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## NEW IDEAS ABOUT BLACK EXPERIMENTAL POETRY

### 1. Ripping out the seams

We name the experimental, as we name any quality, moment, school, or movement in literature, in large part from the vantage point of today. So what appears to be doctrinaire, even hegemonic, from here and now, might well have had to fight to make its space in its time. We now take for granted Langston Hughes's forging poetic form from jazz and the blues. There have been so many practitioners in the jazz/blues poem mode, from the sublime to the ridiculous, that its status as a form is now a given. But when a young Hughes was making those first poems in the 1920s, the forms, the vessels that brought those musics into the muscle and bone of poems, simply did not exist. Hughes was a radical innovator who made poems that managed to sound natural, inevitable, and almost artless, in their very artfulness.

Though Gwendolyn Brooks's sonnets are cast in her specific idiom and syntax, they still look like sonnets and might not appear as groundbreaking as they are. But Brooks was able to listen to and interpellate the voices of Chicago's South Side into a modernist sonnet in a new black idiom, and to this day there are no Brooks imitators who have surpassed or significantly revised her contributions.

And the case of Robert Hayden is well known. His work is profoundly respected in many circles. But from within some black literary communities he has been vilified for insisting that, when it came to his poetry, he was a poet first before racial concerns. The lingering wake of this controversy—

which brewed as early as the 1950s, boiled over at the 1966 Fisk Writers' Conference and was covered in *Negro Digest*—has left him as one who is seen by some as a mainstream sell-out. Yet in the 1940s, before the Black Arts movement was a notion, Hayden wrote poems like "Frederick Douglass" and "Middle Passage" that must be called landmark poems of black resistance. The way Hayden brought documentary material from slave ship logs into the poetic text of "Middle Passage" was *sui generis*. To cut and re-contextualize and bring new meaning to text that is in fact evidence of the wretched human crime of the slave trade was the innovation of this work. The despised information is made into art, its factuality neither erased nor neutralized—this is a historical poem, after all, which believes in telling a story—but its material has been used to make an instrument toward the destruction of its ideology.

I think scholars of twentieth century poetry and people who read and also perhaps write poetry have skipped over some important and potentially rich conversation about what constitutes "experimental" in black poetry. To say that the contemporary black poetic doctrinaire most prominently includes first-person lyrics and/or historical narratives ignores the innovations that have occurred in spaces marked "first-person," "lyric," "narrative," and "historical." How did Hayden's spacings in "Middle Passage" pave new ground? How does Brooks's "In the Mecca" redefine "epic" and "urban" and disrupt all romances about "the black community"? How does Sonia Sanchez bring keen and wail—a woman's individual cries and the cried of a community—as actual space into her poems, and what is made possible in the poetry's wake?

These are undeniably some good old days for African-American poetry, and one of the predictable byproducts of bounty is that people start fussing. Black poets have never been more diversely and extensively published, more available, or better represented at all levels of career, including receiving nominations for major prizes and fellowships, and being present in graduate programs and workshops, present in thriving all-black creative spaces as well as mixed communities. When I was coming along, Rita Dove and Michael Harper were the two black poets making their way in tenured university positions; now there are more than I can count. Of course,

there can never be enough progress to begin to address what needs to be corrected as well as to represent what remains unheralded and deserving of note. But the point is, relatively speaking, these are flush times.

So of course now the debate heats up about who controls what and who names the canon. And while it is crucial that we always question the repressive hold of doctrine of any kind, from within and without what we consider to be our communities, I think that the conversation that stratifies convention and experimentation in black poetry skips over a richer investigation of what the black experimental is. We need to take this moment to redefine experimental poetry in the context of African-American arts, building on the fine scholarly work of Aldon Neilson in *Black Chant*; Nathaniel Mackey in *Discrepant Engagement*; Kimberley Benston, who in *Baraka: The Renegade and the Mask* wrote Baraka back into the Beats; Lorenzo Thomas, who put the innovative doings of the Umbra workshop on record in his 2000 study, *Extraordinary Measures: Afrocentric Modernism and 20th-Century American Poetry*; and others, such as Evie Shockley, who are working on a genealogy of black experimentalism with its own internal referents. Neilson, in particular, has tirelessly chronicled black avant-garde poets such as Oliver Pitcher, Russell Atkins, and Sarah Webster Fabio and has mined the Baraka papers at UCLA along with other archival materials to write a full version of Charles Olson's ongoing involvement, friendship, and cross-fertilizing correspondence on poetics with Jones/Baraka following the 1950 publication of "Projective Verse." Harryette Mullen offers rich definitions of black poetry that challenge the status quo. Her language includes: "standing between and asking questions," "space between declarative representations of blackness and a critical engagement with the . . . practices by which evolving identities are recognized," and "multiplicity and dissonance—the flip side of unity and homogeneity." She also discusses how the central work of "defining and empowering blackness" that was the work of the Black Arts and Black Power movement lets us think about this moment *in time* as another unfolding of "defining and empowering," beyond the simple (not simplistic!) equation black equals. . . . "Black Is . . . Black Ain't," to

invoke the late Marlon Riggs and consider black identity not just as dialectic but as multilectic.

