INTRODUCTION

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FURIOUS FLOWER: AFRICAN AMERICAN POETRY, AN OVERVIEW
by Joanne V. Gabbin

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The time
cracks into furious flower. Lifts its face
all unashamed. And sways in wicked grace.
-Gwendolyn Brooks

African American poetry is the aesthetic chronicle of a race, as Gwendolyn Brooks expresses it, struggling to lift “its face all unashamed” in an alien land. From the earliest attempts of African American poets in the eighteenth century to express lyrically their adjustment to existence in a society that debated their humanity to their intense exploration of their voice in the waning years of a racially charged twentieth century, they have built an aesthetic tradition that affirms them, using a language and literary models adapted to meet their cultural purposes. From the very beginning these poets had a challenging, often agonizing, set of problems: the selection of subject matter, themes, and forms to express their thoughts and feelings; the cultivation of a voice expressive of their racial consciousness; the reception of the desired audience; the support of a publishing and critical infrastructure; the nature of their relationship with other literary traditions; and the identification of the anima and purpose of their literary efforts. In essence, African American poetry is metaphorically the “furious flower” of Gwendolyn Brooks’ poem “The Second Sermon on the Warpland” (1968), pointing to two significant intertwining developments: one radical and the other aesthetic.

When Lucy Terry wrote “Bars Flight” (1746), the first poem written by an African in America, she set in motion a poetic tradition characterized by the furious pursuit of liberation in all of its dimensions as well as the cultivation of a cultural voice authenticated by its own distinctive oral forms and remembered, communal values. Speaking of this first development, Stephen Henderson in his seminal work Understanding the New Black Poetry (1972) writes that the idea of liberation permeated African American literary consciousness from slavery to the tumultuous 1960s, when poets reflected widespread disenchantment with white middle-class values and embraced cultural values emanating from Africa and the African diaspora. From Jupiter Hammon to Kevin Powell the idea of liberation has informed and energized African American poetry. African American poets have been creators and critics of social values as they envisioned a world of justice and equality. Nineteenth-century poets voiced the slaves’ complaint in the abolitionist struggle and rallied the troops in the cause of emancipation and freedom. African American poets in the twentieth century continued to rail against the status quo and protested attitudes and institutions that stood to impede the civil rights movement that changed the nature of American society. As these poets reflected African American concerns in the context of a larger American culture, they created a body of poetry that grew out of folk roots; legitimized poetry as a performative, participatory activity, and succeeded in creating an aesthetic tradition defined by communal values, the primacy of musicality and improvisation, and inventive style.

Roots in Liberation

The fertile soil of American Wesleyanism and the revolutionary fervor for liberty that culminated in the American Revolution animated the poetic impulse in Jupiter
Hammon and Phillis Wheatley, Hammon, the first African American to publish a poem, "An Evening Thought" (1761), longed for salvation from this world and acquiesced to enslavement on earth. Phillis Wheatley, the precocious servant of the Wheatleys of Boston, wrote her earliest verse as a mere adolescent in the late 1760s. She chose subjects that reflected her comfortable and privileged position and her absorption of a New England education which emphasized the reading of the Bible and the classics. Her first volume of poems entitled Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral (1773) contained occasional poems eulogizing notable figures and celebrating significant events such as George Washington's appointment as commander of the Continental Army. Phillis Wheatley, kidnapped at the age of seven, brought to America in a slave ship and sold in 1761, noted as the "Sable Muse" of Boston whose fame spread to England, aware of her own fortunate status in contrast to the lot of impoverished blacks in Boston's ghetto, did not commit any of these subjects to poetry. Her own condemnation of slavery and censure of so-called "Christian" slaveholders and the joys and sorrows associated with her marriage and the birth of her children are preserved only in personal letters. Whether out of a sense of Christian humility or a preference for personal detachment taught by neoclassical conventions, she alluded to her own experience only on rare occasions. More pronounced, however, in her poems, as well as Hammon's, are the issues of religious devotedness, patriotism and liberation which were not generally clouded by the unsettling moral issues of slavery and universal equality.

It would be more than fifty years before George Moses Horton made slavery the major subject of his poems. With The Hope of Liberty (1829), Horton staked his personal freedom on the fruits of his pen; however, the book failed to raise the money needed to buy his freedom. He would not realize his goal until 1865 when the Union Army freed him. Horton, who delighted the university students at Chapel Hill with his humorous and witty jingles and parlayed his art into a money-making enterprise, found liberty a less than lucrative subject matter. However, when Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, the popular abolitionist orator and poet, published her Poems on Miscellaneous Subjects (1854), she found its reception enthusiastic. The volume, which included poems on the tragic circumstances of slavery, went through twenty editions by 1874.

