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A Celebration of Contemporary African American Poets: "We are the Image of Pride Worth Imitating"

CYRUS CASSELLS

"Being a Black American can be real cultural capital when traveling, because the world sees us with more appreciation than our own country does. We are the image of pride worth imitating."

—Shayla Lawson

"Poetry is an independent ambassador for conscience: it answers to no one, it crosses borders without a passport, and it speaks the truth."

—Ellen Hinsey

For this latest issue of the *New American Studies Journal*, poet, cultural leader, and literary light, Dante Micheaux, and I have assembled the work of significant African American poets, including Pulitzer Prize winners and finalists Rita Dove, Tyehimba Jess, Adrian Matejka, and Evie Shockley, alongside up-and-coming poets just beginning to make their mark, such as Roger Reeves, whose second book, *Best Barbarian*, has received widespread critical acclaim, including the NAACP Image Award and Griffin International Poetry Prize.

In this special issue, readers will find a far-ranging, allusive contemporary poetry that doesn't conform to any stereotypical notions of Black American life and culture: Greek mythology, Hansel and Gretel, vintage fashion, the profound mysteries of motherhood, and the deep longing for peace in a fractured world are all presented and described in this work with evocative power—with a scrupulous attention to detail and to the world-at-large.

Here are intrepid African American poets who work with vigor and integrity—despite current right-wing attempts in the United States at cultural erasure, at whitewashing the immensity and longstanding horror of American slave history via mindless distortions, propaganda, and out-of-control state and local book banning:

we are numerous
loud with ancestors & fate
our flesh a thick lace
of tissue & memory
our bone as bond & precious
as a promise ...

black lives are
cobwebbed in cliché
& generative to the nth power
a contradiction in terms
which is to say poetry
(Evie Shockley, "rhizomathematics")

Once spectacular enemies, Germany and the United States now move forward as dedicated co-dreamers and stalwart allies in a 21st century still imperiled by white supremacy, ongoing wars, and looming illiberalism and injustice. The spirited, truth-telling African American poets gathered here continue, through craft and ingenuity, to lift the flag of veracity and humanity, to proffer wisdom, revelation, and altruism in a bigoted and combative world.

In a fraught time globally, let me express my gratitude to Ellen Hinsey, Andrew Gross, and the University of Göttingen for making this vital gesture of show-and-tell goodwill, this purposeful literary ambassadorship possible.

Cyrus Cassells
Coyoacan, Mexico City
March 10, 2024

Interview with Cyrus Cassells

1. The editors of NASJ are honored that you and Dante Micheaux have undertaken to curate this special issue of poetry by Black American writers. This is a very important moment for poetry in general and the work and community of Black American writers in particular. Your first book was chosen by the National Poetry Series competition in 1981. Would you speak a bit about your thoughts on Black American poetry as it has developed over the last few decades?

Cassells: In 2024, I feel Black American poetry is at a truly dynamic stage in terms of eloquence, topicality, range, and public accessibility. When I began my career in the early 80s (African American poet and novelist Al Young chose my first volume for the relatively new National Poetry Series), there was a tangible wave of goodwill and excitement about the potential of Black poetry in the States, but also a sense of a limited network. Hardworking, but a bit isolated, we 80s Black poets were far less organized and cohesive as a group than the literary community is today. Charles Rowell's vibrant journal *Callaloo* was a key champion of African American poetry and fostered the work of Black newcomers, such as myself and two indelible voices, two-time National Book Award finalist Marilyn Nelson, and Rita Dove, featured here, who won the Pulitzer Prize in 1987 for her poignant cycle of poems about her grandparents, *Thomas and Beulah.* In our focus on travel, family, gender, sexuality, contemporary urban life, and pertinent African American history, the verse we forged in the Reagan-Bush years was concerned with the domestic and personal as well as the political and visionary. From the 90s on, I think phenomena such as ubiquitous social media, lively blogs and substacks, Poetry in the Schools, Hip-Hop, the Slam movement, and, of course, the primacy of the far-reaching internet, have helped to popularize and kindle the power and availability of Black Poetry.

