

# PRINT!

AMOS KENNEDY, JR.  
& THE FINE ART OF  
RABBLEROUSERY



A PAPER PRESENTED AT THE INTERNATIONAL  
PERSPECTIVES ON AFRICAN (BLACK) LITERATURE  
CONFERENCE AT HARVARD UNIVERSITY BY

ANDREW STEEVES  
*Printer & Publisher*

MMXIV



**I**n the fall of 2012 I took an 8,800 kilometre-long drive. I travelled from my home in coastal Nova Scotia west to Iowa, followed the Mississippi River south to Alabama, and then headed northeasterly home again with stops in Tennessee, Kentucky, upstate New York, New Hampshire and Maine. Along the way I visited letterpress printers, Linotype and Monotype operators, papermakers, bookbinders and various people practising what might be loosely termed fine printing and the traditional book arts. The tools being employed by most of the people I visited had once constituted the state of the art in the printing industry—metal and wood type, hot metal casters and printing presses of various styles—but they have long since been abandoned by the mainstream of the trade. Like many traditional tools, the tools of the letterpress printer have now been relegated to the world of fine art and handcraft and are no longer used in a truly industrial way.

I have been involved in editing, designing and manufacturing literary books for nearly two decades, and over this time I have developed a preoccupation with the nature of tools, and with the cultural implications of their use or disuse. My personal philosophy of publishing and the way I conduct my business might be considered unconventional, perhaps even quaint, by those familiar with the mainstream of multinational publishing, in part because I have striven to reintroduce many of these allegedly outmoded tools and methods into the production of contemporary trade books, tools and methods which were already abandoned as unfit for profitable work by the time William Morris and the private

press movement took them up in the late nineteenth-century. What is perhaps distinct about my own approach is that it avoids the usual nostalgia for a golden age and instead argues for, and investigates, the continued robustness of these tools for certain sorts of work. And as my printing experience deepens, I become more convinced that we need a broader and a deeper toolbox than is commonly available, one which retains the oldest tools alongside the newest ones instead of throwing them away. This approach argues for a renewed commitment to understanding each tool's characteristics and implications so that we might always be able to select the best tool for the execution of a task. For anyone coming out of a working heritage of construction and of subsistence farming as I do, the truth of these statements seems so obvious as to render their public recitation embarrassingly facile (like saying that water is wet), but in a culture where speed, ease, novelty and cheapness are our overarching preoccupations, I fear it's instead a truth we have forgotten and must relearn.

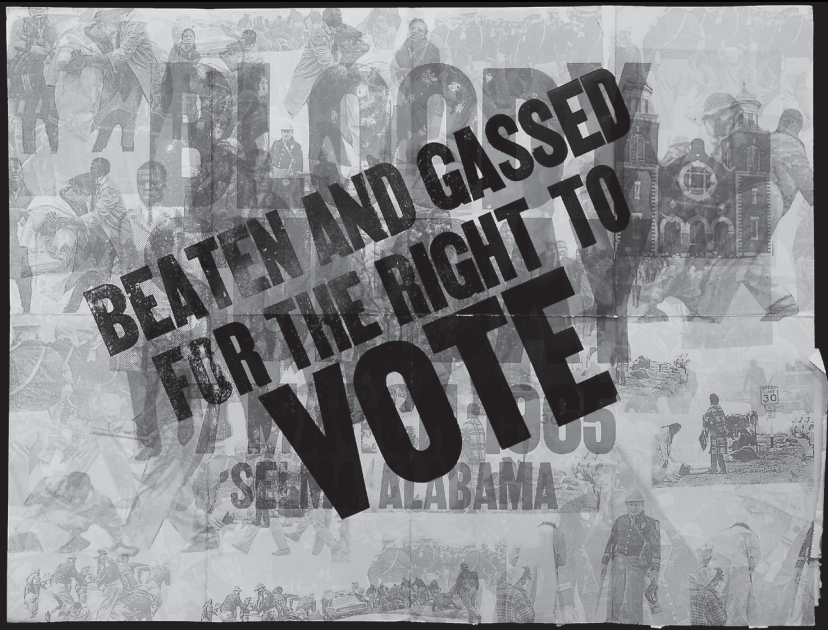
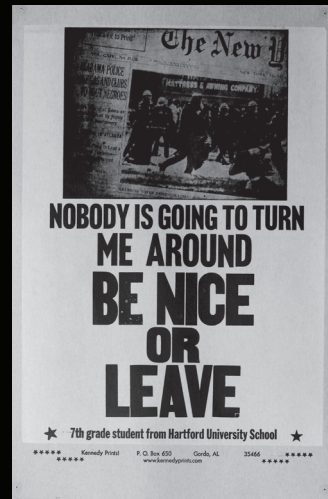
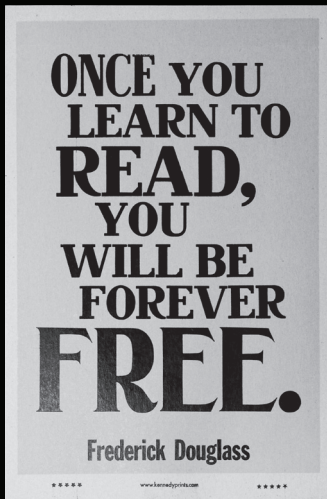
As I wandered deep into the American heartland, visiting with letterpress printers and book artists, these questions about the role of traditional tools and methods in the construction of contemporary cultural artifacts were on my mind. My broader deliberations on the matter were the subject of an article I subsequently wrote for the Canadian printing journal *The Devil's Artisan*,<sup>1</sup> but the subject of this paper will be a brief introduction to the life and work of one particular printer, Amos Paul Kennedy, Jr., and to the way in which he employs letterpress printing tools in a contemporary context.

