

FURIOUS FLOWER

African American Poetry, 1960-1995

A Facilitator Guide to the Video Series

Joanne V. Gabbin with Donna Shafer-Riha

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INTRODUCTION

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 Alberry A. Whitman, the thoughts that troubled their mind -- the evils of slavery, the hope of freedom, struggles with oppression and violence -- were fraught "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 feature entitled "The Negro in Art - How Shall He Be Portrayed - A Symposium," 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 parlance. 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 subjects and the widest scope of treatment."

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 integrationalism 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, Touré contends that it was "the largest cultural upsurge that our people have had in this century and that we were organically-linked writers, activists, musicians, playwrights and such."

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 Kgositisile, 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 Coleman, 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.

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- Rosey E. Pool, ed., **Beyond the Blues**, 1962.
- Arna Bontemps, ed., **American Negro Poetry**, 1963.
- Robert Hayden, ed., **Kaleidoscope**, 1967.
- Addison Gayle, Jr., ed., **Black Expression: Essays by and About Black Americans in the Creative Arts**, 1969.
- George E. Kent, **Blackness and the Adventure of Western Culture**, 1972.
- Richard A. Long and Eugenia W. Collier, eds., **Afro-American Writing: An Anthology of Prose and Poetry, Volume 1 and Volume 2**, 1972.
- Houston A. Baker, Jr., **Long Black Song**, 1972.
- Eugene Redmond, **Drumvoices: The Mission of Afro-American Poetry**, 1976.
- Trudier Harris and Thadious M. Davis, eds., "Afro-American Poets Since 1955," **Dictionary of Literary Biography**, Volume 41, 1985.
- Gwendolyn Brooks, **Blacks**, 1987.
- Henry Louis Gates, Jr., **Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial" Self**, 1987.
- Gayl Jones, **Liberating Voices: Oral Tradition in African American Literature**, 1991.
- Michael S. Harper and Anthony Walton, eds., **Every Shut Eye Ain't Asleep: An Anthology of Poetry by African Americans Since 1945**, 1994.

EPISODE 1: ELDERS

SAMUEL ALLEN

Samuel Allen borrows from history and stretches his language to include the cadence of the Black sermon.

Selected Bibliography

- **Every Round and Other Poems.** Lansing, MI: Lotus Press, Inc., 1987.
- **Ivory Tusks and Other Poems.** New York: Poets press, 1968.
- **Paul Vesey's Ledger.** Detroit, MI: Broadside Press, 1975.
- **Poems from Africa.** New York: HarperCollins Children's Books, 1973.

Discussion Questions

1. Why is "The Apple Trees in Sussex" set in Mississippi? Allen identifies Mississippi as "the worst state." In what way does he mean this? List events that you have studied from the civil rights movement and identify those that occurred in Mississippi.
2. Is the form Allen uses in "Harriet Tubman" effective? How does he bring her to life?
3. Allen says art is suggestive and poetry is a catalyst. What does he mean by this? Does this statement only apply to poetry?

Biography

Samuel W. Allen's poetry has been published in four collections: **Elfebein Zahne; Ivory Tusks and Other Poems; Paul Vesey's Ledger** and **Every Round**. His poems have also appeared in more than 200 anthologies. Known for merging African and African American culture in his poetry, he roots his poetry in the heritage of black people with the oral tradition, African survivals and the Southern black church as his major influences. Allen is also a prominent figure in Africa and African American criticism as a reviewer, translator, editor and lecturer. His translations of Jean-Paul Sartre's **Orphee Noir** and Leopold Senghor's **Anthologie de la Nouvelle Poesie Negre** made these important works available to non-French-speaking readers. Working as an attorney until 1968, he accepted the position as Avalon Professor of Humanities at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama and has since devoted himself to teaching and writing. Allen taught at Wesleyan University, 1970-71, and at Boston College from 1971 until he retired in 1981. He has also served as writer-in-residence at Tuskegee and at Rutgers University. Allen has lectured extensively on black affairs both literary and political at major national and international conferences, and he has read his poetry at institutions throughout the United States and abroad.

JERRY W. WARD, JR.

Biography

Jerry W. Ward, Jr., Lawrence Durgin Professor of Literature at Tougaloo College, is coeditor of **Redefining American Literary History** (1990), **Black Southern Voices** (1992), and **Trouble the Water: 250 Years of African-American Poetry** (1997). His works-in-progress include **JAZZ SOUTH**, a collection of poems, and **Reading Race, Reading America: Social and Literary Essays**. Ward has published essays, poems and critical reviews in **New Orleans Review**, **Obsidian**, **The Southern Quarterly**, **Black American Literature Forum** and **Callaloo**. His work is included in the anthologies **Sturdy Black Bridges**, **Mississippi Writers: Reflections of Childhood and Youth, Vol. III** and **Black Women Writers 1950-1986: A Critical Evaluation**. In 1998, he contributed the introduction to **Black Boy: (American Hunger)**.

MARI EVANS

Mari Evans believes her responsibility as a writer is to speak the truth to her people and urge social progress through activism.

Selected Bibliography

- **A Dark and Splendid Mass**. New York: Writers and Readers Publishers, Inc., 1992.
- **I Am A Black Woman**. New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1970.
- **I Look at Me**. Chicago: Third World Press, 1974.
- **JD**. New York: Avon Books, 1982.
- **Jim Flying High**. New York: Doubleday & Company, 1979.
- **Nightstar, 1973-1978**. Los Angeles: CAAS Publications, 1981.
- **Singing Black: Alternative Nursery Rhymes for Children**. East Orange, NJ: Just Us Books, Inc., 1998.

Discussion Questions

1. Why does Evans feel that calling a dramatic work a "play" is diminishing it? How is that indicative of the philosophy she expresses in this interview?
2. How does she use the metaphor of the dance in describing race relations? In what way do the Rodney King riots in Los Angeles fit into this context?
3. In "Speak Truth to the People," she writes, "Fantasy enslaves." What do you think she means? Is it the obligation of the poet to "speak truth"? Why or why not?

Biography

Mari Evans, educator, writer, and musician, resides in Indianapolis. Formerly Distinguished Writer and Assistant Professor, African American and Resource Center, Cornell University, she has taught at Indiana University, St. Louis, the State University of New York at Albany, the University of Miami at Coral Gables and at Spelman College, Atlanta, over the past 20 years. She is the author of numerous articles, four children's books, several performed theater pieces, two musicals and four volumes of poetry, including **I Am A Black Woman**, **Nightstar**, and **A Dark and Splendid Mass**,

published in 1992. She also edited the highly acclaimed **Black Women Writers (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation**. Her work has been widely anthologized in collections and textbooks, and her poems have appeared in several languages including German, Swedish, French and Dutch. In 1998, she published **Singing Black: Alternative Nursery Rhymes for Children**. Her poetry is a superb distillation of the black idiom, capturing tones from the exquisitely humorous to the hauntingly poignant. It also reveals a skillful grasp of craft that shows to advantage the elegance and dignity that pervade her line

VAL GRAY WARD

Biography

Val Gray Ward is an internationally-known actress, producer and theater personality who has made major contributions to the cultural life of Chicago and America through her work as dramatist, founder and artistic director of the Kuumba Theatre. Since its founding in 1968, Kuumba has never missed a season in which plays were offered to a grateful Chicago audience. Kuumba has also produced many shows that toured in cities such as Louisville, Atlanta, San Antonio, Milwaukee, Montreal, and Osaka, Japan. As the principal creative force behind the Kuumba Theatre, Ward has produced and directed such plays as **Sister Son / ji** by Sonia Sanchez, **Ricky** by Eugenia Collier, **Five on the Black Hand Side** by Charles Fuller, and **The Image Makers** by Eugene Perkins. She also created the Emmy Award Winning **Precious Memories: Strolling 47th Street** which aired over the PBS network in September 1988. Val Gray Ward has also appeared in her one-woman show, **I Am A Black Woman** from 1966 to the present at colleges and universities, conferences and educational meetings across the country. She currently lives in Syracuse, New York

NAOMI LONG MADGETT

Naomi Long Madgett credits several literary giants from the Harlem Renaissance for encouraging her budding poetry.

