

## SPOTLIGHT ARTICLE

### ***What's Happening: A Magazine by 1960s–1970s Young New Yorkers***

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“I HAVE lived years before my time. I have experienced things that are beyond my reach. My feelings are older than I myself.” Both lament and claim, Dorothy Patterson’s “Speaking of Me” captures the stretching, spreading spirit of a vital youth-authored periodical of the 1960s–1970s United States. Led by an editorial team of majority Black teenagers in New York City, *What's Happening: An Independent Student Voice* printed twenty-two issues bristling with nonfiction prose, poetry, and drawings between 1965 and 1971, reaching a peak circulation of 2500. In 2024, the Gottesman Libraries of Teachers College, Columbia University, acquired the *What's Happening* collection from Elaine Avidon, a teacher and later education professor who served as the group’s primary adult advisor and advocate. The materials preserved by Avidon include not only original copies of the full run of the magazine but also letters from readers—including loyal subscriber Langston Hughes; editorial memos; business correspondence; photos of the group at work; and a stained-glass medallion of the “WH” logo, crafted by Elaine’s husband, Richard. The collection reveals a moment in which youth writing ran through the city’s veins. The archive also discloses the practical and emotional intensity of the young editors’ efforts to sustain this circulation of their generation’s voices.

*What's Happening* emerged amid widespread youth activism. Facing rampant school inequality and de facto segregation even after *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), Black, Puerto Rican, and Dominican young New Yorkers organised to demand disciplinary and curricular reform in junior high and high schools. Students connected their efforts for change within schools to broader activism against urban renewal, policing, and the Vietnam War. Despite this agency, young people held little control

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over their public representation. Their appearances on TV and radio were closely chaperoned, and news coverage of young people's activities swung between sympathy and hysteria. This was a time in which a Brooklyn high school with activist Black students was labeled "Mayor [John] Lindsay's Vietnam" (Montgomery), and in which the *New York Times* printed false rumours about Black children's militant activity ("Harlem 'Blood Brothers'").

A monthly magazine, in contrast, could be made from start to finish by young people. As editor Frank Campbell explained in the first issue of *What's Happening*:

Too often the teenager is written off as bad; as a person whose ideals are not worth listening to. The newspapers of this city always print the trouble which the teenager gets into. They rarely tell of the important and valuable acts of young people in the greater New York community. School newspapers do not fill the gap. They only print what they feel will make them look good.... It is our belief that if we print the truth, which will include the good things the youth of today do, as well as the thoughts and ideas of the city's teenagers, there will be greater understanding between the teenagers here and in other parts of the city, as well as between teenagers and adults. (Campbell, "*What's Happening*: Our Purpose")

The magazine format was a labour-intensive but relatively cheap and fast way to maximise both readership and authorship. Any young person could submit to the magazine, which featured as many as fifty contributors per issue and ultimately printed the work of over three hundred individuals (Avidon, "Integration" 15).

*What's Happening* cultivated a far-flung readership. Fan letters are signed by both adolescents and adults, ranging from Omaha, Nebraska, to Berkeley, California; letters often ask for advice on starting similar programs. Subscription requests hail from Prague, Czechoslovakia, and Lima, Peru. Selections from *What's Happening* were reprinted in the youth readers' supplement to a major Communist Italian newspaper; the popular US magazine *Look*, which reached several million readers; and youth literary anthologies. A 1966 issue features translated letters from several Italian fans, including Giovanna Bestoli: "I am an Italian girl of 16 years, and I want to tell you that we in Italy are on your side in your fight for the just cause of equality for all the people of the world, no matter what color their skin may be." The magazine's frankness spurred occasional backlash, as in the 1968 case of one Maine teacher's suspension for reading to his students Tim Engel's poem "One Day I," a first-person speculative dreamscape that includes discussion of drugs, sex, and gun violence (Robinson). Avidon herself was fired from her position as a junior high social studies teacher after inviting students both to read *What's Happening* and to freely author their own writings, as documented by legal records in the collection. Retribution for "curriculum deviation" was not uncommon in the era, which is marked by such

notorious cases as Jonathan Kozol's Boston firing for reading a Langston Hughes poem to fourth graders (Sanchez). Less acknowledged in this history is the banning of students' own writings. The *What's Happening* collection invites further research on the role of juvenilia in the politics of school censorship, book banning, and the disciplining of teachers.

*What's Happening* helped inspire the era's surge in creative writing experiments in classrooms and the ensuing wave of published youth anthologies, particularly featuring Black and Latinx young writers. The Gottesman collection documents cross-pollination not only with other youth writing projects in the city, such as the Brooklyn-based group The Voice of the Children, but also with New York's adult cultural circles, including the Umbra Poets Workshop, a renowned Black poetry collective. Despite its global extension, the magazine's readership remained centred in New York, where it achieved a saturation of influence that shaped the city's youth culture and enabled a sense of a shared project across neighbourhoods.

