

Essay

2009 | “Through the Invisible Cloak: Some Problems and Possibilities of Being a White Reader of African American Poetry.” *RATTLE* 15.1, (Summer).

THROUGH THE INVISIBLE CLOAK:
SOME PROBLEMS AND POSSIBILITIES OF BEING A WHITE
READER OF AFRICAN AMERICAN POETRY

I teach college courses in poetry and poetics, which means that twice a year, I have to drop off materials for my course packets at my local copy shop. Last semester, the white employee filling out the order for my course packet asked me a question about African American poetry which, nearly a year later, I continue to contemplate. Our exchange went something like this:

"Course number?" she asked.

"English 376M, African American Poetry and Poetics," I responded.

"...really?"

"Yes, but let me check the course number on my syllabus just to be sure I've given you the right one."

"No...I mean...that's funny—I just had another red-haired professor in the other day. She was even whiter than you, with an Irish complexion—teaching an African American lit course."

Here I paused, said nothing as I contemplated her statement.

"So tell me," she said with a smiling confidence between the two of us, "what is the deal with all the white professors teaching African American literature?"

That question struck me at once as both entirely offensive and entirely legitimate, and it spawned a dialogue in my writing and teaching that continues to grow more complex. It is not as if I had never thought critically or deeply about being a white person teaching African American poetry; I just had never heard perceptions around the issues of white teaching and readership put to me so bluntly. This perception is not, I believe, just limited to one employee in a copy shop. Students of various ethnicities have told me, by their own admission, that they were surprised to learn on the first day of class that their teacher of African American poetry is white. In my own experience, hiring committees comprised of people of many different backgrounds—young and old, black and white alike—will regard a faculty opening in African American literature as an opportunity to recruit a black faculty member because they assume that only African Americans will be interested in or authorities on the subject.

With this in mind, the question "What is the deal with all the white professors teaching African American literature?" begs a number of others. Why do so many of us expect African Americans to be the authoritative last word on African American literature? How does one's perceived "degree" of color or whiteness influence how we see his or her understanding of the literature? How

would my students learn differently from having an African American teach a course in black literature? Do others see me as a less competent or qualified teacher and critic of African American literature because of my skin color? And does the reverse perception hold true—are African American teachers perceived as somehow less of an authority on literature by people of ethnicities other than their own?

All of these difficult questions translate, I believe, to issues of white readership and criticism of African American poetry. Even in the optimistic and progressive age of Obama, it is easy for any reader—white, black, and shades in between—to participate in a kind of literary segregation based on who he or she perceives can authentically and legitimately engage the literature. If the reaction of this particular employee, my students, and my colleagues at various institutions are any indication, it appears that many of us reading African American poetry hold the deep-seated but largely unspoken notion that African Americans are *de facto* best equipped to engage and speak about literature written by African Americans.

In many ways, this is a dangerous assumption. It not only attributes a racial essence to African American texts, it also implicitly assigns a racial essence to African Americans themselves. Even as particular tropes, themes, and modes of address may re-occur in poetry written by African Americans, and even as African American authors themselves may share a cultural heritage including the acute and sometimes inefable experiences of racism and slavery, we must dispel the notion that there is a “black experience” which is either singular or inherent to every African American. Such a belief denies the diversity of those who identify as black in America as well as the multiplicity of voices that make up African American poetry.

On the other hand, contemplating the voices of African Americans as they speak about their own varied experiences—both individually and as a chorus—is incredibly necessary. Because African American poets have been excluded from the canon for extraliterary reasons, it is important to consider the literary production and reception of African American poets as a group even as it is important to consider their contributions to American letters as individuals. Considering side-by-side the poems and poets collected in this issue brings into sharp relief some commonalities of black experience and the fraught politics of an African American literary tradition, one that began in 1772 with the Phyllis Wheatley’s testimony in court required to prove that she, a house slave educated by her master’s family, was intelligent enough to write the poems in her collection *Poems on Various Subjects*. Only after Wheatley was examined by a panel of white male luminaries was the title of author bestowed upon her. Their legal attestation was published as a preface to her book, launching a tradition in American letters in which white literary authorities introduced, “authenticated,” and attested to the quality of texts written by black writers for white readers (one which persisted through the early twentieth century). Although such prefaces are roundly considered racist today, in many ways the anxiety over agency, authenticity, and authority that influence the contemporary reception of African American poetry recall those of nearly 250 years ago. This persistent dynamic between black authors and white literary authorities

prompted the late scholar Nellie Y. McKay to declare that the Wheatley court is still in session today.

Of course, there are problems inherent in putting together a tribute to African American poets such as this one. Some may regard a special section dedicated to African American poets as a politically correct way to segregate black texts from the larger poetic conversation or to hold it to different standards of quality. Others may see it as a way to fetishize black texts and black writers, valuing and valorizing the expression of a marginalized identity over the poem itself. Still more may view the tribute as a way to make the black poet a token, a novelty or oddity, or to put undue burden on a small group of poets to represent African Americans as a whole. All of these objections are valid, and yet none of them get to the heart of why it may still be appropriate to consider black poets together as well as apart. Not only does such a grouping highlight the diversity of African American poets, it also acknowledges the very real experience of being an African American writing as part of the American literary tradition and as an agent in American culture. Speaking at the Association of Writers and Writing Programs conference this spring, poet Duriel E. Harris summarized the necessity of African American writing communities and practices this way: “Black narratives help us organize our experience so that we can survive in the world.”

