

FLS

外國文學研究

全國中文(世界文學類)核心期刊/A&HCI收錄期刊

Vol. 34, No. 6 December 2012



Foreign
Literature
Studies

中國武漢
WUHAN CHINA

History, Blues Poetic, and Politics: An Interview with Honorée Fanonne Jeffers

Shi Liling

Abstract: Honorée Fanonne Jeffers is one of the leading figures in contemporary African American poetry and literary critics. As associate professor of English at the University of Oklahoma and author of three books of poetry—*The Gospel of Barbecue* (2000), *Outlandish Blues* (2003), and *Red Clay Suite* (2007), she has won such literary honors as Wick Poetry Prize and Julia Peterkin Award for Poetry. In November 2012, Shi Liling, Ph. D. candidate at Central China Normal University and visiting scholar at University of Pennsylvania, interviewed Jeffers via email. Taking her identity of scholar into consideration, this interview focuses on Jeffers' books of poetry, and the issues of history writing, the blues poetic and politics that are crucial both in her writing and African American writing as a whole. Jeffers said that to locate herself in American history is the dynamic for her history writing, and that the southern black experience and the southern black culture are its major content. She concludes the seven parts that consist of blues poem and points out non-black poets also could employ this form. She admits her black feminist perspective in her blues poetry writing, which is mainly about domestic sphere and private experience. In addition, her poetry explores black women's epic trials and compose a blues epic. In regards to the identity politics, she thinks that contemporary black poets continue to wrangle with subjective notions of racial identity. Meanwhile, she emphasizes her gender identity and states that the black feminist movement going on at the same time as the BAM has not received enough attention, while she is an inheritor of a previous generation of black female poets.

Key words: Honorée F. Jeffers history writing the blues poetic politics black feminism

Author: Shi Liling is a Ph. D. candidate at Central China Normal University (Wuhan 430079, China), and lecturer at School of Foreign Languages & Literature of Yunnan Normal University (Kunming 650000, China). Her research area mainly covers African American literature. Email: shililing@yahoo.cn

标题: 历史、布鲁斯诗歌、政治: 欧诺瑞·F·杰弗斯访谈

内容摘要: 欧诺瑞·F·杰弗斯是当代美国非裔诗歌与文学评论新生力量的代表人物之一, 任教于美国俄克拉荷马大学, 著有《烧烤福音》(2000)、《异乡布鲁斯》(2003) 与《红土组曲》(2007) 等诗集, 曾获维克诗歌奖、朱莉娅·彼得金诗歌奖等。2012年11月, 受《外国文学研究》委托, 华中师范大学博士研究生史丽玲在宾夕法尼亚大学访学期间通过电子邮件方式对杰弗斯进行了专访。本访谈以杰弗斯的诗歌作品为主线, 兼顾其学者身份, 围绕杰弗斯个

体创作与美国非裔集体创作中的历史、布鲁斯诗歌、政治等重要议题展开。杰弗斯谈到在美国历史中确定自我是她历史书写的动力,而南方黑人经历与南方黑人文化等是其主要内容。她归纳了构成布鲁斯诗歌的七个要素,承认自己布鲁斯诗歌创作中的黑人女性主义视角,因此家宅空间和个体经历是她关注的重点。在整体上,三部诗集叙述了黑人女性经历磨砺考验,共同构成了布鲁斯史诗。对于身份政治问题,杰弗斯认为当代黑人诗人的艺术主体性仍然深受种族身份困扰。同时她强调自己的性属身份,认为人们忽视了黑人艺术运动时期的黑人女性运动,而她正是秉承了黑人女性前辈诗人的传统。

关键词: 欧诺瑞·F·杰弗斯 历史书写 布鲁斯诗歌 政治 黑人女性主义

作者简介: 史丽玲,华中师范大学外国语学院博士研究生,云南师范大学外国语学院讲师,研究方向为美国非裔文学。

History

Shi: Professor Jeffers, you grew up in the time of the Black Arts Movement, witnessed the rising of the African American Woman Literature, and made a contribution to the flowering of the contemporary African American literature. As an accomplished poet and scholar, you are indebted to the black literary and intellectual tradition. What is more important is that your innovation in poetry writing and critical thinking in scholarship show the dynamics of this tradition. I would like to start our interview with the thematic concern of history. We see a deepening of concerns with history in your three volumes of poetry: *The Gospel of Barbecue* (2000), *Outlandish Blues* (2003), and *Red Clay Suite* (2007). What has aroused your concerns with history?

