"Thoughts on the Challenges of the Afro-Mississippi Writer"
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It is difficult for me to discuss the state of Jackson, Mississippi's African American literary scene without discussing its open mic scene as one aspect and barometer of Jackson's Black Arts scene. The Afro-Mississippi open mic scene is what it is. It ebbs and flows, falling in and out of various levels of popularity based on the popular or commercial media dictates. That is partly due to the fact that a consistent Afro-Mississippi readership has yet to be developed for a variety of reasons. *Slam*, *Love Jones*, the rise in popularity of poetry slams, and television programs, such as *Lyric Café* and HBO's *Def Poetry Jam* have had a great influence on revitalizing open mic/spoken word poetry, but it has done very little to develop a reading audience that will purchase books by African American poets, mostly because the spoken word stars have patterned themselves more after rappers than writers, which is not an innately bad thing, but it does nothing to inspire publishing or serious reading. To be clear, African-American poetry has a long and distinguished history of poets who are equally proficient on the stage as they are on the page, names such as Amiri Baraka, Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez, Askia Muhammad Toure, Ahmos Zu-Bolton, Jerry Ward, Reginald Martin, Kalamu ya Salaam, Charlie Braxton, Nayo Barbara Watkins, David Williams, Ken Stiggers, Marcus Uganda White, Tony Medina, Saddi Khali, Jolivette Anderson, and many others are overwhelming proof of this legacy. However, with the explosion of being able to present one's work orally to millions and receive instantaneous feedback, fame, and financial reward, most Afro-Mississippi poets have gravitated toward a career in spoken word than in publishing. This is a reality in Mississippi as well as everywhere else because almost every young Afro-Mississippian that I meet is more interested in securing a speaking and CD deal than publishing in a literary journal. To combat this trend, there are three hurdles that must be addressed if Afro-Mississippi writers expect to be able to survive and flourish in their own state as writers. And it is important to have a thriving Afro-Mississippian literary scene because the lack of a positive artistic voice and the lack of literacy, in general, are two of the elements that keeps Mississippi at the top of the lists for high school dropouts, teen pregnancy, crime, and dismal economic development, As indicated in the 2008 NEH study on reading and literacy, illiteracy is the essential element driving poverty because people who cannot not read or do not find reading interesting have limited opportunity to employ themselves.

More particularly to Mississippi, first, there continues to be a great chasm or schism between the Afro-Mississippi middle class and the Afro-Mississippi lower economic class, which seems to be the most productive in the creation of art, mostly because the Afro-Mississippi middle class children are attending college to prepare themselves for jobs that are more lucrative than those within the field of the arts. Even if they enroll in college as majors in one of the arts, it is likely they graduate in very traditional majors. They usually cease the production of their art for more lucrative endeavors. Yet, there can be no Black Arts Movement in Mississippi without the Afro-Mississippi middle class to purchase books, paintings, and cds. However, the Afro-Mississippi middle class often feels their sensibilities of upward-economic mobility attacked by the art of the Afro-Mississippi artists, making the Afro-Mississippi middle class leery of the subject matter

of the art created by the Afro-Mississippi lower economic class. Whether it is too sexually explicit or vile or whether it is too politically radical, the art often created by Afro-Mississippi artists, especially younger Afro-Mississippi artists, is often perceived as being degrading, embarrassing, or politically/economically dangerous. The Afro-Mississippi middle class has little desire to seek art created by Afro-Mississippians let alone patronize that art. Because many of the young Afro-Mississippi poets have rejected these conservative sensibilities or were not raised with these sensibilities, this becomes another road block that prevents older, middle-class Afro-Mississippians from even reading or making themselves accessible to the art. For instance, noted cultural critic Mark Anthony Neal, author of *What the Music Said*, *Soul Babies*, and *Songs in the Key of Black Life*, gave a lecture at Jackson State University on the use of the "N-word" as neo-linguistic liberation and an example of intellectual affirmation in hip hop music, and every time he actually said the "n-word," I thought that the older faculty members would die. I am not a fan of the word, myself, but these older scholars could not even bear the use of the word for academic discussion, as their faces seemed to twist into prunes and other epileptic disfigurements. In the Q&A session following Neal's lecture, I got the sense that none of the older faculty were able to "hear" Neal's points due to the use of the "n-word" as well as a few other more colorful terms he used as he quoted hip hop lyrics. Even when young artists, especially young Afro-Mississippi artists have something important to say, it is lost in the older generation's inability to help the younger generation by listening to them and helping them find more effective ways to articulate their ideas so that they are able to communicate to the generation that they will need if the goal is to actually solve the issues. So when a young poet, such as Keno Davis reads his two poems, "May Favorite Cuss Word is B****" and "Ready Set Dump," then the older, middle-class audience is unable to hear his other poem about his grandmother, "Heabem (Heaven)" or some of his more insightful haiku. And more importantly, how many of those elders will take the time to engage Davis in a firm but loving discussion where the goal is not to embarrass or scold him but to nurture and enlighten him.

