

Introduction:

The Forms of Things Unknown

OVERVIEW

Black poetry in the United States has been widely misunderstood, misinterpreted, and undervalued for a variety of reasons—aesthetic, cultural, and political—especially by white critics; but with the exception of the work of a few established figures, it has also been suspect by many Black academicians whose literary judgments are self-consciously “objective” and whose cultural values, while avowedly “American,” are essentially European. This poetry has also been misrepresented in a number of anthologies, not only the so-called integrated ones, but also in some which are exclusively Black. I shall not designate any of these, for my intent is not polemical. Besides, there are many reasons why an anthology may not be “representative.” The central problem, however, is one of selection. If we began with Lucy Terry and Phillis Wheatley, then only brief space could be given to the great quantity of poetry produced during the Harlem Renaissance and later during the sixties. Excellent anthologies have been produced which have deliberately focused on either the earlier periods or on the later ones. However, an attempt should be made in which the *continuity* and the *wholeness* of the Black poetic tradition in the United States are suggested. That tradition exists on two main levels, the written and the oral, which sometimes converge. To illuminate the interaction of these two lines of Black poetry, an anthology could profit from a critical framework, an organizing principle, other than chronology; for, indeed, many crucial questions have been leveled at Black poetry, especially that of the sixties, ranging from the spiteful and splenetic to the quick, intellectual probings of Black people themselves as students and teachers, as critics, as poets and performers. While there is a significant number of statements by the poets themselves regarding their intentions, these are often unknown to the critics or ignored or misin-

terpreted by them. In addition, problems arise as a result of philosophical and political preferences. Other problems arise from an impatience to translate ideological positions into aesthetic ones, even when such translation is both possible and useful. This Black poetry deserves much more serious attention than it now receives, especially from Black academicians and others who profess a concern with cultural clarity, historical accuracy, and social justice.

Art, of course, including literature, does not exist in a vacuum, and reflects—and helps to shape—the lives of those who produce it. It is able to do these things, moreover, because of the special heightening and refining of experience that is characteristic of art. Literature, accordingly, is the verbal organization of experience into beautiful forms, but what is meant by “beautiful” and by “forms” is to a significant degree dependent upon a people’s way of life, their needs, their aspirations, their history—in short, their culture. Ultimately the “beautiful” is bound up with the truth of a people’s history, as they perceive it themselves, and if their vision is clear, its recording just, others may perceive that justness too; and, if they bring to it the proper sympathy and humility, they may even share in the general energy, if not in the specific content of that vision. Since poetry is the most concentrated and the most allusive of the verbal arts, if there is such a commodity as “blackness” in literature (and I assume that there is), it should somehow be found in concentrated or in residual form in the poetry.

The formal or written aspect of the poetic tradition that we are dealing with here reaches back to the eighteenth century, and contains a substantial body of compositions which at their best are the equal of much of the other American poetry of the period. Notable Black poets of this era are Lucy Terry, Phillis Wheatley, Jupiter Hammon, and George Moses Horton. This formal aspect of the Black poetic tradition has been carefully and sensitively studied, and this volume makes no pretense at covering that ground.

Still one can profit from the insight afforded by William

H. Robinson’s scholarly volume, *Early Black American Poets* (William C. Brown Co., Publishers, 1969). In his introduction Professor Robinson states: “. . . if today a college textbook in ‘American Literature’ can include such diverse writings as excerpts from travelogues . . . letters, journals and diaries . . . and if the verse of the likes of Philip Pain, John Josselyn, Edward Coote Pinkney can be included in the *Oxford Anthology of American Literature*, which went through ten (10) printings by 1956, then clearly the efforts of early Black American poets deserve student attention also” (pp. xvi, xvii).

However, even if one approaches poetry as formal, written composition, one soon becomes aware of the other side of the tradition—the unwritten songs, the rhymes, and the speech of Black slaves which have also attracted special attention for a very long time. And if confirmation were needed of early enthusiastic judgments on these compositions, one could easily find it in the texts of the songs which were collected in the nineteenth century, but apparently had been in existence long before then. If one still distrusted one’s own judgment, one could turn to works like R. T. Kerlin’s *Negro Poets and Their Poems* with its sensitive insights into the oral poetry, or to W. E. B. Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk*, or to the essays of Sterling Brown or Alain Locke or to *The Negro Caravan*. However, for my purpose the clearest and most intriguing statement is to be found in Richard Wright’s essay “The Literature of the Negro in the United States,” in which he describes the kind of writing derived from the inner life of the folk as “The Forms of Things Unknown.”

This evocative, almost prophetic phrase suggests an interior dynamism which underlies much of the best of contemporary Black poetry. Although others, before and after Wright, were aware of the potential of building upon Black folk roots, no one had named it so explicitly: almost invariably the earlier critics either thought of refining the folk materials, in the manner of the *Lyrical Ballads*, or of

absorbing them into forms deriving from European music, the opera, for example, and the symphony. Thus Kerlin observes the similarity of the "folk song of the plantation" to the English folk-song tradition and points to a possible line of development for Black poetry.

This unstudied poetry of the people, the unlettered common folk, had supreme virtues, the elemental and universal virtues of simplicity, sincerity, veracity. It had the power, in an artificial age, to bring poetry back to reality, to genuine emotion, to effectiveness, to the common interest of mankind. Simple and crude as it was it had a merit unknown to the polished verse of the schools. Potential Negro poets might do well to ponder this fact of literary history. There is nothing more precious in English literature than this crude old poetry of the people. [p. 18.]

