

## African American Protest Poetry

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### Overview

Given the secondary position of persons of African descent throughout their history in America, it could reasonably be argued that all efforts of creative writers from that group are forms of protest. However, for purposes of this discussion, Defining African American protest poetry some parameters might be drawn. First—a definition. Protest, as used herein, refers to the practice within African American literature of bringing redress to the secondary status of black people, of attempting to achieve the acceptance of black people into the larger American body politic, of encouraging practitioners of democracy truly to live up to what democratic ideals on American soil mean. Protest literature consists of a variety of approaches, from the earliest literary efforts to contemporary times. These include articulating the plight of enslaved persons, challenging the larger white community to change its attitude toward those persons, and providing specific reference points for the nature of the complaints presented. In other words, the intention of protest literature was—and remains—to show inequalities among races and socio-economic groups in America and to encourage a transformation in the society that engenders such inequalities. For African Americans, some of the questions motivating African American protest that inequality began with slavery. How, in a country that professed belief in an ideal democracy, could one group of persons enslave another? What forms of moral persuasion could be used to get them to see the error of their ways? In addition, how, in a country that professed belief in Christianity, could one group enslave persons whom Christian doctrine taught were their brothers and sisters? And the list of “hows” goes on. How could white Americans justify Jim Crow? Inequalities in education, housing, jobs, accommodation, transportation, and a host of other things? In response to these “hows,” another “how” emerged. How could writers use their imaginations and pens to bring about change in the society? Protest literature, therefore, focused on such issues and worked to rectify them. Poetry is but one of the media through which writers address such issues, as there are forms of protest fiction, drama, essays, and anything else that African Americans wrote—and write.

Since this category is so large, three arenas of protest poetry will constitute its parameters. The first will deal with protest poetry during slavery, the second with protest poetry during the period of segregation and Jim Crow, and the third with protest poetry after political obstacles to equality were presumably removed.

**Protesting against slavery** came easily to most African American writers who took up pens before 1865. One of the primary objectives of black Protest poetry during slavery times writing during slavery was to bring about the end of slavery. Since slavery existed foremost in the South, writers often directed appeals for freedom to northern whites, whom they hoped would influence their slaveholding counterparts in the South. “Northern sympathizers” as an audience became a

kind of catch phrase for much of the black writing from this period. That audience was especially important given the fact that the majority of African Americans not only did not have the power to change their condition, but they were mostly illiterate. It would be well into the twentieth century before a substantially measurable black audience emerged to respond to the commentary of black writers.

Among protestor poets during slavery, scholars debate about the extent to which [Phillis Wheatley](#), the first published African American poet (publishing in the 1760s and 1770s), should be included in that category. It is true that “[On Being Brought from Africa to America](#)” seems to praise whites for “freeing” Wheatley from Africa more than questioning their right to have bodily removed her in the first place (“‘Twas mercy brought me from my *Pagan* land”).<sup>1</sup> However, “[On the Death of General Wooster](#)” and “[To Samson Occom](#)” can be read to show that Wheatley was not thoroughly duped by the superficial kindnesses that covered over the fact of her enslavement. She remarks in the poem about General Wooster: “But how, presumptuous shall we hope to find/ Divine acceptance with th’ Almighty mind—/ While yet (O deed ungenerous!) they disgrace/ And hold in bondage Afric’s blameless race?”<sup>2</sup> Such sentiments make clear that Wheatley was not content with slavery. Also, she did not hesitate to depart the premises on which she was enslaved as soon as she was granted permission to do so.

