

(18) Contemporary African American Poetry

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African American Poetry

- History
 - historically the oldest of ethnic minority poetries, the first to gain national and even international importance
 - traditionally the most radical of ethnic poetries and the most hostile to white American culture and literature
 - provided by the fact that unlike other ethnic minorities African Americans did not come to America by choice
 - pivotal in contributing to the mainstream culture with the oral **folk tradition**, the secular and **spiritual song**
 - the underlying subjects were longing for freedom, struggle for civil rights, criticism of racial discrimination
- 1960s
 - the Black Arts movement was parallel with African American **feminism**, black women suffered from the double jeopardy of racism and sexism, pioneered taboo themes like sexuality, childbirth, domestic violence etc.
 - the form of African American poetry drew on the **preacher style** of public speaking, the poet or leader recited at a rapid pace and the audience or chorus danced, shouted and sang in response to the rapt rhythm of the words
 - the content of poetry was radicalised, assertive tone and aggressive gesture served to turn words into weapons
- Recent
 - recent African American poetry still relies on the spoken word as much as on the written, shifts towards poetry of and for the street which is populist and rejects the conventional distinction between high and popular culture
 - stands at the crossroads between musical and rhetorical forms, overlaps with **rapping** and **hip-hop**, exploits ghetto culture in percussive verses and deft rhymes using wry self-mockery, verbal strutting and grim humour
 - includes also such subversive and even offensive forms as **gangsta rap**, which uses sharp talk and shock tactic to provide a raw testimony to the life of the streets, determined by the basic life necessities of money and sex

Gwendolyn Brooks (1917–2000)

- Subjects
 - born in Topeka, Kansas, but considered a native of Chicago, Illinois, where she has lived since early childhood
 - her poetry is occupied with the inhabitants of Bronzeville, a **black urban ghetto** on the South Side of Chicago
 - considers it her privilege to present African American people not as mere curiosities but rather human beings
 - her early poetry was concentrated rather on simply recording the general human experience of life in poverty
 - since the 1960s her poetry grew more radical, she became a celebrated model for the younger generation poets
- Forms
 - shows poetic capacity in a variety of emotions, ranging from brutal anger and wry satire to visionary serenity
 - proves to be a brilliant craftswoman at dealing with both the traditional forms and styles and modern free verse
 - her attitude is realistic, described as ‘objective’ and ‘total-real’, excels at compact images and precise language
 - her poetry is a complex amalgam of black folklore, rough street idiom and classical and modern sensibilities
- Ghetto Dwellers
 - A Street in Bronzeville*** (1945)
 - her first published poetry collection, announced her as an original poetic talent among African American poets
 - chronicles the everyday lives, aspirations and disappointments of ordinary black people in her neighbourhood
 - explores also the unfair treatment of blacks and racism present in the U. S. Army during the Second World War
- Ghetto Woman
 - Annie Allen*** (1949)
 - the collection won her the Pulitzer Prize and made her the first African American poet ever to receive this prize
 - describes the particulars of the troublesome lives of impoverished black slum dwellers, here especially women
 - shows a black woman’s way from childhood to adulthood against the backdrop of poverty and discrimination
- Social Feeling
 - The Bean Eaters*** (1960)
 - poetry with a strong social feeling, the title poem portrays an old couple at dinner in a messy hired back room
 - ‘We Real Cool’**
 - a brief poem which portrays in a direct street slang language the sad and short lives of street gang teenagers
- Radical Mood
 - In the Mecca*** (1968)
 - the collection reflects her shift towards more racial political views in content and a new power in presentation
 - the title poem traces the search of a mother for her daughter lost in the Mecca, a block-long ghetto tenement
 - ‘The Second Sermon on the Warpland’**
 - the poem alludes to T. S. Eliot’s *Waste Land* (1922), contains the famous ‘furious flower’ line which became the motto for the Furious Flower Conference of African American Poets (1994) formally dedicated to the author
- Later Collections
 - Family Pictures*** (1970), ***Beckonings*** (1975), ***To Disembark*** (1981), ***Children Coming Home*** (1991)