Jeffers: At first, my concerns with history were deeply personal. I wanted to find a way to connect with and locate myself in American history. While a graduate student in journalism in 1990, our professor sent us to the Southern Historical Collection (the SHC) to find primary documents on antebellum African Americans. This was during the time I happened upon letters written by African American slaves to their white masters; the letters at that time were embedded in the masters' archival portfolios and many of them weren't even included in the individual portfolio description. The first time I read one of the letters, something just ran through me. I made copies of the letters and kept them, and included one eleven years later as a "found poem" in *The Gospel of Barbecue*.

About half of the first poems in *The Gospel of Barbecue* were written while I was in the Master of Fine Arts program in Creative Writing at the University of Alabama, from 1993 to 1996. While there I became deeply aware that I was considered a "minority" in a larger community of white poets. While I learned about half of what I currently know about the craft of writing poetry, the cultural content of my work was criticized by my peers in the workshop, and the criticism nearly always was directed at the aspects of black life in my poetry. So I sought sanctuary in the library. Strangely, it was not poetry books that I sought out, but scholarly volumes about African American history. By reading that history, I started seeing myself in a larger community of black people, most of whom were long dead. As with the primary sources in the SHC, my reading of secondary accounts of African American history connected me to little-known figures of history, people who were unknown to others. I wasn't as interested in famous figures. Perhaps that was because when I had visited my mother's relatives as a little girl, they told stories about their ancestors and living

family members, and so, as an adult, I returned to family history, too; I see now that I relate better to my family members through the lens of history.

Shi: Let's go into details with your first collection *The Gospel of Barbecue*. Michael Harper spoke of you as "a storyteller in the Hurston tradition." What literary legacy did you inherit from Zora Neale Hurston? How does this play into your thematic concerns with history?

Jeffers: Culturally, I'm as southern as they come, though I never intended for that to happen. I tried running as far away from the South in my work and in my ethos as possible and I ended up coming right back home. I gave up trying to be anything but what I am, but it has taken a while to become comfortable with my southern identity. I believe that I tried to deny southern influences in my work because a thick southern accent meant ignorance, a lack of intelligence. With very few exceptions, any Contemporary black American southern writer has to grapple with the legacy of Zora Neale Hurston, directly or indirectly, because Hurston's legacy is the African American folk tradition. In her writing, she is an archivist of folklore, and she also conducted anthropological research early in her career. I never considered Hurston anything less than a genius, and so, when other writers started comparing me to Hurston, I was flattered. I knew that I was influenced by her same black southern culture. I was astonished the first time I read that folkloric phrase rendered by Hurston. It was a shock of recognition, but also, an apprehension that if Hurston could be black, southern and very smart, then so could I. I stopped being embarrassed at being "country" and started leaning into archiving folklore in my work. I started gathering my intellectual observations, but like Hurston, I wanted these observations to be readable and accessible to audiences outside of literary circles.

Shi: It's fascinating that in your second volume *Outlandish Blues* a series of poems concentrate on the Biblical figures of Sarai, Hagar and Lot's Wife and daughters. Where did you draw your inspiration from? How do you make use of the violent side of the Bible stories to explore the vision of history and trauma?

