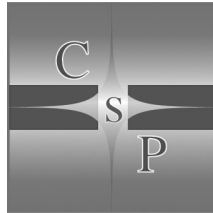


Engaging Tradition, Making It New

Engaging Tradition, Making It New:
Essays on Teaching Recent
African American Literature

Edited by

Stephanie Brown and Éva Tettenborn



Cambridge Scholars Publishing

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INTRODUCTION

ENGAGING TRADITION, MAKING IT NEW: TEACHING AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

STEPHANIE BROWN AND ÉVA TETTENBORN

Teaching African American literature presents instructors with the challenge of designing a course that is both representative of the distinctive African American literary tradition and also innovative and original in its focus. While these issues are to some extent endemic to academia as a whole, they have gained particular resonance in African American literary studies in recent years. Within the context of the broader debates over canon expansion that raged throughout the 1980s and 1990s, scholars of African American literature produced, in the words of Reginald Martin, an “explosive flowering of publication in essential staples of the black print canon . . . [unlikely to] ever be equalled in the future” (425). Martin, writing in 1989, presciently noted that the efforts of the late 20th century would have to be directed primarily at establishing the legitimacy of African American literature as an object of study and consolidating the field’s core texts; he predicted, however, that “after this brief but overwhelmingly fruitful flowering, which I estimate will end around the same time this century does . . . we should move into an even more important period. With the canon lines already being drawn and camps beginning to stratify, I think we shall witness the more important and difficult stage of mass dissemination of this canon at the beginning of the new century” (425). And indeed, this has been the case. It is now rare to find a university English department that does not feature courses in African American literature. For some time now, the question has not been *whether* to teach African American literature but rather *how* to teach it, a question that carries with it a natural corollary: which African American literature should we teach? Recognizing that the landscape of African American literary studies is substantially different today than it was as

little as twenty years ago, this collection updates existing critical and pedagogical resources in the process of addressing this crucial, yet largely unanswered, question. The essays that follow develop a critical vocabulary with which to approach new texts while also extending our understanding of those we have come to regard as familiar.

Thanks to the efforts of pioneering scholars in African American literature, we currently have at our disposal a number of works addressing what has come to be understood as the African American literary canon. Anthologies of African American literature, such as the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (Gates and McKay; 1st edition, 1996; 2nd edition, 2003), the *Oxford Companion to African American Literature* (Yellin, 1997), the *Prentice Hall Anthology of African American Literature* (Smith and Jones, 1999) and *Call and Response: The Riverside Anthology of African American Literature* (Hill, 2003) provide carefully chosen, yet diverse, selections arranged to emphasize thematic and/or chronological coherence, and for this reason probably constitute the most popular textbook options for college instructors. Supplements to these anthologies, such as Joycelyn Moody and Helen Ruth Houston's *Teaching with the Norton Anthology of African American Literature: A Guide for Instructors* (2004), further consolidate the dominant position of these collections. Works offering overviews of frequently studied African American literature and/or theorizing pedagogy in African American literature courses appear only infrequently; noteworthy titles are Dexter Fisher and Robert Stepto's *Afro-American Literature: The Reconstruction of Instruction* (1979); Bernard W. Bell's *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* (1987); and Maryemma Graham's *Teaching African American Literature: Theory and Practice* (1998).

Finally, while generically-oriented studies like the *Cambridge Companion* series have begun to provide relevant resources (*Cambridge Companions* devoted to the African American novel [Graham] and the slave narrative [Fisch] appeared in 2004 and 2007, respectively), many college instructors have also relied heavily on a variety of specific single-author or single-work pedagogical studies, particularly the Modern Language Association's popular series *Approaches to Teaching*. The MLA's volumes dedicated to Frederick Douglass (Hall), Richard Wright (Miller), Ralph Ellison (Parr and Savery), or Toni Morrison (McKay and Earle) have been influential in shaping how college courses in African American literature approach works by these authors. These publications attest to which authors have been canonized as essential to surveys of African American literature, while also suggesting that their works belong within the general American literature canon. As such, they have not only

impacted the specific field of African American literary studies, but have also advanced the inclusion of major African American writers—like Ralph Ellison or Toni Morrison—in other commonly taught undergraduate courses, such as surveys of American literature or surveys of the works of women writers.

