

a sense of regard

essays on poetry and race

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the difficulties, the nuances, the unexamined, the feared, the questions, and the quarrels
across aesthetic camps and biases. The book brings together essays by a range of writers and
academics whose work varies in style from personal accounts and lyrical essays to challenging
criticisms. McCullough believes this approach allows for more avenues and angles of
exploration on this complex topic. She has also strived to be as inclusive as possible, to reach
past the black/white perception of race and offer essays from numerous racial backgrounds.
The anthology covers many issues that cross racial and ethnic borders and is divided into
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ALLISH HOPPER

I. The Past That Won't Stay Past

To talk about race in America is, unfortunately, to often feel caught in a game of racial "gotcha," as we step around closed spaces in the present, kept that way by racial codes. And so it's not surprising that many will do anything to avoid speaking, or writing, freely about race—or, when and if they do, to feel resigned and exhausted by it. Many of us are concerned about being pigeon-holed as one or another racial "type," or feeling like, as John L. Jackson calls it, a "racial sinner" (93). As poets, how is it that we will use the same language that has run the errands of race to depict (and pick) the lock of being free? And how not to bring the diamond-headed needle of our attention into the dusty groove of, as Toni Morrison in *Jazz* characterized our past, an "abused record with no chance but to repeat itself?" (120).

Because race in America is just like bad fiction, with one-dimensional characters, predictable plotlines, passive verbs, subjectless sentences. Even our remedy-stories constrain, or can, if they too become more narratives to be race-patrolled; stories of heroism or helplessness, identities that become narrow containers. Yet it is possible to rewrite, meaning not merely "revise," but write poems that neither ignore racial codes nor give over their power to them. Poems that, like all good art, expand our vision of ourselves—all that we are, all that we are not—to introduce the "another world," as Paul Eluard supposedly put it, that's "in this one."

In practice this concept can feel a little like an enigma. What, really, do emancipated bodies and language look like? Partly, they look like us. They take what is real—our real experiences, our real bodies, and the real encountered world—and use that to show what is here but hidden, by codes, from our view.

In Elizabeth Alexander's poem "Race," an "ivory spouse" looks at "pencil markings in a ledger book" as she "is learning / her husband's caesuras." Like the couple, many in America look at our relations around race and can "see silent spaces / but not what they signify" (22). For many—often, especially, white readers, and editors, publishers—the gate to these closed spaces is elegy; it's the gesture of reaching out or into these caesuras, not only in the past but in the present. In his "Elegy," Jake Adam York points to the mechanics of this resonant elision:

the Greeks
always cut something from their lines,
a syllable or two, to create a silence
or a place to hear it
.
.
.
as if to say
even memory can forget itself
and be written into another history
while everyone is looking at something else. (96)

This is the kind of past that does not stay past. Like Morrison's title character in *Beloved*, these kinds of events and memories "[ha]ve] claim but [are] not claimed," and thus infiltrate—permeate, at times—a present that is, for some of us, ineluctably tinged with "bottomless longing" (58). The body of American society is revealed to be missing some of its limbs, is like the man who is missing his legs, as Natasha Trethewey notes, "bother[ing] / the space for knees, shins, scratching air / as—years later—I'd itch for what's not there" (30). And while each of us is affected in profoundly different ways, these painful events of history are nevertheless a shared seam.

However closed they may be, these spaces nevertheless transmit scripts and performances—encrypted, made invisible by euphemism—into each now. Many of us feel them as we pass through, many others of us see their contents in plain sight. Kevin Young's "For the Confederate Dead" describes this sense of these spaces, "below sea- / and eye-level" where "a mural runs / the wall, flaking, a plantation / scene most do not see—" so that we, instead, are left "digging beside the monument / (that giant anchor) / . . . / fighting the sleep-walking air" (97).

Challenge the codes, however, and you will be punished by their enforcers—who may be black or white. This protective border serves what James C.