But the specific question I want to press, nonetheless, is what are some other ways we can define "black experimentalism"? What genealogy can we think about that doesn't trace contemporary black experimental poetry only and inevitably to, for example, Oppen, Olsen, French surrealists, Marxist political thought, et cetera—sources for white language and experimental poets—and then within black culture just to Ornette Colman and Sun Ra? I'm overstating slightly, but in other words, who within the *literary* black tradition has (as well as, particularly, the visual arts, which is an area of cross-pollination in need of major investigation) made experimentalism more possible, and might we find some of those figures in the columns we call "canonical" or "traditional"? I want to think about poets whose work we might not consider experimental and see how the innovations in that work begin to shift the ground beneath what we think of as "black experimental." What else is it within our culture that a poet feels she can in some way break? Who are the figures and what are the poems that encourage her to go out in language and form? Experimental: that which breaks with the doctrinaire and lets the previously unimaginable happen. Sometimes the wolf arrives in sheep's clothing.

Marjorie Perloff calls Donald Allen's influential 1959 anthology, *New American Poetry*, which features statements on poetics along with the poems, "the anthology of avant-garde poetry." Allen included but one black writer, LeRoi Jones. I use that example to say, white avant-gardes have never contended seriously with African-American poetry in forging their definitions of self, moment, and movement. So we're askew from the start. And by the way, Allen's 1982 follow-up, *The Post-Moderns: The New American Poetry Revisited*, still has a lone LeRoi Jones representing the race in the so-called American avant-garde.

Language poetry "seeks to detach words from their conventional moorings, so that something new and unprecedented, not an imitation of life or the world, emerges."<sup>1</sup> It is a poetry that "experiments with what a poem can be, mixing the genres of verse and prose, discovering new measures, coming up with constructs that push beyond the limits of memory,

emotion, and tradition that confine and diminish conventional verse." In "A Poetics," his famous description of language poetry, Charles Bernstein wrote: "I care most about poetry that disrupts business as usual, including literary business: I care most for poetry as dissent, including formal dissent; poetry that makes sounds possible to be heard that are not otherwise articulated." Let's be glib and imagine for a moment that Bernstein is thinking here about black poetry. There are literally hundreds of thousands of examples where the black poem answers Bernstein's call simply by existing. Anthology after anthology makes it clear that, as with so many other accounts and schools of American arts, black styles, mode, content, and approaches have been poached but not credited, but that in their real theorization, the white avant-garde was not thinking about black writing in a significant way. Thus it is clear to me that, to put it plainly but I think usefully, a theory of black experimental poetry is going to look different than a theory of white experimental poetry.

In Olson's vision of "projective verse," form is an absolute outgrowth of content. I agree with him on that. But in African-American poetry our relationship to received form is more complicated. We can't just throw received form out the window to "make it new" because we have too powerful a legacy of making something new already. From gumbo to the patchwork quilt, African-American artistry makes new from what is handed down, left over, and snatched. Look to the great examples of revising received form in our music such as Coltrane's de-formation of "My Favorite Things;" or Nina Simone and Betty Carter signifying on conventional chanteuse femininity as they unsmilingly torque melody from the root; or Jimi Hendrix's ripping out the seams of the "Star-Spangled Banner;" or Marvin Gaye making the National Anthem so goddamn blue that black male sexual desire and performance can be read as a response to the eternally broken promises of "America the Beautiful." That is part of our collective genius as experimenters: to take received forms that have not included us, wrestle with them and make them our own and new, to hearken back to the Modernists's battle cry.

What does it mean when a black poet "stops making sense"? I think the fragmentation of apparent logic is a way that we mark our own many fragmentations, the way that black

thought and life rarely goes uninterrupted by the violent gougings of racisms. Chasms are the interior spaces we are still exploring. And I think sometimes we mistake certain conventions of typography for experimentation, or venerate the idea of inaccessibility as opposed to what is "simple." To be imagined so very scrutable, as we black people are, can certainly drive one to wish for the veil of obfuscation, the curtain pulled down on a self that will never be imagined free of stereotype. I am overstating the case here, of course. But the complexity that lies beneath "simplicity" is its own artistic innovation.

And from within black poetry conversations, I want to question the idea that there is such a hard and fast thing as a black poetic norm from which other poets must struggle to break free. Have we ever had a black doctrinaire in poetry? Is there really and truly and effectively a black poetic hegemony? Some black poets did feel that the Black Arts Movement was censoring (or perhaps muting or intimidating are better words), but I don't think the BAM tamped down experimentalism per se. Rather, the BAM tamped down what we might now call hegemonic: the personal black lyric. Experimentalism, expecting no safe harbor, has always found its way

## **2. "I lost my charge because I could not make my congregation shout."<sup>2</sup>**

No one would argue for Fenton Johnson as a major poet. He is someone who, from what we now know (though there is an unpublished manuscript called "The Daily Grind: 41 WPA Poems" at the Chicago Public Library's Vivian Harsh Collection and others in the archive at Fisk), wrote a half dozen (some would say three, some would say one) "important" poems and whose first two books are conventional, somewhat florid, and indistinct. But those few breakaway poems make many things possible in the space they clear. For people who make poems, sometimes all it takes is one poem or even one moment in a poem to crack open all sorts of possibilities. One of those poems by Johnson, "Tired," is consistently anthologized (in collections of African-American poetry and, for example, in the recent Library of America *American Poetry:*

*The Twentieth Century*). By that measurement, his work remained alive for poets who followed (his influence on fellow Chicagoan Gwendolyn Brooks is clear), and "Tired" is, I believe, a cult poem that is known and held close by many African-American poets, in large part because it sounds like a poem across time.

