Thoughts after Reading Twenty-Five Collections of Black Poetry in Twenty-Five Days

by C. Liegh McInnis*

In the poem, "Addressed Humorously to Tu Fu," Li Po writes "how thin, how wretchedly thin you have grown/ you must have been suffering from poetry again" (39). Essentially, Po, the Taoist, is condemning Fu, the Confucianist, for Fu's notion that the how (the rules of life and rules of writing) is more important than the what (the subject or being of life and writing). According to Chinese poetry scholar Shigeyoshi Obata, in his seminal work, *The Works of Li Po the Chinese Poet Done into English Verse*, "In contrast with Li Po, who depended largely on inspiration, Tu Fu was a painstaking artist careful of the minutest detail" (39). As such, while some assert that Po is mocking Fu's "thin" frame, I contend that Po is mocking what he perceives as Fu's thin/frail/useless poetry that fails to impact the masses because, again, Fu is more concerned with the how than he is with the what as his Confucian (read Feudal/Class-driven) ideals mandate that if someone does not understand his poetry it is because that person is unintelligent and must rise to his level. This is why Po places Fu high atop "Fan-ko Mountain" in the poem as a metaphor of how Fu sees himself and how, by seeing himself as above and separated from the people, his work is useless, being unable to touch or engage the people. Fu's notion of poetry seems to be the poetic ideal of most award-winning poets who seem unable to connect with a mass audience without compromising skill. Thus, after spending twenty-five days reading twenty-five collections of poetry by African-American writers, all but one having been published in 2018, I realized that I am constantly reading poetry in which noted/award-winning African-American poets are not just more concerned about the form of the work than the subject matter but are seemingly more concerned about creating a form in which preciseness in meaning is not nearly as important as emotive experience. And while the emotive is certainly important, there is something to be said about poets who are able to master literary device in a manner that constructs a work that is both metaphoric in its delivery while being precise in its meaning. Yet, in this current age, preciseness and overt political statement are seen as liabilities rather than assets because a vast majority of the academic and mainstream literary journal poets have forgotten the basic principle of Ludwig Wittgenstein that it is the responsibility of the communicator to locate or create the most vivid image to produce the most precise meaning while being clear about what language game the communicator is playing. However, as it relates to diction, imagery, subject matter, tone, and precise meaning, increasingly more African-American poets, seeking the reward of academic and mainstream literary journals, are becoming more separated from the mass of black folks, which makes it difficult for their work to help the very people they seem to desire to help.

Before addressing the manner in which these poets often populate their poems with vivid and well-drawn images that seemingly have no correlation or connection to each other, there is the issue of presenting lesser-used but highly "prized" terms, i.e. formal or constructed language, in the place of more common (natural or ordinary language) terms as if these lesser-used formal terms somehow have more poetic quality than the more common terms. For clarification, natural or ordinary language, as it relates to "neuropsychology, linguistics, and the philosophy of language, is any language that has evolved naturally in humans through use and repetition without conscious planning or premeditation. Natural languages are distinguished from constructed and formal languages," which are used mostly for very specific purposes and rarely during common discourse" ("Natural Languages"). In most cases, this relates to

adjectives, nouns, and verbs. Of the three, the most belabored use of these is with adjectives. When it comes to the preciseness of language, the general rule of thumb is to use one word that has the ability to speak for or articulate the same meaning as two or more words. For instance, "precocious" does not just mean "advanced" or "developed" but carries with it a connotation that a child is mentally advanced for one's age or has blossomed or ripened, emotionally or intellectually, early. Or, "votive" does not merely mean "vow," "wish," or "desire" but expresses the act of ritual in which one makes an offering in thanksgiving or remembrance or in dedication or sacrifice. In a poetic setting, these words add to the general figurative weight of a poem because of the weight and specificity of their connotative essence. However, terms, such as "sere" rather than "dry" or "withered," "despoil" rather than "plunder," "pillage," or "sack," "mote" rather than "particle" or "speck," "lithe" rather than "supple," "flexible," "agile" or "graceful," and the all-time most overly used term in poetry "languid" rather than "unenergetic," "relaxed," "slow," or "unhurried" do little more than highlight the author's expansive vocabulary without actually adding much in the way of meaning to the poem. (Let's make a deal; if the academic/mainstream literary journal poets will stop using "languid," those of us outside that world (the grassroots/communal poets) will do our best to stop our colleagues from using "black queen" and "black king" in every poem written to celebrate the beauty and power of blackness.) Of course, I do not mind the extended use of vocabulary, but these poets are using the terms as if having a large vocabulary is equated with or deemed as impactful/powerful as mastery of imagery. Yes, creative writing is about vocabulary, but, at its core, is it not about painting with words? Moreover, is it not about painting with words to create a vivid and specific or concrete understanding of an idea or concept? Maybe that's my problem—that I keep expecting poets to be precise in their meaning through a crafting of images that makes one understand their idea on a tangible level. I do not mind the emotive, but, often, the notion of the ethereal or even magical nature of poetry just seems like a copout for someone who cannot or is too afraid to make a specific statement, which is ironic since so many of them are so hell-bent on peppering their poetry with precise, scientific terms that rarely yield a preciseness in meaning. Yes, a poem can be about a lot of different things, but should it not also, simultaneously, be about something precise? And, yes, I understand the concept of leaving room for subjective interpretation because a poem can mean different things to different readers, but poets should also have the courage of their conviction and craftsmanship to say that a poem is about something specific.

Unfortunately, the vast majority of these poets seem to embrace Carl Phillips' notion from his literary treaty, *Coin of the Realm*[1], in which he denounces poems, such as Amiri Baraka's "Black Art," because, among other reasons, it is too specific in person and meaning that only a black person could embrace it. To provide contrast to Baraka's poem, Phillips asserts that "…when Sappho speaks of being alone with nothing but moonlight and her desire for an absent lover, it is irrelevant that she was a woman, may or may not have been a lesbian, lived about twenty-six centuries ago, spoke Greek, and a dialect form of it at that" (160). His urge toward the universality of art causes him to miss the most important aspect of art—its ability to enable humans to see all other humans in both their particularity and their commonality. The power of art is not that it nullifies or erases differences, such as gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, and class but that it finds a way to ease the tension between particularities and commonalities by showing that those particularities are merely various ways in which humans have found differing responses to similar circumstances. Therefore, Phillips is completely wrong that the things he

[1] I actually like all of *Coin of the Realm* except for Phillips' chapter "Boon and Burden."

listed do not matter. History shows that Sappho's pain is specifically because she is a woman who is unable to control her life because choice is not something a woman of her time would have. Additionally, the possibility of her being a lesbian makes her not just a second-class citizen but a being whose love interests were not granted the same tolerance as male homosexuality during her time, making her doubly oppressed. And, the fact that she lived twenty-six centuries ago highlights just how deeply woven into the fabric of human psyche the oppression of women is. As such, what makes Sappho special is the manner in which she uses her mastery of literary technique to make socio-political statements, specifically for the right of women to love whom and how they desire to love. Her ultimate skill is her ability to paint the pain of otherness and loneliness in such a vivid manner that even those who are sexist and homophobic experience a catharsis—the change of position or opinion caused by feeling empathy for another. When Sappho writes, "Some say a cavalry corps,/ some infantry, some, again,/ will maintain that the swift oars/ of our fleet are the finest/ sight on dark earth; but I say/ that whatever one loves, is," the picture she is painting is not merely about universal love but about the right of individuals, especially women, to choose their own lovers. Ultimately, she is asserting that it is the traditional position/rule of thumb that one loves what the society has ordained as proper or valuable. In the case of this poem, there are two ways to interpret what has been ordained proper or valuable. One, this is a sisterhood poem in which Sappho is supporting (riding for) her friend Anactoria who has been exiled from Greece for having the nerve (courage) to choose a man other than one of Greece, which is an affront to Greek manhood. To this end, Sappho is showing herself as a socio-political revolutionary by publically supporting her friend's right to choose the man of her choice and not the man that society has deemed proper. Two, this is a love poem in which Sappho is lamenting the loss of a lover who, having succumb to tradition and pressure, marries a man rather than remaining in a relationship with a woman. Yet, the brilliance of Sappho's painting is that, regardless of this poem being read as a sisterhood poem or a love poem, it is still an explicitly and overly socio-political statement about citizenship and humanity being directly correlated to choice. So, with the greatest use of ambiguity and imagery, Sappho still produces a political poem with preciseness in meaning.

Yet, what Phillips seems to misunderstand is that any person with empathy (critical engagement of emotions) for the struggle of others should be able to understand any work of art presenting the specific or particular struggle of another, even if one has not endured that specific or particular struggle. As such, Phillips is asserting that it is the responsibility of the African-American writer always to make the white reader comfortable enough to engage the art, even if that means minimizing or reducing the reality of the specific issue or the reality of the emotional experience of the specific issue. In this way, metaphoric nature of a creative work is not designed to challenge the reader to understand the specific issue on a deeper or more thorough level but to blur the specific issue so that white readers do not feel condemned through the engagement of the work or so that white readers can create their own meanings that have almost nothing to do with the specific issue of the work. Even further, this blurring of meaning happens even when the African-American writer has been quite specific about the work's intent and meaning because, all too often, a good number of white readers are unable to bear, accept, or consider their role in the specificity of the problem being presented by the black poet. Two works that exemplify this are Langston Hughes' "Harlem" and Claude McKay's "If We Must Die." Both poems were written in reaction to the 1919 Red Summer Riots when African-American neighborhoods were attacked by white mobs. However, over the years, white readers,

either consciously or subconsciously, changed the intent and meaning of both poems for their own use. With "Harlem" the title of the poem was changed to the first line, "What Happens to a Dream Deferred?" Removing Harlem from the title completely changes the specificity of the poem from promoting African-American humanity while simultaneously denouncing white supremacy to celebrating the importance of dreams without showing the evil that has functioned to limit and destroy African-American dreams. Even today, most people who are quite familiar with this poem do not know that its actual title is "Harlem," which means that most people, today, do not know that Hughes, while interested in dialogue between the races, was essentially interested in using his art to develop in his race a sense of dignity that enabled them to develop independent institutions through self-determination and defend those institutions if necessary. At the end of the poem, when he states, "does it explode?," he is issuing a warning to white America that, if they do not change their wicked ways, a black physical response is only natural. To this end, McKay echoes Hughes' position by speaking directly to his race with "If We Must Die." Yet, over time, even a poem as specific as this was able to be "universalized" in a manner that it has been said that a white military regiment used it as its rallying call when facing a mission that would lead to certain death and that even Winston Churchill quoted the poem to rally the British during World War II. Whether true or not, both cases show the hypocrisy of white supremacy in that white people have the "God-given" right to assert "give me liberty or give me death," but folks like Phillips and others make it clear that African peoples do not have this "God-given" or even human right to declare that their lives matter as much as white lives. In fairness to Phillips and others, I think their intent is to promote works of art that they think humanize African peoples by connecting them to the "universal" terms and notions of humanity. But, in truth, this "urge toward" universality only functions to make black issues subservient to white issues by affirming that black issues are only of value when they can be recognized on white terms. Thus, African-American poets are often forced to create art that blurs meaning so as not to alienate white readers. In doing so, they only prove Nietzsche correct that "Poets are unclean [liars]. They all muddy their waters that they might appear deep." As someone who loves determining/searching/researching the meaning to a word puzzle, I do not mind the search. I am just growing tired of there being nothing tangible/precise at the end of the search.

In my search to locate the precise in these poems, I am reminded of John Donne's "A Nocturnal upon St. Lucy' Day," in which Donne writes: "The sun is spent, and now his flasks/ Send forth light squibs, no constant rays;/ The world's whole sap is sunk;/ The general balm th'hydroptic earth hath drunk,/ Wither, as to the bed's-feet, life is shrunk, Dead and interred; yet all these seem to laugh,/ Compared with me, who am their epitaph." In describing the poem, poet/scholar Dr. Jerry W. Ward states: "Donne uses a couple of words that we might deem obscure and crafts an image that is not 'tangible' in the sense of being tactile, available for a finger to touch. But such meaning as we can derive from the lines is 'tangible' in the sense of being definite or not elusive. His image wins the day by virtue of the specific statement in the final couplet." Then, turning his attention toward my frustration with the poems I am currently reading, Ward continues: "What you are fighting, what is triggering your frustration is the value you accord to the concrete and the disdain you have for what might be obscure, esoteric, or just plain exotic." He concludes with; "I freely confess that in my practice as a poet I do from time to time deliberately muddy the water to ensure that only a small group of readers will be able to dig what I attempt to communicate and how I attempt to communicate something." And, in a

final piece of advice to my flinging obscure poetry collections against the wall, Ward reminds me "Don't have temper tantrums like Trump. Be cool like Obama."

It is fitting that Ward presents a poem by Donne, especially this one. Having been forced to write a paper on Donne when I was pursuing the doctorate in creative writing at the University of Southern Mississippi (There was literally no one on the professor's list that I wanted to engage, but Donne was someone with whom I was most familiar from my Jackson State University undergrad time.), I agree that most of Donne's work is to be enjoyed as an onslaught of "waves of imagery and emotion" (a phrase that I never forgot) and rarely for its preciseness in meaning, and, yet, "A Nocturnal upon St. Lucy's Day" is one of the few from which one can draw a concrete meaning of the impact of lost love or, at least, the pain of having one's lover die and, in this case, the inability of the widowed lover to continue "living" as it were. I remember thinking while writing the paper, "I enjoy these images, but I'm really not that interested in being this purposefully obscure." (However, I don't know if Donne was being "purposefully obscure" as his work was originally circulated among a few friends who would have known what he was thinking.) Yet, as a seeming contradiction, I really like Donne's "Air and Angels" mostly because I have always read it as a double sonnet in which Donne is signifying on the form of a sonnet to say that love is so beyond the sphere and realm of human understanding that he must ask the question twice. And, even after asking the question twice (Two sonnets constitute two questions.), he still has no answer for what love is other than something more powerful than humans can comprehend. Further, my affinity for "Air and Angels" is ironic because I am not one who, as a writer, cares to use/manipulate formal verse structures in that manner as I have often seen formal structure as being quite arbitrary. That is—I am still waiting for someone to tell me the metaphoric or symbolic meaning of the number fourteen. Thus, if the number fourteen has no metaphoric or symbolic meaning, such as three and seven meaning completion, then, at some level, those fourteen lines are nothing more than an arbitrarily agreed upon unit with the "question" and "answer" component of the sonnet being the most metaphoric and tangible aspect of the sonnet. But, be that as it may, I still like Donne's seeming trope of the sonnet's structure as a way, again, to show how love's ultimate being and meaning is just beyond the understanding of human/physical beings. In this case, though, Donne seems to be seeking preciseness because he is working with a structure, the sonnet, that is widely known as a form used to ponder (ask and answer) monumental issues. With the use of two sonnets in one poem, Donne is stressing the importance of love by showing the need to investigate it as specifically as possible while also asserting that love is so powerful that it, ultimately, stands beyond full human comprehension.