Thus, open mic venues are seen as places of fads for Afro-Mississippi poets—just something to do while in college that is an economic dead-end, unless one transitions into rapping or singing or is able to land a spot on *Def Poetry Jam*. The problem with the spoken word route is that most spoken word artists are celebrated for their fame, performance ability, or subject matter. Since spoken word has become so much a part of the fabric of popular culture, many spoken word arts are merely famous for being famous and there is no real consideration or discussion of their work as language masters. Secondly, many are celebrated because of their performance skills—whether they are funny, or raw, or angry, or "sing-songy." Again, this limits the discussion of the one's mastery of language. Third, many are celebrated because of their subject matter—whether they are the romance poet or the political poet or the sex poet. Again, they are celebrated because of "what" they say, not because of "how" they say it, which, again, causes the mastery of language to be marginalized. Many of them are limited from being able to transition into writing where they can cultivate a readership once their spoken word fame flame has faded. Accordingly, because the middle class does not frequent or patronize the open mic venues, there remains a disconnect or a missed opportunity for dialogue. Dr. Carl Reddix, a highly successful Afro-Mississippian medical doctor,

became a frequent supporter and patron of the arts when his cousin and poet David Brian Williams died. Having never been a patron of literary events or venues, Dr. Reddix decided to attend a celebration in his cousin's honor that was sponsored and coordinated by local artists. Reddix was floored at the love that the community had for his cousin and at the abundance of talent in the state. "I had no idea that so much quality talent existed here" (Reddix 2008). Since that night in December 2006, Reddix has become a frequent attendee at the weekly open mic poetry events at Seven* Studioz (now Cultural Expressions), he has become a member of the Cultural Expressions Foundation, which uses art to educate and redirect at-risk youths, and he has spent his own money or planned fundraisers on several occasions when Seven* Studioz was facing the closure of its doors. When asked about his love and dedication to the literary world, Reddix asserts, "What most impressed me about the poetry presentations was that these young men and women are really *nerds*. I know that a lot of the city's middle class folk have some concerns or hesitations about the location as well as the subject matter of some of the pieces, but once you hear these young men and women it becomes evident how intelligent, creative, and *bookish* they must be to create this work" (Reddix 2008). Reddix's comments, realization, and patronage of the local literary scene clearly shows what types of connections can be created if more of the Afro-Mississippi middle class chose to open themselves to the local writers. Accordingly, many of the young writers who once thought that people like Dr. Reddix would never be interested in their work now think more about how to master language in a manner that allows them to speak or communicate to a wider or more diverse audience while being able to speak honestly and unflinchingly about the issues of their community. But, if more of the Afro-Mississippi middle-class do not embrace these writers, then their messages and issues will remain unheard and unresolved.

Currently there are two regularly occurring open mic venues that cater to African Americans in Jackson, Mississippi, each averaging about twenty-five to fifty patrons a night. The first and third Saturdays of very month is Gospoetry at Koinonia Coffee House, which, as the name indicates, caters to Christian themed poetry. This was started about three years ago by James Powell, a Jackson State University student, and is currently hosted by Christian comic and musician, Big V. I began attending because at the time there was no regularly occurring secular-themed poetry night on the weekend. Since then, the regular Thursday night open mic at Cultural Expressions, hosted by comic Cocky McFly, has moved to Sunday night. Interestingly enough, the poets have proven to be more flexible than the patrons because about half of poets attend and read at both nights. Of course, that may also have more to do with there being no other open mic venues that cater to Afro-Mississippians. There are other poetry nights often sponsored by students or graduates of Millsaps and Belhaven, which are private Christian colleges, where many Afro-Mississippi poets do not feel as comfortable sharing their poetry, which often conflicts with the political and religious sensibility of their more conservative counterparts. The lack of comfort level is not that they think that the white kids are "out to get them" but is more about needing a space where they do not feel like they are still at work or on the perpetual podium, being judged by what Cornel West calls the "white normative gaze." Whether we admit it or not, most African Americans are raised with the DuBosian notion that we are under obligation to put our best face and foot