In James Weldon Johnson's 1931 preface to *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, the first significant anthology of black poetry when its first edition appeared in 1922, he writes:

What the colored poet in the United States needs to do is something like what Synge did for the Irish; he needs to find a form that will express the racial spirit by symbols from within rather than symbols from without, such as the mere mutilation of English spelling and pronunciation. He needs a form that is freer and larger than dialect, but which will still hold the racial flavor; a form expressing the imagery, the idiom, the peculiar turns of thought, and the distinctive humor and pathos, too, of the Negro, but which will also be capable of voicing the deepest and highest emotions and aspirations, and allow the widest range of subjects and the widest scope of treatment.

Before *The Book of American Negro Poetry* had been released, Fenton Johnson (b.1888) had published several volumes in Chicago and New York at his own expense. He founded and edited three magazines, published a book of essays, and saw his plays produced at the Pekin Theater in Chicago. He was the only child of a relatively wealthy Pullman porter and was known, according to Arna Bontemps, "to ride around the South Side in his own electric motorcar." But his published writing dried up early, and though he lived to 1958, his last known writing was published in the thirties when he worked on the WPA Negro in Illinois project. "The Daily Grind: 41 WPA Poems" was the result of that work, but the collection as a whole was never published.

Fenton Johnson revised and signified upon the modernist long line and stance of despair in "Tired":

I am tired of work; I am tired of building up somebody else's civilization.

Let us take a rest, M'Lissy Jane.

I will go down to the Last Chance Saloon, drink a gallon or two of gin, shoot a game or two of dice and sleep the rest of the night on one of Mike's barrels.

You will let the old shanty go to rot, the white people's clothes turn to dust, and the Calvary Baptist Church sink to the bottomless pit.

You will spend your days forgetting you married me and your nights hunting the warm gin Mike serves the ladies in the rear of the Last Chance Saloon.

Throw the children into the river; civilization has given us too many. It is better to die than grow up and find that you are colored.

Pluck the stars out of the heavens. The stars mark our destiny. The stars marked my destiny.

I am tired of civilization.<sup>3</sup>

To be "tired of civilization"—that Eliotic stance of post-World War II despair—means something different when the speaker is a descendant of the slaves that built that civilization, fought the wars, and reaped no benefits. That weary long line—which Hughes of course utilized in "The Weary Blues" to great effect—was essentially unused at that point in African-American poetry. The headlines in the history of African-American poetry when Johnson begins publishing in the 1910s are really Wheatley and Dunbar. The slave narrative is the most vibrant form of African-American literary production at that time, and the novel began to move forward in the 1890s. In the context of the first proper anthology of black poetry, then, Johnson's "Tired" arguably cracks open the world. We had not yet had our Dickinson or Whitman. We did not have the luxury of innovation as such. We have to redefine genius in the material terms of black people's lives, in thinking about what it would have taken to imagine oneself as literary artist, let alone get published. Wheatley, remember, had to write in imitative verse forms simply to receive a hearing.

In "Tired" there is a sudden sense of space, of utterance broken free, of respectability shaken off, of uncertainty that can be voiced, of stoicism that can be eschewed, of despair that can be spoken instead of the unwavering stiff upper lip of the

ever-striving, ever-hopeful Negro. The poem's stark avoidance of euphemism as it simultaneously employs highly stylized artifice marks a turning point in African-American poetry and its flirtation with modernism.

James Weldon Johnson aptly described "Tired" as a turning point in Fenton Johnson's work: "In the war period he broke away from all traditions and ideas of Negro poetry, in both dialect and literary English. Moreover, he disregarded the accepted poetic forms, subjects, and language, adopted free verse, and in that formless form wrote poetry in which he voiced the disillusionment and bitterness of feeling the Negro race was then experiencing." When you compare "Tired" with Johnson's earlier poems, you can literally see the process (I don't know if I should call it a struggle) to break form, to let the lines breathe, to embrace the breath of the lines. You also find the surprise of specific names and things in the poems that have not previously made their way into African-American poetry: Kris Kringle, Mr. Pullman, "a white girl's education," "Big Lizzie, who kept a house for white men," "Calvary Baptist Church" "the prince of Peace." I won't make the case for Fenton Johnson as a twentieth-century Whitman, but I will say that in the same way that Whitman's mention of "common prostitutes" and other "common" personages and creatures widened the American public vocabulary, so too did Johnson clear imaginative space.

Also new to African-American poetry in the 1910s are Johnson's references that seem to barely veil autobiography, such as the meditation on the role of the artist in "The Banjo Player" ("I fear that I am a failure. Last night a woman called me a troubadour. What is a troubadour?") and "My father worked for Mr. Pullman and white people's tips; but he died two days after his insurance expired. / I had nothing, so I had to go to work," which describes the reversal of fortunes in Johnson's own life, though the speaker in the poem is "The Scarlet Woman."