In considering black poets together, a reader is also (hopefully) forced to confront how and why whiteness and white texts are constructed as the invisible norm in American letters. In an interview featured in this issue, Toni Derricotte speaks of how it was not that long ago that there were few or no black poets included in most classrooms and anthologies, an exclusion performed under and in the name of that invisible cloak of “universality” so often synonymous with whiteness. The idea of literary universality, as Toni Morrison notes in *Playing in the Dark*, silently situates whiteness as normative, unbiased, transcendent, and timeless. The often unspoken but incredibly persistent idea that black readers, writers, and critics are the only ones who can fully engage literature written by African Americans is a child of the same logic. It too feeds the illusion of black authenticity, of white universality; it too renders the cloak of race identification into sameness and invisibility.

The idea that any poem can be universal, somehow apart from its author’s and reader’s subject positions, is an outdated and insidious fiction. Being a white person reading, evaluating, and teaching a black author’s poem carries with it certain questions and complications that a black reader probably does not have. But being a black reader carries with it other difficult negotiations of identification and representation. None of us are free from the limits of our own subject positions; as Derricotte notes in her interview, “We tend to read through what we know and what we read through are often the limits of our own understandings.” (this issue, 152)

Still, we should also remember that we are not forever wed to those subjective limits; rather, our engagement with poetry should be about testing and expanding those limits. Poems are not just elaborate birds resting in snow; they are living animals that instigate empathy, realization, dialogue, and change. This sense of possibility is what I think is most important to remember as a

white reader of African American poetry—that in this careful dance between poet and reader we begin to understand our connections to and through race with new nuance and complexity. By reading and criticizing black poetry in ways that challenge us, the invisible cloak of whiteness is made visible, and when it is visible, we must truly wear it. In doing so, we learn of the weft and warp of the garment of race, the lightness or the burden of its fabric; we know its rough texture and its fine tailoring.

My choice of metaphor here for reading through whiteness—the invisible cloak—is quite a deliberate one, even as it may conjure uncomfortable images including the clansman's robe and hood. Though the white reader may disavow racism and hate crimes performed in the name of white supremacy, to make visible this metaphorical cloak is to acknowledge the sometimes violent and almost always secret history of the designation of whiteness as a social privilege. The cloak also conjures the professor's or critic's academic vestments, the garb of authority so often synonymous with whiteness (and also, until very recently, men). The white reader, in acknowledging the visibility of his or her cloak, acknowledges this sense of privilege without being doomed to recapitulate its oppressive power. The invisible cloak is also an imagistic analog to W.E.B. DuBois's veil of double consciousness: the idea of "always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" and always feeling the "two-ness" of being an American and black. Making the cloak of whiteness visible and truly wearing it means assuming a similar sense of consciousness about one's race—not in a way that inspires a crippling guilt, but in a way that can liberate and inform how and why we see the world the way we do. Finally, the image of the invisible cloak is apt, I believe, because its existence is fabled; the invisibility of both whiteness and of the cloak is only an illusion, a grand ruse. In its fabled invisibility, it is a festooned and pristine robe; when made visible—when we acknowledge its visibility—it is a second-hand coat showing all of its loose threads, its holes.

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I've come across another type of white response to African American literature, one that is perhaps the most well-meaning but that is also the most troubling: the response fueled by white guilt. Some white critics will effusively laud African American writers because of their guilt over the social position of some African Americans (I call to mind here certain reviews of *Def Poetry Jam on Broadway* in which poets of color are praised for their "gritty realism" and "fresh urban vibe"). Others go to the opposite extreme and translate that guilt into a crippling silence—*It was not written by someone like me*, this reader thinks, *and so I have no authority to speak about it*. Both responses are two sides of the same troubling coin. These readers consciously or unconsciously use the cultural politics of race as an excuse to ultimately *disengage* from black literature altogether. Not only are such responses unsavory, they more importantly fail to regard African American poetry for what it is: not some body of literature infused with an unknowable racial essence, but poetry that happens to be written by African Americans.

This begs the question: Can a poet's race (or any other aspect of his or her identity) ever truly be separated from the poem that he or she authors? Probably not, but I think in the case of African American poets and poetry, we have to be able to consider the work both ways—as in conversation with both black and American literature as well as with black and American culture. In this regard, identity becomes not a matter of essence but of perspective. The spectacular (and arguably calculated) performances of blackness enacted by African American poets such as Phillis Wheatley, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Langston Hughes, Amiri Baraka, and Maya Angelou suggest a dialectic beyond an audience of black readers and critics; they engage readers and critics as diverse as the body of American letters. Each of these authors helped to define in his or her own era what black is and black ain't, but in ways that served to open doors for the next generation of poets of many ethnicities. The example of their poetic practice was what propelled African American poetry, if not American poetry, to take its next step. In light of this, the relevant question becomes not "Why group?" but "For whom?"

