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The State of Black Poetry

Kingdom Animalia

Aracelis Girmay
BOA Editions, 2011
ISBN-13: 978-1934414620
\$16.00, 120pp.

the new black

Ernie Shockley
Wesleyan University Press, 2011
ISBN-13: 978-0819572875
\$14.95, 128pp.

Last Seen

Jacqueline Jones LaMon
University of Wisconsin Press, 2011
ISBN-13: 978-0299282943
\$14.95, 80pp.

Mule & Pear

Rachel Eliza Griffiths
New Issues Poetry & Prose, 2011
ISBN-13: 978-1936970018
\$15.00, 97pp.

Black Peculiar

Khadijah Queen
Noemi Press 2011
ISBN-13: 978-1934819203
\$15.00, 64pp.

If you're curious about the state of African-American poetry, look no further than the results of the country's top literary prizes.

Carl Phillips won the 2012 *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize for *Double Shadow*, a National Book Award nominee the previous year. Jamaal May won the 2012 Beatrice Hawley Award for his debut full-length collection *Hum* (three years after the win by poet and memoirist Reginald Dwayne Betts for *Shahid Reads His Own Palm*); Kwame Dawes was one of ten poets honored with a 2012 Guggenheim fellowship. Marcus Wicker's *Maybe the Saddest Thing* was a 2011 National Poetry Series selection. Before Wicker, Douglas Kearney's *Black Automaton* and Adrian Matejka's *Mixology* were selected in 2008, and Tychimba Jess' *Leadbelly* was chosen in 2004. Ruth Ellen Kocher won the 2010-2011 Tupelo Press Dorsett Prize for her fourth book */domina Un/blued*. As if that weren't enough, consider this: for the last two years, the National Book Award has gone to a black poet: Terrance Hayes won in 2010 for *Lighthouse* and Nikky Finney in 2011 for *Head Off & Split*. And don't forget the winner of the 2012 Pulitzer for poetry: Tracy K. Smith, author of *Life on Mars*. The honor comes five years after fellow Dark Room Collective member Natasha Trethewey's win for *Native Guard*.

Each of these poets has a connection to Cave Canem, a New York-based non-profit dedicated to the instruction and mentorship of African-American poets. Phillips, Dawes, Hayes, and Finney are faculty members; Wicker, May, Betts, Kearney, Matejka, Jess, and Kocher have earned Cave Canem fellowships to study poetry with the likes of Yusef Komunyakaa, Claudia Rankine, and Elizabeth Alexander, and Smith won the 2002 Cave Canem Poetry Prize for her first book, *The Body's Question*.

With such an impressive list of accolades, it is clear that black poets are making an impact on American letters. That two of the nation's top poetry prizes were recently awarded to black women is another accomplishment that cannot be overlooked. Perhaps even more rewarding for contemporary poetry fans is that it doesn't stop with Finney and Smith. A group of up-and-coming black women poets, Aracelis Girmay, Jacqueline Jones LaMon, Khadijah Queen, Evie Shockley, and Rachel Eliza Griffiths, all Cave Canem fellows, published innovative collections in 2011 that should be on everyone's reading list. These poets play a significant role in considering the status of black poetry.

Aracelis Girmay's second poetry collection, *Kingdom Animalia*, is a cunning consideration of mortality, humanity, and the responsibility of the voice that bears witness. Divided into six sections, each offers insight on the "war of nature" referenced in the book's epigraph from Darwin's *The Origin of Species*. The poems in *Kingdom Animalia* refuse to be taken for granted. Even when presenting a seemingly non-controversial theme like the death of a grandmother. Girmay's speaker mourns the loss of the matriarch and dares to imagine the grandmother's sexuality in "Starlight Multiplication." The speaker insists such dreaming must be done to challenge the mundane, that

... animals running
through the gates of their lovers, then fields
is old news.

Imagining the grandmother with a lover, an earthly desire, is the kind of dream that the speaker insists can bring the grandmother back to the earthly realm.

Among the conceits that loom large in *Kingdom Animalia* are repeated references to hands and mouths. Hands are used to show power and control, or lack thereof, as in the poem "Science," wherein the speaker recalls how the wind

took us apart with its blue hands, this piece, this piece—
& delivered us to our simultaneous homes.

One home is there! One home is there! It said,
You have been this small before.

