



LIFT EVERY VOICE

WHY AFRICAN AMERICAN
POETRY MATTERS

PROJECT READER

INTRODUCTION BY
KEVIN YOUNG

Copyright © 2020 by Literary Classics
of the United States, Inc., New York, N.Y.
All rights reserved.

Library of America in partnership with
Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture,
presents LIFT EVERY VOICE, a national public humanities
initiative engaging participants in a multifaceted exploration
of African American poetry, the perspectives it offers on
American history and the struggle for racial justice, and
the universality of its imaginative response to the personal
experiences of Black Americans over three centuries.

Some of the material in this volume is reprinted with the
permission of holders of copyright and publishing rights.

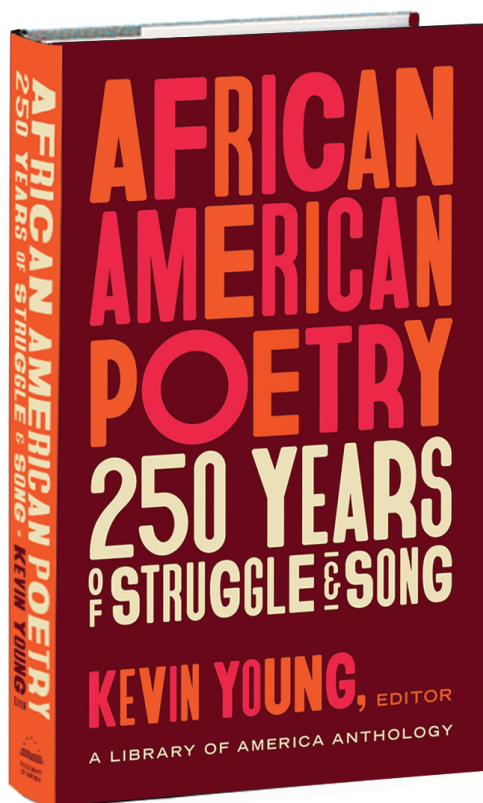
Visit us at www.africanamericanpoetry.org

Lift Every Voice is made possible with support from
The National Endowment for the Humanities, the
Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and Emerson Collective.

Library of America, a nonprofit organization,
champions our nation's cultural heritage
by publishing America's greatest writing in
authoritative new editions and providing resources
for readers to explore this rich, living legacy.

The Library of America
14 East 60th Street
New York, NY 10022
www.loa.org

The poems and suggestions for further reading presented here are drawn from the new Library of America anthology



“This **indispensable anthology** will define the Black tradition for a new generation of students and scholars, and for everyone who loves good poetry.”

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.

“This is **a historic achievement**. I am grateful for this book because it gives me hope: genius will survive and sing truths.”

CATHY PARK HONG

October // 1,170 pages // \$45.00 cloth



LIFT EVERY VOICE
WHY AFRICAN AMERICAN
POETRY MATTERS

Project Reader

Introduction by Kevin Young



THE LIBRARY OF AMERICA

CONTENTS

<i>Introduction</i> by Kevin Young	v
--	---

THE FREEDOM STRUGGLE

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, "The Slave Mother"	2
Claude McKay, "If We Must Die"	4
Aja Monet, "#sayhername"	5
<i>Essay</i> by Joanne M. Braxton	8
<i>Discussion Questions</i>	12

BLACK IDENTITIES

Paul Laurence Dunbar, "We Wear the Mask"	15
Lucille Clifton, "won't you celebrate with me"	16
Alison C. Rollins, "Why Is We Americans"	17
<i>Essay</i> by Walton M. Muyumba	19
<i>Discussion Questions</i>	23

BLACK EXPERIENCE IN HISTORY AND MEMORY

Langston Hughes, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers"	26
Gwendolyn Brooks, "Malcolm X"	27
Kevin Young, "Money Road"	28
<i>Essay</i> by Evie Shockley	33
<i>Discussion Questions</i>	38

BLACK LANGUAGE AND MUSIC

Sterling A. Brown, "Ma Rainey"	41
Michael S. Harper, "Dear John, Dear Coltrane"	43
Kate Rushin, "The Black Back-Ups"	45
<i>Essay</i> by Brent Hayes Edwards	48
<i>Discussion Questions</i>	53

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY

Robert Hayden, "Those Winter Sundays"	56
Nikki Giovanni, "Nikki-Rosa"	57
Jamila Woods, "Ode to Herb Kent"	58
<i>Essay</i> by Kevin Young	59
<i>Discussion Questions</i>	64

<i>Poets</i>	66
------------------------	----

<i>Sources</i>	71
--------------------------	----

<i>Contributors</i>	73
-------------------------------	----

INTRODUCTION

The Difficult Miracle

BY KEVIN YOUNG

*This is the difficult miracle of Black poetry in America:
that we persist, published or not, and loved or unloved: we persist.*

—June Jordan

For more than 250 years, African Americans have written and recited and published poetry about beauty and injustice, music and muses, Africa and America, freedoms and foodways, Harlem and history, funk and opera, boredom and longing, jazz and joy. They wrote about what they saw around them and also what they dreamt up—even if it was a dream deferred, derailed, or flat-out denied. In sonnets and anthems, odes and epics, Black poets in the Americas confronted violence and indifference, legal barriers to reading and writing, illegal suppression of voting rights, and outright threats to their personhood, livelihood, and neighborhoods. They wrote from a world they made and a world that, at times, seemed designed to distract at best, to dis or destroy at worst. For African Americans, the very act of composing poetry proves a form of protest.

In this profound work they were participating in a long line of creation, spanning back to the enslaved “Black and Unknown Bards” of the Negro spirituals, who transformed traditions and invented language to describe and change their conditions—and to take pleasure and power in their own inventiveness. *African American Poetry: 250 Years of Struggle & Song* captures a quarter-millennium of Black poetry in the Americas, from Phillis Wheatley to the present day. Whether we consider that time span to consist of what June Jordan calls

“the difficult miracle of Black poetry in America,” what Amiri Baraka names “the changing same,” or the pleasure that Toi Derricotte invokes when she says “joy is an act of resistance,” this anthology provides a comprehensive look at the centuries of song and struggle that make up African American verse, a legacy that is fruitful and large enough to barely be represented by one volume.

All African American poets have learned from the tradition and are continuing it as they examine an America whose imagination, from Wheatley’s “On Imagination” down to the present day, hasn’t always included Black people. Throughout history poets have continued to write tribute poems in memory—and protest—of their fallen brothers and sisters, especially as victims of police or mob violence at the hands of whites. You could say that this too stems from Wheatley: her poem “On the Affray in King Street” describes the Boston Massacre in 1770, praising Crispus Attucks, the former enslaved runaway who was first among the dead. In full it reads:

With Fire enwrap, surcharg’d with sudden Death,
Lo, the pois’d Tube convolves its fatal breath!
The flying Ball with heaven-directed Force,
Rids the Spirit of the fallen corse.
Well sated Shades! let no unwomanly Tear
From Pity’s Eye, disdain in your honour’d Bier;
Lost to their View, surviving Friends may mourn,
Yet on thy Pile shall Flames celestial burn;
Long as in *Freedom’s* Cause the wise contend,
Dear to your unity shall Fame extend;
While to the World, the letter’d *Stone* shall tell,
How *Caldwell*, *Attucks*, *Gray*, and *Mav’rick* fell.

With his lynching in 1955 spurring along the modern Civil Rights Movement, Emmett Till’s may be the most mentioned name in the modern era; poems about him by Gwendolyn Brooks, Eve L. Ewing, and myself are just some of the testimony offered here, with many more that could be included and those yet to be written.

As the poets here well know, Till’s mournful memory evokes a centuries-old Freedom Struggle still underway, attested by

African American Poetry's roll call of ongoing victims of racist violence—whether Trayvon Martin or Michael Brown, Eric Garner or Sandra Bland (evoked in work here by Claudia Rankine, Khadijah Queen, Major Jackson, Ross Gay, Jericho Brown, and Aja Monet), unidentified women (as in Toi Derricotte) or anonymous men (as in Anthony Walton)—and even the imagined Black phantoms that racism brings to life, conjured by Cornelius Eady, Alison C. Rollins, and numerous others. African American poetry has long borne witness to and sustained social change; our time, with growing protests over the pandemic of racist violence against the unarmed, the young, the trans, the sleeping, the walking, the jogging—all those who have the audacity to breathe while Black—has only given Black poetry, intimate with struggle, more urgency to sing of. The African American experience, these poets know, is a central part of the nation's chorus, with Black poetry offering up a daily epic of struggle and song.

Juneteenth 2020

THE FREEDOM STRUGGLE

FRANCES ELLEN WATKINS HARPER

The Slave Mother

Heard you that shriek? It rose
So wildly on the air,
It seem'd as if a burden'd heart
Was breaking in despair.

Saw you those hands so sadly clasped—
The bowed and feeble head—
The shuddering of that fragile form—
That look of grief and dread?

Saw you the sad, imploring eye?
Its every glance was pain,
As if a storm of agony
Were sweeping through the brain.

She is a mother pale with fear,
Her boy clings to her side,
And in her kirtle vainly tries
His trembling form to hide.

He is not hers, although she bore
For him a mother's pains;
He is not hers, although her blood
Is coursing through his veins!

He is not hers, for cruel hands
May rudely tear apart
The only wreath of household love
That binds her breaking heart.

His love has been a joyous light
That o'er her pathway smiled,
A fountain gushing ever new,
Amid life's desert wild.

His lightest word has been a tone
Of music round her heart,
Their lives a streamlet blent in one—
Oh, Father! must they part?

They tear him from her circling arms,
Her last and fond embrace:—
Oh! never more may her sad eyes
Gaze on his mournful face.

No marvel, then, these bitter shrieks
Disturb the listening air;
She is a mother, and her heart
Is breaking in despair.

CLAUDE McKAY

If We Must Die

If we must die, let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
Making their mock at our accursèd lot.
If we must die, O let us nobly die,
So that our precious blood may not be shed
In vain; then even the monsters we defy
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!
O kinsmen! we must meet the common foe!
Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,
And for their thousand blows deal one death-blow!
What though before us lies the open grave?
Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!