Other nineteenth-century African American poets anticipated Paul Laurence Dunbar's question concerning "why the caged bird sings." James Monroe Whitfield appears to speak for several of his contemporaries when he has the speaker in "The Misanthropist" say, "In vain thou bid'st me strike the lyre,/and sing a song of mirth and glee." For Whitfield, James Madison Bell and Alberey A. Whitman, the thoughts that troubled their mind -- the evils of slavery, the hope of freedom, struggles with oppression and violence -- were fought "with gloom and darkness, woe and pain." These poets continued the tradition of protest begun by Horton. However, James Campbell and Daniel Webster Davis made mirth their dominant lyric and wrote dialect poems that mimicked the stereotypes of the popular plantation tradition. Other poets like Ann Plato and Henrietta Ray took the route of romantic escapism.

With the publication of Oak and Ivy in 1893, Paul Laurence Dunbar inaugurated a new era in African American literary expression, revealing himself as one of the finest lyricists America had produced. His second book Majors and Minors (1895) attracted the favorable attention and endorsement of the literary critic William Dean Howells. Howells's now classic introduction of Dunbar's third volume of poems, Lyrics of Lowly Life (1896), became the quintessential literary piece of damning praise that elevated Dunbar's dialect poems above his poems written in standard English. It ensured his acceptance and popularity among an audience of white readers who were warmed by the good cheer of the hearthside and comforted by the aura of pastoral contentment, hallmarks of Dunbar's bucolic verse. His obligatory mimicking of the plantation tradition conventions popularized by Irwin Russell, Joel Chandler Harris, and Thomas Nelson Page resulted in a perpetuation of these conventions. However, there was no denying for many the immense popularity, freshness, humor, and catchy rhythms of his memorable dialect poems. Nonetheless, Dunbar's meteoric rise to fame did not accommodate a thorough and broad appreciation of the other side of his genius displayed in his non-dialect poems. Tragically, the young poet lived a scant ten years after the publication of Lyrics of Lowly Life, years that were filled with regret that the world had ignored his deeper notes "to praise a jingle in a broken tongue."
The turn of the century witnessed African American poets adopting popular literary traditions and with varied and eclectic approaches joining other poets as the “new” American poetry burst upon the scene. Poets such as Vachel Lindsay, Edgar Lee Masters, Carl Sandburg, Amy Lowell, Hilda Doolittle, and Robert Frost ushered in a respect for ordinary speech, freedom of choice in subject matter, concentration on vers libre and imagism, an unembarrassed celebration of American culture, and irreverent experimentation. African American poets were influenced by these experiments with local color, regionalism, realism, and naturalism and joined other American poets in a mutual rejection of sentimentality, didacticism, romantic escape, and poetic diction.

Several African American women nurtured their poetic talent in this atmosphere of literary freedom. Angelina Weld Grimké wrote lush lyrics on nature and love. Using conventional forms, Alice Moore Dunbar-Nelson explored a woman’s heart in ways considered less than conventional by an audience gradually emerging from Victorianism. Anne Spencer, never as celebrated as her prodigious talent warranted, achieved precision in her imagery and great depth of emotion. Unlike Spencer, who lived quietly in Lynchburg, Virginia, Georgia Douglas Johnson was at the hub of Washington’s literary circle and, with the encouragement of several literary luminaries, published three volumes of poems. However, as was the circumstance of African American women poets during the first three decades of the twentieth century, her limited exposure and promotion diminished her critical reception.

This was not, however, the case for Benjamin Brawley and William Stanley Braithwaite, nationally known scholars who also wrote poetry. Benjamin Brawley was a minor genteel poet but a major scholar who wrote several pioneering anthologies including The Negro in Literature and Art (1918) and Early Negro American Writers (1935), which remains an important study of writers who published from 1761 to 1900. William Stanley Braithwaite, like Brawley, wrote a genteel, non-racial poetry, reminiscent of British Romantic poets. In 1913 he initiated his annual edition of the Anthology of Magazine Verse which chronicled the outpouring of American poetry for several decades.

Two poets, however, hinted at the emergence of robust, militant racial poetry and tended seeds that were political and aesthetic. Fenton Johnson struck a note of despair and pessimism much like Edgar Lee Masters’s and Carl Sandburg’s and prophetically envisioned what black urban life would become after its euphoric beginnings. W.E.B. DuBois, whose intellectual contribution to American political and historical thought, sociological and cultural inquiry, journalism and imaginative literature towers over the century’s best minds, wrote little poetry. However, his most anthologized piece, “A Litany of Atlanta,” written in response to the Atlanta riot of 1906 is representative and provides a bridge for the strains of protest prevalent in both the 1800s and the 1900s.