The image of the mouth is, perhaps, more complex and appears as an instrument of intimacy, one used in consuming or accepting loss and singing its pain and consequence. "On Living" considers a daughter's life after the death of her mother and asks

What could she do? What does one do
when the mother's mouth is gone;
when the mother closes her eye, the door,
but shuts Girl, this time, out—

Together, the recurring images build an intensity fully realized in the book's third section, "a book of graves and birds," which, along with the poem "Science" includes "This Morning the Small Bird Brought a Message from the Other Side," a poem that might very well pose the question of the book when it asks

I want to know what to do
with the dead things we carry.

In a moment of vulnerability, the speaker wonders

Would I trust my mouth
to resuscitate the messenger, small bird
knowing I could kill it
with my teeth?

With the bird depicted both literally as animal and figuratively as the speaker's chest in morning, Girmay implies the suffering of animal can manifest physically in man.

Whereas Girmay's first collection *Teeth* begins with "Arroz Poetica," a treatise on the power of rice in times of war exhaled over nearly three and a half pages, *Kingdom Animalia* ends with the eight-line lyric "Ars Poetica" in which Girmay wishes her poems to be "a quiet record of the foot's silver trail." That wish for such a delicate treatment of the poem's work paints Girmay accurately as the quiet observer, one who appreciates the capture of the moment for others to review independently of her hand. It is a fitting end to a masterful collection.

Winner of the Felix Pollak Prize in Poetry, *Last Seen* finds Jacqueline Jones LaMon adopting multiple personae to tell the stories of missing African-American children. Inspired by real cases, LaMon is poet and historian, speaking as victims, their relatives, a police sketch artist, and others affected by absence and the unknown. She also employs a third-person omniscient narrator that interprets the grief of her characters and reports the true motives of the offenders responsible for the disappearances.

Last Seen begins and ends in inquiry. "Polygraph: The Control Questions" and "Polygraph: The Guilty Knowledge Test" allow readers to imagine the task of interrogation, the control questions acting as a calibration of the machine before seeking the incriminating responses guilty knowledge questions provide. LaMon borrows the titles of the poems in both sections from questions posed by Bhanu Kapil Rider in her book of interviews *The Vertical Interrogation of Strangers*. Although Rider's questions are posed to women of Indian heritage around the world, LaMon insists in the book's endnotes that these questions "should be answered in truth by every woman at least once during the course of her life."

The question "Where did you come from / how did you arrive?" is answered in a pantoum that tells the story of guests at a costume party "dressed up as themselves." In the process, the worlds of the living and the dead, both real and imagined, intertwine like the braid of the form's repeating lines.

The doctors, just like vampires stuck on the quantity of days,
watch the dentists go from chair to chair, sharing sordid jokes
with the managers, stoic as morticians on the cemetery's hill.

By the poem's end, the reality of death presents itself when the body of one of the costumed revelers is discovered. It is a mother who finds him, a pattern in terms of the burden of grief that is repeated throughout the book:

So pregnant and calling the name of your father's absent colleague,
your mother touches the dead one—slumped on the floor, in his costume.

You are born the next day, calling saints and dodging spirits.
Your mother never speaks of him—slumped silhouette, in his costume.

LaMon changes her focus from a wide-angle shot of numerous victims to a close-up of one in "The San Francisco Sonnets," a section of 14 poems dedicated to Toni Danielle Clark. Clark was reported missing in 1990 after her abandoned car was discovered on the San Francisco Bay Bridge. She was 17. In Clark's ab-

sence, LaMon shows a family caving in on itself, overwhelmed with the inexplicable loss, and, in some cases, pointing fingers at each other. "The Missing Girl's Mother" ends with the lines

They say they found her
keys, dangling. Maybe I was a good mother.
Tell me that I am a mother at all, my daughter
A rising of vapors. Explain to me, now, what I am.

The mother's sense of pain in the question of identity is heightened in the poem "The Missing Girl's Father," which closes the section. Before the loss of the daughter, there was the loss of the relationship between her father and mother, the poem reveals, a condition that makes the reality of the missing child harder to bear. The voice of Clark's father insists

Their mother's to blame, not me. She'd
flare up into mushroom clouds whenever
I got near them, singed my babies to silence.
I needed to be more than one line in her story.

Ironically, the absent father offers an insightful comment about the absent child. In reference to his ex-wife and leaving home, the father admits

I think I'm hurting more than her—my girls
swept back from me so many years before. Being
gone is being gone—no matter how you missing.

By the time we are ready to consider the questions raised in "The Guilty Knowledge Test," La Mon has taught the reader that we live with an almost palpable sense of evil that simultaneously threatens and eludes us. For her efforts, LaMon received a 2011 NAACP Image Award nomination in the Outstanding Literary Work-Poetry category.