More prominent in the poetic protest vein during slavery is [George Moses Horton](#). Enslaved in Pittsboro, North Carolina, a short distance from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Horton used his trips to Chapel Hill to sell produce to forge relationships with students at the University. He offered to compose poems for them—although he could not yet write—and recited them on return Saturday outings to Chapel Hill. A professor’s wife, Caroline Lee Whiting Hentz, learned of Horton’s talent and taught him the rudiments of writing. By the time he published his second volume of poetry in 1845, he was skilled in the art. His first volume, [The Hope of Liberty](#), which Hentz transcribed and which was published in 1829, was the first volume of poetry published by an enslaved person who could not read or write. Among the many poems devoted to nature and domestic affairs in the volume, Horton lamented his condition as an enslaved person in poems such as “The Slave’s Complaint” (“Must I dwell in Slavery’s night, / And all pleasure take its flight, / Far beyond my feeble sight, / Forever?”)<sup>3</sup> and “On Liberty and Slavery” (“Alas! and am I born for this, / To wear this slavish chain? / Deprived of all created bliss, / Through hardship, toil, and pain!”).<sup>4</sup> Horton also later published “[On Hearing of the Intention of a Gentleman to Purchase the Poet’s Freedom](#),” which is more a series of reflections upon enslavement than a direct appeal, but he makes his dissatisfaction with slavery clear and his hope for relief equally so (“Some philanthropic souls as from afar, / With pity strove to break the slavish bar; / To whom my floods of gratitude shall roll, / And yield with pleasure to their soft control”).<sup>5</sup> In spite of his poetic presentation of his plight as well as his letters to potential benefactors, Horton was released from slavery only when the Union Army came through North Carolina. Even in his politest appeals, however, Horton never strayed from labeling slavery the evil he believed it to be.

Although their poems were published following slavery, both [Frances Ellen Watkins Harper](#) and [Paul Laurence Dunbar](#) had much to imagine in verse about how things had been for their enslaved ancestors. In poems such as “[The Slave Auction](#),” “[The Slave Mother](#),” and “[Bury Me in a Free Land](#),” Harper paints heart-grabbing pictures of the separation of families and the

yearnings for freedom for which blacks longed during slavery. The concluding quatrain of “The Slave Auction” illustrates the first point: “Ye may not know how desolate/ Are bosoms rudely forced to part,/ And how a dull and heavy weight/ Will press the life-drops from the heart.”<sup>6</sup> The first quatrain of “Bury Me in a Free Land” indicts the country for its unholy practice of enslaving human beings: “Make me a grave where’er you will, /In a lowly plain, or a lofty hill,/ Make it among earth’s humblest graves,/ But not in a land where men are slaves.”<sup>7</sup> Harper’s retrospective indictment of slavery was perhaps designed to engender—as were other of her poems—better treatment of African Americans in the post-slavery world.

Perhaps [Dunbar’s](#) reasons for looking back were similar. He was keenly aware of the poverty of blacks after slavery; indeed, he started a night school to assist some in developing reading skills. He reasoned thus: “Some people . . . think Negroes should be maids and bootblacks, but I am determined that they shall not make menials out of all of us.”<sup>8</sup> Depicting conditions of enslaved blacks could, again, presumably inspire readers into better treatment of blacks after slavery. Although Dunbar is criticized frequently for writing in the “plantation tradition” and portraying enslaved blacks who seem to enjoy their enslavement, he also has poems in which protest of slavery is clear.<sup>9</sup> They include such poems as “An Ante-bellum Sermon,” in which he suggests that some Moses will come to rescue black people from slavery, and “[Accountability](#),” in which stealing of food is justified during slavery. In these instances, Dunbar relies upon humor to cloak his criticism of the dominant society’s treatment of African Americans.<sup>10</sup> As the most-touted African American poet of the 1890s, he had a wide audience for his sentiments.

Both Harper and [Dunbar](#) complained in their poetry about the conditions of black people after slavery. Protest poetry during the Jim Crow eraThey thereby straddle the divide between protest directed against slavery and protest during the period of segregation and Jim Crow. Harper used her “[Aunt Chloe](#)” poems to highlight the negative conditions in which many of the newly freed found themselves. In addition to issues internal to the black community, Harper depicted politicians who pressured those blacks who could vote to change their votes, or they simply bought their votes. Her two-pronged, internal and external to the community, approach to protest is echoed in many poets of the twentieth century. Contemporary with Harper, however, Dunbar also addressed issues of the late nineteenth century, including segregation in public transportation (“To Miss Mary Britton”), lynching (“[The Haunted Oak](#)”), and general restrictive conditions for black people (“Sympathy,” “[We Wear the Mask](#)”). Having graduated from high school (a feat in itself for African Americans in the 1880s), Dunbar knew from being confined to a job as an elevator operator while his white classmates went into the corporate world that opportunities for blacks needed desperate improvement. Loyalty that blacks had exhibited in war time (“The Colored Soldiers”—one of the few poems in which Dunbar addresses whites directly) needed to be reciprocated in the closing couple of decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>11</sup>