Selected Bibliography

- **Adam of Ife: Black Women in Praise of Black Men.** East Lansing, MI: Lotus Press, Inc., 1992.
- **A Milestone Sampler: 15th Anniversary Anthology.** East Lansing, MI: Lotus Press, Inc., 1988.
- **Octavia and Other Poems.** Chicago: Third World Press, 1988.
- **Pink Ladies in the Afternoon.** East Lansing, MI: Lotus Press, Inc., 1990.
- **Phantom Nightingale.** East Lansing, MI: Lotus Press, Inc., 1981.
- **Remembrances of Spring.** East Lansing, MI: Lotus Press, 1993.
- **A Student's Guide to Creative Writing.** East Lansing, MI: Lotus Press, 1980.

Discussion Questions

1. How does she use the imagery of the sun in her poem "Phillis"? Compare this poem with Samuel Allen's "Harriet Tubman."

2. She remembers a white teacher's saying, "If you've read one black poem, you've read them all." Is this true? Could the same be said of the white canon? Identify some characteristics of black poetry and discuss whether they cross racial lines.
3. Why is her nurturing of Lotus Press an important achievement? What impact has it had on black poetry?

Biography

Naomi Long Madgett, writer, editor, teacher and publisher, , has been the moving force behind Lotus Press, Inc., the leading publisher of distinguished poetry by African Americans. Responsible for the publication of 75 titles, she became senior editor of the Lotus Poetry Series of Michigan State University Press in 1993. An award-winning poet in her own right, Madgett has published seven collections of poetry including **Pink Ladies in the Afternoon** (1972, 1990), **Exits and Entrances** (1978), **Phantom Nightingale: Juvenilia** (1981), and **Octavia and Other Poems** (1988) which was national co-winner of the College Language Association Creative Achievement Award. **Black Scholar Magazine** gave her the Award of Excellence in 1992, and in 1993 the Hilton-Long Poetry Foundation offered its first annual Naomi Long Madgett Poetry Award for excellence in a manuscript by an African American poet. Madgett's poems have been included in well over 100 anthologies in this country and abroad and have been translated into several languages. In 1998, she is an Artist in Residence at Western Michigan University.

ELEANOR W. TRAYLOR

Biography

Eleanor W. Traylor is professor of English and chair of the department of English at Howard University. Adjunct professor of English at The Catholic University of America, she is also Project Director of **From Text to Stage to Text: Great Moments in African American Literature**, a multimedia resource for the teaching of African American literature in secondary schools. Essayist and critic of African American literature, she has prepared historical and biographical scripts for the Program in Black American Culture of the Museum of American History at the Smithsonian Institution, and she has developed and directed the Larry Neal Cultural Series in literature at the African American Historical and Cultural Museum in Philadelphia. She is the recipient of The Marcus Garvey Award for community service, the Hazel Joan Bryant Award of the Midwest Black Theatre Alliance for service in community theater, and the Catholic University Alumni Achievement Award in literary criticism. Her publications are numerous and multi-faceted, among them **The Humanities and African American Literary Traditions**. Her articles have appeared in every major collection of essays on African American literature since 1980.

Alvin Aubert

Alvin Aubert cultivated his poetic voice by synthesizing literary elements and the blues tradition.

Selected Bibliography

- **Against the Blues.** Detroit: Broadside Press, 1972.
- **Feeling Through.** New York: Greenfield Review Press, 1976.
- **Harlem Wrestler and Other Poems.** East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1995.
- **If Winter Come: Collected Poems 1967-1992.** Pittsburgh: Carnegie-Mellon Press, 1994.
- **South Louisiana: New and Selected Poems.** Grosse Pointe, MI: The Lunchroom Press, 1985.

Discussion Questions

1. Discuss the different sources of inspiration for Aubert's poems "Nat Turner in the Clearing," "Sixty-two," "Like Miles Said," and "Bessie." Why are the poems larger than the single person on whom each focuses?
2. How does Aubert define "performance"? What does he mean when he says, "The poem must perform itself on the page"? Describe how the poetry you have read "performs itself on the page."
3. What are the blues? How did they influence Aubert's work? Why is it important that he came from Louisiana?

Biography

Alvin Aubert is an award-winning poet and a playwright, editor and literary critic. In 1993 he retired from Wayne State University where as professor of English he taught creative writing and African American literature and served two years as interim chair of the Department of Africana Studies. In 1975 he founded and edited the journal **Obsidian**, now **Obsidian II**, aimed at publishing works in English by and about writers of African descent worldwide. This outstanding journal continues to debut the works of many African scholars and creative writers. Engaged in teaching since 1960, he taught at Southern University in Baton Rouge, his alma mater; the University of Illinois; the University of Oregon and the State University of New York's Fredonia campus. He received the A.M. degree in English from the University of Michigan, which he attended as a Woodrow Wilson Fellow, and studied at the University of Illinois. He was a Bread Loaf Scholar in poetry (1968) and received two creative writing fellowship grants from the National Endowment for the Arts for his poetry (1973, 1981). He also received an Editors Fellowship Grant (1979) from the Coordinating Council of Literary Magazines for small press editing and publishing, and the 1988 Callaloo Award for his contribution to African American cultural expression. His poems, articles and reviews have appeared in numerous literary magazines and anthologies. **South Louisiana: New and Selected Poems**, which includes new poems along with poems from two previous collections **Against the Blues** (1972) and **Feeling Through** (1975), was published in 1985. **If Winter Come: Collected Poems, 1967-1992** was published in 1994. His latest book is **Harlem Wrestler: and Other Poems** (1995). He is currently professor emeritus at Wayne State University.

LENARD MOORE

Biography

Lenard Moore, founder of the Carolina African American Writers' Collective, is one of the most lyrical poets to emerge in the late eighties and nineties. Born and raised in Jacksonville, North Carolina, Moore was educated at Shaw University where he graduated Magna Cum Laude. He is the author of **The Open Eye** (1985), **Forever Home** (1992), and **Desert Storm: A Brief History** (1993). His poems have been published in numerous journals, including **Poetry Canada Review**, **Callaloo**, **Midwest Quarterly**, **Colorado Review**, **African American Review**, and **North Dakota Quarterly**. His honors include The Haiku Museum of Tokyo Award (1983 and 1994). Currently a Teacher of English at Enloe High School, he lives in Raleigh.

PINKIE GORDON LANE

Over the past three decades, Pinkie Gordon Lane has represented one of the quieter strains of Black poetry.

Selected Bibliography

- **Girl at the Window**. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991.
- **I Never Scream**: New and Selected Poems. East Lansing, MI: Lotus Press, Inc., 1985.
- **The Mystic Female**. Fort Smith, AR: South & West, 1978.
- **Wind Thoughts**. Fort Smith, AR: South & West, 1972.

Discussion Questions

1. Where does Lane find the time to write her poetry? Is that how you envision a poet at work? How does that encourage you in your writing?
2. She identifies the greatest encouragement she ever received as coming from Margaret Danner who told her to be herself and create her own audience. Why would she find this to be the most important? What forms of discouragement were offered to Lane and to budding writers in your acquaintance?
3. Why does she call herself "an imagist"? Could all poets be called imagists? What are some of the most powerful images that her poems have left in your mind?