Paradoxically, however, the commendable push for the inclusion of some African American authors in various literary canons—those of African American and American literature, women’s literature, and popular culture—has left us with a new set of challenges stemming from exclusion: given that the acceptance of the established canon is still a relatively recent phenomenon, why, when, and how should we include recent works by African American authors in our courses? Are there any appropriate criteria for judging new publications “worthy” of the college classroom? How will such alterations affect our selection of readings by more established writers? And should we only pick emerging writers who have already received some critical recognition and whom we thus perceive to be on their own way towards canonization, or can we embrace what Catharine R. Stimpson has memorably valorized as “paracanonical,” or “beloved” literature, a category Stimpson argues has particular resonance in the context of African American cultural production?¹ Is there an argument to be made that we have now reached a point when it is possible to propose for African American literary studies, as Robert Dale Parker did in 1993 for American literature generally, a move towards a “post-canon, a canon whose very canonicity . . . is ironic, strategic, multiple, and self-contradictory” (105), or is such a move premature? In other words, what happens to the African American literary canon if we move beyond its boundaries and into the realm of the extracanonical?

The call to include in our courses more recent works by black writers has grown progressively more vehement over the past twenty years, as African American literature has become increasingly diverse and has attracted a wider and more heterogeneous readership outside the

¹ Stimpson defines “paracanonical” texts as those that “some people have loved and do love” (958). Because “their [slaves’] love of reading is inseparable from their desire for freedom and self-empowerment,” Stimpson argues that the “beloved,” paracanonical text occupies a special position in the history of African Americans’ struggle for literacy. She demonstrates that although African Americans obviously fought to gain access to canonical texts as well as to see texts by black authors enshrined within that canon, the African American “community’s paracanonical love for its nonauthoritative texts mingles with its defiance of a brutally authoritarian society” (959-960).

classroom.² Although the mid-1990s renaissance in African American literature is often assumed to have been driven by bestselling popular fiction by such writers as Terry McMillan and Bebe Moore Campbell, the fact is that the explosion of talent in the field is limited to no single genre or audience. Popular conferences like the National Black Writers' Conference, which has been held every few years since 1986, provide forums in which writers and readers (including scholars, teachers, students and those who consider themselves all three simultaneously) can come together and learn about new African American fiction; as the conference's director, Elizabeth Nunez, told the NEH, "About two thousand people attend each conference, and then they go back to their communities and form book clubs and ask for these books in libraries and on the Internet" (Erskine 46). Many of us have been approached by students who ask us to include recent fiction by African American writers on our syllabi, and we are more than willing to do so. When we make the attempt, however, we often find ourselves faced with a dearth of materials. Not only are there usually few or no critical studies of these texts, studies providing pedagogical approaches to such works are still more rare.³

Complicating the job of the college level instructor still further is the fact that emerging African American writers not only often depart from what have become expected genres for African American narrative, such as protest fiction or the (neo)slave narrative, but also sometimes at the same time even break from the conventions of realism which have for so long marked the dominant mode of African American literary expression. Thematically and stylistically iconoclastic texts that redefine generic boundaries may be exciting to read, but they are often extremely challenging to teach. Thus, both students and instructors may welcome suggested approaches when engaging newer texts in African American literature for the first time. The collection of essays we present here is intended to meet this need and to serve as a point of departure for all who

² Frances Smith Foster, editor of the *Oxford Companion to African American Literature*, concluded in an article in the *PMLA*'s millennial issue that today, as in centuries past, "the classroom is not the most popular or productive place for most people to study African American literature. . . . when I look at course schedules, course syllabi, and course demographics of any given institution, I see that the same few African American authors and texts are generally taught once a year" (1966-7).

³ A notable exception to this rule is scholarship on high school or middle school teaching, often of young adult literature, as evidenced by a large number of articles indexed in the ERIC database. These studies, however, are generally of minimal use to instructors at the college level, with the exception of instructors who work with education majors.

look to expand their syllabi or their reading lists. It is, of course, not intended to be a prescriptive or exhaustive approach to the works discussed. Still, it is our hope that the essays that follow, all of which are based on our own experiences in the classroom and include specific suggestions for classroom discussion, will prove helpful tools that students and instructors may use, update, or unravel as they see fit.

We have organized our collection around an overarching theme of transgressive literary strategies for two reasons. First, the essays that follow inspire instructors to open up notions of which texts are essential in the African American canon: we encourage all instructors to include at least one emerging writer in their future courses, assuming that the overall topic or historical focus of the course allows for this change. We are, of course, aware of the need to introduce students to the best-known works in African American literature, especially if it is likely that their only exposure to it will come in the form of a single-semester survey course. When instructors are constrained by a 15-week period of teaching, they know that for every Colson Whitehead novel added to the course reading list, a novel by James Baldwin or Ann Petry must be sacrificed. Yet it is in the nature of the survey course to force the instructor to make difficult choices; furthermore, discussing what Barbara Herrnstein Smith labels “contingencies of value” in a classroom setting can be in itself an important pedagogical exercise. We also realize that the list of new authors discussed in this book is far from complete. However, it is intended to be representative; our selection of texts illustrates both the variety and excellence of new African American literature, and we expect that our work will serve as a challenge to its readers to pursue more scholarship in the field of emerging African American writers. Finally, we are conscious of the fact that our collection, if it is successful in directing scholarly attention toward previously under-recognized writers, may mark our own foray into the type of canon-building we wish to critique. Nevertheless, we maintain that these steps into the direction of new pedagogies are essential if the study of African American literature is to remain compelling, relevant, and dynamic.