Notwithstanding, Kerlin, as others both white and Black, would emphasize the essentially American, i.e., *white* cultural values and norms to be followed by these "potential Negro poets." He warns the reader not to expect or demand "novelty of language, form, imagery, idea—novelty and quaintness, perhaps amusing 'originality,' or grotesqueness . . .," but, considering the climate of the twenties and the thirties, and, indeed, even the sixties and the seventies, the warning had a certain humane reasonableness. For we remember the patronizing preface which W. D. Howells wrote to Dunbar's *Lyrics of Lowly Life*, and we remember the equally patronizing preface which Allen Tate wrote to Tolson's *Libretto for Liberia*, as well as Karl Shapiro's foreword to *Harlem Gallery*, and the pontifications of an Albert Goldman, on blues singers and Black poets. And for those who see parallels between the Harlem Renaissance and the present, most apparent certainly must be the cult of the Exotic Negro, which so disgusted Langston Hughes. And in the middle ground of the picture, between Langston Hughes and the Last Poets, there is the remarkable achievement of Gwendolyn Brooks, which poet-critic Louis Simpson dismissed in a review in the *New York Herald-Tribune*

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(1963) because he was "not sure it is possible for a Negro to write well without making us aware he is a Negro; on the other hand, if being a Negro is the only subject, the writing is not important. . . ." His opinion seems fairly widespread, despite the evaluation by another brilliant poet, Margaret Walker Alexander (*Black Expression*, p. 97).

What we are speaking about now, to be clear, is the question of form, theme, and invention in Black poetry, and the means for assessing them. We thus raise the questions: What is Black poetry? Who is to judge Black poetry? How is it to be judged?

To the first, we may logically say that Black poetry is chiefly:

1. Any poetry by any person or group of persons of known Black African ancestry, whether the poetry is designated Black or not.
2. Poetry which is somehow *structurally* Black, irrespective of authorship.
3. Poetry by any person or group of known Black African ancestry, which is *also identifiably* Black, in terms of structure, theme, or other characteristics.
4. Poetry by any identifiably Black person who can be classed as a "poet" by Black people. Judgment may or may not coincide with judgments of whites.
5. Poetry by any identifiably Black person whose ideological stance vis-à-vis the history and the aspirations of his people since slavery is adjudged by them to be "correct."

Each of these statements poses certain serious and wide-ranging problems of an aesthetic, sociological, historical, political, and critical nature. Each of them suggests a limited means for understanding the scope of Black poetry, and I raise them chiefly to stimulate creative discussion. I have no illusion about answering them completely. Notwithstanding, I do have a position, which is that these questions can not be resolved without considering the ethnic roots of Black poetry, which I insist are ultimately understood only

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by Black people themselves. Be that as it may, let me try, for the sake of clarity, to suggest some of the questions which are implicit in the five formulations.

In No. 1, these questions can be raised. Is there a quality, condition, construction, or composition that can be called "poetry" wherever it is found? Is there, in other words, a poem that everyone would agree to as being a poem, a "universal" poem? Some people obviously think so, and thus we find anthologies of the "best" in American poetry, or the "best" in world poetry, even in world *literature*. And, certainly, there are numerous attempts to define poetry, oftentimes with elaborate theoretical formulations.

Accordingly, there are collections of poetry which contain some "universal" poems that were written by persons who incidentally *happened* to be Black. There is a long and complex history surrounding this kind of argument, involving poets like Countee Cullen on the one hand and some of our most respected critics and scholars on the other. For my part, I confess that the only "universal" commodity that I feel at all certain about is the hydrogen atom.

However, there are working definitions of poetry that are subscribed to by people within the same general cultural framework. Thus, on the basis of criteria developed out of a specific kind of writing, one could say that a certain passage from Phillis Wheatley is better than one from Anne Bradstreet, or that a given passage from Pope is better than both of the others. But whether a passage in the heroic couplet is better or more "poetic" than a passage in blank verse is certainly no easy matter to resolve. Whether everyone should write in a given form because it is accepted by the literary establishment is certainly a relevant and very difficult question.

Statement No. 2 raises the problem of national poetic forms, themes, and temperament. With specific reference to Black poetry, one raises the question of "characteristic" Black forms and expressions. Are there any? What are they? This makes us aware of the need for a serious consideration

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of "Negritude" as well as of the historical evolution of poetic forms in the Black World, i.e., Africa and the Diaspora.

Statement No. 3 raises the same kinds of questions in more detail. What, for example, distinguishes a Claude McKay sonnet from a sonnet by Longfellow? Is the difference a quality that is common to all, or only to a representative number of Black sonneteers? Is it possible that, given a Black Poetic Structure, a non-Black can create in this form—as whites play jazz, for example? Or as Blacks sing Italian opera?

Statement No. 4 raises the question, Who is a poet? Are the answers the same for all people, in all times? Is the concept of the poet *relevant* to an extended discussion of Black poetry? Is the Baptist preacher who describes the Last Judgment or the Valley of the Dry Bones a poet? Is the blues singer/composer a poet? Is Melvin Tolson a greater poet than James Brown?

Statement No. 5 raises an extremely important question, especially when dealing with contemporary Black poetry. Is the conservative James Weldon Johnson as good a poet as the radical W. E. B. Du Bois? Further, is all of the ideologically "correct" material found in *The Journal of Black Poetry* equally valid as Black poetry? Should one judge? Various poets have said or implied that a relevant criticism is necessary to the development of Black poetry, and some of them have written articles and reviews which express their positions.*

* Stanley Crouch, for example, has made important statements in "Toward a Purer Black Poetry Esthetic," *Journal of Black Poetry*, I, 10, 1968, pp. 28, 29, and in "The Big Feeling," *Negro Digest*, July, 1969, pp. 45-48. Other important statements have been made by Clarence Major in "A Black Criterion," *Journal of Black Poetry*, Spring, 1967, pp. 15, 16; Askia Muhammad Touré, "Black Magic!" *Journal of Black Poetry*, I, 10, 1968, pp. 63, 64; Carolyn Rodgers, "Black Poetry—Where It's At," *Negro Digest*, September, 1969, and more recently in "Uh Nat'chal Thang—The Whole Truth—Us," *Black World*, September, 1971, pp. 4-14; Mari Evans, "Contemporary Black Literature," *Black World*, June, 1970, pp. 4, 93-94. Larry Neal's and Imamu Baraka's statements are well known. To these must be added the observations of Don L. Lee in his new *Dynamite Voices #1*, Broadside Press, 1971.