Achieving this reach was no small feat. The magazine's staff boasted at times over forty members, with a core group of ten to fifteen editors. *What's Happening* maintained a robust editorial process: each submission received at least seven staff reads and needed at least five affirmative votes to be accepted for publication. Yet selecting and editing the writings and artworks was just the beginning. Priced out of professional printing for much of the magazine's run, the staff themselves handled production, beginning with "making stencils for each page (up to fifty), on a Gestefax machine, and then reproducing 2000 copies of each page on a mimeograph. The whole staff helps collate and staple, under the direction of the production managers"—after which came the task of mailing (Boone). The work was long, fiddly, and limited by the technology the group could afford. In 1967, Avidon wrote to the magazine's supporters: "There are five times as many students who would like to receive the paper but as you can see [from the print quality] the machine barely manages 2000 copies" (Avidon, letter to "Friends of *What's Happening*"). Editor Frank Campbell vowed in a letter to the staff that same year: "We will make sure that typing, layout and production committees are running smoothly. So we won't have to race the clock and put out another terrible issue" (Campbell, memo to *What's Happening*). The printing practices of *What's Happening* extended both the historical tradition of child-produced periodicals and the 1960s project of Black-owned presses that bypassed white-controlled corporate publishing.

Even as they pumped out youth writing to a broad public, the *What's Happening* staff wrote intimately to each other. They bemoaned their shortcomings. They scolded: "The time schedule was set by you. Abide by them! Please don't walk into the meeting *late*" (Campbell, memo to *What's Happening*). On occasion, they bared their souls. Regular meetings of *What's Happening* staff featured not only work on the magazine but also a writing workshop and a talk session to discuss group members' personal problems, perhaps cultivating the honesty that suffuses the group's correspondence (Boone).

Letters of resignation are among the most tender, as group members confess their struggles to balance the demands of *What's Happening* with schoolwork, family responsibilities, money troubles, and youthful self-searching. In one such letter, Maurice Jackson explains his recent abrupt departure from the group. When his grandmother falls sick, his family suggests that stress over his failings have caused her illness. In a wry moment, Jackson recalls that “my mother and aunt told me to get a haircut—I did, why? Stupidity I suppose.” While he is out for the haircut, his elders decide that “that all my faults were developed by and through ‘What’s Happening.’” This family pressure leaves Jackson little choice but to step away, but the letter implies that breaking the news to his editorial colleagues has not gone well. In that conversation, “I felt terrible—I mean really bad—and when you started with the questions I couldn’t answer because I couldn’t think clearly and I probably would have cried.... If I was baiting you it wasn’t meant.” Through two painful conversations, first with Jackson’s family and then with the *What’s Happening* group, Jackson examines his own imperfect efforts to negotiate his responsibilities, his loyalties, and his own self-expression. The letter ends with a declaration of love: “What’s Happening has become a true part of me and until my heart and soul [are] in the words ‘I quit’ I’ll never stop being a part of you or you a part of me.” Jackson shows his devotion to the group through his efforts to tell them the full story, complete with his own faults, and through his faith that when he puts his feelings to paper, his confidantes will understand. Jackson’s message is one of many of what we might call community love letters exchanged within the inner circle of *What’s Happening*. This intimate correspondence resonates with Elissa Myers’s analysis of care and collective agency within white girls’ amateur periodical culture in the late nineteenth-century United States. As those girls formed an interdependent community and a bulwark against misogyny through their periodicals, so did the members of *What’s Happening* intertwine magazine production with the work of caring for each other in a racist and classist society.

Caring enabled daring, as the magazine not only practised ambition but also creatively explored the very concept of ambition. A 1968 fantasy comic page contributed by Robert Jackson (herein cited as “Robert” to avoid confusion with Maurice Jackson) investigates the lure and risks of unlimited power (Fig. 1). Penned in intricate style, dense with moody cross-hatch shading and three-dimensional forms, Robert’s comic opens in the mythical realm of “Alzainia,” a world both archaic and sleek. The muscled villain A Vak sneaks into a temple to steal a legendary box holding “the infinite powers of the ruler of the universe, Kazar the Great!” Before A Vak can escape with his spoils, “the wrath of Kazar” emanates from a glowing dome,

releasing the mysterious box from the intruder’s gift [*sic*], leaving him ever so helpless, at the mercy of the most powerful, and inconceivably supernatural power ever known to all humanity.

But let us leave now, for we all know that for anyone who messes with Kazar the Great, the consequences can't be all too good. But now ... where is the box? We look down and see it drifting aimlessly through another dimension. Where will it land, only heaven knows.



Figure 1. Robert G. Jackson, "Combinative Man," original comic. Featured in What's Happening, vol. 3, no. 4, May 1968 (Courtesy of Teachers College, Columbia University; and Elaine Avidon on behalf of What's Happening).

Presented as “Part 1” of a series on “the invincible Combinative Man,” the comic implies that the lost box will prove central to the origin story of the unseen title hero. In the meantime, Robert explores the wielding, appropriation, and articulation of power. As an unnamed “brilliant scientist” has boxed up Kazar’s powers—whether or not benevolently remains unclear—so does Robert experiment with the containment of force and awe within the squares of the comic form. Kazar seems to retain enough agency to foil A Vak’s scheme but not enough to control the box’s trajectory. As the box “drift[s] aimlessly through another dimension,” Robert’s art seems to shift dimension as well. The comic dissolves almost into abstraction as the receding treasure emits a pulsing, disorienting light in its wake. The initial order of Alzainia has given way to cosmic entropy. This final image of infinite potential spinning out, away from institutional control, and presumably towards the making of a future hero, is reminiscent of the *What’s Happening* creators’ efforts to gather, manage, and launch youth voices as far as they could reach. The work of *What’s Happening* was not only in the making of the magazine but also in the imagining of “another dimension” in which marginalised young people speak for and to their own.

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