AJA MONET

#sayhername

i am a woman carrying other women in my mouth
behold a sister, a daughter, a mother, dear friend.
spirits demystified in a comrade's tone. they gather
to breathe and exhale, a dance with death we know
is not the end. all these nameless bodies haunted

by pellet wounds in their chest. listen for us in
the saying of a name you cannot pronounce, *black*
and *woman*, is a sort of magic you cannot hashtag.
the mere weight of it, too vast to be held. we hold
ourselves, an inheritance felt between the hips

woman of soft darkness. portal of light, watch them
envy the revolution of our movement. we break
open to give life flow. why the terror of our tears,
torment of our taste. my rage is righteous. my love
is righteous. my name is righteous. hear what i am

not here to say, we, too, have died. we know we are
dying, *too*. i am not here to say, look at me, how i
died so brutal a death, i deserve a name to fit all
the horror in. i am here to tell you, how if they
mention me in their protests and their rallies,

they would have to face their role in it, too, my
beauty, *too*. i died many times before the blow
to the body. i have bled many months before
bullet to the flesh. we know the body is not the
end. call it what you will but for all the hands,

cuffed wrists of us, shackled ankles of us, the
bend over to make room for you of us, how dare
we speak anything less than *i love you*. we who

love just as loudly in the thunderous rain as when
the sun shines golden on our skin and the world

kissed us unapologetically. we be so beautiful
when we be. how you gon be free without me?
your freedom tied up with mine at the nappy
edge of our soul singing with all our sisters, watch
them stretch their arms in my voice, how they
fly open-chested toward your ear, listen for

Rekia Boyd

Tanisha Anderson

Yvette Smith

Aiyana Jones

Kayla Moore

Shelly Frey

Miriam Carey

Kendra James

Alberta Spruill

Tarika Wilson

Shereese Francis

Shantel Davis

Malissa Williams

Darnisha Harris

Michelle Cusseaux

Pearlie Golden

Kathryn Johnston

Eleanor Bumpurs

Natasha McKenna

Sheneque Proctor

Sandra Bland

we are each saying,

we do not vanish in the bated breath of
our brothers. show me, show me a man
willing to fight beside me, my hand in his,
the color of courage, there is no mountaintop
worth seeing without us. meet me

in the trenches, where we lay
our bodies down
in the valley
of a voice

say it say her name

Essay by Joanne M. Braxton

IN THE struggle between the promise of the American Dream and the failures of the dominant culture to comprehend that Black lives not only matter but, like all lives, are precious, the poet sings a healing song. In this section, we encounter African American poets who engage this struggle to resist injustice and envision new aesthetic, spiritual, and humanistic possibilities.

“The Slave Mother,” by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, was published in 1854 at the height of antislavery activity in the years preceding the Civil War. An influential essayist, novelist, and lecturer, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper was born to free parents in Baltimore, orphaned at an early age, and raised and educated by her uncle, William Watkins. Beyond her primary and secondary education in her uncle’s school in Baltimore, she was, like Frederick Douglass, largely self-educated. She published her first volume of poetry, *Forest Leaves*, in 1846 while working as a maid. When the Fugitive Slave Law was passed in 1850, free Blacks in Maryland came under increased risk of being sold South into slavery. Harper moved to Philadelphia to decrease this risk; here she expanded her involvement in the antislavery movement after meeting Underground Railroad stationmaster William Still.

“Heard you that shriek?” Harper asks. Inspired by the personal testimonies of fugitive slaves she encountered through her work with the Underground Railroad, the poet goes beyond the sentimental and genteel poets who influenced her, such as Whittier, Longfellow, and Bryant, to raise the voice of protest at the heart of the abolitionist movement. In writing “The Slave Mother” she used oral traditions and poetic forms from the Black church to speak for enslaved women who may not have been literate and who were therefore unable to speak for themselves. Evoking the preaching and spiritual solidarity of a worship service, “The Slave Mother” uses the form of a metrical hymn (first stanza in short meter, remaining stanzas in common meter) to plumb the literary trope of the outraged mother. The first stanza can actually be sung to “Blest Be the

Tie That Binds” and the remaining stanzas to “O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing,” hymns with which Harper as a church woman would have been familiar. Taking on the struggle of the enslaved women of the race, the poet testifies to the human cost of the auction block, narrating in vivid and symbolic imagery details of the young boy trying to find comfort and protection in the folds of his mother’s skirts, and the mother’s pain-filled shriek as the inevitable soul-rending separation of mother and child comes to pass. Acting as a compassionate witness, the poet lifts up and restores the humanity of this mother and child, which enslavement so deeply denied.

“If We Must Die” originally appeared in *The Liberator* during the Red Summer of 1919, a time of bloody race riots in Washington, D.C., and Chicago and increased lynchings in other areas where hundreds of African Americans were killed. The author, Claude McKay, was a Jamaican-born poet, novelist, and intellectual and a key figure in the Harlem Renaissance. Born on a small farm, McKay was educated in part by his older brother, Uriah, a teacher, who introduced him to the poetry of Milton, Pope, and Shakespeare. Claude began writing at around 10. “My brother was fond of good books and possessed a nice library—all the great English masters and a few translations from the ancients . . . I read whatever pleased my fancy, secretly scribbling in prose and verse at the same time.” As a Jamaican, McKay made a choice to identify with the struggle of Black Americans in the U.S., just as Harper, a free woman, made a choice to identify with the struggle of enslaved women. In 1912, at the age of 23, he published and won a prize for his first two volumes of poetry and used the winnings to set out for the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. In the American South and later in the Midwest, he encountered a racial animosity he had never experienced in Jamaica: “It was the first time I had ever come face to face with such manifest, implacable hate of my race,” he wrote. “My feelings were indescribable.”

“If We Must Die” is McKay’s response to the many murders of Black people in the United States in the era immediately following World War I. Among those targeted in particular were African American soldiers returning from Europe, assaulted by white American servicemen who regarded them as a threat back at home. Some Black men were lynched in their

military uniforms; others fought back and mobilized to protect their communities. McKay's poem employs the rhetoric of honorable death commonly used to celebrate soldiers who "did not die in vain" to defy the dishonoring of Black soldiers by the "inglorious" mockery and violence they faced returning from war. The form of "If We Must Die" is a Shakespearean sonnet, an octet followed by a sestet. There is an appreciable tension between the stark imagery and the form of the poem—the metaphor of men being hunted by dogs and penned like hogs. The tension between the brutal imagery of hog-killing and the high artistic form of the sonnet is one of the marks of the aesthetic excellence of the poem, which was later republished in *The Messenger* and *The Crusader*. Juxtaposing the simile of dying "like hogs" with dying courageously "like men" serves to underscore the unifying trope—Black men are urged to resist ignominious slaughter by "fighting back." This was McKay's defiance and his call to action.

"I am a woman carrying other women in my mouth," writes Aja Monet, a Caribbean American poet of Jamaican-Cuban descent born in Brooklyn, New York. "#sayhername" is from her 2017 debut volume, *My Mother Was a Freedom Fighter*. The historical context is the Black Lives Matter and #sayhername movements in the early twenty-first century. According to the Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies at Columbia University, the #sayhername movement is "dedicated to the Black women who have lost their lives to police violence and to their families who must go on without them." These are the women in the poet's mouth. The poem itself is both a lamentation and a call to action. Monet's poem, like the movement itself, resists the narrative of excessive police force and lethal violence as "exclusively the experience of men." The poet witnesses and demands that the reader see and touch the "cuffed wrists of us, shackled ankles of us" that connect those named in the poem to those enslaved women who went before. Aja Monet's use of the word *us* is powerful. She becomes one with the women she carries in her mouth, recognizing the commonality of experience over time, particularly the struggles of Black women to be made visible in the trauma zone of violence where emotional, psychological, and physical scarring occurs. Her work has been called "a healing balm for the soul."

When the poet reads her poem aloud, twenty-one real women, who lived and walked this earth and who died too soon, fly out of her mouth. They include Kathryn Johnston, 92, from Atlanta, killed in her home during a drug raid on the wrong property; Eleanor Bumpers, 66, a grandmother from the Bronx killed by two blasts from a 12-gauge shotgun as she was being evicted for being four months behind in her \$98.65 monthly rent; Rekia Boyd, 22, shot in the back of the head as she stood in an alley with friends in Chicago; and 7-year-old Aiyana Jones, killed as she slept during a raid on her grandmother's home. Others, like 28-year-old Sandra Bland, on her way from Chicago to Texas to take up a new job at Prairie View A&M University, died in prison after being pulled over on a traffic stop. Monet's calling of these names reflects ritual religious and liturgical practices within communities with which this Caribbean American poet would have been familiar. She forges a literary form that is uniquely her own and yet connected to Black feminist poets of the '60s and '70s, particularly June Jordan and Audre Lorde, finding her place among them. Monet witnesses to the reader/listener, reminding her audience that the Black woman is too likely to be erased, even in death. The poet demands that, as we read the name of each woman, we "say her name," that we speak with her the names of Black women who have died, so that their lives and their deaths will be remembered. Monet specifically speaks to the Black man and invites him to *see* her struggle and the struggles of Black women everywhere. She demands that he see the bodies in the trenches and lay his body down in struggle, beside hers.

Collectively, these poems by Francis Ellen Watkins Harper, Claude McKay, and Aja Monet represent a shriek, a call to action, and a lamentation. Each poet was politicized by things that they saw in the world, and each chose symbolic witnessing and protest over silence. These brave poems carry within them countless other poems, lives, lamentations, and the sorrow-songs of a people still struggling to be free.

Discussion Questions

1. The authors of each of these three poems are engaged in struggle. What specifically is each struggling *for*? How do their differing contexts affect the way each gives voice to their struggle?
2. Read each poem aloud and let each word sink into your body. Describe what was happening with your voice when you read each poem: For each, were you drawn to read it in a loud or a soft voice? Were there pauses or silences that seemed especially significant? How can different registers of voice and feeling be used to express a sense of struggle? Read each poem a second time, as slowly as the first, allowing the pace of reading and the emphasis on certain words to shift. Ask yourself the same questions for the second reading of each poem. What changes for you and what stays the same? Find another person doing the same exercise to share with. Pay particular attention to your changing experience of each poem.
3. Some diminish the poetry of the African American struggle for the full recognition of Black humanity by calling it the poetry of protest. Nonetheless, each of these poems voices strong emotions against injustice. What sorts of appeals do they make to those among their audience who, like the poets themselves, are struggling against oppression?
4. At times African American poets have spoken in two voices at once, as their ancestors sometimes did in the “masked language” of the spiritual. Where in these poems (if anywhere) do these poets speak in ways that seem to keep something hidden beneath the surface?
5. Who is each poem addressed to as its primary audience? How does the racial identity of this audience—and that of other audiences that might read the poem—affect the understanding of these works?

Poems for further reading

Andy Razaf, “What Did I Do (To Be So Black and Blue)”

Langston Hughes, “Let America Be America Again”

Countee Cullen, “Scottsboro, Too, Is Worth Its Song”

Esther Popel, “Flag Salute”

Pauli Murray, “Prophecy”

Toi Derricotte, “On the Turning Up of Unidentified Black
Female Corpses”

Claudia Rankine, from *Citizen*

BLACK IDENTITIES

PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR

We Wear the Mask

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes—
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile
And mouth with myriad subtleties,

Why should the world be over-wise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see us, while
 We wear the mask.

We smile, but oh great Christ, our cries
To Thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing, but oh the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile,
But let the world dream otherwise,
 We wear the mask!