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Besides the poets themselves there are the professional and the academic critics. Some of them sympathize with the views of the poets, some of them do not. At any rate, whether the poets want it or not, readers and listeners will judge. Certainly poets expect it. The question thus should be: Who is best qualified to judge Black poetry? Black people obviously should judge, since the poetry—at least the contemporary poetry—is directed to them. The question then arises: Are all Black people equally endowed with the poetic talent? With the critical talent? Who decides? Black English teachers brought up on English literature? Or the man in the street? Or the ideologue who raises the “correct” questions? Is Maulana Karenga a better critic than Addison Gayle, or Saunders Redding, or Don L. Lee, or George Kent? Or Larry Neal?

There should be, of course, a way of speaking about all kinds of Black poetry, despite the kinds of questions that can be raised. In our attempts to clarify such a method, it might be wise to speak more specifically about the poetry itself, in addition to the critical premises stated above.

Although it is an arbitrary scheme for the purpose of analysis, one may describe or discuss a “Black” poem in terms of the following broad critical categories: (1) Theme, (2) Structure, (3) Saturation.

(1) By *theme* I mean that which is being spoken of, whether the specific subject matter, the emotional response to it, or its intellectual formulation.

(2) By *structure* I mean chiefly some aspect of the poem such as diction, rhythm, figurative language, which goes into the total makeup. (At times, I use the word in an extended sense to include what is usually called genre.)

(3) By *saturation* I mean several things, chiefly the communication of “Blackness” and fidelity to the observed or intuited truth of the Black Experience in the United States. It follows that these categories should also be valid in any critical evaluation of the poem.

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THEME

Of the three categories, perhaps the simplest and most apparent is theme. In the following quatrain by George Moses Horton, for example, the “Blackness” is apparent in what he is speaking about, his historical situation as a Black slave in the United States.

Alas! and am I born for this,
To wear this slavish chain,
Deprived of all created bliss,
Through hardships, toil and pain!

Or another simple example might be Cullen’s “To Make a Poet Black,” with its bitter concluding couplet:

Yet do I marvel at this curious thing,
To make a poet black and bid him sing.*

It could be easily argued that both Horton and Cullen are really dealing with the universal theme of rebellion against oppression, and that Black poets have no monopoly on the theme. To that there can be varied response, but the significant point is that poetry because of its very nature—sensuous and rooted in particular experience—is not the same as philosophy or mathematics. Thus, though “slavish chain” might evoke a sympathetic tear from the eye of a white New York professor meditating upon his people’s enslavement in ancient Egypt, that makes the poem no less valid

* All thematic materials are certainly not this obvious and direct, but on a very low level of perception we can be alerted to racial content this way. Ambiguities, of course, exist. For example, if a non-Black writer elected to write on a “Black theme” using a Black persona, and if he were as successful in absorbing Black expressive patterns as some musicians are, then, indeed there would be real problems. As far as I know, there are no poems written by non-Blacks which have that degree of success. But there is a considerable body of “dialect” poetry from whites to indicate what I mean. In addition, there are various poetical works like Blake’s “Little Black Boy,” as well as prose fiction like *Othello*, *Oroonoko*, *Uncle Remus*.

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as a "Black statement." However, this ambiguity does make it a less precise kind of statement than Cullen's, because in the latter the irony cannot be appreciated without understanding the specific historical debasement of the African psyche in America. Other questions raised under the rubric of "universal theme" can be answered basically in the same way.

It should be understood from the outset that a Black poet may develop a theme which stems directly out of his experience, colored, so to speak, by his Blackness, but not communicate that Blackness, unless one go outside the poem itself. This we may choose not to do. If we do, however, the action, I think, would be perfectly valid. To test the validity of this statement, let us read the following sonnet:

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;
Coral is far more red than her lips' red;
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.
I have seen roses damask'd, red and white,
But no such roses see I in her cheeks;
And in some perfumes is there more delight
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.
I love to hear her speak, yet well I know
That music hath a far more pleasing sound;
I grant, I never saw a goddess go;
My mistress when she walks treads on the ground:
And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare
As any she belied with false compare.

This, of course, is Shakespeare's sonnet No. 130. But, if we discovered one day that it had been composed by an African at Elizabeth's court, would not the thematic meaning change? Perhaps formalist critics would not publicly admit the point, but a culturally oriented critic would. So, knowledge of the author's race altered our point of view, i.e., going outside of the poem changed our perspective of it.

There are more difficult questions regarding theme, which cannot be discussed abstractly or by simple example. Such

questions are: Is there a special theme or cluster of themes which run throughout Black poetry? Are there Black themes which apparently cannot be handled by non-Black writers? This question was raised by W. S. Braithwaite in "The Negro in American Literature," *The New Negro*, p. 35, but in the broader context of all of Black literature, not just poetry. He states, ". . . in spite of all good intentions, the true presentation of the real tragedy of Negro life is a task still left for Negro writers to perform. This is especially true for those phases of culturally representative race life that as yet have scarcely at all found treatment by white American authors." Present-day poets and many critics too—as the response to William Styron's *Nat Turner* shows—would deny the ultimate validity of any white presentation of the Black Experience in art.

Historical surveys such as Brawley's *Early Negro American Writers*, Brown, Davis, and Lee's *The Negro Caravan*, and Robinson's *Early Black Poets* suggest that there are indeed thematic clusters in Black poetry around what could be called the idea of Liberation. And when we move to the present, we must consider certainly the essays by Richard Wright and the critical statements by the poets themselves in which they express their intent that, as a rule, follows the historical consciousness of the people. This is to say, that as Black people in the United States refine and clarify their conceptions of themselves the poetry reflects the process.

The early formal Black poetry reflected the concerns of those who were trained to read and to write. Thus, to follow Sterling Brown's account, there were those poets whose chief object was to demonstrate their ability to write as well as the whites, as in the case of Albery Whitman and the "Mockingbird School of Poets." Other poets, like James Bell and Frances Ellen Harper, used their talents in the abolitionist cause. Another group wrote in dialect and took for their subject matter the lives of the common folk which they sometimes caricatured in the manner of white writers like Thomas Nelson Page. Others, like Paul Laurence Dun-

bar and James Edwin Campbell, while still influenced by white stereotypes and the expectations of white audiences, presented wholesome, if not altogether realistic, portraits of Black folk life. The period preceding the Harlem Renaissance not only produced the dialect poets but found many Black poets studiously avoiding overt racial considerations in a manner reminiscent of the late forties and the fifties. "Poetry was a romantic escape for many of them," states Brown, "not a perception of reality. . . ."