Moreover, Ward's presentation of Donne is fitting because of the manner in which Donne fell "out of favor" for a while with both Johnsons, Ben and Samuel, dismissing Donne's work for its problems with meter as well as meaning. This type of literary history is significant because students can always find where someone dismisses a writer or movement as insignificant and then that dismissed writer or movement becomes accepted as seminally important as in Matthew Arnold dismissing the Romantics as not having written anything worth remembering; and, we all know how "wrong" Arnold was about their work not being remembered. With all of this, the nature of subjectivity or politicized subjectivity of art has always bothered me because editors and critics often act like scientists except when it is time to justify what works are included and what works are excluded. I can accept that sensibilities and tastes change over time and vary for

community to community. But, I have often wondered if there can be and if there has really ever been a movement attempting to narrow the gap between the empirical and subjective understanding of art? It is not that I want to eradicate the subjectivity of art, but I would like, at least, for the people writing blurbs on the backs of these collections to be a bit more concrete in why this poetry is something that should be read, especially as it relates to the theoretical explication of the work. Unfortunately, New Criticism is too soiled by its racist roots for many to embrace it purely as a way to achieve the closest reading of a text possible. But, it would be better severing of poetry and humanity if more editors and critics simply admit that the vast majority of poetry that they reject or omit is because of socio-political sensibilities than for craftsmanship.

Still, Ward's use of Donne illuminates his final point "that in [Ward's] practice as a poet [he does] from time to time deliberately muddy the water to ensure that only a small group of readers will be able to dig what [he] attempts to communicate and how [he] attempts to communicate something." When I read this, I immediately thought of the difference between Dante and Donne in how they disseminated their work. It is not just that Donne disseminated his work primarily among close friends that is the issue. But, it is that Dante, when nearing the completion of *The Divine Comedy*, disseminated a letter/essay, "Letter to Can Grande della Scala," which is a theoretical document in which he provides guidelines to help the reader understand the art. In both "The Letter" and "The Banquet" Dante discusses the themes and elements that must be understood to understand the entirety of *The Divine Comedy*. While the next generation of readers realize that Dante is doing this because, at that time, the last thing one wants is to be misunderstood when engaging the Christian narrative as it could result in death or imprisonment, Dante also understood that he was doing something so revolutionarily new with the Christian form/narrative that he needed to provide guidelines for it to be understood. (This is also why I still contend that Milton is lying about the theme and purpose of *Paradise Lost* as basic character analysis of God and Satan through the lens of what defines a protagonist and an antagonist proves that he's lying.) This is why I have so much more respect for Dante than many creative writers today because Dante was bold enough in his conviction as well as in his craftsmanship to state, "This is what I'm trying to do." This raises the question of all artists: how do we know if you have done what you have intended to do if we do not know what you are intending to do? I remember reading some noted writer who said something to the effect of "it's not the job of the poet to explain the meaning of the work." That position has always smacked of bs because it is just difficult to believe that someone who has something definite or concrete to say would want it not understood.

Yet, as it relates to "the small group of readers" to which Ward refers, I immediately thought of the difference between Einstein and Tesla with Einstein being the theoretical physicist and Tesla being the utilitarian/applied physicist. Tesla hated Einstein because he believed Einstein to be a charlatan whose theories were nothing more than smoke and mirrors. Unfortunately for Tesla, the elite minds were completely enthralled with Einstein, and science eventually proved Einstein to be the genius all thought he was. So, the writing to and for a small group of readers/writers is important as is theoretical physics is important for the most advanced physicists to share ideas about the most finite and infinite aspects of physics in the same way that it is important for the most advanced literary minds to share ideas about the most finite and infinite aspects of language. But, whose job is it to bridge the gap between the

theoretical to the applied? If that is the job of the literary critic, most of them are doing a poor job of it. And, since most of the blurbs on the backs of these collections are by poets, they are not doing an effective job of bridging the theoretical to the applied either. This causes me to think about the Fireside or Household poets who were seemingly able to bridge that gap in a way that they were valued by critics and accessible to a mass of readers. I often wonder if this has happened at any other time, and what does the fact that Paul Laurence Dunbar was loved by literary critics as well as the black mass say about the ability to bridge that gap then and now. Of course, segregation has a way of forcing a mass of black folks to have a similar sensibility and aesthetic regardless of their socio-economic status that does not exist today.

But, ultimately, Ward is completely right that I must be more like Obama and less like Trump and realize that mine is not the way of Einstein but of Tesla or more like Tyler Perry, which is to remember my own advice: it is not the job of the journal to change its aesthetic for the writer but the job of the writer to find the audiences that appreciate one's aesthetic. Clearly, the flinging of the manuscript was just my frustration with what passes for the most advanced/well-crafted forms of poetry, and my reluctance to accept that I have no desire to write that way or even to read it, which limits where I can publish. My head loves the manipulation of form, but it has always been the works that impact or embed themselves in my gut that I remember. A bunch of beautiful/vivid, well-crafted images that combine to mean nothing precise do not impact me, do not remain in my gut, like, say, Brooks' "The Mother," or Shakespeare's "Sonnet CXXXVIII," or any number of Margaret Walker Alexander, Baraka, or Kalamu ya Salaam, or Ward's poems, or Dickinson's "There Is no Frigate like a Book," or Sappho's "To An Army Wife from Sardis," or even Von Schiller's "Human Knowledge." Sadly, these works all seem to have more funk and soul encased in their forms than many modern Negro poets because, as most funk and jazz artist know, a work can be as experimental, seeking, and wide-ranging as possible as long as it periodically returns to the one.

This lack of funk or soul in the poetry of contemporary, award-winning black poets seems to be echoed in the manner in which even college students are often disinterested in what these poets are saying and how they are saying. If this is the case, then the question arises: for whom are these poets crafting poetry. Noted literary scholar Dr. Howard Rambsy offers some insight:

> …the terminology in contemporary African-American poetry has become more obscure in a lot of respects. That's not to say that there's not a long history of obscure poetry by black people. I just think it's more possible today than ever before to earn a living, a really comfortable living writing obscure poetry than in previous decades. There's something else too. Most award committees are comprised of previous award-winning poets as judges and not general poets and certainly not non-poets. Because of the construct of the committees and people making selections at publishers, there's a strong incentive for aspiring poets to showcase their distinct uses of vocabulary, including obscure words.
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> I happen to think vocabulary is one of several other elements that have been shifting in greater quantities over the last two decades as more and more poets have entered MFA programs like we've noticed an increasing number of black poets (and white poets)

writing sonnet sequences. Also, these days, many poets are encouraged to write poems about paintings. Many black poets write about black painters. But still, it's clear that practice is linked to distinct Eurocentric poetry traditions.

Rambsy is right on target with everything he has stated. At the core, it is the issue of writers writing for writers as opposed to writers finding creative ways to use their mastery of language to impact larger audiences. Of course, I must add/admit that poetry is a niche of a niche market. It has been some time since I have studied the market numbers, but people who purchase books regularly constitute about twenty to twenty-five percent of the population, which makes bookselling a niche market. Then, people who purchase poetry regularly constitute about ten percent of that market, making poetry, again, a niche of a niche. So, most poets who complete creative writing programs learn, either organically or formally, that there is not much money or notoriety to be obtained through the traditional marketplace, which causes most of them to embrace wholeheartedly the very narrow and selective paths to obtain funding and notoriety as a poet. Yet, as Rambsy stated, this leads them to creating work almost exclusively for those givers of awards and gatekeepers of tenure that is designed to showcase just how "above" or "beyond" they are from the average LeRoi Jones, placing them atop their own Fan-ko Mountain, creating the unstated notion and unwritten law that, if the average LeRoi can comprehend it in one reading, it cannot be worthy of award or tenure. Thus, most of them fear being Tesla and do all they can to be Einstein (abstract and understood by a very few) without remembering Einstein's intellectual imperative that at some point all that we do must be able to be explained to a child.

With all of that being said, each semester, at some point after midterm, I walk into all my classes and read the below listed twenty-three poems. There is no preface other than the reading of African-American poets being listed on the syllabus. After reading the poems, with no discussion of them at all, students of my composition literature and world literature courses must locate and construct five-paragraph essays analyzing the central issue of one of the poems, explaining how that work's issue or message can be used to impact a current societal ill. Students of my creative writing class are to compose a poem reacting to one of the poems, using a line from one of the poems as its epigraph. (As an aside, I also have a similar assignment to this in my creative writing class in which we use paintings because, as Rambsy also stated, of how popular this exercise has become.) What I have enjoyed most about this assignment over the years is how much these poems move my students whom most of them openly/readily admit to having rarely, if ever, engaged poetry. I almost always get a great essay on Ward's poem, "Don't Be Fourteen (in Mississippi)," because even today the well-drawn images speak to the plight of African-American youth. Now, I do not know if that says anything about what poetry by back writers once was and what it now is since I have little desire to use most of the "award-winning" poems for this exercise, but understanding Rambsy statement of students being "bored" with the "award-winning" poems speaks, I think, to the very notion of what the African-American community risks losing as long as the most well-crafted black voices are more interested in speaking to the smallest number of people who have very little desire to improve the condition of the mass of black people. While I am not saying that all of these twenty-three poems are the highest of literary craftsmanship, each of them paints well-drawn and accessible portraits of what it means to be a person of African descent struggling to live in this world in a manner that allows a wide array of readers to understand the world that they inhabit and be

provided more ideological pathways of how to navigate that world. If I can do this as these poets have done, then I, too, will have succeeded as a writer.

"The Revolution Will not Be Televised" by Gil Scott-Heron
"If We Must Die" by Claude McKay
"Harlem" by Langston Hughes
"The Negro Speaks of Rivers" by Langston Hughes
"For My People" by Margaret Walker Alexander
"The Mother" by Gwendolyn Brooks
"Black Art" by Amiri Baraka
"Homecoming" by Sonia Sanchez
"For Saundra" by Nikki Giovanni
"Cosmic Deputy" by Kalamu ya Salaam
"Homage to My Hips" by Lucille Clifton
"I Ain't Yo Earthmama (2)" by Wanda Coleman
"A Poem Inspired by a Television Ad for *The Color Purple*" by Haki Madhubuti
"Butt…Or, the Gluteus Maximus Addictus Poem" by Derrick I.M. "D-Knowledge" Gilbert
"Nudity" by Kysha Brown-Robinson
"Don't Be Fourteen (in Mississippi)" by Jerry Ward
"Simple Love" by David Brian Williams
"Santa Claus Never Comes to the Ghetto" by David Brian Williams
"Latent Rapists" by Ntozake Shange
"Taxicab Blues (edit)" by Ahmos Zu-Bolton
"Family Tree" by Ahmos Zu-Bolton
"We Wear the Mask" by Paul Laurence Dunbar
"Symphony" by Paul Laurence Dunbar

What seems to differentiate the above poems from the collections that I have recently read is that prior to Rita Dove winning the Pulitzer Prize in 1987 for *Thomas and Beulah*, form—be it literary devices and structure—was an equal partner with subject matter, which continued the tradition of Gwendolyn Brooks' *Annie Allen* which, of course, won the Pulitzer Prize in 1950. Yet, *Thomas and Beulah*'s victory, alone, does not fully account for the shift of the award-winning black poet into the obscurity of form. Natasha Trethewey's *Native Guard*, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 2007, Tracy K. Smith's *Life on Mars*, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 2012, and Tyehimba Jess's *Olio*, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 2017, are not obscure works at all. Yet, one can argue that Trethewey's *Bellocq's Ophelia* and Jess' *Leadbelly* paint more vividly with extended metaphor and syntax that are not as truncated (minimal) as in the award-winning works, which have more a feel of "refinement" or "understating" as opposed to leaning more closely to the dialectical of the communities from which those poems spring. As such, what might account for this shift is not just the winning of awards, alone, but the manner in which MFA and Ph.D. creative writing programs through the 80s and 90s often emphasized form over subject matter as a way to minimize the politicizing of poetry by a growing number of women and people of color entering those programs. This speaks not just to the East Coast bias toward minimalism but also to the notion that northern liberal racism is just as limiting as overt southern racism, which has been on full display since the second part of Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, "American Hunger," was not included in the initial publication of the novel because Wright

refused to paint the North as Negro Heaven. Thus, that final section was deleted because white liberal publishers could not bear to promote the notion that their North is just as heinously racist as the Confederate South. This is also affirmed in Tracy K. Smith's excellent article, "Political Poetry Is Hot Again. The Poet Laureate Explains Why."

> In the mid-1990s, when I was a student of creative writing, there prevailed a quiet but firm admonition to avoid composing political poems. It was too dangerous an undertaking, one likely to result in didacticism and slackened craft. No, in American poetry, politics was the domain of the few and the fearless, poets like Adrienne Rich or Denise Levertov, whose outsize conscience justified such risky behavior. Even so, theirs weren't the voices being discussed in workshops and craft seminars.

During my own pursuit of a PhD in creative writing in 1994, I submitted to my creative writing seminar class a poem, "The Evil of Integration," which reacts to the, then, newly elected majority Republican Congress led by Newt Gingrich and Bob Dole and their "Contract with America," which read to most black folks as a "Contact on Black America." The key respondent to my poem was a white female who was livid with my poem, not with the poetics but with the subject matter and my position. As the key respondent, she never made one statement about the poem's form but, instead, lectured me about the American success stories of Oprah Winfrey and Mya Angelo, declaring, "Are they stuck somewhere sweeping basements?" I remember thinking at the time, "Wow, she named two whole black people not in servitude to whites, which certainly proves that integration has been a success." Of the entire class of mostly whites, one Asian female, and me, an African-American male, the only person who said anything about the form of the poem was a white male who added at the end of the class discussion, "Well, we've been asking him to add more imagery. And, he certainly did that." Not one respondent/classmate said anything to the effect of "Hey, I don't like your politics, but let's discuss how we can make your poem more structurally effective." I can only surmise that there was nothing wrong with the work's structure or that my classmates were not interested in helping me make my poem's structure more effective in communicating its message. It was at that moment that I understood the reason that form is always more prized in poetry. Unfortunately, for me, even with a great creative writing professor and advisor Dr. Angela Ball who was more than willing to help me develop my mastery of imagery, that incident with my classmates and three other teachers confirmed for me that completing the Ph.D. in creative writing was not the path for me. Still, I do wonder how it would have been different had Dr. Ball been the director of the program when I was there. Luckily, I have maintained a great relationship with Dr. Ball over the years and have benefited greatly from her insight.