Imamu Amiri Baraka (b. 1934)

- influenced in the earlier stages of his career by white American poets who saw themselves as alienated from

Develop- ments	the cultural mainstream, some of his poems recall the work of Frank O'Hara, others in turn echo Charles Olson
Character- istics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • became for a while the most innovative black beat poet, influenced by European Surrealism and Dadaism, the jazz poetry of Vachel Lindsay and Langston Hughes, the jazz music of Charlie Parker and black oral tradition • his early-1960s poetry is formally loose in the bohemian mode of the beat generation, his mid-1960s poetry reflects his concern with the Black Arts, since the 1970s he fights against imperialism as a left-wing adherent • his earliest poetry is determinedly autobiographical, occupied with sex and death, shaped by existential despair • his nationalist poetry is often marked by rage and anger, but employs also cries for help or friendly persuasion • inclines to moral didacticism, but surprisingly manages to extract poetic qualities even from feelings of hatred • expresses respect for the energy of black people, takes pride and places faith in a shared collective identity • seeks to unravel a new language and rhythm to liberate him and the hearts and minds of all his 'black family'
Beatnik	<p><i>Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note</i> (1961)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • his first poetry collection, includes personal and often domestic poems, mostly in the style of the Beat poets
Revolut- ionary	<p><i>The Dead Lecturer</i> (1964)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • his second poetry collection and his poetic farewell to what he sees as the political decadence of the Beatniks • his lyrics crystallize his commitment to revolutionary action and his increasing concentration on racial issues
Separatist	<p><i>Black Magic: Collected Poetry 1961–1967</i> (1969)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the collection includes numerous separatist poems chronicling his divorce from white culture and white values <p>'Black Art'</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • an extremist poem which defends a violent revolutionary action against the white American establishment • calls for 'poems that kill', 'assassin poems', claims no love poetry can be written until love may exist freely
Later Collections	<p><i>In Our Terribleness</i> (1970), <i>Hard Facts</i> (1975), <i>Poetry for the Advanced</i> (1979), <i>Wise Why's Y's: The Griot's Tale</i> (1995), <i>Funk Lore: New Poems, 1984–1995</i> (1996)</p>
Present-Day Controversy	<p><i>Somebody Blew Up America and Other Poems</i> (2004)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the title poem aroused much controversy, it was misinterpreted as a defence of the 09/11 terrorist attacks and accused of anti-Semitic sentiments, as it suggests that the Israeli were responsible for the Twin Towers attacks

Alice Walker (b. 1944)

Character- istics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • her creative vision is rooted in the economic hardship, racial terror and folk wisdom of her native Georgia • explores multidimensional kinships among women, among men and women or among humans and animals • her work embraces and illustrates the redemptive power of social, spiritual, cultural and political revolution • writes in a spare and lyric free verse compared to Zen Buddhist poetry or to the work of Gwendolyn Brooks • avoids artificial artfulness, her short and simple lines are warm addresses invoking solidarity and compassion
Life & Death	<p><i>Once</i> (1968)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • her first poetry collection, based on her experiences during the civil rights movement and her travels to Africa • influenced in form by the Japanese haiku and in content by the existentialist philosophy of Albert Camus • contains meditations on love and suicide, contemplates death but also the triumphant decision to reclaim life • influenced presumably by her unwanted pregnancy when at college and her anguished deciding for abortion
Revolution & Love	<p><i>Revolutionary Petunias and Other Poems</i> (1973)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • her second collection, the narrative poems revisit her southern past and challenge superficial political military • focuses on revolutionaries and lovers and on how the loss of trust and compassion robs human beings of hope
Tributes to Blacks	<p><i>Good Night, Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning</i> (1979)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the poems of her third collection contain tributes to black political leaders as well as fellow creative writers • the title of the collection is explained by the author as the last words of her mother to her father at his funeral • searches for connections between love relationships and lasting change, presents love not as disease but health
Humans & Nature	<p><i>Horses Make a Landscape Look More Beautiful</i> (1984)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the poems of the collection capture the ordinary joys of life, as a daughter's homecoming or a lover's warmth • addresses also the issues of racism and injustice and insists on the need to save our planet from self-destruction
Society & Ecology	<p><i>Absolute Trust in the Goodness of the Earth: New Poems</i> (2003)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the collection continues to examine the author's long-time interest in spiritual questions and ecological topics • praises friendship, romantic love, ancestors, ethnic diversity, peace movements and admirable strong women
Poetry Sketches	<p><i>A Poem Travelled Down My Arm</i> (2005)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the collection was inspired by the author's task of providing autographs for the copies of her previous