New Negro Renaissance

By the 1920s it was clear that an unprecedented flowering of literary expression was in full bloom. Called alternately the New Negro Renaissance and the Harlem Renaissance, this literary movement, according to Alain Locke, its major promoter and interpreter, was the first opportunity for group expression and self-determination. As Locke pointed out in The New Negro (1925), the old attitudes of self-pity and apology were replaced by a frank acceptance of the position of African Americans in American society. A growing racial awareness among African American writers prompted self-discovery -- discovery of the ancestral past in Africa, discovery of folk and cultural roots reaching back into colonial times, and discovery of a new kind of militancy, self-determination and self-reliance. Langston Hughes in his famous manifesto “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” (1926), captures the prevailing sentiment.

We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn’t matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn’t matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves.

Artistic freedom was the banner under which Jean Toomer created Cane (1923), one of the masterstrokes of the New Negro Renaissance. An unprecedented
collection which combined poetry and prose with experimental verve, it was also.

Toomer's revelation piece, an unrestrained release of racial.

celebration. His poems

in this volume are alive with the pine-scented landscape of Georgia and capture the

mysterious and illusive beauty of folk spiritualism.

Unlike Toomer, Claude McKay, the first and most radical voice to emerge

in the 1920s, personified the tensions and contradictions lived by those too conflicted by

racial anomalies to celebrate. With the publication of Harlem Shadow (1922), he

became the poet that best expressed their rage and anger and newfound militancy.

The popular "If We Must Die," "Baptism," "To the White Fiends" expressed emotions

chafing to be exposed. According to Alain Locke, McKay "pulled the psychological

cloak off the Negro and revealed even to the Negro himself, those facts disguised till

then by his shrewd protective mimicry or pressed down under the dramatic mask of

living up to what was expected of him." Ironically, McKay was uncomfortable as a

spokesman for the black race, for he saw his poems speaking to the individual soul

of all people.

In the midst of the New Negro Renaissance the issue of choice of subject

matter was debated by the literary lights of the period: Langston Hughes, W.E.B. DuBois,

Claude McKay, James Weldon Johnson, Arna Bontemps, Jessie Fauset, among

many others. However, Countee Cullen, perhaps more than any of his

contemporaries, agonized over the issue (freedom in choice of subject matter,

delineation of character, decorum and representativeness of portrayal, and the

bearing race should have on art). The most learned African American poet to

emerge in this era, Countee Cullen demonstrated his enormous talent in his first

book entitled Color (1925). At the young age of twenty-two, Cullen became the most

famous and most quoted African American writer at the time.

Cullen became assistant editor of Opportunity in 1926 and inaugurated his "A Dark

Tower" columns; shortly thereafter he responded to the NAACP questionnaire


which ran in The Crisis in 1926 and 1927. He made it clear that he would not "vote

for any infringement of the author's right to tell a story, to delineate a character, or to

transcribe an emotion in his own way and in light of the truth as he sees it."

However, he was quick to add that African American artists have a duty "to create

types that are truly representative." Just a year later in what appears to be a critical

reversal, he said that African American artists should not be bound by their race or

restricted to race matters simply because they are a part of that racial group.

Ironically, the poet who was recognized as best representing the emerging New

Negro resented having his poetry judged on the basis of race. "If I am going to be a

poet at all, I am going to be POET and not NEGRO POET." Langston Hughes was

quick and relentless in his attack on Cullen's creed in "The Negro Artist and the

Racial Mountain" (1926). Hughes' analysis and Cullen's own fierce battle with double

consciousness coalesce in the conundrum no better expressed than in Cullen's own

lines in "Yet Do I Marvel" (1925):

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

These lines capture the essence of Cullen's highest achievement and paradoxically

the confluence of his most troubling dilemmas. It was his blackness that was at once

his perceived handicap and his greatest asset.

Cullen was one of several poets who benefited from the numerous publishing

opportunities and literary prizes available to promising writers. Under the editorship

of Charles S. Johnson, Opportunity published works by Renaissance writers and

offered the Alexander Pushkin Award. The Crisis under the leadership of editor

W.E.B. DuBois and literary editor Jessie Redmond Fauset was a showplace for

literary artists and annually awarded poetry prizes for outstanding entries. For

example, Arna Bontemps' early success at writing poetry won him recognition and

prizes from both Opportunity and Crisis magazines in 1926 and 1927. Bontemps's

poem "A Black Man Talks of Reaping," which won the Crisis prize, is representative

of the note of bitterness that is a consistent tone in much Renaissance literature. It is

also important to note that these magazines were instrumental in encouraging

writers like Bontemps and developing an audience for their work.

