

What's African American About African American Poetry?

[Elizabeth Alexander, Cornelius Eady, Tracie Morris, Harriette Mullen, Kevin Young](#)

In November 2000, the Poetry Society of America and The New School sponsored a panel bringing together five writers—Elizabeth Alexander, Cornelius Eady, Tracie Morris, and Harriette Mullen, along with moderator Kevin Young—to consider the question “What’s African American about African American Poetry?” The event expanded upon a similar conference sponsored by the same pair of institutions in 1998, which asked, “What’s American about American Poetry?” (See Fence Vol. 2, N. 1, Spring/Summer 1999).

KEVIN YOUNG: We’ll begin by letting each panelist speak, and then open it up for questions. Harriette will be first.

HARRYETTE MULLEN: Forgive me, but I had to write something down. It’s called “Forms of Things Unknown.”

As I was thinking about this topic, “What’s African American about African American Poetry?” I returned to the examination of this question by Stephen Henderson in the introduction to his 1973 anthology, *Understanding the New Black Poetry*, which offers three broad criteria for determining the blackness of black poetry: *theme, structure, and saturation*. Henderson defines black *themes* as those having particular relevance to the collective historical and social situation of black people in the United States, and proposes that black *structure* “derives its form from two basic sources, Black speech and Black music.” He then defines *saturation* as “(a) the communication of Blackness in a given situation, and (b) a sense of fidelity to the absurd and intuitive truth of the Black experience.” He also demonstrates saturation with what he calls “mascon” words, meaning terms or images embodying a mass concentration of historical and cultural significance. Such words—like “blue,” “cool,” “funk,” or “soul”—are frequently used to evoke collective black experience and historical consciousness.

A reconsideration of these ideas alone could give us a great deal to talk about, but I want to add a couple of issues, too. One is the replacement of African American folk culture by an American mass culture that has appropriated, distorted, and commodified certain elements of black cultural expressiveness. For many of us, what we call the folk or oral tradition is available only in archival form, as texts and recordings, and requires some effort if we hope to recover it. I also want to consider the diversity and stratification of black America—such that it is no longer accurate, if it ever was, to speak of a singular black experience.

If an important aspect of African American experience is the “double consciousness” defined by W. E. B. DuBois, it is increasingly apparent that the recipe for mixing our African with our American consciousness varies with each individual. The result of our failure to respect the differences among us as African Americans has often been destructive, as illustrated, for example, in the recent Spike Lee film “Bamboozled.” Dramatic works like this reveal that in the absence of full recognition of the differences among us; in the absence of actual agreement or

political solidarity; African Americans have at times resorted to a performance of blackness that is no more than a caricature of identity.

In our anxiety to embody or represent authentic black identity, we may impoverish our cultural heritage and simplify the complexity of our historical experience. As poets and as people of African descent, we are in danger of only performing blackness, rather than exploring the infinite permutations of our lived experience and creative imagination as black people. Also, because poetry typically appeals to relatively small audiences, we may be in danger of becoming isolated from varieties of experience outside our own particular frame of reference.

This brings me back to Henderson's introduction, whose title, "The Forms of Things Unknown," takes up a phrase that Richard Wright had used in a 1957 essay, "The Literature of the Negro in the United States." Wright observes that "Negro literature" is an artifact of slavery and racial discrimination; that black poets are not free to choose any theme as long as our experience in this country compels us to "pay tribute to the power of oppression." Wright notes that the blackness of black poetry fluctuates with the harshness or indifference with which black people have been treated politically, legally, and socially within our history in the United States. He goes so far as to say that the literature of African Americans would be indistinguishable from that of other Americans, were it not for this history of racial exclusion. Without the constant reminder of our otherness, we might be as integrated into America, and might produce works as congruent with the national culture, as those of Dumas in France or Pushkin in Russia.

However, Wright also briefly mentions another possibility. Given that our historical experience has caused us to create a distinct black culture within the United States, Wright allows the possibility of a literature that would be distinctly African American. Referring to this poetic synthesis of folk culture, speech, and song, Wright uses the phrase "the forms of things unknown." Henderson seizes upon this vision in his piece, which was introducing to a mainstream audience the literature produced in the 1970s at the height of the Black Arts movement. It's my impression that Henderson intended to inspire further discussion and exploration, rather than confine readers, writers, and critics to a stereotypical or dogmatic performance of blackness. The important idea he took from Richard Wright concerns what James Joyce called "the uncreated conscience" of a race. Wright himself had borrowed the phrase from Shakespeare, and I want to quote a little bit of Theseus's speech from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Lovers and madmen have such seething brains,
Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend
More than cool reason ever comprehends.
The lunatic, the lover and the poet
Are of imagination all compact.
One sees more devils than vast hell can hold;
That is the madman. The lover, all as frantic,
Sees Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt.
The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;
And as imagination bodies forth

The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes and gives to aery nothing
A local habitation and a name.