**Poets of the Harlem Renaissance** take up where Harper and Dunbar leave off in the second category of protest during segregation and the Jim Crow eras. Directly addressing contemporary conditions, [Langston Hughes](#), [Claude McKay](#), [Countee Cullen](#), and a host of others (such as [James Weldon Johnson](#), [Gwendolyn Bennett](#), [Angelina Weld Grimke](#), [Georgia Douglas Johnson](#), [Anne Spencer](#), and [Jean Toomer](#)) comment on the social and economic conditions of a people seemingly doomed to second class citizenship by the violence that victimizes them, the socioeconomic conditions that keep them locked in poverty, and the unwavering resentment that

turns hope into resignation when they leave the violent South for what they anticipate is a more receptive and tolerant North. [Hughes](#) depicts the violence that prompts black folk to move to the North (“One-Way Ticket,” “[Bound No’th Blues](#)”), the resistance they meet there (“[Ballad of the Landlord](#)”), and their resignation to inner-city living (the [Madam poems](#), “[Harlem](#)” [“Here on the edge of hell/ Stands Harlem”]), while McKay portrays graphic images of lynching (“[The Lynching](#)”), denial of citizenship (“[If We Must Die](#)”), an unwelcoming America (“[Baptism](#),” “Tiger,” “[America](#),” “[The White House](#)”), and an equally unwelcoming north (“[Harlem Shadows](#)”).<sup>12</sup>

[Countee Cullen](#) joined Hughes and McKay in criticizing conditions for African Americans. One of his briefest, most effective pieces is “[Incident](#),” in which he portrays a young black boy who has a visit to Baltimore marred when a young white boy calls him a “nigger.” The “incident” has such an impact upon the youngster that the slur is all that he remembers. In “Incident,” as well as in several other poems, Cullen, the quieter of the protest poets of the 1920s, shows that America is not fully American for blacks living on its soil. They are shut out (“[The Shroud of Color](#)”), closed in (“Saturday’s Child”), and generally denied access. God seems to fail to hear their prayers (“Pagan Prayer”), and even in heaven, Cullen asserts, whites assume that black folks will be waiting on them (“[For a Lady I Know](#)”).<sup>13</sup>

While the general assertiveness of the 1920s showcased blacks who demanded equal rights, who supported the [NAACP’s campaigns against lynching](#), and who formed other organizations for [self-help and advancement](#), the 1930s are officially labeled the decade of protest, probably bowing to [Richard Wright’s](#) hard-hitting critical prose of the period, especially in his collection of short stories entitled *Uncle Tom’s Children* (1938). The thirties were less dramatic than the 1920s or the 1960s for African American protest poetry, but some poets are worth mentioning, the most prominent of whom is [Sterling A. Brown](#). His graphic depictions of sharecropping existence in *Southern Road* (1932) paint vividly the limits on human possibility as well as on the human spirit.