Jeffers: Just as folklore is part of the black southern experience, so is the Christian tradition. When I was a little girl, my mother was very religious and insisted on taking us to church. I leaned more into feminism as a teenager and young adult and I had a hard time reconciling those patriarchal Biblical stories with my beliefs in female empowerment, so I stopped going to church and actually, I became an atheist-leaning agnostic. However, as I returned to my southern roots I rediscovered my spirituality, and I returned to Christianity, although as a feminist, I really didn't want to. I supposed I was forced to do so when I started having ecstatic spiritual experiences.

Around that time, I was dealing with issues of childhood trauma, trauma that resulted in unhealed psychological wounds. I was in emotional pain and I turned to my spiritual faith as a means of psychological survival. My faith led me to go back to the Bible, where I grappled with scripture that frankly, unapologetically assigned women the worst portions of life simply because of gender. Some feminists have rejected Christianity, but I felt that God was trying to tell me something, and that I was meant to testify on my spiritual revelations. That is when the poems of the Women of Sodom came to me, the stories of Sarai, Hagar, the Wife of Lot and her two daughters. Suddenly, it seemed so obvious that to men of the Bible, women's and children's bodies were meant to be traded; this "trading" connected to my own traumatic experience, and in turn, I saw a connection to the larger African American woman's experience. It was not my job to challenge the fact of the Biblical stories, but rather, to add to the spiritual record, to create a woman's scripture and provide a woman's understanding of what happened.

Shi: It seems that you intend to establish a metaphorical association between the woman's body and the southern landscape. This kind of association is highlighted in your third collection

Red Clay Suite. What effect would you expect this association to produce?

Jeffers: I've had a very problematic emotional relationship with Africa as "motherland" throughout my adult life, which is ironic since my father was a Black Nationalist who had a very visceral emotional to Africa. At the time that I wrote *Red Clay Suite*, I was actively rejecting the notion of a mythic African motherland, and rejecting the primacy of African heritage; instead, I was exploring the notions of a culturally mixed ancestry. I proudly identify as African American, but I proudly identify as a Cherokee Indian *as well*. I am Cherokee and African on both paternal and maternal sides. I have European ancestry on both sides, too, but it's hard to revere one set of ancestors who were the transgressors toward the other two sets of your ancestors. I'm getting there, though most of American history represents a symbolic tending of Anglo-American ancestral altars, so I don't feel so bad.

I think we all have a need to categorize, when someone embraces several categories, it is problematic, but I contend that "black" or "African American" is a hybrid identity. Our heritage is many generations removed from the continent of Africa. We as black people have created new traditions on American soil and I've been very vocal about my refusal to see Africa as a "motherland," insisting that, "Georgia is my motherland because that's where my mama was born." *Red Clay Suite* is an attempt to locate that cultural motherland, the site of the tangled, hybrid identity that formed me culturally, and to explore how the south was the cradle of that identity, with all its attendant joys and sorrows.

Shi: The south emerges as more a symbolic space than a geographic location in both the mainstream literature and African American literature. How do you view the ways in which the traditional southern literature (white and male) and the black southern literature explore the "southernness"? What literary influence have you received from one of them or both of them?

Jeffers: My friend, the poet Natasha Trethewey and I have discussed that, many times, scholars of traditional southern literature argue that this literature arose from the fact that "we lost the Civil War." But who might "we" be? Southern African Americans did not lose the war; actually they won, because they are no longer slaves! And so, that is the first differing point of departure. Also, black folks do not exist on the margins in black southern literature, as mere foils as they tend to exist in traditional southern literature. For the most part, the symbolic south of African American literature is a strange mix of pastoral beauty and brutality. As Faulkner has said, "The past isn't dead. It isn't even past," and this is definitely true in black southern literature. The past hovers, and it comes to bear on the present. Slavery, Jim Crow, lynching, white male sexual transgressions against black women, the peonage system—all these are present in black southern settings. You might say history is an invisible character in black southern fiction and the speaker in that poetry. Actually, all those things are present in *white* southern literature, too.