Scott calls the "public transcript," which justifies and prosecutes "rules" that are by nature hidden. They can only be expressed in codes, euphemisms, and other forms of disguise, which appear as simply agreed-upon, unanimous. Meanwhile there exists a "hidden transcript," the things that are said away from the gaze of the racial codes and their enforcers (45). As in the rest of the world's activities, poetry, publishing, and criticism numbingly and brutally reflect this dynamic, what Marcel Cornis-Pope calls "narratives of containment" (xii).

A fine example of this enforcement appeared in the review of Rita Dove's poetry anthology by Helen Vendler, who uses "multiculturalism" as a euphemism for aesthetic inferiority in order to patrol a status quo. Done under the guise of a dichotomy that's "merely" aesthetic, the critique—while it may have had other, insightful things to say, and not that I am at pains to support Dove's (or Penguin's) particular project—nevertheless reveals the public script of whiteness. "Twentieth-century American poetry," Vendler writes, "has been one of the glories of modern literature . . . names and texts . . . known worldwide," but she complains of Dove's "introducing more black poets and giving them significant amounts of space, . . . in some cases for their representative themes rather than their style. Dove is at pains to include angry outbursts as well as artistically ambitious meditations." Here the public transcript, whiteness, punishes Dove for breaking its "rules," such as challenging white definitions of and allowances for "diversity" (Vendler begrudges not the fact of these poets being included but the "significant amounts of space" they are given); attempting to ruin white achievements (its "glories") for their own emotional needs (her Manichean gesture comparing "artistically ambitious" work with "angry outbursts"). White poetry, known worldwide as valuable, stylish, artistically ambitious; black poetry: of unproven value, concerned with content over craft, filled with angry outbursts.

There is also a third kind of transcript, Scott says, in which the narrative of containment is ruptured, a space is opened between onstage and backstage. This is the space of rewriting. Poems that do this can use any number of techniques; what qualifies them as rewriting race is that, rather than seeking to "pretend . . . racelessness," as Major Jackson put it (142), they seek to be race-real. With rewriting, though we are still by the terms of society raced, we are awake inside of race, and awake inside of our art. From here, real choice begins.

II. Scenes of Instruction

Of course, not everyone has a choice about whether or not to be awake to race. When we say “white privilege,” we mean those allowed by social structures and codes to be “asleep,” not subject to what Paul Mooney calls “nigger wakeup calls,” or, as Henry Louis Gates calls them, “scenes of instruction,” which viciously initiate one to the physical and existential costs of being in one’s particular skin (Touré 125). Any “we” is thus subject to scrutiny, as a likely euphemization of race, as Tracy K. Smith shows:

There is a *We* in this poem
To which everyone belongs.

As in: *We the people*—

In order to form a more perfect Union—

And: *We were objects of much curiosity*

To the Indians

We has swallowed *Us* and *Them*. (20)

Julie Agoos in her book *Property* borrows the form of a court transcript to show this *We*’s most common disguise: a narrative in which someone is “merely” in power and someone else, who “just happens” to be there, argues or pleads:

Q: Unless you want to claim the black man’s skin
In evidence—made him one to fear—

AttD: Objection!

Q:—caused harm
To the boy—

AttD: Your honor—

Q: against the law. (76)

The American racial imagination is quite taken with this, the de jure aspect of race, where there are clear victories and losses, so Agoos’s poem partly feels like a familiar scene, whether from the imaginary frames of *To Kill a Mockingbird* or newscasts of twentieth-century headlines. In addition to de jure racism and

de facto racism (overt, unacceptable to mainstream, national social norms), there is the harder-to-see *de carnis* racism, the ways that all of us, in whatever different ways, reflect and internalize race narratives (J. Jackson 160). In this way, race narratives, in our perception, transform how we look into who we feel we are. Evie Shockley’s “You Can’t Deny It” displays the way that this gives all identity a quality of performance:

| | | | |
|--------------------|----------------------------|---|---------------------------|
| cast of characters | | | |
| <i>speaker</i> | an african american woman | | |
| <i>you</i> | an african american woman | → | <i>roster of emotions</i> |
| | | | pride |
| | | | puzzlement |
| | | | connection |
| setting: | dinner, early 21st century | | defensiveness |
| | | | pleasure |
| | | | understanding |

(54)

Here two African American women encounter not only each other but each other’s racialized experiences. A “selected bibliography” describes three works of American literature that serve as shared touchstones as they move from “puzzlement” or “defensiveness” to “pleasure” and “understanding.” The authors of the books listed are also African American; thus, to discuss the works is possibly, no matter one’s race, to wonder from which perspective of race/class—possibly even before literary or personal taste—each other will come.