**The 1940s** brought the advent of [Gwendolyn Brooks](#) and [Margaret Walker](#), both of whom wrote and published poetry for the remainder of the twentieth century. Brooks focused her attention on the thousands of blacks who [migrated from the South](#) to the south side of Chicago. There, they met “up South,” that is, pretty much the same conditions from which they had escaped, except perhaps the overt violence. In *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945), Brooks captures these denizens in all their hopes and their hopes denied. They have come to the city expecting better conditions, only to find themselves in “kitchenette building[s],” the same kind of one- or two-room “apartments” with down-the-hall baths that Lorraine Hansberry depicts in *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959). They try to [make it in the city](#) through hustling (“[The Sundays of Satin-Legs Smith](#)”), loitering (“[We Real Cool](#)”), or taking advantage of each other (“[the vacant lot](#)”), but they are ultimately consumed by and/or resigned to the forces around them (*The Bean Eaters* (1960). Walker also depicts black dreams conjured and lost, as her personas in *For My People* (1942) find themselves in ghettos with hopes lost and dreams long deferred.<sup>14</sup> [Cities consume them](#), cities not of their own creation, whether they live on Rampart Street in New Orleans, or 47th Street in Chicago, or Lenox Avenue in New York. Indeed, perhaps their most creative intents are the compromises they make with the urban spaces—both north and south—that contain their potential just as easily as they contain their bodies. In the 1970s, Walker’s *Prophets for a New*

*Day*, which contains portraits of civil rights leaders and activists named after Old Testament prophets, continued her artistic protest.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to Brooks and Walker, [Robert Hayden](#) and [Melvin Tolson](#) provide glimpses of protest in their poetry of the 1940s through the 1960s. Hayden's signature poem, "[Middle Passage](#)," looks backward in its protest to the point of African enslavement in the New World. In a beautifully crafted poem of multiple voices, Hayden explores what the transportation of black bodies meant to the transporters as well as to those enslaved. For the captives, the Middle Passage was a "Voyage through death/ to life upon these shores," though the quality of that life is dramatically diminished. In *Harlem Gallery* (1965), Tolson paints a panorama of Harlem and its elusive "Negro" inhabitants: "The Negro is a dish in the white man's kitchen/ . . . a dish nobody knows."<sup>16</sup>

Hayden, Tolson, Brooks, and Walker, all publishing through the 1960s, joined younger poets such as [Amiri Baraka](#) (then LeRoy Jones), [Nikki Giovanni](#), [Sonia Sanchez](#), [Etheridge Knight](#), [Haki R. Madhubuti](#) **Protest poetry after Jim Crow**(then Don L. Lee), and many others in their militant protestations during the Black Aesthetic and the [Black Arts Movement](#). Perhaps protest poetry in this third period is so vehement because it is after official segregation and other presumed barriers to inequality between blacks and whites presumably ended. Baraka, who began his publishing career in the 1950s and shared poetic sentiments and acquaintances with the [Beat poets](#), became the iconic figure of protest of the 1960s, in a variety of genres. His most militant poem, perhaps, is entitled "Black Art." The poem captures the essence of a group of young writers who were trying to encourage the masses of black people to a renewed sense of appreciation of their own beauty even as they denigrated the society that had caused them to feel less than happy in their own skins. In "Black Art," Baraka (then known as LeRoy Jones) declared that black people needed "poems that kill./ Assassin poems, Poems that shoot/ guns. Poems that wrestle cops into alleys/ and take their weapons leaving them dead/ with tongues pulled out and sent to Ireland."<sup>17</sup> Castigated not only for its violence, but for its seeming anti-Semitism, the poem was initially withheld from anthologies. However, it now appears in almost every large anthology of African American literature. Expansive in his multi-pronged attacks on a racist, capitalist society, Baraka became the poster writer of protest of the 1960s, as a quick perusal of almost any of his verse will reveal. Strikingly, Baraka remains just as unrelenting in his criticisms of America in the twenty-first century as he was in the sixth and seventh decades of the twentieth century. His "Somebody Blew Up America," a multi-page poetic commentary on 9/11, recognizes the infamy of the assault but also suggests that America and its capitalist practices were as much to blame as the hand of any terrorist. <sup>18</sup>

Giovanni, Sanchez, Knight, and Madhubuti all joined Baraka in the 1960s in pointing out the inconsistencies in a presumed American belief in democracy and the obvious gaps between belief and practice. When Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in 1968, they joined a chorus of poetic voices condemning America. Giovanni's "Reflections on April 4, 1968" is one of her angriest poems, one in which she asks a questions and provides multiple answers: "What can I, a poor Black woman, do to destroy america?/ . . . There is one answer—I can kill. There/ is one compromise—I can protect those who kill. There is/ one cop-out—I can encourage others to kill. There are no/ other ways." In "Assassination," Madhubuti implies that the police were complicit in King's death. <sup>19</sup>