I know it's a stunning statement to be a southern writer and say, "I'm not a fan of Faulkner," but I'm not. I've never been able to enter his work with any sort of joy. To me, it's unsatisfying labor to read his work. I do acknowledge his genius and that his work must have some sort of indirect influence on my own because he's influenced southern readers that I love and read. In the same way, I know Robert Penn Warren's poetry must have influenced me as well, though I'm not a fan of his work, either; if I'm honest, I see much of my work as refuting Warren's stance of white male privilege, although that is not my specific point of departure. The southern writers that I do enjoy tend to be black fiction writers, with the exception of poets Yusef Komunyakaa and Sonia Sanchez. The southern writers who have had the most direct impact on my work are Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, and Ernest Gaines. I still haven't figured out whether Langston Hughes is a southern writer but he has had a tremendous influence not just on

my poetry and fiction, but also, my ability to consider myself a multi-genre writer. And there are peers of mine whose work teaches me something, such as Natasha Trethewey, and Crystal Wilkinson, a black southern novelist whose work is located in regional place and who renders language in rich, very satisfying ways.

The Blues Poetic

Shi: Many African American writers have found a way to the blues. Ralph Ellison says "As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expresses lyrically." For Langston Hughes, the blues are "laughing to keep from crying." Kevin Young states that, "the blues provide a fresh way to express the lyric poem's mix of emotion and intensity." As a poet and scholar who has explored the blues in many ways, how do you view their statements? What is your notion of the blues?

Jeffers: All of the above statements are so true. The blues is about ancestral and personal pain. Further, the singer in a blues song or the speaker in a blues poem doesn't only speak to his or her own pain, but a collective pain that each listener or each reader gets to participate in. This goes beyond "universality," for as I noted about black southern writing, in the blues particular truths hover and inform the work before it is even created. Langston Hughes's blues poems represent what might be called the "dramatic lyric." He uses the first person much of the time, but his individual speaker stands with the African American community behind him or her—that, to me, is the blues. As a woman, the domestic sphere, the home, is always with me. Even when I write about history, it's usually the private reality of a public moment. For me, the blues is a way to explore painful, internal realities as public testimony, personal moments as longstanding truths, plainspoken as they are.

Shi: When using the term blues, actually we don't distinguish the blues song and the blues poetic. Could you explain more about the initial five-part equation of a blues song? How does a blues song transfer into a blues poetic?

Jeffers: The blues began as a musical form and Langston Hughes was the first poet to use it as a basis for writing poetry. The notion of the blues as an official poetic has been pretty loose; I don't mean that as a criticism, just as a point of fact. Because I'm a poet who has written blues poetry, I had been asked to comment on writing blues poetry and to lecture on what constituted the blues poetic, and that led me to try to understand the form. However, I noticed that when I went back and read some of the scholarly discussion of the blues, such as those by Langston Hughes, LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), and later, Yusef Komunyakaa and Kevin Young, there was no *architectural* rubric for *writing* blues poetry. There was a discussion of the "blues feeling" but no sort of craft plan. I was fine with that until I started being asked very pointed blues craft questions by young writers, most of whom were Anglo-American. In summer of 2004, I was asked to present a poetry craft and I decided to present on blues poetry. I really had to get a handle on the blues poetic and how exactly to write the poetry.

First, it was obvious that any blues poem had to include music. That's where the poetic had started, when Langston Hughes decided to take blues music and incorporate it into the writing of poetry. It didn't necessarily have to be about a song, just include a sense of music. Next, when someone has the blues, that person is sad. So pathos was very easy to locate as a requirement and that was sort of a no-brainer. In addition, pathos gives an instant tension to blues poems or songs. My notion about "tension" originated with the blues. A blues poem always has tension. That's where I started with my blues poetic theory, with music, pathos and tension.