This academic emphasis on form during the 80s and mid-90s was somewhat parallel to the rise of New Criticism of the 1950s when southern white male college literary professors found their programs and classes being invaded by women and people of color whose interpretations of literature were often in contrast to the traditional (read white) interpretations. While New Criticism was designed to silence the socio-political voices of women and people of color, it also serves as a way to inject a sense of the empirical into the discourse of literature, especially creative literature. The problem is that the founders of New Criticism were not interested in uncovering the empirical fact through a systematic exploration of language but in promoting a philosophical truth that whiteness reigns supreme. Thus, the urge to seduce/push

poets of color toward the universality and empirical measurement of form evokes notions of Hughes' "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" when he asserts: "The Negro artist works against an undertow of sharp criticism and misunderstanding from his own group and unintentional bribes from the whites. 'Oh, be respectable, write about nice people, show how good we are,' say the Negroes. 'Be stereotyped, don't go too far, don't shatter our illusions about you, don't amuse us too seriously. We will pay you.' say the whites" (1270). From the moment Lucy Terry's "Bars Fight" was published in 1855, African-American poets have been walking the line of using their art to have socio-political impact while simultaneously appeasing the sensibilities of white publishers and readers. Like Phillis Wheatley's "On Being Brought from Africa to America," Terry's poem is situated in the ideal (fantasy) of whiteness, ingratiating itself to white pain/grief and mythological heroism. "Bars Fight" recounts an "ambush" of two white families by Native Americas in Deerfield, Massachusetts, on August 25, 1746. I placed "ambush" within quotations because how can any act of aggression by Native Americans against whites in 1746 be understood as anything other than self-defense and resistance to colonization, enslavement, and eradication is beyond me. Yet, Terry's poem is clearly on the side of the whites. My point is not to castigate Ms. Terry or to question the sincerity of her empathy toward the "ambushed" white family. However, it is also very clear that "Bars Fight" would have never been published if the tenor and tone of the poem would have presented the Native Americans as valiant revolutionaries rather than as savages. Thus, this is the uneasy relationship that literature created by people who define themselves as African American had and continues to have with white publishers and readers, prompting Hughes to add "But this is the mountain standing in the way of any true Negro art in America—this 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). The struggle for the black poet striving for relevance in the academy and in the major literary journals is the fitting or pouring of one's sensibilities—be they individual or collective—into the Saussurian notion/mold of form being its own thing, separate and above human engagement with the tangible universe. And, to most of their credit, African Americans have done a great job of creating literary jazz, the impregnating of European structures with African-American ethos, which serves to modify the form as well as the ideals. Still, over time, as each poet and generation needs to express themselves uniquely, as T. S. Eliot advises in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," this need to "one-up" the next poet or generation through form has created more poetry that wades deeper and deeper into the waters of obscurity in which even the blurbs on the backs of collections or articles written to explain these works spiral into the abyss of obscurity as well.

One example of this is Smith's use of "found" poems in *Wade in the Water*, which, barring the "found" poems, is an excellent collection of poetry, especially section four. While I appreciate the work/research and even creative effort of "erasure" poems, I often wonder if "found" poems are much like poorly crafted Hip Hop sampling, which I called/labeled as "theft" until my mid-thirties. (I didn't really change my opinion of sampling, per se, but met a DJ [DJ Phingerprint] whom I respect so much as a beautiful human being that it felt like I was disparaging him/his work by referring to all sampling as "theft," even if, to some degree, I still view sampling as a form a plagiarism as I can never equate the talent of a DJ to that of someone who learned how to play a traditional instrument.) As such, with "found" poems, I am never quite sure how much of what I like is the product of the original document and how much I like is of the poet's ability to manipulate the original document. Even though erasure poems are

types of "found" poems, I can respect/admire/like the process of erasure poems in that the poet is much like the sculptor, removing excess of material to reveal the bare essence of the thing (document). So, with Smith's "erasure" poem "Declaration," I can appreciate the work that she does "to remove the fat" from the *Declaration of Independence* to reveal the hypocrisy, if not the schizophrenia, of men who would fight for their freedom while simultaneously denying freedom to others. In this, she is working in the tradition of Frederick Douglass' "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" and David Walker's *Appeal*. However, in her "found" poem, "I Will Tell You the Truth about This, I Will Tell You All about It," which presents a series of letters by African Americans who fought in the Civil War to and from their relatives, I do not know if she is functioning any more than as an editor. I appreciate the display of the humanity (love, morality, intelligence) of African Americans, but I think I am more moved by their words than I am by her "manipulation" of their words, which, as an editor, then, makes what she is doing not so poetic. Of course, the line of demarcation between poet and editor is something different than the line of demarcation between poet and archivist since, as a griot, the poet and archivist are often committing the same function or act. Thus, the "found" poem just feels more like "cheating" in the same way that sampling feels like cheating. And, if not cheating, it seems to be something that is not quite artistic/poetic.

In this issue of the validity of "found" and "erasure" poems, Rambsy makes an important point about Robert Hayden's "Runagate Rungate,"

> "where he's embedded what seem like lyrics from spirituals or at least close approximations. Maybe not so much a found poem as found fragments? A collage of sorts…The most interesting work that I have read with found poems are those contrapuntal poems in Tyehimba Jess' *Leadbelly*. Jess places the contents of a letter from John Lomax, line-broken, on one side of the page. He then creates words by Leadbelly on the other side, matching the syllables and offering a counter-response. But, that original, painstaking approach was rare in terms of found poetry."

Rambsy's point infers that many poets, unlike Jess, are taking/re-presenting words from other sources and then merely using lines breaks without providing their own creative wording or imagery to make the work something other than a refashioning of a document. Thus, Jess' *Leadbelly* is a perfect example of using the historical document as a springboard or foundation for one's art, allowing the art to do as Wordsworth commanded, using the poetry to make the familiar unfamiliar so that readers can re-recognize it: "to throw over [incidents and situations from common life] a certain coloring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect; and, further, and above all, to make these incidents and situations interesting" to the senses as well as to the mind (483). The historical document provides the science, and the art is supposed to make the science meaningful, making it real, as Aristotle asserted that things are not real just because they exist. They are only "real" if they have meaning, and it is art that gives life meaning. It is no small note that Aristotle asserted this in *Poetics*, his rebuffing of Plato's desire to banish the poets in *Republic*. So, as Rambsy asserts, many "found" poems never make the document from which they have been "found" more real/meaningful because too many poets have done as the writers of 16th and 17th Century classicism, place too much emphasis on being "formal and restrained [with] more overtly structural overtones of orderliness, predictability, the use of geometry and grids, the importance

of rigorous discipline and pedagogy, as well as the formation of schools of art and music," becoming what the Romantics would call betrayers of poetry for the sake of appearing as scientists to get paid ("Classicism"). (Let's not forget that what's driving 16th and 17th Century classicism is the need to keep up with the Joneses, err I mean scientists, to remain relevant and, again, paid. Thus, the same is true of many of today's academic poets. The award is often for form not for funk.) Yet, who needs a poet posing as a historian simply because that poet is afraid to be a griot? As such, in *Leadbelly*, Jess is unearthing the spirit from the archival remains rather than just "re-presenting" the history. Because of this, my first thought is that the other poets are just afraid to be funky, afraid to be connected to a juke joint. But, the more I think about *Leadbelly* and compare it to what I have read in these past twenty-five days, I am now wondering if these poets just do not know what it means to be funky because they have ever been in a juke joint. For all their hip-hop braggadocio, these fragile/plastic poets would not know a VFW or a café if you threw them inside one. Returning to Po's critique of Fu, most of the structural emphasis used by award-winning black poets seem to be frail as it falls quite short of what Jess is doing in *Leadbelly* as their work leans too heavily on appearing to be an archivist, historian, or scientist than being a poet. This seems to be the poetic ideal of most award-winning poets who seem unable to connect with a mass audience without compromising skill. So, again, I do not know if it is because they are afraid to be funky/bluesy or if they do not know how. I recently read a wonderful but brief article, "Is Rock Music a Shadow of Its Former Self?," by Leland Shenfield, that asserts that Rock-n-Roll has lost its way because it has lost its soul, which is and always was R&B. (Let's not forget that R&B is a non-organically coined term to place Little Ricard and Chuck Berry in one box so that Elvis Presley and Pat Boone could rule Rock-n-Roll. As Little Richard stated, "R&B doesn't mean 'rhythm and blues' it means 'real black'" [Narine 1989] because Richard was a Rock-n-Roll artist on Monday and became a R&B artist on Tuesday having done nothing to change his sound.) I would argue that the same is true of Hip Hop. In the beginning Hip Hop was tied to Funk and R&B, which tied it to Rock-n-Roll and Blues as well; remember L. L. Cool J's "The Do Wop" from *BAD (Bigger and Deffer)* (1987) and, years later, Andre 3000's "Hey Yeah" from *Speakerboxxx/The Love Below* (2003)? Both are completely connected to the soul of black folks through the soul of the music. However, today, there is no soul—name five quality male soul singers of this (the past five years) generation—in the music or the poetry because they do not know what funk is, what blues is. They know hardship, personal and communal pain, but they—the poets—have chosen to be scientists in expressing that pain rather than being LeRoi Jones' *Blues People* because, as history has shown, Blues People do not win awards until they are dead or damn near dead, and these new Negroes want their awards today! *Lawd Today*.

Turning attention toward the specific collections of poetry that inspired this diatribe, I have ranked them 1 – 5. The collections that received a 4 is because they have great uses of imagery but too many obscure/vague poems or they have great uses of imagery but, as well, too much telling in places that could benefit from more imagery. Of course, the collections that received a 5 found just the right balance of well-crafted imagery while being intellectually challenging without being obscure/vague. While reading these collections, I had in my head as a type of litmus test Kalamu ya Salaam's essay, "Two Trains Running: Black Poetry 1965 – 2000 (Notes towards a Discussion & Dialogue)" as it connects nicely with Smith's article. While Smith's article confirms some things about the academy and political poetry, it also provides a better understanding of Smith's overall thrust as a poet. Further, Salaam's essay does a good job

of showing that the Black Arts Movement was started by poets who had roots in academia but who worked to bend their craftsmanship toward the understanding of the masses as a way to reconcile the tension between poetics and politics. Then, of course, he explains that with the advent of Cave Canem after the rise of Michael Harper, Yusef Komunyakaa, and Rita Dove, the emphasis of form became primary if not exclusive emphasis, which, of course, is the academy's way of removing explicit political statements.

To this end, I like Rambsy's categorizing of poetry engaged by black students on most college campuses as into three realms:

> Re: Three Trains running at SIUE
>
> 1. At my university, there tend to be three communities of poets. One is with the MFAs, and it's almost fully white. And the work is print-based. Folks with this one have the most institutional support—there are professors, creative writing classes, a small budget for readings, an annual student publication, etc. There are just a few black students associated with this one.
>
> 2. The other community is spoken word. They don't have much funding, but they have the largest diverse group of black participants—meaning black women and black men students. Really no white students involved. There are no classes, but I cover several spoken word pieces in one of my classes, and young women in the class always bring me suggestions on what other black women spoken word artists that I should add to the mix.
>
> 3. Then, there's the rap community. This one is mostly informal. It includes a mix of students—men and women, black and white. Young black men, though, are the most visible. When there's a show, everyone shows up though. All the student social events indirectly connect to rap, as they play the songs between and during various activities. I've been teaching a series of literature courses on aspects of rap the last few years, and, not surprisingly, it's far more popular than my classes on "African-American poetry."

I must lean on Rambsy's understanding of Rap/Hip Hop since I have not listened to the radio since 1988 other than the locally produced *Saturday Morning Blues Workshop*, but I understand the conundrum of being the advisor for the university poetry organization. For years, I was the advisor for the Pierian Literary Society, which was the JSU English Club/Society, under which all aspects of English majors fell. Until I became the advisor, creative writing was a non-thought and not even an afterthought. I changed that, and my last few years as the advisor all the presidents were self-proclaimed poets who wanted to publish more than they wanted to perform. A few years after being the advisor for Pierian, a student approached me about being the advisor for a new poetry organization. I informed her there was no need for that since Pierian was basically controlled by poets. However, she was adamant, and, after completing a mission that I thought she would never be able to complete, I was forced to relent and become the advisor for the newly formed poetry club, which became known as Outspoken. I was reluctant to become the advisor for Outspoken because I knew that it would become mostly a performative based organization, which it eventually did over the six or seven years that I was the advisor. Since I am not primarily interested in the performative and have no clue about Hip

Hop, I decided to relinquish my role as advisor. Unfortunately, Pierian died because most of the students interested in poetry are now primarily interested in the performative aspect and migrated to Outspoken while the other English majors all want to be lawyers or teachers. (Interestingly enough, the students' love for spoken word enabled Outspoken to maintain a campus presence for two years without an official sponsor/advisor until they were able to secure an advisor once a former Outspoken member was hired at the university as the university's social media person.) As such, one of the things that a few of us in the JSU English Department want to develop is a way to create an effective pipeline for our students to MFA and Ph.D. creative writing programs. But, we are still trying to determine the best way to do that since, again, most of the students we get are more interested in the performative than publishing.