2. Do you see a particular turning point in the last decade? Last year marked the ten-year anniversary of the Black Lives Matter movement. While poetry is, by definition, an expression of individual vision, do you see a particular aesthetic or aesthetic tendencies that stand out in the work of younger Black American writers?

Cassells: Regrettably, reactionary Trump-era and MAGA politics have led to a tsunami of censorship and outright erasure of Black History and culture alongside LGBTIA culture, eroding and diluting the gains engendered by the Black Lives Matter movement. Despite right-wing rhetoric, egregious legislation, and a too-often stalled sense of justice, the work of younger African American poets continues to be bold and undaunted. In the work of younger poets, I find a strong sense of integrity and self-possession, a willingness to explore world mythology and culture, human psychology, and bedeviling ghosts of historical and private trauma. These are vivid, reliable poets who routinely defy stereotypes, at-the-ready bards who don't cotton to being told how to write or "perform" their Blackness. As 21st century descendants of slaves, their work addresses that colossal and forbidding legacy; their poems investigate the bogeymen of angst and longing, and, in contrast, shareable joy and celebration.

3. *How have important organizations such as Cave Canem (https://cavecanempoets.org) contributed to a sense of artistic community and agency?*

Cassells: I'd say that my most potent teaching experience has been with Cave Canem, the African American Poets workshop, created by poets Toi Derricotte and Cornelius Eady. It has forever altered the landscape of American literature by creating a powerful support system for the full range of voices within our community. This organization, which has garnered both a National Book Award and a National Book Critics Circle Award for its literary gallantry and impactful service, has helped to foster a whole new generation of Black Poets who have gone on to attain the utmost acclaim, including the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award. It was my pleasure and good fortune to serve on the Cave Canem faculty from 2005 to 2007, where I first met Dante Micheaux and so many other significant poets, both as students and as inspiring colleagues. Teaching over sixty poets at the summer sessions three years in a row, listening to them share exhilarating, on-fire work, I realized that I was witnessing the birth of a whole new generation of fearless and accomplished Black poets. The space Cave Canem provided was a rare safe-house, a refuge from colorism, class, a respite from the rampant social incomprehension and rejection faced by many Black intellectuals, scientists, and artists—too often bullied or traumatized by the inference or

outright accusation that their intellectual/artistic pursuits render them "not Black enough." I remember the open-hearted welcome I received from Walter Mosley, the great detective writer, who was my first-session housemate at the annual gathering in the Pittsburgh area: "It feels like you've always been here, Cyrus."

4. *We are currently facing a moment of compounded violence: both domestic, the violence of States against their own peoples—such as American police violence against Black lives—but also international violence and war. Many of the poems in this selection attempt to come to terms with this violence, expressing the toll that it takes on the intimate life of the individual. This is poignantly expressed, for example, in the moving poem in this issue "rhizomathematics" by Evie Shockley, which expresses the emotional toll of violence on the physical level. The poem begins:* that bloody muscle/in my left chest/contains no numbers/of heartbeats or more/painful contractions/but it lives them/ holds no bleak statistics/of black murders/ but it bears them—"

Could you talk about the challenges involved in representing violence and perhaps some of the strategies adopted by the poets featured in this special issue? Do we as artists facing violence also become artistically entrapped by it?

Cassells: Police brutality, relentless gun violence, and the calamitous ghosts of lynchings and excessive incarcerations remain constants in American life: Trauma has a tendency to disrupt and cause language to falter, to break down, so fragmentation is one puissant technique, along with staggered lines, spare punctuation, brusque enjambment, and starling juxtapositions that Black poets in this special issue employ to convey the deeper impact of persecution, violence and dispossession:

> where are the fresh
> images to feed the elegies
> the blood is never
> blue but so old so
> overexposed it isn't even red
> just dried & cracked black
> (evie shockley, "rhizomathematics")

Pandemic, allegory, and apocalypse haunt Roger Reeves's "The Beginning of Terror":

The moon goes blind lost in the wheat.

The dogs refuse to beg the dead
For their bright rags and unused bones.
The dead refuse to grave, and roam.
In black gowns, the crows head

To the *flu-infected cities*.
The beginning of terror: not
Just the angels and committees
But the dew and sun's pity

For war war war, and yet the sheep
Run, apostles of hunger,
To the shepherd with his hand full
Of blood and grain.