What did Johnson mean when he wrote, in the poem "The Minster," "I lost my charge because I could not make my congregation shout. And my dollar money was small, very small"? Because we have seen how he knits autobiographical understanding into distinctly different personae, one can speculate on the difficult career of a poet who clearly steps into his

voice, but it is a voice that is ahead of its time in a genre and profession that has seen but one previous, full-fledged professional, Paul Laurence Dunbar. Hughes was a teenager when Johnson wrote those lines, and though he went on to make a fine life as a Negro man of letters, he never had more than a few pennies in his pocket. More profoundly, or, I should say, less mundanely, Johnson's lines allow us to imagine the poet as a preacher in search of a congregation that, in the end, wants the entertainment of the "shout" rather than hard-won revelation and the difficult paths of spirit and flesh. Innovation might be defined as that which engenders resistant response as it challenges aesthetic, political, and emotional doctrine. I feel Johnson's preacher's lament in my own heart sometimes, when the "poetry" that receives the most acclaim is that which makes people shake their behinds, wave their hands, holla.

### 3. "the man of blue or purple"

Jean Toomer's genre-bending 1923 lyrical masterpiece *Cane* is sometimes said to inaugurate the Harlem Renaissance. Few surveys of African-American literature would skip it, and there have also been fruitful critical conversation about its relationship to high modernism in the American canon. *Cane* is a formally innovative book that contains poems but cannot be called a book of poems. Just after the publication of *Cane*, Toomer famously began serious study under the Greek-Armenian mystic Georges Gurdjieff and became interested in ideas of racial transcendence. Some have said that Toomer, who appeared white to many observers, "left the race behind," but a richer way to describe his work from a philosophical perspective can be found in Toomer's poetry, from his "sound poems" of the twenties to the book *Essentials*, published in 1931, and the epic 1934 poem "The Blue Meridian," where he described the "new" American as "the man of blue or purple." Under Gurdjieff, Toomer came to believe that "substance is one of the greatest of our illusions." In his work he moved further into poetic forms that might also allow him to explore ideas of transcendence. While most know Toomer as *Cane's* author, in 1923 he was only beginning his artistic journey.

The original introduction to Toomer's *Essentials* calls the pieces "prose," akin to Pascal's *pensées*. These aphorisms attempt to transcend language as Toomer tries to transcend not only the racialized and gendered body as an idea, or, conceptually, but also literally, with his Gurdjieffian study and interest in yoga and meditation and other exercises in physical transcendence that were part of the practice. The "essentials," to call the form by a name organic to the book, rely not on fifty dollar words nor the imagistic saturation that distinguished *Cane*. The language is stripped down, and each "stanza," if you will, is actually a statement. They are about epistemology, the process and shape of thinking, the avenues by which Toomer and readers can reach new understandings. The utilitarian aspect also had a practical correlate: in Gurdjieff's lectures, aphorisms were passed out on index cards as a way of stimulating conversation. These are a few:

## XXIV

I am of no particular race. I am of the human race, a  
Man at large in the human world, preparing a new  
Race.

I am of no specific region. I am of earth.

I am of no particular class. I am of the human class,  
Preparing a new class.

I am neither male nor female nor in-between. I am of  
Sex, with male differentiation.

I am of no special field. I am of the field of being.

## XXXI

Because of unbecoming human relationships the world  
stinks like an outhouse.

There is no love, no faith, no trust, but what the world  
calls forth to violate.

These are not dead; these are among the hopeless living  
things.

Far from loving all that breathes we do not  
 Love even those we do love.  
 Occidental romance has lead to Freud.

XLV

An artist is he who can balance strong contrasts, who can  
 combine opposing forms and forces in significant unity.

Real arts demands the intense purity and wholeness of  
 The very materials we artists often irresponsibly mutilate.

One must become a man before he can be an artist.

For above a single talent I prize a multiformed man.

Art is a means of communicating high-rate vibrations.

I think of these in the context of spoken aphorisms in the African-American tradition. Sterling Brown, Arthur Davis, and Ulysses Lee, in their 1941 anthology *Negro Caravan: Writings by American Negroes*, had a section on folk literature that brought oral and nonliterary roots of the black literary tradition into the same conversation as written work. That folk section included spirituals, "slave seculars," aphorisms, ballads, work songs and social songs, social protest songs, blues, folk tales and folk sermons. The whole section is fascinating, as was the move to include these materials, but for today's purposes I want to look at the aphorisms. *Negro Caravan* might have been the first place where the word "literature" (rather than "expression" or something similar) was attached to "folk." That section was a landmark in terms of saying that this is not just folklore, not just incidental; this is art and art-ful and can be discussed alongside literature as such.

The aphorisms included in *Negro Caravan* are strictly vernacular: "It's hard to make clothes fit a miserable man," "buy-in' on credit is robbin' next year's crop," "De rich git richer and de po' get children", "De quagmire don't hang out no sign." These stylistically differ from Toomer. But the pithy sayings, the vernacular philosophizing, the very idea of pith, or distillation, is common to both and illustrate the way in which Toomer brings an idea of the folk, and rural Southern wisdom, into his well-read "essentials." In folk aphorisms and in the

poems of *Essentials*, declarative statements are meant both to mean and to invite thought, rumination, and interaction.

Ten years before *Essentials*, in 1921, Jean Toomer was twenty-seven years old and had not yet written his masterpiece, *Cane*, which is to say, inaugurated the Harlem Renaissance. He had directed much energy toward thinking about race, gender, and the limitations and possibilities of the body. He had written a literal trunkful of poetry and prose, all of which he considered unsuccessful, pushing at the possibilities of genre and lyric language. We exist beyond language and its parochial limitations, beyond nation, and even beyond the body, his work strove to suggest.