Before providing the list of my ranking of the twenty-five poetry collections, I should mention that I really like James (Jimmy) Kimbrell's *Smote* and not just because he has a poem in the collection dedicated to me and our time in the Mississippi National Guard. Jimmy is a white poet of Lebanese and Scotch-Irish descent (which does not do full justice to his ethnic background) who was raised primarily in West Jackson, a predominately poor and African-American neighborhood that included him living on various streets, such as Hooker, Latimer, Houston, Clinton, and Lorraine Streets, as his family moved a great deal, seeking less expensive rent. However, living in West Jackson allowed Jimmy to become aware of Jackson State University before eventually attending Millsaps and the University of Southern Mississippi. He is now the creative writing director at Florida State. I mention *Smote* because it is not like his first two collections in that it, while still being about form, confronts race in a much more explicit way than his first two collections while also maintaining an undeniable southern vernacular. When I asked him why he changed his focus in this collection, he responded: "I read Major Jackson's essay, 'A Mystifying Silence: Big and Black,' asserting that the issue of race must be addressed by the white poets as well and thought 'he's right.'" Jimmy, sitting in my living room reminiscing about our time in the National Guard and our writing over the years, added: "I don't know if I'm qualified to do so, but I know it is something I must do." As the grandchild of immigrants, Jimmy often says that he is "the genetic result of globalization," which aligned him more with the colonized than with the colonizer. *Smote* is a testament that Jimmy is not just a poet who can master form to win a Pushcart and a Guggenheim but also use his verse to study, critique, and celebrate all things southern and racial. More importantly, he is a poet defined as white who was able to be influenced by his life experience with African Americans and by the insightful words of an African-American poet who was not interested in couching his words to appease the white power structure. This, then, can be an example of African-American writers being so loving of themselves, their aesthetic, their sensibilities, and their issues that they impact others not by acquiescing to them but through the sheer brilliance and power of their being. With that, here is the list.

How the End First Showed by D. M. Aderibigbe (**5**)
Excellent imagery and only a few incoherent/obscure poems; I've already started recommending this collection to my students.

I Can't Talk about the Trees without the Blood by Tiana Clark (**5**)
Great images, especially the Phillis Wheatley poems and most, if not all poems, are very precise in meaning.

Fractal Song by Jerry W. Ward, Jr. (**5**)
Excellent balancing of well-drawn and moving images that combine into precise presentations of ideas and ideals

Refuse by Julian Randall (**4.5**)
Excellent use of imagery with only a few inaccessible/obscure poems

Wade in the Water by Tracy K. Smith (**4**)
Lots of great images and moments but the "found" poems and a few other vague works keep me from giving it a 5; yet, section IV of this collection is killer/excellent. It almost earned a 5 on its own.

Brown by Kevin Young (**4**)
Lots of excellent images, phrasing, and didactic narratives but a few poems that seem to meander into obscurity.

Threat Come Close by Aaron Coleman (**4**)
Excellent imagery and wordplay but a few incoherent poems

Muhammad's Mountain: Poems for Muhammad Ali by John Warner Smith (**4**)
Some good to very good images but too much telling where there could be more showing. I really wanted to give this a 5, but, again, just too much telling.

Indecency by Justin Phillip Reed (**4**)
Lots of excellent imagery but too many vague/obscure poems to be a 5

Sons of Achilles by Nabila Lovelace (**4**)
Great images with a nice meshing of Greek mythology with current tropes and issues but too many of the poems remain indecisive in meaning if not obscure/vague.

Black Queer Hoe by Britteney Black Rose Kapri (**4**)
Lots of excellent images but often falls on the cliché or just too much telling; reminds me of a lot of the stuff Jolivette Anderson and I were doing in the late 90s by using the profane/the carnal to say something sacred. Thus, it is reminiscent of Prince's use of sex and the body as a metaphor to make socio-political commentary.

For Every One by Jason Reynolds (**4**)
This is not a collection of poems but a stream of consciousness, somewhat like Rankine's *Citizen*, without Rankine's sophistication. It's clearly meant for the young adult audience, but the images placed throughout this stream made me want to swim until the end. I could see my students liking this, but I worry that the places where he tells rather than shows would lead my students to do the same as well. Yet, I enjoyed this book completely.

American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin by Terrance Hayes (**4**)

Lots of interesting images contained in lots of vaguely abstract poems; I often read Hayes as an exercise of skill and rarely for nutrition of the soul.

Museum of the Americas by J Michael Martinez (**4**)
Strong images and challenging syntax but often leading to obscure or vague meaning even after completing the research; however, "The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo" is one of several of the poems in this collection that should find a wide audience.

Ghost, Like a Place by Iain Haley Pollock (**4**)
Very good images but a bit too vague at times

Blood Vinyls by Yolanda J. Franklin (**4**)
Nice images but too much telling and not enough showing to be a 5

Taking the Arrow Out of the Heart by Alice Walker (**4**)
Lots of nice imagery but in some cases just more telling than showing

The Gospel According to Wild Indigo by Cyrus Cassells (**4**)
Lots of great images but lots of obscurity as well

Cape Verdean Blues by Shauna Barbosa (**4**)
Really strong images—I almost gave it a 3.5 for how obscure most of the poems are, but the sheer sharpness of the imagery raises it to a 4.

Confessions of a Barefaced Woman by Allison Joseph (**3.5**)
Some nice uses of imagery but most of the poems tell rather than show

Life and Rhythms by Ian A. Campbell (**3.5**)
Some solid images but often sacrificing imagery for rhyme, with the rhyming falling flat

In Love in War: A Journey of Black Womanhood by K. Grace (**3.5**)
Lots of excellent images but far too many poems that tell or just explain as essays

Wild Heart, Peaceful Soul by J. Autherine (**3**)
Some creative uses of imagery but too many works employing no literary devices at all

She Felt Like Feeling Nothing by R. H. Sin (**3**)
Some minimal to good examples of imagery but too many works with no use or display of literary devices

Heart Talk: Poetic Wisdom for a Better Life by Cleo Wade (**0**)
Lots of insight and wisdom but no use of any literary device that constitutes this as a collection of poetry other than being named as such

One of the reasons that I began keeping the list in this specific way is because I wanted to see how close I would be to the other judges for a particular award. Then, as I started reading the

collections, all these other thoughts began to flower so, now, here we are with this essay. I did not know Clark's work before reading *I Can't Talk about the Trees without the Blood*, and I was pleasantly surprised. However, I was not surprised to hear that Clark's reading at her own institution received a split reception from the whites and blacks attending. Rambsy notes: "Tiana Clark is my colleague here at SIUE. I enjoyed her book. She gave a reading a little bit ago, and I was intrigued that, while most of the audience seemed to be really into the reading, some people had reservations because the delivery style was not expressive or performative in that spoken word type of way." As a poet and short story writer, I am not as excited by the reading aspect as I am about the writing and publishing aspect, but I do approach reading like a job. Not like, "Oh, it's a job so I gotta do it," but in that way when our parents told us that if we are before people that we should do our best not to waste their time. What I hate most is not just unenthusiastic, monotone poets but poets who are unenthusiastic, monotone, and seem to have had no idea that they were scheduled to give a reading as they spend most of the time flipping the pages of a book to find something to read. "Are you fucking kidding me?!? You didn't even think enough of our time to have some poems prepared?!?" Now, that is the utmost in academic arrogance. So, as a reader/presenter, I am always thinking about the audience, how to keep them engaged. In fact, for a few of my poems, I actually have a version for submitting to be published and a version to be read. The versions are not that drastically different, often only slight changes in a word or two, but it represents me thinking about how a poem can be read and how it can be received when I am reading it to someone. As such, I do not think a lot of poets think about that—the notion that the same poem can be one way on the page and another way in an oral presentation. (Of course, if I am reading poems from a book/publication that is being purchased because of that particular reading, then I stick strictly to text. But, if I am asked to write a poem for a specific event or organization, which is not a strictly literary organization, and that poem will be engaged primarily by that audience in the performative, I often will have two versions of that poem—one for the audience that is not primarily interested in form and one that I would submit to a journal. I admit that for a time I did feel perplexed whenever I was creating poetry for people who were not regularly reading literary journals because I often wondered if doing so limited my own "potential" or "growth" as a writer. So, this act of crafting two versions of the poem is my way of navigating that perplexity.) Furthermore, and I am not saying this is or was true of Clark's reading, especially since I was not there, sometimes I have seen black poets overcome by W. E. B. Du Bois' "double consciousness" or by Cornel West's "white normative gaze" and fall victim to becoming entrapped by what Thomas Sayers Ellis identifies in "All Their Stanzas Look Alike," trying to be just as reserved and monotone as their white counterparts. Yet, two of the best compliments I have ever gotten were after reading poetry before a vastly white audience at the Mississippi Museum of Art and at Mississippi College. In both cases, there were a small number of black students, and after each reading one of the students said to me, almost in amazement, "You were the exact same person during your reading that you are all the time." Since I understood that both students were referring to code-switching and had not been used to seeing an academic or professional black person not code switch to please or ingratiate oneself to the majority white audience's aesthetic, I simply replied, "Sometimes, all you can be is all you can be." But, I have always remembered the look in both those students' eyes as if I was, somehow, affirming their desire to be and love themselves regardless of the circumstance or consequences.

Additionally, when I was an undergraduate at JSU, a JSU English professor announced to our class that we would go to the JSU Library and hear some recordings of famous black poets. Man, I was so excited. I had only read poetry to that point. I had never attended a poetry reading so poetry was just something on the page. But, this thought of hearing people that I have been reading for so long fascinated and excited me. I literally was like a child waiting on Christmas, and the end of the week to go to the library seemed to take forever. Finally, Friday came, we were at the library, the teacher put the needle on the record after announcing, "Here is Langston Hughes," and what came from that speaker was the most bewildering sound I have ever heard in my life. After the initial shock of how sad, forlorn, and dry Hughes sounded, I could only think two thoughts: "What the hell!!!" and "Why is this happening?!?" I could not believe that the man who had produced some of the coolest and most moving work I had read sounded like a zombie. At first, I thought there was something wrong with the record. It had to be warped or something. But, the more that I listened I realized it wasn't the record. It was Hughes. I have never been so disappointed in my life, which is why every time I would hear Ellis' poem I would laugh my ass off. A few years later someone explained/conjectured that Hughes probably was reading that way because it was being produced for mass consumption, which meant that anything that might be engaged by white people must be presented a "certain" way. I do not know if that is the reason for Hughes uninspired reading, but it still hurt the first time I heard that record. Again, I was not just shocked; I was greatly disappointed. To some degree, I was anticipating re-meeting myself though that recording in the same way that Hughes' poetry on the page had enabled me to re-meet myself by presenting the ideas, sensibilities, ethos, diction, and vernacular of my father, mother, uncles, aunts, grandparents, and the people who populated my community. Instead, I received a cold serving of being mindful, in all of one's actions, of the presence and power of whiteness to impact black life. So, I do not know if that is what impacted Clark, but it also may be that they—the Clarks, Smiths, Doves, Elizabeth Alexanders, and Hayeses of the world truly believe that the words are supreme and that any verbal/vocal emphasis or excess may cause too much focus toward the performance and not enough toward the work, itself. Moreover, it may just be that they do not want to be seen as merely "performing" blackness or "Uncle Toming" for the audience. What I do know is that none of them are more intellectually accomplished than Ward; yet, his readings rarely bore me to tears while I am still inspired by his creative use of form. As a writer, Ward's poetry forces me to think about the specific meaning and impact of each word and structure employed, and his enthusiastic readings supplement that understanding rather than distract from it. To that end, I still hear "Jazz to Jackson to John" swinging in my head even though it has been over ten years since I have heard Ward read it.

Yet, I have wondered why more spoken word communities on college campuses do not create their own publications or recordings? With technology making everything so affordable/doable, I wonder why more college students are not taking advantage of this. Just because I am not necessarily interested in the performative does not mean that there are not more college professors that are not. But, I guess the problem is that most professors are driven by what enables them to obtain tenure, and not enough of the professors who find value in spoken word have done more to institutionalize it on their campuses since the "study" of spoken word has yet to be readily affirmed by college boards and tenure committees as worthy of tenure. Still, I have found that movements tend to grow if there is a way to quantify it, especially if one can quantify it on the terms of the folks driving the movement. Even if that publication or

recording platform is a website page, it can be something that gets them thinking about codifying their work in a way that makes it something tangible to be shared in multiple ways. I thought about this when I was the advisor to Outspoken, but, at the time, I was editing *Black Magnolias*, which had a specific aesthetic that was different than what most of the Outspoken poets were doing. And, I could not seem to find anyone, especially a faculty member, who was equally interested in the performative and publication to embrace the role of helping Outspoken poets expand into the realm of publishing. However, I think the biggest hurdle is getting young people, especially young people that are not reading regularly, to think thoroughly about what their aesthetic is and how to articulate it so that others understand what they are attempting to do. Since I had read Addison Gayle's *Black Aesthetic* in high school because my father believed that "you should know what you are trying to do before you do it," and because it was a choice between that and something else I was completely disinteresting in reading, I arrived at college already thinking about what an aesthetic is, though it was a really surface/shallow understanding of it. But, just that little bit of understanding made the act of writing essays about aesthetics and exchanging ideas about aesthetic seem normal and not a burden as it does to many of my students. I begin my creative writing class with my students constructing a five-paragraph essay explaining what three literary devices they most use. While most of them do not understand why they are doing that at the beginning of the semester, they understand its necessity at the end of the semester as I spend months grilling them about their choices of the "how" as much as the "what" of their writing.

This notion of the merit of the performative is really a discussion of how individuals and systems define the intellectual. Stoicism remains the ideal of Western intellectualism as the western man (read Caucasian and not originally Greek or Italian) deemed emotion as an indicator of low intelligence. The notion is that the emotional or the passionate person has lost control of one's intellectual facilities. (I am guessing that someone forgot to explain this to Nietzsche, but I digress.) There is a lot of great work being done on this topic. Notably, Rambsy has produced two short but enlightening works, "Notes on 'Beyond Poet Voice" and "Dynamic Black Women Speakers versus Flat Sounding Poets." Rambsy has also served as a user-tester for the essential work being done by Marit J. MacArthur (lit scholar and poet), Georgia Zellou (linguist), and Lee M. Miller (bioengineer and neuroscientist), working closely with computer scientists Robert Ochshorn and Max Hawkins, who developed some technology for assessing the pace, pitch range, dynamism, etc. of poets reading their works. Collectively, they have produced a seminal study, "Beyond Poet Voice: Sampling the (Non-) Performance Styles of 100 American Poets," which shows how performance is not just a reflection of a particular poet's personality but more a reflection of the manner in which society dictates the behavior of what is defined as intellectual, even when that definition is based on purely arbitrary and racially defined aspects. As Rambsy explains it:

> There's this really dominant mode of reading poetry. In many quarters it's known as "Poet Voice." Some people label it as "*NPR* voice." Basically, it means the reading style is flat (opposite of a dynamic reader), or what we'd call a *neutral voice*…Alright...so...I was at a conference a year ago, and talking to these scholars who study sound and poetry. At one point, a couple of the scholars hypothesized that if we traced the backgrounds of every single poet who reads with a neutral voice then we'd eventually end at the Iowa Writer's Workshop. That is, if a prominent poet is reading with neutral voice, it's

because they were directly taught by or deeply influenced by someone from that famous workshop. In short, blame Iowa.