Although there were attempts at realistic depiction of Black life before they came on the scene, the writers of the Harlem Renaissance were the first to do this in a systematic manner, as even a cursory look at the period will reveal. One recalls Langston Hughes's famous declaration in "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain":

These common people are not afraid of spirituals, as for a long time their more intellectual brethren were, and jazz is their child. They furnish a wealth of colorful, distinctive material for any artist because they still hold their own individuality in the face of American standardizations. And perhaps these common people will give to the world its truly great Negro artist, the one who is not afraid to be himself. Whereas the better-class Negro would tell the artist what to do, the people at least let him alone when he does appear. And they are not ashamed of him—if they know he exists at all. And they accept what beauty is their own without question.

[*Black Expression*, pp. 259, 260.]

Notwithstanding the bravery of this kind of effort, Hughes and other realistic writers of his generation were sharply censured by middle-class members of their own race, including W. E. B. Du Bois and Benjamin Brawley (*Negro Genius*, p. 248), for portraying the "seamy side" of Black life. Seen in retrospect, the poetry of this group, the poetry of the twenties, helped to balance the pieties of the abolitionist writers on the one hand and the bucolic idylls of the dialect school on the other. Alain Locke's essay entitled "The

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New Negro," which appeared in his larger "statement," the epoch-making volume of the same name, brought the issues into focus. Afro-Americans had come of age; they could look at themselves for what they were, without false piety and without shame, rejecting the "social nostrums and the panaceas," and realizing that although religion, freedom, and education were important to their cause, they alone were not sufficient. What was needed was group solidarity and collective effort.

Each generation . . . will have its creed, and that of the present is the belief in the efficacy of collective effort, in race cooperation. This deep feeling of race is at present the mainspring of Negro life. It seems to be the outcome of the reaction to proscription and prejudice; an attempt, fairly successful on the whole, to convert a defensive into an offensive position, a handicap into an incentive. It is radical in tone, but not in purpose and only the most stupid forms of opposition, misunderstanding or persecution could make it otherwise. Of course, the thinking Negro has shifted a little toward the left with the world-trend, and there is an increasing group who affiliate with radical and liberal movements. But fundamentally for the present the Negro is radical on race matters, conservative on others, in other words, a "forced radical," a social protestant rather than a genuine radical. Yet under further pressure and injustice, iconoclastic thought and motives will inevitably increase. Harlem's quixotic radicalisms call for their ounce of democracy to-day lest to-morrow they be beyond cure.

[*New Negro*, p. 11.]

Locke's analysis was essentially correct. Unfortunately his warning was not heeded, and although the "stupid forms of opposition," the "misunderstanding," and the "persecution" which he warned against seemed to be abating during the Civil Rights Movement of the fifties and sixties, the failure of Dr. King's Northern Campaign which linked the anti-war and the Civil Rights issues, and his assassination in 1968 in-

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licated that the country still intended to keep its Black citizens in subjection.

Disenchantment with the goals and strategies of the Civil Rights Movement led to the Black Power Movement and the subsequent widespread revival of nationalist and internationalist feeling and thought among Blacks. To the extent that Black artists today have influenced their community to view itself in the larger political and spiritual context of Blackness, they have moved beyond the Harlem Renaissance, though obviously influenced by it. The old theme of liberation took on new meaning. Thus the Black Arts Movement, though emerging before the Black Power Movement, is in some respects the cultural dimension of that phenomenon. Numerous eloquent spokesmen have appeared, among them Imamu Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), Larry Neal, Ron Karenga, and Don L. Lee.

In their statements, one can see the process of self-definition made clearer and sharper as the self-reliance and racial consciousness of an earlier period are revived and raised to the level of revolutionary thought.

The present movement is different from the Harlem Renaissance in the extent of its attempt to speak directly to Black people *about themselves* in order to move them toward self-knowledge and collective freedom. It is therefore not "protest" art but essentially an art of liberating vision. Larry Neal is probably its most articulate proponent. He states that when Black artists speak of the need to address the psychic and spiritual needs of their people,

They are not speaking of an art that screams and masturbates before white audiences. That is the path of Negro literature and civil rights literature. No, they are not speaking about that kind of thing, even though that is what some Negro writers of the past have done. Instead, they are speaking of an art that addresses itself directly to Black People; an art that speaks to us in terms of our feelings and ideas about the world; an art that validates the positive aspects of our life style. Dig: An art that opens

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us up to the beauty and ugliness within us; that makes us understand our condition and each other in a more profound manner; that unites us, exposing us to our painful weaknesses and strengths; and finally, an art that posits for us the Vision of a Liberated Future.

["Any Day Now: Black Art and Black Liberation,"
Ebony, August, 1969, pp. 55, 56.]

A difference in emphasis, in depth, in scope, and political maturity is thus evident when one considers the Harlem Renaissance, but many of these developments were possible because of the changing world in which Black Americans of the post-World War II generation found themselves, a world in which articulate men and women rediscovered Africa and Pan-Africanism, rediscovered Du Bois and Garvey, rediscovered the Harlem Renaissance itself and built upon its strengths while seeking to avoid its errors. The process is continuing, as a careful examination of Neal's statement would show, for in its polemical dimension it calls attention, in fact, to the problems which still beset Black art. There is still, for example, a sizeable amount of masturbatory art that screams "whitey" and "honkie." But that too is changing under the advice of artists like Mari Evans, in critical essays and in poems like "Speak the Truth to the People." Askia Touré is another who has contributed to a growing general awareness by Black intellectuals that there are more important things to do than to amuse supercilious whites or to respond to their misunderstanding of Black creative efforts.

This awareness is especially meaningful when we hear it expressed by Gwendolyn Brooks. In a lecture at Clark College, in Atlanta, Georgia, April 26, 1971, Miss Brooks stated that she could not imagine herself today writing the kind of poem whose theme was a pleading of her humanity to a larger white society, as she had done years earlier in the words:

Men of careful turns, haters of forks in the road,
The strain at the eye, that puzzlement, that awe—

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Grant me that I am human, that I hurt,
That I can cry.*

[*Selected Poems*, p. 65.]

