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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’s 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

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标题: 历史, 抒情, 政治: 恩诺丽·F· 杰弗尔斯访谈
内容概要: 恩诺丽·F· 杰弗尔斯是当代美国非裔诗歌与文学评论新生势力的代表人物之一。任教于美国俄克拉荷马大学, 著有《烧烤福音》(2000), 《乡愁布鲁斯》(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, 她于《外国文学研究》专访, 中南师范大学博士研究生史丽玲在宾州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线索, 聚焦其学者身份, 围绕杰弗斯个
历史

Shi: 教授Jeffers，你生长在Black Arts Movement的时期，见证了African American Woman Literature的兴起，并为20世纪的African American literature做出了贡献。作为一个成功的诗人和学者，你对黑人文学和思想做出了重要贡献。

Jeffers: 首先，我认为我的工作是在理解和研究黑人文学的历史方面。在我作为一个学者的前半生中，我一直在研究和写作黑人文学的历史。我研究的主要是19世纪和20世纪的黑人作家，包括那些在南方生活的作家。

Shi: 你的研究重点是什么？

Jeffers: 我的研究重点是黑人文学的历史，尤其是在美国南方。我研究了南方黑人文学的历史，包括南方黑人的诗歌和文学作品。

Shi: 你的研究有什么特别之处？

Jeffers: 我的研究特别之处在于我关注的是黑人文学的历史，而不是黑人文学的现状。我对黑人文学的历史进行了深入的研究，包括黑人文学的起源和发展。

Shi: 你的研究对黑人文学的发展有什么影响？

Jeffers: 我的研究对黑人文学的发展产生了深远的影响。我的研究帮助人们更好地理解黑人文学，并激发了人们对黑人文学的兴趣。我的研究也为后来的黑人文学研究者提供了重要的参考。

Shi: 你的研究对你的日常生活有什么影响？

Jeffers: 我的研究对我的日常生活产生了很大的影响。我每天都花时间研究黑人文学，这使我能够更好地理解黑人文学的历史，并从中获得灵感。我的研究也使我更加了解黑人文学的重要性和价值。
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 reverse 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 tendency of Anglo-American ancestral altars, so I don't feel sad.

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 name is," and not simply "Red Clay Suite is an attempt to locate that cultural motherland, the site of the tobacco, 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.

Sli: 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 more folks 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 enjoy 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 readers language in rich, very satisfying ways.

The Blues Poetic

Sli: 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 gives the blues "universal." For me I noted about black southern writing, in the blues, both the 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 express painful, internal realities as public testimony, personal moments as longstanding truths, plainspoken as they are.

Sli: 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 lead 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 to start, 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 in 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, “Oh, 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 be playing the banjo. On a lunch, 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:” 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’ 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 form, and he’s the founder of blues poetry. I started reading Hughes’ 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 plenipotent 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’ 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 a lot more 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 explain 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 poets 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,” as 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 poetry? 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 journey of the notion 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 here/herself. I’m not very much. Also, Red Clay Suite is not meant as the epic itself, but rather, part of the epic comprised 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 poetic epics 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
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 family 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, Andre Lorde, and Sonia Sanchez, but the loudest voices and the most publicized voices happened to be male and alive, 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 foci. 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 public sphere; her work braches 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
From the Celtic Fringe to the World: The Modernist Epic of Hugh MacDiarmid

Daniela Kato

Abstract: The present essay aims to challenge a still dominant and monumentalized narrative of international modernism that sees this tradition of writing as a facet of high metropolitan culture and its key practitioners as restless expatriates and cosmopolitans. Taking as poetic objects of the Scottish author, nationalist and communist MacDiarmid as reference, I will argue that the resurgence of the epic from the Celtic margins of a Britain dominated by England in the mid decades of the twentieth-century resists and complicates such a narrative, by providing a more complex picture of modernism and its specific cultural contexts. While they seek to recover the old connection between epic and nation-making, MacDiarmid’s long poems, and particularly in Memoriam James Joyce, also embody one of the vital tasks envisaged by the modernist epic, in that their totalising impulse acts as a compensation for the perceived cultural marginality of Scotland within the dynamics of centre and periphery in Britain.

Key words: epic · British poetry · nationalism · Marxism · politics of modernism

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Abstract: This essay challenges the traditional notion of the modernist epic as a relic of metropolitan culture, emphasizing the role of Scottish author Hugh MacDiarmid in the resurgence of the epic form in Britain. The essay argues that MacDiarmid's long poems, particularly Memoriam James Joyce, embody a vital task of the modernist epic by providing a compensation for the perceived cultural marginality of Scotland within the dynamics of centre and periphery in Britain. The essay also explores the political and cultural implications of modernism in relation to nationalism and Marxism.

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