Biography

For **Pinkie Gordon Lane**, the title of "first" has spanned her professional career. She was the first black woman to receive a doctorate from Louisiana State University in 1956 and the first black poet laureate of Louisiana, an honor she held from 1989-92. Described as "a poet of lyric space," Lane and her work have garnered awards and praise, and she has been inducted into the Louisiana Black History Hall of Fame and has been cited for her work as an educator, poet and humanist by the Black Caucus of the National Council of Teachers of English. Representative of one of the quieter strains of poetry over the past two decades, the English professor emerita of Southern University in Baton Rouge has found a wide audience for her volumes of poems, **Wind Thoughts** (1972), **The Mystic Female** (1978), which was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize in 1979, **I Never Scream: New**

and Selected Poems (1985), and **Girl at the Window** (1991). Some of her poems first appeared in such periodicals as **Callaloo**, **Journal of Black Poetry**, **Ms. Magazine**, **Negro American Literature Forum**, **Nimrod**, **Obsidian**, **The Black Scholar** and **The Southern Review**. Her forthcoming book is titled **Elegy for Etheridge**.

SANDRA GOVAN

Biography

Sandra Govan is a professor of English at the University of North Carolina Charlotte with a specialty in American and African American literatures. Her areas of specialization include the Harlem Renaissance and African American writer in science fiction. She has scholarly essays included in **Erotique Noire**, **Langston Hughes: The Man, His Art, and His Continuing Influence**, **Recovered Writers/Recovered Texts**, and personal essays in **My Soul is a Witness**, and **Father Songs: Testimonies by African American Sons and Daughters**. Since 1994 she has served as the Coordinator of the Ronald E. McNair Post-baccalaureate Achievement program. Her proudest accomplishments with McNair are that participants in the summer 1998 program won four awards at the University of Tennessee McNair Scholars' conference and that McNair at UNC Charlotte has placed more than thirty students into graduate schools. She has also been a regular consultant to the North Carolina Humanities Council.

EPISODE 2: WARRIORS

AMIRI BARAKA

Amiri Baraka and Askia Touré continue the struggle.

Selected Bibliography

- **The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones.** Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1997.
- **Black Music.** New York: De Capo Press, Inc., 1998.
- **Eulogies.** Hawthorne, NY: Mouton de Gruyter, 1996.
- **Four Black Revolutionary Plays.** New York: Marion Boyars Publishers, Inc., 1997.
- **Funk Lore: New Poems 1984-1994.** Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1996.
- **Jesse Jackson & Black People.** Chicago: Third World Press, 1997.
- **Shy's, Wise, Why's: A Griot's Tale.** Chicago: Third World Press, 1994.
- **Thornton Dial: Images of the Tiger.** New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1993.
- **Transbluesency: The Selected Poems of Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones.** New York: Marsilio Publishers, 1995.
- **Wise Why's Y's: A Griot's Tale.** Chicago: Third World Press, 1995.

Discussion Questions

1. Why does Baraka say the strongest political work you can do is in the arts?
2. How does he differentiate "mass or popular work" from "advanced work"?
3. How is watching and listening to Baraka reading his poetry a different experience than reading it yourself? Why did he choose the performance techniques that he did?
4. Who are the "heathens"?

Biography

Amiri Baraka, poet, activist, and playwright, is one of the most exciting and prolific authors in America. Considered an architect of the Black Arts Movement, he has published 14 books of poetry including **Preface To A Twenty Volume Suicide Note**, **The Dead Lecturer**, **It's Nation Time**, **Spirit Reach**, and **Reggae or Not**, a novel, five books of essays, 24 plays, and four anthologies. Baraka, born LeRoi Jones, was educated at Rutgers University and Howard University. Since 1962 he has combined his artistic and literary activities with teaching and has taught poetry and drama at The New School for Social Research, Columbia University, University of Buffalo, Yale University and George Washington University. He was the professor of African Studies at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. Amiri Baraka has also been a prime and dynamic force in the Black Arts Repertory Theater School in Harlem and Spirit House in Newark. From 1968 until 1975, he was one of the founders and chairmen of the Congress of African People, a nationalistic Pan-African organization, and one of the chief organizers of the National Black Political Convention in 1972. He also edited **Cricket**, a magazine of African-American music, and directed and publication of new literature through Jihad Press and Peoples War Publications. He is currently editor of **The Black Nation**. As well as a long list of publications, his most recent work includes appearing in Warren

Beatty's political satire **Bulworth** as a prophetic homeless man and writing the liner notes for the Ravi Coltrane's (son of John Coltrane) first album **Moving Picture**.

ASKIA MUHAMMAD TOURÉ

Biography

Askia Muhammad Touré was one of the earliest and forceful voices in the Black Arts/Black Aesthetic Movement. Touré has also been a member of the legendary Umbra Group. Touré's books include **Earth** (1968), **JuJu: Magic songs for the Black Nation** (with Ben Caldwell) (1970), **Songhai!** (1972), and **From the Pyramids to the Projects** (1990), which won an American Book Award. One of the architects of the Black Arts/Black Aesthetic Movement, Askia Touré has responded on many levels to the culture of black liberation. His poems and essays, widely published in **Black Scholar**, **Soulbook**, **Black Theatre**, **Black World**, and **Freedomways** embody the ideology of a people seeking to reclaim their images and history.

HAKI MADHUBUTI

Haki Madhubuti and Sonia Sanchez stay closely involved with their community and continue to influence a new generation of poets.

Selected Bibliography

- **Black Men, Obsolete, Single, Dangerous? Essays in Discovery, Solution & Hope.** Chicago: Third World Press, 1990.
- **Book of Life.** Chicago: Third World Press, 1992.
- **Claiming Earth: Race, Rage, Rape, Redemption: Blacks Seeking a Culture of Enlightened Empowerment.** Chicago: Third World Press, 1994.
- **Confusion by Any Other Name: Essays Exploring the Negative Impact of the Blackman's Guide to Understanding the Blackwoman.** Chicago: Third World Press, 1992.
- **Developmental Manual for Young Black Males.** Chicago: Third World Press, 1996.
- **Don't Cry, Scream.** Chicago: Third World Press, 1992.
- **From Plan to Planet: Life Studies: The Need for Afrikan Minds & Institutions.** Chicago: Third World Press, 1992.
- **Heart Love.** Chicago: Third World Press, 1998.
- **Ground Work.** Chicago: Third World Press, 1996.
- **Killing Memory, Seeking Ancestors.** Chicago: Third World Press, 1992.
- **Why L.A. Happened: Implications of the '92 Los Angeles Rebellion.** Chicago: Third World Press, 1993.

Discussion Questions

1. How was his childhood as Don Luther Lee different than his adulthood as Haki Madhubuti? Give evidences of this from the poems he chose to read.

2. Compare the way his family influenced Madhubuti in his craft to the influence of family on Naomi Long Madgett's writing. Which is closer to the way your family has influenced you and your creativity?
3. Madhubuti states that the third renaissance of Black writing will be more lasting? Why? Do you agree?
4. Madhubuti and Sonia Sanchez say they have "the scars." What do you understand them to mean?

Biography

Haki R. Madhubuti, born Don L. Lee, moved to Chicago as a teenager, thus beginning a period of growth, service and commitment that would have a significant impact on the literary and cultural life of Chicago. Madhubuti, one of the most distinctive and searing voices in contemporary poetry, has divided his time among a variety of activities. Best known as a poet, he works as an essayist, critic, publisher, social activist and educator. He is the founder and editor of Third World Press and **Black Books Bulletin** and directs the Institute of Positive Education, an organization that brings nation-building ideas to the youth of Chicago. A founding member of the Organization of Black American Culture Writers Workshop (OBAC), he honed his early poetic style in the circle of other OBAC poets such as Gwendolyn Brooks, Carolyn Rodgers, Johari Amiri, and Sterling Plumpp. His books include **Think Black; Black Pride; Don't Cry, Scream; We Walk the Way of the New World** and **Dynamite Voices: Black Poets of the 1960's**. His more recent work includes **Claiming Earth: Race, Rage, Rape, Redemption** (1995), **Heartlove: Wedding and Love Poems** (1998), and editing **Million Man March/Day of Absence: A Commemorative Anthology** (1996). He is currently a professor of English and director of the Gwendolyn Brooks Center at Chicago State University.