After I located the first three parts of the equation, I started doing more interrogation. I

looked at specific blues songs, blues poems, and writings about black music, which always came back to the Traditional Spirituals as the artistic ancestor of black music. I noticed a three-part *emotional* structure to the Spirituals. I replayed in my mind the long and involved artistic discussions that I'd had with a mentor of mine, the poet Afaa Michael Weaver, and his saying once that in all black music there were three movements. But what *were* those movements? I kept looking at the songs and the poems, and I noticed that in each of them, the speaker would begin with a sort of thesis statement: "This is what is going on with me [or with this situation]." Then, the speaker would spend a little time with the problem and then finally, wrap things up. Sometimes, things wouldn't be wrapped up nicely, but still, there was some sort of conclusion to the situation or problem. Finally, I settled on a trinity of "identification, exploration, and resolution" as the fourth part.

The last issue was the hardest, because it had to address "race" and culture in writing blues poetry. I didn't know any other way to address it other than to ask it outright: could white folks (and other folks) write blues poetry? I know some black poets thought I was rude asking (and answering) that question in the craft essay on the blues that I published, but the reason I did was that I've had several white poets to ask me, "Do I have the right to write blues poetry as a white person?" I'd been looking at some so-called blues poems by white poets and frankly, some of them were very awful and some white folks were trying to use black vernacular, which was kind of insulting, though I know/hope they didn't mean it that way. And as someone who wanted to further the blues tradition, I really wanted to help those white poets and other non-black poets to write the best blues poems, only in their own cultural language. I figured it out on the phone one night with my dear, late friend, J. W. Richardson, Jr., who remains the most brilliant man I've ever met. He said to me, "Well, you know, the blues is always about the working class experience and poor folk." I said something to the effect of, "Ok, that's true. But still, what does that have to do with white folks?" And he said, "Girl, it's some poor *white* folks out there, too. Don't you think they got the blues?" It seemed so obvious I was rather ashamed I hadn't seen it before. My mind started bubbling, and I remembered a performance of "It Ain't Nothing But the Blues," a musical play that I had attended at the Lincoln Center, and there'd been this white guy singing country music up there surrounded by all these black singers. He'd been playing the banjo. On a hunch, I decided to look up the origins of the banjo, and there it was: the banjo was an African-derived instrument! That was the metaphor for the blues, a poetic form that, like the banjo, could migrate to other cultures, but still maintain its working class origins.

Thus, to write a blues poem, you need five "parts," but those parts *add up* to seven: 1) pathos; 2) tension; 3) the three-part structure of a) identification, b) exploration, and c) resolution; 4) music; and 5) working class ethos. I truly believe that craft "blues-print" will work with any poet of any culture.

Shi: Your second collection *Outlandish Blues* is dedicated to Langston Hughes, poet laureate of the blues. As you once said no author of blues poetry could ignore his or her debt to Hughes's *The Weary Blues*, how did Hughes and his poetry influence your writing?

Jeffers: Anyone who writes blues poetry must first give credit to Langston Hughes, because he's the first poet to write in the blues poetic; he's the founder of blues poetry. I started reading Hughes's poetry as a small child, in my home. "Mother to Son" was a very popular poem in my majority black elementary school and we frequently memorized other poems by Langston Hughes in school for African American History Month. After I started singing in graduate school, I started rereading the poetry of Langston Hughes. Before that, I had thought of his poems as simple, but suddenly, I saw the plainspoken genius of it and that pulled me in. The musicality of it mixed

with lyricism was wonderful!

If I am honest, though, initially I became very serious about writing blues poetry because I was a woman and I didn't like that male poets seemed to dominate the "public relations" component of contemporary blues poetry. The time around Mr. Hughes's one-hundredth birthday, I wasn't invited to any of the poetry celebrations. I'd written blues poems in my first book, and I wrote about music in general—blues, jazz, spirituals—but no one seemed to pay attention to *my* blues poems! Oh, I didn't like that. So I was young then and extremely insecure about my work and career for many reasons, but once I really got into writing in the blues poetic, I got completely hooked. If it only had been about needing to prove something, I would have moved on, but I fell in love with the feeling I got when I wrote the poetry, the blues feeling LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka talked about; it was a high, but also, very spiritual as well. And now that I've grown up, I see that the poetic has to be extended to more than just one person. I've tried to contribute to the legacy of blues poetry, without needing to snatch everything for myself. When I go back and read *Outlandish Blues* and try to understand what happened when I wrote those poems, the tight alchemy of it all, I can't understand, but that lack of understanding is somehow satisfying. I wish I could duplicate it, but I can't. I'm not in that moment anymore, but I'm very grateful I was there for a little while, and now, I write blues poems in different ways, as well as blues fiction and blues non-fiction, and the blues continues to be deeply satisfying.