It's a provocative idea and probably not entirely accurate, but it is helpful for organizing some ideas about the prevalence and circulation of these neutral/unenthusiastic reading styles. Those same sound studies scholars used computers to analyze the ranges of flat to dynamic reading styles, and with their sample of 50 women poets, they found something fascinating. Some black women (Trethewey and Tracy K. Smith) were the most neutral/flat, and some other black women (Sanchez and June Jordan) were the most dynamic. Now, there's no surprise that Sanchez is more dynamic than most. Yet, it is *something* to know that Trethewey and Smith are flatter than even many white women poets.

According to some scholars, those prominent, MFA women poets are reading with neutral voice in an effort to be taken seriously. That is, they have come up in environments that say speaking this way -- with little to no fluctuating vocal variety -- is the best way to be heard, valued, praised, and viewed as a certain kind of professional. Those were the environments in which Trethewey and Smith were trained. That's the environment in which Clark was trained. The young, black women who attended Clark's reading were not raised in that framework and are, in fact, distant from it, come from spaces that value the opposite—outspoken, vocal modulating black women speakers. Hence, they had negative reactions to Clark's reading voice.

The theory connecting the poet/NPR/neutral voice to the Iowa Writer's Workshop is plausible in a very general notion that black folks have always sought to use various techniques to appear non-threatening and similar to white folks as a way to gain entrance into the power structure. As such, the Fisk Jubilee Singers may be the best example of this as the choir was organized by a northern white missionary who was dedicated to music and to proving blacks were equal to whites, which mean showing "how like white" they were. Thus, when the Fisk Jubilee Singers traveled the country and the world, as the university's main source of fundraising, they were not singing in the more traditional African-American manner but in a type of hybrid manner to prove their "humanity" by proving that they could understand and execute notes in the same manner as whites. At the core of this is the manner in which notes are executed. In the "strictly" European sense, the goal is to mimic the "perfect," "sharp" note as a way to mimic the pristine (read idealized or fantasized) life of whiteness. In contrast, the African-American sense is to bend, drag, and elongate the note in a way to signify that black life is a constant amalgamation of cultures with a constant struggle to endure, survive, and overcome white supremacy. Moreover, the European notion of perfectly mimicking the note has been identified with intelligence (the mental discipline to adhere to a refined standard) whereas the African-American notion of reshaping the note has been identified with emotionalism, which is why, often, black Methodist and Catholic churches still frown upon the "overly emotional" renditions of songs because they feared that those types of renditions identified them as emotional (uncivilized) beings rather than intellectual beings. (My father who remained a Baptist would often tell a joke about Methodists to needle my aunt who became Methodist when she married. He would say, "Son, always remember that a Methodist is either a Baptist with a good job or a broke Catholic." To which, my aunt would simply roll her eyes. But, the message

was clear. One's cultural and class sensibilities are reflected by everything, especially how one expresses one's religious beliefs.) So, music (sound) and language (vocabulary and articulation) remain primary indicators—for better and for worse—of intelligence whereas the ability to understand and use concepts for one's own improvement is often minimized if one is not able to articulate those notions in what is deemed the preferred style/sound of intelligence. Hence, the poetry/NPR/neutral voice remains the "go to" when one wants to be sure to impress upon a certain audience that one is a master of language and not merely an emotional performer. Yet, since I had parents, teachers, and other community folks who developed in me an understanding of the intelligence of the pre-colonized African, the enslaved African, the blues artist, and the jazz artist, I know that phonetic intelligence is equal to terminology intelligence and that one does not have to sacrifice intelligence to engage the emotive whether in the written or in the performative. Black people have always been aware that the emotive alone is not enough on which to build a stable, progressive society as James Brown indicates with "You like a dull knife just ain't cutting. Talking loud and saying nothing." Even within the African-American community, there has always been the tension regarding preachers who primarily teach and preachers who primarily whoop and holler as an example of the intellectual prowess in which the community has always engaged the most important aspects of its culture. As a result, preachers, such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Louis Farrakhan, Jesse Jackson, Cornel West, Jeremiah Wright, Eddie Glaude, William Barber, and many others, often rose to local and national prominence because of their ability to navigate knowledge and passion in way that their passionate deliveries enhanced their messages rather than distracting from it. In this vein, the African-American communities who uplifted these preachers seem to be more intellectual than Nietzsche who longed for a complete rejection of the Apollonian and a complete embracing of the Dionysian; yet, no one ever accuses Nietzsche of being unintelligent because, of course, white skin always presupposes one's intelligence whereas black skin presupposes one's ignorance, which means that black skin must always present in the poetry/NPR/neutral voice if one wants to be "taken seriously" as an intellect by the white power structure. And, this is where I become limited in my artistic endeavors as I am just unable to care about being published by white journals or win white awards more than I am interested in using my work to convince the mass of black folks that self-love and self-determination rather than begging white people to be nice to us is the only strategy or program of work that will lead to liberation/sovereignty. To be clear, as someone who would rather read a poem more than hear a poem and as someone who gains more joy from being published than from presenting my work, form, especially the mastery of imagery, is important to me. But, I am not as interested in writing for other writers as I am writing for people for whom my hope is that my work will inspire in them a sense of self-pride and belief to create their own institutions rather than continuing to beg white people for the opportunity "to be as little Negro and as much American as possible," which rarely leads to first-class citizenship and often leads to emotional, mental, and psychological dysfunction, manifesting itself in self-destructive behavior through destructive art, drug abuse, and violence.

Also, the trick for me is not to be sweeping (overly general) in my discussion of the difference between the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement. Yet, the primary difference between both movements is to whom the majority of each group was speaking. On the one hand, the writers of the Harlem Renaissance were speaking to white audiences, functioning as diplomats for the mass of black folks. On the other hand, the writers of the Black Arts Movement were speaking to black audiences, functioning as inspiration and guidance

toward sovereignty. One of the best examples of this is that the Harlem Renaissance produced only one self-contained journal whereas BAM produced nineteen. Of course, speaking to white folks is not, in and of itself, a bad thing. People must exist within their own countries and on this planet together. In that, humanity can use Booker T. Washington's notion that "in all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress" (154). But, the problem for some black intellects is that they perceived that they have more in common with their white coworkers than with other black people not of their socio-economic circumstance. So, for the black writer nurtured in most MFA and Ph.D. creative writing programs, their people are the people they see/engage within those halls. Those are the people who hold direct power over their lives. As such, they are always speaking, in some way, more to the people within the walls of the ivory tower than to the people beyond those walls. While they may be speaking for those outside the walls of the ivory tower, one wonders if that speaking to the white power structure actually ever helps those people beyond the walls in a manner that actually speaking to those people beyond the walls directly. To paraphrase Baraka, are these ivory tower poets helping the mass of black folks by "negotiating coolly on the steps of the white house" (1884) when those negotiations rarely produce anything that impacts or changes the lives of the people beyond those steps and walls? Rather than choosing one over the other, I have always tried to do both. On the one hand, publishing work in a literary journal or reading one's work on a college campus can impact the minds and hearts of people who make governmental policy. On the other hand, reading one's work and even disseminating one's work in a church, Kwanzaa celebration, local NAACP, Urban League, Nation of Islam, and Black Lives Matter event can impact/inspire people at a communal level to seize control of their lives. As such, the point is not having to choose one over the other but being well-crafted enough to do both. Yet, black artists/intellects have always felt a need to choose one path over the other, and I have often wondered if it is because black folks believe that there is very little that we can do without white people's permission. Thus, black artists/intellects have learned, internalized, the unspoken but very understood rules of where and where not to be (live/socialize) so as not to upset one's white benefactors just as they have learned, internalized, the unspoken but very understood rules of how and how not to write and sound to be accepted by white benefactors. In their world of very limited funding for black artists/intellects, they cannot risk saying or publishing anything that causes white benefactors to rescind or withhold their funding. My problem, I guess, is that my upbringing of a mother who was a black college graduate, a father who was a black college graduate, two uncles who were black college graduates, two aunts who were black college graduates, our family doctor who was a black college graduate, our family lawyer who was a black college graduate, and even our veterinarian who, for some reason, was also a black college graduate caused me to believe in black excellence that does not need white permission to be excellent/sovereign. Yet, as time has shown, even the children of black college graduates now opt to attend white institutions because white folks' water is always colder than black folks' water and white folks' ice cream is always sweeter than black folks' ice cream even if the water and ice cream produced by black folks nourished and sustained the black community for hundreds of years.

Moreover, while African-Americans did a great job fighting for legal, educational, and economic rights, we never developed a sustained movement to address self-hatred, which includes the work of the artists. So, once the doors to integrated educational and economic opportunities opened, we rushed through them not thinking about or developing a plan to address

what happens when a mass of self-hating people work and, now, live in close quarters to the people responsible for black people hating themselves. I know a very financially comfortable African-American couple who are graduates of a HBCU, one an engineer and one a lawyer, who once told me that they were only considering Ivy League schools because "a black college can't do anything for their child." Thus, it seems that academic and economic successes are not cures for self-hatred. When Frantz Fanon asserts that we must kill the oppressor of the mind, he makes it clear that art is one of the most powerful tools of mental liberation. Adding to this, Du Bois is clear about the power of art in "Criteria of Negro Art" when he asserts that "all art is propaganda" (757). Someone once challenged me regarding this notion by asking, "What if I draw a flower on a vase, how is that propaganda?" My response was: "the mere drawing of a flower is an ode to nature, to the manner in which its beauty and its oxygen nurture our minds as well as our bodies. That, then, is an act of propaganda as you are celebrating and promoting the flower—nature—as something that adds positive value to life. The drawing of it is a statement of its value to humanity for if it had no meaning (positive or negative) or value it would not be drawn." I find it interesting that the same folks who deny that art is propaganda are the same folks who make distinctions between highbrow and lowbrow art to the extent that they argue the negative effects of exposing people to lowbrow art. Even if they are basing their definition of lowbrow art on the technique of the art and not the subject matter, they are clear that lowbrow art hinders the intellectual development of those who are exposed to it, but they still cannot see this as understanding art as propaganda, having the ability to influence the mind and emotions of the masses.

It also seems that another problem is not studying, empirically, as best we can, the manner in which audiences understand/perceive verbal and physical gestures from poets during readings and what level of enjoyment those audiences receive from those verbal and physical gestures. I have been raised to understand the dual meaning of "whooping and hollering" preachers. On the one hand, it means that a preacher is very emotive and expressive. Yet, on the other hand, it means that the preacher may not be a "teacher" of the word and has not the intellectual ability to engage learned audiences in a cognitive engagement of the text. And, of course, for African Americans, this criticism of their aesthetic manner of existence extended to every aspect of their lives. Whether it is fashion, singing, teaching styles, and even athletic engagement and celebration, African Americans have been made to understand the often unspoken but always very present notion/judgment of their intellect based on their level of emotion and passion. As such, the emphasis is rarely placed on the audience/listener to be able to decipher the presentation for the actual poem, which, I realize, can be difficult for both sides. The audience that loves the expressive presentation is often bored to tears by the neutral presentation, regardless of how well-crafted the work is. The audience that loves the neutral presentation is often immediately disconcerted or repelled by the expressive presentation, regardless of how well-crafted the work is. And, rarely, is someone like King held as an example of the perfect balancing of logic and passion being an example for the commonality of black aesthetics rather than as an anomaly of black aesthetics. Moreover, this inability of white audiences to see the humanity (complete self) of African Americans causes artists, such as Marvin Gaye and Prince, to be viewed either as sensual/sexual artists or socio-political artists. They are rarely viewed as both because, often, the stoicism (read the hypocritical Victorian perversion of stoicism) of Western aesthetics separates the body from the mind putting them in battle or conflict rather than things working in unison. (The notion of the body being innately

evil is a Westernized concept making all musings and urges of the flesh foreign to the spirit and soul.) So, when Amiri Baraka states, "Let there be no love poems written until love can exist freely," (1884) in "Black Art," far too many students and followers of Baraka took that to mean that serious poets, especially revolutionary poets, never discuss love, sex, or the body, for that matter, unless wanting to risk being deemed not a serious artist or revolutionary. I had a good friend who said to me, "I don't write love poems because Baraka said that serious poets don't write love poems." To which, my response was, "Dude, you have seven children. You were feeling loving or sexual to someone at least seven times in your life. Refusing to write about those moments is denying your humanity (whole self) and is failing to provide the most important reasons for the need for revolution and justice."

The struggle to be taken seriously as an intellectual is such a "mountain," to use Hughes' term, to climb that most African-American artists decide early not to carry or to eliminate any baggage, including overt politicizing and overly expressive language, that makes the climb up the racial mountain even more difficult. Furthermore, the Black Nationalist in me thinks that the real problem is that African artists continue to climb the wrong mountain, which is the mountain of white acceptance and reward. I understand why they climb it. The money that built it makes it shinier with greater treasure at the top. Yet, far too many African poets never realize that what they relinquish to climb the "mountain of racial acceptance" can never be replenished by the gold, status, and slaps from white hands on black backs that await the black artists upon completion of the climb. For all of its excellent imagery, the one thing that bothers me about Rankine's *Citizen* is the moment when the speaker goes to a white psychiatrist for emotional and psychological trauma caused by existing for too long under the umbrella of white supremacy.

> The new therapist specializes in trauma counseling. You/ have only spoken on the phone….At the front door the bell is a small round disc that you/ press firmly. When the door finally opens, the woman/ standing there yells, at the top of her lungs, Get away/ from my house! What are you doing in my yard?/ It's as if a wounded Doberman pinscher or a German/ shepherd has gained the power of speech. And though/ you back up a few steps, you manage to tell her you have/ an appointment. You have an appointment? She spits/ back. Then she pauses. Everything pauses. Oh, she says,/ followed by, oh, yes, that's right. I am sorry./ I am so sorry, so, so sorry (18).