The development of the African American poetic tradition paralleled the development

of an elaborate oral tradition that encompassed every aspect and attitude of black
life, offering what Ralph Ellison called “the first drawings of any group's character.” Sterling Brown, another critic who explored fully and consistently the inexhaustible possibilities of the folk tradition, found in its storehouse of songs, tales, sayings and speech the originality, vitality, truthfulness and complexity that would be his touchstones in the assessment of literature. The poetry of the nineteenth century with its mimicry of popular stereotypes, sentimentalism and escapism would have been found wanting if held to these standards.

However, during the early twentieth century, especially during the period known as the Harlem Renaissance, African American poetry began to flower because of a greater exploration of the black voice as it consciously recognized and mined the black folklore. African American poets in varying degrees engaged in a kind of literary tropism by turning away from western cosmology and mythology in preference for expressing their own cosmology and cultural myths. In their attempt to find a voice expressive of their racial consciousness, they turned to cultural tropes abounding in the universe of folk par Excellence. Among the African American poets who explored the unique vernacular resources of the blues, spirituals, proverbs, tales, sayings were James Weldon Johnson, Langston Hughes, and Sterling Brown.

James Weldon Johnson played a significant role as anthologist-critic in introducing African American poetry to the American public with *The Book of American Negro Poetry* (1922). In his preface, Johnson initiates the debate on the limitations of dialect by signaling African American writers’ rejection of conventionalized dialect associated with the minstrelsy and by calling for a form of expression that would not limit the poet's emotional and intellectual response to black life. In some of his best poetry collected in *God’s Trombones* (1927), he shows his skillful treatment of the black folk sermon and his use of racially authentic language.

Langston Hughes, indisputably the poet laureate of Harlem, was the most experimental and versatile poet of the New Negro Renaissance, launching his career as a poet at the age of nineteen with what has become his signature poem “The Negro Speaks of Rivers.” Over the next forty-six years, Hughes had as his goal to discover the flow and rhythm of black life. Authoring more than 860 poems, he never tired of exploring the color, vibrancy, and texture of black culture and "his" beloved people who created it. In his first two volumes of poetry, *The Weary Blues* (1926) and *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927) such poems as "Lenox Avenue Midnight," *Jazzonia,* and "To a Black Dancer in the Little Savoy," recreate the jazzy, blues-tinged, frenzied, exotic world of Harlem nights.

Hughes called himself a folk poet, and he had faith in the inexhaustible resources to be mined in folk music and speech. He sought to combine the musical forms of the blues, work songs, ballads, and jazz stylings with poetic expression in such a way as to preserve the originality of the former and achieve the complexity of the latter. As Hughes' biographer Arnold Rampersad said, Hughes' fusion of African American music into his poetry was his "key technical commitment." Some of his critics will argue that he remained too close to the folk form to achieve much beyond weak imitation and others considered his approach too simple and lacking in intellectual sophistication and rigor. But for Hughes it was enough that he became the voice of African American dreamers. In tones that ranged from poignantly conciliatory to acerbically radical, Hughes continued to point out the great distance between the premise and the promise of America in his last volumes *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951), *Ask Your Mama* (1961) and *The Panther and the Lash* (1967) published posthumously.

Like Langston Hughes, Sterling A. Brown (1901-1989) relished his title of folk poet. As such, Brown's most significant achievement is his subtle adaptation of folk forms to the literature. Experimenting with the blues, spirituals, work songs, and ballads, he invented combinations that at their best retain the ethos of folk forms and intensify the literary quality of the poetry.

In his poem "Ma Rainey," one of the finest poems in his first volume of poetry, *Southern Road* (1932), Brown skillfully brings together the ballad and blues forms and, demonstrating his inventive genius, creates the blues-ballad which is a portrait of the venerated blues singer and a chronicle of her transforming performance. With a remarkable ear for the idiom, cadence, and tones of folk speech, Brown absorbed its vibrant qualities in his poetry. Brown came as close as any poet had before to achieving James Weldon Johnson's ideal of original racial poetry "capable of voicing the deepest and highest emotions and aspirations, and allowing the widest range of
The next three decades, 1930-1960, trace the continuing careers of Langston Hughes and Sterling A. Brown and mark the ascendancy of Melvin B. Tolson, Robert Hayden, Margaret Walker and Gwendolyn Brooks. These major voices joined a growing list of poets who brought African American poetic expression to new heights of competence and maturity. The list includes Sam Allen (Paul Vesey), Waring Cuney, Frank Marshall Davis, Owen Dodson, Ray Durem, Frank Horne, and Richard Wright. These poets cultivate their individual voices by synthesizing elements from the western literary tradition and their own vernacular tradition. They explored history as a riveting subject matter for their poetry, and they stretched the boundaries of language to have it hold the depth and complexity that the new poetry requires. These poets, in keeping with the continuing development of the radical/political strain in African American poetry, also pursued a brand of social justice that emphasized integralism and a sensitivity to international connections and socialistic movements.