A second reason we emphasize the transgressive nature of the texts we examine here is that, as many of the contributors to this anthology emphasize, they challenge the reading habits and expectations of students and instructors alike by engaging themes and literary forms that are not usually associated with African American literature. The authors discussed here may depart from traditional modes of approaching historical, social, or legal struggles, for example; they may also engage in genre-bending as they rework earlier forms, or offer unexpected intertextual connections. At

the same time, the essays work to identify which literary call individual works responds to, thus grounding each writer's seemingly different work in a rich African American literary tradition. Each chapter offers a specific reading of a particular novel, memoir, or poetry collection, sometimes in concert with a second, related text, and suggests both a useful critical context and one or more pedagogical approaches.

Jennifer Drake's analysis of Kevin Young's *Jelly Roll: A Blues* and Elizabeth Alexander's *Antebellum Dream Book* introduces instructors and students to the post-soul aesthetic and its influence in current African American poetry. Drake's readings of both poets offer guidance for how we should understand post-soul literature and examples of how these works respond to those of their literary forebears. The chapter also addresses questions of how to move beyond potential student reader resistance to postmodern poetry, especially in the context of African American literature.

Jared Champion discusses Paul Beatty's *The White Boy Shuffle* and suggests that Bertolt Brecht's theories and implementations of the alienation effect in epic theater serve as a helpful approach to understanding the novel. Champion's essay reads Beatty's novel as a performative work, likening its postmodern characters to actors in a dramatic performance of their own identities. In particular, his chapter foregrounds postmodern identity politics, the difficulties inherent in any attempt to define notions of race, and questions of genre.

Éva Tettenborn focuses on Diane McKinney-Whetstone's *Blues Dancing* and *Leaving Cecil Street* and argues that the portrayal of middle-class characters in these novels is not a refusal to challenge social circumstances but instead a form of protesting stereotypical ideas of black communities past and present. The chapter poses the question of how received ideas of class, the challenging of which has informed African American literature as a whole to a greater degree in recent years, can be complicated, even deconstructed, in the classroom by assigning some of McKinney-Whetstone's works to show the significance of deviating from a tradition of ambivalent or negative portrayals of the African American middle class.

Engaging in a project that crosses centuries to describe an ongoing literary "conversation," **Robin Smiles** discusses Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and Jill Nelson's *Volunteer Slavery*, arguing that Jacobs's slave narrative serves as a background onto which Nelson projects her own recent memoir. Most intriguingly, Smiles points to the two authors' similar mingling of the genre of the memoir with that of a contemporaneous popular form (the sentimental romance for Jacobs and

“sistah fiction” for Nelson) to illustrate the ways in which black women writers respond to one another (and to their readers) not just thematically but also stylistically.

Sinéad Moynihan’s chapter considers the relationships among racial identity, passing, authorship, and authenticity. She juxtaposes Percival Everett’s 2001 novel *Erasure* and Hannah Crafts’ *The Bondswoman’s Narrative*, a long-lost manuscript discovered by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and published in 2002. While the *Narrative*, believed to have been written in the 1850s, perhaps does not technically qualify as emerging literature, Moynihan argues nevertheless that the discourses surrounding the presentation of its long-dead author to a reading public anxious to attribute authenticity to a found document raise many of the issues so critical to today’s debates over literary racial authenticity. The chapter engages questions of the expectations of readers and critics based on knowledge of an author’s (racial) identity.

Josh Lukin offers a reading of Colson Whitehead’s most recent novel, *Apex Hides the Hurt*, using an approach grounded in both classicist studies and disability studies. Lukin’s essay considers *Apex Hides the Hurt* as a revision of Sophocles’s *Philoctetes* and delineates how Whitehead’s novel brings together Greek mythology, African American history, and contemporary concerns about inclusiveness. This chapter’s inter- and multidisciplinary approach is especially useful for those who wish to incorporate fiction by African American writers into courses other than those specifically focusing on African American literature.