LUCILLE CLIFTON

won't you celebrate with me

won't you celebrate with me
what i have shaped into
a kind of life? i had no model.
born in babylon
both nonwhite and woman
what did i see to be except myself?
i made it up
here on this bridge between
starshine and clay,
my one hand holding tight
my other hand; come celebrate
with me that everyday
something has tried to kill me
and has failed.

ALISON C. ROLLINS

Why Is We Americans

We is gator teeth hanging from the rear-view mirror as sickle cells suckle at Big Momma's teats. We is dragonfly choppers hovering above Walden Pond. We is spinal cords shedding like the skin of a cottonmouth. We is Psalm 23 and the pastor's chattering chicklets. We is *a good problem to have*. We is throats constricting and the grape juice of Jesus. We is Roach and Mingus in Birdland. We is *body electric*, eyes watering with moonshine, glossy lips sticky with lard. We is half brothers in headlock, arm wrestling in the dirt. We is Vaseline rubbed into knocked knees and cracked elbows. We is ham hocks making love to kidney beans. We is Orpheus, lyre in hand, asking *do we have a problem?* We is the backstory of myth. We is sitting horse and crazy bull. We is brown paper bags, gurgled belches. We is hooded ghosts and holy shadows roaming Mississippi goddamned. We is downbeats and syncopation's cousin. We is mouths washed out with the blood of the lamb. We is witch hazel-coated backs sucking on peppermint wrappers. We is the spiked antennae of a triangle-faced praying mantis. We is barefoot tongue-tied hogs with slit throats and twitching bellies. We is sun tea and brewed bitches. We is the crying pussies that stand down when told to

man up. We is Radio Raheem and Zoot
Suit Malcolm. We is spit-slick low cuts
and fades. We is scrappy black-masked
coons and turkey-necked bullfrogs. We
is the pits of arms at stake, the clouds
frothing at the mouth. We is swimmers
naked, private parts Whitman allegedly
fondled beneath the water. We is
late lurkers and castrated tree limbs
on the Sunday before last. We is red-
veined pupils and piss-stained knickers,
slack-jawed and slumped in the
bathroom doorway. We is whiplash
and backhanded ways of settling grief.
We is clubbin' woolly mammoths
upside the head, jammin' fingers in
Darwin's white beard. We is comin'
round yonder, pigeon-toed and
bowlegged, laughin' our heads off.
We is lassoed cowboys swingin' in
the sweet summer breeze.

Essay by Walton M. Muiyumba

ONE WAY for readers to understand the African American poetic tradition is as a series of lyrical improvisations on Blackness. Sometimes a mode of lament, sometimes born of celebration, call it the tragi-celebratory poetics of African American identity. Published in Dunbar's collection *Majors and Minors* (1895), "We Wear the Mask," a poem that highlights Dunbar's ability to blend vernacular and formalist impulses, is a strong example of African American tragi-celebratory poetics. Its subject is nothing less than expression itself, and the constraints on unadulterated self-representation imposed on African Americans. The opening stanza invokes masking as a practice of dissembling that is fundamental to African American identification: "We wear the mask that grins and lies, / It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes— / This debt we pay to human guile; / With torn and bleeding hearts we smile / And mouth with myriad subtleties."

Dunbar's poem suggests that in order to protect themselves, physically and psychologically, African Americans must shield themselves by cynically, strategically, performing stereotypes of Black joviality and insouciance. For nineteenth-century white readers Dunbar's poem would have confirmed what they thought they already knew about African Americans. Note, however, that this poem conceals much more than it reveals. Black readers would have recognized some semblance of their own daily practices or experiences expressed with tonal and lyric complexity.

Indeed, in line 6, the speaker asks, "Why should the world be over-wise" about the tribulations of Black life, "all our tears and sighs?" The speaker's articulation of double consciousness relies on indirection—as both a poetic device and a trope of African American vernacular expression. In this poem, smiling and singing aren't exhibitions of Black life's joys and pleasures; those actions screen lived Blackness from onlookers, misdirecting them with a kind of Blackface minstrelsy.

Though the first-person plural subject employs guile and subtlety to insulate their "torn and bleeding hearts," readers

are left wondering from whence these injuries arrive or why the group must obscure their true feelings and actual selves. In fact, Dunbar's speaker neither announces that the plural subject represents Black Americans nor exposes what conditions inspire masking. While the speaker claims to communicate transparently—suggesting that one kind of Black performance cloaks some other, more sincere Blackness, or that trauma and misery define Black experience in toto (“the clay is vile / Beneath our feet, and long the mile”)—rather than confronting the structures of white supremacy, say, he dwells in opacity, refuses elucidation. Blackness remains obscured, even inscrutable. The speaker closes the piece directing “the world [to] dream otherwise” while imagining that masking (or a poem describing it) expresses African American identity matter-of-factly. Given its concluding exclamation, we might read the line as a chant, celebrating simultaneously the resistance to revelation and the protections born of ingenuity and indirection.

One measure of Dunbar's importance is to trace these themes in poems by a late twentieth-century poet like Lucille Clifton and a twenty-first-century poet like Alison C. Rollins. Clifton, in “won't you celebrate with me,” also imagines Blackness as an ingenious form of political resistance, but she expands Dunbar's sly defiance into brazen, exuberant confrontation. The poem's fourteen lines give the lightest impression of the sonnet form. Through its four tercets it sets up a problem (she “had no model” for living), rises to climax (“both non-white and woman . . . i made it up . . . my one hand holding tight / my other hand”), and arrives at its denouement with a closing unrhymed (broken) couplet (“something has tried to kill me / and has failed”).

While offering a recipe for self-invention, Clifton's speaker announces that she has shaped her life to stave off destruction: “i made it up / here on this bridge between / starshine and clay.” She claims to have birthed herself in a process that involves, we might imagine, stardust, water, red clay, a potter's wheel, and an ancient Babylonian kiln. Sitting centrally in the poem, lines 7, 8, and 9 play triply: they answer line 6 (“what did i see to be except myself?”), describe the speaker envisioning and fashioning her selfhood, and at the same time metaphorize the poet's own creative act.

On the “bridge between,” the poem’s pivot, the speaker crosses from death-defiance to life-creation. Dashing “starshine and clay” against each other like flintstones, the speaker ignites a lightning-like linguistic force that she uses to write herself into existence. These lines also explain the poet’s free-verse experimentation: “i made it up.” Clifton’s fragmented, epigrammatic style is a correlative for the improvisational imperative of Black American experience, especially Black women’s lives: improvising Black selfhood is not only an act of resistance against mortal danger, it’s an act of joyous artistry.

One hundred and twenty-five years after Dunbar articulated Blackness as masked and a quarter-century after Clifton improvised Black selfhood from life-giving cosmic elements, Alison C. Rollins can joyfully reveal the cultural markers and political makings of African American identities. In her poem “Why Is We Americans,” Rollins repeats the African American Vernacular English (AAVE) grammatical construction, “We is” to announce a series of contingently linked Black identities, the “royal,” collective, and the singular simultaneously. Rollins, like her poetic forebears, imagines that in naming and celebrating a system of references associated with Black American experience, a poem’s speaker enacts self-creation.

As the main riff (“We is”) repeats, the poem advances and accrues new elements, each adding to the aggregate and generating the gnarly complexities of Black selfhood. Rollins’s opening flourish—“We is gator teeth hanging from the rear- / view mirror as sickle cells suckle at Big / Momma’s teats”—harkens back to Dunbar’s grinning “we.” Where Clifton imagines Blackness born of astro-chemical reaction, Rollins imagines it as the strange juxtaposition of animal incisors dangling totemically and anemic cells squeezing life’s blood, sucking mother’s milk.

The poem describes Blackness through its multitudinous, largely pop-cultural litany. Rollins’s list defines “African American” as a fluid, shifting concept rather than a cemented identity. With each new turn, Rollins plays out a fresh metaphor for Blackness. “We / is Orpheus, lyre in hand,” Rollins’s speaker explains, “asking *do we / have a problem?* We is the backstory / of myth.” Here, lyric poetry’s mythical inventor invokes a line made famous by the rapper Ice Cube in John Singleton’s *Boyz n the Hood* (1991). Blackness becomes more than myth’s “back-

story”: it becomes the lyric tradition’s seminal note. We might also read this line as Rollins’s making an announcement about her reference system and expressive style. She’s like a hip-hop DJ and MC in one: Rollins “samples” sound and image to contextualize her “gangsta” lyricism. Later in the poem, glancing back to the prehistorical, Rollins imagines Blackness as a survival attitude: “We is clubbin’ woolly mammoths / upside the head, jammin’ fingers in / Darwin’s white beard.” Blackness is both primordial and evolutionary; because it is various, Blackness resists becoming an ossified, excavated, display-worthy relic.

However, as the poem draws to its ending, Rollins links her sense of abundant Blackness to a bitter Black reality: “We is comin’ / round yonder, pigeon-toed and / bowlegged, laughin’ our heads off. / We is lassoed cowboys swingin’ in / the sweet summer breeze.” In this last phrase gesturing toward Abel Meeropol’s “Strange Fruit,” a song Billie Holiday made famous, Rollins binds joy and pain as the ultimate components of Blackness. Complementing Dunbar’s charged refusal to reveal and Clifton’s ode against erasure, Rollins’s poem acknowledges that any celebration of Blackness’s human comedy, its compounding, ever-expanding breadth, is always “lassoed” to the tragedy of “Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze.”

Discussion Questions

1. These three poems lament certain aspects of African American experience and at the same time celebrate certain forms of Black identity. What, in each poem, is being lamented? What is being celebrated?
2. Each of these poems suggests that the expression of lived experience requires certain forms of aesthetic artistry. Why might this be? Identify, for each poem, a trope (image, metaphor, etc.) or rhetorical device that represents some facet of African American identity or experience in an imaginative way. What possibilities are envisioned?
3. As with any form of self-conception, African American identity is never static and has evolved over time. Judging by these poems, how is African American identity conceived differently by later poets such as Clifton and Rollins than it had been by their nineteenth-century predecessor Paul Laurence Dunbar?
4. In “won’t you celebrate with me,” Lucille Clifton invites her readers to join with her as she lifts up and commemorates her own experience. In what specific ways might her African American audience be able to identify with her experience as she presents it in the poem?
5. Alison C. Rollins’s poem “Why Is We Americans” consists of a long series of references to African American culture and history. Find two such references that seem unusual or unexpected when paired. What is surprising, revealing, or otherwise interesting about their juxtaposition?

Poems for further reading

Claude McKay, "The Tropics in New York"

Langston Hughes, "I, Too, Sing America"

Waring Cuney, "No Images"

Lucille Clifton, "I am accused of tending to the past"

Nikki Giovanni, "Ego Tripping (there may be a reason why)"

Rita Dove, "Hattie McDaniel Arrives at the Cocoanut Grove"

Nikky Finney, "Concerto No. 7: *Condoleezza at the Watergate*"

BLACK EXPERIENCE IN
HISTORY AND MEMORY

LANGSTON HUGHES

The Negro Speaks of Rivers

I've known rivers:

I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the
flow of human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.