KALAMU YA SALAAM

Kalamu ya Salaam and Everett Hoagland experiment with language and performance as they push the boundaries of Black poetry.

Selected Bibliography

- **He's the Prettiest: A Tribute to Big Chief Allison "Tootie" Montana's 50 Years of Mardi Gras Indian Suiting.** New Orleans: New Orleans Museum of Art, 1997.
- **The Magic of JuJu: An Appreciation of the Black Arts Movement.** Chicago: Third World Press, 1998.
- **Tarzan Can - Not Return to Africa But I Can.** Clarkston, GA: Visions Three-Thousand, 1996.
- **What is Life? Reclaiming the Black Blues Self.** Chicago: Third World Press, 1994.

Discussion Questions

1. What was Salaam's education as a poet? Do you think this is typical of all poets? What other influences on his writing does he cite?
2. Why is his poem about poetry named "The Call of the Wild"? What poetic strategies can you identify in this poem?
3. Analyze his performance of "Blue Zephyr."

Biography

Kalamu ya Salaam is a professional editor/writer and arts administrator. He is a senior partner in the New Orleans based public relations firm of Bright Moments. He served as the editor of THE BLACK COLLEGIAN Magazine for thirteen years. Continuing his work in journalism, Mr. Salaam is the Arts & Entertainment Editor for **The New Orleans Tribune**, Modern Jazz Editor for **Wavelength**, **The New Orleans Music Magazine** and a regular contributor to **The Louisiana Weekly** newspaper. He was a member of the Free Southern Theatre from 1968 through 1972, and a founding member of BLKARTSOUTH (a performing and publishing group). Mr. Salaam's plays have been widely anthologized and a 1987/88 production of his "BLK LOVE SONG #1" won a "Best of Fringe" award from the Manchester Evening news in England.

Kalamu ya Salaam is the author of several books of poetry, including **The Blues Merchant** (1969), **Hofu Ni Kwenu/My Fear Is For You** (1973), **Pamoja Tutashina/Together We Will Win** (1974), **Ibura** (1976), **Revolutionary Love** (1978), **Iron Flowers** (1979), **A Nation of Poets** (1989). His latest book is **Speak the Truth to the People**, an anthology of NOMMO Literary Society workshop writers co-edited with Kysha N. Brown. He has also done numerous pamphlets on political issues, particularly the issue of apartheid. He is the leader of the Wordband, a poetry performance ensemble. His latest CD is **My Story, My Song**. He is co-founder/editor of Runagate Press.

EVERETT HOAGLAND

Selected Bibliography

- **Black Velvet.** Chicago: Broadside Press, 1970.
- **Scrimshaw.** Detroit: Broadside Press, 1970.
- **Ten Poems: A Collection.** Lincoln University, PA: American Studies Institute, 1968.

Discussion Questions

1. How does Hoagland's "Love Child--An Aesthetic" compare to other poems you have read celebrating the female body (or the male) such as John Donne's "To His Mistress on Going to Bed"? Why does he use so many food-related metaphors and analogies?

Biography

Everett Hoagland's poetry is fueled by musical rhythms, a sense of history, and an appreciation for human beauty. His earliest contributions were in education; in Philadelphia he taught high school English and for Operation Headstart and adult literacy programs. He later taught at several universities, including Swarthmore College and Southeastern Massachusetts University. He published his signature collection of poetry, **Black Velvet**, in 1970. He has been the recipient of the Gwendolyn Brooks Award for Fiction from the magazine **Black World** and a Creative Artists Fellowship from the Massachusetts Arts and Humanities Foundation. He has also served as the contributing editor for the **American Poetry Review**.

SONIA SANCHEZ

Sonia Sanchez and Lorenzo Thomas recall the liberation tradition of the 1960s.

Selected Bibliography

- **Does Your House Have Lions?** Boston: Beacon Press, 1998.
- **Homegirls & Handgrenades.** New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1997.
- **I've Been a Woman.** Chicago: Third World Press, 1987.
- **Like the Singing Coming Off the Drums: Love Poems.** Boston: Beacon Press, 1998.
- **Shake Loose My Skin.** Boston: Beacon Press, 1999.
- **A Sound Investment.** Chicago: Third World Press, 1993.
- **Under a Soprano Sky.** Lawrenceville, NJ: Africa World Press, 1987.
- **Wounded in the House of a Friend.** Boston: Beacon Press, 1997.

Discussion Questions

1. How did Sanchez's childhood influence her writing? 2. What is happening in "We Are Here" and where does it take place? Why do you think she wrote it? If you were writing a similar poem, where would you set it and what would the action be? 3. "As long as you breathe, you will write." How does she demonstrate the truth of this in her life? 4. Who is the speaker in "I Have Walked a Long Time"? What life events are catalogued in it, and why did Sanchez choose to include these?

Biography

Sonia Sanchez is one of the most deeply moving and committed poets to emerge from the Black Arts Movement in the late sixties and seventies. A poet, activist, playwright, editor and teacher, Sanchez has significantly influenced African American literature and culture by the urgency of her sustained and powerful voice. From 1969 to the present, she has authored twelve books of poems including **Homecoming** (1969), **We a BadddDDD People** (1970), **A Blues Book for Blue Black Magical Women** (1974), **homegirls & handgrenades** (1984), and **Under a Soprano Sky** (1987), **Wounded in the House of a Friend** (1995), **Does Your House Have Lions?** (1998), and **Like the Singing Coming Off the Drums: Love Poems** (1998). A recipient of numerous awards including a National Endowment for the Arts Award, 1985 American Book Award for **homegirls & handgrenades**, the Governor's Award for Excellence in the Humanities for 1988, and the Peace and Freedom Award from the Women International League for Peace and Freedom for 1989, she also received the Pew Fellowship in the Arts for her outstanding literary achievement. Sanchez has lectured at over 500 universities and colleges in the United States and has traveled extensively, reading her poetry in Africa, China, Europe, Canada, and the Caribbean. She currently holds the Laura Carnell Chair in English at Temple University.

LORENZO THOMAS

Biography

Lorenzo Thomas, assistant professor of English at the University of Houston-Downtown, was a member of the legendary Umbra workshop in the 1960's. This workshop drew young writers to the Lower East Side of New York City in search of their artistic voices. Reflecting on those years in a 1978 Callaloo essay, Thomas observes, "cultural black nationalism of our moment did not spring forth from inspiration of the New York Times or the Late News," but was the result of cultural transmissions from the griots of the folk tradition to these young writers. Now an internationally acclaimed poet and critic, he continues to receive inspiration from this source. His collections of poetry include *Chances are Few* (1979), *The Bathers* (1981) and *Sound Science* (1992). He is a recipient of two Poets Foundation awards and the Lucille Medwick Prize.

EUGENE REDMOND

Eugene Redmond and [Jabari Asim](#) discuss the significance of cultural ancestors and define their writing in the context of grass-roots organizing.