In spite of false starts, meandering, backsliding, and illusory goals, the great overarching movement of consciousness for Black people must be called, in contemporary parlance, the idea of Liberation—from slavery, from segregation and degradation, from wishful “integration” into the “mainstream,” to the passionate denial of white middle-class values of the present and an attendant embrace of Africa and the Third World as alternative routes of development. This is not to say, of course, that all contemporary Black poets mean the same thing by Liberation, or even that they speak very precisely for the Black masses when they use that term, but if one substituted the old word “Freedom” for it, there would be no doubt at all that the message is clear. At any rate, it should be clear that not only have the Black professionals organized themselves around varying concepts of Liberation, but so also have innumerable other groups, some representing and having direct contact with the masses. But perhaps the most striking embodiment of this Liberation consciousness has occurred among Black prisoners, as the Attica uprising of September 9, 1971, indicates. Some Blacks see the uprising as a failure of revolutionary resolve because of the divisiveness among the prisoners and their seeming inability to make good on their threats to execute their hostages and fight to the death. Another view appears in a report from

* Because of her importance as a distinguished poet and a catalyst of the present generation of artists and writers, especially of the Chicago-based OBAC group, Miss Brooks's words and attitudes distill the essential heroism of writers like Alain Locke, and makes them meaningful to us in these crucial times. Other writers have served a similar function, among them Langston Hughes, and Sterling Brown, “Black grandfathers of the new poetry.” It must be understood, however, that although I have called attention to a few, there are other important and influential writers who have helped to clarify the shift in consciousness from Black endurance and pride to revolutionary awakening, and in any assessment of that function one must certainly name Margaret Walker, Dudley Randall, Sam Allen, Hoyt Fuller, Mari Evans, James Emanuel, and Margaret Danner.

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The Institute of the Black World, an independent research organization based in Atlanta, Georgia. The report describes the political significance in these terms:

Attica is a new event in history. Nothing like it has ever happened before. It is a symbol that black men whom white society has consigned to its deepest dungeons have, instead of succumbing, rediscovered themselves and re-educated themselves to rise up and strike back at the system which intended that they should never survive at all—and certainly not as men. But beyond the symbolism are the immense practical achievements of the brothers.

After listing these achievements, it goes on to state:

The men of Attica were different from their captors. One brother said, “I am Attica.” He meant that he was the new reality, the embodiment of change that Attica and all American institutions must undergo. . . . In order to sustain the revolt at Attica some new moral and political force had to be created, some new set of values. What was it? What was new about the black prisoners which made their revolt unlike any other that had happened before? . . . The prisoners seized Attica and ran it *autonomously* and *humanely*. With compassion for their enemies. This is what is new. This is what the non-official “visitors” who got inside could not believe.

[*IBW Monthly Report*, Sept., 1971.]

Whether the masses of Black people accept this position, the first one, or some other, the cultural dimension of the event lies in the fact that Black writing—not only the works of Malcolm X and Fanon, but the poetry of Etheridge Knight and Don L. Lee and Claude McKay—had helped to shape the prisoners' new values, had increased their self-esteem and sharpened their political awareness, just as it has affected a whole generation of Black college students on all levels. Ironically, for it shows with graphic precision the arrogant ignorance which established institutions have of the Black Arts Movement, and, deeper, of Black history and aspirations

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—ironically, a *Time* magazine story which purported to be an in-depth study of the rebellion noted that Black prisoners were inspired by original writings by the prisoners themselves, among which was “a poem written by an unknown prisoner, crude but touching in its would-be heroic style” (*Time*, Sept. 7, 1971, p. 20). And in demonstration of what he meant, the *Time* writer included the opening lines of Claude McKay’s famous sonnet, “If We Must Die.” This was crude! True, the prisoner who copied the lines had written “unglorious” for McKay’s “inglorious.” But crude! Winston Churchill, of course, had better taste, and better judgment. In the abysmal early days of World War II when Great Britain was struggling for its very life against Nazi Germany, when all of Western Europe had been overrun, and France itself had been crushed—in those bitter times for the British people—Winston Churchill, the Prime Minister of Great Britain and its greatest leader of modern times, galvanized the British Parliament and the will of the English people with the ringing words of this self-same sonnet, written by a young Jamaican two decades earlier, while he smarted from the same kind of institutionalized racism that Hitler’s Germany was inflicting upon its neighbors. The crowning irony, of course, is that few people knew that McKay was Black or bothered to think, if they knew it, that his homeland Jamaica was an exploited British colony with a history of bloody suppression, or, for that matter, that his adopted homeland America though subtle, at times, was hardly less brutal. And now twenty odd years after his death, amidst the intellectual ambivalence which surrounds the Harlem Renaissance, his explosive words, though literally baffled by the sonnet form, still inspire hope and revolutionary courage in the minds of men whom their country had declared to be an economic and spiritual surplus.

But though the great theme of Black poetry, and, indeed, of Black life in the United States is Liberation, there are important complementary patterns, some of which take us outside the dimension of history into the universal realm of

the mythical. In the oral tradition, the dogged determination of the work songs, the tough-minded power of the blues, the inventive energy of jazz, and the transcendent vision of God in the spirituals and the sermons, all energize the idea of Liberation, which is itself liberated from the temporal, the societal, and the political—not with the narcotic obsession to remain above the world of struggle and change and death, but with full realization of a return to that world both strengthened and renewed. Thus in the spirituals we have both:

Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt land.
Tell ol Pharaoh to let my people go.

and

Drinkin’ of the wine, wine, wine,
Drinkin’ of the wine
I ought to bin to Heaven ten thousand years
Drinkin’ of the wine.

In the blues we find these haunting lines from Robert Johnson:

I got to keep movinn’, I got to keep movinnn’,
Blues fallin’ down like hail, blues fallin’ down like hail,
Mmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm, blues fallin’
down like hail, blues fallin’ down like hail,
And the days keep on worryin’ me, for a hell-hound
on my trail,
Hell-hound on my trail, hell-hound on my trail.

But we also find this famous anonymous line, which seems a distillation of the blues spirit:

I got the blues, but I’m too damn mean to cry.