I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.

I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.

I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went
down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy bosom
turn all golden in the sunset.

I've known rivers:

Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

GWENDOLYN BROOKS

Malcolm X

For Dudley Randall

Original.
Ragged-round.
Rich-robust.

He had the hawk-man's eyes.
We gasped. We saw the maleness.
The maleness raking out and making guttural the air
and pushing us to walls.

And in a soft and fundamental hour
a sorcery devout and vertical
beguiled the world.

He opened us—
who was a key,

who was a man.

KEVIN YOUNG

Money Road

for John T. Edge

On the way to Money,
Mississippi, we see little
ghosts of snow, falling faint

as words while we try to find
Robert Johnson's muddy
maybe grave. Beside Little Zion,

along the highwayside, this stone
keeps its offerings—Bud & Louisiana
Hot Sauce—the ground giving

way beneath our feet.
The blues always dance
cheek to cheek with a church—

Booker's Place back
in Greenwood still standing,
its long green bar

beautiful, Friendship Church just
a holler away. Shotgun,
shotgun, shotgun—

rows of colored
houses, as if the same can
of bright stain might cover the sins

of rotting wood, now
mostly tarpaper & graffiti
holding McLaurin Street together—

RIP Boochie—the undead walk
these streets seeking something
we take pictures of

& soon flee. The hood
of a car yawns open
in awe, men's heads

peer in its lion's mouth
seeking their share. FOR SALE:
Squash & Snap Beans. The midden

of oyster shells behind Lusco's—
the tiny O of a bullethole
in Booker's plate glass window.

Even the Salvation
Army Thrift Store
closed, bars over

every door.
We're on our way again,
away, along the Money

Road, past grand houses
& porte cocheres set back
from the lane, crossing the bridge

to find markers of what's
no more there—even the underpass
bears a name. It's all

too grave—the fake
sharecropper homes
of Tallahatchie Flats rented out

along the road, staged bottle trees
chasing away nothing, the new outhouse
whose crescent door foreign tourists

pay extra for. Cotton planted
in strict rows
for show. A quiet

snowglobe of pain
I want to shake.
While the flakes fall

like ash we race
the train to reach the place
Emmett Till last

whistled or smiled
or did nothing.
Money more

a crossroads
than the crossroads be—
its gnarled tree—the Bryant Store

facing the tracks, now turnt
the color of earth, tumbling down
slow as the snow, white

& insistent as the woman
who sent word
of that uppity boy, her men

who yanked you out
your uncle's home
into the yard, into oblivion—

into this store abutting
the MONEY GIN CO.
whose sign, worn away,

now reads UN
Or SIN, I swear—
whose giant gin fans,

like those lashed & anchored
to your beaten body,
still turn. Shot, dumped,

dredged, your face not even
a mask—a marred,
unspared, sightless stump—

all your mother insists
we must see to know
What they did

to my baby. The true
Tallahatchie twisting south,
the Delta

Death's second cousin
once removed. You down
for only the summer, to leave

the stifling city where later
you will be waked,
displayed, defiant,

a dark glass.
There are things
that cannot be seen

but must be. Buried
barely, this place
no one can keep—

Yet how to kill
a ghost? The fog
of our outdoor talk—

we breathe,
we grieve, we drink
our tidy drinks. I think

now winter will out—
the snow bless
& kiss

this cursed earth.
Or is it cussed? I don't
yet know. Let the cold keep

still your bones.

Essay by Evie Shockley

HISTORY, for Black people in the United States, is and always has been deeply charged and highly contested. The Middle Passage and centuries of slavery created a rupture in the transmission of cultural memory and related practices that would have connected the descendants of captive Africans with their ancestral past. This trauma was compounded by racist laws and customs that left the lives of the enslaved documented poorly, if at all. From the colonial period until well into the twentieth century, white people in power generally recorded those aspects of Black existence that were deemed economically or politically profitable (such as gender, purchase price, or demographic numbers), while Black people were widely denied the literacy, resources, or access necessary to maintain thorough records of their own. Until as recently as fifty years ago, the nation's history was primarily taught and promoted as a narrative constructed by, for, and about the most powerful members of the populace, in which Black people (and Black women in particular) appeared rarely, except in the most negative light.

The African American poetry tradition reflects this troubled relationship to history. Black poets have consistently used their poems to create a historical counternarrative, a corrective to the skewed one that has marginalized and denigrated Black people. Our poems regularly celebrate Black people's collective and individual achievements, shed light on figures and events whose importance is little known, record and remember injustices that have been swept under the rug, and elegize our tragedies. Poets of course draw their information and inspiration from rigorous research performed by scholars of African American history since the era of W.E.B. Du Bois and Carter G. Woodson. But because the archives of documentation upon which historians typically rely are so incomplete with respect to African Americans, poets often turn to memory—history's sibling—for personal accounts that are perhaps less verifiable or less central to key events, but which provide vital texture and precious details about experiences less likely to be a part

of the official record. Moreover, in places where the formal archive is most achingly silent, poets turn to their most important resource, imagination, using it in conjunction with history and memory to help us think about gaps in the record that can never be filled.

A closer look at three poems will enable us to examine a few of the myriad approaches African American poets have taken to incorporating the Black past in the poetic record. The first is Langston Hughes's "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," one of the earliest poems he wrote and published. Rivers held great significance in African American culture during the antebellum period: one could be sold "downriver," carried by the Mississippi deeper into slavery, or one could cross "the river Jordan," or the Ohio River, into freedom. Traveling by train to visit his father in Mexico, the young Hughes was moved—perhaps by the passing landscape, perhaps by the prospect of leaving the U.S. for the first time—to reflect on the fact that Black history does not begin in New World slavery. The poem speaks in a singular voice ("I've known rivers") of a collective experience:

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went
down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy bosom
turn all golden in the sunset.

Hughes traces Black history back to the African continent and, further, to the area around the Euphrates known as "the cradle of civilization," before redeeming the Mississippi for a postslavery significance. The poem invites us to see the commonalities between Black people and rivers—characterizing both as "ancient, dusky," and "deep"—and thereby stakes a claim for African Americans to a venerable past, of which we can rightly be proud.

If Hughes's poem writes African Americans into ancient history, Gwendolyn Brooks's "Malcolm X" seeks to establish the terms on which one of her people's heroes, a recently fallen martyr, will be remembered. Written for Dudley Randall's influential 1967 poetry anthology, *For Malcolm: Poems on the Life*

and the Death of Malcolm X, within two years of the assassination of Black nationalist and human rights activist Malcolm X (El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz), Brooks's poem presents a portrait of a leader whose power emanated in part from his charismatic masculinity:

He had the hawk-man's eyes.
We gasped. We saw the maleness.
The maleness raking out and making guttural the air
And pushing us to walls.

These nearly violent images of Malcolm X might echo the way he was portrayed in the mainstream (white) media, but in Brooks's hands, they show him to be the embodiment of a crucial Black Power— and Black Arts—era imperative: self-determination. Brooks's portrait draws upon her own memories of the impact of his displayed confidence and uncompromising authority upon Black people, herself included (“We gasped”). Ready to take control of their own destiny, African Americans equated his “maleness” with a longed-for sovereignty. The poem amplifies the desirability of Black empowerment through the sonically exuberant compound adjectives with which it describes him (“ragged-round,” “rich-robust”) and the penultimate stanza's sexually suggestive metaphor: “He opened us— / who was a key,” unlocking the political power within Black people.

The title of the third poem, Kevin Young's “Money Road,” places us on a literal and metaphorical route to the scene of one of African American history's most visible and lamented tragedies of the past hundred years: the lynching of Emmett Till. In 1955, in Money, Mississippi, Till was brutally beaten, murdered, and submerged in the Tallahatchie River by the husband and brother-in-law of a white woman who accused the Black teen of flirting with her. Young's poem begins in nearby Greenwood, Mississippi, with a pilgrimage to bluesman Robert Johnson's “muddy / maybe grave,” setting up a link between Till's death at 14 and Johnson's at 27, both coming far too early in their young lives. Money Road is another connector, not only naming the highway that leads from the one small town to the other, but also signifying the commercial interests that continue to drive structures of racism in the U.S.

The poem recounts some of what one sees along the way:

the fake
sharecropper homes
of Tallahatchie Flats rented out

along the road, staged bottle trees
chasing away nothing, the new outhouse
whose crescent door foreign tourists

pay extra for. Cotton planted
in strict rows
for show. A quiet

snowglobe of pain
I want to shake.

Visual markers of Mississippi's Jim Crow past are maintained for the benefit of "foreign tourists," most of whom won't see the pain the speaker sees in the cotton field. Young's poem, first published in 2016 during the thick of the Black Lives Matter movement, invites us to look *through* the clouds of snow and fog at "things / that cannot be seen // but must be." In its stanzas we see layers of history: the antebellum era, when cotton was king; on top of it, the subsequent century of tenant farming and segregation, when Till's murderers were acquitted in a farcical trial; and on top of that, our contemporary (millennial) moment, when the poet confronts profitably marketed nostalgia for the plantation days and the "Old South," even as Black people are still being killed with impunity. Till's Civil Rights-era lynching is tethered to the slavery past *and* the purportedly "post-racial" present, Young's metaphors show us, just as a cotton gin motor was tied to the murdered boy's body *and* to cotton as an economic engine still running today.

Dominant narratives continue to obscure the contributions of Black people—especially Black women—to American history. But the African American poetry tradition offers an increasingly larger and more diverse representation of the

people, places, and events situated beyond the official record. For the foreseeable future, the poetic imagination will continue to be an essential complement to and conveyor of Black history and memory.

Discussion Questions

1. Each of these poems serves a commemorative function but addresses a different subject. What are some of the ways these poems complement one another?
2. In evoking the historical experience of Black people, these poets not only speak their words and fashion their metaphors but also establish a mood for their poems. What sort of words might you use—solemn or celebratory, for example, or mournful or defiant—to describe the mood of each poem?
3. One way that poets in particular can voice a people's collective consciousness is through the fusion of imaginative and historical elements. Find specific images, metaphors, or references that seem especially imaginative and powerful. What do each of these tropes communicate about African American identity?
4. How do each of these poems, through the use of “I” and “we,” position their speakers to the subjects being addressed?
5. One of the anthology's sections is called “Ideas of Ancestry.” What sort of ideas about African and African American ancestry are put forward in these three poems?
6. These poems invoke and name the well-known historical figures Abraham Lincoln, Malcolm X, and Emmett Till, all of whom have been depicted widely in books, films, and works of visual art. How does the treatment of these historical figures overlap with, and possibly diverge from, what you already know about them? Do the poems confirm certain aspects of how you think about them? Do they bring out anything surprising?