collection, decided to make each signature a thoughtful reflection, an impromptu sketch and a heartfelt poem
 • the result is a collection of insights and drawings, by turns charming and humorous, provocative and profound
Hard Times Require Furious Dancing: New Poems (to be released in 2010)

Coming
Soon

Michael Harper (b. 1938)

Character-
istics

- studied medicine, employs medical terminology and medical metaphors, especially in his *Debridement* (1973)
- inspired by the black **musical tradition**, imitates not only the forms but also the specific visions of jazz music
- admired musicians Billie Holiday, Bessie Smith, Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, Thelonious Monk, John Coltrane
- presents the deprivations felt in African American history in such a manner as to disturb the white conscience
- records violence as a matter of family loss and racial history, as the death of an infant son or of a brother, the suffering inflicted on Native Americans by Puritans or the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X
- seeks to unite the fractured inhumane technologies of our time with the abiding well of black folk traditions

Jazz &
Blues

Dear John, Dear Coltrane (1970)

- intended as a homage to John Coltrane and his mentors, saxophonist Charlie Parker and trumpeter Miles Davis
- explores his connection to jazz saxophonist and tenor John Coltrane and claims human and cultural **continuity**
- perceives jazz and blues as characteristically open-ended forms whose most important feature is their modality
- believes that moments of improvisation can assist the artist in revealing deeper meanings of human experience
- suggests his peculiar wholistic vision of the universe, views the past as inextricably connected with the present
- addresses the theme of redemption in compact poems based on historical events and figures and personal life

‘Here Where Coltrane Is’

- the poem seeks to identify with the message and impression of John Coltrane’s record *A Love Supreme*¹ (1964)
- exploits jazz not merely as a specific music form but also as an expression of the way one perceives the world

Past &
Present

History Is Your Own Heartbeat (1971)

- explores the African American past, merges the **personal and historical** experience indiscriminately into one
- supplants the false Western myths by ‘new arrangements of human essentials confirmed by past experience’

Song: I Want a Witness (1972)

- continues to stress the significance of history to the individual human beings, particularly African Americans

Vietnam
Veterans

Debridement (1973)

- the title is a medical term referring to the surgical removal of dead or contaminated tissue from a wound, in this case a metaphor for the wound of the Vietnam War which cannot be healed due to the problems of veterans
- devotes one part of the volume to a black soldier who was wounded in Vietnam and now suffers from severe depressions, fails to re-assimilate into society and ends his life absurdly when attempting to rob a grocery store

Tributes
to Blacks

Nightmare Begins Responsibility (1975)

- sets the general tone of the collection by including many poems referring to various African American writers
- one of his most acclaimed collections, offers a series of portraits of individual courage despite circumstances

Later
Poetry

Images of Kin: New and Selected Poems (1977), ***Healing Song for the Inner Ear*** (1985), ***Honourable Amendments*** (1995)

Present
Day

Songlines in Michaeltree: New and Collected Poems (2000)

- his most recent collection, eschews neither the personal, political nor the lyrical, but chooses a middle road from the multiple intersections of memory and experience, music and language, oppression and achievement
- uses repetition and lyric fragmentation reflecting the influence of jazz but also of blues, gospel and folk music

Yusef Komunyakaa (b. 1947)