Although the goal of this essay is to discuss the complex dynamic that happens between white readers and black poets, I also have to acknowledge that some African American authors aren't interested in engaging white audiences, and that too is acceptable. Despite my emphasis here on how black texts have engaged me as a white reader, I fully acknowledge that there will always be moments in black literature with which I may not be able to fully empathize or even comprehend because of my cultural position. It would be ridiculous to suggest that all there is to say about African American poetry can be told through how it engages or rejects the white reader alone. Exclusively black spaces, meanings, and expressions serve an important purpose, for they can provide models of identification for black poets and inspire work that speaks both to and beyond a racially exclusive community.

In underscoring why we should consider African American poets and poetry under the rubric of race (as well as apart from it), I don't want to suggest that there is or ever has been one "black voice" in African American literature. The styles and influences that contemporary African American poets reflect are just as diverse as those in all of American poetry, from formal to experimental and from textual to performed. Poetry written by African Americans is just plain poetry after all, and in seeking such poetry out, one soon comes to realize that there really is no such thing as "African American poetry." Black folks can share certain experiences, and they can share a history of struggle and oppression in the U.S. as they may globally, but political, social, or creative solidarity does not equal sameness of voice.

One of the totems of contemporary African American poetry is Cave Canem, a week-long summer retreat dedicated to cultivating the new voices of black poets in the U.S. Founded by Toi Derricotte and Cornelius Eady in 1996, the Cave Canem community has grown exponentially in size and influence over the years; it now sponsors first and second book prizes, publishes annual and special-topic anthologies, and hosts regional workshops and readings in addition to the summer retreat in which residents participate over three years. This retreat is the center of the Cave Canem, fostering a close-knit community of

adult artists that rarely exists beyond the framework of an artist's colony. Every time I hear an alum speak about the program, he or she remarks on the breadth of styles and aesthetics among the poets, which range from formalism to the slam. In creating all-black spaces in which poets can write, the Cave Canem community creates a necessary insularity, a "safe space" for African American poets to experiment and try on many voices. In this regard, Cave Canem is not about fostering "the black voice" in American poetry (again, said in the erroneous singular) but about nurturing African American poets so that they can find their own voices.

And those voices are plural, indeed. The field of contemporary African American poetry, like the field of poets selected to join Cave Canem, is deep as it is wide. African American poets practicing today are formalist poets such as Marilyn Nelson and poets re-inventing received form such as Ruth Ellen Koher; experimental poets such as Harryette Mullen and Nathaniel Mackey; poets experimenting with sound-text such as Tracie Morris, Douglas Kearney, and Duriel E. Harris; poets working in blues and jazz idioms such as Tyehimba Jess, Cornelius Eady, Kevin Young, Yusef Komunyakaa, and Quincy Troupe; Black Arts poets such as Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, and Nikki Giovanni; poets rising from and moving beyond the national slam scene such as Reggie Gibson, Saul Williams, and Patricia Smith; poets of the South and Affrilachia such as Natasha Trethewey and Nikky Finney. And then of course there are two of my very favorite poets, Lucille Clifton and the late great Gwendolyn Brooks, who deserve categories of their very own. This short and very incomplete list of authors is evidence enough that African American poetry is as diverse as American poetry itself.

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One of the texts that I like to begin with when teaching an African American literature course is Audre Lorde's "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House." In this speech given at a women's studies conference in 1979, Lorde discusses how asking women of color to present token perspectives on an issue asks them to place their experience against the backdrop of whiteness, an act which forever sets them apart as marginalized. "How come you haven't also educated yourselves about Black women and the differences between us," she asks of her white feminist colleagues, "when it is key to our survival as a movement?"

When I read this essay as an undergraduate student, that sentence resonated deeply with me and helped set me on the path of study I follow today. The idea that it was my own responsibility as a white woman to educate myself about writers of color—to initiate the conversation of difference rather than assume people of color were the best and only sources from which that dialectic could emerge—was profound. I decided to seek out African American poets precisely because their work challenged and taught me new things about black expression and myself. "Difference," Lorde wrote, "must not merely be tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark."

As a result of my own imperative desire to read African American poetry and speak authoritatively about it, I have discovered a beauty and a complexity that I had not known before. Acknowledging difference does not erase the complications of my reading practice; rather, it is about embracing and welcoming those complications. Reading African American poetry from and through the cloak of whiteness carries with it the possible entanglements of cultural voyeurism and fetishism, and for white writers, it can produce a special kind of anxiety of influence. But the alternative to this is not to engage in dialogue, which is no alternative at all. I choose the trouble and the self-doubt of this reading practice because by embracing the complexities of race and of difference, by making the invisible cloak of whiteness visible, extraordinary possibilities emerge.

That, in the end, is the deal with this white professor teaching African American literature: she is a white reader critically engaging the troubles and joys of this poetry as art, as cultural engagement, as specific human connection.

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