Melvin B. Tolson demonstrates all of these interests in his poetry. In brilliant strokes of irony and iconoclasm, he produced Rendezvous with America (1944), Libretto for the Republic of Liberia (1953), and Harlem Gallery (1965). Tolsonian style is a synthesis of classical imagery, racial symbolism, and extensive historical allusions. In "Psi," one of the sections of Harlem Gallery, Tolson describes the "Negro artist" as a "flower of the gods, whose growth is dwarfed at an early stage." Certainly, this was not Tolson's personal complaint; for, in truth, only his critical response was dwarfed, never his considerable gifts as a poet.

Equally gifted, Robert Hayden throughout his distinguished career as a poet held to his credo that poets "are the keepers of a nation's conscience, the partisans of freedom and justice, even when they eschew political involvement. By the very act of continuing to function as poets they are affirming what is human and eternal." Hayden, like Countee Cullen, insisted that poets should not be restricted to racial themes or any subject matter or polemic that would fetter their artistic expression. His consistent refusal to be limited by subject matter or to be relegated to a double standard of criticism ironically found him at odds with the white literary establishment as well as the 1960s proponents of the Black Aesthetic and often exacted stiff penalties of critical neglect and racial ostracism. Though Hayden never retreated from his position, two of his most outstanding poems, "Middle Passage" (1945) and "Frederick Douglass" (1947), show his lifelong commitment to exploring African American history and folklore. In A Ballad of Remembrance (1962), Hayden brought together revised versions of these poems and some of the best portraits of historical figures in American literature including "The Ballad of Nat Turner," "Runagate Runagate," and "Homage to the Empress of the Blues." Ironically, because of the excellence of his book, Robert Hayden, who had resisted racial categorization in judging his poetry, won The Grand Prix de la Poesie, a prize reserved to honor the best poet of Negritude in the world.

Untroubled by a Hayden-like sensitivity to racial subject matter, Margaret Walker made the full absorption of racial material one of her highest goals. In her most famous poem, "For My People" she mirrors the collective soul of black folk. As W.E.B. DuBois had succeeded in announcing the political, economic and cultural strivings of African Americans in The Souls of Black Folk (1903), Walker accomplished a stunning psychological portrait of "her people" during the unsettling years of Depression, and throughout the succeeding decades. As Eugenia Collier writes the poem "melts away time and place and it unifies Black listeners," deriving its power from "the reservoir of beliefs, values, and archetypal characters yielded by our collective historical experience." With a verbal brilliance owing to an impressive absorption of the myths, rituals, music, and folklore of the African American tradition, Margaret Walker shares her cultural memories and creates new ones in For My People (1942), Prophets for a New Day (1970) and October Journey (1972).

Another major voice, Gwendolyn Brooks, has produced some of the most outstanding poetry written in the twentieth century. With poetry that benefits from great compression, technical acumen, and emotional complexity, no poet lays better claim to heir of two hundred years of the maturation of African American poetry than Gwendolyn Brooks. In 1950 Brooks won the Pulitzer Prize for her volume of poetry Annie Allen, becoming the first African American to win this award. In 1968 she was named Poet Laureate of Illinois, succeeding the late Carl Sandburg. Author of more
than twenty books including A Street in Bronzeville (1945), The Bean Eaters (1960), In the Mecca (1968) and RIot (1969), she is a master at manipulating language until it distills the pure essence of the life and character that she astutely observes in Chicago and the world. Brooks joined other poets who were writing in the 1950s -- Owen Dodson, Sam Allen, Ray Durem, Margaret Esse Danner, Margaret Taylor Goss Burroughs -- in responding poetically to a nation carrying the anlage of social change in its mounting civil rights movement. The year 1955 witnessed the Montgomery Bus Boycott which brought Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr. to national prominence; it also witnessed the senseless lynching of Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old black boy accused of whistling at a white woman in Mississippi. The latter event had a profound effect on Gwendolyn Brooks and is the subject of two of her poems, "A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi, Meanwhile, a Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon" and "The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till."

**Furious Flower**

Ten years later another event, the assassination of Malcolm X, would capture the imagination of a group of younger poets and be the catalyst for the Black Arts Movement and the furious flowering of African American poetry that it produced. Malcolm's ideas provided the radical, philosophical framework for the movement. According to Larry Neal in Visions of a Liberated Future (1989), he "touched all aspects of contemporary black nationalism." Malcolm's voice sounded the tough urban street style, and his life became a symbol and inspiration. With his words resonating in their consciousness, and his image inspiring a revolutionary world vision, poets such as David Henderson, James A. Emanuel, Robert Hayden and Etheridge Knight paid tribute to him after his death.