Formal
Features

- a poet, editor and essayist, the most appreciated of African American poets, winner of the Pulitzer Prize (1994)
- influenced by experimental European literature, by Harlem Renaissance poets and by jazz and blues rhythms
- writes in a confessional mode informed by strikingly original images, **dense language** and syntactic tension
- speaks in a universal voice, whether it embodies the specific experience of a black man, a soldier or a child

Writing
Subjects

- draws on in his childhood spent in the racially segregated Bogalusa, Louisiana, on his difficult relationship with his father who disapproved of his son’s wish to study and on his Vietnam experience as a correspondent
- shows **what it is to be human** in dealing with complex moral issues and harrowing subjects of American life
- seeks in his writing to ‘remove layers of façades and superficialities’ to ‘get down to the guts of the things’

¹ The title song includes a ‘musical narration’ or a ‘wordless recitation’ of a devotional poem quoted in the liner notes, meaning Coltrane plays the words on his saxophone without pronouncing them. The device pays homage to the sermons of black preachers.

Music Catharsis	<p><i>Copacetic</i>² (1984)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a collection of poems built from colloquial speech which demonstrates his incorporation of jazz influences • explores jazz as a medium to express racial iniquity and as a catharsis to heal the wounds of hatred and bigotry • describes childhood memories and folk experiences that are startling and pleasurable, gripping and appealing • invokes jazz and blues forms, themes and idioms to create poetry aiming to soothe the pain of his community • renders the hope of a people who have persevered and ultimately triumphed despite the long history of racism
Against Labels	<p><i>I Apologize for the Eyes in My Head</i> (1986)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the collection attempts to coalesce seemingly disparate events, to extract meaning from all lived experiences • satirically analyses narrow and simplifying definitions, rejects the idea of status or class and ‘Uncle Tom-ism’ • embraces ordinary images of old women, babies, prostitutes or ghosts and attributes them a mythic resonance
Vietnam Poetry	<p><i>Dien Cai Dau</i>³ (1988)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the collection deals with the Vietnam War and is considered perhaps the best American poetry on the subject
Veteran Racism	<p>‘Facing It’</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the poem describes the contradictory feelings of an African American veteran on visiting the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D. C., and reading the names of victims engraved in the black granite of the memorial • the speaker is ignored by a white veteran but ends up captivated by the image of a passing woman and her son • mingles darkness and light, reality and fiction, contrasts the names of casualties and the uninvolved passers-by
Soldier Racism	<p>‘Tu Do Street’</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the poem interweaves the themes of racism and the Vietnam conflict, shows racism in the American army
Boyhood Memories	<p><i>Magic City</i> (1992)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the collection is a tense and lyrical evocation of the author’s boyhood, brilliantly captures the imagination of a child, drawing on images as a love-torn and abusive father, rivalry of siblings or a neighbourhood street prophet <p>‘My Father’s Love Letters’</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the poem portrays an abusive father dictating to his literate son love letters for his wife who abandoned him
Pulitzer Prize	<p><i>Neon Vernacular</i> (1993)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a collage of new and collected poems from the previously published volumes, winner of the Pulitzer Prize <p>‘Songs for My Father’</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a powerful series of poems tracing the development of the relationship of the poet to his father, beginning with mutual incomprehension and disappointment and ending in a delayed reconciliation with the dying old father
Classical & Modern	<p><i>Talking Dirty to the Gods</i> (2000)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a mixture of classical and modern themes where Greek mythology and deadly sins meet sensuality and jazz
Present Day	<p><i>Pleasure Dome: New & Collected Poems, 1975–1999</i> (2001), <i>Taboo: The Wishbone Trilogy, Part 1</i> (2004), <i>Warhorses</i> (2008)</p>

² The word was originally coined by the African American tap dancer Bill ‘Bojangles’ Robinson to refer to situations where everything is all right. The expression was later adopted by jazz musicians to describe particularly melodious and smooth pieces.

³ The title is Vietnamese for ‘this crazy head’, a phrase which the Vietnamese used for the American soldiers fighting in Vietnam.