

Bread and Salt in African American Poetry: 250 Years of Struggle & Song

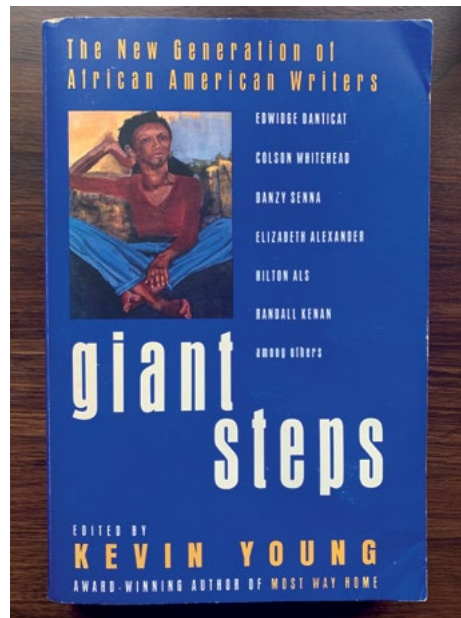
Irvin J. Hunt

The summer before I flew off to college, I was given a book I have taken everywhere I have lived: Kevin Young's *Giant Steps: The New Generation of African American Writers* (2000). Many of the writers gathered between its thick, sizeable pages, spanning and bending all literary genres, were only a handful of years older than myself. With its sea-blue cover and autumnal yellow print, the book represented for me the ocean I was about to cross to enter the next season of my life – my own giant step. I am struck by this now, because racked by a season of what writer Imani Perry has recently called “our hibernation without rest,” our long Covid-exhaustion, nothing feels further from my capacities than a giant step.

Yet it is precisely this narrowing of our energies that makes Young's latest rhapsody to Black expressive arts, *African American Poetry: 250 Years of Struggle & Song* (Library of America, 2020), so necessary, so fitting, for our times. Everything about the volume is an invitation to rest, from the colors on its cover, muted-red and marigold, to the modesty of its title, captured best by the last word – “song.” Without the article, “song” denotes something smaller than a song, something as soft and intimate as “the music the wind / Makes when I run for a bus,” to quote one of the book's bards, Amiri Baraka. It certainly does not suggest anything on the order of John Coltrane's “Giant Steps,” widely regarded as “the most feared song in jazz.” Despite how light it feels to carry, this volume bears giant numbers: 246 Black writers, 675 poems, first published between 1746 and 2020 (even the titular total of “250 years” adds modesty to magnitude), on 1160 pages.

I started my mornings with this beautifully printed book throughout the winter last year. What I loved most was that I could read through it at random, back to front, front to back, middle to middle, a kind of iniminimini-more, and still get the same effect – recharge. I lacked the energy for the long attention required by a novel, but I found I could slip into a poem, as knee-bending as Baraka's, as mind-bending as “Giant Steps,” and be carried through the day. From Lucy

Terry's “Bar's Fight” to Jamila Woods's “Ode to Herb Kent” – whose voice is imagined “as speaking coolly to flames ... spreading the gospel of soul in a time of fire” – none of these works are easy, but all of them give ease. What Young captures best in his only “comprehensive” anthology is the care Black poetry takes with our flames. In the words of George R. Margetson, a little-known writer from the early twentieth century, this is a tradition of song “to the people ... with the people ... for the people ... of the people ... to rouse the people.” It is a tradition of togetherness across time, place, and even pandemics.



Nothing makes this closeness clearer than Young's omission of the publication dates from the ends of the poems (a standard inclusion in anthologies) and his use of painterly names for its eight, numbered sections (one gets the sense they could go on forever). Instead of the Black Arts Era for 1971-1989, Young calls these years “Blue Light Sutras.” Instead of the weighty “Harlem Renaissance” for 1919-1936, Young pulls an image from a poem by Countee Cullen, “the dark tower.” It is no coincidence that “The Dark Tower” was also the name for the legendary gathering space for Black literati during the 1920s – A'Lelia Walker's palatial

townhouse on West 136th Street. An invitation to gather, not to generalize; to specify, not to pigeonhole; unites all the work in this volume, along with its graceful, editorial input.

Lavishly open to all kinds of imagination, these are poems for people who read nothing but poetry and anything but poetry. Young describes contemporary poets like Claudia Rankine as uniquely irreverent about the “old artificial divide between vernacular and formal,” but to read through the volume is to see that this irreverence to divisions of taste was present from the start. Even the most intricately wrought poem of the Ballads of Remembrance (1936-1959) section, Melvin B. Tolson's “Dark Symphony,” is trellised to the vernacular:

Black Crispus Attucks taught

Us how to die

Before white Patrick Henry's bugle breath
Uttered the vertical

Transmitting cry:

'Yea, give me liberty or give me death.'

The inclusion of big names like Tolson next to all but forgotten ones like George Margetson suggests the other contribution this book makes to American letters. Recovery. Take Angelina Grimke, for instance. Grimke is most often anthologized for her anti-lynching play *Rachel* (1916), but Young includes her recently disinterred, never before published, love poems on gay life. Or take the first anthology of African American poetry, *Les Cenelles: Choix de poésies indigènes* (1845), by free Creoles in Louisiana. Young departs from tradition by including translations of these works, written in languages other than English. Above all, Young recovers the notion that African American poetry is not defined by one renaissance here, another one there. It is defined by renaissance in and of itself. When he published *Giant Steps*, he wanted, he said, “to capture the new energy afoot.” Twenty years later, he is still saying, as he told the *Chicago Tribune*, that “people are writing in what I think is a real renaissance of Black poetry and they're leading the way of the renaissance in American poetry, more generally. I think you see the ways contemporary

poets have just exploded in numbers, but also the quality of poetry now.”