Three poets inspired by the example of Malcolm X emerged as the moving spirits and visionaries of the Black Arts Movement in the late 1960s: Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), Larry Neal, and Askia Muhammad Touré (Rolland Snellings). Baraka saw the movement as a revolutionary force "to create an art, a literature that would fight for black people's liberation with as much intensity as Malcolm X our 'Fire Prophet' and the rest of the enraged masses who took to the streets in Birmingham after the four little girls had been murdered by the Klan and FBI, or the ones who were dancing in the street in Harlem, Watts, Newark, Detroit." Baraka captures in this statement the revolutionary fervor and commitment that led him, Larry Neal, and Askia Touré to create the Black Arts Repertory Theatre School in Harlem, that led to the collaboration with Neal in publishing Black Fire (1968), the seminal anthology of the period; and that guided his constant spiritual striving toward building a black nation in America.

Out of this striving came a poetry that was emblazoned with the liberation struggle. Baraka, poet, activist and playwright, gained a strong reputation as a poet among the avant-garde artists of Greenwich Village during the 1950s and collected his early poetry in Preface to a Twenty-Volume Suicide Note (1961). Since that time he has published fourteen books of poetry including The Dead Lecturer (1964), Black Magic Poetry (1969), In Our Terribleness (1970), It's Nation Time (1970), Spirit Reach (1972), Funk Lore (1996) and Wise Why's Y's: A Griot's Tale (1995). His poetry is experimental, explosive, improvisational, and allied to black music, especially jazz.

Like Baraka, Larry Neal wrote poetry that had the sound and the pulsing, pumping rhythm of black music. His early death at forty-three curtailed a brilliant career as a poet, essayist, teacher and community activist. However, his essays, drama, and poetry have been collected in Visions of a Liberated Future: Black Arts Movement Writings (1989). "Poppa Stoppa Speaks from His Grave" and "Don't Say Goodbye to the Porkpie Hat" are excellent examples of the hip, urbane, jazz-digging style that was his signature.

The music of John Coltrane, Charlie Parker, Theolonious Monk, and other jazz greats also suffuses the poetry of Askia M. Touré. To a rich lyricism he adds a cosmic vision that was first apparent in JuJu: Magic Songs for the Black Nation (with Ben Caldwell, 1970) and Songhai (1973) and continues in From the Pyramids to the Projects (1990). His commitment to raising the national consciousness carried over to the 1990s, when his messages challenged the destructive forces wielding genocide both physical and mental. Reflecting on the Black Arts Movement,
Several forces converged to create the outpouring of African American poetry that has taken place since 1960. The political and social upheavals brought about by the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s ushered in a dramatic change in the legal and social status of African Americans. With its non-violent strategies of sit-ins, marches, freedom rides, boycotts, voter registration drives, the movement united two generations of African American poets around the dream of freedom and equality and supplied them with a wealth of cultural heroes including Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, Emmett Till, Fannie Lou Hamer, Medgar Evers, who became the subject matter of their poetry. The assassination of Martin Luther King inspired a groundswell of poems from such poets as Nikki Giovanni, Haki Madhubuti, Sam Allen, Quincy Troupe, and Mari Evans. In the wake of the urban riots and fires that were the people's response to King's martyrdom came the Black Power movement with its bold language of racial confrontation, cultural separation, and its insistence upon self defense, self reliance, and black pride. With their iconoclastic attacks on all aspects of white middle class values, it is not surprising that the poets who shaped the Black Arts movement, the Black Power's cultural wing, rejected unequivocally Western poetic conventions. Their poetic technique emphasized free verse; typographical stylistics; irreverent, often scatological, diction; and linguistic experimentation. In addition to Baraka, Neal and Touré, prominent among these poets were Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, Haki Madhubuti, Etheridge Knight, A.B. Spellman, Calvin C. Hernton, Mari Evans, David Henderson, June Jordan, Clarence Major, Jayne Cortez, Henry Dumas, Carolyn M. Rodgers, and Quincy Troupe.

Following Maulana Ron Karenga's dictum that black art must be "functional, collective and committed," these poets addressed their messages primarily to African Americans and African people in the diaspora, and in their messages the artist and the political activist become one. Poets such as Sam Allen, Margaret Burroughs, and Margaret Danner set out to reclaim the lost African heritage, continuing the "literary Garveyism" that began in the 1920s. The strains of Pan Africanism, nurtured by W.E.B. DuBois appear in the poetry of W. Keorapetse Kgositisele, an exile from South Africa, and the confluence of African and European cultures mesh in the poetry of West Indian poet Derek Walcott, continuing the tradition of the Negritude movement. Not only were these poets extending their boundaries, but they were also exploring the interior spaces of the African American identity. Henry Dumas, "whose brief life held out the promise of brilliant and passionate writing," according to Eugene Redmond in Drumvoices (1976), studded his poetry with raw and angry dimensions of the African American psyche. Conrad Kent Rivers, who also died too young, was concerned with his inner world where pain, violence and destruction only ended with death. In the hands of Lucille Clifton, Lance Jeffers, Raymond Patterson, and Johari Amini, among others, the concept of blackness is sculpted into a composite of courage, endurance, beauty, and stoicism - positive images for a nation reconstructing itself.