The next year, 1922, James Weldon Johnson would publish *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, the landmark anthology of African-American poetry which asserts that a people is not truly a people until they can demonstrate that they have created a viable literature. Toomer was asked to contribute but does not appear in the volume, inaugurating a central theme in his career of standing and being placed at times squarely within an African-American community, tradition, and mission, but also resisting being classified as a Negro writer.

Unlike many young men of his generation, Toomer missed World War One because of bad eyes "and a hernia gotten in a basketball game." His work experiences are inconsistent but funnel into his writing; after working for ten days in a New Jersey shipyard, he writes to the poet Georgia Douglas Johnson, "Now I know their life, so I've quit. I'll have more time to write." In early 1921 he was not gainfully employed but was reading Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Flaubert, Freud, Buddhist philosophy, writings on occultism and theosophy, and the Bible "as if it were a new book." He attended Georgia Douglas Johnson's famous Saturday night literary salons, which over the twenties were to draw writers such as Langston Hughes, Alain Locke, Angelina Weld Grimke, and Alice Dunbar Nelson. In fact, Toomer is said to have suggested the salons to Johnson. He acquired, in his own words, "the reputation of being a very queer fellow."

In 1921 Toomer had not yet encountered Gurdjieff. He had attended half a dozen colleges without graduating, studying agriculture "of all things" at the University of Wisconsin and physical education at the American College for Physical Train-

ing in Chicago. He was living by his account a rather miserable life in an apartment in Washington DC, tending to his declining grandparents and two uncles. This is the year that Toomer renamed and reinvented himself, as he would again and again, changing his given names from Nathan Eugene Pinchback to Jean, short for Eugene but also after one of his literary heroes, Victor Hugo's character Jean Valjean. He named himself away from the legacy of both his father Nathan and his grandfather, P.B.S. Pinchback.

In this time period before *Cane*, when he was still finding his way as a young person and an artist, Toomer's poetry went further out into a quasi-Esperanto, a language that means to move away from representation of a people or place or nation and rather to primordial utterance that communicates across difference.

Sound Poem (1)

Mon sa me el kirimoor,  
 Ve dice kor, korrاند ve deer  
 Leet vire or sand vite,  
 Re sive tas tor;  
 Tu tas tire or re sim bire  
 Rozan dire ras to por tantor,  
 Dorozire, soron,  
 Bas ber vind can sor, gosham,  
 Mon sa me el, a som on oor.

(Jean Toomer, 1919–1921)

Whether it was Washington, his family situation, youthful angst, or some combination of all, of 1921, around when he wrote that strange and wonderful poem, Toomer wrote, "I felt I would die or murder someone if I stayed in that house another day." So when a chance opportunity arose, Toomer jumped. His break came serendipitously and was unlikely: out of the blue, he was offered the chance to serve as substitute principal and teacher for a few months at Sparta Agricultural and Industrial Institute while the regular principal toured the North to raise funds. Toomer arranged immediately for the temporary care of his grandparents and set off for the Deep South, which he had never seen.

In Sparta, Toomer encountered the Negro culture he feared was dying. He heard the sorrow songs for the first time and, like Du Bois before him, was deeply stirred. Something was unlocked within him. He felt certain this culture and way of life would be lost, and this perception fueled his writing. He found not only his themes but also the *raison d'être* of his themes. When he returned home to Washington after two months, as his train lumbered north he began writing what would become *Cane*.

The writing that boils up as *Cane* is gorgeous, strange, besotted, purple, overwrought. "Her soul is like a little thrust-tailed dog that follows her, whimpering." "Carma in overalls, as strong as any man." "Becky was the white woman who had two Negro sons." "Shake your curled wool-blossoms, nigger. Open your liver-lips to the clean white spring. Stir the root-life of a withered people. Call them from their houses and teach them to dream." It is less about the landscape itself than of the idea of the landscape, the idea of Negroes in the south, their mythos. The names of his characters are as indelible as the characters themselves: Karintha, Rhobert, Carma, Fern, Bona and Paul, King Barlo. As *The Souls of Black Folk* is not written by one who dwells within the particular veil of the Negro South, so too *Cane* is written by an outsider to a culture he had never known. From Sparta he writes to Alain Locke at Howard University, "99% of the people who write and talk about the Negro hardly know his name." In Sparta, he listened for the songs of a people in some ways his own and in some ways utterly other and recorded what he heard, sometimes beautifully, sometimes awkwardly.

*Cane* would be resurrected in the 1960s, when it suited a movement open to the political and aesthetic utility of black essentialisms. Toomer, at that point, has crossed the color line forever, or, rather, become black in another way not delimited by race, human in a fashion not delimited by gender. Was Toomer in denial about his race, ambivalent, or nuanced? Many commentators have weighed in. His years in Washington leading up to the 1921 trip to Georgia suggest that when he was in a context of other people like himself—educated African-Americans of mixed ancestry who were not themselves ambivalent but did not feel the need to continually proclaim racial identity because they were in a common commu-

nity—that he made sense to himself and to others. The crises came when he moved in white circles, and often in his relationships with white women his racial background became an issue. This was true on numerous occasions throughout his life. And black communities like the one where he taught in Sparta were ill-fitting as well.