What is striking about the works of the 1960s poets, however, is that their protests are often directed as much inward to the black community as outward to the dominant white power structure. In the 1960s African American poets aimed their protest at both the white and black communities. Consciousness-raising is crucial to Giovanni and Sanchez, as Giovanni urges the masses of black people to become truly militant by playing games that are relevant to them, such as “run-away slave” and “Mau Mau” (“Poem for Black Boys [With Special Love to James]”).<sup>20</sup> Sanchez urges blacks to “get the white out of their lives” and to remember that, now that Native Americans are confined to reservations, the only “Indians” left are black people who are being systematically exterminated ([“right on: white america”](#)).<sup>21</sup> In “TCB,” Sanchez urges blacks to get over the superficiality of calling whites out of their names and on to the business of helping their own communities.<sup>22</sup> At the institutional and personal level, Knight focuses on drugs and their consequences for African Americans and their communities. Having been imprisoned for robberies committed to support his cocaine habit, Knight also provides poignant glimpses of prison life, one in which inmates are systematically reduced to automatons who respond to any and all orders ([“Hard Rock Returns to Prison from the Hospital for the Criminal Insane”](#)).<sup>23</sup>

The 1960s were perhaps the height of protest poetry in the sense of a traditional meaning of protest. Post-1960s poets, such as Pulitzer-Prize winners [Rita Dove](#) and [Yusef Komunyakaa](#), are less inclined to overt protest. That, of course, is not to suggest that their poetry is devoid of complaint about American society and the conditions of black people in it. It is to say, however, that their canvases of exploration are broader than rural black America or inner city urban America. Dove deals with issues of inequality and repression in the Dominican Republic ([“Parsley”](#)) as well as in other international portraits she offers in her volume *Museum* (1983), while Komunyakaa examines the details of the Vietnam War from the perspective of black soldiers. He still manages, however, to show how American racism has been transplanted to Vietnam. Several of the poems in *Dien Cai Dau* (1988) make that clear, especially “One More Loss to Count,” “Tu Do Street,” and “The One-legged Stool.”<sup>24</sup>

There are hundreds of contemporary African American poets and thousands of poems, from spoken word artists to additional award winners such as [Natasha Trethewey](#), who won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 2007. Contemporary work This survey barely scratches the surface of what can be considered protest poetry in African American literature. It simply highlights some of the significant poets and poems, as well as some of the subjects and patterns of protest. Serious teachers and students will want to be diligent in exploring beyond what is offered here. One place to start is with [Cave Canem](#), a collective of young poets founded by poet and essayist [Toi Derricote](#). Many contemporary published poets worked on their first books in workshops sponsored by Cave Canem. With their teaching and publishing records, and with individuals having passed through the workshops for more than a decade, they have had a substantial impact upon the current state of African American poetry. Another resource is the [Furious Flower Poetry Center](#), currently housed at James Madison University. Director Joanne V. Gabbin sponsored international poetry conferences on that campus in 1994 and 2004; she has amassed a wealth of material for scholars and readers. One of her latest projects, focusing on Hurricane Katrina, gave voice to many young poets throughout the United States as they shared their compositions in a volume entitled *Mourning Katrina* (2009).<sup>25</sup>

## Guiding Student Discussion

Begin by having your students contemplate definitions of the word “protest.” What are the contexts in which they are familiar with the word being used? Have students begin by reflecting on protest in general. Invite them to meditate on the differences between public protests, say the efforts of anti-war activist Cindy Sheehan or animal rights [PETA](#), that are directed outward for political purposes in intense emotional spaces and writings that encourage reflection in the quiet comfort of one’s home, though those writings might also have political purposes. What are the differences in objectives? What do the various groups hope to achieve? Is “protest” the best word to use for both sets of activities?