forward in front of white folks. And for many of these kids, poetry night is a night to vent, to release some steam, and to be received by folks who are experiencing the same trails as them. Even about twenty percent of the poetry at Gospoetry has a political nature—though I will admit to being responsible for infusing the political element—but liberation theology is nothing new to Afro-Mississippians whereas to the Millsaps and Belhaven crowds the fiery Reverend Wright styled poems of Gospoetry would not be received as well by the Belhaven or Millsaps audience. And yet, a college-aged white Christian poet felt quite comfortable coming to Gospoetry and reading a poem with the phrase "Hitler Hillary." So even at their own venues, Afro-Mississippians must be on guard for the attack of white judgment, even if the white poet does not mean to offend the Afro-Mississippi audience, which shows the different levels of freedom and liberties for the two races and how literature can be used to highlight and affect that unlevel or uneven plight.

Secondly, there is no major press in Mississippi that publishes poetry and fiction. Thus, most creative writers in Mississippi, African American or white, have no local agency, vehicle, or organization that is designed, by its nature, to nurture, mine, or prospect for new writers. Publishers and presses all have people who are paid to acquire books or writers. Not only are they building relationships with agents, these presses or publishers often coordinate or sponsor events and contests that offer prize money and publishing opportunities to beginning writers. With no press or publisher in the state, there is no major entity that sees it in its best interest to cultivate a ready supply of creative writers, thus the ground or soil of Mississippi creative writers is left uninspired, or most Mississippi creative writers, especially the Afro-Mississippians, know that one must flee the state to be published. Essentially, it is the out of sight out of mind theory. With no state-wide press or publisher seeking creative writers or cultivating opportunities for creative writers, many young artists never see writing as a viable financial or aesthetically fulfilling endeavor. There are smaller presses, such as Dogwood Press, located in Brandon, Mississippi, but those presses are more concerned with mainstream, white sensibilities, which is, of course, where the money is. I'm not suggesting that white presses lose money by publishing work that their target readership does not want to read. I am suggesting that more work needs to be done to bridge the gap of literary and aesthetic sensibilities between the Afro-Mississippi middle class and the Afro-Mississippi artist class so that press sees the publishing of Afro-Mississippians as a viable economic prospect.

Thirdly, the lack of creative writing programs at HBCUs makes it difficult to develop Afro-Mississippi writers as well as a readership. In *What Is Life?*, Kalamu ya Salaam asserts that what is wrong with African American poetry is not that there is not enough great African American poets but that there is not enough published African American poets. He continues that if one walks into any bookstore, the shelves are lined with mediocre white poets. Thus, there exist more so-called great white poets because the pool to find them is greater. However, since so few African American poets are published it becomes more difficult to find those great African American poets because we are looking in a smaller pool. Now, allow me to be clear. Only ten percent of the American population purchases books on a regular basis. So literature or bookselling is a

niche audience. Then, we must realize that only ten percent of that niche audience purchases poetry on a regular basis. Thus poetry (the selling and reading of it) is a niche of a niche. What aids white creative writers is that all of the creative writing programs are housed at traditionally white institutions, which limits African American access to the programs. Even if access is not limited, it is unlikely what is taught about content addresses the special issues African American writers might wish to confront. The typical BFA or MFA program encourages people to be apolitical or address issues from a more universal perception where the allegory of humanity rather than race is the primary issue. However, what Langston Hughes said about universality in literature is as true today as it was ninety years ago. That this demand for universality creates an "urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible" (1267). This is important because creative writing programs are the feeders or minor leagues from which the major journals and publishers harvest the writers for their pages. So in Mississippi the MFA in creative writing at the University of Mississippi and the MA and Ph.D. in creative writing at the University of Southern Mississippi are the only games in town. Yet even at Mississippi State a student can, in the least, get a concentration in creative writing. In contrast, with no type of program or concentration in creative writing, Jackson State, Alcorn, Mississippi Valley, Tougaloo, and Rust have very limited power to affect the production of Afro-Mississippi writers. Furthermore, this limiting of exposure and opportunity begins as early as high school or even earlier. In the same way that USM, UM, and MSU have relationships with journals and presses, they also have relationships with majority white high schools where students are exposed and identified early to the prospect or opportunity of a life or career in creative writing. On the other hand, for the Afro-Mississippi high school student a career or life in creative writing is seldom seen as viable in any other medium other than rap because their high schools have no connection to the college creative writing programs. In fact, in many cases, Afro-Mississippi high school students who are identified as top scholars and placed in advanced programs or whose parents have the economic ability to live in an area that has a level five (top performing high school) are funneled from HBCUs from their teachers and taught early to be non-political. This has a negative effect on HBCUs because it develops in Afro-Mississippi children an early negative perception of HBCUs, which limits the ability of HBCUs to develop the next generation of leaders who are willing to speak to the specific issues of their people and their institutions.