**A**mos Kennedy is a Detroit-based letterpress printer who was born and raised in the southern United States. When his well-educated, middle-class parents moved the family to Michigan, Kennedy found himself

the only Black student in his junior high school. As his mother recalls, his white teacher 'assumes that we are impoverished, uneducated. So Amos lets him think this. Then Amos' grades wasn't too good, so I had to go over and see [his teacher] and talk to him. And this is when I found out that Amos was playing the man. *You don't expect nothing out of me, I don't give you nothing*'<sup>2</sup> This anecdote suggests that from an early age Kennedy has been interested in questions of class and race in society, and in subverting and exposing people's cultural biases and expectations.

Despite these early preoccupations, Kennedy initially pursued and achieved the kind of education and career which most people equate with success, culminating in his employment as a systems analyst for the telecom giant AT&T. On the surface, Kennedy, following in his parents' footsteps, had broken through race and class barriers and established himself in 'white-collar' America. By doing so, he was helping to change societal norms and attitudes, but for whatever reason he didn't find much satisfaction in these accomplishments.

During a tour of the Colonial Williamsburg historic site with his sons, Kennedy saw an antique printing press and lead type in use, and within mere minutes understood what he wanted to do with his life—*Print!* He left the stability and the status of his high-tech job and transformed his life, studying with (among others) the renowned book artist Walter Hamady at the University of Wisconsin–Madison and earning a Master's of Fine Arts degree in 1997. After a brief stint as an associate professor of art at Indiana University Bloomington from 1999 to 2001 (a sometimes frustrating stint for Kennedy, and one which is discussed in Laura Zinger's 2008 documentary film *Proceed and Be Bold*), Kennedy again cut his employment ties with a large northern institution, this time moving to the rural south to establish himself, ultimately, not as an artist or an academic, but rather as a self-described 'humble negro printer'.



For the next decade, Kennedy honed his craft in a series of small Alabama towns while also travelling extensively to teach, speak and sell his work. This self-described time of apprenticeship in the rural south had a tremendous impact on Kennedy. But just last year, Kennedy, now in his mid-sixties, made the decision to move north again, settling in urban Detroit where he is presently working to establish a new print shop.

During his ‘apprenticeship’ in the south, Kennedy wasted little time shrugging off the conventional fine-press notions and practices usually associated with letterpress printing, where elaborate, carefully printed and lavishly bound books and exquisite broadsides are produced in small limited editions and sold to university libraries and private collectors for considerable sums. Instead, Kennedy turned his attention, wit and skill to more populist forms of graphic expression—to posters, postcards and sometimes booklets. Using his wood type and hand presses, Kennedy produces large editions of wildly colourful, typographically-driven posters on inexpensive chipboard stock, posters which are often so riotously layered with vibrant colours of ink as to retain a wet iridescence and tackiness years after they were printed. His working method often involves overprinting multiple layers of text and making constant, subtle alterations to the colour of the inks throughout each press run, resulting in no two prints being truly identical. At first glance his process can seem chaotic and accidental, but Kennedy’s ability to balance forethought with the exploitation of the unexpected opportunities that arise as many layers of ink hit paper is to a great extent what makes his technique and its result so evocative.