Shakespeare's references to the beauty of Africans and the proliferation of devils might have seemed particularly relevant to the poetry of the Black Arts movement surveyed by Henderson, in which poets and critics alike—aware of the successes and failures of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s—struggled to redefine a black aesthetic by giving names to things yet uncreated. As Amiri Baraka asks in “Ka’Ba,” a poem from the era of the Black Arts movement: “What will be the sacred words?”

KA’BA

A closed window looks down
on a dirty courtyard, and black people
call across or scream across or walk across
defying physics in the stream of their will

Our world is full of sound
Our world is more lovely than anyone's
though we suffer and kill each other
and sometimes fail to walk the air

We are beautiful people
with african imaginations
full of masks and dances and swelling chants
with african eyes, and noses, and arms,
though we sprawl in gray chains in a place
full of winters, when what we want is sun

We have been captured,
brothers. And we labor
to make our getaway,
into the ancient image, into a new

correspondence with ourselves
and our black family. We need magic
now we need the spells, to raise up
return, destroy, and create. What will be

the sacred words?

TRACIE MORRIS: I really appreciate Harryette as a scholar and poet, so I'm mad that I have to follow her. Alright. When Kevin called me about this panel, I thought, well, the question should be, what's African about American poetry? So I'm going to read a list of words and phrases. *Jazz, bad, boo, boogiewoogie, bug, cootie, cop, chick, daddy, dick, fuzz, golly, gut*

bucket, jam, jamboree, jitterbug, jive, juke, bogus, hippie, honky, rap, banana, banjo, cola, elephant, goober, gorilla, gumbo, juke, okra, mumbo jumbo, phony, potato, tater, tote, turnip, oasis, mojo.

These are Africanisms and Africanized words in African American English, as well as in standard American English. Why bring them up? It's certainly not to propagate *akumbayah*, "come by here," integrationist aesthetic about how we're all connected through language. I'm concerned about the ahistoricity in a glossed-over statement like that. There is a danger of de-emphasizing the trauma of oppression and how people negotiated these challenges. No, the actual purpose of identifying these words and phrases is to assert our discreteness and power: to measure the African presence in American letters. We can experiment by deleting these terms from poetry not written by black people and see what happens. How bereft would nonblack language be without words like *buddy* and *daddy* and *okay*? In fifty years, when words like *dope*, *fly*, *fresh*, *yo*, *be* as a habitual verb, *been* as a temporal verb, *stupid*, *chill*, *mack*, *max*, *dissed*, *whoa* and *funky* are fully incorporated into the American lexicon, will they go the way of pom-poms and fried chicken, in that their construction as African American aesthetics will disappear? The identity that we describe as American has to be, by its very nature, fundamentally African and Native American. How can it not be? So the purpose of listing these words is to claim the transformative power of African influence on American language. This examination of Africanisms becomes a form of ancestral worship, simply by telling the linguistic truth. Our cultural and possibly physical survival depends on an examination of this inheritance. It is ultimately about the control of one's own body and what it produces, be it the physical body, cultural body, or specific bodies of work which we have been negotiating to have and to keep.

ELIZABETH ALEXANDER: The gauntlet thrown down. Well, the first thing I want to say is that what's African American about African American poetry is that black people have made it. I think that that's actually a very important thing. Because we have not yet been able to fully get our arms around the vast diversity of our tradition.

Think of the view of African American poetry in Dudley Randall's *The Black Poets*—which was for a long time the only anthology of black poetry in print, the one that many of us came up on or have taught from for many years—and how different our view of the tradition becomes if we put that next to, say, Michael Harper and Anthony Walton's *Every Shut Eye Ain't Asleep*. To hear all of our often divergent voices is our first task, and one about which we must remain ever vigilant.