The poem describes two women not only negotiating relationship but doing so in the dimly lit minefield of identity performance. It reflects the constraints of, on one hand, reaching for the gifts of the world (educational access, wine, literature) but, possibly on the other, still needing to be “black enough” lest one be cast out, left in the land of being not-black, not-white. Importantly, this racial negotiation, however black-specific Shockley’s poem may be, also mirrors numerous other racialized experiences, including those with racial privilege. People who challenge racial norms, if they go far enough, will all be threatened with some form of social death.

This protective and threatening script is embodied in Douglas Kearney’s poem “Swimchant for Nigger Mer-Folk (An Aquaboogie Set in Lapis),” which channels the voice of each player on the stage of the public transcript, for instance an enforcer who announces:

ATTENTION: NIGGER MERMAIDS & MERRINIIES
CHAINED LIKE HOOKED AND SINKED SARDINIIES:
DO NOT BLEED IN THE SEA. THE STAINS WON'T WASH
OUT WE AIN'T RESPONSIBLE FOR YOUR MESS.
MUCH OBLIGED, THEE MANAGEMENT

Kearney's poem shows us the color line, the scripts of power that enforce it, or order to "mess with" it, to—as all acts of naming do—amplify the danger, so that it loses power. The references and signifiin' that Kearney performs on the public transcript are too numerous to fully address here. The message, anyway, is clear: black folk are "chained" and "hooked" and ultimately "sunked"—and this is an act for which the white perpetrators, or anyone in "management," says they "ain't responsible" (62).

III. A Tyranny of Elegy

Yet our remedy narratives, too, are familiar and are their own constraint, whether the quasi-transcendence of "we are one" or the disempowerment of the "suffering black body" on "the stage of suffering" (D. Brooks 28). Elegy can be its own tyranny; hero(ism) can permanently detain(ce) us. It's hard but necessary, says Toni Morrison, to see the way we can become captive to our own attachments—can "live in a redesigned racial house and . . . call it diversity or multiculturalism as a way of calling it home" ("Home" 8).

This asks us to de-transcendentalize our most familiar and replied-upon approaches to racial pain and difference. Jane Cooper, for instance, looks squarely at white guilt, the edifice at which most white exploration stops, asking: "When is memory transforming? when, a form of real estate?" (23). Likewise, here is Martha Collins, trying to look past the edifice of racial code constraint:

and if I look at your face at your hands your
triumphant or suffering body and do not
see . . .
who wasn't us
who isn't us
who isn't there
(49)

James Baldwin in "Everybody's Protest Novel" critiques predictable moral-ity narratives, "neatly framed . . . incontestable . . . terrified of the darkness, striving mightily for the light" (ii). In "Ode to My Blackness" Evie Shockley likewise presses on this complexity, and constraint, acknowledging the ways that blackness is her "shelter from the storm" and, at the same time, "the storm"; her "anchor // and the troubled sea" (30).

