

An Introduction to Black American Poetry

Jean Dubois

Substitute Teacher
Durango High School
Durango, Colorado

TEACHING Black American Poetry by chronology is convenient for the anthologist and acceptable to the pedant, but it is grossly inappropriate to the classroom. Using the chronological approach, the class begins the semester with a ghastly piece of doggerel entitled "Bars Fight" written in 1746 by a slave named Lucy Terry. It carries through with two generations of undistinguished poetry, and then, sometimes after the students have lost interest altogether—and rightly so—it finally gets to the vital, living black American poetry which forms the reason for studying the subject.

It is more meaningful to desert chronology and to classify the poetry instead by the philosophy toward discrimination which it reflects. Philosophically, this poetry groups itself into five categories: (1) slavery; (2) acquiescence; (3) integration; (4) separatism; and (5) militancy. A glance at the dates of publication of some of the poems discussed herein shows how far ahead of history poetry is. The most militant poems, "Epilogue" and "For My People" were published in 1926 and 1942, respectively. "Runagate Runagate," which we shall use

for an historical introduction, was first published in 1966.

The various attitudes possible toward discrimination can be elicited from the class and discussed at the beginning of the session in order to provide a philosophical framework for the poems which follow. It should be noted that separatists form a composite group, made up partly of disillusioned integrationists, partly of "black is beautiful" philosophers, and partly of militants. The militants themselves are divided. Some are separatists, but others have no real objection to discrimination. They are merely determined to be on top. None of these philosophies is triumphant; neither is any dead. Many sincere integrationists are still at work. The black is beautiful philosophy is evident everywhere as young blacks wear their "afros" and study their ancestral beginnings. Even acquiescence lives on as "Uncle Tomism."

Slavery

RUNAGATE RUNAGATE¹

I.

Runs falls rises stumbles on from darkness
into darkness

and the darkness thicketed with shapes of
 terror
 and the hunters pursuing and the hounds
 pursuing
 and the night cold and the night long and
 the river
 to cross and the jack-muh-lanterns beck-
 oning beckoning
 and blackness ahead and when shall I
 reach that somewhere
 morning and keep on going and never
 turn back and keep on going

Runagate
 Runagate
 Runagate

Many thousands rise and go
 many thousands crossing over

O mythic North
 O star-shaped yonder Bible city

Some go weeping and some rejoicing
 some in coffins and some in carriages
 some in silks and some in shackles

Rise and go or fare you well

No more auction block for me
 no more driver's lash for me

If you see my Pompey, 30 yrs of age,
 new breeches, plain stockings, negro
 shoes;

if you see my Anna, likely young
 mulatto
 branded E on the right cheek, R on the
 left,
 catch them if you can and notify sub-
 scriber.

Catch them if you can, but it won't be
 easy.

They'll dart underground when you try
 to catch them,
 plunge into quicksand, whirlpools,
 mazes,
 turn into scorpions when you try to
 catch them.

And before I'll be a slave
 I'll be buried in my grave

North star and bonanza gold
 I'm bound for the freedom, freedom-
 bound
 and oh Susyanna don't you cry for me

Runagate
 Runagate

II.

Rises from their anguish and their power,

Harriet Tubman,

woman of earth, whipscarred,
 a summoning, a shining

Mean to be free

And this was the way of it, brethren
 brethren,
 way we journeyed from Can't to Can.
 Moon so bright and no place to hide,
 the cry up and the patterollers riding,
 hound dogs belling in bladed air.
 And fear starts a-murbling, Never
 make it,
 we'll never make it. *Hush that now,*
 and she's turned upon us, levelled pistol
 glinting in the moonlight:
 Dead folks can't jaybird-talk, she says;
 you keep on going now or die, she says.

Wanted Harriet Tubman alias The
 General
 alias Moses Stealer of Slaves

In league with Garrison Alcott Emerson
 Garrett Douglass Thoreau John Brown
 Armed and known to be Dangerous

Wanted Reward Dead or Alive

Tell me, Ezekiel, oh tell me do you see
 mailed Jehovah coming to deliver me?

Hoot-owl calling in the ghosted air,
 five times calling to the hants in the air.
 Shadow of a face in the scary leaves,
 shadow of a voice in the talking leaves:

Come ride-a my train

*Oh that train, ghost-story train
 through swamp and savanna moving
 moving,
 over trestles of dew, through caves of
 the wish,
 Midnight Special on a sabre track mov-
 ering moving,
 first stop Mercy and the last Hallelujah.*

Come ride-a my train

Mean mean mean to be free.