Finally, **Stephanie Brown’s** conclusion to the volume reflects on the notion of new African American writers’ awareness both of the tradition within which their work must be situated and of the forces that reify the strictures of the African American canon. Brown reads Colson Whitehead’s *The Intuitionist*, itself possibly the most nearly canonical of the texts discussed here, as a meditation on the impact of the pedagogical process on the writer and the reader of new black fiction. Brown concludes that although *The Intuitionist* lends itself most obviously to inclusion in a course in postmodern fiction, it can also usefully be employed as a way to get students to think about what is at stake in defining what it is that African American literature is supposed to “do” in the classroom of the twenty-first century.

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PART I—CALL:
TOWARDS A NEW AFRICAN AMERICAN
LITERARY AESTHETIC

CHAPTER ONE

AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE
AND THE POST-SOUL AESTHETIC:
TEACHING THE POETRY OF KEVIN YOUNG
AND ELIZABETH ALEXANDER

JENNIFER DRAKE

Introduction: The Post-Soul Aesthetic

In an essay entitled “Meditations on ‘Mecca’: Gwendolyn Brooks and the Responsibilities of the Black Poet,” Elizabeth Alexander writes that “African Americans rarely metaphorically slay their elders, because we understand the very real struggles and risks of those elders to make their voices heard and clear the way for us. So in a way the historical challenge, to understand context, is unusually great for black writers” (378). Alexander’s first sentence here can be understood as a statement about the tension that informs her poetry, as well as Kevin Young’s: how to honor literary and cultural ancestry while making it new in order to keep it real? Or, in her words, how to balance “the matter of listening to the muse, of being utterly ‘free to choose,’” with a sense of responsibility for “larger concerns that can at times come to constitute the muse’s voice” (379)? The second sentence offers an answer, or a strategy: understanding how texts shape and are shaped by historical contexts is essential to the reading and writing *and constant renewal* of African American literature. New contexts create new texts, and require them. “Making it new” doesn’t slay the ancestors; it means resurrecting and addressing them. Kevin Young’s and Elizabeth Alexander’s poems and poetics are firmly grounded in the richness of the African American literary tradition. At the same time, their poems and poetics express the situational aesthetics of what Mark Anthony Neal, in *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic*, has dubbed the post-soul generation. Teaching Young’s and

Alexander's poetry as representing a post-soul aesthetic opens up new perspectives on the tradition.

Building on Nelson George's use of the term "post-soul" to describe black popular culture of the post-blaxploitation era, Neal borrows the term to describe the historical location and cultural work of artists and intellectuals who grew up after the Civil Rights and Black Power movements:

[These are] folks who live in the fissures of two radically different social paradigms . . . born between the 1963 March on Washington and the [1978] Bakke [challenge to affirmative action], children of soul . . . came to maturity in the age of Reagonomics and experienced the change from urban industrialism to deindustrialism, from segregation to desegregation, from essential notions of blackness to metanarratives on blackness. . . . [Children of soul grew up in an era] defined by the incidence of black middle-class flight, a substantial deterioration of black public life, structural transformations in the economy and the labor force . . . [as well as the] proliferation of mass media, the corporate annexation of black popular expression, and the first substantial presence—both negative and positive—of black images within the mass media. (102)¹

In *Soul Babies*, Neal argues that the post-soul generation has developed a post-soul aesthetic that is shaped by and responds to these material conditions. Like Michael Eric Dyson in *Holler If You Hear Me: Searching for Tupac Shakur*, Neal seeks to distinguish between the strategies and struggles of the civil rights generation and the hip-hop generation, especially as those strategies and struggles are expressed in the arts.

According to Neal, the post-soul aesthetic "has been fueled by three distinct critical desires, namely, the reconstitution of community, particularly one that is critically engaged with the cultural and political output of black communities; a rigorous form of self and communal critique; and the willingness to undermine or deconstruct the most negative symbols and stereotypes of black life via the use and distribution

¹ Neal also argues, as Alexander suggests in her poem "Fugue," that the post-soul generation received "the history of the modern civil rights movement and its brash and angry offspring, the Black Power and feminist movements" as stories passed down from their elders or as very early childhood memories (*Soul Babies* 100). The post-soul generation's pop culture touchstones include "*Roots* . . . multicultural school textbooks . . . Jesse Jackson's two historic presidential campaigns, the rebirth and rise of the nation of Islam, the first black Miss America, the child murders in Atlanta, Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*, the liberation of Nelson Mandela, and the publication of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*" (100).

of those very same symbols and stereotypes” (120). Neal also suggests that much of this critical work either occurs in the realm of popular culture, or imaginatively engages the genres, languages and images of popular culture.² Kevin Young makes similar assertions, also employing the term post-soul, in his manifesto-introduction to the anthology *Giant Steps: The New Generation of African American Writers*, which begins with Alexander’s work and ends with Young’s. While one could debate whether or not we currently inhabit a post-soul moment post-9/11 (Nelson George says no in his 2004 book *Post-Soul Nation*), the term “post-soul aesthetic” still provides a useful lens for teachers and students to consider how young African American writers are engaging and extending the African American literary tradition.