Khadijah Queen's second poetry collection, winner of the 2010 Noemi Book Award for Poetry, is a tour de force of innovation. A trilogy of long works—two poems and a "chorus" with stage directions—*Black Peculiar* is as much an exercise in logic as it is a collection of verse.

For a poet whose aesthetic is built on groundbreaking forms, the "analogies to imaginary letters to various facets of the self" found in the book's opening section

“Black Peculiar :: Energy Complex” proves itself as an engaging, and sometimes confusing, mental exercise. A 17-page poem, the series of analogies show Queen’s assembly of and reverence for metaphor. There are moments of comedy:

Determination :: *perpetual*
leveling :: potentiality

Dear Future Mistakes,
Please, stop laughing.

moments of clarity

14 :: iambic
naiveté :: 116

Dear Shakesperare,
I memorize your sonnets like prayer.

and others of sympathy

utterance :: come across
non-entities :: *superceding*

Dear Reader,
Do you want me to keep going? Has the profane
frequency
been reached?

Queen’s talent as a poet complicates the reader’s expectation of form. “Non-Sequitur (a disjointed chorus in three acts),” closes the text in performance free of the traditional responsibilities of a Greek chorus. In this case, the chorus is the main performance, not an answer to another drama, and the characters found here may speak in unison, but their lines are completely different. Consequently, the “disjointed” nature of Queen’s chorus embodies the chaos of the world: people from different racial, religious, and socioeconomic backgrounds who fail to see eye to eye despite frequently occupying the same space.

Reading the alternating lines of *The Brown Vagina*, *The Blonde Institution*, *The Online Payments*, *The Fondled Hair*, and *The White Appropriation* in act one create a dizzying, nonsensical effect.

Queen presents the opening of act one, scene one as:

THE BROWN VAGINA

I am still not female.

THE BLONDE INSTITUTION

I can never be invisible.

THE ONLINE PAYMENTS

Your payment was rejected.

THE FONDLED HAIR

No.

THE WHITE APPROPRIATION (*Moves slightly into shadow*)

Reading each character's lines individually, however, provides a clearer picture of the malady each suffers. The lines of 'The Brown Vagina in act one, scene one are:

I am still not female.

I am an animal to you.

I am bleeding tonight.

I am still giving birth.

With the line "I am an animal to you" following the move into the shadows by The White Appropriation, the juxtaposition of lines raises questions, as does the line "I can sense your violent thoughts" that comes next from The Blonde Institution. Between white privilege and blonde beauty, the sexuality of people of color is rendered less than human and less desirable. Queen provides some insight into such misinterpretation and oppression early on in "Black Peculiar :: Energy Complex":

If the peculiar energy
becomes complex, just call it black.

What Evie Shockley considers *the new black* defines itself with each poem in her daring collection. The new black, be it ideology or individual, is not afraid to question the validity of the concept of post-blackness or challenge our understanding of key figures in American history.

The poem “from The Lost Letters of Frederick Douglass” finds Shockley imagining the famed abolitionist reaching out to his first-born, daughter Rosetta, to explain his marriage after the death her mother, Anna Murray. Douglass’s marriage to his second wife, Helen Pitts, a white abolitionist, was met with opposition—including disapproval from Douglass’ new in-laws—a controversy the poem does not ignore. Shockley creates a voice for Douglass that exhibits remorse for his strained relationship with his daughter and the toll of public scrutiny:

Your mother’s eyes stare
out at me through yours, of late. You think I
didn’t love her, that my quick remarriage
makes a Gertrude of me, a corseted
Hamlet of you. You’re as wrong as you are
lucky.

The luck Shockley’s Douglas refers to is his daughter’s education. In contrast, he argues that her mother “died illiterate” while he risked his life “to master language,” a difference that led to their break up. By the tone of the letter, it is also a difference that could continue the rift with his daughter. With the letter unanswered, Shockley keeps the reader wondering about the next step.

Thomas Jefferson receives similar treatment in “dependencies,” a poem that examines the most damning contradiction of his legacy: author of the Declaration of Independence and slave owner. The speaker, who indicates that she is a black woman (and perhaps Shockley herself), dissects the grounds of Monticello and Jefferson’s construction of dependencies: living quarters for slaves behind the main house built partially underground. The dependencies emerge as a metaphor for the social standing of slaves—behind and beneath their masters:

visiting monticello was
an education of course you
named your home in a romance
language spent 40 years
constructing it and the myth
of yourself

Jefferson's status as slave owner is complicated by the fact that he fathered children with Sally Hemmings, whom he owned, and kept his children from the relationship enslaved as well. It would be easy for Shockley to simply throw stones, but a much more human side surfaces in the poem's speaker. She expresses the desire to like Jefferson, but what she knows of his character stands in the way.