¹"Runagate Runagate" by Robert Hayden from *Selected Poems*. Copyright © 1966 by Robert Hayden. Reprinted by permission of October House Inc.

An oral presentation of "Runagate Runagate" by Robert E. Hayden, which reads well and packs a terrific emotional wallop, makes a good introduction to a unit on black poetry. An additional advantage is that it lends itself well to class discussion. What was the underground railway and how did it work? Who was Harriet Tubman, and why did she threaten to shoot anyone who turned back? Who were Alcott, Garrett, Thoreau, Garrison, Emerson, Douglass, and John Brown? These questions the students can answer from their study of history; yet they have not experienced them before in their full emotional intensity, and within a few moments the entire class has lost its resistance to poetry.

Acquiescence

A poem, uniquely suited to this section, is Sterling Brown's "Southern Road."² This poem by Sterling Brown, reflecting the traditional mode of behavior with its traditional structure and easy understandability, provides a good way to get the class entirely involved. After the teacher has read the poem through once, the group of boys who have voiced their hatred of poetry the most openly can be chosen to read the "hunh." Another group can render the first four verses of each stanza, while a third group reads the last two verses of each stanza. The result is close to Brown's original intention, and a far cry from the black letters on a white page image of poetry most students have.

Integration

ALABAMA CENTENNIAL³

They said, "Wait." Well, I waited.
For a hundred years I waited

²The poem would have been included but the original publisher has relinquished permission rights to Sterling Brown himself, and *EJ* has never been able to communicate with Mr. Brown.

In cotton fields, kitchens, balconies,
In bread lines, at back doors, on chain
gangs,
In stinking "colored" toilets
And crowded ghettos,
Outside of schools and voting booths.
And some said, "Later."
And some said, "Never!"

Then a new wind blew, and a new voice
Rode its wings with quiet urgency,
Strong, determined, sure.
"No," it said. "Not 'never,' not 'later,'
Not even 'soon.'
Now.
Walk!"

And other voices echoed the freedom
words,
"Walk together, children, don't get
weary,"
Whispered them, sang them, prayed them,
shouted them.

"Walk!"
And I walked the streets of Montgomery
Until a link in the chain of patient
acquiescence broke.

Then again: Sit down!
And I sat down at the counters of
Greensboro.
Ride! And I rode the bus for freedom.
Kneel! And I went down on my knees in
prayer and faith.
March! And I'll march until the last chain
falls
Singing, "We shall overcome."

Not all the dogs and hoses in Birmingham
Nor all the clubs and guns in Selma
Can turn this tide.
Not all the jails can hold these young
black faces
From their destiny of manhood,
Of equality, of dignity,
Of the American Dream
A hundred years past due.
Now!

Naomi Long Madgett

"Alabama Centennial" by Naomi Long Madgett, provides a vivid history of the

³From *Star by Star* by Naomi Long Madgett (Detroit: Harlo, 1965, 1970). By permission of the author.

Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. Oddly enough, this movement is news to today's high school students, and this poem needs some historical background. They've heard of Selma, but they don't know that the marchers were treated to fire hoses and dogs at Birmingham. For the most part, they are unaware that public accommodations were recently white only. With few exceptions they do not understand the reference to "We Shall Overcome." Once Pete Seeger's recording has been played in class, and the Civil Rights movement has been discussed, this poem usually becomes the group's favorite.

Separatism

THE MELTING POT⁴

There is a magic melting pot
where any girl or man
can step in Czech or Greek or Scot,
step out American.

*Johann and Jan and Jean and Juan,
Giovanni and Ivan*
step in and then step out again
all freshly christened *John*.

Sam, watching, said, "Why, I was here
even before they came,"
and stepped in too, but was tossed out
before he passed the brim.
And every time Sam tried that pot
they threw him out again.
"Keep out. This is our private pot.
We don't want your black stain."

At last, thrown out a thousand times,
Sam said, "I don't give a damn.
Shove your old pot. You can like it or not,
but I'll be just what I am."

Dudley Randall

The philosophy of separatism is beautifully expressed in "The Melting Pot" by Dudley Randall. It presents no philo-

⁴From *Cities Burning* by Dudley Randall (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1968). Reprinted by permission of the author.

sophical or poetic difficulties, and speaks directly to the point.

Militancy

EPILOGUE⁵

I, too, sing America.
I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes.
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong.