Even hope, precious hope, might be a false remedy. Tyrone Williams in "I Am Not Proud to Be Black" describes this place, free from racial codes, as standing where "Hope ends and thinking breaks out." This hope, if it is hope, is "disfigured"; to Williams, we are sitting at a "table" that,

already broken,
Dysfunctional, is finally institutionalized
.
Another country cobbled out of continents
Exrant and not: February, Juneteenth, Kwanzaa . . .
.
Or we throw our hands in the air like we just
Don't care, nobodies or nations, the false dilemma. (60)

Here Williams points to the symbolic taxes we each pay to our identities, such as "February, Juneteenth, Kwanzaa," safe houses of African American identity. None of these symbols lives outside the racial narratives' border patrol. The existential basis of this constraint—of resistance and remedy—is beautifully reflected in Thomas Sayers Ellis's poem "Or," in which the narratives, if not quite being more of the same, are clearly also not yet outside the (either/) "Or" dimension.

or
Other
or theory or discourse
or oral territory.
Oregon or Georgia
or Florida Zora (4)

Ellis unites theoretical spaces ("Other" and "theory" and "discourse") with physical ones, which are encoded as white ("Oregon") or black ("Georgia"), or as sites of resistance ("Florida Zora," i.e., Hurston).

Or Moor:

Or a Noir Orpheus
or Senghor

or

Diaspora (5)

Even symbols of strength, tragic heroes like Shakespeare's Othello ("Moor"); the literary and intellectual hero Léopold Senghor; the millennial, heroic overtones of "Diaspora" and, later in the poem, of roots ("Yoruba"); a U.S. African American symbol of unity, the Black Church ("Worship"); and the ethos of survival ("Neighbor")—all are here mere empty, if "important," "poets" (5).

IV. A Cold Shower

Elizabeth Alexander's "Race" shows us another important gesture of rewriting, in which the poet turns toward the audience, breaking the fourth wall, to say: "Many others have told, and not told, this tale" (22). She candidly reveals her awareness that it is a "tale," a story and performance, and not reality, and she thus keeps us as readers from pretending, either.

This step in rewriting, what Bertolt Brecht called the "alienation effect" or a "cold shower" (12), is the least understood, and most necessary, step: the gesture, on the part of a poem, toward the script and the stage of racial codes—the gesture that flaunts its freedom in front of the enforcers. As its name suggests, this can thus make us readers feel like the poem is messing with us. Because it is, Brecht calls this process "liberating the spectator," or bringing the audience into the work of art by acknowledging not only the script and the stage but all of the context—the backstage of history, the scripts of privilege's euphemisms—all of the elephants in the room (D. Brooks 28). For, as Major Jackson pointed out, part of the problem with racism in America is that discussing it is a "spectator sport" (141). Here rewriting asks us all to acknowledge that, in the stage play of white power and its forms of domination, there are no spectators. And whoever challenges the script, whether as "spectator" or performer, will indeed be punished.

Thus, in this dramaturgy of power, anger is a particularly forbidden emotion, depicted—and delegitimized—as nothing more than the property of conspiracy-theorists, or people who let emotion get in the way of their thinking. For the artist, this will be expressed in charges of aesthetic inferiority (sometimes coded as accusations of being "experimental") or, more often, di-

dacticism. In Ross Gay's poem "Within Two Weeks the African-American Poet Ross Gay Is Mistaken for Both the African-American Poet Terrance Hayes and the African-American Poet Kyle Dargan. Not One of Whom Looks Anything Like the Others," the title alone begins the cold shower, calling out white readers for the effects of their racialized experience, in this case a white person who asks Gay to sign someone else's book, "whispering, / *but that's not you?*" Gay's response is "I do not / feel sorry for you. No" (30).

This fierceness, however, is a nuanced one, familiar in some ways from Gwendolyn Brooks, who in "The Womanhood" urged, "First fight. Then fiddle . . . / . . . muzzle the note / With hurting love; the music that they wrote" (54). Though we must "first fight," the "muzzling" of "their" note is always done "with hurting love." Likewise, Gay goes on:

I think only that when a man
is a concept he will tell you about the smell
of smoke . . . the distance
between heartbeat and rage. (30)