And more often than not, these poets created their own journals to disseminate their messages. Hoyt Fuller, the influential editor of Negro Digest and Black World, edited NOMMO, the journal of the OBAC Writers Workshop and, like Gwendolyn Brooks, had a great impact on the younger poets as mentor and cultural guide. Tom Dent and Kalamu ya Salaam edited Nkombo, the journal of BLKARTSOUTH, a cultural organization that grew out of the Free Southern Theater in New Orleans. Burning Spear featured the poetry of the Howard poets such as Lance Jeffers. The collection was an outgrowth of the Dasein Literary Society at Howard University. As The Crisis and Opportunity magazines had stimulated artistic and intellectual activity during the New Negro Renaissance, several journals founded during the late 1960s and 1970s increased readership for African American poetry over the next twenty years. Notable among them are the Journal of Black Poetry, founded by Joe Goncalves; The Black Scholar, founded by Robert Chrisman; Black Dialogue, founded by Abdul Karim and Edward S. Spriggs; Callaloo, founded in 1974 by Charles H. Rowell, Tom Dent and Jerry Ward; and Obsidian, founded by Alvin Aubert in 1975 with Gerald Barrax assuming the editorship in 1985. Many poets were also responsible for establishing presses that encouraged emerging poets to publish. Haki Madhubuti's Third World Press in Chicago, Dudley Randall's Broadside Press in Detroit, and Naomi Long Madgett's Lotus Press became invaluable outlets for African American poetic expression.
The proliferation of the ideas and impact of the Black Arts Movement was due largely to the formation of cultural organizations and writers' workshops committed to encouraging African American poets and increasing readership among an African American audience. The Umbra Workshop first gathered in Greenwich Village and Lower East Side of New York in 1941 and listed among its members David Henderson, Calvin C. Hernton, Tom Dent, Ishmael Reed, Askia M. Touré, Raymond Patterson, Charles Patterson and Lorenzo Thomas. It produced the first issue of Umbra in 1963. In Chicago, Haki Madhubuti and Walter Bradford were among the founding members of the Organization of Black American Culture (OBAC), which brought together Carolyn Rodgers, Gwendolyn Brooks, Johari Amini, Sterling Plumpp, Eugene Perkins, Ebon (Leo Thomas Hale), and Angela Jackson, among others. Zealous in carrying out the ideals of black solidarity and empowerment, they read in schools, community centers, bars, parks, on street corners.

Since the 1970s, these contemporary African American poets have developed a form of communal performance art that draws heavily on what Stephen Henderson called black music and black speech as poetic referents. The poets' work evidenced a full absorption of musical forms such as blues and jazz, call-and-response features, improvising lines, evoking tones, rhythm, structure of folk form, and the entire range of spoken virtuosity seen in the sermon, the rap, the dozens, signifying, toasts, and folktales. Poets such as Jayne Cortez, Sonia Sanchez, Haki Madhubuti, Amiri Baraka, Nikki Giovanni, Askia M. Touré, Victor Hernandez Cruz, Sun Ra, and Ted Joans discovered how to transform the printed poem into a performance that unleashes the elegance and power of black speech and music. For example, Jayne Cortez's ability to evoke the jazz sound of Arnette Colemen, Bessie Smith and John Coltrane in her first volume of poetry Pisstained Stairs (1969) suggested the power that she would develop as a performance poet. Sonia Sanchez significantly influenced the cultural landscape by the urgency of her sustained committed voice, often rendered in her deeply spiritual chanting/singing style. Eugene Redmond, Sarah Webster Fabio, Gil Scott-Heron, and Ted Joans are representative of those poets who incorporate "rap," blues, jazz, and soul music in their poetry making it move with the rhythm of contemporary beats. Nikki Giovanni achieved national popularity as she wedded her visionary, truth-telling poetry with the sounds of gospel music in her best-selling album "Truth Is On Its Way" in 1971. Haki Madhubuti, with his explosive, annunciatory kinetic rap style, has been one of the most imitated poets among young artists seeking to develop a performance style. Though much of the poetry was involved with music, orature and performance, for Alvin Aubert the poem will have to "perform itself on the page." His poems in If Winter Come: Collected Poems, 1967-1992 (1994), Pinkie Gordon Lane's I Never Scream: New and Selected Poems (1985) and Naomi Long Madgett's Octavia and Other Poems (1988) illustrate a reliance upon quieter, muted strains to enhance their poetry.