It must be understood clearly that the failure to develop creative writing programs at HBCUs is not due to the ineptitude of the institutions so much as it is the nature of how state college boards and state boards of regents fund colleges and universities. To add programs, HBCUs often must climb the mountain or defeat the fire-breathing dragon of "duplication," which is the standard reason why HBCUs are not awarded funding to develop creative writing programs. If a so-called specialty program exists at a white institution, then HBCUs are denied the funding to develop the same program even in the case of Jackson State, which is two to three hours from the nearest state-funded university, which means that the capital city, Jackson-Metro area is denied programs because the state of Mississippi failed to establish a white institution in the capital city. (Of course I don't want to say that too loudly because for the past fifty years the state of

Mississippi has been attempting to transition Jackson State into the University of Mississippi at Jackson, which would mean even less access for Afro-Mississippians to quality education.) Additionally, HBCU presidents understand their institutions to be so cash limited or cashed strapped that they tend to invest privately secured funds in programs with a traditional track record of garnering more funding or producing majors that will earn the type of incomes that allow them to contribute to endowed chairs or special research projects. These same issues apply for high schools in African American districts. There is barely enough funding to hire teachers to cover the basic courses; therefore, creative writing is a non-issue. Furthermore, the special academic programs, IB (International Baccalaureate) and APAC (Advanced Performing Arts Center), and Davis Magnet School—what I like to call charter schools within the public school system—are often lead by teachers and administrators who have little connection to HBCUs and foster the notion that HBCUs are inferior, which creates a generation of Afro-Mississippi scholars who are not interested in investing their time and resources in HBCUs. For instance, my sister, Elizabeth McInnis, was enrolled in IB while in high school. When her teacher asked her which colleges she was considering and she said Jackson State, her white teacher responded, "Why with your grades would you go *there* when you could attend *Ole Miss*?" Luckily, she was able answer, "Because my father, mother, aunts, uncles, and brother all attended JSU and seem to be doing just fine." Because creative writing is not at the top of the list when Afro-Mississippians seek jobs that pull one from poverty into respectability and because the Afro-Mississippi middle-class takes most of its reading cues from the *New York Times* Bestseller List, creative writing does not appear to be a program that warrants the necessary funding and energy to be established at HBCUs.

Accordingly, enrollment and success in creative writing programs as well as publication in major, "mainstream" journals is as much about style as it is about ability. Journals, anthologies, competitions, and publishers are all looking for certain styles, and these styles are taught in the creative writing programs. If Afro-Mississippians are limited in their exposure to the types of styles that are taught in the programs, that limits their ability to be published. Now, I am in no way suggesting that an Afro-Mississippi writer cannot read and study the most popular journals and anthologies and mold oneself into the type of writer that can be published by the national journals. But, it is more likely for one to be published by the major national journals and anthologies and win contests if one has a mentor or a surrogate who can advise him as to how to craft work for the national journals, anthologies, and contests. For the Afro-Mississippi writer this is especially daunting because, again, local readership for both poetry and fiction does not exist in any way to support Afro-Mississippi writers that have not been first approved or validated by the national media. For instance there are national African American journals, such as *African American Review* and *Callaloo*, but they use the same feeder system as *The New Yorker*. (Also, in comparison to the number of other journals, there are very few literary journals that specialize in the publishing of African American writers or subject matter. And with the growing movement of cosmopolitism or post-racial literature promoted by nationally noted African American writers, such as Charles Johnson, the number of journals whose mission it is to identify and nurture African American writers is decreasing, or those journals are starting to look/read more like their