That explosive quality is evident in the way Francis Ellen Watkins Harper draws out the tough implications of what it means to live together even as we live apart. I say “draw,” but a better word would be “unspool.” Here is a verse that may very well leave you undone, from Harper’s “A Double Standard” (1895).

*Yes, blame me for my downward course,
But oh! remember well,
Within your homes you press the hand
That led me down to hell.*

Here everyone is a friend of a fiend, six degrees of separation reduced to none.

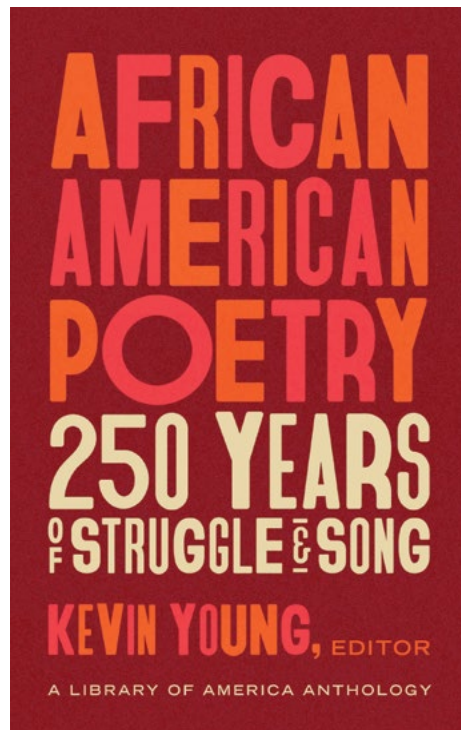
The notion of broad implications in history’s crime and the failure to collectively face this keep reappearing through the volume. This failure sometimes surfaces as cognitive impairments, as in one of Grimke’s most famous poems, “Tenebris,” meaning “darkness” or “after dark.” The paranoid speaker asks about a tree “whose black hand plucks and plucks / At the bricks, ... is it a black hand / Or is it a shadow?” Uncannily touching the tone of our times, this speaker has lost all sense of the divide between fiction and fact, between the dark and a dark body, between a body and the absence of it. When we all share the house that slavery built, ghosts and griefs lurk in every shadow in every corner of every eye. Haunted rooms among the scratch and play of shadows, these poems beseech us to do what we have not been able to do – mourn our dead as if our sanity depends on it. Because our sanity depends on it.

I, for one, depended last winter on all these excursions into the relationship between death and survival. They were sometimes simply stated, as in Sarah Louisa Forten’s “The Grave of the Slave,” from the aptly named section “Bury Me in a Free Land (1770-1899)” – “The sod of the valley now covers his form, / He is safe in his last home, he feels not the storm.” Sometimes simply spoofed, as in Lucille Clifton’s wink of a poem from “Ideas of Ancestry (1959-1975).” For obvious reasons, this one poem became a sort of Covid-anthem across social media.

*... come celebrate
with me that everyday
something has tried to kill me
and has failed.*

These works do not make grieving easy, but between their flint and humor they do make it possible.

I want to say more, much more, about how these works may carry you when the ends of your week feel withered and thin, but account-



ing for over a thousand pages of poetry feels a lot like accounting for over a thousand pages of poetry. So I leave you with this, Yusef Komunyakaa’s “Anodyne,” from the “Blue Light Sutras (1976-1989).” While it is customary to see during this period of bald indignation for all cultural hierarchies the juxtaposition of the high and the low, the very abstract and the very concrete, the inside and the outside, it is rare to see it done to such ecstatic effect, and even rarer as an “anodyne,” an alleviation of pain, the speaker’s own pain at looking at his body, until, that is, he decides to look again.

*I love my crooked feet
shaped by vanity & work
shoes made to outlast
belief.*

*... I love
how everything begs
blood into song & prayer
inside an egg.*

*I love this body
made to weather the storm
in the brain.*

Looking again at values given to the Black body, at grief ungiven to the loss of it, describes all the poems selected for the volume. So let us look again at Komunyakaa’s juxtapositions. How many there are – a “body” in the “storm” in the “brain,” “feet” in “work” in “shoes” in “belief,” “everything” in “blood” in “prayer” in an “egg.” Komunyakaa is moving in and out, in and out, ever-expanding concentric containers of scrutiny, like shuffling babushka dolls, until, at last, they cease to contain him, and even his angels are stunned.

*... I love my big hands.
I love it clear down to the soft
quick motor of each breath ...*

*I love this body, this
solo & ragtime jubilee
behind the left nipple,
because I know I was born
to wear out at least
one hundred angels.*

Young’s latest book makes you want to cry out in the middle of a winter morning, I love this tradition! I love how all its children shepherd winter into grief into bread and salt on a broken moon. If Young’s sections are its seasons, I love all eight of them. Big enough to carry us, light enough to carry around, this anthology articulates less a map of a territory than touchstones on which to stand, withstand, and go on, less a song than song: the idea that our smallest steps are sometimes our biggest.

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