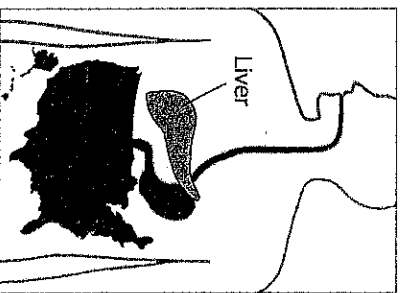
Thus the fierceness of rewriting, aimed at protecting the body, is rarely far from kindness, the nurturer of all bodies. Here the poem makes clear the cost to one person—being, literally, not seen—of another's complicity in the public transcript. Gay highlights the difference between the two racialized experiences. As someone who appears black, and subjected to the resulting slights, fights, and existential horror, the speaker attempts with the poem to puncture the public transcript, the white racialized narrative encoded to deny its presence, to highlight the person's refusal to own their own speaking-as, expressed so vividly in the white person's assumption that her actions were innocent, an accident, and not by a design, even if that design is far larger than herself.

Gay's poem, especially the "No," here, reflects the fact that, again, within the scripts of race, anger has a special and dangerous role. Harryette Mullen, in "We Are Not Responsible," articulates how much of white ideology relies on striking out at even the appearance of anger. Borrowing the form of legal disclaimers, the poem embodies the physical and emotional distance that are characteristic of the denial: "We do not endorse the causes or claims of people begging for handouts. . . . Before taking off, please extinguish all smoldering resentments. . . . In the event of loss, you'd better look out for yourself. Your insurance was cancelled because we can no longer handle your frightful claims" (77). Mullen ingeniously characterizes the white cultural body as a bureaucrat waving away someone who has filled out a form incorrectly, illuminating the

way that anger and “angry people,” no matter their racial identity, are symbolically no longer privileged or white, the mask of obliviousness covering an attempt to morally justify white power’s own refusal.

This suspect gesture, anger, is equally distorted across the racial spectrum. For white poets, for instance, pain is visible only in its neurotic forms, such as “white guilt,” which is merely another version of white refusal. Real accountability, naming the stage and the script we all stand on and speak from, is thus an important rupture. Martha Collins acknowledges: “a few years after Brown / v. Board of Education I wrote a paper / that took the position *Yes but not yet?*” (1), not adding a narrative of remedy, despair, or even hope. She simply opens this closed space in history and lets stand her naked complicity. This poetics is thus a cold shower not only on history but on our readerly desire to be soothed or to find sympathetic understanding.

Rewriting aims to disrupt what Brecht called a “hypnosis” that can happen between poem and reader, if it is based on stable, but false, notions of our own, and others’, identities (12). Inside this hypnosis, all manner of racial codes can safely be transmitted, with the reader unaware. The disruption, since language is so complicit, too, is well assisted by visual language or actual images. Claudia Rankine, in *Don’t Let Me Be Lonely*, pairs a poem with an illustration by John Lucas that makes material the social internalization of “toxic” racialization:



Above it the speaker says, “Be happy you can’t read their thoughts, I want to say to / him. I smile into the rearview mirror instead” (90). This is thus also a poetics of self-alienation, with speakers expelling our national poisons, the visceral and embodied decrepitude hidden in these closed spaces, from their bodies by reciting a litany of the Real.

In this way, rewriting introduces the “unthinkable,” as Pierre Bourdieu defined it: “that which one cannot conceive . . . because it defies the terms under which the questions are raised” (Houlliot 85). The policing racial codes nearly define what can and cannot be raised, as well as the ways it can be introduced. Thus Thomas Sayers Ellis’s “Pronoun-Vowel Reparations Song” (103–19)—which brings up the sine qua non of racially taboo subjects, reparations for slavery—dislocates nearly every formal convention of language using colossal font and single-letter homophone code, not only signifying but embodying in language how unthinkable to us are any new, restorative and relational, race narratives.