While Rankine paints wonderfully the total pain of a black being submerged in a white world in which even the people and institutions identified to help are poisoned with white supremacy, I can only experience the bewilderment of why a black person suffering from the trauma of white supremacy would see a white psychiatrist. Of course, the point of Rankine's efforts is to use her imagery to force white readers to see the hellish nature of themselves and be transformed. Yet, the election of Trump pretty much proves that as an impossibility. Moreover, Rankine has, like many of her counterparts, presented the struggle of climbing the mountain of white acceptance or white transformation as opposed to climbing the mountain of black self-acceptance. In doing so, *Citizen* provides no relief or solution to her African-American readers other than the acceptance that the nature of life is to endure hell for the crumbs of white benevolence. Though my criticism seems harsh, I love the imagery of *Citizen*; I just do not love its ultimate message that never even considers the possibility of black self-determinism as a response to white supremacy. To extend this point even further, over the years Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Cornel West, and others

have left one Ivy League school for another not just for better pay and opportunities but often due to some issue in which they have perceived the current institution as a planation-like atmosphere. As I recognize the right of any African-American individual to do what is best for oneself, one's family, and one's work, whenever they would move from one Ivy League school to another in search of less hellish pastures, I could only consider that constant movement as a greatly missed opportunity. If they were really serious about the manner in which African-American intellectuals are treated and serious about building something that fully nurtures African-American intellectualism, they should have relocated to Mississippi Valley State University or even a private HBCU, such as Rust or Tougaloo, in the same way that Washington "tricked" George Washington Carver to come to Tuskegee. What Tuskegee obviously lacked in funding in relation to the white institutions where Carver was working, it provided more opportunity for Carver to become the independent and much more profound scientist than he would have been had he remained under the thumb of white overseers.

At this point, it seems that I should make a distinction between something being racial and racist. Hughes' racial mountain is not just an issue of white supremacists willfully/maliciously using bias indicators to marginalize black writers. In some cases it is the problem of people in power not being able to conceive of something else, especially something foreign to them, being as equally pleasurable and valuable to them as that to which they are accustomed. As such, they rarely think to ask very basic questions: Why do I like what I like? What are the factors that determine why I like what I like? In 1987 Whitney Houston released the single "So Emotional," which begins with her declaring in a breathlessly sexual voice, "I don't know why I like it; I just do." Whenever that would play on the radio, my cousin, John, would respond, "Well, she needs to get that shit checkout out before it leads to something terrible." While John and I were being silly college undergraduates, we both were slightly serious in having been taught that one must always know why one likes or is doing something. However, MacArthur et al show that often people are quite unaware of what factors combine to create their aesthetic pleasure.

> "Just as speech production can vary tremendously according to paralinguistic context, our listening history or experience deeply influences speech perception—including of performative speech, like poetry readings. Psychologists have noted how we carry a sort of buffer of recent history, an implicit memory, such that specific words (or words representing related concepts) repeated over time are processed differently (faster)" (MacArthur)

Yet, for the more learned of society, what intellectual responsibility do they bear to hear beyond their normal or usual socio-linguistic experience? Who bears this responsibility? Are white audiences or listeners always allowed to be guilty of what James Baldwin called "selective naivety" as it relates to engaging art created by African peoples? To what degree does this selective naivety lead to the mythological perversion of the black body and mind as seen in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* or in Mary Dalton and Jan Erlone's inability to realize the very awkward, if not compromising, situation in which they place Bigger Thomas in Wright's *Native Son*? Again, MacArthur et al show that:

> Linguists have also shown that the perception of sounds and words in speech can vary based on multiple sociolinguistic factors related to the paralinguistic context. For instance, the perceived gender of a speaker can influence the linguistic interpretation of a word, as can the speaker's perceived characteristics related to race, ethnicity, national origin, regional background, sexual orientation, and age. While three elite white male poets may read their poetry in a similar manner, it is quite possible that the perception of these shared identity markers influences us to actually hear such poets as sounding similar in performance style. Or if we place ourselves in a particular aesthetic-ideological lineage of poetry, we may be predisposed to enjoy the reading style of a poet in that lineage, and to perceive that style as highly distinct from, the reading style of a poet whose aesthetic-ideological orientations we do not share."

If the academic and mainstream literary organizations are the true and rightful keepers of the canon as they present themselves, then should they not have the ability to recognize a well-written poem even if it is presented in a manner that is foreign or simply annoying to them?

To be clear, I understand that there can be times when a poet's reading of a poem is the most effective aspect of the poem. During the first year of editing *Black Magnolias*, I would often be so enthralled by a poet's reading that I would ask the poet to submit that poem to be published in *Black Magnolias*. But, after reading the poem, I would find that it was the poet's presentation of the poem that moved me and not the actual poem. The research of MacArthur et al shows that this is not an uncommon occurrence.

> When we listen to a poem read out loud, the tone of voice obviously affects our interpretation of the words, and our perceptions of the poet. In research on the perception of tone of voice, Jody Kreiman and Diana Sidtis (2011) write that "studies ... support the idea that listeners normally expect semantic and intonational meanings to be concordant"… It is all too common to like a poem on the page and be disappointed by its performance, and vice versa (MacArthur et al).

This experience taught me to be a more skilled listener rather than to disparage the young poets that I was hearing. Though, I did adopt the policy of no longer asking poets to submit their work simply because I had enjoyed their reading of it. I adopted this policy mostly because of how awkward it felt when, after asking the poet to submit a work that I had heard, I would then ask the poet to revise the poem.

One aspect of becoming a more discerning listener as well as reader is realizing, as "Beyond Poet Voice" indicates, that the definition or notion of what is considered "poet voice," "neutral," or even "expressive" is subjective. For instance, while I love Trethewey's work and might not consider her "expressive" but more "neutral," it is because I am comparing her to folks like Giovanni, Baraka, Sanchez, Clifton, Brooks, and even Allen Ginsberg. Yet, that being said, I remember Trethewey (her printed poems and her readings) as well as the poets I just listed. As such, "Miscegenation" is one of my favorite poems by Trethewey, and, periodically, no matter what I might be doing or where I might be, I hear her voice clear as a Gulf Coast breeze saying, "When I turned 33 my father said, *It's your Jesus year—you're the same/ age he was when he died.* It was spring, the hills green in Mississippi." And, what usually comes to mind is simply,

"*It's your Jesus year—you're the same/ age he was when he died*." Now, connecting the reader's/hearer's subjectivity to the work, I have always been fascinated with the so-called Jesus year of 33 and the notion that one can have such major impact on society in such a short time. Still, in context of the poem, the line echoes with the metaphoric quality of names and meaning that are impregnated/weighted more when we consider the Civil Rights Movement was partly a battle about naming/identification/categorizing and what we all did—on both sides—to expand, delete, and/or blur those lines of naming and meaning. So, when Trethewey writes and says, "*It's your Jesus year*," I hear/think the command or declaration that the father is speaking rather than just an informative. The father is not just informing the child that it's her "*Jesus year*" but commanding her to act on all that having lived to be 33 enables her to do. Thus, when we arrive at the final couplet and the speaker asserts knowing more than "Joe Christmas," it reads like a warning to the reader to be more like Jesus in our Jesus year than like Joe Christmas who never seems to come to terms with his name, identity, or the people to whom he may possibly belong. Therefore, Joe Christmas is the symbol of those who fail to make life better because they fail to know themselves and their own power to impact the lives of others positively. Yet, I often wonder how much I am impacted by Trethewey's reading of the line, "*This is your Jesus year*," the manner in which a simple, unstressed declaration is allowed to breathe if not linger into the next line, which she stops abruptly with the last line, ending with another declaration: "[Natasha] means *Christmas child*, even in Mississippi." The abrupt stop of the line and poem, turning on the stress of "even," indicating that "not even" the terror and hellish history of Mississippi can stop the progress of folks (black and white) from doing as Margaret Walker Alexander declared in "For My People," "Let a new earth rise. Let another world be born, …Let a second/ generation full of courage issue forth; let a people/ loving freedom come to growth. Let a beauty full of/ healing and a strength of final clenching be the pulsing/ in our spirits and our blood. Let the martial songs/ be written, let the dirges disappear. Let a new race of men now/ rise and take control." Trethewey's speaker in "Miscegenation" is the fulfillment of the father's declaration and of Alexander's declaration, proving that subtly in both writing and speaking can be as powerful as the elaborate or expressive in writing and speaking. However, the issue, which "Beyond Poet Voice" raises, is not that both can be equally as powerful but that, often, one (subtly or expressive) is viewed as more intellectual and valuable than the other, which causes readers and listeners to miss the beauty and power of both styles as Trethewey is responding equally to Faulkner and Alexander, which means that she reads/hears Faulkner and Alexander equally. So, the article's question remains: can the English teachers and literary critics hear not just Faulkner and Alexander equally but the diversity of poets who utilize either subtly or expressiveness equally?

The good news is that Smith is organizing the Black Poetry Conference at Princeton, and based on the names listed to present at the conference, it looks like they will have a variety of poets there. It is quite notable and important that she has included icons who are offspring of Brooks, such as Sonia Sanchez and Haki Madhubuti as well as younger poets who see themselves in the tradition of the Black Arts Movement, looking to bend form to the service of their work rather than bending their work to fit the appeasement of form. Yet, while this upcoming conference is promising, there are not enough academic spaces for the more expressive/humanist style of writers. One of the few is being created by Dr. Maryemma Graham, African-American literature specialist, Margaret Walker Alexander scholar, and director of the University of Kansas Project on the History of Black Writing. Graham regularly

established programs and projects that enable her students to bridge the gap between how poetry is defined off the campus and how poetry is defined on the campus. After having one of her more recent students complete a project comparing the local poetry/spoken word scene of Kansas to what is normally taught in the classroom, Graham explains that these things tend to move in cycles if not paradigm shifts:

> After first being disappointed after hearing Hughes' recording readings, we discovered a recording of his visit to KU in the late 50s or early 60s where he performed with a combo, unheard of in this part of the world, and it was quite different. I imagine he was trying to get his audience in "woke" mode given the times, and given that his earlier reading years before had caused some grief because he refused to read to a segregated audience. He returned ONLY because they promised him otherwise.
>
> Generally, speaking…all of [Kansas'] poet laureates sound like Hughes. Kansas native Kevin Young might be a bit different, but, then, he was influenced by the Dark Room Collective from which he came. But if you listen carefully, you can hear shades of Hughes there as well, when he retreats to a somber monotone.
>
> But we've been spoiled here at KU; Danez Smith was here last year, and people fell in love with poetry. Among our students, Simone Savannah is the only voice that makes poetry jump off the page. Check out *The Hemp Breakers* by Pellom McDaniels (his first collection); it has power in the words on the page and the voice on the stage.
>
> One of my students did a case study of the spoken word scene in Kansas City for her final project. She attended events, interviewed the person considered the "father" of KC spoken word. She brought recordings to class, did a content analysis of the poets she collected, and the places throughout the areas. Her thoughtful observations and descriptions of the audience poet interaction were quite striking as if we were there. She definitely saw herself as making an assessment about the KC version of the transmigrating of poets between DC and KC, one I've encouraged her to expand. Whereas KC jazz was known for its outward mobility, it seems that spoken word didn't have a real "space" until young Turks left and returned as 40 somethings bringing it to the area. It's huge here now, [which seems to signify the always revolving cycles if not paradigm shifts.] Spoken word was big [on campus] when I arrived but disappeared a few years later. One of those poets won the CLA writing awards and performed at a CLA banquet some years ago

The most essential aspect of Graham's point is that she, her teaching, creates space for various types of black writers to be acknowledged and studied whereas in most cases university classes/programs do not usually provide this space for a variety of black writers. Thus, the work of her student is necessary and revolutionary in that the scholarship needed to highlight the spoken word artist is still minimal, which means that spoken word is still viewed as more emotive than intellectual. One way I try to debunk this notion is when I insist on being identified as a writer and folks ask me what is the difference between being called a poet/writer or a spoken word artist. My response is "all spoken word artists are writers, but not all writers are spoken word artists. As such, I consider myself a writer simply because the performance of my work is

almost always an afterthought and because I have published poetry, short stories, and essays." Yet, again, this can only be understood widely when more teachers are willing to engage the aesthetic notions of spoken word in the same manner as other aspects of writing. When I was a first-year instructor at JSU, the vast majority of the professors was near retirement age and had no desire to attend or even encourage student readings. To be clear, I was not so interested in student readings as I was interested in using those readings as a Trojan Horse to introduce students to text and publishing. The most important work that Mississippi Vibes, a poetry collective that existed primarily between 1996 – 2000, accomplished was not the jam-packed Thursday and Saturday night readings, but that we helped to expand the width of literary education by facilitating weekly workshops and a monthly book club. The Wednesday Night of Literature sessions became so popular that students were leaving or missing their night classes to attend those meetings. When professors would complain about their students skipping class or leaving class to attend our sessions, I was forced to make a nightly announcement: "If you are enrolled in a Wednesday night class, please go to your class because you will not get credit from us toward your class." For a while, we were able to nurture a very successful poetry scene, with little to no support from my own department until Dr. Jean Chamberlain became the chair. The other two chairs did not attempt to stop me from using my position as a JSU Department of English faculty member to organize local poetry readings on and off campus, but there is a difference between tolerating and supporting. Moreover, Dr. Chamberlain used her access to state and national arts and humanities programs to connect me with them so that I could obtain resources and more support for the work that Mississippi Vibes (David Brian Williams, Jolivette Anderson, Derrick Johnson, and Ken Stiggers) was doing across the state. But, the unfortunate truth of the matter is that most English folks are not creatives and are not apt to support or engage something that is not already established, does not look good on a traditional resume of "teaching and scholarship," and that they think may have the potential to be "controversial," which simply means to offend white benefactors.