As readers eager to comprehend troubling issues, we need more than blunt realism and exacting detail and documentation; we need rhythm and imaginative imagery, as images can whisk us past intellect, past fraudulent rationalizations for cruelty and excessive force. Rhythm, Robert Hass asserts in an essay, is "revolutionary ground."

I think the danger for poets is in merely replicating violence and shock, sans operational wisdom or clarity, and thereby, inciting the re-opening of wounds—without actually providing, in vital language, an equivalent to solace, healing, to much-needed moral and social epiphanies.

5. *While the body is on the front line of impact in many poems in this selection, there is also a quality of intimacy with history and "the other" that stands out. In your own work, and the work of Rita Dove, one is reminded of Czesław Miłosz's famous lines*: "The purpose of poetry is to remind us/ how difficult

it is to remain just one person/ for our house is open, there are no keys in the doors,/ and invisible guests come in and out at will."

Could you talk about where "the other" enters into poetry in the form of meaningful encounters and past events?

Cassells: Love trouble and finding a suitable vocabulary for our first romantic jousts and foibles is where most of us begin as poets. Black American writers are no different from other questing humans in terms of crucial encounters serving as vibrant testing-grounds or clashing (but illuminating) arenas. The messiness and mysteries of human interactions, large and small, naturally lead to a search for sanity and psychological clarity. I think most Black poetry frankly rejects solipsism and the Romantic ideal of the poet as solitary priest of nature, in favor of community, altruism, and articulated love, while maintaining a lucid balance between the alert, dedicated individual and the heft and clamor of the collective.

As it turns out, the Milosz quote was originally the epigraph for my forthcoming first novel, *My Gingerbread Shakespeare*, about the life of a fictional Harlem Renaissance poet and playwright. The quote seemed appropriate in terms of the protagonist Maceo Mitchell's many travels and his acclaimed work in the theater. Since puberty, my second recognized talent has been acting, so masking, role-playing, and energizing persona-work come easily to me as a poet and novelist. Likewise, a fair amount of focus on otherness and demonstrable kinship is involved in my work as a Catalan and Italian translator.

6. You have entitled this special feature "We are the image of pride worth imitating," taken from your epigraph by the poet Shayla Lawson. With this you engage the painful reality that outside the United States Black Americans experience that the "world sees us with more appreciation than our own country does." This has long been the case for Black writers, with major figures such as W.E.B. Dubois, Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, Richard Wright being well-known examples. But this dynamic continues, and one thinks of Audre Lorde's reception in Germany, and the experiences of many other contemporary writers—

Cassells: The anti-intellectualism deplored by Richard Wright in his Depression era memoir *American Hunger* as the "American lust for trash" remains quite a spiky dynamic and a longstanding deterrent for Black cultural and intellectual growth. Certainly, Europe has long served as a viable refuge from the New World's stubborn hierarchies and poisonous racial stereotyping. International discourse and inclusive community have proven liberating for Black writers, so often accustomed to being perceived, through a bigoted "Dixie-driven" lens, as less than worthy—even sub-human.

My personal happiness and artistic expansion have been greatly enhanced by living in Florence, Mexico City, Montreal, Paris, Rome, Tokyo, and working on occasion in Barcelona and Mallorca as a Catalan translator. My expatriate periods have definitely increased the scope of my life's vocation in poetry and prose. As an African American abroad, fascinated by the Iberian Peninsula since adolescence, heading to Andalusia, to Cordoba, Granada, and Seville to explore Lorca's legacy and flamenco culture intensified my intellectual curiosity and yen for adventure. Learning to read and to translate Catalan, one of the four great languages of Spain, a Romance language that was, for a vexing portion of the 20th century, callously banned from public use ("Don't bark! Speak the language of the empire!") appealed to my sense of justice as an African American artist, vigilant and engaged with the world.