Shi: You mentioned that both Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown codified early blues poetics in their work. What are the features of the traditional blues exemplified by these two poets?

Jeffers: Well, these were the two poets I examined most closely when developing my craft "blues-print," so I think/hope you will find the five-part blues requirement when you read the blues poetry of Hughes and Brown: music, pathos, tension, the trinity (identification, exploration, and resolution), and working class ethos. In addition, in terms of musicality, a reader will notice that meter in these early blues poems tends to be irregular and accentual instead of syllabic. I'm not certain why, but I've thought about this a lot. If I had to conjecture, I'd say it's because early blues poems had a more immediate artistic reference to stage singers, and individual, improvisational performances focused more on the subjective stresses of accentual meter, rather than fixed syllabic meter.

Shi: The format of your third volume *Red Clay Suite* is quiet expressive. It consists of four sections: Prologue, Migration Cantos, Dark Pastoral and Red Clay Reprise. The subtitles evoke European epic and blues musicality as well. Could this be read as a juxtaposition of European form/structure and black blues poetic? What is your intention for this juxtaposition?

Jeffers: That is such a kind thing to say about my book. Thank you so much. And here is where I give a very not-intellectual answer: I don't know *what* I was juxtaposing! I do know that the notion of journey was very important to me, and I do know that I was thinking about a blues epic, but I can't say I see myself as worthy of the rank of epic hero/heroine. I'm very flawed. Also, *Red Clay Suite* is not meant as the epic itself, but rather, part of the epic composed of my first three books that should be taken together.

Shi: Could you explain more about the notion of blues epic? How do these three books work together to explore blues epic?

Jeffers: Alright. A blues epic must have the five movements, but let's take a look at the generally agreed upon requirements for the epic poem, too, and use both poetics to move through those first three books of mine. Typically, the hero of the epic is male, someone who has high status in the world as well as powerful abilities—sometimes, supernatural abilities. In *The Gospel of Barbecue*, my speaker locates her home culture, as any epic hero would, and that would be Af-

rican American culture in all three books and in the first and third books, Native American culture as well. But my speaker's position as blues heroine would be altered from the traditional epic hero. First, she's a woman. Further, because of the working class requirement of the blues and the speaker's identity as both an African American and a trauma survivor, she doesn't have the high social status of a regular epic hero. She's not what the original composers of epic poetry had in mind. But the spiritual component of my poetry might count for the speaker's supernatural powers that are evident in epic heroes. We start with that black feminist positionality as a point of departure in the first book, *The Gospel of Barbecue*.

Throughout my three books, the subjective female speaker has a sense of personal agency that gives her power in an otherwise oppressive world; this personal agency helps the speaker in her epic quest when she is tested. The epic trials she faces and which sometimes depress her would be ordinary trials facing ordinary women: perhaps rape or domestic violence or political humiliation/oppression or other attempts to take away her strong female power—attempts to break her ethereal and corporeal spirit. The epic mythic beings she would encounter would be those figures from black, Native, and Biblical history—and in a few cases, folklore—who have encountered overwhelming odds and who provide models of survival for the blues heroine. Perhaps those figures have overcome these odds; perhaps they haven't. But either way, these figures provide wisdom for the heroine's survival of her epic blues journey. And these figures provide her entry into worlds not open to regular human beings (especially in *Outlandish Blues*) through spiritually ecstatic experiences; however, because of the nature of these experiences, her quest would be both linear and non-linear through time and history. Because the blues surrounds "regular folk," the deeds of my blues heroine aren't extraordinary, just her ability to survive and to ultimately testify on her trials. In *Red Clay Suite*, the third book, my blues heroine clearly does survive her epic trials and is lifted up spiritually and emotionally, if not in status.