As we do in our civilian, or nonwriter, lives as black people in this country, we labor as poets against the defamation of our image on a regular, minute-by-minute basis. Another thing that's African American about African American poetry is that black poets still work against severe publishing constraints that see us in quite stereotypical terms—while at the same time, from within our communities, we work with and against the pressure to create something that is useful and, yes, sometimes discernibly or identifiably black.

Those twin pressures can interfere in the work of trying to put one's poetry forth. It doesn't necessarily come into play when you are digging within to make a poem, but you hear the voices pretty quickly as a poem rises to the surface. This is a challenge—you might call it a burden—that is uniquely ours. But there are many vibrant schools of contemporary black poetry and I

think this is a moment of great diversity, great shine. There are the renegade children of Baraka; the sonneteering sons and daughters of Brooks, pre-1968; Sister Sonia's keening, righteous progeny; surrealist funkster Bob Kaufmanites; Robert Hayden's solemn spawn; and even the "Phenomenal Women" born of "Poetic Justice" and "Love Jones."

Here I echo Ntozake Shange's introduction to *nappy edges*, where she talks about how we need to be able to listen to and know and identify our writers as well as we do our musicians. She asks, would anybody confuse Chaka Khan singing "Empty Bed Blues" with Bessie Smith singing "Empty Bed Blues"? Well, no, you could not make that mistake. In that vein, I would ask, could anyone other than black Robert Hayden have imagined "Aunt Jemima of the Ocean Waves"? I don't think so. I can't do a scientific breakdown of it, but that's a black poem and only a black person would have imagined that character, or his "Quadroon Mermaids" and "Afro Angels." Could anyone other than Jayne Cortez have written about how she "Perdidoed with Pettiford and Squatty-Rood with Peterson"? I don't think so.

To speak again of anthologies, it's useful to remember that American literature collections in the eighteenth century were very much concerned with nation building. If there could be an anthology of American poetry, that meant it was distinct from British poetry; if the new American nation had a poetry to show for itself, that fact undergirded and made strong the nation. Which is useful to remember when we consider these different African American collections available now and their purposes in putting forth a vision of black poetry, and how that vision is tied to a sense of responsibility or pressure to have one work function usefully for the community at large, however we might define that community.

Let me just put forward two voices among the many. This is Melvin Tolson from "Harlem Gallery," a poet who is often dismissed as being too difficult or too obscure. "Unteachable," I've heard him called.

Hideho Heights
and I, like the brims of old hats,
slouched at a sepulchered table in the Zulu Blub.
Frog Legs Lux and his Indigo Combo
spoke with tongues that sent their devotees
out of this world!

Black and brown and yellow fingers flashed,
like mirrored sunrays of a heliograph,
on clarinet and piano keys, on cornet valves.

Effervescing like acid on limestone,
Hideho said:
"O White Folks, O Black Folks,
the dinosaur imagined its extinction meant
the death of the piss ants."

Cigarette smoke
—opaque veins in Carrara marble—
magicked the habitués into
humoresques and grotesques.
Lurid lights
spraying African figures on the walls
ecstasied maids and waiters,
pickups and stevedores—
with delusions
of Park Avenue grandeur.

Once, twice,
Hideho sneaked a swig.
“On the house,” he said, proffering the bottle
as he lorded it under the table.
Glimpsing the harpy eagle at the bar,
I grimaced,
“I’m not the house snake of the Zulu Club.”

Then, just another little bit from Michael Harper. This is a jazz poem, and—as you can tell from the title—it tells a very American story.

DRIVING THE BIG CHRYSLER ACROSS THE COUNTRY OF MY BIRTH

What does Detroit have to give my music
As elk-miles distance into shoal-lights,
Dashes at sunrise over Oakland:
Elvin from Pontiac, McCoy from Philly,
Chambers from Detroit waltzing his bass.
I can never write a bar of this music
In this life chanting toward paradise
In this sunship from Motown.

So, you know, a snippet of something with a sounding that’s quite different from the Tolson. We could have a beautiful afternoon just reading poems and seeing if we could possibly begin to answer the question, *What’s African American about African American Poetry?* after hearing all these radiant voices.

KEVIN YOUNG: Cornelius Eady will conclude, and then we’ll open it up.

CORNELIUS EADY: Like Tracie, I had to make a decision when I was asked to join this conversation. What would the basis be for my response? I had to decide that the reason I wanted to participate—instead of trying to defend something I don’t think needs defense or explanation—was that there is a wonderful diversity in African American poetry and I think it’s important to attend to it. The reading last night gave us a great dose of what is going on. But having said that, I have to add this: The fact that we still have to ask the title question implies

that we are still, to a certain extent, invisible vis-a-vis the mainstream, whatever that term is supposed to mean.