Poems for further reading

James Weldon Johnson, "Lift Every Voice and Sing"

Richard Wright, "Between the World and Me"

Gwendolyn Brooks, "A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in
Mississippi. Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns
Bacon" and "The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of
Emmett Till"

Robert Hayden, "Middle Passage"

Lucille Clifton, "why some people be mad at me sometimes"
and "i am accused of tending to the past"

Elizabeth Alexander, "Praise Song for the Day"

Natasha Trethewey, "Pilgrimage"

Clint Smith, "Your National Anthem"

Morgan Parker, "The President's Wife."

BLACK LANGUAGE AND MUSIC

STERLING A. BROWN

Ma Rainey

I

When Ma Rainey
Comes to town,
Folks from anyplace
Miles aroun',
From Cape Girardeau,
Poplar Bluff,
Flocks in to hear
Ma do her stuff;
Comes flivverin' in,
Or ridin' mules,
Or packed in trains,
Picknickin' fools.
That's what it's like,
Fo' miles on down,
To New Orleans delta
An' Mobile town,
When Ma hits
Anywheres aroun'.

II

Dey comes to hear Ma Rainey from de little river settlements,
From blackbottom cornrows and from lumber camps;
Dey stumble in de hall, jes a-laughin' an' a-cacklin',
Cheerin' lak roarin' water, lak wind in river swamps.

An' some jokers keeps deir laughs a-goin' in de crowded aisles
An' some folks sits dere waitin' wid deir aches an' miseries,
Till Ma comes out before dem, a-smilin' gold-toofed smiles
An' Long Boy ripples minors on de black an' yellow keys.

III

O Ma Rainey,
Sing yo' song;

Now you's back
Whah you belong,
Git way inside us,
Keep us strong. . . .

O Ma Rainey,
Li'l an' low;
Sing us 'bout de hard luck
Roun' our do';
Sing us 'bout de lonesome road
We mus' go. . . .

IV

I talked to a fellow, an' the fellow say,
"She jes' catch hold of us, somekindaway.
She sang Backwater Blues one day:

*'It rained fo' days an' de skies was dark as night,
Trouble taken place in de lowlands at night.*

*'Thundered an' lightened an' the storm begin to roll
Thousan's of people ain't got no place to go.*

*'Den I went an' stood upon some high ol' lonesome hill,
An' looked down on the place where I used to live.'*

An' den de folks, dey natchally bowed dey heads an' cried,
Bowed dey heavy heads, shet dey moufs up tight an' cried,
An' Ma lef' de stage, an' followed some de folks outside."

Dere wasn't much more de fellow say:
She jes' gits hold of us dataway.

MICHAEL S. HARPER

Dear John, Dear Coltrane

*a love supreme, a love supreme
a love supreme, a love supreme*

Sex fingers toes
in the marketplace
near your father's church
in Hamlet, North Carolina—
witness to this love
in this calm fallow
of these minds,
there is no substitute for pain:
genitals gone or going,
seed burned out,
you tuck the roots in the earth,
turn back, and move
by river through the swamps,
singing: *a love supreme, a love supreme*;
what does it all mean?
Loss, so great each black
woman expects your failure
in mute change, the seed gone.
You plod up into the electric city—
your song now crystal and
the blues. You pick up the horn
with some will and blow
into the freezing night:
a love supreme, a love supreme—

Dawn comes and you cook
up the thick sin 'tween
impotence and death, fuel
the tenor sax cannibal
heart, genitals, and sweat
that makes you clean—
a love supreme, a love supreme—

*Why you so black?
cause I am
why you so funky?
cause I am
why you so black?
cause I am
why you so sweet?
cause I am
why you so black?
cause I am
a love supreme, a love supreme:*

So sick
you couldn't play *Naima*,
so flat we ached
for song you'd concealed
with your own blood,
your diseased liver gave
out its purity,
the inflated heart
pumps out, the tenor kiss,
tenor love:
*a love supreme, a love supreme—
a love supreme, a love supreme—*

KATE RUSHIN

The Black Back-Ups

This is dedicated to Merry Clayton, Fontella Bass, Vonetta Washington, Carolyn Franklin, Yolanda McCullough, Carolyn Willis, Gwen Guthrie, Helaine Harris and Darlene Love. This is for all of the Black women who sang back-up for Elvis Presley, John Denver, James Taylor, Lou Reed. Etc. Etc. Etc.

I said Hey Babe
Take a Walk on The Wild Side
I said Hey Babe
Take a Walk on The Wild Side

And the colored girls say
Do dodo do do dodododo
Do dodo do do dodododo
Do dodo do do dodododo ooooo

This is for my Great-Grandmother Esther, my Grandmother Addie, my Grandmother called Sister, my Great-Aunt Rachel, my Aunt Hilda, my Aunt Tine, My Aunt Breda, my Aunt Gladys, my Aunt Helen, my Aunt Ellie, my Cousin Barbara, my Cousin Dottie and my Great-Great-Aunt Vene.

This is dedicated to all of the Black women riding on buses and subways back and forth to The Main Line, Haddonfield, Cherry Hill and Chevy Chase. This is for the women who spend their summers in Rockport, Newport, Cape Cod and Camden, Maine. This is for the women who open bundles of dirty laundry sent home from ivy-covered campuses.

My Great-Aunt Rachel worked for the Carters
ever since I can remember.
There was *The Boy*
whose name I never knew,

and there was *The Girl*
whose name was Jane.

Great-Aunt Rachael brought Jane's dresses for me to wear.

Perfectly Good Clothes

And I should've been glad to get them.

Perfectly Good Clothes

No matter they didn't fit quite right.

Perfectly Good Clothes

brought home in a brown paper bag with an
air of accomplishment and excitement,

Perfectly Good Clothes

which I hated.

At school in Ohio,

I swear there was always somebody

telling me that the only person

in their whole house who listened and understood them,

despite the money and the lessons,

was the housekeeper.

And I knew it was true.

But what was I supposed to say?

I know it's true. I watch her getting off the train,

moving slowly toward the Country Squire

station wagon with her uniform in her

shopping bag. And the closer she gets to the car,

the more the two little kids jump and laugh

and even the dog is about to turn inside out

because they just can't wait until she gets there.

Edna. Edna. Wonderful Edna.

But Aunt Edna to me, or Gram, or Miz Johnson.

Sister Johnson on Sundays.

And the colored girls say

Do dodo do do dodo dodo

Do dodo do do dodo dodo

Do dodo do do dodo dodo ooooo

This is for Hattie McDaniel, Butterfly McQueen and Ethel Waters.

Sapphire.

Saphronia.

Ruby Begonia.

Aunt Jemima.

Aunt Jemima on the pancake box.

Aunt Jemima on the pancake box?

AuntJemimaonthepancakebox?

Ainchamamaonthepancakebox?

Ain't chure Mama on the pancake box?

Mama . . . Mama . . .

Get off that box and come home to me.

And my Mama leaps off that box and

she swoops down in her nurses's cape

which she wears on Sundays and for

Wednesday Night Prayer Meeting

and she wipes my forehead and she

fans my face and she makes me a cup o' tea.

And it don't do a thing for my real pain except

she is my mama.

Mama Mommy Mammy

Maa-mee Maa-mee

I'd Walk a Mill-yon Miles For

One o' Your Smiles . . .

This is for The Black Back-Ups.

This is for my mama and your mama,

my grandma and your grandma.

This is for the thousand thousand Black Back-Ups.

And the colored girls say

Do dodo do do dodododo

do dodo

dodo

do

do

Essay by Brent Hayes Edwards

FOR CENTURIES, Western poetry has been shaped by a struggle over the status of the vernacular. The overt formalism and refinement of verse—a poem’s quality as a self-conscious construction—begs the question of the relationship between poetic language and everyday speech. From Chaucer, Dante, and Wordsworth to Dickinson’s common meter and Whitman’s “barbaric yawp,” from the jittery Jazz Age argot of T. S. Eliot to the plainspokenness of Frost and the downtown colloquialisms of Allen Ginsberg and Frank O’Hara, there has been a drive to find the aesthetic qualities—the everyday music—of the demotic: the popular language of ordinary people. These issues, while prevalent elsewhere, have been formative for African American poetry. It is worth recalling that the word *vernacular* is derived from the Latin for a native-born slave: African American poetry is a tradition built by a group of people who were initially, for some, defined by the condition of enslavement and who were forcibly denied access to literacy. If the poetic achievement of a Phillis Wheatley could be taken as evidence of the very humanity of the enslaved, then the turn to vernacular forms among later generations of Black writers eventually came to demolish the pretense that poetry was an art reserved for the privileged few.

The influence of the vernacular in African American poetry emerged only over time, however. As technically adept as they may be, the verses of Wheatley, George Moses Horton, and other early poets hew to the confines of convention. Ironically, in the nineteenth century Black vernacular music and dance proved central to the forging of American popular culture, but in an ignominious role, through the caricatures of Jim Crow minstrelsy, with whites amusing themselves in grotesque impressions of the Black performance styles that, even in the antebellum period, began to gain renown. Both minstrel shows and the movement that came to be known as “local color” literature (centered on nostalgic depictions of plantation life in the South) parodied Black speech as dialect, depicting the particularities of pronunciation with a hodgepodge

of orthographical deformations in a manner meant to imply that African Americans were uncultured primitives incapable of standard English. At the end of the century, Paul Laurence Dunbar's writing was pioneering in demonstrating that dialect could be deployed in a manner to capture the warmth and interiority of Black life, with poems such as "When Malindy Sings" and "When de Co'n Pone's Hot."

After World War I, the efflorescence of Black culture known as the Harlem Renaissance was pivotal in the reevaluation of the vernacular. James Weldon Johnson's groundbreaking 1922 anthology *The Book of American Negro Poetry* was instrumental in proving the depth and vitality of the tradition. Notably, though, Johnson spends the majority of his preface discussing not the literary poems that follow, but instead the achievements of Black vernacular in culture (folktales, the spirituals or slave songs, the cakewalk dance, and ragtime music), which he argues are the "only things artistic that have yet sprung from American soil." Three years later, Johnson edited a best-selling two-volume anthology of spirituals, and the decade saw a huge expansion of interest in collecting artifacts of Black southern culture among folklorists, musicologists, and anthropologists. But the impact was not solely ethnographic: as the poet Sterling Brown argued in a 1930 article, Black popular music, including the spirituals, work songs, and the blues, was not only social documents but also literary accomplishments in their own right, filled with "flashes of excellent poetry." As the inclusion in Kevin Young's *African American Poetry* anthology of a popular song lyric such as Andy Razaf's "What Did I Do (To Be So Black and Blue)" (made famous in Louis Armstrong's infectious recording) and the text of Gil Scott-Heron's fierce hit single "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised" suggests, the vernacular is not only the backdrop to the written tradition: it is part and parcel of African American poetry.