Selected Bibliography

- **Consider Loneliness as These Things.** Rome, Italy: Centro Studi E Scambi Internazionali, 1973.
- **Drum-Voices: The Mission of Afro-American Poetry.** New York: Anchor, 1976.
- **The Eye in the Ceiling: Selected Poems.** New York: Writers and Readers Publishing, Inc., 1992.
- **In a Time of Rain & Desire: New Poems.** East St. Louis, IL: Black River Writers, 1973.
- **River of Bones and Flesh and Blood.** East St. Louis, IL: Black River Writers, 1971.
- **Sentry of the Four Golden Pillars.** East St. Louis, IL: House of Truth, 1970.
- **Songs from an Afro/Phone: New Poems.** East St. Louis, IL: Black River Writers, 1972.
- **A Tale of Time & Toilet Tissue.** East St. Louis, IL: Privately printed, 1969.
- **A Tale of Two Toms, or Tom-Tom (Uncle Toms of East St. Louis & St. Louis).** East St. Louis, IL: Privately printed, 1968.

Discussion Questions

1. Why has Redmond's poetic output been limited? Do you feel he made the right choice? Are you aware of other poets and writers who have filled the role of mentor when it was necessary?
2. Identify Shakespeare's influence in "I Can Never Unlove You."
3. How have the "street poets" influenced the "academy poets" in Redmond's opinion? What does he mean by "parallel institutions or apparatus"? Why are they vital?

Biography

Eugene Redmond, the first and only official poet laureate of his native East St. Louis, Ill., since 1976, teaches at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, his alma mater. He has written several books, including **Songs from an Afro/Phone: New Poems** and **Drumvoices: The Mission of Afro-American Poetry, A Critical History**. He, along with Henry Dumas and Sherman Fowler, founded

Black River Writers Publishing Company, which has published most of his poetry. His boundless energy has propelled him into countless creative projects including his work with Katherine Dunham at Southern Illinois University's Performing Arts Training Center and his biographical study of the late poet and fiction writer Henry Dumas. Redmond has been poet-in-residence at Southern Illinois University, Oberlin College, California State University, Southern University in Baton Rouge, and the University of Wisconsin at Madison. Redmond is the founding editor of **Drumvoices Review**, a multicultural literary magazine. He is also a playwright whose works have been produced by colleges in Illinois, California, Louisiana and New York. The recipient of the 1993 American Book Award for his collection of poems **The Eye in the Ceiling**, he received the 1993 Pyramid Award from the Pan African Movement USA for his writing achievements and his lifetime dedication to multiculturalism. He is presently at work on a poetic biography of former premiere ballerina Katherine Dunham.

JABARI ASIM

Biography

Jabari Asim is book editor for the **Washington Post**. He is an assistant editor of **Drumvoices Revue**, a journal published by Southern Illinois University-Edwardsville. He is founding editor of **EYEBALL**, a literary arts journal that was awarded a Gregory Kolovakos Seed Grant. His poetry has appeared in **Black American Literature Forum**, **Obsidian II**, **Painted Bride Quarterly**, **Catalyst** and **Shooting Star Review**, among others. His plays include "Caribbean Beat," produced by Muny Student Theatre Project; "Peace, Dog," produced by The New Theatre; "Believe I'll Testify," produced by Gettys Productions; and "New Blood Symphony" and "Didn't It Rain," both staged by Pamoja Theatre Workshop. His fiction and poetry are both included in **In The Tradition: An Anthology of Young Black Writing**. In 1995, he became the arts writer for the new **Post-Dispatch** entertainment magazine **Get Out**, and his reviews have appeared in various publications, including **The Hungry Mind Review** and **Salon** magazine.

NIKKI GIOVANNI

Nikki Giovanni expresses the values that pervade her writing and her ongoing commitment to the Black community.

Selected Bibliography

- **Appalachian Elders: A Warm Hearth Sampler**. Blacksburg, VA: Pocahontas Press, Inc., 1996.
- **Ego-Tripping and Other Poems for Young People**. Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1993.
- **The Genie in the Jar**. New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1995.
- **Grand Mothers**. New York: Henry Holt & Company, Inc., 1996.
- **Knoxville, Tennessee**. New York: Scholastic, Inc., 1994.
- **The Selected Poems of Nikki Giovanni**. New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc., 1996.
- **Love Poems**. New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc., 1997.

- **Racism 101.** New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc., 1994.
- **Shimmy Shimmy Shimmy Like My Sister Kate: Looking at the Harlem Renaissance Through Poems.** New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1995.
- **The Sun Is So Quiet.** New York: Henry Holt & Company, Inc., 1995.

Discussion Questions

1. What does she mean by "anticipating a life"? How does the craft of writing fit into that plan?
2. What kind of advice does she give young people? Why does she dismiss the idea that it's not what you know, but rather how you live your life?
3. Why did she write "I Was Old"? Discuss its literary techniques. Are they effective?
4. What qualities in "Knoxville, Tennessee" signal Giovanni's style?

Biography

Nikki Giovanni is one of America's most widely read and controversial poets. The visionary, truth-telling qualities that have come to be associated with poetry of the sixties and early seventies are yet alive in her writings. Giovanni entered the literary world at the height of the Black Arts Movement and quickly achieved not simply fame but stardom. **Truth Is On Its Way**, a recording of her poems recited to gospel music, was one of the best-selling albums in the country in 1971. All but one of her books are still in print with several having sold more than 100,000 copies. Named woman of the year by three magazines, including **Ebony**, and recipient of a host of honorary doctorates and awards, Nikki Giovanni has read from her work and lectured at college around the country. Her books include **Black Feeling; Black Talk/Black Judgement; My House; Ego-Tripping and Other Poems for Young People; The Women and the Men; Cotton Candy on a Rainy Day; Those Who Ride the Night Winds; Sacred Cows...and Other Edibles, Racism 101**, and **Love Poems**, her most recent work. Giovanni is a professor of English at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.

VIRGINIA FOWLER

Biography

Virginia Fowler teaches courses in African-American Literature at Virginia Tech, with a special emphasis on African-American women writers. She has recently published **Henry James' American Girl** (1984), **Nikki Giovanni** (1992) and **Gloria Naylor: In Search of Sanctuary** (1996) and is currently at work on projects about Zora Neale Hurston and Gwendolyn Brooks.

EPISODE 3: SEERS

RITA DOVE

The poetry of black women speaks honestly of their experiences, revealing their vulnerability and their strengths. Rita Dove wears the mantle of poet laureate well as she shares her imaginative vision.

Selected Bibliography

- **The Darker Face of the Earth: A Play.** Ashland, OR: Storyline Press, 1994.
- Dove, Rita, and Robert McDowell. **The Diviners.** Ashland, OR: Storyline Press, 1996.
- **Fifth Sunday.** Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1985.
- **Grace Notes.** New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991.
- **Mother Love.** New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1995.
- **Museum.** Pittsburgh: Carnegie-Mellon University Press, 1983.
- **The Poet's World.** Washington, D.C.: The Library of Congress, 1995.
- **Selected Poems.** New York: Pantheon Books, 1993.
- **Thomas and Beulah.** Pittsburgh: Carnegie-Mellon University Press, 1987.
- **Through the Ivory Gate: A Novel.** New York: Random House, Inc., 1993.
- **The Yellow House on the Corner.** Pittsburgh: Carnegie-Mellon University Press, 1980.

Discussion Questions

1. What emotions is Dove trying to evoke in "Augusta the Winged Man and Rasha the Black Dove"? Why did she choose them as her subject?
2. Would "Parsley" have the same impact on the reader if the subject matter were fiction? Do you need the background that Dove gives to make that decision?
3. What does "After Reading 'Mickey in the Night Kitchen' for the Third Time" tell you about her relationship with her daughter? Why do you think she chose this subject matter for a poem? Would you classify this as a feminist poem?

