

The Black Poets

A New Anthology Edited By
Dudley Randall



THE BLACK POETS

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Introduction

In 1962 Rosey E. Pool published *Beyond the Blues* in England, a book which was the first comprehensive anthology of black poetry since Langston Hughes's and Arna Bontemps's *The Poetry of the Negro 1746-1949*. Because the United States would have been its greatest market, she tried to find a publisher or a jobber to distribute the book here. Everyone she queried said the book was too special and declined to handle it. Now, in 1970, after Watts and Detroit, and the Black Arts movement, there are so many anthologies of black poetry that each editor must justify the publication of a new one.

I hoped to make *The Black Poets* the definitive anthology of black poetry, but I was shaken when Everett Hoagland sent me his *Black Velvet*, a book I liked so much that I immediately selected poems from it for the anthology. I had been unaware of Hoagland. I wondered how many other good poets I was omitting from the anthology. The inclusion of new poets omitted from previous anthologies is one reason for a new one.

There have been criticisms of the number of new anthologies, but I think they are necessary because each editor may have knowledge of some poet or poets of whom other editors are ignorant. At some future time an editor may cull the best poetry from these anthologies, but for the present, each book is valuable for its new discoveries, and its omissions are compensated for by the inclusions of other anthologies.

To glance down the list: Imamu Amiri Baraka's (LeRoi Jones's) and Larry Neal's *Black Fire* presents many of the younger poets, but it leaves out the two best living black poets, Robert Hayden and Gwendolyn Brooks. If you say that their aim was to present only the younger poets, what about the omission of Don L. Lee and Etheridge Knight, surely two of the best younger poets? Clarence

Major's *The New Black Poetry* has many poets, but they are represented by only one poem each, and we don't get the full range and flavor of their work. Baird Shuman's *Nine Black Poets* gives poets in depth, but is limited in the number. Adam Miller's *Dice or Black Bones* gives good and welcome representation to West Coast poets, but only scanty representation to midwestern ones. Because of these lacks in each anthology, I say the more the better, and some day in the future they will contribute to one definitive anthology.

The claim of *The Black Poets* to being at least a partially definitive anthology is that it presents the full range of black American poetry, from the slave songs to the present day. It is important that folk poetry be included because it is the root and inspiration of later, literary poetry. Folk and ballad poetry influence is seen in Hayden's "The Ballad of Nat Turner," Melvin B. Tolson's "The Birth of John Henry," and in Etheridge Knight's version of the legend of Shine, the stoker on the *Titanic*. In *Black Fire*, Larry Neal gives a different version of the legend.

It is important that the reader, as well as young black poets, be familiar with these roots of black poetry, so that he can recognize them as they recur in Tolson, Sterling A. Brown, Margaret Walker, or in some new young poet of today, and so that the poets can utilize them in their own poetry.

Not only does this book present the full range of black poetry, but it presents most poets in depth, and in some cases presents aspects of a poet neglected or overlooked before. Claude McKay is well-known for his poetry of defiance and rebellion, but some of his later introspective, self-questioning poems, after he was converted from atheism to Catholicism, are included here. Hayden is often characterized (wrongly) as an art for art's sake poet, but some of his poems in this book are the most powerful presentations of the black experience. Frank Horne is best known for his "Letters Found Near a Suicide." Students in my class were so fond of them that I asked them whether they were death-wish oriented. But his later poetry, when he was struggling for strength

after paralysis, is included here. Gwendolyn Brooks is represented not only by poems on racial and domestic themes, but is revealed as a writer of superb love lyrics.

In addition, new poets, or poets seldom anthologized before, are included, such as Everett Hoagland, James Randall, Jr., Stephany, Carolyn M. Rodgers, Doughtry Long, and Johari Amini.

The first literary black poets tried to write as whites for a white audience. Phillis Wheatley imitated Pope and Dryden. Their models were likely to be genteel or to antedate the current poetic practices. In the Harlem Renaissance, Countee Cullen wrote under the influence of Keats and Housman, and Claude McKay wrote sonnets in the tradition of Wordsworth and Milton. It took the impingement of racism on Cullen's life, and McKay's belligerent personality, to give their poetry distinction. Only Langston Hughes and Jean Toomer, one by his use of colloquial black speech and blues form, and the other by his employment of new images and symbolism, were abreast of the poetic practices of the day.

In the post-Renaissance generation, Sterling A. Brown and Margaret Walker continued Hughes's use of folk materials, and Robert Hayden, Gwendolyn Brooks, Melvin B. Tolson, and Margaret Danner brought black poetry abreast of its time by absorbing and mastering the techniques of T. S. Eliot, Hart Crane, Ezra Pound.

The poets of the sixties and seventies have gone further than the poets of the post-Renaissance. The best of them have absorbed the techniques of the masters, have rejected them, and have gone in new directions. Perhaps this rejection had its roots in the movement of the fifties and sixties. When the poets saw the contorted faces of the mobs, saw officers of the law commit murder, and "respectable" people scheme to break the law (there was no cry for law and order then), perhaps they asked themselves, Why should we seek to be integrated with such a society? Perhaps they resolved to work toward a more civilized, a more humane society.

This alienation from white society initiated a turning away from its values and its poetry. Poets turned to

poetry of the folk, of the streets, to jazz musicians, to the language of black people for their models. Their first impulse was no longer to send a poem to *Poetry Magazine* or *Harper's*, but to think of *Black World*, *Journal of Black Poetry*, *Black Dialogue*, *Soulbook*, *Freedomways*, or *Liberator*. This emancipation from white literary models and critics freed them to create a new black poetry of their own. Such freedom was necessary if they were to create a truly original poetry. This is not to say that they remained ignorant of the currents of contemporary poetry, but that their attitude toward it was different. What they could use, they took, but they wrote as black men, not as black writers trying to be white. They tried to change language, to turn it around, to give new meanings and connotations to words. One example of this is the word *black*, which no longer connotes evil or dirt, but pride and beauty.

Examples of their success in "blackening the language" are phrases that have passed into common speech and that one repeats without knowing the originator, such as Imamu Baraka's (LeRoi Jones's) "up against the wall" and "black art," and Don Lee's "think black," "black pride," "the unpeople," "the realpeople," "the world-runners," "I under/overstand," "blackwriting," "integration of negroes with black people," and "talking black and sleeping white."

This turning away from white models and returning to their roots has freed black poets to create a new poetry. This book records their progress. They no longer imitate white models, strain toward white magazines, defer to white critics, or court white readers. They are in the process of creating a new literature. Whatever the outcome, they are taking care of business.

DUDLEY RANDALL

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