CHAPTER 1

Introduction to a Genre

Speak this because I exist.
This is my voice
These words are my words, my mouth
Speaks them, my hand writes.
I am a poet.

Calvin C. Hernton, "The Distant Drum"

African American poetry pre-dates the nation that became the United States of America and is a central part of its identity and expression. It is a major touchstone of the American literary tradition and deserves recognition for its aesthetic quality and influence on world culture. Yet this extraordinary body of writing remains under-explored as a topic of research, study, understanding, and appreciation. *A History of African American Poetry* seeks to provide critical and historical insight into this genre from its origins to the present with the hope of stimulating new ideas. As a critical study, this book does not aim to replicate or synthesize existing scholarship. It is "a" history, not "the" history. There is no pretense or possibility of being exhaustive in such an immense field, or of implying that there is a uniform perspective on issues about this diverse body of writing. Questions and controversies will be neither avoided nor resolved: they will, and should, remain alive and vital by the end of this book. My publications often have addressed formal innovation in poetry of the black diaspora. I will bring that interest to bear here in sharing the insights that I have gained through the process of researching and writing this book. A wealth of excellent critical, bibliographical, and biographical resources is readily available in this field. Most cover the poets and poems that are viewed as canonical, but a rising number address the writers and writings that have been deliberately or inadvertently excluded or forgotten. Often, these overlooked texts display qualities that affiliate them with new forms and concepts, features that would categorize texts in other forums as avant-garde, experimental, oppositional, innovative,

or difficult. A central motive is to examine the theoretical and practical implications of why these texts are "missing" or invisible, and how their inclusion might impact the existing canon. This book is designed to offer a summative and illustrative overview of the genre from its origins to the present, but it has a strong mission towards revision and recuperation. Readers will be directed to many materials on commonly accepted and respected information and interpretations, as well as figures and trends that have been unjustly disregarded and which often reveal hidden continuities and progressions.

A major goal of this book is to raise questions about how and why we have inherited a fundamentally conservative canon and to think about how it might be imagined differently. I was originally drawn to the field of African American literature because it provided examples, ideas, perspectives, and encounters which struck me as essential American voices that were excluded from my education. As I looked more deeply into this rich body of writing, the texts that often seemed most compelling and revelatory were not part of the African American canon as it had evolved. This book invites attention to valuable poets and poems that have been marginalized or forgotten from the African American, American, diasporic, and Anglophone literary corpus. Since many of these writings were well known in the past, we gain important insight into which texts became alternately validated and excluded in varying iterations, which provokes speculation about the reasons.

The foundations of the African American literary tradition are in its poetry. Although this body of poetry is as diverse and varied as its individual creators, some common themes and threads appear which justify its consideration as a literary tradition: attention to both orality and print culture; themes and impacts of migration, diaspora, and transnationalism; the location and meaning of home and family; African survivals and the role of Africa; imagery of enslavement and freedom; the purpose of art as social and political action; art as defining a relationship between the individual and the community; music and musicality; art as a bridge between the present and the past; the deep and spiritual significance of land and place; play with multiple audiences and levels of address; creative and hybrid senses of diction; concerns with assimilation and authenticity; a clear pattern from the time of its origins of self-referencing, citationality, and allusion, even as it is in dialogue with the Anglo-American canon; and concern with the best critical tools to evaluate and appreciate African American poetry, including the question of whether a special theoretical lens should be developed and applied to this

writing, which reflects its features, goals, and identity. This book is organized chronologically to discuss a range of poetic styles and critical perspectives, representing both oral and literary traditions, from the arrival of the first Africans in America to the current moment. Key ideas – for example, politics, race, religion, duality, identity, performance, oratory, slavery, freedom, music, Africa, America, and discrimination – recur in the chapters to demonstrate traits that define this field as cohesive and special, yet also part of larger traditions of literariness.