The vanguard of the Harlem Renaissance was keen to draw upon what Langston Hughes called a "great field of unused material" in Black vernacular culture, especially Black music. As an art of heightened or condensed language, poetry is often said to aspire to the condition of music. The carefully wrought stress patterns of a poetic line can be taken to suggest rhythm

and cadence, and the play of assonance and rhyme can seem to imply melody. Hughes and Brown sought to intensify these effects by molding their poetry in the shape of the popular music of the time. They began to write poems employing the unique three-line stanza of the blues, which exploded in mass-market popularity at the beginning of the 1920s.

Some of their early efforts (for example, Hughes's "Bound No'th Blues") read as almost straightforward transcriptions of blues recordings, with slight variations or interjections in the repeated lines suggesting the way a singer might improvise in performance. Others use the blues to occasion a formally daring and subtle exploration of Black folk culture. Brown's "Ma Rainey" may be the most astonishing accomplishment in this vein: while it includes a transcription of the haunting lyrics of "Backwater Blues" (a song about the devastating Great Mississippi Flood of 1927), the four sections of the poem shift in tone and line length as well as perspective, providing a kaleidoscopic vantage of the ineffable bond between an itinerant performer and her local audiences.

In *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, Johnson famously argued that Black poets would have to move beyond the conventional dialect of minstrelsy to invent "a form that will express the racial spirit by symbols from within rather than by symbols from without." In Johnson's own sermonic poems (such as "Go Down, Death") and the blues- and jazz-based poems of Hughes, Brown, and their contemporaries, there began to emerge a Black vernacular poetics based in "truth to idiom" (as Brown incisively phrased it) rather than deformations of pronunciation. From this period on, African American literature has been indelibly shaped by what the cultural critic Albert Murray termed a "vernacular imperative": the need to recognize the full range of expressive possibilities available, including the ingenuity of everyday speech and the power of popular music from the spirituals to hip-hop.

African American poetry is informed by the vernacular in two ways: in form and by reference. On the one hand, vernacular verse forms such as folk ballads and blues have been adopted in written poetry. More generally, writers have found ways even on the seemingly static landscape of the page to suggest the in-the-moment epiphanies of improvisation. As Michael

Harper has explained, what he seeks in evaluating his writing is a sense that he has captured the “kernel of nuance that will allow me to enter that zone which is analogous to the freedom that happens in a solo and can never be repeated.”

Later, especially for poets of the Black Arts Movement in the 1960s and spoken-word poets such as Sekou Sundiata, Saul Williams, Mariposa, and Joel Dias-Porter who emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, the poetic text came to be considered less a finished artifact than a musical score to be fully realized only in performance. Noting the central role of what Murray calls “reciprocal voicing” in the music—the emphasis on playing instruments like the saxophone and trombone with speechlike vocalizations, and the parallel predilection among singers to use their voices like instruments—experimental poets, including Nathaniel Mackey, Harryette Mullen, Ed Roberson, Tracie Morris, LaTasha Nevada Diggs, and Fred Moten, have been compelled to extend the expressive possibilities of language in response to the music’s implicit lesson that, in Mackey’s words, “the realm of conventionally articulate speech is not sufficient for saying what needs to be said.”

At the same time, the vernacular reverberates in written poetry as an ever-present field of reference. Poems like Brown’s “Ma Rainey” suggest the social settings of the music and the special atmosphere it engenders. They redeploy song titles and lyrics as a common storehouse of resonant idiom. And writers repeatedly invoke the names and personalities of musicians, whether in commemoration or adulation (as in Jayne Cortez’s “Jazz Fan Looks Back”) or in elegy (as with poems dedicated to Billie Holiday by Gayl Jones and Rita Dove). Michael Harper’s “Dear John, Dear Coltrane” is a particularly virtuosic instance of the latter, with the famous sung ostinato of Coltrane’s classic 1965 recording *A Love Supreme* functioning as a ritualistic refrain in Harper’s exploration of the spiritual resilience (“*Why you so black? / cause I am*”) at the core of Coltrane’s life and career.

In one of the very first articles on “jazz poetry,” the sociological Charles S. Johnson noted in 1928 that “the new racial poetry of the Negro is the expression of something more than experimentation in a new technique. It marks the birth of a new racial consciousness and self conception.” In African

American poetry, the vernacular is not only a set of formal possibilities or cultural reference points. It also affords a worldview and implies a specific political and ethical sensibility: an insistence on democratic collaboration, a commitment to dialogue, even a shared state of grace. It can also provide the basis of critique, as in Kate Rushin's marvelous "The Black Back-Ups," which invokes the anonymous "colored girls" singing wordless syllables in the chorus of Lou Reed's iconic "Walk on the Wild Side" in a praise poem not only to those back-up singers but more broadly to all the Black women, whether legendary or unnamed, whose labor forms the bedrock of the American service economy.

For many African American writers, Black music in particular has come to epitomize racial consciousness. In this sense, poets gravitate toward the standard of music not only because of its expressive amplitude but because it is viewed as the definitive transcript of Black historical experience. As James Baldwin famously argued in a 1951 essay, "It is only in his music, which Americans are able to admire because a protective sentimentality limits their understanding of it, that the Negro in America has been able to tell his story. It is a story which otherwise has yet to be told and which no American is prepared to hear." This conviction forms the backdrop of the contemporary African American poetic tradition, even for individual poems that do not explicitly mention music, and its legacy is a vibrant and multivalent poetic practice enriched by the continuing cross-fertilization of the vernacular and the literary.

Discussion Questions

1. A number of the poems in the anthology (including selections by Langston Hughes, Robert Hayden, Claudia Rankine, Douglas Kearney, and Harryette Mullen) incorporate multiple registers of speech, from more formal or seemingly “standard” forms of English to a variety of colloquialisms. Choose a particular example of this sort of polyphony for discussion: What point is the poem attempting to make by juxtaposing different sorts of speech?
2. In a written text, it is notoriously difficult to suggest the quality of improvisation: something being invented “in the moment.” Look for examples of poems that strive to create this effect. What strategies do they employ to imply that their language is ephemeral and unexpected?
3. Consider some of the poems in the anthology that invoke specific Black musicians by name (Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, Howlin’ Wolf, Art Blakey, Eric Dolphy, John Coltrane, Stevie Wonder, etc.). What are some of the ways that these works attempt to capture the accomplishments and legacies of musicians?
4. These poems take as their subjects both male and female performers. What are some of the ways that women are described in these poems?
5. Identify some of the ways that the poems adopt techniques borrowed from or shared with genres of music. Which passages, due to their artistry with sound or rhythm, do you experience most vividly?

Poems for further reading

Henry Dumas, "Son of Msippi"

Gil Scott-Heron, "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised"

Paul Laurence Dunbar, "When de Co'n Pone's Hot"

Ted Joans, "Jazz Is My Religion"

Yussef Komunyakaa, "Blue Light Lounge Sutra for the
Performance Poets at Harold Park Hotel"

Saul Williams, "Amethyst Rocks"

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY

ROBERT HAYDEN

Those Winter Sundays

Sundays too my father got up early
and put his clothes on in the blueblack cold,
then with cracked hands that ached
from labor in the weekday weather made
banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.

I'd wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.
When the rooms were warm, he'd call,
and slowly I would rise and dress,
fearing the chronic angers of that house,

Speaking indifferently to him,
who had driven out the cold
and polished my good shoes as well.
What did I know, what did I know
of love's austere and lonely offices?

NIKKI GIOVANNI

Nikki-Rosa

childhood remembrances are always a drag
if you're Black
you always remember things like living in Woodlawn
with no inside toilet
and if you become famous or something
they never talk about how happy you were to have
your mother
all to yourself and
how good the water felt when you got your bath
from one of those
big tubs that folk in Chicago barbecue in
and somehow when you talk about home
it never gets across how much you
understood their feelings
as the whole family attended meetings about Hollydale
and even though you remember
your biographers never understand
your father's pain as he sells his stock
and another dream goes
And though you're poor it isn't poverty that
concerns you
and though they fought a lot
it isn't your father's drinking that makes any difference
but only that everybody is together and you
and your sister have happy birthdays and very good
Christmases
and I really hope no white person ever has cause
to write about me
because they never understand
Black love is Black wealth and they'll
probably talk about my hard childhood
and never understand that
all the while I was quite happy

JAMILA WOODS

Ode to Herb Kent

Your voice crawls across the dashboard of Grandma's Dodge Dynasty on the way home from Lilydale First Baptist. You sing a cocktail of static and bass. Sound like you dressed to the nines: cowboy hat, fur coat & alligator boots. Sound like you lotion every tooth. You a walking discography, South Side griot, keeper of crackle & dust in the grooves. You fell in love with a handmade box of wires at 16 and been behind the booth ever since. From WBEZ to VIO3, you be the Coolest Gent, King of the Dusties. Your voice wafts down from the ceiling at the Hair Lab. You supply the beat for Kym to tap her comb to. Her brown fingers paint my scalp with white grease to the tunes of Al & Barry & Luther. Your voice: an inside-out yawn, the sizzle of hot iron on fresh perm, the song inside the blackest seashell washed up on a sidewalk in Bronzeville. You soundtrack the church picnic, trunk party, Cynthia's 50th birthday bash, the car ride to school, choir, Checkers. Your voice stretch across our eardrums like Daddy asleep on the couch. Sound like Grandma's sweet potato pie, sound like the cigarettes she hide in her purse for rough days. You showed us what our mommas' mommas must've moved to. When the West Side rioted the day MLK died, you were audio salve to the burning city, people. Your voice a soft sermon soothing the masses, speaking coolly to flames, spinning black records across the airwaves, spreading the gospel of soul in a time of fire. Joycetta says she bruised her thumbs snappin' to Marvin's "Got to Give It Up" and I believe her.

Essay by Kevin Young

LANGSTON HUGHES's famous "Mother to Son" is a poem of intergenerational understanding. Direct and accessible, Hughes's poem nonetheless displays a doubleness, in that we're given a son recounting, in the mother's voice, what his mother once said to him. It's powerfully generous to the mother, but it also admits something about the son's knowledge that has come from the mother. A poem of mother-wit, a poem about passing along knowledge, it's also a poem of metaphor. It's not a straight line. The poem's concluding line (also given at the beginning), "life for me ain't been no crystal stair," may seem straightforward, but we should hear it communicating resilience and a kind of resistance that is rooted in womanhood. The poem is both about resistance and about family as a kind of safe haven: it looks inward, but also looks outward. It drops the veil: it is given in the voice of someone else—a leap into the consciousness of another—but it isn't speaking for that person. A lesser poet would have written a poem to say, "This is what black mothers experience," or "This is what family does." Hughes, instead, enacts the experience: the telling is part of the testifying in the poem.

Robert Hayden's "Those Winter Sundays" possesses the same sort of doubleness in presenting the belated realization of a father's love and the ways that love was manifested. Such love wasn't expressed in some conspicuously brave, outward fashion: instead, the father's love was bound up with the daily struggle, the daily survival, the daily tenderness involved in making "banked fires blaze" and warming and polishing the son's good shoes. And now the son has come to understand, in the unforgettable line that closes the first stanza, that "No one ever thanked him."