Toomer's interest in the body, its malleability and ostensible perfectibility was longstanding. He writes of lifting weights and watching his body change dramatically, masturbating compulsively, playing sports and dancing, going on milk and orange juice fasts. Once he became a disciple of Gurdjieff and a teacher of his philosophy, he was no doubt compelled by the spinning, dervish-y dance that was one manifestation of Gurdjieff's philosophy. When Toomer writes about the body, the tension between what is malleable and what is fixed and what can be changed, he also talks about and wonders about what his blood percentages signify. And he continually quests in his writing for a language to transcend English.

Picture Jean Toomer on the train in 1921, traveling north (perhaps in a first-class seat purchased with his principal's salary, where he would be assumed white without having to so declare himself.) He is writing furiously those first words of *Cane*. He of course has no inkling that his career will be written as something of an African-American literary mystery story with a hint of tragedy: He "left the race," encountered difficulty publishing, and never wrote another book as great as *Cane*. To the final point, he wrote, retrospectively: "*Cane* was a swan-song. It was a song of an end. And why no one has seen and felt that, why people have expected me to write a second and a third and a fourth book like *Cane*, is one of the queer misunderstandings of my life." Toomer died in 1967, a light-skinned American writer of African ancestry, in the middle of the Black Arts movement which resurrected the one book for which he would be remembered, a book catalyzed by a chance trip to Sparta, Georgia, in 1921 which begat a masterpiece.

#### 4. "again wild"

The sonnet is a hardy, enduring form that has crossed cultural lines and survived more or less intact for hundreds of

years. It is here to stay. It is a useful, appealing, and flexible form. And though today it is a traditional form, it began as a rebellious one. The sonnet is the first poetic form in what we know as Italian and was written in vernacular, which is to say, not Latin. The tradition is marked with innovation from its roots. And so, to reimagine and reinvigorate it and make it black, if you will, is inevitable work for black poets that opens up innovative possibilities.

In a Dunbar or Cullen sonnet, to look at a few of Gwendolyn Brooks's predecessors within the African-American canon who we know she read and studied, there are not significant conscious challenge to and tussle with the form.<sup>4</sup> The form suits the poets and they spread their wings within it, but they also labor under the expectation that certain rules must be followed in order to assure one's place within the canon. And by the canon, I do not mean a must-read list for freshman English, or an entry in the Norton anthology; I speak of a moment where we were still, as Phillis Wheatley, effectively "proving" our literacy through mastery of European form and thus "proving" our humanity. Dunbar was a soul tormented by many demons who lamented the constraints white audiences placed on his work. According to James Weldon Johnson, Dunbar often said to him. "I've got to write dialect poetry; it's the only way I can get them to listen to me. . . . I have not grown. I am writing the same thing I wrote ten years ago, and I am writing them no better."<sup>5</sup> This had to affect the way he approached the sonnet. In the case of Cullen, he knew that no less a personage than his father-in-law (for a moment) W.E.B. DuBois saw him as the future of the race and its prime ambassador on the cultural front. So writing expertly within prescribed European forms was a particular, if implicit, pressure on his work.

In Brooks's first book, the 1945 volume *A Street in Bronzeville*, she concludes with a series of sonnets on black soldiers who fought in World War II, "Gay Chaps at the Bar." This topic and these poems continue in her second book, the Pulitzer prize-winning *Annie Allen*. In her poetics Brooks profoundly understands and maps the ironies these soldiers faced, fighting for their country but knowing all along or perhaps coming to realize that they would remain second-class citizens—think, for example, of black soldiers who liberated

concentration camps being forced to ride in the back cars of military trains upon their return while German prisoners of war rode in the front—calibrating the faint scrap of hope that there might be what she called “the” progress.

This poem closes *A Street in Bronzeville*:

the progress

And still we wear our uniforms, follow  
 The cracked cry of the bugles, comb and brush  
 Our pride and prejudice, doctor the sallow  
 Initial ardor, wish to keep it fresh.  
 Still we applaud the President's voice and face.  
 Still we remark on patriotism, sing,  
 Salute the flag, thrill heavily, rejoice  
 For death of men who too saluted, sang.  
 But inward grows a soberness, an awe,  
 A fear, a deepening hollow through the cold.  
 For even if we come out standing up  
 How shall we smile, congratulate, and how  
 Settle in chairs Listen, listen. The step  
 Of iron feet again. And again wild.<sup>6</sup>

After the volta or turn of the sonnet it loses the order of the *abab cdcd* rhyme scheme established in the first eight lines. Brooks wants us to know not only that she is writing about the disorder of war, and of the black soldier's ironic place in that world turned upside down, but that the idea of the rightness and inevitability and order of war itself must be dismantled. Rather than start with that “fear” and “soberness,” she recreates the process of getting there so that disillusionment is inscribed in the movement of the poem. This happens with a “But,” where the stoicism and patriotism of the first two stanzas’ (“Still we applaud the President's voice and face”—not a man in flesh but rather his iconicity) end-rhyme scheme falls apart by the “inward” growing “soberness,” “awe,” “fear,” deepening hollow.” War is about pageantry and also about death and absence. And there is no rhetoric adequate to justify it.