white counterparts, which means that from an early age most African American writers will be excluded even from journals originally created for them because they will not have been taught or nurtured in the style necessary to publish.) And even a very important organization such as Cave Canem is limited to Afro-Mississippi writers who either do not know about Cave Canem or cannot afford to spend an entire summer at one of Cave Canem's summer workshop. So, for the Afro-Mississippi writer it is an issue of finding a Mississippi readership. (I am sorry to say that less than ten percent of my sales, be they poetry or fiction, are from Mississippi customers.) This can be countered by increasing the Afro-Mississippi middle class readership, but most of them are reading *The New Yorker*, *NY Times Book Review*, *The American Scholar*, or *Harper's* if they are reading anything literary. A lot of this has to do with the conservative nature of Afro-Mississippians. Mississippi is in the Bible belt, so they want poems and stories devoid of profanity, explicit sexuality, militant ideals, and heavily flavored with Christian sensibility. And I do believe that the customer is always right. The only problem is that when we applaud subject matter over technique, we encourage writers who are not well-crafted to produce not well-crafted work because the subject matter is pleasing. And this is also true of books that are laced with explicit sex and violence. People also like these poems and books because of the sex and violence and not because of the mastery of language. Of course, style is ultimately about "how" you do something—about how one takes elements or techniques and stylizes them into a form or formula. Accordingly, style and or stylization is rooted in or inherent to culture so that how one styles something is related to the culture in which one has been raises or the culture that one embraces or adopts. Yet, it cannot be denied that the use or stylizing of literary elements and techniques is a direct reflection of the writer's and the reader's culture. This is what Toni Morrison is asserting when she states that she wants her literary ability judged by how well it affects or influences her culture. "I don't like to find my books condemned as bad or praised as good, when that condemnation or that praise is based on criteria from other paradigms. I would much prefer that they were dismissed or embraced based on the success of their accomplishment within the culture of which I write" (Morrison 60). Morrison is asserting that part of mastering theory is understanding one's culture to utilize the most effective techniques or stylizing of those techniques to achieve effective communication to and with one's culture. Morrison is clear to state that African American writers should not be championed merely for being black and writing. African American writers should be championed if they have been able to discover, like any other writer, the place where meaning can be found, which is usually where "what" and "how" intersects, but it must be acknowledged that this intersection has specific and unique elements from town to town and culture to culture. "There is something very special and very identifiable about it and it is my struggle to find that elusive but identifiable style in the books" (Morrison 60-61.)

From Phyllis Wheatley to Frederick Douglass to the Harlem Renaissance to the Black Arts Movement, African Americans have sought to balance three distinct spaces: the church, the academy, and the club. Today, an abyss separates the young and the old, the churches and the juke joints, the ivory tower and the mainstream culture. One of my mentors, Dr. Reginald Martin, author of *Southern Secrets* and *Everybody Knows What Time It Is* and editor of *Dark Eros* and *Deeper Shade of Love*, is always advocating for

bridging the gap between theory and community service, inviting writers to consider the needs of their audience when he poses the question: "When do we artists learn to embrace new formats and, fifty percent of the time, give the readership what it wants?" (Martin 2009). The notion that art exists as anything more than a vehicle to make money is foreign to most emerging, commercially ambitious artists. Meanwhile, many of our politically minded young guns are busy shouting down the old guard or representing history in one-dimensional symbols. If Afro-Mississippians do not embrace Afro-Mississippi artists, we will continue to be a voiceless culture speaking to a deaf wind. Although Martin's questions are specifically aimed at poetry, as a fiction writer he has often pondered these questions about fiction also. Beginning with the production of poetry, there seems to be two poles of poetry. On the one hand, there is the poetry of the white university and the major literary journals that is so encoded with imagery and minimalist technique that it is easier for the average non-English major to crack a CIA code than it is to understand the poetry. And at the other end of the spectrum is the typical poetry presented at open mic/spoken word houses across the country that is often devoid of imagery and rings more like limericks and is celebrated as much for the performative technique of the poet than the mastery of language. Most poetry falls somewhere between these two poles, but the poetry in the literary journals is not being read by very many people, and the poetry in the coffee house is not been published by very many journals. Thus, ninety percent of the American public has no reason or interest in purchasing poetry. Yet, Dr. Jerry Ward, author of *The Katrina Papers* and editor of *Trouble the Water: Two Hundred and Fifty Years of Black Poetry* and *The Richard Wright Encyclopedia*, forces me not to be to myopic or sweeping in my assessment.

> "The one area that you give too little notice is the existence of a middle ground between the extremes of poetry. Some of the non-black poets with whom I interact at the Gold Mine Saloon's 17 Poets Series in New Orleans sound more like Baraka than the contemporary equivalent of Elizabeth Bishop. There is cross-fertilization and shared non-publication among these poets, if publication means acceptance in high-brow magazines that appeal to elite, non-black readers. It is in such multicultural arenas—the middle grounds as I would call them—that the range of contemporary poetry is heard and then read in 'little magazines.' You ought not ignore this category of analysis" (2009).