Two of the most important critical texts in this field are now more than forty years old: *Understanding the New Black Poetry* by Stephen Henderson and *Drumvoices: The Mission of Afro-American Poetry: A Critical History* by Eugene B. Redmond, both written during one of the most active periods of production of African American poetry and scholarship. Redmond and Henderson invited increased attention to be paid to the connections and advances in this field that reveal its fundamental cohesiveness while recognizing its tremendous diversity. Both critics call for the reconciliation of various critical commonplaces about this genre, which are sometimes perceived as schisms or parallel paths, such as its relationship to oral and English literary traditions, and its address of dual audiences. According to Henderson, "an attempt should be made in which the continuity and the wholeness of the black poetic tradition in the United States are suggested. That tradition exists on two main levels, the written and the oral, which sometimes converge."[1] Redmond writes, "From the ditties, blues, spirituals, dozens, sermons, and jokes, the poet fashioned an endless stream of poetic forms and fusions."[2] The statements by Henderson and Redmond articulate some of the fundamental premises of this book: sound, performance, visuality, and inscription are integrally connected in this tradition, which is characterized by wholeness and continuity. The wholeness indicates its central core of values and identity, and the continuity reflects its capacity to navigate change and continuously refresh itself for new times and conditions.

It is impossible to mark the precise genesis of African American poetry, but its history of documentation must begin no later than the poetic expressions of the first kidnapped Africans landing on American soil, which is often dated to 1619. Although it can only be hypothesized and

[1] Stephen Henderson, *Understanding the New Black Poetry: Black Speech and Black Music as Poetic References* (New York: William Morrow, 1973), p. 3.
[2] Eugene B. Redmond, *Drumvoices: The Mission of Afro-American Poetry: A Critical History* (New York: Anchor Books/Doubleday, 1976), p. 420.

imagined, as discussed in Chapter 2, I consider the African American poetic tradition to have started with the slave songs forged from African survivals, synthesized with the trauma of the Middle Passage, and radically impacted by the experience of enslavement in American plantation culture. This body of oral poetry was not transcribed until the nineteenth century – probably two hundred years or more after it was first created – but its rhythms, dictions, perspectives, rhetorical strategies, and themes initiate a context for an authentic canon to which future generations of readers and writers could refer and allude from the seventeenth to the twenty-first century. Starting with slave songs as its roots – as I have discussed in *Slave Songs and the Birth of African American Poetry* – the poetry of African Americans has been viewed as something "unique" and with a distinctive capacity to impact audiences.[3] This level of "difference" has been a significant factor in both the valuation and the depreciation of this body of poetry, which is reflected in the intertwined development of the canon and curriculum. It has generated a history of contention and claims about how best to respond to and critically evaluate this body of poetry – how and what it signifies. It has long been debated whether it should be regarded as original, authentic, and apart, or as reactive, conventional, and imitative, as only two – but abiding – perspectives. Is it a central and essential part of the larger American cultural panorama, or does it represent voices of "outsiders" coming from "the margins" to speak truth and independence to a perceived national mainstream? In the earliest eras of its critical evaluation, the enthusiasms and skepticisms in judgment reflected the fears, values, and prejudices of now distant and different times. External commentators wondered whether African American poetry and its original sources were primitive or sophisticated, high or low art, American or "foreign," random or structured, tricky or sincere, wily or childish, true "poetry" or meaningless noise. As we will see, the kernel of these lingering questions can remain implicitly buried in the discourse.

Early auditors described the slave songs as "weird," "wild," "unique," "strange," and "different" in ways that were hard to define.[4] Even

[3] See Lauri Ramey, *The Heritage Series of Black Poetry: A Research Compendium* (London: Routledge, 2008) and *Slave Songs and the Birth of African American Poetry* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

[4] Some of the early important collections and commentaries expressing this perspective on the poetry known as Negro spirituals, slave songs, or plantation verse are William Francis Allen, Charles Pickard Ware, and Lucy McKim Garrison, eds., *Slave Songs of the United States* (1867), William E. Barton, ed., *Old Plantation Hymns* (1899), E. P. Christy, ed., *Christy's Plantation Melodies* (1851), and Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *Army Life in a Black Regiment and Other Writings* (1870).

W. E. B. Du Bois, who called them "the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side of the seas" also referred to them as "weird old songs" containing "strange word[s]."[5] Though these slave songs were considered curiosities, critics disregarded their quality and originality. Some attributed their strangeness to being poor imitations of white hymns or verse. Others raised suspicions about the "foreignness" of their unknown words, sounds, and phrases. Efforts were made to "translate" these unfamiliar expressions into "comprehensible" messages. Observers were baffled by their semi-improvisatory, performative, and physical style of oral delivery and communal participation. These features contrasted with contemporaneous ideas of poems as fixed printed texts by sole authors.[6]

From its origins, African American poetry had to be inventive and cleverly subversive. Communication was an immediate challenge for kidnapped Africans, brought together on slave ships from multiple cultures, who needed to establish linguistic and social common ground. When they arrived on plantations in America, many of the enslaved people were legally deprived of literacy. Slave songs needed to be transmitted orally and serve diverse purposes efficiently. The oral tradition of Africa would have served as a strength. These sung lyrics offered the enslaved peoples a means of expressing their own theology, preserving African survivals, building community, keeping hope alive, communicating during work, relaxing with entertainment, sending messages of resistance to oppression, sharing local and political news, and carrying practical information. It is rare for a body of art to be called upon to mean so much for so many.