in some world an even
newer one i might have liked you
and you might have liked
(not fancied) me
we might have shared a bottle
a conversation some poems
in this world i prefer your words
depending on them to be
better than you

One of the joys of *the new black* is Shockley's commanding embrace of classic form in modern context. Ekphrastic poems inspired by the photos of poet Thomas Sayers Ellis ("womanish" and "go-go tarot") mix it up with the sestina ("clare's song"), the sonnet ("a sonnet for stanley tookie williams") and newer forms like Afaa Michael Weaver's Bop ("bop for presidential politics, c.2008), a sonnet-like composition that depends on a refrain of song lyrics, and Ruth Ellen Kocher's gigan ("celestial," "to see the minus," and "because there should be love"), a 16-line poem of alternating couplets and tercets with line one repeating as line eleven, and line six repeating as line twelve. Shockley's use of form shouldn't come as a surprise given the release of her book of critical analysis *Renegade Poetics: Black Aesthetics and Formal Innovation in African American Poetry* by the University of Iowa Press just seven months after *the new black*.

Like Shockley's imagined conversations with historical figures, the genius of Rachel Eliza Griffiths's third collection, *Mule & Pear*, is the creation of new experiences for beloved literary characters. Griffiths has a gift for enveloping the reader in image, presenting *Mule & Pear* in four unnamed, dream-like sections. The quality of imagery and diction mirror Griffiths's new visions for Alice Walker's Celie from *The Color Purple*, Toni Morrison's Sula, and Zora Neale Hurston's Janie from *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (the source of the book's title), among others. These new episodes are what Griffiths refers to as "interrogations, alternate endings, resurrections."

In the first poem for Walker's character, "Dear Celie," Griffiths relays a moment of discovery that melds woman with land, making the two inseparable:

Some night
in a field of silk-
petal teeth
I found you
lying there
with sweet grass
humming
in your eyes

Ultimately, "Dear Celie" is a poem of hope for a survivor of an abusive marriage, a reminder that Celie is more than her husband, Mister, makes her out to be:

One day Celie
I want to find you
Singing

I want to see
a smile knock
at each door
in your mouth

until somebody
answer us

Reading *Mule & Pear*, one can't help but wonder if Griffiths's other artistic medium gives her an advantage as a poet; a gifted and sought-after photographer, Griffiths's poetic images give the feeling of breathing objects that have been momentarily held and thoughtfully examined. These images, like photographs, are something to return to for new information, details that may be missed on first viewing. To Griffiths's credit, you will want to go back and marvel at the accomplishment.

In the introduction to *Spirit & Flame: An Anthology of Contemporary African American Poetry*, editor Keith Gilyard explains "corporate publishers pulled the plug on the Electric Black Poetic" from 1975 until, perhaps, the publication of the anthology by Syracuse University Press in 1997. During these "lean years," Gilyard noted "we knew we had serious literary work to do beyond merely writing

poems.” That work included starting literary journals, presses, and self-publishing. It was a way for black writers to acknowledge their own efforts when others were slow to praise. Certainly, it would not be a stretch to say this kind of thinking made it possible for black poets to experience the attention they garner today.

It may be too early, however, to determine what the recent tide of publications and contest wins by black poets means. Such a declaration could be akin to the rush to call America post-racial in light of the Obama presidency (if they were still alive, Trayvon Martin and James Craig Anderson would have plenty to say about that). The Poetry Foundation can help put things in perspective.

For the week of March 4, 2012, *Allegiance*, written by Detroit poet and Cave Canem fellow Francine J. Harris, debuted at the number one position on the Poetry Foundation’s list of the top-selling contemporary poetry books. Out of the top 30 spots, five were held by African-Americans. In addition to Harris, the latest offerings from Finney, Girmay, Nikki Giovanni, and Tim Seibles also charted. In fact, from January through April of 2012, an average of three spots per week were occupied by black poets. The week of February 5 was an exceptional showing with representation from seven poets including Finney, Seibles, Cave Canem co-founder Toi Derricotte, Hayes, Girmay, Giovanni, and Smith. On the week of March 11, Finney was the only black poet on the chart.

The true test of whether America values black poetry is not only the books published and the contests won. Black poets need to be celebrated critically and recognized financially. If the average poetry reader continues to buy books by black authors new and old, that will be a sign of an established presence, one that authors like Girmay, LaMon, Queen, Shockley, and Griffiths, appear more than ready to earn.