Ward seems to infer that the answer to not drowning in the sea of obscurity between the polarization of academic publication and coffee house fame is that the writers who compose the "middle ground" realize that their opportunity lies with the mid-level regional and community publications. Of course there is still the issue or problem of getting the regional and community folk to purchase the read the publications, which means that there must be a strategy of how to market these journals to the community.

Additionally these two poles also exist in fiction, but commercial fiction—be it romance/chick lit or urban/hood tales—continues to be at least moderately successful. Of course, chick lit and urban tales are not taught in the academic classroom, and it is almost impossible to develop scholarship or criticism on these genres because very few

professors will approve theses or dissertations on these topics—not if they want to keep their "high brow" white status and accreditation. My goal in publishing *Black Magnolias Literary Journal* has been to navigate the waters of publishing poetry and fiction that displays mastery of language and literary elements while simultaneously being accessible to both the middle and lower economic class. As an artist and an editor I have a duty and a responsibility to educate and instruct, which means exposing my readership to new ideas and styles of writing, but I also have a duty to inspire people, especially Afro-Mississippians, which means we want the poetry and fiction to paint pictures that reflect them in an honest, critical, and challenging manner that they can understand. This does not mean dumbing down to a particular audience. I believe in African genius too much. But it does mean trying to meet our readership at various levels and connecting those various levels, using the poetry and fiction as a way to provide a window into each other's world that will hopefully cause a dialogue and a catharsis. And the same holds true for the essays that we publish.

One requirement of each essay that we publish is that the author includes in the introduction of the piece a caveat that explains how the ongoing analysis can benefit a potential reader. I am not interested in printing essays merely to prove that African people are just as smart as anyone. I do agree with DuBois that in the final analysis all art is propaganda, and, as such, we want readers to know how this information, especially the literary analyses, can benefit them. Unfortunately, as I have said more than once, most literary criticism is cultural warfare, where the praise and denouncement of a particular poem, short story, or novel is code for praising or denouncing a particular culture or ideology. Many of the essays that are suppose to enlighten the readership on particular themes and issues present in an author's work digress into intellectual acrobatics that lead the average non-English major to flee like Bigger Thomas from the corpse of a white woman. And no, I am not suggesting that advanced, graduate school and journal literary criticism devolve into a thumbs up or thumbs down seventh grade reporting, but artists and literary critics, especially Afro-Mississippians, must realize that one of the roles of literary criticism is to decode the aesthetics and creative elements so that more readers gain access to the work. I am well aware that the publishing business is fighting an uphill battle trying to win the attention of new readers from the crass and overtly primitive world of film, television, radio, and video games that offer quick and easy gratification. But it is also quite hypocritical for those with the intelligence to separate themselves from the masses, create an elite class that fights diligently to limit access to the masses, and then condemn the masses for being unable to understand and connect with the so-called "high art." To paraphrase Booker T. Washington, those millions of hands that are excluded from effective education and understanding of art

> "will aid…in pulling the load [of America, particularly Mississippi,] upward, or they will pull against you the load downward. [They] shall constitute one-third and more of the ignorance and crime of the South, or one-third its intelligence and progress; [they] shall contribute one-third of the business and industrial prosperity of the South, or [they] shall prove a veritable body of death, stagnating, depressing, retarding every effort to advance the body politic" (Washington 155).

The literacy rate of Afro-Mississippians is directly related to the rising crime rate and lack of economic development in locations with higher Afro-Mississippi populations, such as Jackson, Mississippi. If we as artists are not concerned about the economic consequences of not connecting middle and lower economic Afro-Mississippians, we should consider that people who do not and cannot read tend not to solve their problems or address their needs of unemployment and hunger in civilized and nonviolent manners.