The perception of African American poetry as being unlike mainstream Anglo-American verse has been a double-edged sword that has followed the genre from its roots and into the present. It is expected to be "different" but only in particular ways. The peculiar criterion of "authenticity" has gone hand in hand with "otherness." The more African American poetry is viewed as "odd," the more it has seemed to be considered an "authentic" expression of the language, ideas, and experiences of its creators. As we will see with the poets who are often credited with originating this tradition, such as Phillis Wheatley, the ability to work

[5] Quoted in Patricia Liggins Hill, gen. ed., *Call & Response: The Riverside Anthology of the African American Literary Tradition* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), p. 749. The text is widely available in multiple whole editions and excerpted.

[6] See, for example, *Methodist Error Or, Friendly, Christian Advice to those Methodists, who indulge in extravagant religious emotions and bodily exercises* (1819), authored anonymously by "A Methodist," and later attributed to John F. Watson.

within English poetry's conventions has generated negative comparisons. Yet, ironically, when African American poetry is the most original and distinctive, it has been criticized as primitive, unsophisticated, or strange. It seems as if African American poetry has been judged by two sets of standards and it cannot gain respect from either of these alternative views. As a result, this body of poetry has had a long history of exclusion from the lyric poetry and literary canons, until very recently. Critically speaking, African American poetry has long been framed as the marked term, reflecting the circumstances of a population that has fought for equality for more than four centuries. Inevitably, the issue of racial discrimination in America is integrally related to perceptions of African American poetry. As Paul Robeson wrote in "The Negro Artist Looks Ahead" (1951), "America is a nation based upon oppression, where black artists in all fields have suffered discrimination, exploitation, and limited opportunities for success and recognition." Despite the vast influence of African American artists on world culture, Robeson offered numerous examples to show how "the fruits have been taken from us."[7]

Canons are not eternal verities of quality, but mutable and competitive, and change to reflect the current values of times, places, institutions, and sociopolitical forces. In *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes*, Alastair Fowler identifies three primary kinds of literary canon: potential, accessible, and selective. Potential refers to all works in existence, accessible means that a reader can discover it, and selective is the authoritative choice of texts with some special value to preserve and revere. As Fowler describes it, canon formation is a somewhat unruly and changing power struggle to control the official version of literary esteem. He writes, "The official canon is institutionalized through education, patronage, and journalism … Someone must be first to see merit in an experimental work."[8] That is true, but those seeing merit are not necessarily those with the power of institutions behind them. Before the 1997 appearance of the first edition of *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, edited by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay, which was a long-awaited signal event of canon-establishment for educators, few African American and black

[7] Paul Robeson, "The Negro Artist Looks Ahead," in Manning Marable and Leith Mullings, eds., *Let Nobody Turn Us Round: Voices of Resistance, Reform, and Renewal* (Lanham, Boulder, New York, and Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), p. 353.
[8] Alastair Fowler, *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), pp. 213–16.

diasporic poems entered the canon. Those few that were included tended to reinforce the mainstream national narrative in style and content, or to serve as an acceptable version of alterity which also reinforced the dominant culture's vision. To give an idea of the momentousness of the preparation and publication of the Norton anthology, in *Drumvoices* in 1976, Redmond specifically decried the absence of the imprimatur of a Norton anthology for African American literature. In the Preface to his 1922 *Book of American Negro Poetry*, James Weldon Johnson wrote that no group that produced great art had been disrespected. Was the Norton meant to be such a display of respectability? Did its birth perpetuate the idea that there might be a separate and equal canon of African American literature that was somehow different and tangential from "American literature?" Yet it was an important and necessary move because it sought, in the esteemed academic venue of a Norton anthology, to establish the bona fides of the literature of African Americans. That it followed firmly in the conventional tradition of Norton anthologies also perpetuated the problems of how restrictively this canon came to be defined.