Politics

Shi: Your generation lives in the shadow of the Black Arts Movement (BAM) of the 1960s and 1970s, which was a wing of the Black Power Movement. In fact, you received direct legacy from your father, Lance Jeffers, who was one of the architects of the BAM. How would you describe the role of the BAM in your career as a poet and its influence on the poets of your generation as a whole?

Jeffers: My father had a profound early intellectual influence on me, in that he never really knew how to interact with children as immature, constantly forming beings, but only as tiny adults. And he demanded adult thinking from me. He bought me children's books, yes, but also, I made my way through Richard Wright, Tolstoy, Langston Hughes, Shakespeare, and the classic Slave Narratives, and he made me discuss the books with him. It's a wonder my little brain wasn't entirely warped. We lived at that time in Durham, North Carolina and there were four universities in a small area: North Carolina State University, Duke University, North Carolina Central University, and University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. As a result, we had a constant stream of black intellectuals and writers coming through our house. Whenever Daddy had a poetry reading, Mama and I would go with him. And there were concerts and art exhibits and lectures and foreign films that I attended with my parents. In this way, I observed the Black Arts Movement that was ending in my early childhood and incredibly, viewed myself as sort of a participant. I say "incredibly" because the artistic and intellectual atmosphere that I took for granted then, I now know was extraordinary for a small child to experience. And looking back, I suppose it was a foregone conclusion that I would become a writer, but I resisted it for a long time. My fa-

ther cast a very big shadow. He was a very dominant figure personally, and intellectually, I know I will never have one-tenth of his knowledge. It used to depress me until I found a way to mark my own territory. I know for other BAM "kids" it's hard for them, too. You can't shake that history; people who hate your parents hate you and if they admire your parents, you never can live up to the legend.

Shi: The BAM is sometimes supposedly a male-identified movement, while your work contains strong female consciousness, female perspective and female voice. How do you negotiate the gap between the male-centered racial politics of the BAM and an assertion of womanhood of a new generation of black women poets?

Jeffers: As a feminist and a dogged individual, I've had some problems with BAM artistic principles, but I've always acknowledged that I stand on the shoulders of those poets. Because of the choices of some editors of anthologies and critics who write about the Black Arts Movement, many readers assume that the BAM was a purely black male movement. That couldn't be further from the truth. There were plenty of women writing during that time, such as June Jordan, Lucille Clifton, Audre Lorde, and Sonia Sanchez, but the loudest voices and the most publicized voices happened to be male and also, happened to be associated with the Black Power Movement. If you strip away the mere sexist rhetoric of the BAM to look at some of the artistic concerns of the poets, first, there were plenty of black female poets writing according to "black power" principles. Further, what doesn't get mentioned nearly as much was that there was a thriving black feminist movement going on at that same time as the BAM and certain BAM women poets were interrogating black *female* empowerment in these ways. And so, the issue becomes, what *sort* of black power? I consider myself to be an inheritor of and tender to a previous generation of powerful black female poets. And I don't see myself negotiating the gap, but rather, as the old ones say, I see myself as "standing in the gap." I am black and woman, not either/or, and like my black woman literary ancestors, I write about both ways of being. I'm a dogged individual, sure enough, but at this age, knowing what I now know, I'm not so arrogant or stupid as to reject the truth: certain folks gave me a softer place to land. And I'm grateful to them.

Shi: I think that your negotiation between receiving political dynamics from the BAM and breaking away from its imposed standards would be one of the common issues confronted by the younger generation of black poets. Another issue that forms the main debate in African American literary tradition is the question of black poet's identity. This issue recurs in different time of the Harlem Renaissance, the BAM and the so-called post-racial time with subtle difference in focuses. Could you briefly trace the transformation of the black poet's subjectivity and explain how it operates in specific authors' work? What would you say about your own location?