Now turn to some African American poetry to make further distinctions. Ask students to read Phillis Wheatley’s “[On Being Brought from Africa to America](#),” Langston Hughes’s “[Mother to Son](#),” and Rita Dove’s “[Parsley](#).” Have students identify what it is that each poet hopes to achieve in his/her poem. Earlier, I labeled Wheatley’s and Dove’s poems as protest, but they are distinctly different. Have students account for those differences. Can “Mother to Son” be considered a protest poem? If so, what makes it so? If not, what makes a designation of protest poetry inappropriate? What are the strategies that each poet uses to effect his/her objective?

Have your students imagine that they are slaveholders (yes, all of them) at the time that George Moses Horton published his poetry and his appeal for release from bondage. Students as slaveholders Select two of his poems on which to focus. Encourage your students to put as much of their twenty-first century sentiments aside as they can as they try to respond emotionally to the poetry. How many of them would have been touched to respond favorably to Horton? Why would that have been the case? What would have prevented them from responding sympathetically to Horton? Now, let them shift their roles and become “northern sympathizers.” How would their responses have been affected? Can those responses be identified exclusively as simply human or as part of an acquired anathema to the South and southern slaveholding?

The poems that Horton composed for students at Chapel Hill were frequently in the form of acrostics. Have your students look up examples of [acrostics from Horton’s](#) time or some other period. An exercise for them might be this: Write an acrostic focused on protesting something in contemporary society. What issues or problems do they find worthy of protest? Who would be the likely audiences for such protests?

In another exercise, ask your students to compare Paul Laurence Dunbar’s “The Colored Soldiers” with Gwendolyn Brooks’s “Negro Hero.” Both poems deal with war, but they have varying levels of protest in them. What accounts for the differences? What social and political factors may have influenced how Dunbar developed his poem? What different such factors may have influenced Brooks? As one of the few female poets writing about war, Brooks is unique in the annals of such creativity. She manages to showcase a history of failed democratic principles and ideals in “Negro Hero,” one that makes it particularly rich for comparison with the legacy of service that Dunbar documents in “The Colored Soldiers.”

Authors who composed protest poems in the 1960s often directed their protests as much at black people as at white people. Consider The Last Poets' "[When the Revolution Comes](#)." What are the protests directed toward African Americans? Given the history of black people in America, which seem most valid to you? Are the criticisms in the poem legitimate, or are they a matter of airing dirty linen in public? Ask the same question of Sonia Sanchez's "summer words of a sistuh addict." Is her focus something that African Americans—and other readers—would perhaps believe should best be left unsaid? Is unspoken—or spoken—censorship something that can be tolerated in the literary arena? Why or why not? Is there a difference between speaking something on an album or CD and writing it in a book? Would one have a greater impact than the other? Why? Are there situations that your students believe are worthy of protest but about which things are best left unsaid? Would these instances fit into that schema? Are there other examples that your students can come up with that would fit? Are there contemporary situations not yet written about that warrant protest but about which the general public—and writers—remain silent?

A significant part of any poetry appreciation is hearing it read or listening to it on recordings. Get copies of Amiri Baraka's "Dope" and "Somebody Blew Up America" and have your students read them, then play them ("[Dope](#)," "[Somebody Blew Up America](#)") for your students. How are reactions different from seeing the words on pages and hearing them? Again, this is an issue about audience and how audiences respond to protest in whatever vein it is delivered. Baraka got into trouble with authorities in New Jersey for publishing "Somebody Blew Up America," because some considered it un-patriotic. This is an issue that falls under censorship as well. Although America professes democratic values, it at times places limits on what one can and cannot say. What are some of those limiting times? In what ways can one criticize one's country without being un-patriotic? Does quiet protest yield the same result as more vocal or artistically sharp protest? Why or why not?