Biography

Rita Dove, Poet Laureate of the United States from 1993-5, is one of the most gifted poets of the last half century. Her poems show an expansive and eclectic intelligence and impressive lyrical and linguistic gifts. Dove was born and raised in Akron, Ohio, and was educated at Miami University and the University of Iowa. She is the author of a novel, **Through the Ivory Gate**, and a collection of stories, **Fifth Sunday** (1985), as well as a book of essays, **The Poet's World** (1995). Best known for her poetry, she is the author of six books of poetry: **The Yellow House on the Corner** (1980); **Museum** (1983); **Thomas and Beulah**, which was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1987; **Grace Notes** (1989), **Selected Poems**, (1993), and her most recent work, **Mother Love: Poems** was published in 1996. Her other honors include fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Guggenheim Foundation. In 1996, she received the Heinz Award in the Arts and Humanities and the Charles Frankel Prize. In that year, her play **The Darker Face of the Earth** was first produced at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. Currently Commonwealth Professor of English at the University of Virginia, she lives in Charlottesville.

TOI DERRICOTTE

Toi Derricotte and Opal Moore speak openly about the often unspoken issues of black women's sexuality and intimacy

Selected Bibliography

- **The Black Notebooks: An Interior Journey.** New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1997.
- **Captivity.** Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997.
- **The Empress of the Death House.** East Lansing, MI: Lotus Press, Inc., 1978.
- **Natural Birth.** Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, Inc., 1983.
- **Tender.** Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997.

Discussion Questions

1. In "Clitoris," what metaphors and analogies does Derricotte use to approach the subject of sexuality? Are they effective?
2. How does Derricotte use her feelings about the past to create art? Is she different than other writers in the way she does it? Do you see a cycle here between life and art?
3. Opal Moore asks Derricotte if slavery has influenced the sexuality of black women. How does she respond? Do you find clues in Derricotte's poetry that she is a black woman? Why or why not?

Biography

Toi Derricotte has published three collections of poetry, **The Empress of the Death House** (1978), **Natural Birth** (1983), and **Captivity** (1989). She says of her poetry, "Truth-telling in my art is a way to separate my 'self' from what I have been taught to believe about my 'self,' the degrading stereotypes about black females in our society." Because of this poetic approach, her poetry emerges as strong, sensuous, courageous and poignantly personal. Derricotte is the recipient of two fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts (1985 and 1990), as well as the recipient of the Lucille Medwick Memorial Award from the Poetry Society of American (1985), a Pushcart Prize (1989) and the Folger Shakespeare Library Poetry Book Award (1990). Her poems have been published in a significant number of journals, including **American Poetry Review**, **Callaloo**, **Iowa Review**, **Massachusetts Review**, **New England Review**, **Bread Loaf Quarterly** and **Ploughshares**. Derricotte is an associate professor of English at the University of Pittsburgh and has taught in the graduate creative writing programs at New York University, George Mason University and Old Dominion University. In 1997, Norton published her autobiography, written in journal form, **The Black Notebooks**.

OPAL MOORE

Biography

Opal Moore is an associate professor in the Department of English at Spelman College, Atlanta, where she teaches creative writing, fiction writing workshop, and courses in contemporary African American literature. Her fiction and poetry have appeared in journals and anthologies, including **Callaloo**, **African American Review**, and **Honey, Hush! An Anthology of African American Women's Humor**, edited by Daryl Cumber Dance.

Her other interests include the representations of ethnicities in children's and young adult literatures; she has published a number of articles on this subject in journals and collections, including **The Black American in Books for Children**, **The Role of Illustration in Multicultural Literature for Youth** (1997) and **The Maya Angelou "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" Casebook** (forthcoming, Oxford UP, 1998). She is currently planning to publish a collection of poems, *Leaving Mississippi*, and is completing work on a collection of stories, **The Births of Eve**.

DOLORES KENDRICK

Dolores Kendrick and Judith Thomas explore the powerful historical images of women whose lives bore witness to struggle.

Selected Bibliography

- **Now is the Thing to Praise**. Lansing, MI: Lotus Press, 1984.
- **The Women of Plums: Poems in the Voices of Slave Women**. New York: William Morrow & Company, 1989.

Discussion Questions

1. Describe the voice in "Peggy in Killing." Would the poem be as powerful in the third person? Compare the poem to Toni Morrison's novel **Beloved**.
2. Why are her poems about the experience of slavery able to cross racial boundaries and touch a white mother, as she gave in her example? What techniques does she use in her poetry to bring about this effect?
3. What does she mean by empowering yourself to prevent invisibility? Is this a problem that everyone must solve? How has Ralph Ellison influenced Kendrick's solution?

Biography

Dolores Kendrick, poet, playwright and educator, has been published in the **Beloit Poetry Journal**, the **Indiana Review**, **Open Places** and several other anthologies. Author of **Through the Ceiling** (1975) and **Now is the Thing to Praise** (1984), she has received great acclaim for **The Women of Plums** (1989). This book won the Ansfield-Wolf Award in 1990, it was listed as the New York Public Library Best Book for Teenagers in 1991 and it was the inspiration for an original production by Karamu Theatre in Cleveland. The poem "Peggy in Killing" from *The Women of Plums* has been adapted for an opera which will open in New York in the spring of 1995. Kendrick has also recorded her poetry as a part of the Contemporary Poets' Series by the Library of Congress and has read at

The Folger Shakespeare Library, the Library of Congress and the Gertrude Whittall Series. She has received a Fulbright to Ireland and a National Endowment for the Arts Award (1989). She is the Bira I. Heinz Professor Emerita at Phillips Exeter Academy and a National Association of Independent Schools People of Color Award recipient (1992).

JUDITH THOMAS

Biography

Judith Thomas is the recipient of numerous awards. A few include the Lindbach Distinguished Teaching Award, the Sojourner Truth Award from the national Association of Business and Professional Women, the outstanding Educator Award from the Black Dupont Employees, the Mary E. Baltimore Award for Outstanding Contribution to Education from the Pennsylvania Black Conference on Higher Education. She regularly serves as a consultant in both basic and higher education on topics such as oral language proficiency, multicultural education, teaching methodology, discipline without damage, curriculum development, interpersonal relations on the job, recruitment strategies of minority students and faculty, male/female relationships, and the African American experience.

Several of her most published articles include "A Case for the Language Consideration in the Interview Dynamic of the Black Family: Merits and Demerits" in the **Pennsylvania Black Conference on Higher Education Journal** and "Black Youth in Urban Schools: Attrition, Performance, Self-Concept," **The State of Black Philadelphia Journal**. She is one of the four editors of the first edition of **Exploring the African American Experience: A Multidisciplinary Approach** (1996) text in which her chapter is entitled "Language and Empowerment: A Case for the Language Consideration in the Interview Dynamic."

SHERLEY ANNE WILLIAMS

Sherley Anne Williams and Deborah McDowell share their views of the impact of black music, especially rap, on contemporary poetry.

Selected Bibliography

- **Dessa Rose: A Riveting Story of the South During Slavery.** NY: William Morrow & Company, Inc., 1986.
- **Girls Together.** San Diego, CA: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1999.
- **Give Birth to Brightness: A Thematic Study in Neo-Black Literature.** New York: Dial Press, 1972.
- **The Peacock Poems.** Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1975.
- **Someone Sweet Angel Chile.** New York: Morrow, 1982.

Discussion Questions

1. What is Williams saying about Black community in "The Black Back-Up"? Why did she choose the refrain for the poem? Can you identify musical elements in the poem?
2. How does she differentiate poetry and fiction? Which is more difficult to write and why?
3. What is her creative process?
4. What is her opinion of rap music? What difference in accountability does she identify between rappers and poets?