The most interesting moment in the poem, the moment where it breaks and surprises, in the final line, is the space Brooks makes between “again” and “wild.” If you scan the line

"Of iron feet again. And again. wild." Da-da Da-da Da-DA DA DA DA DA, the rhythm sounds like something a drummer boy would play on the battlefield. This invokes the Civil War, not World War II, and by bringing the specter of a war in which race was a foregrounded issue, Brooks reminds us of the perennial nature of the black struggle for true citizenship. The rhythm also sounds something like taps, a dirge, a lonely accompaniment to the iron boots, something that will repeat, as "again," and as "still" earlier in the poem, in perpetuity and across blank space.

And what of that space, that void? It marks many things in this poem. It is space of the unspoken, the vowel caught in the throat, the logic that cannot be spoken because it does not exist. It ushers the reader from the order and even rhythm of men marching out of black neighborhoods toward a cause seen as noble and manly into that which is "wild": war, the violent loss of swaths of young and vibrant men. This understanding of "wildness" as an emotional landscape is echoed throughout Brooks's work—think of the use of the word "chaos" in "The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till," for example. The single word explodes the spare composure of the poem, which describes Emmett Till's mother "after the funeral, after the burial," and exposes the volcanic roil.

A larger study might fruitfully survey black poets' use of the caesura. How do we make space in poems and what does that space signify? The unspoken? Euphemism? Keens and wails so profound they cannot be put into words? The violent vast fissure of the Middle Passage; that ocean and crossing and all it represents? All the history that has been eradicated? Existential blackness itself. Room for what is unsaid. These are the "chasms" or "gougings" of race in America that I mentioned earlier. Perhaps, in the case of "the progress," I am merely explaining how an excellent poem in conventional form operates. But what I am trying to do is show how an excellent poet working in conventional form breaks quietly with that form in order that her poetics underscore and enact the very thing she is speaking of. In so doing, she makes the form do something it wasn't expected to and makes an argument for the absolute rightness and necessity of innovating from within that form to make poetry that speaks powerfully to and out of its black reality.

If we take it as a given that, for poets of high skill and unique voice, subject matter bears relationship to form, then to think of the innovative possibilities in subject matter is particularly relevant for African-American poetry because of how circumscribed our subject options have been. Robert Hayden's 1945 sonnet "Frederick Douglass"—he and Brooks wrote and published these poems almost simultaneously—not only used the form to talk about the deep love of community and heroes rather than romantic love, but also interpellated the oral tradition of the sermon, as practiced and mastered by Douglass, and brought a blue note into the poem. These variations on a love poem also lets Douglass be the vessel for undercutting the false hopes pinned on the Negro hero. It is the Negro hero himself who says "no": not statues, not poems, not rhetoric, but rather life.

##### **5. "Jimmy Durante, Marlene Dietrich, Mary McLeod Bethune"**

Langston Hughes's last major poem, "Ask Your Mama," isn't on most radar screens when we think of a Langston Hughes poem. A longer paper would consider what I call late turns, the admirable moments in long careers where a poet opens up and changes course. In this pantheon I would place Brooks's epic "In the Mecca," Hayden's "American Journal," and Hughes's "Ask Your Mama." Here Hughes is doing at the end of his career what we may forget to give him credit for in the beginning, some forty years before: bringing the form now of newer jazz into the poem itself and letting the music suggest shapes that he then alchemizes into literary practice. At the moment in his career when he might settle contentedly into the poetics of America's most beloved Negro poet, he does something new.

This brings us back to the present. One impetus for this essay was a series of conversations with people within and without the black poetry communities in which I felt contemporary experimental black poetry was being narrowly defined without a rich historical investigation of its lineages. The names Will Alexander, Harryette Mullen, Erica Hunt, Nathaniel Mackey, Ed Roberson, Claudia Rankine, and Tracie

Morris are often cited as experimental, and with obvious cause. But to discuss these writers without including a peer discussion of African-American writers who are not placed under that rubric or without placing them in a historical lineage of African-American writers which redefines the experimental is to lose a richer sense of what they are doing. Harryette Mullen's brilliant *Muse and Drudge*, for example, is in conversation with Kevin Young's short-lined, elliptical, humorous lines, but to move backwards in time, she is more than free jazz plus surrealism with a sprinkled blue note. I myself have often stated that Mullen's work is in conversation with my own and pushes me out of my ruts into new places. I have a serious concern that a discussion of poetry which glibly places us into camps within the subgenre, if you will, serves no purpose other than to calcify our thinking about who we are and misname each others' work and intent. It keeps us from fruitful conversations and collaborations. And we mustn't forget how poems are made, how poets think, and how good poetry always refuses the straight line.

When I began my study in the scholarly field of African-American literature, we didn't have the Norton and Oxford anthologies and companions and encyclopedias we have now. The departments for those studies were barely off the ground. With a few significant exceptions, if universities had anyone teaching African-American literature, it was often one person covering three hundred years in all genres. It is a wonderful testament to progress that the one-semester, multi-genre survey is now so clearly insufficient as to seem absurd. But I think we have rested on certain assumptions of who's who and who's in what camp without taking the time (we have hardly had the time) to move carefully back through works not necessarily even widely available when our canon was securing its foothold. And black poetry has not had the sustained critical attention it deserves.