Thus, I return to where I started. How do we bridge the gap between the Afro-Mississippi middle class and the Afro-Mississippi literary artist to create a Black Arts Movement? Ward asks a very simple question: Why does Black art perpetually find itself at this place, dealing with this conundrum? And though his question is rhetorical, it forces me to examine myself as both a writer and a publisher. As a writer, are my works well-crafted enough and accessible enough to reach middle-class Afro-Mississippians, and/or is my work well-crafted enough to inspire my café audience to read a book? As a publisher, when have I earned enough money with *Black Magnolias* to begin publishing full-length books by writers other than myself? Maybe all of this is inspired by my own selfish concerns. As I am currently writing a collection of short stories, I am constantly asking myself, "Who is going to read this?" The younger crop of talented poets can be tricky to categorize. The two-time Jackson Music Awards Poet of the Year Kanika Welch aka Poet of Truth now coordinates her own creative-writing workshops for elementary and middle-school children while submitting her work to an array of journals and lecturing on writing as a tool of activism. Her work won't fit under a single label, such as feminist, Black Nationalist, or Christian. Another example is Nathan Harper, aka Urban Raw, once considered the most profane and sexually explicit writer in Jackson—he came with his own PARENTAL ADVISORY sticker—who is busy finishing two epic poems, including "New Canaan," which describes New Orleans residents dislocated to Jackson's Holiday Motel, a haven for drugs and prostitution. Harper uses sexual imagery as a metaphor for human neurosis while incorporating rich layers of history. The young poet Tori Thompson, aka Scarlette, can be hip, funky, and funny in one poem, such as "Memo #13: There Are No Thugs in College," and scholarly and melancholy in another, such as "Be Not Our Love: Sonnet #15." Even though these three poets are more difficult to categorize, especially for the major literary journals, they are still in the tradition of African American writing. Unlike the schools of western or European writing, African writing has never completely embraced the notion of the complete separation of the arts. In the African tradition, and in most traditions before the European Renaissance, poetry was a part of a multilayered or multidimensional art form that included poetry, storytelling, dance, music, history archival, painting, and sculpting. This is essentially what the term "griot" means in ancient African culture—a multilayered artist/historian/scholar. This is true of even the Greek epics. What we know as the Greek tragedy and comedy were actually stylized forms that developed from Greek religious festivals that included singing, dancing, miming, and masquerades. Remember, the first Greek tragedies consisted only of men singing and dancing. The "hypocrite" or actor was added later. So it is only somewhere between the Middle Ages and the European Renaissance that creative or figurative forms of literature are called or considered something other than poetry. The "drama" was considered a type of poetry. Although the use of the word for drama comes from the Greek word for "action," the use of

"drama" in the narrow sense to designate a specific type of play dates from the Nineteenth Century. And the term "play," meaning to "mimic representation of an action or story as a spectacle on the stage" is not used until the mid-1300s. So, from its origin in all cultures, poetry has always been about being inclusive and not exclusive to other art forms. But, that did not mean that the mastery of language was not/is not important. With the European Renaissance creating the path for the age of specialization, the arts were disconnected and compartmentalized merely for the sake of creating individual bases of power and because some people were not as fluent in their combining of the arts as others. (Of course, somebody else's lack of funk ain't really my problem.)

However, that compartmentalizing has never been totally accepted by Africans on their Continent and where they have been disbursed across the globe. Yet, while Africans continue the history of a multilayered form of poetic presentation, American mass media (particularly popular culture) has chosen to marginalize the history or importance of mastery of language in African American poetry and focus on the performative aspect and the subject matter. My goal is to champion the inclusionary aspect of African-American poetry, but do it in a manner so that mastery of language is not marginalized for rhythm and rhyme. To paraphrase the African griots and Horace, poetry is as much concerned about "how" one says as it is with "what" one says. The ability or success of a poet's "how" is based on mastery of language, i.e. utility of literary devices. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Zora Neale Hurston could have merely said that Janie was attractive or fine, but she chose to say that "men noticed her firm buttocks like she had grape fruits in her pockets" (2). In *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison could have merely said that the protagonist simply learned to love himself rather than showing him there with butter and yam grease smeared over his face, saying to himself, "I *yam* what I am" (260). In his poem "Don't Be Fourteen (in Mississippi)," Ward could have said that African American boys must learn to defeat racism with diplomacy and intellect. Instead he chose to say, "When white boys ask you why you don't like them/ spit on them with your mouth closed" (297). In "A Moment in a Mississippi Juke Joint," Salaam could have said that Wilma Mae and John L. were hot for or attracted to each other, but he chose to say "'god,' she thought, 'that man look like a tractor, & i feels like a field what ain't never been plowed" (50). In "I Want to Have Chu'tch," David Brian Williams could have said that the intense emotion felt in African American churches is connected to the pain of their history, but he said, "The sweet potato pie voice affirmin' 'I love the Lord; He heard my cry,'/ From the back of the church rolling through the congregation/ Like the mighty Mississippi River rolling through Cairo,/ Like the River Jordan/ runnin' up and down the aisle and up into the balcony./Then you feel it/ The spirit of the Lord comin' down like rainwater in a summer storm" (70). In each case, the imagery is not merely taking something abstract and making it concrete. With each image, the writers are attempting to navigate and master language in a way that allows them to write themselves, their culture, into a lexicon of ideas that has either marginalized or erased their value by marginalizing and erasing the worth of their cultural artifacts. Hurston, Ellison, Ward, Salaam, and Williams are not just painting pictures to show how smart or well-crafted they are. Like Lucile Clifton in "Homage to my Hips," they are using the African American body and its culture—this same body that has been objectified and demonized by white lust—to celebrate the uniqueness of African culture, which