Yet, I must admit that my own shortcomings were not developing my grant writing skills and not attending more conferences as my vision of being a creative writer was very narrow: reading, writing, editing, submitting to journals. That was it. As such, I never learned where the funding for the arts is, how to access it, or how to connect with the folks who could have helped me publish more. I foolishly thought that, if I just read/studied enough, I would one day develop my skill to publish my poems and short stories widely. In this, I was a capitalist, thinking that my publishing in literary journals and publishing my own books will get me where I need to go. Of course, that did not happen, and, more importantly now, I am also limited in my ability to send my students, those who are interested, to creative writing programs. But, finding the programs is not as big of a hurdle as finding the students who want to walk that path. Probably my most effective contribution of creating a space for various types of black creative writers was the editing and publishing of *Black Magnolias Literary Journal*, which was an eight-year joint venture with my wife, Monica McInnis. It was originally started to publish Afro-Mississippi writers. (*Black Magnolias* was the product of a realization that grew from facilitating a local creative writing workshop. A young short story writer presented a very well-crafted story, but one aspect of the story bothered me. From every aspect, but one, the story seems to be set in the South and, specifically, in Mississippi. But, the story contains a scene on a subway, which does not exist in Mississippi. After complimenting the young writer on the story, I asked where the story is set. He informed me that, indeed, in Mississippi. When I asked about the

presence of the subway, he replied, "Every story I've read or see has a subway." At that moment, I realized that young southern, particularly Afro-Mississippi, poets and storytellers need a journal that is not just open to publishing Afro-Mississippi writers but must be seeking their particular voices, sensibilities, and realities. As the Delta is different from Central Mississippi, and Central Mississippi is different from the Piney Woods region, and the Piney Woods region is different from the Gulf Coast, they need a journal that is willing to reflect the nuances of those differences in locale and aesthetics while connecting them to the rich heritage that has made it possible for them to exist.) However, over time, we were publishing writers from Mississippi to Croatia, various African countries, India, and China. The most satisfying was that I was able to publish the poetry, short stories, and essays of HBCU students, especially Jackson State students, in the same pages as award-winning writers. *Black Magnolias* offered first-time publication to at least three writers who later won literary awards and obtained mainstream publication of their manuscripts. Unfortunately, personal issues, rather than funding, forced us to end *Black Magnolias*, which still had several folks subscribed through a two-year period, and we still continue to receive submissions. This aspect is important because the solution to a problem is not complaining but doing something, sometimes anything, to change something bad into something good. Whatever issues I may have with Cave Canem, they did something and did not just complain. The legacy of the Dark Room Collective is that they did something and did not just complain. The legacy of the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement is that they did something and did not just complain. We did not have a long rung with *Black Magnolias*, but we did something. And, even though I find fault with poets and fiction writers who spend pages upon pages merely explaining just how bad white supremacy while seemingly not having the courage of their conviction or craftsmanship to promote self-determination, at least these writers are doing something. It is, then, the responsibility of the writers, like me, who see integration as nothing more than begging white folks to be nice to us to create institutions that enable black writers to be the best of their full selves, masters of form who utilize that form to revolutionize the mass of black people into sovereign beings. As it relates to craft, it is the responsibility of writers, like me, who see value in the image as the supreme soul of the poem and also love expansive and elaborate syntax that also lead to precise meaning to create spaces for those types of writers to flourish.

I ended my reading of twenty-five collections of poetry in twenty-five days by returning to Kevin Young's *Brown*, which I mostly love. Yet, reading it makes me think about something my creative writing students always ask me: "When does a poem have too much imagery?" My response to my students is: "That's a two-fold issue. One, the amount of imagery or any literary device necessary for a writer to convey the work's meaning effectively is based on the subjective tastes of the writer and one's audience. However, if one is seeking to be as empirical or scientific as possible in all things, then too much imagery or any literary device is that which does not lead to a specific understanding of the work's theme or central issue. In this case, the writer is simply 'showin' off' without any point to the demonstration of knowledge/ability." I continue, "It is similar to a basketball player who dribbles behind the back, through the legs, and makes a no-look pass. If all of that leads to a score, then all of that was necessary. Yet, if all of that leads to a turnover, then it was either unnecessary or poorly executed. But, even more, that player's poor execution can have a negative impact on the general public's perception of the techniques because someone watching the poor execution may blame the technique as being useless rather than blaming the player's poor execution or overuse of the technique as being

ineffective. As such, those of us who seek to master the techniques of our trades must realize that we have a responsibility to ensure that we use our techniques in a way that do not merely illuminate/glorify our own individualized knowledge and skill but serve as a way to provide, if not reveal, the ultimate possibilities of the techniques' ability to deliver greatness in functionality." In all of this, Young seems to walk a very tight/narrow line between greatness and obscurity whereas in some poems his creation of misdirection through literary device works well and in other poems he is simply fumbling the ball beyond the bounds/limits of play and understanding. In "Mercy Rule" he excellently uses subtitles and sharp images to construct a didactic poem about the general lessons one can gain from sports and about the specific manner in which playing baseball was both a rite of passage as well as a tool of self-development, self-defense, and civil rights progression for the speaker and his poor, black teammates. The entire poem, with its six sections, is well titled and peppered with well-drawn images that lead the reader to a precise understanding of the personal and cultural importance of sports, especially baseball's impact on socio-political change as America's pastime and once most popular sport. (I must add that the poem "Shirts & Skins" provides very effective images showing how humans are taught tribalism at some point in their lives so that life is always, ultimately, about people learning/believing that the essence of life is us versus them—a perpetual competition of race, class, religion, and gender that devolves rather than evolves the human species.)

Yet, there are other poems, such as "Ad Astra Per Aspera," that function only to show Young's skill at creating vivid and powerful images that seem only or eventually to meander into nowhere, reading like distorted portraits with unconnected images that combine to little or no meaning. After reading the title, I researched it to learn that it is a Latin phrase that means "through hardship to the stars" and is the Kansas state motto. So, now I know that this is a poem about Kansas. Then I engaged the subsections of the poem which have the following titles: "Western Meadowlark," "American Bison," and "Sunflower." I immediately assume that the "Western Meadowlark" is probably Kansas' state bird. After another quick search, that assumption is confirmed. Thus, without any additional research needed, I can surmise that "Sunflower" is the state flower and that "American Bison" roamed and still roam Kansas. Now, I am prepared to read this poem. The first section, "Western Meadowlark," is not so much about the bird as it is about the sprawling, spacious, and beautiful, landmass of Kansas, which is cool until I get to the last stanza, which is about John Brown. I did not need research to know that Brown lead two bloody insurrections in Kansas to free slaves. But, the titling of the poem, this particular section, and the seven preceding stanzas do nothing to prepare me for this swift turn toward Brown. And, maybe that is the point—that Brown seemingly appears from nowhere onto the landscape of history and the landscape of Kansas to change the course of history and Kansas. But, if that is the point of the poem or this section, then is the poem really about Kansas, and, then, does that mean that the "set up" of the poem is unnecessary misdirection as I am left with more questions than I have answers? The next section, "American Bison," seems to say nothing about the bison and is mostly about John Brown, which is cool if I can understand the connection between Brown and the American Bison. I know that in Native American lore the bison is the symbol of the indomitable spirit, representing rebelling and survival, but there is nothing (no imagery) in the poem that connects Brown to the bison. So, am I expected to make this connection without Young, a master of imagery, drawing that connection? I may be asking too much of Young, but just because I know Prince is a great guitar player does not mean that I do not want to hear him play it. For example, the most disappointing aspect of Prince's song

"Hardrocklover" is that it is a song about the power of rock music with no guitar solo. Yes, the guitar simmers in the background throughout most of the song, but that simmering guitar never erupts into a fully satisfying solo, though the song's lyrical and musical progression leads listeners to believe that it will. There are two or three specific points in the song in which one thinks/feels "here comes the electrifying solo," but it never comes. Even Prince's own instructions to the song's producer and co-musician, Joshua Welton, indicate that there was supposed to be an erupting guitar solo: "Prince said to me: 'I need something that starts off quiet, and then I just want it to erupt and then I want you to go back…like this roller coaster'" ("Hardrocklover"). Yet, that erupting guitar solo never comes, causing the song to feel incomplete or anticlimactic, much like "Ad Astra Per Aspera" as there is no illuminating imagery that makes me know the specificity of Kansas or how the specificity of Kansas relates to John Brown.

This gets to the final section, "Sunflower," which is not about the state flower or the Kansas landscape at all but about the speaker's adult reunion with three childhood friends and how their children mark the passage of time in their lives. Save for four stanzas, this twenty-four stanza section is not about Kansas, at all, or even how Kansas' landscape or geographic sensibilities have impacted who the speaker, his friends, and their children have become. The only passage of this section that seems to be about Kansas' unique impact on the speaker, his friends, and their children are the four stanzas that read: "who, back again in what/ once was home,/ would drink & mourn/ in Topeka's sole/ non-chain bar,/ now closed. We'd shut/ the place down then too,/ whiskey downed & burning/ like grief—not picturing/ that one day we'd feel/ anything, much less anything/ else. Yet, here/ they are, our children—" (40). What gives this passage, these four stanzas, weight is the use of "non-chain" to indicate that this is a business unique to Kansas. It is a ma and pa store in contrast to the mega-franchise that rarely adds to a region's uniqueness and often serves to destroy a region's uniqueness by destroying, if not colonizing/engulfing, local businesses, thereby eroding what makes that region special. Thus, the use of "non-chain" speaks to the importance of home-grown businesses and their ability to cater to the unique needs and desires of that region, reflecting and nurturing those unique sensibilities by servicing the community rather than just conducting business transactions with the people of the area. Yet, even in this moment of the poem, I am never given/shown the uniqueness of Kansas through that "non-chain" so I'm never sure what it is, specifically, that the speaker and his friends receive from Kansas that enables them to produce well-developed children. The passage certainly teaches/expresses precisely the importance of "home-grown" businesses, but, in a poem that seems to announce that it is about Kansas, I was expecting something that makes me know/feel why/how Kansas, its specificity, enables the speaker and his friends to produce well-developed children. (Based on the titling and the set-up, I thought I was getting a poem about what makes Kansas Kansas as opposed to any other state.) And, of course, maybe the poem is not about the specificity of Kansas, per se, but if one drapes the poem's outer shell or casing in the specificity of Kansas, should not the reader leave with an understanding of the metaphoric essence of what Kansas means to the speaker along with any other aspects the poet wants to convey? Additionally, this issue of titling and misdirection would not be much of an issue, but Young does this throughout the collection, especially in "De La Soul Is Dead," which has several subsections with six of them named for Prince songs, but those sections do not seemingly relate to or reflect the meaning of those songs other than to mark the actual chronology of when those songs were released as a time-setting for the moment of the

poem. Only in the "I Would Die 4 U" titled section does the section seem to reflect or connect to the song's actual meaning. And, in the "U Got the Look" section, in which he also quotes "Sexy MF," the poem does reflect thematically Prince's style of misdirection in which his songs seemingly about sex are often about the manner in which sex is a metaphor for human neurosis or a metaphor for humanity's desire for something ethereal and the attempt to use the body to discover or achieve the metaphysical through the physical. But, that discourse is not sustained long enough for that idea to manifest in any effective manner to the whole of the poem. As such, the reader is often left at the end of a poem wondering how the title reflects or relates to the meaning of the poem, which limits the ability to enjoy some of the poems as nothing more than a collection of well-drawn images that never seem to combine into a precise meaning. It is like watching a movie with great parts but no cohesive narrative. Clearly, that is fine for most, but I am often left intellectually and emotively unfulfilled. There are lots of enjoyable metaphoric moments, but, again, I would like those moments to "payoff" in a more precise way.

My one fear of making this essay public was that I know that those who oppose what I am saying will assert that I am arguing for a complete "denigration of intellectual engagement and rejection of craft." Based on pages fifteen through seventeen where I rank the collections of poetry as well as throughout the entire essay, it would seem that I am one who supports the highest use of literary device in poetry. My explication of Donne's poem as well as others should show that as well as the fact that the lowest ranked collections are the ones that exemplify little to no use of literary device, most earning 3 – 0. On the other hand, even the obscure poems that also provide excellent images earn a ranking of 4. So, on that note, I have no real problem with what Rebecca Watts is saying in regards to needing a more empirical way to discuss what is considered well-crafted poetry in her article, "The Cult of the Noble Amateur." Watts begins her article fair enough with: "Why is the poetry world pretending that poetry is not an art form? I refer to the rise of a cohort of young female poets who are currently being lauded by the poetic establishment for their 'honesty' and 'accessibility' – buzzwords for the open denigration of intellectual engagement and rejection of craft that characterizes their work. The short answer is that artless poetry sells." Surprisingly to some, I do not have a real problem with Watts' beginning, and I agree that most of the poetry that she cites in her article is not the most well-crafted poetry I have read; yet, not all of it is worst either. However, my biggest issue with Watts is that she seems to want to have the pie and the cake too, which is a bit different than wanting one's cake and wanting to eat it as well. It is not enough for Watts that the obscure poets win all the major literary awards. She also wants to control what the average person defines as worth their dollar. Yet, I wonder if anyone can find one article by Watts in which she chides the academic and literary mainstream poets for not doing their part to make poetry more accessible. If the so-called masters of language persist on creating a style and clique of language accessible for only the top one percent, then can they really be surprised when bullshit gets disseminated to the general public as well-crafted poetry? So, rather than being angry at the poorly-crafted poets, Watts might want to ask what she and people of her ilk have done to bridge the gap between the most learned of the society and those who have not been exposed as such, other than sit high atop Fan-ko Mountain and look down their noses at those beneath them. As such, I can have no real respect or concern for Watts' position when she states: "I was supposed to be reviewing [*Plum!*], but to do so for a poetry journal would imply that it deserves to be taken seriously as poetry. Besides, I was too distracted by the pathological attitude of its faux-naïve author, and too offended by its editor's exemplary bad faith, to ignore the broader questions it

provokes." I find this response hilariously hypocritical that this type of outrage can be expressed over a work like *Plum!*, which does not do much for me either, while mountains of obscure poetry is celebrated in literary journal after literary journal with not one of these critics taking the time to provide any real analysis of literary device. Moreover, here was her chance to "teach," to offer a lesson of what is well-crafted poetry by engaging in an empirical discourse, but it, clearly, would be beneath Watts' dignity to "teach" people who seem to have what she deems as limited intelligence. I am just glad that most of the people that I engaged who were smarter than me abided by Sojourner Truth's notion that, just because my brain can only hold a "pint" as compared to those that can hold a "quart," they would not withhold knowledge from me just because they perceived me as being less intelligent (198). Understand that Watts is from that old school of ignoring something is the best way to make it marginal or disregarded. However, what has gotten her feathers ruffled is that today poets do not need her or her machine to connect with a readership. What one really reads in Watts' article is a person frustrated that she can no longer control who has the ability and the right to create art as if somehow she and people of her ilk are the only people who get to decide who has a voice. It just seems that the so-called poorly crafted poets are now beating the establishment at their own game of promoting the subjective as objective, and they—the poetry elite—must take the blame for all the subjectively overly vague bs that they have, for years, promoted as well-crafted poetry and well-articulated theory and criticism.