And in Furry Lewis’ “White Lightnin’ Blues,” the blues not only represent spiritual paralysis, but liberation through sexuality.

Baby, fix my breakfast, so I can go to bed,
Baby, fix my breakfast, so I can go to bed,

I been drinkin' white lightnin' and it's done gone
to my head.

Got the blues so bad, it hurts my feet to walk,
Got the blue so bad, it hurts my feet to walk;
It wouldn't hurt so bad, but it hurts my tongue to talk.

Not only that, but also this resolution in the affirmative:

The train I ride sixteen coaches long,
The train I ride sixteen coaches long;
She don't haul nothin' but chocolate to the bone.

And even in the contemporary poetry, with all of its pre-occupation with the immediate problems of political assertion and the raising of consciousness and the celebration of the Black cities, there is a pronounced concern with the spiritual, sometimes rooted in the idiom of the Black church, sometimes exploring religious concepts of Islam and African religions, sometimes seeking analogues to modern music. Some of the poets who reflect this concern with the spiritual are W. Keorapetse Kgositsile, Don Lee, Imamu Baraka (LeRoi Jones), and Larry Neal. In this volume the pattern is found in poems like Baraka's "I Am Speaking of Future Good-ness and Social Philosophy," Sharon Bourke's "Soprano-sound, Memory of John," and Larry Neal's "Morning Raga for Malcolm," with the lines:

I now calm airily float
lift my spirit—Allah you
am me. space undulates
under me, space, to my sides
and under me nothing
I now calm airily float

There are, of course, other thematic patterns that Black poetry handles. But even in the purely personal concerns, say, of some of Paul Laurence Dunbar's "nonracial" poems, or of Countee Cullen's or Walter Dancy's, there are patterns that one can call "Black," if one accepts the critical premises of this essay. So, there are, then, Black poems in which the

theme is apparent, such as the personal concern of Horton as a Black person in the previously quoted quatrain. One might also include in this group Dunbar's bitter lament in "The Poet," Cullen's "Heritage" and some of the poetry of Langston Hughes.

A step toward objectification and distancing of personal involvement occurs when the poet depicts either real or imaginary Black figures. Here the technique, of course, merges with that of other literary traditions, at times rather obviously so, as in the case of the realistic writers of the thirties being under the influence of Carl Sandburg, E. A. Robinson, and other American whites. However, it must be remembered that there is a Black storytelling tradition which is also at work, and sometimes it is consciously being followed. At any rate, this depiction of Black character deals with historical figures like Frederick Douglass, in Robert Hayden's poem; Malcolm X, as in Margaret Walker and James Emanuel; Martin L. King, Jr., as in Mari Evans, Margaret Danner, and Donald Graham; Nat Turner, as in Robert Hayden and Margaret Walker. At times it deals with Black musical figures, whose lives become vehicles for comment by the poet, as in the various poems on Coltrane by Don Lee, Sonia Sanchez, and others; Bessie Smith, by Robert Hayden; Ma Rainey, by Sterling Brown; Duke Ellington, by Sarah Fabio. In addition, there are musical figures who may or may not be historical, such as Dunbar's "Malindy" and "Whistling Sam."

Similarly, Black literary figures also become the subject of various poems. Among the figures thus treated are Countee Cullen, Richard Wright, Paul Dunbar, Langston Hughes, and Gwendolyn Brooks.

A final group of character poems includes larger-than-life figures such as Stack O'Lee, Shine, and John Henry. In all of this, of course, the poet can pursue whatever theme related to the Black Experience he finds meaningful. Of course, few white writers find these subjects meaningful enough to write about.

Some of these concerns, as I have implied earlier, are common to poets outside of the Black tradition as well, so I need not try to enumerate or to discuss them. Others have been dealt with in summary form, but it might be of value to return to the poetry of the Harlem Renaissance and to compare its concerns with those of the present.

Sterling Brown's succinct statement is an indispensable point of departure. Speaking of the Renaissance poetry, he points out its five chief areas of interest:

- (1) a discovery of Africa as a source for race pride, (2) a use of Negro heroes and heroic episodes from American History, (3) propaganda of protest, (4) a treatment of the Negro masses frequently of the folk, less often of the workers with more understanding and less apology, and (5) franker and deeper self-revelation.

[*Negro Poetry & Drama*,
Atheneum ed., 1969, p. 61.]

Some of these concerns are also those of contemporary Black poetry, but with an important difference of emphasis. For example, in the rediscovery of Africa as a source for race pride, poets of the sixties were better informed generally about the true nature of African civilizations and, as a rule, were especially concerned about the political relevance of modern Africa to the rest of the Black World. This obviously has been the result of the emergence of free African states during the past two decades as well as the rise of interest among American Blacks in their continental brothers and sisters. The role of the media cannot be overestimated in this phenomenon, especially when Black men in the General Assembly of the United Nations, dressed in their native garb, were shown on television intelligently debating issues of international significance. A further related factor undoubtedly has been the influx of African students into the colleges and universities of the United States, especially into the Black ones. Then, one must consider the Black Power Movement and its extensions in the Black Arts Movement,

the national concern with Black Studies and the subsequent reprinting of quality materials on Africa, and finally the resurgence of interest in Pan-Africanism. In all of this, Alain Locke's essay "The New Negro" presently reads almost like prophecy. In sum, if the concern in the twenties was largely romantic, in the sixties, though at times not unromantic, it has been chiefly political.

With regard to the second point, "a use of Negro heroes and heroic episodes," we have already referred to the contemporary popularity of Black historical figures as subjects of poetry. However, it must be noted that the single most popular hero of contemporary Black poetry is Malcolm X, not Martin Luther King, Jr. And the heroes, whoever they are, do not apologize to America, nor plead, but seek to affirm their right to self-definition and manhood, with all that that implies. And the episodes in American history are viewed as episodes in "Black history," so it is not Peter Salem who interests the present generation but Nat Turner. And Black history also means African history and African heroes, Chaka, Kenyatta, Lumumba, Nyeryere, Nkrumah.

There has been, despite denials, some protest poetry in the sixties, as I have implied, but for the most part the message of that period, unlike that of earlier times, has been directed toward Black audiences, even though the poet knew that the white world was looking over his shoulder.