Kennedy usually sells his work for prices in the \$20 range and refuses to call what he does art. ‘I don’t believe in that thing called art,’ says Kennedy. ‘I think people make stuff. I think that people that call themselves artists are full of themselves and they’re looking for a label to exclude the rest of the world.’<sup>3</sup>



WANTED  
WOOD  
TYPE

COUGAR  
COUGAR

Washdirect

one

Shine

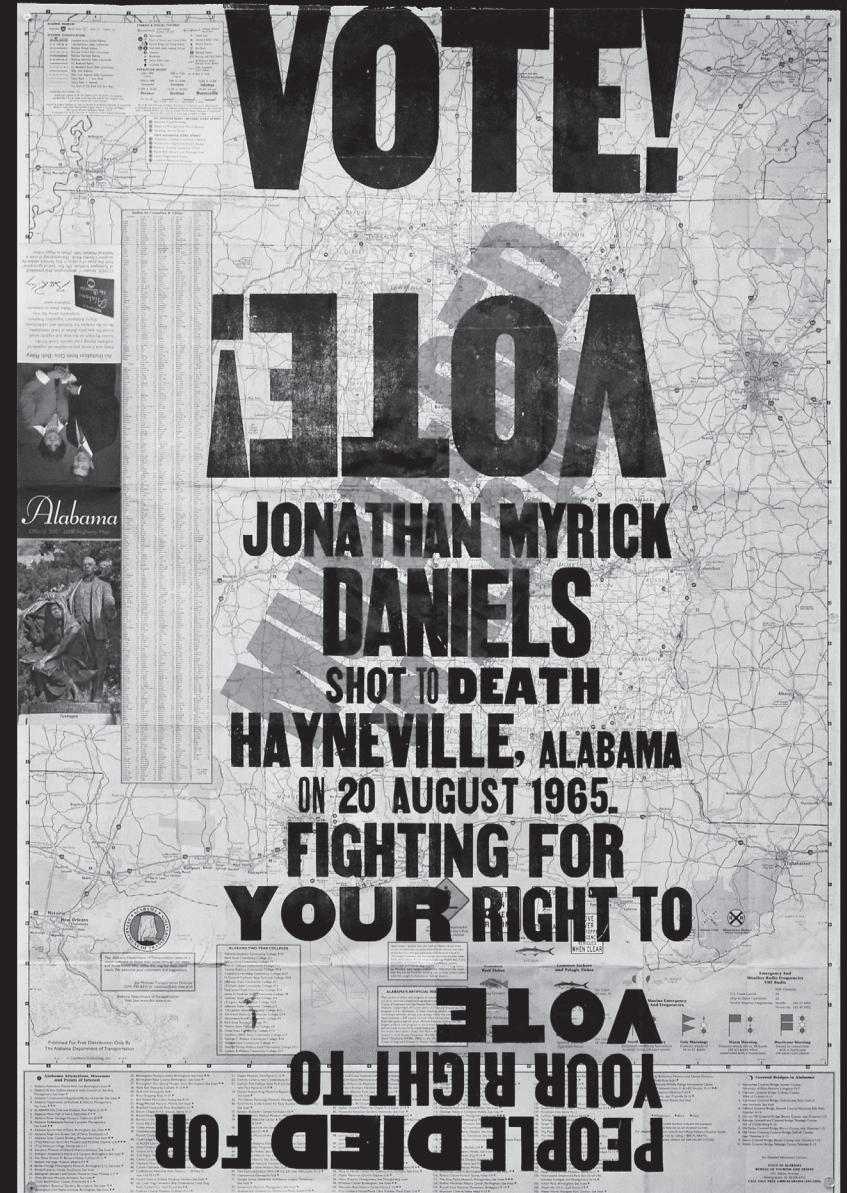
BILLING

RESPECT THE

Kennedy underscores this attitude with his choice of clothing, typically a pair of denim bib-overalls and a pink dress shirt. It is an ensemble whose contrast encompasses both working class and socially progressive sensibilities and seems engineered to challenge our very notions of work and class. As Elena Bertozzi observes, 'It's amazing how much you experience when you are with a person who is consciously trying to tear down or make evident things that otherwise are hidden, in part by forcing people to look at what their biases are. So if the guy standing in front of you is wearing overalls, are you going to treat him like an artist or are you going to treat him like a hillbilly from Alabama? And he's interested in the answer to that question.'<sup>4</sup>