Importantly, Ellis begins with the public transcript, the vowel song, including the “alternate” vowel *y*, whose homonym is, of course, “why.” Ending the line “A E I O U” on the poem’s first page (105), its questioning sound rings out: why? By the next page Ellis begins to rewrite, exposing the hidden transcript that lies beneath:

I O U,

and asking, again:

Y

The larger font size of “Y”/“why” presses the poem’s reach beyond the page and the racial stage, so that there is no longer a performer/audience dichotomy; every spectator must play a part. In response to his own question, he asserts:

I

Followed by:

B E F O R E U

B E F O R E
U

It is difficult to imagine a more confrontational move than this reversal. A colder shower for power. It aims neither at persuasion nor at sympathetic understanding: it aims to disrupt:

A E I O M E

At one level, this is a poem simply making a demand. And I can imagine the patrolling racial euphemisms, accusing it of aesthetic inferiority or didactic-

cism. Indeed, the poem's radical choices clearly provoke exactly this. But Ellis, who describes these as "identity-repair poems," deploys far more than mere demand. While obviously discarding the usual tools of lyricism and mimesis, having sacrificed them to alienation, the poem does still move, playfully "singing" this most unthinkable thought, with "U O me" hyphenating and repeating the different "syllables" ("AAA—EEE UUU—OOO M—EEEE), alternating regular type with italics as if fluctuating between notes ("OOOO / U—OOO / U—OOO"). The song and the speaker's aims are ambiguous, lying somewhere between a taunt and a playful dance with the white-power race police. Ellis riffs again with a children's grammar rhyme ("U A-F-T-E-R Q"), which he disrupts and displaces ("T-I-X"), and finally resolves ("E Q U A L S") with the poem's end:

A P O
L O G
I Z E

Jamming the signals of narrative, the poem still theorizes, proposes a "fix." In its semantically stark landscape we are left with Ellis's basic message, which is evident not only in its content but in the means he uses to get there: that, for the story to change, everyone, not only the "bad guys" in our race narratives, needs to give something up, whether it is sympathy, comfort, money, or power. Like the world created in Ellis's profoundly original poem, we have to be willing to enter a landscape that we don't at first recognize and yet already live in. By breaking from mainstream linguistic, typographic, and prosodic norms, he signifies on them, which is to say that he, playfully and freely, undermines their hold. Ellis shows that: 1) power lives inside our language; 2) we can take hold of and change things via language; 3) only if we're open to a radical change, not only in language, but in how we think and be.

V. Patterned, Wild, and Free

The freedom of this language project is a "playful ontological instability" (D. Brooks 22), although, like all freedoms, it comes with a price. Because we're not really talking about race, or writing about it, if the abyss, the absurd, or some form of social death isn't somehow on the line. If not, we risk writing about, and for, white power. The poet rewriting race not only disrupts; she is willing to be disrupted, as well.

Rewriting thus demands complexity; we become traitors to our racialized experience, which we acknowledge freely. In rewriting, poets from across the racial identity spectrum can and must negotiate some kind of alterity. Language is an important site of that, for language gestures are social gestures. And, though it is hard to feel or believe, "since language is community, if the cognitive ecology of a language is altered, so is the community" (Morrison, "Home" 8). Dawn Lundy Martin's book *Discipline* beautifully embodies this:

We walk backward

into a room because we want to restate our thoughts. All the brown skins are glowing in this light and no one is afraid we're all joyous but it's difficult to tell if the joy is real or if it's just lack of fear. What kind of understanding will sink into the body?

... when it feels something it really does. It changes, though, and it grows up and looks completely different in the face. (47)

Thus the goal of alienation—of, for a moment, making enemies—is not to divide but to connect. A poet who rewrites, however, insists that there is no connectedness possible if it is done while trying to *dissolve* difference. Instead, we must hold difference and particularity—boldly, fearlessly, lovingly—in view. Stand fully in our own shoes, and in one another's, without regressing to mere universalism, a blurry, overdetermined picture of "we are one."

Here rewriting can be seen as a poetics of existential vulnerability, in which we are willing to somehow step from behind our racial masks. Douglas Kearney in "The Black Automaton in de Despair ub Existence #3: How Can I Be Down?" shows us that any real encounter with the limits of race is at least partly an existential encounter, as he asks, "to be / or not . . . Toby."

TR knows the world
is round whether it likes TR or not.
TR asks the first question:

(and then all the crows, circling.)

all that
hurts [TR]. //let [TR] understand . . .

you-speak
you.