As a poet I am looking for what helps me write a better poem, what pushes me to new possibility and challenges me out of my ruts. That might be found in poems that look like me and very often in poems where the connection is not immediately apprehensible, is perhaps invisible. Thinking about belonging to a community, a fellowship, is one thing, but belonging to a school of writing I think ultimately makes writers

feel limited and rebellious, underestimated and only partially heard. There is always space between what we read about poets and their work and the wider range of influences on them, literary and not. Here, for example, is a statement Langston Hughes made in an autobiographical sketch about his likes, dislikes, and influences: "My chief literary influences have been Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Carl Sandburg and Walt Whitman. My favorite public figures include Jimmy Durante, Marlene Dietrich, Mary McLeod Bethune, Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt, Marian Anderson and Henry Armstrong. I live in Harlem, New York City. I am unmarried. I like 'Tristan,' goat's milk, short novels, lyric poems, heat, simple folk, boats and bullfights; I dislike 'Aida,' parsnips, long novels, narrative poems, cold, pretentious folk, buses and bridges."<sup>7</sup>

Jimmy Durante? Go factor that into a conversation about Hughes's poetics, I say to myself. But it actually isn't hard to do, if you think about Jess B. Simple and Madam Alberta K. Johnson, about Hughes's lifelong exploration of the important role of black humor and the centrality of humor to black expressive culture, about the daring it took to bring humor into the poker-faced space of the upright and upstanding race poem, about his interest in Everyman characters. I could go on. Thus I have become more and more interested in mapping the further and unexpected crossings and influences of writers, connecting the unconnected dots. The work of charting influence of black poets relative to each other and in conversation with other canons is still nascent and in need of careful thinking that evades the prescriptiveness of much conventional wisdom about black artistic complexity and innovation.

I find myself at an interesting moment in my work now, having completed a *New and Selected Poems*, which felt like a process that swept the deck clean, and also having gone through a very intensely public stage the last few years following the Obama inaugural. Though some seemed to think I sailed about the country on a garland-bedecked Matterhorn, waving my Queen Mother wave on behalf of poetry, what is truer is that I scrambled like a madwoman trying to keep up and use the opportunity on behalf of poetry and African-American studies. I wanted to see what was out there. I had the good fortune of experiencing all the ways in which poetry matters so much to so many people and has wide and

surprising readership. I also became a bit of a lightning rod for the strange forces of negativity and ignorance that live on the comment pages of online publications everywhere, and the process of getting my behind kicked and learning to come back to the ballast of the work itself was instructive and has left me more ready for, well, the rest of my life.

Something new, something these poems shake loose.

Making a sound I don't recognize.

The *New and Selected* ends with this poem, which completes the deck-clearing gesture:

One week later in the strange

One week later in the strange  
exhilaration after Lucille's death

our eyes were bright as we received instructions,  
lined up with all we were supposed to do.

Now seers, now grace notes, now anchors, now tellers,  
now keepers and spreaders, now open arms,

the cold wind of generational shift  
blew all around us, stinging our cheeks,

awakening us to the open space  
now everywhere surrounding.

So as far as the poetry that is ahead for me, I turn to these early black innovators to think about how the next poetry can be "something patterned, wild, and free," to quote Hayden, who of course studied here with W. H. Auden and earned a degree in 1944, won a Hopwood prize, and was a teaching assistant and later and until his death, a professor. I am seeking open space. Here are some starting places, first, middle, or last lines, wild hares I don't understand, phrases that set me loose and free:

*Once upon a time every black family and every black  
neighborhood had an Uncle Butch or a Cousin Butchie.*

*It is raining one day and one of my old-school colleague  
says to me, as I head out the door of our building, "better be  
careful, 'cause sweet things melt in the rain!" I have one*

*other old school colleague, who says things to me like, "that's a hellified pocketbook you got there." He says things like hellfied, trickeration, and livin' double in a world of trouble.*

*I want to write a poem called "the invention of the stocking cap," which comes from a wild story with no beginning and no end that my father used to tell, a story which began, "the original stocking cap came from the thigh of Mary McLeod Bethune."*

*I have been thinking about black language, not African-American language but black language, and which black language is on the verge of extinction.*

*I want to write a poem about Anna Douglass's cornbread pan, which I have seen in their home on Cedar Hill. I want to write about his suspenders laid out on the bed, and the portrait in his study of John Brown with a peacock feather stuck in the frame.*

The ravenous poet simply wants to write.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> John Drury, *The Poetry Dictionary* (Cincinnati, OH: Story Press, 1995) 144.

<sup>2</sup> Fenton Johnson, "The Minister," in Robert Hayden, ed., *Kaleidoscope* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1967) 42.

<sup>3</sup> Fenton Johnson, "Tired," in James Weldon Johnson, *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1931) 144-5.

<sup>4</sup> See Marcellus Blount's excellent essay on the history of the African-American sonnet, "Caged Birds: Race and Gender in the Sonnet," in Joseph A. Boone and Michael Cadden, eds., *Engendering Men: The Question of Male Feminist Criticism* (Routledge: New York and London, 1990) 225-238.

<sup>5</sup> Johnson, *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, Preface to the 2nd edition, 35-6.

<sup>6</sup> Gwendolyn Brooks, "the progress," in *A Street in Bronzeville* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1945) 57.

<sup>7</sup> As quoted in Langston Hughes's obituary in the *New York Times*.