Throughout their years of writing protest poetry in America, African American authors have directed their gaze upon subjects that include slavery, the [Black Codes](#) following slavery, the Convict Lease system, Jim Crow laws, lynching and other forms of violence—especially in the South, segregation, discrimination in educational and other institutions, and general unfair treatment at all levels of American society. Assign your students to research two of these areas and report on the four or five most salient features of their selected areas that have drawn most frequent criticism in poetry. Have the strategies that the poets used been mostly emotional, logical, shaming, or a combination of these? What evidence within the poems supports these conclusions? Have your students consider protest poetry from the era of Phillis Wheatley to twenty-first century spoken word artists and identify the features of the poetry, if any, that have remained constant. Are there subjects or topics other than those listed that have also remained constant?

Another exercise would be to have your students consider the structures of protest poems. What formal features do the poets seem to rely on most? Do Wheatley's rhyming couplets carry more responsive weight than Horton's almost sing-songy quatrains? What about Rita Dove's detached, almost clinical presentation in "Parsley"? What causes it to be effective? Or is the narrative, first-person voice of complaint that many poets use the most compelling form of presentation for protest? In connection with this last question, read and compare Countee Cullen's "Incident,"



Nikki Giovanni's "For Sandra," and Audre Lorde's "Power." Which poem seems to carry most emotional weight? Why? What impact does diction have upon your responses to protest poems? Do poems in dialect or vernacular speech exhibit a power that those in standard English do not elicit? Provide examples for your conclusions. As a result of these readings and analyses, what overall conclusions can you draw about the form in which protest sentiments appear in poetry?

## Scholars Debate

Perhaps the two most salient debates surrounding protest literature of any kind have to do with what the creators of the protest hope to achieve as well as why they have chosen particular methods to attempt their achievements. The first centers upon audience. It certainly made sense during slavery to direct pleas for help toward audiences. Writing for a white audience who were in positions of freedom and influence, which clearly did not apply to those enslaved. Northern whites therefore became the ideal audience toward whom protest was directed, though certain treatises, such as [David Walker's Appeal](#) (1829), were directed toward blacks with the intent of violently overthrowing the system of slavery. Mostly, those who wrote with the intention of bringing about the end of slavery did so through moral suasion. They, like Frederick Douglass in [Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass](#) (1845), aimed to enumerate the atrocities of slavery in such vivid detail that those not caught in its hypnotic grip could take actions to bring about its demise. During slavery, therefore, northern whites were a logical audience for protest literature of any kind that concerned African Americans, and that included poetry.

The same might be asserted of the period immediately following slavery. The majority of African Americans were still illiterate; indeed, it would be almost 1900 before W. E. B. Du Bois introduced the idea of a "[Talented Tenth](#)" among the black population that should become educated and lead the others. When [Charles W. Chesnutt](#), writing in the latter decades of the nineteenth century, was asked about black audiences for the novels and stories he published, he concluded that it was not worth his publisher's time to try to determine how many black readers there were. Logically, therefore, the audience for African American creative productions remained mostly white and northern.

With the advent of the Harlem Renaissance, a new attitude toward audience emerged. Black authors begin to be. The white audience becomes a problem viewed as pandering to whites in their works, more concerned about acceptance from them than perhaps focusing on the truth of their creations. Langston Hughes captured the dilemma in "[The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain](#)," his 1925 manifesto for younger black writers:

We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. If black people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves.[26](#)

The white audience, from some perspectives, had now become as problematic as the actual conditions of black existence in America. Why should black writers go pandering to whites, hat in hand, essentially begging for things in the same ways they did during slavery, so this argument

went. Why should they not simply take their place in American society, white people be damned? As long as blacks were willing to ask for rights and privileges, so this logic went, they would always remain subservient to whites and in a secondary position within American society. They would never be equals.

That position intensified as the decades of the twentieth century progressed. Why are we always complaining to whites about our plight, many asked. Why cannot we, within our own communities, solve our own problems? Yet the 1930s and 1940s, the era of Richard Wright and Ann Petry, are considered the greatest period of protest in African American literature. In the creation of Bigger Thomas (*Native Son*, 1940), Wright offered a monstrous character designed to show white America all its failings as far as incorporating black citizens into the body politic was concerned. Those who complained about protest nonetheless had to admit that Wright and other protest writers had valid points. The issue was perhaps one of dignity. How could blacks grow and develop strong communities on their own if they were always bringing their lacks to white audiences for examination and redress? Why were they always dependent upon whites to rectify problems? Obviously the power structure of the United States made such supplications necessary, but they were nevertheless galling to people who would have preferred to maintain their pride instead of appearing to beg for change.