What Brown stated in his fourth point is still true of Black poetry. Although the "masses" appear frequently in the poetry of the sixties, there is to my knowledge little or no treatment of the Black worker as subject. Perhaps this is due to a comparative lack of sympathy with Marxist thought, perhaps to ideological unclarity, perhaps to a tendency to concentrate on heroic figures, martyrs, hustlers, and other romanticized types who go counter to the "mainstream" of American life.

Point number five, "franker and deeper self-revelation," indicates an important difference between the poetry of the Renaissance and that of the present; the tendency since the

sixties has been mainly toward public statement, toward didacticism, and toward collective ritual. Thus it is not surprising that some of the poets are also dramatists and musicians and artists. I think one can safely generalize that much of the poetry of self-revelation written and published during this period is either by poets whose chronological age puts them in the fifties, at least, or by very young poets who are caught up in the introspection of adolescence. Notwithstanding, it is curious that much of contemporary poetry avoids the character drawing which was so prominent a part of the earlier production, from Paul Laurence Dunbar to Gwendolyn Brooks. Again, however, the exceptions are the older poets who have managed to keep attuned to the times. The question of form and personal habit may have something to do with this. At any rate, the younger poet will usually rap or declaim or sing, but if he wants to create a Black character for one purpose or another, he usually turns to drama or to the short story, as in the case of Sonia Sanchez, Carolyn Rodgers, and S. E. Anderson. Perhaps, finally, their method is dictated by their objectives. They want to speak as directly to the community as they can. At times they succeed, even when it entails not only speaking to a college audience but to a cynical gathering of people at a poolroom or bar, as the OBAC writers have done. More recently, the poets have been experimenting with more effective ways of reaching a mass audience, and the result has been the recording of LP albums which are played on the air, the use of the church as a forum, as in the case of Nikki Giovanni, and TV appearances, like those by the Last Poets. As I pointed out earlier, these poets are being heard and they are being understood by the people whom they address.

Sometimes a poet in his effort at self-revelation moves outside of the immediate concerns of the Black Community. Some of the poems of Mari Evans, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Robert Hayden appear to do this. Nevertheless, our mere awareness of them as Black persons helps to shape our response to the poem, and this is so whether or not the poet

wants us to consider him as other than a poet pure and simple, or for that matter, pure and complex. The fact of the matter is that the Black Community does not intend to give up any of its beautiful singers, whether Countee Cullen or Melvin Tolson or Robert Hayden. We may quarrel with them sometimes, but ain't never gonna say good-bye.

STRUCTURE

Structure in Black poetry in some respects is the most difficult of the three elements which I have chosen for discussion. In the two examples used earlier, Horton uses a quatrain modeled on the English hymn, while Cullen uses the Shakespearean sonnet. And to complicate the matter, Claude McKay, the most militantly Black poet of his generation, uses the sonnet also, in a manner in which his thematic intention is unmistakable. We and the poets of our day have the problem of form to contend with as well, for often there is little (sometimes nothing) on the page to tell a reader at first sight that a "Black" poem was not indeed composed by e. e. cummings, Jack Spicer, or Paul Blackburn.

Professor W. E. Farrison, one of the outstanding scholars in the field of Afro-American literature, is noticeably peeved, for example, in a review of *Today's Negro Voices: An Anthology by Young Negro Poets*, edited by Beatrice M. Murphy (Julian Messner, 1970). He questions the inclusion of certain poems for their deficiency "in the harmony of sound and clear sense which is essential to good poetry." Then he singles out the kind of typographical stylistics which were popularized by e. e. cummings. He tries to hold his peace, but finds it difficult.

Now as is evidenced by the long history of the art of writing, if a writer can express himself well without the aid of capitals and punctuation, he can most probably express himself better with it; and if he cannot express himself well with their aid, it is doubtful that he can express himself better without it.

[*CLA Journal*, XIV, no. 1, 1970, p. 96.]

Although one could quarrel with the excessively stringent concept of poetry found in this review, it isn't difficult to sympathize with Farrison's impatience, because a good deal

of modern poetry—white and Black—not only makes excessive demands on the reader's eyesight but tends too often to degenerate into artifice that however clever bears little real relationship to the oral aspect of the poem. Indeed, this emphasis on the visual has extensive and tenacious roots in Western poetry, not only in the cryptograms which Dryden satirized in *Macflecknoe*, but in the poetry of George Herbert, and long before him the Greek poems in the shape of altars, wings, and the like, which date from Simmias' poem in the shape of an egg in 300 B.C. (See *Art News Annual*, XXVIII, 1958, pp. 64-68, 178.) This tradition has also influenced modern Black poets, like Joe Goncalves in his "Now the Time Is Ripe to Be" and "Sister Brother," both appearing in *Black Fire*, LeRoi Jones and Larry Neal, eds. (William Morrow & Co., 1968), and N. H. Pritchard's various "concrete" poems in *Dices or Black Bones*, Adam David Miller, ed. (Houghton Mifflin Co., 1970).

Still if one is seriously interested in contemporary Black poetry, then one must examine some of the bases of this confusion. One must admit that typographically, at least, contemporary Black poets have been greatly influenced by white poets and frequently admit it, at least the older ones do. Imamu Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) has said on several occasions that he owes a great technical debt to William Carlos Williams, and his early poetry embodies many of the attitudes and utilizes many of the techniques of the Beats who were also indebted to Williams. Much the same can be said of Bob Kaufman, who is considered by some to be the greatest innovator among the poets of that generation. But more fundamental than all of this is the fact that along with their immersion in Zen, the Beats themselves were enamored of jazz in particular and the Black life-style in general, and at times sought to communicate what has to be called a "Black feeling" in their work. Often their formal model was alleged to be jazz, so that accurately or not, Allen Ginsberg described Jack Kerouac's writing as a kind of "bop prosody." The words give us an important

clue. They let us know that the Beats in their writing were striving to capture the rhythms and phrasings of Black music, to notate somehow those sounds on the printed page.