In this essay, I will more fully characterize and discuss the post-soul aesthetic and its usefulness as a critical lens in the literature classroom through an examination of two poetry collections: Kevin Young’s *Jelly Roll: A Blues* (2003) and Elizabeth Alexander’s *Antebellum Dream Book* (2001). While I could have chosen to write about the work of their peers Thomas Sayers Ellis, Terrence Hayes, Tracie Morris, Harryette Mullen, ZZ Packer, Natasha Trethewey, or Colson Whitehead, I focus on Young and Alexander for three reasons. First, they represent two different locations within the post-soul generation. Alexander was born ten years earlier than Young, and because her book *The Venus Hottentot* was published in 1990, when Young was still a Harvard undergraduate, she is both an influence on Young and a generational peer. In a 2004 e-mail correspondence with me, Alexander wrote that “I met Kevin Young and Colson Whitehead when they were college students at a reading I gave at Harvard after [*The*] *Venus* [*Hottentot*], and many people of their sub-generation have told me how much *Venus* sort of ushered in a new era and new poetic possibility for them, in many of the ways ‘post-soul’ seems to suggest. Thomas Sayers Ellis sez it was their *She’s Gotta Have It*, which always flattered me.”

Second, in addition to writing poetry, both Young and Alexander engage in intellectual work by editing anthologies and collected works, and by writing essays about African American literature and culture. The

² The conversation about the use of popular and folk sources in African American literature is not new; debates about this topic informed the Harlem Renaissance, and the Black Arts movement embraced this particular strategy for making poetry accessible and relevant. See Alain Locke’s *The New Negro* anthology, and Black Arts essays “Towards a Black Aesthetic” by Hoyt Fuller, “The Black Aesthetic: Introduction” by Addison Gayle, Jr., and “The Black Arts Movement” by Larry Neal.

scope of their achievement has gained them recognition in the literary and academic worlds. Each has a home at a well-known press: Knopf for Young, and Graywolf for Alexander. Each has won prestigious awards: Young's awards include a Guggenheim, an NEA fellowship, a McDowell fellowship, and the Paterson Poetry Prize, while Alexander has won a Guggenheim, two Yaddo fellowships, three Pushcart prizes, and the inaugural Jackson Poetry Prize. Each holds a high-profile academic position: Young is the Atticus Haygood professor of English and creative writing, and curator of the Raymond Danowski Poetry Library at Emory University, while Alexander is a professor of African American Studies at Yale University.

Third, despite these successes, neither Young nor Alexander has received much attention from literary critics. The MLA Bibliography lists only one short article on Alexander's work, a comparison of Alexander's first book *The Venus Hottentot* with Guyanese writer Grace Nichols' *The Fat Black Woman Poems*. And while the MLA Bibliography lists interviews with Young, as it does for Alexander, there are no articles at all on his work.³ This essay begins to address this gap in the scholarship.

Synopsis of Kevin Young's *Jelly Roll*

In *Jelly Roll*, his third book of poetry, Kevin Young continues a multi-faceted engagement with African American cultural production by writing a blues book about—what else?—good love gone bad. *Jelly Roll* is divided into three sections, each of which records a different stage of love: the joyous and sexy early stages, the emotional chaos of breaking up, and the slow move towards finding comfort and happiness as an individual rather than as part of a couple. And like a good lover or a good singer, Young uses language to seduce. His writing is both colloquial and literary, infused with historical and pop cultural allusions, providing multiple points of entry. He makes use of classic blues repetition, but he also tinkers with sound, layering assonance and consonance and rhyme towards

³ The MLA Bibliography lists sources on Young by Arnold; Rowell; and "Conversation" in *Indiana Review*. Brief reviews of Young's books appear in *Library Journal*, *Booklist*, *Publisher's Weekly*, and *Poetry*. The MLA Bibliography lists sources on Alexander by Nisco; Phillip; and Rose. (It is interesting to note that Rose, the noted hip-hop scholar, was Alexander's undergraduate roommate.) Two substantial interviews are posted on Alexander's website, one of which appeared in the fall 2006 issue of the *AWP Chronicle* (Keenan and LeBlanc). Brief reviews of Alexander's books appear in *Library Journal*, *Booklist*, *Publisher's Weekly*, *Poetry*, and *The New York Times Book Review*.

surprise, even humor, like a hip-hop DJ. He doesn't overwhelm, but employs short lines and couplets to craft intimate poems that draw readers close while offering white space, room to breathe. And, like a blues performer or rapper, he risks being too comedic, too tragic, too over-the-top, and so puts on a good show.