The cultural movement of the 1960s and 1970s not only changed the way African Americans thought about their political and social status as American citizens, for the poets it also planted the seeds for a truly liberated exploration of literary possibilities. Poets such as Lucille Clifton, Audre Lorde, Jay Wright, and Michael S. Harper cultivated their poetic imaginations in line with more personal and individualized goals. In An Ordinary Woman (1974), Lucille Clifton floods her private and public identities with light, illuminating family histories and relationships in epigrammatic flashes. Audre Lorde, during the course of a thirty-year career, struggled against the poet's death of being "choked into silence by icy distinction." In volumes such as Coal (1973) and The Black Unicorn (1978) she resisted categorization and definition by a narrow expectation of her humanity by boldly exploring all of the essences of womanhood. Jay Wright's eclecticism led him to create poetry that is a multicultural mosaic of his interest in history, anthropology, cosmology, religion and social thought as evident in Death as History (1967). As suggested by the title of Michael S. Harper's second book of poems, History Is Your Own Heartbeat, history is the heartbeat of his poetry as he chronicles personal and kinship relationships and cultural histories that link complex emotional and philosophical experiences shared by diverse ethnic groups.

Rita Dove, acknowledging her own debt to the Black Arts Movement, said that if it had not been for the movement, America would not be ready to accept a poet who explored a text other than blackness. Unencumbered by a necessarily political message, Dove in her Pulitzer Prize winning book Thomas and Beulah (1987) brings wholeness and elegance to the histories of her grandparents. Dove, who held
the post of Poet Laureate of the United States from 1993 until 1995, is representative of a large accomplished group of poets who published their first poems during the late 1970s and 1980s: Yusef Komunyakaa, Cornelius Eady, Melvin Dixon, Dolores Kendrick, Thylas Moss, Toi Derricotte, Gloria Oden, and Sherley Anne Williams.

Elizabeth Alexander is emblematic of the promise and wide range of variegated voices that have sprung forth during the first half of the 1990's. Her first collection, *The Venus Hottentot* (1990), reveals poems that explore the interior lives of historical figures, exposing emotions and experiences that strikingly illuminate public concerns. In a poem called "The Dark Room: An Invocation" she hails talented young poets who make up The Dark Room Collective: Thomas Sayers Ellis, Sharan Strange, Kevin Young, Carl Phillips and Natasha Trethewey, to name a few. In highly individual styles, they shape metaphors and images in a fisted reading of contemporary life. Other young poets, such as Ras Baraka, Kevin Powell, Jabari Asim and Esther Iverem, place themselves in the tradition of struggle that they see as artistic, political, spiritual, and psychological; they seek to revisit the ideals of the Black Arts Movement in the language of a hip-hop nation.

In the closing decade of the twentieth century, African American poetry is again experiencing an expansive, renewing phrase that some have termed the "Third Renaissance." This sense of renewal was dramatically evident at the Furious Flower Conference in 1994, when the largest gathering of poets and critics in more than two decades, met at James Madison University in Virginia to read, discuss, and celebrate African American poetry. The conference, dedicated to Gwendolyn Brooks, brought together three generations of poets. In doing so it symbolized the continuity in the African American poetic expression and signaled the dimensions of its future development. Seasoned poets who began writing in the 1960s are continuing to write with skill and power. Sonia Sanchez's *Wounded in the House of a Friend* (1995) and Gerald Barrax's *Leaning Against the Sun* (1992) are prime examples. Derek Walcott's Nobel Prize for Literature in 1992, Rita Dove's appointment as Poet Laureate of the United States, and Gwendolyn Brooks' naming by the National Endowment for the Humanities as the Jefferson Lecturer for 1994 represent the unprecedented achievement of African American poets as recipients of the nation's highest honors. This newest renaissance is also marked by the emergence of a group of young poets who have been published in such anthologies as In the Tradition: An Anthology of Young Black Writers (1992), edited by Kevin Powell and Ras Baraka and On the Verge: Emerging Poets and Artists (1993), edited by Thomas Sayers Ellis and Joseph Lease.

Just as Gwendolyn Brooks' poem "The Second Sermon on the Warpland" suggests "furious flower" as a metaphor for the aesthetic chronicle of African American poetry, it also encourages the emerging generation to bloom "in the noise and whip of the whirlwind." After 250 years of African American poetry, these young poets are "the last of the loud," ferocious in their call for humanism and beautiful in their response to the magic and music of language.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Listed chronologically.