Keaney's partly retracted but nevertheless active assertion "understand . . . / you wouldn't / you won't" shows how this poetics also asks us, thus, to reckon with trust. The myriad suspicions that get raised in response to acts of rewriting are the echo in our head of the race narratives' "insistence," as Baldwin said, "that it is [our] categorization alone which is real and . . . cannot be transcended" (18). The public show, and the hidden realities—the things that whites don't say in front of blacks, the things that blacks don't say in front of whites—all of these, if disrupted, can, even temporarily, come "to an end, and the necessity of actively choosing one's orientation among them" can begin (Bakhtin 296, qtd. in Hale 454). We can fall into "plain talk," outside of, and even playing on, the careful codes that we would otherwise rely on.

There is no plain talk possible, however, if we do not do the real work: for each of us, especially white people, to look and see our own racialized experience, our own internalization of the structures and power of race. Martha Collins, in the last "White Paper" of her book, links her family's experience to societal patterns, showing how what seemed to be "just" her life was in fact a mirror of larger structural agendas, how her "yes but" response when presented with an agenda of change likewise reflects the public transcript, and so must be rewritten, reimagined:

I'm still learning this un-
learning un/ying
the knot of *Yes but* re-
writing this *Yes* Yes (2012, 64)

Smattering the syntax and extracting punctuation so that both visually and musically the discursive admixture can run freely through a reader's own experience, the real force in this poem is still its use of alienation: the courage of its embodied complicity with the structures that it names, and yet, through that sense of accounting, its solidarity with the forces that seek possibility and change.

As Gwendolyn Brooks described and these poems remind, only if they meet with us, if they "first fight," do poems clear a space around what would "fog out [our] identity" ("Sundays" 16), so that rewriting, too, urges us to "First civilize a space / Wherein to play your violin with grace" ("Womanhood" 54). These are a range of gestures and aesthetics, which can be read as "formal" or "experimental," as "concliatory" or "aggressive," but in all of these cases what makes them rewriting is that, paradoxically, even while they aim to desta-

bilize, these acts of "messing with" are acts of re-membering or making whole. In Remicia L. Bingham's "Summie Knox Paints Bill Clinton for the White House," she sees deeply both the individual in his full complexity ("When he mentioned never knowing his father— / killed three months before his birth—I put my camera / down") and her own ("I thought of my own fading mother"), as well as the larger patterns that connect ("We both know what it's like to be deprived of things"). Only then is she able to "[see] him clearly. His face creased and stained as any other / human face." And then, only then, she says, "I picked up my brush" (25).

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22 ~ no laughing matter

Race, Poetry and Humor

TONY HOAGLAND

At a 2011 commemoration of the National Book Awards' fiftieth anniversary, in the half-full auditorium of the New School in New York City, a panel met to discuss, in public, the aesthetic "track record" of the NBA poetry awards. The panel included Susan Stewart, James Longenbach, Stephen Burt, Elizabeth Alexander, and Maureen McClane.

In some ways the event was an occasion of justified self-celebration: over those fifty years, a surprising number of groundbreaking collections of American poetry had been selected by the NBA, choices that represented the insight and sometimes even the daring of past NBA commitees. Winners have included Adrienne Rich's *Diving into the Wreck*, Robert Bly's *The Light Around the Body*, books by William Bronk and Lucille Clifton, none of them obvious candidates for establishment approval, but special, perhaps even crucial books in the progress of American poetry.

Alexander, the first speaker of the night, opened her remarks with a rueful and witty preface: "Apparently I have been put on earth to count colored heads; when they are there and when they are not. It is tiresome at times, but in fact it is a habit which is an ethical practice: count and name; mark absence; herald presence; keep silent."

It was a droll beginning, self-consciously wry about the unenviable duty of monitoring racial equity in culture. Alexander went on to observe the disproportionately large number of white males in the NBA roll books, and the comparatively very few women and minorities represented.

"In looking through the list that we were given of winners of the NBA for tonight, the headline for my five minutes was clear: there were no black