Critical Discussion of Kevin Young's *Jelly Roll*

Young's *Jelly Roll* clearly illustrates—and links—two hallmarks of the post-soul aesthetic: a fan-critic's engagement with popular culture, and a collector's non-nostalgic orientation to the past. Mark Anthony Neal writes that the post-soul generation understands popular culture “as a conduit to introduce marginalia, on its own merit, into mainstream discourse” and as a primary source of shared memory and history (121). Young develops this point: “Ultimately, what folk culture was to the Harlem Renaissance, popular culture is to the post-soul writer: a common language, a structure that can be referred to” (*Giant Steps* 7). Music, for Young, is the richest pop culture source, an aspect of post-soul aesthetics which is definitely nothing new.⁴ Young argues that for his generation, hip-hop is the most influential musical form, and that hip-hop should be understood primarily as “an aesthetic approach, a flexible form, which, at its best, is unafraid to take from any source” (*Giant Steps* 7). For Young, this means that post-soul writers “use quite comfortably, hip-hop's aesthetic and sense of history—that is, that history is ever-present, the past easily taken from (‘sampled’), repeated (‘looped’), collaged together, unified often only by voice and by the rhythm of day-to-day life (‘flow’ and ‘beat’)” (6).

⁴ In the following quotation, Henderson lists ten ways in which music informs Black poetry:

- The casual, generalized reference
- The careful allusion to song titles
- The quotations from a song
- The adaptation of song forms
- The use of tonal memory as poetic structure
- The use of precise musical notation in the text
- The use of an assumed emotional response incorporated into the poem: the ‘subjective correlative’
- The musician as subject/poem/history/myth
- The use of language from the jazz life
- The poem as ‘score’ or ‘chart.’ (47)

He then provides ample illustration of these points. In relation to Young's work, points 1,4, 7, and 9 are most salient.

This hip-hop approach to history informs the archival impulse of the post-soul aesthetic, which is rooted in collection but is not necessarily nostalgic about the past. Neal suggests that post-soul writers and artists “borrow profusely from black modern projects in an effort to derive new meanings more in tune with contemporary experiences” (*Soul* 17). Young glosses this point further by describing post-soul writers as “engaged in and with history in a way the Harlem Renaissance was engaged with origins . . . and Black Arts with politics and identity . . . [W]hat further distinguishes the writers . . . is a willingness to find ancestors anywhere the ghost takes them” (*Giant Steps* 6, 8). In *Jelly Roll* the ghost takes Young to the blues, and a focus question, then, is to consider how Young draws upon the blues, including the historical context in which the blues emerged, to write poems that feel so contemporary, so post-soul.

Young clearly situates *Jelly Roll* in the blues tradition, a form of African American cultural expression in which the individual voice takes center stage while remaining rooted in collective experience. As Sherley Ann Williams writes, “The particularized, individual experience rooted in a common reality is the primary thematic characteristic of all blues songs no matter what their structure” (125). *Jelly Roll* introduces its alliance with the blues tradition from the beginning. First, Young chooses “jelly roll” for his title, which is a blues slang term denoting sexual intercourse and either male or female genitalia. Second, under the dust jacket—which depicts a clip art gramophone—the hardcover edition of the book presents a collage of blues sheet music, including “The ‘Jelly Roll’ Blues,” “The Yellow Dog Blues,” and “Blues My Naughty Sweetie Gives to Me.” Third, Young places a clip art photo of legendary blues musician Robert Johnson’s face just after the acknowledgments page, leaving it uncaptioned, surrounded by white space, to be read as a kind of invocation or dedication. And fourth, on the following page, Young includes a lengthy quotation from the lyrics of Johnson’s “Kind-Hearted Woman” that introduces the conflict that emerges in the second section of the book: “I love my baby/but my baby don’t love me” (1-2).