Sundays too my father got up early
and put his clothes on in the blueblack cold,
then with cracked hands that ached
from labor in the weekday weather made
banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.

I'd wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.
When the rooms were warm, he'd call,
and slowly I would rise and dress,
fearing the chronic angers of that house,

Speaking indifferently to him,
who had driven out the cold
and polished my good shoes as well.
What did I know, what did I know
of love's austere and lonely offices?

Being a parent can be the most glorious thing, but it doesn't come with an instruction manual or elicit a thank-you card, except for maybe once a year. In a revelation that seems to happen in real time, the speaker acknowledges that he has taken his father's love for granted, hasn't been able to see it: "What did I know, what did I know / of love's austere and lonely offices?" True love is revealed as a generous thing, given without expectation of reciprocation. Like "Mother to Son" but in its own way, "Those Winter Sundays" is about survival. Neither poem is sentimental, though each is deeply felt. Both poems speak to Black culture and survival and the family as this rooted place, but each avoids the pitfalls of sentimentality because they're both talking about difficulty—in detail and via metaphor and in ways that are particular. The very title "Those Winter Sundays" might suggest something that could easily turn out to be a charming, sweet portrait, and instead we're given something dark and damp but ultimately more powerful because of its depths. The poem itself is like a banked fire that blazes up.

Nikki Giovanni's "Nikki-Rosa" has that doubleness, too, and though it speaks in a different mode than either Hughes or Hayden, it incorporates the tones adopted by each of them. There's a mournful part that's nonetheless a celebratory expression of survival, and then added to these layers is a kind of irony that works really fruitfully in the poem. It's a memory poem, a poem of salvage from Giovanni's childhood, but it's also a poem of resistance in the spirit of her fellow poet Lucille Clifton, who titled one of her poems "why people be mad at me sometimes." Giovanni begins "Nikki-Rosa" by observing

childhood remembrances are always a drag
if you're Black
you always remember things like living in Woodlawn
with no inside toilet
and if you become famous or something
they never talk about how happy you were to have
your mother
all to yourself

“if you become famous” is a bit of humblebragging, but Giovanni is also saying that there's this part of a family's poverty that isn't poor *feeling*. Most Black people I know have that experience of not knowing they're poor in the sense of being different from everyone around you. *Everyone* was poor, and yet there comes this weird moment when it seems that you've got to feel bad about your upbringing, at least here, where she's responding to a white person or to people utterly detached from such a childhood. As she writes later in the poem: “I really hope no white person ever has cause / to write about me / because they never understand / Black love is Black wealth.” She is asserting that her own memories are different than the remembrances you're supposed to deliver in some sort of official, obligatory way. To go back to Hughes, she is suggesting that “life ain't no crystal stair, but let me tell you, it was kind of fun sometimes.” She writes, “your biographers never understand / your father's pain as he sells his stock”—referring to a middle-class suburban housing development outside Cincinnati that was fiercely resisted for years by the local whites—“and another dream goes / And though you're poor it isn't poverty that / concerns you.”

What's important to tease out here is that Giovanni is saying that the problem with poverty isn't being poor; it's all the other problems that come with it and the assumptions made about it. You saw something analogous during the George Floyd protests, where you couldn't even say “Black Lives Matter” without people arguing with you, even though that would seem to be a pretty clear statement. (One of the brilliant things about Black Lives Matter is how it asks you to make the smallest contention on earth and white people still have a problem

with that.) With poverty, people often don't understand that "it isn't poverty that / concerns you," but what's important is that everyone is together. That togetherness is encapsulated in Giovanni's maxim "Black love is Black wealth." Family adds up to more than the sum of its parts—and so does Black experience, which can seem, if you just take it in something like an abstract way, like a set of linked tragedies ending in death. But that *isn't* Black life. "Black love is Black wealth," a love that outweighs any material thing, is in fact a radical thing for Giovanni to say. There's a kind of pity that she's rejecting outright. Here again, as with the Hughes and Hayden poems, there's a refusal of pity, a refusal of sentimentality in the service of a deeper recognition of feeling.

We can see here the bridge between the intimacy of the family and the larger embrace of the community. Jamila Woods, praising a renowned and beloved DJ in her prose poem "Ode to Herb Kent," goes further and summons the spirit of her Chicago community through the recollections of his voice on the radio:

Your voice crawls across the dashboard of Grandma's Dodge Dynasty on the way home from Lilydale First Baptist. You sing a cocktail of static and bass. Sound like you dressed to the nines: cowboy hat, fur coat & alligator boots. Sound like you lotion every tooth. You a walking discography, South Side griot, keeper of crackle & dust in the grooves.

This community, invoked through this disembodied voice on the radio, unites the secular and the sacred in something that is holy. Both Black music and Black poetry have an interest in regarding, at times, the community as a kind of congregation. Now I wouldn't want to paint a picture of that community too idealistically, as something only positive. Sometimes there's a tension between the self and the group. In Langston Hughes's long poetic sequence "Montage of a Dream Deferred," to me the ultimate poem about community, he's writing about how these torsions within community are nonetheless part of the community, and the various ruptures and—to speak metaphorically—the kind of notes that a European tradition would

call wrong notes or blue notes become exactly what the music is built around. There's always this kind of split even as there is connection. But the connection is there. Woods's "Ode to Herb Kent" celebrates it, along with the forms of communal memory that have taken shape over time:

When the West Side rioted the day MLK died, you
were audio salve to the burning city, people. Your
voice a soft sermon soothing the masses, speaking
coolly to flames, spinning Black records across the
airwaves, spreading the gospel of soul in a time of
fire. Joycetta says she bruised her thumbs snappin'
to Marvin's "Got to Give It Up" and I believe her.

As reservoirs of memory, communal music is akin to poetry itself, the poetry that has sustained us and changed us and predicted our futures and brought them into being. As Elizabeth Alexander writes, "Black celebration is a village practice that has brought us together in protest and ecstasy around the globe and across time. Community is a mighty life force for self-care and survival. But it does not protect against murder." Yes, it doesn't stop bullets the way it might or should. Yet people find themselves reaching for poetry in times of protest and stress and death, to help express that complex of emotions that can be found in these poems—that mix of pride, protest, and resistance, sometimes resignation, sometimes ironic survival or defiance. What poetry can do is name something over and over and over again. You're not going to forget what's been said. And that kind of resonance down the generations is, ultimately, the power of poetry.

Discussion Questions

1. Are there experiences in these poems that seem familiar to you or that you recognize in your own life?
2. Robert Hayden and Nikki Giovanni look back retrospectively on their childhoods, but each poet adopts a markedly different tone when recalling how they feel about their family relationships. Describe the differences in tone between these two poems.
3. In the poems by Giovanni and Woods, the experience of family is intertwined with the recollected pleasures of community. What are some of the experiences each poet is fondest of, and do they overlap?
4. Nikki Giovanni makes the point that African American lives are often misunderstood by those who aren't Black. What in these three poems might be misunderstood, and why?
5. Families and communities are cemented through bonds of affection and love. How is love represented in these three poems?

Poems for further reading

Langston Hughes, "Mother to Son"

Margaret Walker, "For My People"

Etheridge Knight, "The Idea of Ancestry"

Mari Evans, "I Am a Black Woman"

Natasha Trethewey, "Miscegenation"

Danez Smith, "dinosaurs in the hood"

Poets

Gwendolyn Brooks (1917–2000) b. Topeka, KS. Brooks grew up and lived in Chicago her entire life. She published poems as a teenager and, at sixteen, became a regular contributor to the *Chicago Defender's* poetry column. The first of her many poetry collections, *A Street in Bronzeville*, was published in 1945. In 1950, she became the first African American poet to win the Pulitzer Prize, for *Annie Allen*. By 1967, her work became heavily influenced by the aims of Black Arts poets. In solidarity, Brooks released later volumes through Dudley Randall's Broadside Press and her own small presses. In 1976, she became the first African American poet to join the National Institute of Arts and Letters. Brooks's other awards include the National Medal of the Arts as well as Lifetime Achievement Awards from the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Book Foundation.

Sterling A. Brown (1901–1989) b. Washington, DC. Brown earned a BA from Williams College and his MA from Harvard University. In 1929, he became professor of American literature at Howard University, where he remained for forty years. His debut poetry collection, *Southern Road* (1932), was influenced by his travels throughout the South. Brown served as editor on Negro Affairs in the Federal Writers' Project. As a critic, his books include *Outline for the Study of Poetry of American Negroes* (1931), *The Negro in American Fiction* (1937), and *Negro Poetry and Drama* (1937). Brown edited the poetry anthology *The Negro Caravan* (1941). His *Collected Poems* was published in 1980.

Lucille Clifton (1936–2010) b. DePew, NY. Clifton was raised in Buffalo, NY, and attended Howard University, where she studied drama. In the 1960s, she settled in Maryland. Later, she served as poet-in-residence at Coppin State College and was the state's poet laureate. *Good Times* (1969), her first poetry book, was followed by numerous collections, including

Blessing the Boats: New and Selected Poems, 1988–2000 (2000), which won the National Book Award. In 2007, Clifton was the first Black woman to be awarded the Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize.

Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872–1906) b. Dayton, OH. Dunbar was the son of formerly enslaved couple. His father fought with the Massachusetts 55th Infantry Regiment in the Civil War. Dunbar was the only Black student at Dayton Central High School, where he was class poet. Orville Wright was a classmate and friend. He published his first volume of poetry, *Oak and Ivy*, in 1893. His second collection, *Majors and Minors* (1895), comprised a mixture of traditional and dialect verse. The volume received favorable notice from William Dean Howells and made Dunbar the most visible and popular African American poet of his time. Shortly thereafter, he read his poems during a tour of England. In 1898, he married Alice Ruth Moore, who later published poetry as Alice Dunbar-Nelson. The couple separated in 1902. In addition to several poetry collections, Dunbar wrote fiction as well as lyrics for the pioneering musical comedy *In Dahomey* (1903). He died of tuberculosis at age 33.

Nikki Giovanni (b. 1943) b. Yolande Cornelia Giovanni in Knoxville, TN. Giovanni was raised in the Cincinnati suburbs. She earned her BA in history from Fisk University and did graduate study in social work at the University of Pennsylvania and in the MFA program at Columbia University. Giovanni's poetry emphasized Black Arts and militant themes in numerous collections, including *Black Feeling Black Talk* (1968) and *Black Judgment* (1969). She has also written poetry for children, including *Rosa* (2005), winner of the Caldecott Medal. Giovanni is currently Distinguished Professor of English at Virginia Tech, where she has taught since 1987.

