

# 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—*

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*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 dodododo*

*Do dodo do do dodododo*

*Do dodo do do dodododo 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"