Amidst these introductions to the blues tradition and invocations of *Jelly Roll*’s debt to it, Young breaks with—and extends—that tradition in two key ways. First, a scan of the table of contents reveals that Young’s poem titles almost always reference music. However, rather than referencing the blues, with just a few exceptions the titles reference classical music, hip-hop, jazz, country, and types of dances—“Cantata,” “Boasts,” “Ragtime,” “Honky Tonk,” “Cakewalk,” and so on. The poems’ connections to their titles often seems to be tangential; the titles serve more as a point of departure for composition rather than a point of

thematic focus. This clue to Young's compositional approach aligns with my second point. Young lists himself as the book's composer and arranger on the title page. If the post-soul aesthetic understands popular culture as a source of shared memory and history, and collects materials from the past with pleasure and without nostalgia, then "composer and arranger" is clearly a post-soul way of understanding authorship. In the context of the post-soul generation's engagement with hip-hop, this composing-and-arranging mode of authorship should be understood as resembling the work of the hip-hop DJ, with its emphasis on what scholar Tricia Rose has called "musical collage" (*Black Noise* 54). As such, Young's multiple invocations of the blues tradition at the beginning of *Jelly Roll* can be read as rap sampling, which, according to Rose, "is a process of cultural literacy and intertextual reference . . . [that functions] as a challenge to know these sounds, to make connections . . . [to affirm] black musical history and locate . . . these 'past' sounds in the 'present'" (*Black Noise* 89).

As DJ of *Jelly Roll*, Young connects the blues past to the hip-hop present, performatively arguing that rap is our contemporary blues. However, while this move acknowledges African American collective experience as the grounding for the blues, hip-hop, and *Jelly Roll*, Young also clearly situates the speaking subject of these blues poems in a multicultural community. The speaker of the *Jelly Roll* poems has been schooled in many expressive traditions, and freely samples them all. This explains the poem titles and their range of musical references. It also explains the wide-ranging use of allusion in the poems, which assumes (and helps to create) a similarly multicultural audience. Some poems incorporate tropes from African American literature and culture; for example, "Cakewalk" uses "Canada" to signify freedom, but with a personal twist: "you are a Canada/someplace north/I have been, for years/headed & not//known it" (13-17). Other poems make reference to popular culture, often in playful ways. "Boogie Woogie" gets silly: "I'm kazoo for you//fool, counting/down the days//like those numbers/before films, a glimpse//that once, before Abbott/& Costello//a screen test/lady winked & was//gone—spliced in" (12-21). More seriously, "Fantasia" alludes to the 1940 Disney film in which Mickey Mouse appears as a sorcerer's apprentice who cannot control his magic: "Day disappears//like a dove//into the dark//of the magician's hat--/*abracadabra/alakazam*—my hands//flutter about//offstage, lost under/night's false door" (1-9). Traditional literary references include those to the Adam and Eve myth, humorously evoked in the context of "Boasts"—"Wouldn't be no fig leaf/if I was Adam//but a palm tree" (1-3)—as well as to Shakespeare and

Homer, as in “Nocturne:” “I call you Paris,/Telemachus, whatever//that means. I mean/sweet hijacker, you make me//want to make you/mine” (9-12). Blues references include train travel imagery, as in the poems “Locomotive Songs,” “Threnody,” and “Cotillion.” The collection also includes many references to God and Satan, often updated for the twenty-first century through the image of the television as altar, as in the poem “Vespers.”

In the context of this DJ’s swaggering stance towards the materials of the past—playing this stuff is the way to preserve it, not displaying it behind glass—it is worth noting that Young sees the blues as a contemporary form of the lyric poem in its focus on emotional experience, an idea perhaps most fully expressed in the collection’s moving sonnet sequence “Sleepwalking Psalms.” He writes that “for me the blues provide a fresh way to express the lyric poem’s mix of emotion and intensity, all the while evoking not so much strict autobiography as a personal metaphor for life’s daily struggles” (*Blues Poems* 12). Young’s description of “the lyric poem’s mix of emotion and intensity” seems to paraphrase Wordsworth’s definition of the lyric as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings,” but clearly Young is repositioning the lyric in the context of African American music, thereby returning lyric poetry to its musical roots while turning the lyric tradition on its head. In the end, Young’s poems feel so contemporary because he uses the blues as a starting point for mining the power of popular song, a form of poetry that is unafraid of sentiment and mass appeal.

Young’s project in *Jelly Roll* must be understood in the context of the other two books that complete his trilogy. In *Black Maria* (2004) Young writes a film noir in poetry, and in *To Repel Ghosts (The Remix)* (2005), first published as *To Repel Ghosts: Five Sides in B Minor* (2001), Young meditates on the art and life of painter and graffiti artist Jean-Michel Basquiat. In this trilogy, Young accomplishes two post-soul goals. He makes poetry inspired by very American genres—the blues, film noir, and graffiti—and in so doing, reveals the poetry in popular culture forms. And in approaching writing as remixing—DJ authorship as an act of excavation and renewal—Young emphasizes the centrality of African American contributions to American culture, while adding new material to the mix.