I thought another way of trying to define this question would be to consider the writing process itself. I'm going to describe something that happened that I haven't written about but might write about, and then read a poem that I have written, and the claim I'm going to make is that these are both African American poems.

This happened yesterday. I'm walking down here to the New School, and I stop at the corner of 12th Street and 6th Avenue. There is a white couple right next to me, and they are trying to hail a cab. I am very close to them. There is a little understanding, a little dance, cabs are whizzing by, there's a man and a woman, and the woman decides that maybe it might be better if she tries alone, on 12th Street. So they separate. The guy walks away from me a little bit, the woman goes over to the 12th Street side, and it all happens very quickly.

What was that moment about? I got the feeling that there was an unspecified understanding between all three of us for a couple of seconds, and the examination of that moment might be part of what could be considered an African American poem.

And this is the second thing, a poem called "The Ants."

THE ANTS

They are horribly single-minded:
You barely notice a scout, and the next morning
There's a highway in the kitchen,
Pointed towards some delicious part of
Your life. They are a thousand fingers,
Out to tumble your locks.

Grain by grain, they persist,
The periods and commas
Of an argument you can never hope To win.

You have it, they want it.
How little they'd let you keep,
Reasonable man, dusting poison
Upon their heads.
They'd haul off your breath,
Bead by bead.
They'd peel the sweat
From under your nails.

That's an African American poem, because it was written by an African American. Now, there are people in this world who would decide this is not an African American poem, just as there are other people who would decide that any poem I might write is true black. So I have to deal

with that contradiction. I asked my City College undergrad workshop what they thought of this question, and they put it very simply. “It’s about what you choose to claim. Who are you writing to, and who are you writing for?”

KEVIN YOUNG: Let’s take some questions.

AUDIENCE: What are some of the African origins of African American poetry?

TRACIE MORRIS: There’s a historian named Lorenzo Dow Turner, who learned about eight languages to trace the West African roots of the Gullah dialect; there’s also a book called *The African Heritage of American English* that talks specifically about Central African sources. As a writer, though, on a musical level, I like to imagine that you can actually hear the phonemic commonalities between some of the words I quoted. What are the smaller, fundamental sound particles and combinations—the sounds highlighted, for example, when people do renderings of “African” speech in a bad or disrespectful way? What they’re trying to get to, even if in a dehumanizing manner, is the basis of sounds that are connected to or associated with Africans. Obviously, as poets, our ways of looking into these patterns should be more sophisticated and humane. Somehow, though, the unstudied among us have a sort of rough knowledge about what these sounds may be. We can look at how these sounds stuck it out across time, became representations of ideas that everyone is intimate with in this country.

It’s important to remember that the slave trade was not indiscriminate. Specific peoples were targeted because the American economy needed infusions of certain skills; there were Africans who were kidnapped because they knew how to cultivate rice, or dye indigo. As far as I’m concerned, talking about indigo and rice and poems is ultimately talking about cultural production—what sounds did Africans bring with them into the American vocabulary?

HARRYETTE MULLEN: Most of us, individually, do not know which particular cultural group our ancestors came from. Howard University is about to offer us the service of analyzing our DNA, so we will perhaps be able to know our origins. But an African culture existed in this country before there was a notion of Africa as a collective entity. Africans brought here as slaves thought of themselves as specific ethnolinguistic groups, and what we have in this country is a residue and synthesis of those separate identities. Alan Lomax and Raoul Abdul anthologized three thousand years of African poetry; I have this book. So what I know of that tradition comes from reading work preserved by modern and contemporary writers.

AUDIENCE: Which musicians do you compare your poetry to?

HARRYETTE MULLEN: Thelonius Monk, for his attitude toward composition and improvisation—the idea that eccentricity is part of the method; that individual eccentricity is incorporated into the technique of composition. Monk didn’t worry about being aesthetically African American, because that just wasn’t a problem. His music bespeaks an attitude toward improvisation that allows the individual to recognize his or her individuality without that individuality coming into conflict with belonging to a group. I think we assume in this culture that they are in conflict. But all cultures don’t necessarily feel that way.