Jeffers: The earliest extant poem by an African American, Lucy Terry's "Bars Fight" (1746) records a public act, and so, the history of black poetry began in a public sphere. Later, Phillis Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773) continues that negotiation of the public sphere; her work broaches political concerns by airing colonial complaints with British rule. However, her work explores emotional interiority as well by addressing her Middle Passage trauma—she was kidnapped as a small child from Africa—and the grief of mothers who have lost children. And then, run along a couple more centuries. Since the end of the Black Arts Movement, and now in this time in twenty-first century black poetry there's been an argument raging within the ranks of black poetry about what makes a poem "black." Is a poem "black" simply because it is written by a black poet, or must it exhibit certain specific, cultural markers? I'm afraid I can't answer that question.

Black poetry is certainly *quieter* now than it was in the mid-to late 1960s and early 1970s but

I do think I can say with some confidence that Wheatley's dual political and personal concerns remain the concerns of many contemporary African American poets, just as those were concerns during the BAM and even now in this so-called "post-racial" American environment. As I've said, I don't believe in the existence of "race"—but I do know that because other people *do* believe in "race," the *notion* of "race" continues to be very powerful. Because of this, Double Consciousness as theorized by W. E. B. DuBois will continue to affect black poets and as a result, probably affect their artistic subjectivity. When I look at the black poets who started publishing in the 1990s and the twenty-first century—such as Natasha Trethewey, Tracey K. Smith, Elizabeth Alexander, Terrance Hayes, Kevin Young, Thomas Sayers Ellis, Lyrae Van Clief Stefanon, A. Van Jordan, Major Jackson, myself, etcetera—we continue to wrangle with increasingly subjective notions of "racial" identity, but are constantly trying to find new ways to do so. Again, I'm almost positive that this is a result of Double Consciousness, but I think it's also about the changing career landscape of American poetry.

There are a lot of poets writing now, and many black poets. As Thomas Sayers Ellis has written satirically, there are "ways to be black in a poem," cultural signifiers developed indirectly or on purpose by black poets to provide allusive shortcuts for readers. Thus, if a black poet doesn't want to keep writing in instantly familiar, stale ways about subjective blackness, ways that are identical to how other black poets write, there has to be constant improvisation to satisfy readers. And let's keep it real: most of those readers are white, so black subjectivity in certain arenas is very dependent upon white patronage in ways that it wasn't during the Black Arts Movement—perhaps. These are the new imposed standards as opposed to the old imposed standards, but there's not much freedom if a black poet wants a career as a well-known writer, and make good or great money. I'm not sure we're in a better, freer moment now, to be honest. Just a different one.

Shi: Finally, could you say something about the future, or futures, of American poetry?

Jeffers: The proliferation of Master of Fine Arts Programs in Creative Writing has changed the arena of American poetry. Poetry has become a far more specialized academic field and has traveled far from connecting to readers who are not other poets. "Accessibility" has become a dirty word, and current styles of poetry in academic circles privilege the jagged lyric over the comprehensible narrative. As a result, the field of poetry is sustained only by readers who are economically invested in poetry production, and not by non-writing readers outside of this small circle.

Something has been deeply concerning to me, ever since I started thinking about Modernism, and that's about the emerged, *aggressive* primacy of lyric poetry over narrative poetry. The historical tradition of black writing depends upon the oral tradition and the oral tradition depends upon ready accessibility of the word for the audience. One reason I once dismissed Hughes' poetry as "simple" is that you didn't need extensive training in reading literature to understand and appreciate his poems; now I *praise* his poems because of that. Once we irrevocably shift to a place where audience accessibility is derided, at some point African American literary traditions that depended upon non-academic audiences will become obsolete. And so, I hope it is time for something new to arise, because frankly, the current artistic atmosphere can't be financially or intellectually sustained for much longer, either for black or mainstream poets.

责任编辑: 四维