Synopsis of Elizabeth Alexander’s *Antebellum Dream Book*

Like Kevin Young, Elizabeth Alexander passionately engages African American history and cultural traditions in her writing. In Alexander’s

third collection, *Antebellum Dream Book*, the fugue, a word rooted in flight and holding multiple meanings, provides the fulcrum for her explorations.⁵ In psychology, fugue is a dissociative state characterized by amnesia, identity confusion and re-creation, and sudden travel away from home. In music, fugue is a polyphonic form in which themes are tonally established and then continuously worked: imitated, expanded, layered, opposed, re-established. Sampling and looping the fugue's psychiatric and musical meanings, *Antebellum Dream Book* is a black girl's pillow book, all about reality's slippery origins: how past selves and others haunt our mutable histories, how hormones make us crazy-visionary, how pop culture detritus lurks in our brains just waiting to throw 3 a.m. parties, how motherhood gathers our pleasures and fears. Alexander's dream book explores the strangeness of the familiar in three sections. The first section presents poems that connect—and differentiate between—personal history, family history, communal history and national history. These poems constitute a critical reflection on the complex functioning of origin stories. The second section is composed of surreal dream poems narrated in the first person and strongly shaped by pregnancy, represented here as fugue state extraordinaire. The third section includes two long multi-part poems, one written in Muhammed Ali's voice and the other focusing on giving birth and the early days of motherhood. Both of these poems reflect Alexander's ongoing preoccupation with using dramatic monologues and poem sequences to write African American history, including her personal history and her family's history.

Critical Discussion of Elizabeth Alexander's *Antebellum Dream Book*

Like Young's, Alexander's post-soul poetics is archival but rarely nostalgic, and takes popular culture as a primary source of shared memory and history. A focus question regarding *Antebellum Dream Book*, then, is to consider how and why Alexander introduces the concept of fugue as a post-soul strategy for rethinking memory and history at multiple levels: personal, familial, communal and national. In this context, I want to argue that *Antebellum Dream Book* records the process of making and remaking post-soul subjectivity, and that the speakers of the poems can be read as various selves or parts of self that together comprise "Elizabeth Alexander." While Alexander is not a confessional poet, her poems often

⁵ Alexander's other poetry collections include *The Venus Hottentot* (1990), *Body of Life* (1996), and *American Sublime* (2005).

take an autobiographical stance, whether that stance is rooted in a childhood memory, or in the reiteration or creation of a dream, or in an intellectual or political commitment, as in the poems that dialogue with works of art or take on the voices of historical figures.

However, as Alexander tells Deborah Keenan and Diane LeBlanc in a 2002 public dialogue, the poems should be read as *transformations* of autobiographical material:

A lot of my poetry comes from “personal” or autobiographical material. What is the transformation that has to happen in order for those details and the realm of the personal to work within a poem? I can’t really say that I could anatomize it, but I know there’s a transformation that has to take place . . . [The “I” is] one level removed, or alchemized. Or converted, for the purposes of poems. (n.p.)

Alexander’s understanding of the alchemized “I” illustrates a central idea in contemporary theories of life writing. As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson argue in *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, the autobiographical “I” is a complicated construction that must be differentiated from the historical “I,” and is comprised of the narrating “I,” the narrated “I,” and the ideological “I” (59). Alexander is arguing that her poems alchemize the historical “I” into the narrating “I” and the narrated “I.” The concept of the ideological “I,” which Smith and Watson, after Paul Smith, define as “the concept of personhood culturally available to the narrator,” allows us to consider how Alexander’s location in the post-soul generation plays a role in this alchemization (61)

One way that Alexander creates post-soul subjectivity in *Antebellum Dream Book* is by introducing amnesia, through the concept of fugue, into the process of subject formation. In a 1994 essay called “Memory, Community, Voice,” Alexander tells the following story about amnesia:

When my brother and I were small, we used to “play” amnesia. “What’s your name?” one or the other of us would say, and the reply would be, “I don’t remember.” “Where do you live? Who are your parents?” and again, “I don’t remember.” We thought this was incredibly funny, because, after all, how in the world could you not know who you were or where you came from? I think we had seen too many soap operas where heroes and heroines got knocked on the head and forgot everything, leaving them to either reinvent themselves or be coaxed back to familiarity by anxious loved ones. That was how we ended the game: the memoried one would tutor the amnesiac back . . .

I loved being the amnesiac. I loved the idea that you could make yourself up, or that someone would love you enough to tell you the story of your