Biography

Sherley Anne Williams, who has been described as a brilliant critic and moving poet, began writing seriously after she received a bachelor's degree in history from California State University at Fresno in 1966. Her first story, "Tell Martha Not to Moan," was published in 1967 while Williams continued graduate study at Howard University. She earned her master's degree in 1972 from Brown University, where she taught in the Black Studies Program. Her volume of literary criticism, **Give Birth to Brightness**, was published the same year. Williams is the author of two volumes of poetry titled **The Peacock Poems** and **Some One Sweet Angel Chile**. Describing **Some One Sweet Angel Chile**, she sees it as a "series of self-affirmations, each rooted in a sense of the sisterhood of black women and dealing with some aspect of self-image. Each arises out of a deeper and wider sense of the group experience." Williams often renders that sense of group experience with the poignance and transcendence of the blues. Author of the novel **Dessa Rose**, she has published several books, as well as stories, criticism and a play. Her children's book **Working Cotton** is a Caldecott Honor Book. **Girls Together**, which she coauthored with Varnette P. Honeywood, is due for release in February 1999. Williams currently teaches at the University of California at San Diego.

DEBORAH MCDOWELL

Biography

Deborah McDowell is professor of English at the University of Virginia. She is the author of "**The Change Same**": **Studies in Fiction by Black American Women**; **Leaving Pipe Shop: Memories of Kin**; period editor of **The Norton Anthology of African American Literature**, and co-editor, with Arnold Rampersad, of **Slavery and the Literary Imagination**. Her articles have been published in the **Black American Literature Forum**, **Feminism Beside Itself**, **Studies in Historical Change**, and **Critical Essays on Frederick Douglass**. Among her many honors are the Woodrow Wilson Fellowship (1994-5) and the Helen Homans Gilbert Lectureship at Harvard University (1988).

GERALD BARRAX

Gerald Barrax explores his ideas, revealing a deep and intense sensibility while using traditional forms.

Selected Bibliography

- **An Audience of One.** Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1980.
- **The Deaths of Animals & Lesser Gods.** Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1984.
- **From a Person Sitting in Darkness: New & Selected Poems.** Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998.
- **Leaning Against the Sun.** Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 1992.

Discussion Questions

1. How did Barrax's experience of finding and killing a black snake grow into self-knowledge and a poem?
2. Why does he believe it is important to be aware of poetic form? How aware are you of poetic form? Is poetic form as important in the twentieth century as it was previously? Explain.
3. He says, "There's something in poetry that you can use." Can people in all situations and lifestyles find something useful in poetry? Give examples.

Biography

Gerald Barrax, a poet of exceptional perception and stunning poetic technique, has been writing poetry since the 1960s. His early poems appeared in a volume entitled **Another Kind of Rain** (1970) and stylistically link him to the young black poets who experimented with new typographical techniques, a poetic diction laced with street talk, and metaphors of political urgency. Since then he has published three other volumes: **An Audience of One: Poems** (1980), **The Death of Animals and Lesser Gods** (1984), and **Leaning Against the Sun** (1992). Barrax was born in Attalla, Ala., and grew up in Pittsburgh. After serving in the U.S. Air Force, he attended Duquesne University where he earned his B.A. degree in English. He continued his studies at the University of Pittsburgh and the University of North Carolina. Barrax, a widely recognized poetry critic and editor, won the 1983 Callaloo Creative Writing Award for Non-Fiction Prose and edited the poetry section of **Callaloo** from 1984-1986. In 1985 he assumed editorship of **Obsidian II** at North Carolina State University, where he is a professor of English. His latest work **From a Person Sitting in Darkness: New and Selected Poems** is scheduled for release in 1998.

JOYCE PETTIS

Biography

Joyce Pettis is an associate professor in the English Department at North Carolina State University, Raleigh, where she teaches graduate and undergraduate courses in African American literature. She is the author of **Toward Wholeness in Paule Marshall's Fiction** and is currently working on a study of celebration and festivity in African American and Black Caribbean fiction. The following are representative of articles she has published: "Reading Ann Petry's **The Narrows** into Black Literary

Tradition," **Recovered Writers/Recovered Texts**, Ed. Dolan Hubbard, University of Tennessee Press, 1997; "The Marrow of Tradition: Charles Chesnutt's Novel of the South," **North Carolina Literary Review** ; "She Sung Back in Return": Literary (Re)vision and Transformation in Gayl Jones's **Corregidora**." Additionally, she serves on the editorial board of **North Carolina Literary Review**, is a former associate editor of **Obsidian II: Black Literature in Review**, and evaluates manuscripts on African American literature for several university presses.

E. ETHELBERT MILLER

With Black Arts poets as his role models, E. Ethelbert Miller talks about poetry as a tool and his responsibility to the Black community.

Selected Bibliography

- **First Light: New and Selected Poems.** Baltimore, MD: Black Classic Press, 1994.
- Editor. **In Search of Color Everywhere: A Collection of African American Poetry.** New York: Stewart, Tabori, & Chang, Inc., 1994.
- **The Land of Smiles and The Land of No Smiles.** Cal.: Miller, 1974.
- **Season of Hunger/Cry of Rain, Poems: 1975-1980.** Detroit: Lotus press, 1982.
- **Where are the Love Poems for Dictators?** Seattle, WA: Open Hand Publishing, Inc., 1987.
- **Whispers, Secrets, and Promises.** Baltimore, MD: Black Classic Press, 1998.

Discussion Questions

1. How does Miller use the metaphor of war in "Rebecca"?
2. How do past and present meet in the poem "The Bronx is Where Dreams are Made"? What chronology and images does Miller use? How do these images tie into the larger images of America?
3. What makes a poem popular?
4. Recount the story contained in "Omar." What changes occur between the oral telling and the poem? Would it be different as a short story? Why does Miller choose to tell it as a poem?

Biography

E. Ethelbert Miller is the director of the African American Resource Center at Howard University, a position he has held since 1974. Miller is the founder and director of the Ascension Poetry Reading Series, one of the oldest literary series in the Washington area. He has authored **Migrant Worker, Season of Hunger/Cry of Rain, Women Surviving Massacres and Men, Where are the Love Poems for Dictators?**, and **First Light: Selected and New Poems**. Miller is a Washington, D.C. treasure. In 1979, the Mayor of Washington, D.C. proclaimed September 28, 1979 as "E. Ethelbert Miller Day." Awarded the Mayor's Art Award for Literature (1982), he has received the Public Humanities Award (1988) and the Columbia Merit Award (1993). Miller has served on the D.C. Community Humanities Council and as senior editor for the **Washington Review of the Arts**. His most recent work includes editing the acclaimed anthology **In Search of Color Everywhere: A Collection of African-American Poetry** (1996) and authoring **Whispers, Secrets, Promises** (1998).

EUGENIA COLLIER

Biography

Eugenia Collier, a native of Baltimore, is a writer and critic. She taught English at colleges and universities in the Baltimore-Washington area until her retirement in 1996. She has published scholarly and critical articles as well as stories, personal essays, and poems in numerous periodicals. With Richard A. Long, she co-edited an anthology, **Afro-American Writing**. Her stories are collected in **Breeder and Other Stories**. Her work is motivated by her love for African American literature, drama, and culture.

MICHAEL HARPER

The music of urban jazz informs Michael Harper's poetry. He tells how his musical heritage and his background influence the meaning and structure of his work.

Selected Bibliography

- **Debridement**. Garden City: Doubleday, 1973.
- **Healing Songs for the Inner Ear**. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1985.
- **Honorable Amendments**. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1995.
- **Images of Kin: New and Selected Poems**. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977.
- **Nightmare Begins Responsibility**. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975.
- **Rhode Island**. Roslindale, MA: Pym-Randall Press, 1981.
- **Song: I Want a Witness**. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1972.