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (1825–1911) b. Baltimore, MD. Born free, Harper was orphaned as a child and raised by an aunt and uncle. She received instruction at the latter's Academy for Negro Youth. In 1851, Harper moved to Columbus, OH, and became the first female professor of domestic science at the African Methodist Episcopal Church's Union Seminary (later

Wilberforce University). While living in Philadelphia, she became involved in abolitionism and lived at an Underground Railroad “station.” Harper contributed to *The Liberator*, *Frederick Douglass’s Monthly*, and the *Anglo-African Magazine*. She continued her activism throughout Reconstruction and for the rest of her life, addressing racial issues, temperance, and support for women’s suffrage. Harper published widely and, in addition to her poems and nonfiction, wrote short stories and novels. In 1859, she published “The Two Offers,” what is believed to be the first short story published by an African American.

Michael S. Harper (1938–2016) b. New York, NY. Harper was raised in Los Angeles, CA. He earned a BA and an MA from Los Angeles State College of Applied Arts and Sciences (now California State University, Los Angeles). He earned his MFA from the Iowa Writers’ Workshop. He later taught at various colleges in California. From 1970 to 2013, he held a teaching position at Brown University. The first of his several poetry volumes, *Dear John, Dear Coltrane*, was published in 1970. Harper also edited anthologies of African American poetry, including the post-1945 collection *Every Shut Eye Ain’t Asleep* (1994) and, with Anthony Walton, *The Vintage Book of African American Poetry* (2000).

Robert Hayden (1913–1980) b. Asa Bundy Sheffey in Detroit, MI. Hayden was the name of his adoptive parents. He earned a BA from Detroit City College (now Wayne State University), then worked for the Federal Writers’ Project. Hayden earned his MA from the University of Michigan two years after the publication of his first volume. He converted to the Baha’i faith. For twenty-three years, he taught in Fisk University’s English department, followed by an appointment at the University of Michigan. He was awarded Grand Prize at the First World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar, Senegal, in 1966. Hayden’s poetry collections include *A Ballad of Remembrance* (1962) and *Night-Blooming Cereus* (1972).

Langston Hughes (1901–1967) b. Joplin, MO. Hughes was raised by his grandmother in Lawrence, KS, then by his mother in Lincoln, IL, and Cleveland, OH. After graduating from

high school, he joined his father for a year in central Mexico. In September 1921, Hughes moved to Harlem. He became a seaman in the summer of 1923 and traveled throughout West Africa and Europe. He then lived in Paris and Washington, DC, working in both cities as a busboy. Hughes published the first of many poetry collections, *The Weary Blues*, in 1926. He earned a BA from Lincoln University in 1929. In 1932, he moved to the Soviet Union and, soon thereafter, worked as a newspaper correspondent during the Spanish Civil War. Hughes penned plays, essays, the novel *Not Without Laughter* (1930), a two-part autobiography, and children's books. As an anthologist, he edited *The Poetry of the Negro, 1746–1949* (1949; exp. ed. 1970) with Arna Bontemps.

Claude McKay (1889–1948) b. Sunny Ville, Jamaica. McKay published his first poetry collection, *Songs of Jamaica*, in 1912, the year he arrived in the U.S. Along with poetry volumes such as *Harlem Shadows* (1922), he published novels and memoirs, including *Home to Harlem* (1928), the autobiography *A Long Way from Home* (1937), and the recently published *Romance in Marseille* (2020). McKay spent much of the 1920s and 1930s in Europe and North Africa.

Aja Monet (b. 1987) b. New York, NY. Monet earned her BA from Sarah Lawrence College and MFA in creative writing from the School of the Art Institute in Chicago. At 19, she was the youngest winner of the Nuyorican Poets Café's Grand Slam. Monet published her first full-length poetry collection, *My Mother Was a Freedom Fighter*, in 2018. She co-founded the Miami arts collective Smoke Signals Studio. Monet also manages the poetry workshop Voices: Poetry for the People.

Alison C. Rollins (b. 1987) b. St. Louis, MO. Rollins earned her BS in psychology from Howard University and Master of Library and Information Science from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. She published her debut poetry collection, *Library of Small Catastrophes*, in 2019. Rollins is currently lead teaching and learning librarian at Colorado College.

Kate Rushin (b. 1951) Rushin was raised in Camden and Lawnside, NJ. She received her BA from Oberlin College and MFA from Brown University, where she studied under Michael S. Harper. Her poetry collection *The Black Back-Ups* was published in 1993. She was writer-in-residence and director of the Center for African American Studies at Wesleyan University. She has also taught at MIT and Connecticut College. Rushin is the recipient of the Rose Low Rome Memorial Poetry Prize and the Grolier Poetry Prize.

Jamila Woods (b. 1989) b. Chicago, IL. Woods earned her BA from Brown University. She published her chapbook, *The Truth About Dolls*, in 2012. Woods is also a singer and songwriter. She is associate director of the nonprofit youth organization Youth Chicago Authors and helps organize the poetry festival Louder Than a Bomb. She also designs curricula for Chicago public schools and teaches poetry to children throughout the city.

Kevin Young (b. 1970) b. Lincoln, NE. Young earned his AB from Harvard University and MFA from Brown University. He was a member of the Dark Room Collective. He has published ten books of poetry and edited several anthologies. His nonfiction includes *The Grey Album: On the Blackness of Blackness* (2012) and *Bunk: The Rise of Hoaxes, Humbug, Plagiarists, Phonies, Post-Facts, and Fake News* (2017). Young was Charles Howard Candler Professor of English and Creative Writing and, later, Atticus Haygood Professor of Creative Writing and English at Emory University. He also served as curator of literary collections at the university's Raymond Danowski Poetry Library. He was elected chancellor of the Academy of American Poets in 2020. He is currently poetry editor at *The New Yorker* and director of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

SOURCES

Gwendolyn Brooks, "Malcolm X." *In the Mecca* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968). Copyright © 1968 the Estate of Gwendolyn Brooks. For permissions, write to Brooks Permissions, P.O. Box 19355, Chicago, IL 60619.

Sterling A. Brown, "Ma Rainey." *The Collected Poems of Sterling Brown*, ed. Michael S. Harper (Evanston, IL: TriQuarterly Books, 1989). Copyright © 1980 Sterling A. Brown. Reprinted by permission of Jacqueline M. Combs.

Lucille Clifton, "won't you celebrate with me." *The Collected Poems of Lucille Clifton 1965-2010* (Rochester, NY: BOA Editions, 2012). Also published in *The Book of Light*, copyright © 1993 Lucille Clifton and reprinted with the permission of The Permissions Company, LLC, on behalf of Copper Canyon Press, coppercanyonpress.org.

Paul Laurence Dunbar, "We Wear the Mask." *Majors and Minors* (Toledo, OH: Hadley & Hadley, 1895).

Nikki Giovanni, "Nikki-Rosa." *The Collected Poetry of Nikki Giovanni 1968-1998* (New York: William Morrow, 2003). Copyright compilation © 2003 Nikki Giovanni. Used by permission of HarperCollins Publishers.

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, "The Slave Mother." *Complete Poems of Frances E. W. Harper*, ed. Maryemma Graham (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

Michael S. Harper, "Dear John, Dear Coltrane." *Songlines in Michael-tree: New and Collected Poems* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000). Copyright © 1970, 2000 Michael S. Harper. All poems used with permission of the University of Illinois Press.

Robert Hayden, "Those Winter Sundays." *Collected Poems*, ed. Frederick Glaysher (New York: Liveright, 1996). Copyright © 1962, 1966, 1978, 1982. Used by permission of Liveright Publishing Corporation.

Langston Hughes, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers." *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, ed. Arnold Rampersad with David Roessel, Associate Editor (New York: Random House, 1994). Copyright © 1994 the Estate of Langston Hughes. Used by permission of Harold Ober and Alfred A. Knopf, an imprint of the Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC. All rights reserved.

-
- Claude McKay, "If We Must Die." *Harlem Shadows* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1922).
- Aja Monet, "#sayhername." *My Mother Was a Freedom Fighter* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017). Copyright © 2017 Aja Monet. Reprinted with permission of Haymarket Books.
- Alison C. Rollins, "Why Is We Americans." *Library of Small Catastrophes* (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon, 2019). Copyright © 2019 Alison C. Rollins. Reprinted with the permission of The Permissions Company, LLC on behalf of Copper Canyon Press, coppercanyonpress.org.
- Kate Rushin, "The Black Back-Ups." *The Black Back-Ups* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books, 1993). Copyright © 1993 Kate Rushin. Reprinted by permission of the author.
- Jamila Woods, "Ode to Herb Kent." *Poetry* (December 2015). Copyright © 2015 Jamila Woods. Reprinted by permission of the author.
- Kevin Young, "Money Road." *Brown* (New York: Knopf, 2018). Copyright © 2018 Kevin Young. Reprinted by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, an imprint of the Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House, LLC. All rights reserved.

CONTRIBUTORS

Joanne M. Braxton is Frances L. and Edwin L. Cummings Professor of the Humanities at William & Mary. Since 1995, she has served as director of the Middle Passage Project. Braxton is the author and editor of numerous books on African American history and literature, including *Black Women Writing Autobiography: A Tradition Within a Tradition*, *Monuments of the Black Atlantic: Slavery and Memory*, and *The Collected Poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar*. In addition to being a scholar and emerita professor, Braxton is a poet, ordained minister, and founder and president of The Braxton Institute for Sustainability, Resiliency, and Joy.

Brent Hayes Edwards is Peng Family Professor of English and Comparative Literature and an instructor at the Center for Jazz Studies at Columbia University. He is also director of the Scholars-in-Residence Program at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. Edwards is the author of *Epitaphies: Jazz and the Literary Imagination* and *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism*. He has edited scholarly editions of classics by Frederick Douglass, Joseph Conrad, and W.E.B. Du Bois; co-edited *Uptown Conversation: The New Jazz Studies* with Farah Jasmine Griffin and Robert G. O'Meally; and translated various works of Francophone literature.

Walton M. Muyumba is associate professor of English and director of creative writing at Indiana University. He is the author of *The Shadow and the Act: Black Intellectual Practice, Jazz Improvisation, and Philosophical Pragmatism*. Muyumba is also a book reviewer, cultural critic, and essayist whose work has appeared in numerous publications, including the *Chicago Tribune*, *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, *The Atlantic*, *The New York Times*, and *New Republic*.

Evie Shockley is professor of English at Rutgers University. She has published five books of poetry, including *The Gorgon Goddess, the new black*, and *semiautomatic*. Shockley is also the author of *Renegade Poetics: Black Aesthetics and Formal Innovation in African American Poetry*. Her poems and scholarly essays have appeared in various anthologies, including *Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry*, edited by Camille T. Dungy, and *Contemporary African American Literature: The Living Canon*.

Kevin Young is director of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture at the New York Public Library and poetry editor of *The New Yorker*. A chancellor of the Academy of American Poets and a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, he is the author of many books of poetry, including *Brown, Blue Laws*, and *Jelly Roll: a blues*. Among the anthologies he has edited are *Blues Poems*, *Jazz Poems*, *The Art of Losing: Poems of Grief & Healing*, and, for Library of America, *John Berryman: Selected Poems*.