on it now, this all went down just a few storefronts south of the tenement where Hammonds's mamma, Deborah, raised him, his three sisters and one brother. This is also mere blocks from his alma mater, the School for Creative and Performing Arts, where Hammonds found and accepted himself as an artist destined to transcend his block and his city.)

Windows down, terrible black radio station blaring clichés and misogyny to a dope-ass beat. "HAMMMBOOONE!" I yell to him.

Hammonds comes loping across the street toward my passenger-side window carrying several sheets of 23-inch-by-30-inch rag cotton paper. He leans slightly in the window. His glasses are Mars Blackmon-big. He's got that toothy grin across his face and slides the sheets into the car. "Here!" he says, giggling, smiling that way he does.

"What is this?"

"You can have these. They're just test prints. They're not very good...just something I'm trying out."

And he laughs again.

Before I can pelt him with more questions, he is off; back on the sidewalk, his backpack squarely on his back and his dirty Clark's moving at such a jaunt he appears to skip.

The light turns green. With cars bearing down on my bumper, I pull off, holding the paper flat against the seat with my right hand.

I get the pages home.

I assume they're blank—where *exactly* the *fuck* is the print?—and that I'll soon be writing across the thick cotton with one of my cheap ink pens.

But, wait.

He did say these are test prints.

I flip over the top sheet.

Embossed in large letters in what looks like American Typewriter font:

I
AM A
WHITE
AGITATOR

Well. Sheeeeitt.

Because of this print I learned later the phrase was often mis-attributed to former Alabama Governor and avowed racist George Wallace; however, it was actually a turned phrase appropriated from Wallace's belief "his" tranquil and happy "niggras" were stirred to civil rights action by "outside white agitators." Therefore, civil rights leaders emblazoned the statement on buttons worn by whites working in tandem with the tenets of the modern civil rights movement of the mid- to late-1960s.

Raised and Braille-like, it's white-on-white, like blue-collar crime or the alt-right suckling the withered teats of Wallace-era Ku Klux Klan or like Wallace's hate sermons that kept Southern racists stoked to the point of widespread lynching.

What Hammonds did by turning a long-ago and perhaps forgotten (and clever) civil rights slogan into a poster, of sorts, on beautiful art paper was he turned something heretofore used as an imperative into an edict, a to-do list for the 21st Century's well-meaningest of whites and an old-school history lesson for the most ignorant of blacks (myself especially).

In retrospect, I felt like Rene Ricard when he realized the utter and still-to-come brilliance of Jean-Michel Basquiat.

It was like being the only soul standing in sunlight.

I then commissioned a 43-inch-by 43-inch print of repeated images of civil rights-era violence between blacks and white cops; many depict women fighting back. Images are repeated inside the curlicues of an elaborate wallpaper print that would've been plastered throughout the master's mansion of a Southern plantation.

Again, the collision and collusion of opulence and oppression; this time, as high-end (yet affordable) home décor.

Subversive, this cat.

Our home is a virtual Terence Hammonds one-man show.

There is the trio of fine china with water-soluble prints of classic Hip-Hop groups at their centers and gold-leafed edges. There are the prints of James Baldwin, his already-bugged eyes covered by African shields and embellished with gold leafing; the print of Cameo's Larry Blackmon (also on a T-shirt) and Nina Simone and Shirley Chisholm. There are the Rookwood pots and decanters with images of Chisholm and Barbara Jordan on them; the Rookwood cups with Bayard Rustin, Stokely Carmichael and Marsha P. Johnson.

Drink. This, do in remembrance of them.

We spent our afternoons back then together, talking about art, going to art shows, me looking at and learning about his art and his family and watching him burn screens and ink and pull prints.

During this time I also met his mother who not only gave the world a fragile yet fitfully made black boy, but who also bakes a mean church-basement-good pound cake.

She is also a cancer survivor and during her initial diagnosis and treatment, I saw Hammonds' softest and most vulnerable side.

Hammonds and I were soon each untethered—I from the see-saw sickness of grief over my mother's death and yet another job loss and he

from the two-fisted apathy that comes with simultaneously merely existing in an unfulfilling relationship and job.

We'd fallen out of touch the way friends do when one gets married and starts a family and the other re-adjusts to living with dual diagnosis and repeated hospital stays, but I made sure to reach out and counsel him with what I knew about living through watching a black mamma fight cancer.

After numerous commissions and gallery shows in and around Greater Cincinnati, after being "discovered" and collected by Jamie Lee Curtis and after a prestigious fellowship in Sweden, here's what'll be hard to swallow in this age of self-celebration and -promotion and within the static obnoxiousness of most art cliques: Terence Hammonds neither trumpets his accomplishments nor fixes exorbitant prices to his art because art ownership does not equal class status or privilege.

The art of Terence Hammonds—like power, like justice, like access, like beauty—is for the people. Because Terence Hammonds came from us.