Discussion Questions

1. How does Harper treat the subject of death in the poems he chooses to read?
2. Harper struggles with how the poet can make the transition from music to literature. Can it be done successfully? How are music and poetry tied together?
3. What were the sources of inspiration for the poems he reads? Why is he uncomfortable with being compared to poets like Gwendolyn Brooks and Langston Hughes?
- 4.

Biography

Michael S. Harper, the poet laureate of Rhode Island, is one of the country's most prolific writers. Author of eight books of poetry, he began his distinguished career with **Dear John, Dear Coltrane** (1977). His other books include **History Is Your Own Heartbeat** (1971), which won the Black Academy of Arts and Letters Award for poetry, **Nightmare Begins Responsibility** (1975), **Images of Kin: New and Selected Poems** (1977), which won the 1978 Melville Cane Award from the Poetry Society of America, and **Healing Songs for the Inner Ear: Poems** (1984). Harper has also made a significant contribution as the editor of **Chant of Saints: A Gathering of Afro-American Literature of Art and Scholarship**, which he edited with Robert B. Stepto, and **Every Shut Eye Ain't Asleep: An Anthology of Poetry by African Americans Since 1945**, edited with Anthony Walton.

Nominated twice for the National Book Award, he has been honored by the National Institute of Arts and Letters, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Guggenheim Foundation, and was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1995. He won the 1996 George Kent Poetry Award for Honorable Amendments, and in 1997 he was awarded the Claiborne Pell Award for Excellence in Arts. He is University Professor of English at Brown University, where he directs the writing program.

ALDON L. NIELSEN

Biography

Aldon L. Nielsen, professor of English at San Jose State University, is the author of **Reading Race: White American Poets and the Racial Discourse in the Twentieth Century** (1988) and **Writing Between the Lines: Race and Intertextuality** (1994). Nielsen's two collections of poetry are **Evacuation Routes** and **Heart Strings**. Nielsen was producer, director and host of a San Jose State, California radio program, **The Incognito Lounge**, and published a poetry newsletter. Nielsen also served as director of poetry writing workshops at the Martin Luther King Public Library in Washington, D.C. His latest works are **C.L.R. James: A Critical Introduction** (1997) and **Black Chant** (1998).

EPISODE 3: Seers

ELIZABETH ALEXANDER

Discussion Questions

1. What literary traditions do the poets of the [Dark Room Collective](#) seem to draw upon most fully?
2. The themes of family and community are prominent in the poems in the "Initiates" section. Discuss the similarities and differences in the poets' exploration of these themes.

Biography

Elizabeth Alexander was educated at Yale University and Boston University, where she studied with Derek Walcott. Having previously taught at the University of Pennsylvania, she currently teaches at the University of Chicago. Her first collection of poems, **The Venus Hottentot**, published in 1990, reveals poems that often explore the interior lives of historical black figures, exposing emotions and experiences that strikingly illuminate public concerns. Her poetry and fiction have appeared in such publications as **The Southern Review**, **American Poetry Review**, **Prairie Schooner**, **Callaloo**, **Black American Literature Forum**, and **The American Voice**. She also reviews contemporary literature for **The Village Voice**. A 1992 recipient of the NEA artist grant, she has been anthologized in **In The Tradition: An Anthology of Young Black Writers** edited by Kevin Powell and Ras Baraka and **Every Shut Eye Ain't Asleep**, edited by Michael S. Harper and Anthony Walton. Her latest book is **Body of Life** (1996).

DARK ROOM COLLECTIVE

Natasha Trethewey was born in Gulfport, Mississippi in 1966. She received an MA from the Hollins College Creative Writing Program and an MFA from the University of Massachusetts. She is a recipient of a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts, and her poems have appeared in such journals as *Agni*, *The American Poetry Review*, *Callaloo*, *Gettysburg Review*, *New England Review*, *The North American Review*, and the *Southern Review*. She is Assistant Professor of English at Auburn University.

Thomas Sayers Ellis, was born and raised in Washington, D.C., studied poetry at Harvard with Seamus Heaney and received an M.F.A. from Brown University in 1995. His work has appeared in *The American Poetry Review*; *AGNI*; *Best American Poetry 1997*; *Boston Review*; *Callaloo*; *Grand Street*; *Hambone*; *Harvard Review*; *the Kenyon Review*; *Ploughshares*; *the Pushcart Prize 1998*; *the Southern Review* and *The Garden Thrives: Twentieth-Century African-American Poetry*. He has received fellowships from The MacDowell Colony, The Fine Arts Work Center (in Provincetown) and YADDO: and in 1993 he coedited *On the Verge: Emerging Poets and Artists* (Faber & Faber). His first

collection *The Good Junk* was published in the Graywolf annual "Take Three" in 1996. He teaches in the Bennington Writing Seminars and is currently Assistant Professor of English and African American Literature at Case Western Reserve University.

Kevin Young attended Harvard University, where he won the Academy of American Poets Prize his first year. He went on to win prestigious Hoopes and Garrison Prizes from the same university before holding a Stegner Fellowship in Poetry from Stanford. After receiving an M.F.A from Brown University and several MacDowell Colony residencies, Young currently serves as assistant professor of English and African-American Studies at University of Georgia, teaching poetry and film studies. Young's first book, *Most Way Home*, won the National Poetry Series and the Zacharis First Book Prize from *Ploughshares*; William Morrow published it in 1995 (Quill paperback, 1996). Publications from *Seventeen*, *Emerge* and *Jet*, to *Poetry*, *Harvard Review* and the *Village Voice Literary Supplement* reviewed or featured the book widely.

Sharan Strange is a native of Orangeburg, South Carolina, and was educated at Harvard and Sarah Lawrence Colleges. She now lives in Washington, D.C., where she teaches writing, literature and social studies in an alternative school which focuses on experiential learning. She has also taught poetry workshops in high schools, colleges and universities throughout the East coast and in the Midwest, and has been writer-in-residence this past year at Fisk University, Spelman College and the California Institute of the Arts. Her work has appeared in numerous journals and anthologies - - most recently in *American Poetry Review*, *Agni* and *Callaloo*-and is forthcoming in *Identity Lessons*, *Bittersweet: Contemporary Black Women Writers*, *Radcliffe Quarterly* and *What I Never Said: Letters from Daughters and Sons to their Fathers*.

Major Jackson is a graduate of Temple University and Central High School in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. While at Temple University, he studied poetry under the tutelage of poet Sonia Sanchez. He is the recipient of fellowships from Pew Charitable Trusts, MacDowell Artist Colony, and Bread Loaf Writers' Conference. He has read his poetry widely at such institutions as the St. Mark's Poetry Project, Bowdoin College, Gettysburg College, Swarthmore College, Third Avenue Performance Space, and University of Pennsylvania. His work has been published in the *American Poetry Review*, *Boulevard*, *Callaloo*, *Absidian II*, *Painted Bride Quarterly*, and in the anthologies, *CrossConnect: Writers of the Information Age*, and *Spirit & Flame: An Anthology of African-American Poetry*. From 1992-97, he worked as Curator of Literary Arts & Programs at Poetry. From 1992-97, he worked as Curator of Literary Arts & Programs at the Painted Bride Art Center in Philadelphia. Currently, he is enrolled in the creative Writing Program at the University of Oregon.

Vera Beatty received her bachelors from Emerson College and her M.F.A. from Brown University. She has studied with Michael S. Harper and Cornelius Eady. In the Spring of 1993 she joined the Dark Room Collective. "I was very lucky to have been a part of the Dark Room. The Collective continues to be many things for me and I hope that the emerging young Black artists of tomorrow find or begin to build on what I experienced with the Collective." Ms. Beatty presently lives, teaches and organizes around Political Prisoners in Brooklyn, NY.