A parallel signal event in its own way was the re-release in 1999 of *The New American Poetry, 1945–1960*, edited by Donald Allen. Originally published in 1960 with its iconic four red waving lines evoking the bent stripes of the American flag, the anthology was indeed a counter-cultural bombshell or breath of fresh air, as has been thoroughly documented and discussed. Its re-release by new publisher University of California Press almost forty years after its original publication by Grove Press coincided with the publication of the first edition of the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature.* University of California Press's website states:

> With more than 100,000 copies sold, *The New American Poetry* has become one of the most influential anthologies published in the United States since World War II. As one of the first counter-cultural collections of American verse, this volume fits in Robert Lowell's famous definition of the raw in American poetry. Many of the contributors once derided in the mainstream press of the period are now part of the postmodern canon: Olson, Duncan, Creeley, Guest, Ashbery, Ginsberg, Kerouac, Levertov, O'Hara, Snyder, Schuyler, and others.[9]

One problem with this anthology, described as representing the "counter-cultural," "the raw," and others "derided in the mainstream press" was its inclusion of only one African American among forty-four poets: LeRoi Jones

[9] www.ucpress.edu/book/9780520209534/the-new-american-poetry-1945-1960 (last accessed August 19, 2018).

(later to become Amiri Baraka). In the history of American literature, it appears that only certain kinds of counter-culturalism and difference have been acceptable or even visible where issues of race are involved.

Until late in the twentieth century, few African American poets entered the canon, and the token representation of the Allen anthology had become the norm. When a few black poets were included in anthologies used in the classroom, the selections were typically formally and conceptually accessible, written in either urban slang or conversational diction and free verse, and depicted African Americans' alienation and struggles to surmount oppression, such as "Theme for English B" by Langston Hughes and "Still I Rise" by Maya Angelou. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, African American poetry appears in much greater quantity and variety, which proves the point that potential and access – existence and presence – are the paths to selection, but that also depends on the terms of selection. Things have come a long way, especially in quantity, towards including more African American poets in the canon, but not necessarily in range and diversity.

Published in 2006, the *Wadsworth Anthology of Poetry*, edited by Jay Parini, presents a substantial representation of African American and black diasporic poetry: "The Bars Fight" by Lucy Terry, "On the Death of Rev. Mr. George M. Whitefield 1770" by Phillis Wheatley, "The Slave Mother" by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, "Douglass" by Paul Laurence Dunbar, "Paul Laurence Dunbar" by James David Corrothers, "O Black and Unknown Bards" by James Weldon Johnson, "I Sit and Sew" by Alice Moore Dunbar Nelson, "America" by Claude McKay, "Yet Do I Marvel" by Countee Cullen, "For My People" by Margaret Walker, "For Mack C. Parker" by Pauli Murray, "A Poem for Black Hearts" and "A New Reality is Better Than a New Movie!" by Amiri Baraka, "malcolm" by Lucille Clifton, "Double Elegy" by Michael S. Harper, "Parsley" and "David Walker" by Rita Dove, "The Black Clown," "Harlem," "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," "Esthete in Harlem," and "Theme for English B" by Langston Hughes, "Middle Passage" and "A Plague of Starlings" by Robert Hayden, "Telephone Conversation" and "Night" by Wole Soyinka, "Beautiful Black Men" and "Poetry" by Nikki Giovanni, "For Black Poets Who Think of Suicide" by Etheridge Knight, "Negro Hero" and "my dreams, my works, must wait till after hell" by Gwendolyn Brooks, "Poetics" by Yusef Komunyakaa, "Ballad of Birmingham" by Dudley Randall, "Ballad from Childhood" by Audre Lorde, "In the Mountains of the Moon, Uganda" by Lorna Goodison, "homage to my hips" by Lucille Clifton, "As from a

Quiver of Arrows" by Carl Phillips, "Twenty-Year Marriage" and "Killing Floor" by Ai, "Prelude" by Kamau Brathwaite, "Come Thunder" by Christopher Okigbo, "Stowaway" by Olive Senior, and "African Sleeping Sickness" by Wanda Coleman.