Let me share a pertinent tale about the reach of Black American culture. In summer of 1986, not long after Chernobyl, I traveled to the former Soviet Union with a group of American journalists and writers. We visited literary shrines, such as Tolstoy's house, Yasnaya Polyana, and Chekhov's house in Yalta, but I also took it upon myself (along with a Russian-speaking American colleague) to bring flowers to Boris Pasternak's grave. On a white night in mid-July, the cemetery in Peredelkino (the writer's colony on the outskirts of Moscow) was enough of a confounding labyrinth that my scholarly friend Martha and I had to enlist the help of Russian visitors, who gallantly led us to the impeccably carved grave, where our newfound hosts recited Pasternak's poetry by heart, reminding us that *Doctor Zhivago* had still yet to be published in Russia (that came two years later in 1988). These courteous Russian poetry enthusiasts insisted on driving us back to Moscow (a risky thing to do—even in Gorbachev's Russia, as "fraternizing" with foreigners was definitely discouraged). In the backseat, the shyest among our rescuers asked

me, out of the blue, in heartfelt, tentative, totally charming English: "Do you know Richard Wright?"

7. In difficult times poets face the eternal dilemma of how to balance directness in utterance with the mysterious demands of craft. Tommye Blount's poem "The Rose Dorothea" ends with this question, echoing the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam's credo that a poem should be an Egyptian boat of the dead, filled with everything it needs for the long journey. Blount poses this question directly: "I'll write it: a poem is a big schooner/ will it harm the craft to put in so plainly?"

Cassells: Mandelstam's Egyptian boat posits poetry as transporting and talismanic, verse as profoundly usable and sturdy, but complex, artful—the opposite of propaganda or sloganeering. There's room for agile indirection (Dickinson's "tell it slant") as well as unabashed assertion, trumpeted chivalry and protest, and outright opposition to injustice. Not just coruscating nuance and ambiguity, the time-tested allure of compelling imagery and verbal music, but upfront emotion and ready-to-roll storytelling remain indispensable poetic tools for investigating and limning the world.

8. Despite reflections on the struggle with violence and injustice that the poems in this issue address, we also find instances of the hope for grace and peace. We see this in poems such as Roger Reeves's moving elegy for Martin Luther King, "Without the Darkness Opening" and Tyehimba Jess's "One Black Man's Prayer for Peace." In Vievee Francis's poem "Abandon" we find in a natural metaphor something that could also be a definition for poetry, or how poetry endures through all the dark times: "I planted a tiny garden inside that no one could reach." Could you share your thoughts on poetry as a medium of hope?

Cassells: How to square Dickinson's "Hope is the thing with feathers" with the grim fact that southern slaves were once referred to as "birds of the iron feather"? The "tiny garden" that Vievee Francis refers to speaks to the sacramental, the inviolable in us as a people, despite the sobering specter of nonstop violence endured by indomitable Black citizens in an America continually soured by white supremacy. In a real way, some of these poems are 21st century "courage songs" that spur readers to keep up the ennobling project

of empathy, of ongoing identification with the suffering and yearning of others.

As a seeker and a poet who would lift the banner of brotherhood in verse, when I think of hope, it's always linked to inspiriting action and revealing words. For example, my cousin and uncle worked for Doctor King and were among his closest friends. My father helped to desegregate West Point. Hope and resilience are in my DNA.

About the author

Is There Room for Another Horse on Your Horse Ranch? (Four Way Books: March 2024) is Cyrus Cassells's latest volume. *Everything in Life is Resurrection: Selected Poems*, 1982-2022 (TCU Press) and *Lorca to the Umpteenth Power* (3: A Taos Press) are forthcoming in 2025 and 2026. Among his honors: a Guggenheim fellowship and a Lambda Literary Award. *The World That the Shooter Left Us* was a Houstonic Book Award finalist and *The Gospel according to Wild Indigo*, a finalist for the NAACP Image Award. His two books of Catalan translations, *Still Life with Children: Selected Poems of Francesc Parcerisas* and *To The Cypress Again and Again: Tribute to Salvador Espriu*, both received the Texas Institute of Letters' biennial Soeurette Diehl Fraser Award for Best Translated Book. The 2021 Poet Laureate of Texas, Cassells is a Regents' and University Distinguished Professor of English at Texas State University.