By the 1960s, the audience issue had morphed into one in which African American writers actively attacked white audiences. The white audience becomes the enemy. In [agit-prop theater](#), for example, it was not uncommon for actors on various stages to leave the demarcation of the fictional stage and walk among audiences directly indicting or insulting white attendees. In poetry, one of the most vivid examples is Sonia Sanchez's "TCB." On the one hand, the poem marks the migration from supplicating approaches to white audiences actually to abusing them, while, on the other hand, it calls for change among blacks. That migration also marks the second issue in considering protest poetry, that is, the questioning of writer reliance upon protest at all.

Critics such as Stanley Crouch began castigating black writers for adherence to what he and others termed "victim studies." Protest literature as victim studies. From this perspective, victim studies were identified as any form of literature in which characters are actively engaged in showcasing the lacks they believe to be societally induced or complaining about their so-called secondary positions in American society. Instead, writers should start from the assumption that they are American and thus heir to all the rights and privileges of all Americans. Such an approach would eliminate the need for literature that essentially said "I hurt racially," "I am in racial pain," "The racist society is responsible for my condition," "Please change the racist society." In the abstract, there should be no need for such assertion. However, American history has proven that the lingering effects of early ill treatment still exist—even into the twenty-first century—for those of African descent on United States soil. Still, writers such as Ralph Ellison preceded Crouch in suggesting that protest should be downplayed in African American literary creations. However, a quick perusal of Ellison's masterpiece, *Invisible Man* (1952), will show that it is not exactly protest-free. Equally, protest is not its dominant strand.

To eliminate protest from African American writing would be to deny the history from which it was forged. That history is one laced with violence and inequality, and, like writers of any other culture, African American authors have been drawn to the land and the society that shaped them.

That shaping is filled with many things that are protestable, thus protest, whatever nuanced forms it may take to conform to the time period in which it is produced, will undoubtedly continue to be a part of the African American literary landscape. What W. E. B. Du Bois articulated in 1926 in “[Criteria of Negro Art](#)” remains true in the twenty-first century:

Thus all Art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda. But I do care when propaganda is confined to one side while the other is stripped and silent.[27](#)

A seamless combination, as Du Bois suggests, is the objective for which most African American artists strive even as they continue to wield the weapon of protest in their imaginative creations.

For an early general study of the political nature of African American literary creativity—not exclusively devoted to poetry—see Donald L. Gibson’s *The Politics of Literary Expression* (1981). While poetry is perhaps the most neglected genre of African American literary creativity in terms of scholarship produced on it, there are nonetheless some helpful texts. For the early poets, Jean Wagner’s *Black Poets of the United States* (1973) remains a standard. Eugene B. Redmond’s *Drumvoices: The Mission of Afro-American Poetry: A Critical History* (1976) has been bolstered recently by Keith Leonard’s *Fettered Genius: The African American Bardic Poet from Slavery to Civil Rights* (2006). A volume that focuses on poets of the 1960s is Stephen Henderson’s *Understanding the New Black Poetry: Black Speech and Black Music as Poetic References* (1973). There are also volumes devoted exclusively to poets, such as George Kent’s and D. H. Melhem’s volumes on Gwendolyn Brooks, Joanne V. Gabbin’s volume on Sterling A. Brown, and Angela Salas’s *Flashback Through the Heart: The Poetry of Yusef Komunyakaa* (2004); Arnold Rampersad’s two volumes of biographical and critical studies of Langston Hughes and his works are particularly noteworthy. In addition, special issues of journals are available on specific poets, such as the *Callaloo* volume devoted to Komunyakaa (Volume 28, Number 3; Summer, 2005) and another to Rita Dove (Volume 31, Number 3; Summer, 2008). Encyclopedic reference tools such as the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* also have volumes devoted exclusively to African American poets and their poems.