In this massive anthology of 712 pages, covering all poetry in English or influencing the English tradition, the percentage of African American and black diasporic poets may be slim, yet I list all poems and poets canonized by Parini because it is a legitimately thoughtful and well-chosen selection that does reinforce the international links. It appears to indicate progress. Yet of all the choices available, a conventional cultural ideology abides with the accompanying exclusions and oversights. Unsurprisingly, the largest selection given to any black poet belongs to Langston Hughes, who is represented by five poems. Considering the wealth of possibilities, this anthology selects Charles Simic but not Ed Roberson, Jorie Graham but not Harryette Mullen, Walt Whitman but not James Monroe Whitfield, William Carlos Williams but not Jean Toomer, Ezra Pound but not Melvin B. Tolson, Robert Service but not James Edwin Campbell, Anne Carson but not Russell Atkins. Of course, the list of choices and absences could go on and on, but even with a good-hearted and relatively generous taste of the black poetry genre, the issue of style appears to be less important than who is using it based on who they are. As written in the same year by Aldon Lynn Nielsen and Lauri Ramey in the Introduction to *Every Goodbye Ain't Gone: An Anthology of Innovative Poetry by African Americans*, "Despite what you've been reading, there's more and better reading."[10]

Mostly locked out of the canon until recently, African American poems existed mainly as "potential" literature, occasionally as "accessible," and very rarely as "selective." When poems do enter the "selective" category by way of volumes like the *Wadsworth Anthology of Poetry*, *Norton Anthology of Poetry*, *Longmans Anthology of Poetry* and others, they typically do not represent the boldest, or the most innovative, self-possessed, experimental, oppositional, disruptive, or interventionist choices. In short, the ignored or marginalized poetries and poetics are precisely those that may be of greatest threat to the literary and cultural status quo and power center of taste. A very partial listing of some formally, thematically, and conceptually innovative poets who were actively publishing in the 1960s and 1970s includes Lloyd Addison, Russell Atkins, Jayne Cortez,

[10] Aldon Lynn Nielsen and Lauri Ramey, eds., *Every Goodbye Ain't Gone: An Anthology of Innovative Poetry by African Americans* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006), p. xix.

Julia Fields, De Leon Harrison, David Henderson, Calvin C. Hernton, Ted Joans, Percy Johnston, Stephen Jonas, Jones/Baraka, Bob Kaufman, Clarence Major, Oliver Pitcher, Norman H. Pritchard, Ishmael Reed, Ed Roberson, A. B. Spellman, Lorenzo Thomas, Melvin B. Tolson, Tom Weatherly, and Jay Wright.

The next generations of progressive and visionary African American poets followed in the footsteps of these predecessors, who were in turn examining and extending the legacies of their own predecessors. Some of the most innovative and challenging poets of the last two decades include Will Alexander, Ron Allen, T. J. Anderson III, Tisa Bryant, Pia Deas, Latasha N. Nevada Diggs, Tonya Foster, C. S. Giscombe, Renee Gladman, Duriel E. Harris, Harmony Holiday, Erica Hunt, Kim D. Hunter, Geoffrey Jacques, Douglas Kearney, John Keene, Nathaniel Mackey, Dawn Lundy Martin, Mark McMorris, Tracie Morris, Fred Moten, Harryette Mullen, Mendi Lewis Obadike (often working with her husband Keith Obadike as keith+mendi obadike), Julie Ezelle Patton, Claudia Rankine, Deborah Richards, Evie Shockley, giovanni singleton, Tyrone Williams, and Ronaldo V. Wilson. What have they been modeling, representing, and voicing when compared with the group that has been taken as exemplary of the mainstream practices and conventions of the genre?

White experimental writing has been a subject of production and scholarly attention since the early modernist works of the historical avant-garde movements of Dada, futurism, and surrealism. An academic industry has been devoted to the innovations of long-canonical figures such as T. S. Eliot, Hart Crane, Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens, and William Carlos Williams. Two even earlier figures often viewed as the founders of the American poetry tradition – Emily Dickinson and Walt Whitman – displayed (now) well-accepted inventive practices that convey an "American" voice and spirit of independence, individuality, and freedom. The issue of acceptance does not appear related to the oppositional, challenging, or unfamiliar poetic modes themselves. It appears to be based on ideas about who the author is, and specifically the author's race. One of this book's major threads is to reveal the continuing and integral presence of avant-garde practices in the African American poetry tradition, such as formal innovation, deliberately placed obstacles of production and reception, and resistance to – not ignorance of – conventions. This tradition has always been "experimental" and original.

Experimental poetry and African American poetry have historically been viewed as unrelated fields – meaning that truly original poetry,