Watts' attack on these so-called lesser poets is from the same playbook as when Tyler Perry was being blasted by the Negro establishment for his lowbrow art. Yet, very few of these people blasting Perry were doing any real work to connect to the people that Perry was attracting, first to theatre houses and then to the movies. To that end, are the poor and poorly educated merely supposed to exist without art because the most learned among us feel that they do not have the time to create art for them? As someone who only teaches college students and advanced high school students, I cannot get angry when someone else gets funding or payment to facilitate creative writing workshops for people under the age of fourteen or for high school students not enrolled in advanced classes. Since I decided that I was not best equipped to engage that segment of society, why would I be angry at someone else who decides to do so? From 1996 – 2000, Mississippi Vibes used the open mic, spoken word venue as a way to expose young, African-American students to a more intense study of the language. By making these workshops open to the public as well as actually taking moments during the open mic events to discuss various aspects of literary devices, such as having quizzes in which audience members could win books, free meals, or tickets to the next event by answering literary questions, we found that we were not just nurturing more well-read poets but a more well-read audience. This came to complete fruition when a group of faithful audience members asked (demanded in that passive-aggressive sort of way) if we could stop a particular poet from reading his god-awful sex poetry. As the coordinators of the weekly open mic event, our response was "It is open mic so anyone gets to present their work." To which, one of the faithful audience members responded, "Well, the mic shouldn't be that damn open," and another very faithful member concluded, "Y'all can't get him to attend those workshops 'cause his shit is terrible?!?" I love this story because this is what happens when artists engage their audience to learn and grow as they learn and grow. Unfortunately for Watts, she seemingly has been so busy making sure to exclude as many people as possible from the Hall of Great Literature that now she is surprised that what she loves and her work is becoming as dead as Latin, which did not die because it was useless but

because, again, the elites decided to hoard it to themselves. As Terrence Moore, the principal of Ridgeview Classical Schools in Fort Collins asserts, "Having a critical and historical knowledge of one's own language that comes through the study of Latin is plainly useful." However, when the intellectual gatekeepers work to limit educational exposure to ensure that there is an underclass to remain as their perpetual labor class, then things such as the mass populace' access to and ability to master Latin and well-crafted poetry suffers. But, this is not the fault of the mass populace; this is the fault of folks like Watts. So, she must blame herself for what she considers as bullshit poetry outselling well-crafted poetry.

While I understand the concept of language being a "thing" of itself, I have never had much use for that concept since, at its core, language is a thing of human existence. Language does not exist prior to human existence. It is human existence that produces language. And, even if we accept Saussure's notion that language was a thing that existed in the metaphysical realm prior to tangible existence, then we must also make room for the "religious" notions that so many strictly scientific types reject to show that Saussure's notion that language is a thing of metaphysical being is no different from the *Holy Bible*'s notion in *John* 1:1-14: that

> "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. The same came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all men through him might believe. He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light. That was the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not. He came unto his own, and his own received him not. But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth."

Even in this context, language exists for humans to exist and seems to be its most effective, powerful, and beautiful when working to enhance that existence. The beauty and power of the "well-turned" phrase is the manner in which it so "fitly" captures the feeling, idea, or circumstance of humanity in a way that clearly defines the present and pushes toward a new understanding of where humanity can go. As such, for my work and what I love to read, the notion is always how does this use of language impact or improve human existence? Now, if people are not interested in that, as such, I have no issue with that, but, in the context of this essay, I am directly addressing folks who claim to be interested in that, i.e. speaking for the mass of African Americans yet also obsessed with creating work that makes little sense to the most elite masters of language, which, then, has no way of connecting with or working for that mass of African Americans or any group. (When a poetry judge states that "a poem does not have to 'mean' something to be beautiful," it raises the question of what defines beauty as well as what defines language.) To be clear, I am not addressing the poetry equivalent of Percival Everett, though even for all his abstractionism and sleight of hand, his work often seems misguided in

that, while he supposedly hates being pigeonholed by whites, he often makes art that minimizes or demonizes African Americans. So, a major problem in adequately critiquing his work is that he eschews, rejects, or deflects the move toward empirical analysis of his work on the basis of form or even what he calls stereotypical expectations rather than simply saying, "this is specifically what I'm trying to do/achieve with form."

At some point, even culinary arts is about scientific inquiry and mastery, regarding what humanity knows about tastes buds and what humanity knows about its ability to reimagine edible objects to provide new taste/aesthetic sensations. How food tastes or creating pleasing/favorable foods is not about hiding meaning (flavor/tastes) but mastering tastes in a way that continues to open new worlds or expand human horizons, by constantly working to combine the old flavors or discover new flavors. However, the problem is when a chef wants to hide the actual "special" ingredient not because hiding that "special" ingredient makes the food taste better but because hiding that "special" ingredient makes the chef, not the food, seem "special" because the chef is the only one who knows the ingredient. This is why for 1500 years poets rejected Horace's scientific approach to creative writing because, as one of the first people to assert that creative writing is about skill and not some mystical, magical gift from the gods, his literary theory (scientific approach to writing) made the poets, themselves, no longer "special." People pay other people to do things they cannot do or do not want to do. (For instance, I know how to change my own oil. I'm just not interested in doing it. However, I do not know how to play the guitar. So, I am more than willing to pay someone to play it well.) Prior to Horace, poetry was viewed as a special gift from the gods that could not be taught, which is why all the epics begin with a prayer to the gods for inspiration and guidance. At best, the poet could get high or drunk to expedite or enhance the gift from the gods, but that was the only hand the poet took in the creation of the art, or so it was supposed. Then, here comes Horace asserting, in *The Art of Poetry*, that, no, what he does is not a "gift" but is a skill that is refined and made more impactful by a scientific understanding of words and a dedication to diligence. But, for 1500 years he and his work were denied until the age of science forced the poets to remove the cloak of magic and reveal their scientific understanding of what language is, can do, and can be. Unfortunately, at the most elite level, poetry has been recolonized to a type of poetic obscurity that ensures that only a few people will be deemed as quality poets because their sleight of hand is designed not to reveal what language is, can be, and can do but to hide or eschew, as much as possible, empirical meaning as a way to make themselves appear more learned than they actually are. Therefore, the real linguistic crime, and I do not use that word loosely, of these poetic makers of obscurity is not that they want the best of both worlds, which is to be both scientists and magical beings. We all want the best of all worlds. Their crime is that they want to be scientists and magical beings only when it is convenient to be one, the other, or both; yet, they do not want to do the work of providing empirical discussion of how they are easing/narrowing the tension between being scientists and magical beings. So, they are more like the poets who defied and rejected Horace than they are like Horace or the poets who are willing to do the work to explore and resolve, as best as possible, the gap or tension between science and the magic/mystery of human experience.

In this analogy, we can compare the poet to another skilled worker who seeks to create mystery around one's craft, the magician. For the magician, the wow is from the perceived defying or breaking of physics, the defying or breaking of what the viewers understand is possible. Yet, there is no wow without the understanding of the rules of physics. Defying or

breaking the rules of physics means nothing without the other party knowing what is being broken or defied. As such, the breaking, defying, or reconstruction of language (its rules of being) really does not "mean" anything if the receiver has no idea of what is being broken, defied, or reconstructed. So, the real wow is that even when the audience knows how the trick is accomplished, they are, often, still wowed by the magician's ability to cast the shadowed perception of being able to manipulate physics. In truth, we all want to be "tricked" because the concept of being able to defy physics is one way for us—the audience—to believe that we are capable of being something more than our physical limitations, giving us the impression, notion, belief that life can be more wondrous than the lives that most of us are living. (When I was an undergraduate, I once gave an older woman a compliment. As she was enjoying the compliment, her friend stated, "Honey, you know that young man is just smooth with language." To which, the woman I complimented turned to her friend and stated, "I don't mind when a man lies to me. I just want the most creative lie I can be told that gives me reason to believe in him, me, us, and the world in which I want to live." Then, she refocused her gaze on me and said, "So, lie to me, baby.") All of that hinges on the notion that there is a physical that is difficult to transcend, but the magic "trick" gives us the belief that some aspects of the physical are not nearly as limiting as we think they are, in the same manner that the mastery of language in poetry and fiction gives us the understanding that life, which is often confined by what we can think or think we can think, can be reshaped and transformed by language, i.e. "the power of life and death is in the tongue," according to *Proverbs* 8:21. So, the sleight of hand of language is not to hide meaning but to provide connections to things that the average person did not readily see as connected, which, then, expands the horizons of what we can all see and what life, itself, can be.

As Jacob Bronowski states in his essay, "The Nature of Scientific Reasoning," a scientist is not just a recorder of facts but a person who is able to see, locate, identify, and make connections on the most minute scale that others are unable to make, proving Einstein's notion that for the scientist to be of use to the community the scientist must first see oneself as an artist, making those literal and metaphoric connections that, again, do not hide meaning but make the meaning of life more noticeable and understandable from the micro to the macro level. Yet, again, this realization is only possible by knowing what the rules are and how those rules are being refashioned and reinterpreted to provide readers this newness or new understanding of what life is. This is even true for most idiomatic expressions that are usually only misunderstood by those not familiar with the etymology of the expression and its culture of origin. Yet, to those familiar with the historical and cultural development of an expression, that power and beauty of the expression is that it both correctly and creatively expresses something precise/specific as well as offering metaphoric wisdom that is beneficial to communicating the values and sensibilities of the particular culture in which it originates as well as the connecting with and communicating values and sensibilities common to all human existence. This is seen with a phrase, such as "a stitch in time saves nine."

> This [phrase] is nothing to do with rips in the fabric of the space-time continuum, as some have ingeniously suggested…The question usually asked is "saves nine what"? The 'stitch in time' is simply the prompt sewing up of a small hole or tear in a piece of material, so saving the need for more stitching at a later date when the hole has become larger. Clearly, the first users of this expression were referring to saving nine stitches. "This little homily seems to be falling out of use - as does stitching." This proverbial

> expression was obviously meant as an incentive to the lazy. It's especially gratifying that 'a stitch in time saves nine' is an anagram for 'this is meant as incentive'! The Anglo Saxon work ethic is being called on here. Many English proverbs encourage immediate effort as superior to putting things off until later; for example, 'one year's seeds, seven year's weeds', 'procrastination is the thief of time,' and 'the early bird catches the worm'.

These phrases may begin in the particularity of Anglo Saxon culture, but they sustain themselves because they speak to the commonality of all people concerned with completing a task in the most efficient manner possible. Similarly, I can use an African proverb, "Every morning the lion rises knowing he must run as fast as the slowest gazelle to survive, and every morning the gazelle rises knowing he must run as fast as the slowest gazelle to survive," to teach give my students an example of Sun-Tzu's *The Art of War* Theory. What they quickly realize is that the gazelles are at war with each other as well as being at war with the lion to survive. That then drives home a cold but factual reality that each of them must do as well as they possibly can because they are at academic and economic war with both the outside and the inside worlds. What gives these idiomatic expressions and proverbs power is their simultaneous preciseness in meaning, metaphoric wisdom, and their ability to exemplify the reality of various cultures. In contrast, no one cares about an idiomatic expression that means something to three people, regardless of how highbrow or lowbrow it is. A high school friend and I would often use the phrase, "Hell if I know why I let you drive my car," from Prince's "Irresistible Bitch," whenever someone would ask us something we did not know or understand or even when we did things that we could not explain the reason why we did it. We are, of course, troping the speaker's pain and bewilderment that he is extending himself for a person who does not love him or appreciates this extending of himself for her pleasure or need, as the complete line is "Hell if I know why I let you drive my car/ Don't I know that walking won't get me very far?" We thought it was hilarious when people looked at us puzzled, as the point was to be obscure, to have an inside joke that signified us as "special" Prince fans who could communicate in a manner that only diehard Prince fans could. However, that idiomatic expression relevant only to three people will never "catch on" or have any emotive or cultural meaning to the rest of humanity. Thus, to give it a prize for its being would be just the most heightened form of elitism if not bullcrappery. So, as a young scholar stated to me, it is true that "the more time you spend reading and writing and engaging [creative literature,] you develop ways to traverse it and appreciate it and admire it" (Bryant). Yet, that does not mean that it ultimately is not "pretentious gobbledygook" for which I have acquired a taste in the same way that caviar is something for which people develop a taste merely as a way to show class superiority more than because it is actually something that pleases the taste buds. This is—unless we know lots of people who like fish flavored jelly as opposed to strawberry flavored jelly, then caviar is just an artificial index used to separate one group of people from another more than it is a thing of culinary pleasure. The notion of an acquired taste is really just a way to justify subjectivity as not just valid but as somehow more intellectually valued.

So, can I appreciate, even love, an image just for its sheer uniqueness or ability to "mean" beyond the parameters of the logic of language and the physical rules of the universe? Sure, I can. However, that does not mean that we, those of us trying to be or considering ourselves masters of language, do not have the responsibility of being able to ask and answer what is the ultimate meaning or purpose of the work. When is a blue dot just a blue dot, and when is a blue

dot an artistic expression? The answer lies in the empirical response of both the artist and the receiver. An artist's artistic expression can be just a blue dot to a receiver, and a painter's blue dot can be an artistic expression to another receiver. But, in both cases, it is imperative for those who are defining the blue dot as an artistic expression to be able to articulate what makes it something more than just a blue dot. My issue is not with those calling a blue dot an artistic expression but with those unwilling to explain, be concrete in their explanation of what makes the blue dot an artistic expression. Just because the sublime is difficult to explain does not mean that we should stop trying to explain it as part of the enjoyment and satisfaction is creeping ever more closely to defining specifically what the sublime is, regardless of how long it takes humanity to do so. However, allowing the so-called most learned of us merely to gush glowingly about something that they are unable to define as sublime has a negative impact on humanity because that ensures that humanity will never know or come close to reaching, connecting with the sublime. And, is not the point of language to enable us to reach the sublime? If so, how do we get there or even know that we are there if we are not critical/analytical in our ability to understand the sublime while also being critical/analytical of our various processes and pathways to know and/or achieve the sublime?

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