celebrates the uniqueness and richness of African contribution to the American landscape. "these hips are big hips/…they don't fit into little/ petty places. these hips are free hips/…I have known them/ to put a spell on a man and/ spin him like a top" (2223). Clifton engages in cultural liberation through linguistic and anatomical liberation by taking something that has been negatively portrayed by European standards and media and recasting it in a positive light. For Clifton the body is the starting point of developing self-esteem and the last line of defense against physical and psychological oppression. As Aristotle asserts, the beauty of the play is man's recognition of himself. The mastery and communication of these literary devices can inspire a movement of literacy and critical thinking, which can inspire more Afro-Mississippians to consider a career in creative writing. Likewise, more Afro-Mississippi writers painting familiar and inspiring images that are just as vivid as the television and radio but designed to inspire thinking will have a direct effect on the drop-out and incarceration rates of young Afro-Mississippians.

The solution was easier in 1997 for Mississippi Vibes (the poetry group that consisted of Williams, Anderson, Stiggers, myself, and Derrick Johnson who is now the President of the Mississippi NAACP) because we never saw ourselves as spoken word artists, but as writers who were using the open mic medium to get people interested in reading. The Saturday night open mic was not our *primary* priority. During the week we sponsored book clubs, creative writing workshops, and worked with grassroots organizations, such as Southern Echo and the Algebra Project, that put us in direct contact with the community in our attempts to promote and improve literacy in the Afro-Mississippi community. Also we sponsored online contests where community people could win tickets or a free meal at the open mic venue by answering questions about poetry or writers in general. Some of the questions included, "What is considered Etheridge Knight's seminal book, or what is the definition of sonnet or a haiku or a tanka or a ballad or iambic pentameter, or name the first African American to win a Pulitzer Prize in Poetry or Fiction?" And at least once a month we scheduled readings and panels in the community libraries so that our audience, especially the college and high school students, became comfortable with being in the presence of books and serious discussions about books. We were not cultivating a *spoken word* audience; we were cultivating *readers* who also liked to patronize open mic venues. Our biggest mistake was that we failed to continue to nurture younger, college-age writers to take control of the more public events and activities while we each decided to pursue more private writing and publishing goals.

We also need more writing workshops like Cave Canem. Each state should have an annual workshop that enhances the skills of African Americas while also teaching them how to increase their chances of gaining admittance to a creative writing program, how to submit to journals, how to make contact with agents, and how to secure book deals. Earlier this year, I partnered with an two old friends, Carlton Turner and Maurice Tuner, who comprise the hip hop/jazz duo M.U.G.A.B.E.E, and we coordinated a workshop designed to teach local artists how to gain municipal, county, state, and federal funding for their arts projects. Maurice is a trumpeter, playwright, and serves on the board of several arts organizations. Carlton is a poet/rapper/playwright and is the

Director of Alternate Roots, which is an organization that helps individual artists and artistic organizations secure funding for arts activism.

A final step is that those of us who have one foot in the commercial or overtly political publishing world and one foot in the academy must continue to fight to bridge those worlds, must be unceasing in always suggesting ways to both camps how they can get to know the other. As a teacher I try, each semester, to introduce my students to one well-crafted published African American author who is either under thirty or who is published by a small press. As co-sponsor of the JSU Pierian Literary Society and the JSU Poetry Club Outspoken, I am constantly finding ways to hold events of those organizations off campus as well as on camps so that people who would not normally attend an event on a college campus can still be exposed to the environment. Additionally, I remain in constant dialogue with young spoken word artists, inviting them to present at and attend campus events, such as conferences and festivals. It is quite tiring grading papers, editing a journal, and trying to get my own work published while keeping my wife happy, but the joy that explodes from the email or the smile of a young African American, especially an Afro-Mississippian, who has just received their first publication makes me forget, even if just for a moment, that I am overworked and always behind because that one publication from a small journal like mine is a small but important flame to an African American in a cave of dark rejection where it seems that someone is constantly blowing out their light to the path of publication.

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