TRACIE MORRIS: I've learned two important technical things from Monk. One is about space and the value of spaces and rests and holes in the wall of sound I try to make in a poem. Also, his fabulous, frequent refusal to resolve a musical phrase in the way that the listener might expect it to be resolved. That taught me a lot, especially about the ends of poems—the rewards of ending on the off-note.

CORNELIUS EADY: Late Coltrane has been instructive for me as a writer about pushing formal and expressive boundaries, almost to the point of attracting ridicule. He's a hero now, but when he was doing it everyone was scratching their heads and saying, there's no melody, what is he doing? That nakedness is valuable to me.

AUDIENCE: What about visual artists?

KEVIN YOUNG: I have a book of poems that are influenced by Jean-Michel Basquiat. I was struck by his paintings, because you can almost hear them. They incorporate lots of words, multiple layers—he deals with translating sound into image, and I found that I was trying to translate image into sound, without making the final poem an illustration of a painting. So, certainly a particular issue in African American writing is: How do you represent oral or visual aspects on the page?

TRACIE MORRIS: I would also cite Leonardo Drew, Xenobia Bailey, Arthur Jafa, and a lot of album covers from the 1970s. Earth, Wind and Fire covers; P-Funk covers by Pedro Bell. There's a cover of an album by Little Jimmy Scott called *The Source*, which was out for a hot minute before it was pulled because of contractual problems. There was this sister, sort of Roberta Flack-esque, Chapter 2-esque, you know, the big afro and really long eyelashes, and for many years I thought she was singing the Jimmy Scott songs. Then when I had to make the mental transfer between the voice singing and the person on the cover, it did something to my mind in terms of understanding the relationship between visual representation and sound.

[Editors' Note: At this point Tracie Morris left the event to catch a plane.]

HARRYETTE MULLEN: I think abstract expressionist and nonrepresentational visual artists have often felt conflicted about what they do—or other people have tried to make them feel conflicted—because there is an immense pressure on African American visual artists to create an image of the black human figure. Someone like Romare Bearden resolves this by making collages that function as compositions in color and space, but also represent black figures. So that zone of push/pull against expectations about representing the race has been important for me.

ELIZABETH ALEXANDER: Bearden has been important to me, particularly in the urban mode—let's say Bearden's *The Block*—where he constructs a cross-section of this Harlem street and you can see into the different homes, but not as a Peeping Tom, more as someone trying to go behind the façade, to say, here is what this community really is. There's the picture you first perceive, but then you look closer and see that these are fragments from another place, from other lives, which bring the power of their original sources with them. So much African American culture is collaged or syncretized in that fashion. In the essay "In Search of Our

Mother's Gardens," for example, Alice Walker talks about how the brilliance of her mother's garden became her mother's art form. Yes, we find our brilliance in books and paintings, but as African Americans we also find our brilliance in the way people talk, in the so-called folk arts of people's gardens and kitchens and so forth. Those are rich resources that I think might go toward refining the question *What's African American about African American Poetry?* How do black poets, in whatever way, synthesize or fashion the nonliterary or non-high-art aspects of our culture? Because for all sorts of reasons, our brilliance does not always take place in books and paintings and museums.

AUDIENCE: I wonder if I could get some advice: I live in a Connecticut town where there are almost no African American writers and no way even to talk about writing with fellow African Americans. That's why I came down here today, to hear your voices.

KEVIN YOUNG: We've all been there and had that feeling and wish. I went to high school in Kansas where there was no poetry, much less black poetry. It was only later I realized that Gwendolyn Brooks and Langston Hughes were both from Kansas. That struggle for community is part of the process of being an artist of any kind. But I think it can be quite profound if you are African American.

CORNELIUS EADY: Some of us are part of an organization called Cave Canem, a retreat and workshop and mentoring program that was established to address the problems of isolation you're talking about. The retreat happens once a year, in the summer. Then, in New York City, we also have two ten-week workshops at Poet's House, in the fall and the spring.

ELIZABETH ALEXANDER: Another thing about encouragement—there are a lot of anthologies of African American writers out now. I was recently looking at Mark Strand's collection of American poets, just beyond pissed off about who wasn't in there, but there are other general anthologies that are more inclusive and that's exciting. *[Editors' Note: See bibliography following the discussion.]*

AUDIENCE: A professor of mine told me not to use the first-person pronoun in poetry. What do you all think about that?