Of course, it was not all printed, and some of the poetry was read to the accompaniment of jazz combos. But the point needs to be made that this was a generation after Langston Hughes had done the same thing—and with greater success. So, in effect, the Beats were approaching through empathy with the Black Experience some of the very same considerations—technical and thematic—that the Harlem Renaissance, the Negritude Movement, and the present generation of Black poets have approached from the *inside*, so to speak.

In their insistence upon jazz as a model and inspiration for their poetry, these writers were and are confronted with enormous technical problems, some of which may be insoluble if they continue to write that poetry down. For their model is dynamic, not static, and although one can suggest various vocal and musical effects with typography, an extensive use of these rather mechanical devices may be ultimately self-defeating. Thus Black poets are rediscovering the resources of their oral traditions and have occasionally been very successful with them. Some *idea* of that success may be obtained by listening to Imamu Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), Larry Neal, Don L. Lee, Nikki Giovanni, and Ghylan Kain and the Original Last Poets. In the meantime, however, the question of typography is still quite formidable and still unresolved.

The central problem again is the printed page. Perhaps it will remain with us as a reminder of our compromise with a cold technology. Perhaps not. Though some of the poetry even on the page is highly effective, we still are confronted with Larry Neal's challenge of "the destruction of the text," in which the text of a poem is merely a "score," a single possible form of a poem. Much more theorizing and experimenting remain to be done.

Structurally speaking, however, whenever Black poetry is most distinctly and effectively *Black*, it derives its form from

two basic sources, *Black speech* and *Black music*. It follows, then, if this is correct, that any serious appreciation or understanding of it must rest upon a deep and sympathetic knowledge of Black music and Black speech and—let us be plain—the Black people who make the music and who make the speech.

By Black speech I mean the speech of the majority of Black people in this country, and I do not exclude the speech of so-called educated people. By Black speech, I also imply a sensitivity to and an understanding of the entire range of Black spoken language in America. This includes the techniques and timbres of the sermon and other forms of oratory, the dozens, the rap, the signifying, and the oral folktale.

By Black music I mean essentially the vast fluid body of Black song—spirituals, shouts, jubilees, gospel songs, field cries, blues, pop songs by Blacks, and, in addition, jazz (by whatever name one calls it) and non-jazz music by Black composers who *consciously or unconsciously* draw upon the Black musical tradition.

These two "referents," as I shall call them, of Black poetry are themselves so closely related that it is quite naive, even foolish, to speak of the spirituals or the blues without considering their verbal components. And even in jazz the verbal component lurks somewhere in the rhythms, in the coloring, and in the phrasing, so that one hears talk, for example, of "speech inflected jazz"; one reads descriptions of the "scream" of Coltrane's horn.

Black Speech as Poetic Reference

There are two simple ways of documenting Black speech and its appearances: (a) in references to the speech and songs of the Black slave in journals, kept by whites, and (b) in the texts of the songs themselves collected since the middle of the nineteenth century. Other sources, of course, are folktales, either recorded by scholars or surviving in the present rural Black communities and the so-called slave narratives.

But the most important source is the living speech of the Black Community, both urban and rural, which forms, as it were, a kind of continuum of Blackness—at one end instantly identifiable in all of its rich tonal and rhythmic variety, at the other indistinguishable from that of the whites. Even those at that far end of “Standard English”—and it is a good, ironically expressive term—respond, however, to the dynamics of the middle range.

The ear, of course, is the best guide to any consideration of Black speech, for there is no adequate way of indicating its rhythmic variety, especially in stylized ceremonial talk or in oratory. Nor is there any adequate way of representing its tonal range or its consonantal ambiguity or its incredible energy. But our poets do attempt this impossible task, and they should. Some bravely, I think, in the face of intolerant, fearful, and sometimes ignorant criticism.

Perhaps the fear of Black speech in poetry comes from a too vivid recollection of the Dunbar School and the “minstrel” tradition which preceded it; perhaps it stems from a genuine desire not to be boxed in by the speech of any particular class. It is a groundless fear, I think, which in both poet and critic is rooted in the narcissism which Richard Wright speaks of and, frankly, ignores the technical breakthroughs of James Johnson, Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown, and others. This is not to say that all poets who try to use “the language of the people” are equally effective, or, indeed, that the language of the “streets” is capable of expressing everything that the poet knows and feels. Nevertheless, no one to my knowledge has demonstrated that the language of the streets is *not* capable of expressing all that a poet needs to say, especially if he is speaking *to* the people. Nor have I seen any contemporary Black poet restrict himself exclusively to the language of the streets. That is, to what critics usually call the language of the streets, because street language is not limited to hip phrases and monosyllabic obscenities—at least not the language that I hear in the streets, because often when I hear a group of brothers

or sisters talking I hear poetry—sometimes a very complete poetry.

Poets use Black speech forms consciously because they know that Black people—the mass of us—do not talk like white people. They know that despite the lies and distortions of the minstrels—both ancient and modern, unlearned and academic—and despite all of the critical jargon about “ghettoese” and “plantation English,” there is a complex and rich and powerful and subtle linguistic heritage whose resources have scarcely been touched that they draw upon.

Don Lee, for example, can use the word “neoteric” without batting an eye and send us scurrying to our dictionaries. The word is not “Black” but the casual, virtuoso way that he drops it on us—like “Deal with that”—is an *elegant Black linguistic gesture*, a typical gesture, like lightning arpeggios on difficult changes, or on no changes at all. If one has heard the contrasting voices of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, then further comment is superfluous.

For there is this tradition of beautiful talk with us—this tradition of saying things beautifully even if they are ugly things. We say them in a way which takes language down to the deepest common level of our experience while hinting still at things to come. White people and many academicians call this usage slang and dialect; Black people call it Soul Talk. Some of the song texts which I have included are striking examples of this “talk,” especially “Black Woman” (p. 108), recorded in the fifties by Rich Amerson of Alabama, and “Dry Spell Blues” (p. 113), recorded in the twenties by Edward “Son” House, the great Mississippi blues singer. The lovely complex imagery of the one and the highly charged, almost allegorical imagery of the other are worthy of the most serious reflection.

Black linguistic elegance takes innumerable forms, many quite subtle, but some of the more obvious ones may be considered here.

a. *Virtuoso naming and enumerating.* This technique