The texts Kennedy selects for his posters range from folk wisdom, humorous sayings and quotations to bold statements about art, politics, race relations and social justice. Not surprisingly, his choice of subject matter and the overt social politics of the texts he prints dominate much of the discussion of Kennedy's work. While his statements on race mesh with widely-accepted narratives of the emancipation of the American Blacks, the Civil Rights movement and the ongoing struggle for real and tangible equality in America, Kennedy's impish side frequently asserts uncomfortable notions that leave us wondering *Can he say that?!* and *Should I repeat it?!*

I've provided this all-too-brief sketch of the life and work of Amos Kennedy because I believe that what he is creating with paper, ink and type is noteworthy, and because as scholars of Black Studies and African-American Literature you might benefit from being aware of his work and from considering it alongside other literary forms. There's no time for a detailed critique here, but I wanted to offer a few observations which might spark further inquiries into Kennedy's work.



Given my opening remarks on the implications of tools, one key question is, Why in an age when the means of publishing self-expression is both broadly available and widespread in our culture—either through digital means like social media or through digital/physical hybrids like digital page design and inkjet output—would anyone choose a tool as encumbered, arduous and limiting as letterpress printing to express themselves? The answer to that question, I suspect, needs to touch on the tactile differences between these various tools and on the different ways in which they transmit image and text through time and space. As well, one must consider what impact their use might have on the maker, the thing made, the people it is made for and the society it is made in.

Also, Kennedy's choice to reject a career and a lifestyle which our society conventionally associates with 'success' and to adopt, not the role of the artist exactly, but rather that of the itinerant tradesman, the humble negro printer clad in inky overalls, is a choice which seems charged with a greater political purpose—particularly coming from an Black man for whom the pathways to success in corporate America have traditionally been blocked. On a certain level this stance might be simply understood as an extension of the lark Kennedy played as an adolescent on his White junior-high school teacher, constructed to test and perhaps subvert dominant societal expectations and attitudes. That sort of rabbleroising tendency is certainly the leaven, but I do not think it is the main ingredient in the bread; I believe that a more complex social commentary underpins Kennedy's best work, but I will leave expansion on this point to those who more skillfully wield the tools of criticism than do I.

What I can speak to is the printer's diminishing role in giving the community a voice and the way in which Kennedy's grassroots approach counters that decline. In an age when most printing and publishing firms and the methods and tools



they employ have been industrialized and multinationalized beyond the scope of the general public's engagement and understanding, Kennedy has identified himself as merely a humble negro printer, working to re-imagine a vital use for these traditional tools, and the skills that travel with them, in contemporary culture. Being a printer in this sense is what we once would have called a vocation, one which involved serving one's community by chronicling its life and times in ink and paper and by advocating for right action, justice and equality. What Kennedy has done with wood type and printing presses and how he has chosen to do it are intrinsically linked by this notion of vocation, and its success is tied not only to *what* he prints and *how* he prints it, but also to *why* he chooses to print anything at all. As Wendell Berry writes in his essay collection *Standing by Words*, 'When we regain a sense of what poems are for, we will renew the art (the technical means) of writing them. And so we will renew their ability to tell the truth.'<sup>5</sup>

#### NOTES

1. Andrew Steeves, 'The Arcane Adventures of a Tramp Printer Abroad ...?' in *The Devil's Artisan* 72 (2013).
2. Helen Kennedy, interviewed in the documentary *Proceed and Be Bold*, directed by Laura Zinger (20K Films, 2008). Much of the biographical information used in this essay is documented in this film, supplemented by personal conversations between the author and Amos Kennedy, Jr.
3. Amos Kennedy, Jr., interviewed in *Proceed and Be Bold*.
4. Elena Bertozzi, interviewed in *Proceed and Be Bold*.
5. Wendell Berry, 'Notes: Unspecializing Poetry' in *Standing by Words* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1983), p. 84.







THIS MONOGRAPH WAS SET INTO  
TYPE BY ANDREW STEEVES AS A  
KEEPSAKE FOR THOSE WHO ATTENDED  
A CONFERENCE AT HARVARD UNIVERSITY  
IN MAY MMXIV. ¶¶ THE TYPEFACE IS  
FRED SMEIJERS' QUADRAAT, WITH MAT-  
THEW CARTER'S HWT VANLANEN FOR  
DISPLAY & ORNAMENTS BY KEVIN KING.  
¶¶ PRINTED OFFSET & BOUND AT THE  
AUTHOR'S OWN GASPEREAU PRESS, KENT-  
VILLE, NOVA SCOTIA, CANADA. THE COV-  
ERS WERE HANDPRINTED FROM WOOD  
AND METAL TYPE BY THE AUTHOR. ¶¶