KEVIN YOUNG: I think your question is in part about what role the "I" has played in recovering and establishing African American voices. This tradition is partially shaped by confessionalism, which for many people has been exhausted and is seen as exhausting. But I think that African American usages of the first-person position are differently inflected, too. Think about Langston Hughes, who often uses the "I" as persona. He might be writing as a woman newly come to the city, or as an older man. *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, for example, is a community portrait made up of multiple "I's" in a Whitmanesque way. It relates to what Harryette was saying, that the individual and the group aren't in conflict.

ELIZABETH ALEXANDER: But I think there's something deeper and more pernicious, not necessarily in what your professor was saying, but in how that argument has been used. African Americans haven't been the only ones saying "I, I, I." And yet—I wish I had the precise quote and if anyone has it, please correct me. But recently on NPR, the poet John Hollander was asked

if he could name any African American poets whose work he admired, and he said, well, no. “I suppose there will be some good African American poets when they stop writing about their experience,” or some such thing. Now, I mean, that is a particularly dangerous use of the idea that personal subjectivity is somehow passé. I think there is talk, which has currency in more than one place, that really is saying, I don’t want to hear that story; I don’t want to be confronted with what that voice is presenting to me.

AUDIENCE: I would be interested in how members of the panel would respond to Toni Morrison’s assertion that black literature is not simply books written about or by black people. In her article “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation,” Morrison argues that for a writing to be considered African American, it has to include the presence of the ancestor. I interpret this to mean that the historical circumstances of slavery, or simply the communal history of black people in America, must somehow resonate in the text, perhaps through an ancestral figure.

ELIZABETH ALEXANDER: Maybe because I have a scholarly interest in African American literature, I do feel that I can’t break away from a sort of demographic approach, which is part of my quest to get my hands around this tradition. But I am excited by a poem like Carl Phillips’s “Passing,” which works—to put it crudely—as a litmus test from blacks to blacks about what it means to be part of a tradition. Phillips says, “Alabama is not my name,” i.e., what use do I have for the black heroes of the past? Why should that be relevant in my life? So I’m interested in thinking about how work like Phillips’s takes part in a tradition that looks consciously to slavery and the most assertive, bedrock black experiences. Or take a poem like Frank O’Hara’s “The Day Lady Died,” in which a white writer does beautifully capture the breath of Billie Holiday in the absence of her voice. Certainly there are many white writers who have engaged with the big black stuff and come up with profound and artful results, and I am drawn to that work. But it’s not African American to me. Maybe that’s more a reiteration than an answer. It’s a provocative question.

HARRYETTE MULLEN: I am totally inspired by Toni Morrison, but I do sometimes disagree with things she says, and I can give at least one example where following that rubric led to the misreading of a Rita Dove poem in my classroom. My students give presentations and a person had chosen “Ö,” a poem from *The Yellow House on the Corner*, which is about learning a different language and feeling freed to travel in the imagination because the language gives you words and ideas that you might not otherwise have. In the poem there is a reference to a ship, “a galleon stranded in flowers.” My students are saying, okay, African American poet, there’s a ship in the poem, it’s a slave ship—she’s talking about having to speak a non-African language. I had to point out that the speaker has chosen to learn another language, and that she’s talking about being liberated by that choice.

KEVIN YOUNG: It’s interesting, too, in terms of writers like Countee Cullen, who are thought of as perhaps not black enough. These are old questions in a way, but I don’t think they are going to leave. In the 1920s, James Weldon Johnson discussed the fact that Cullen tried to write around race or against race, and proposed that this was what made him interesting—that this was, in fact, what made Cullen part of the African American tradition. In other words, I think that leaving America, becoming an exile, doesn’t make you not American. It might be the most American thing you can do, whether you are Richard Wright or Ezra Pound. I think the same is

true in terms of African Americanness—people need to question those boundaries. The formation of the identity is part of the play, the improvisation, the changes.

CORNELIUS EADY: I get nervous when I hear somebody trying to lay down an absolute definition of what a tradition is. One of the things that's exciting now is that people are starting to examine what tradition means for them individually, in the moment they happen to be in. When tradition is predefined, it stops you, by definition, from examining it further. On the other hand, how do you escape the need for such definitions?

I think the history of African American poetry, maybe literature in general, is the history of negotiating that contradiction. Being who you are in the country that we have. Sometimes you go out of the country; sometimes you ask, what does Alabama have to do with me? Sometimes you totally embrace it and dig deep to find and re-inhabit