Tomorrow,
I'll sit at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
"Eat in the kitchen,"
Then.

Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed,—

I, too, am America.

Langston Hughes

There is a superlative recording of Langston Hughes reading his poem "Epilogue" in the *Anthology of Negro Poets*, along with a short introduction to it by the poet. This poem is entitled "I too" on the record, and presents a slightly different form from the printed version.

FOR MY PEOPLE⁶

For my people everywhere singing their
slave songs repeatedly; their dirges and
their ditties and their blues and jubilees,
praying their prayers nightly to an un-
known god, bending their knees humbly
to an unseen power;

⁵From *Selected Poems* by Langston Hughes (New York: Alfred A. Knopf). Copyright 1926 by Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1954 by Langston Hughes. Reprinted by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

⁶From *For My People* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1942). Copyright © 1942 by Yale University Press. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

For my people lending their strength to the years, to the gone years and the now years and the maybe years, washing ironing cooking scrubbing sewing mending hoeing plowing digging planting pruning patching dragging along never gaining never reaping never knowing and never understanding;

For my playmates in the clay and dust and sand of Alabama backyards playing baptizing and preaching and doctor and jail and soldier and school and mama and cooking and playhouse and concert and store and hair and Miss Choomby and company;

For the cramped bewildered years we went to school to learn to know the reasons why and the answers to and the people who and the places where and the days when, in memory of the bitter hours when we discovered we were black and poor and small and different and nobody cared and nobody wondered and nobody understood;

For the boys and girls who grew in spite of these things to be man and woman, to laugh and dance and sing and play and drink their wine and religion and success, to marry their playmates and bear children and then die of consumption and anemia and lynching;

For my people thronging 47th Street in Chicago and Lenox Avenue in New York and Rampart Street in New Orleans, lost disinherited dispossessed and happy people filling the cabarets and taverns and other people's pockets needing bread and shoes and milk and land and money and something—something all our own;

For my people walking blindly spreading joy, losing time being lazy, sleeping when hungry, shouting when burdened, drinking when hopeless, tied and shackled and tangled among ourselves by the unseen creatures who tower over us omnisciently and laugh;

For my people blundering and groping and floundering in the dark of churches and schools and clubs and societies, associations and councils and committees and conventions, distressed and disturbed and deceived and devoured by money-hungry glory-craving leeches,

preyed on by facile force of state and fad and novelty, by false prophet and holy believer;

For my people standing staring trying to fashion a better way from confusion, from hypocrisy and misunderstanding, trying to fashion a world that will hold all the people, all the faces, all the Adams and Eves and their countless generations;

Let a new earth rise. Let another world be born. Let a bloody peace be written in the sky. Let a second generation full of courage issue forth; let a people loving freedom come to growth. Let a beauty full of healing and a strength of final clenching be the pulsing in our spirits and our blood. Let the martial songs be written, let the dirges disappear. Let a race of men now rise and take control.

Margaret Walker Alexander

On the same record with Langston Hughes, Margaret Walker Alexander reads her beautiful prose poem "For My People," which serves as a good class introduction to the rationale of militancy, and incidentally to the poetic techniques of repetition and alliteration.

BLACK American poetry lends itself thoroughly to small-group multimedia work. After somewhat chaotic preparation, each group can present one of the poems to the class, projecting illustrations (either original or culled from current magazines) on the screen, while reciting the words along with a background of blues, spirituals, or jazz. Some groups will choose to dramatize; others will turn the poems into panel discussions.

This unit also serves as a marvelous springboard to the writing of poetry. Everyone has been discriminated against in some way. It's not just that our skins are different colors; we are too young or too old, we are women, our hair is long, our ideas are original, or we are newcomers. Those bright spirits who have never known discrimination can write about a

time when they discriminated against someone else, and what that did to both personalities. This is a good assignment in poetry writing because it doesn't tie the student down to any particular form; yet it holds him to his own experience of hurt and indignation out of which real poetry can emerge.

If the class wishes to go on to a further study of black poetry, the text *Black American Literature—Poetry* edited by Darwin T. Turner (Merrill, 1969), has many other fine poems, as well as an authoritative bibliography. If the students wish instead to go into other aspects of

black literature, there are three excellent anthologies in the field: *The Black American Experience*, edited by Frances S. Freedman; *Dark Symphony*, edited by James Emanuel and Theodore Gross; and *Black Voices*, edited by Abraham Chapman. Appropriate selections in the drama might be *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry or *Blues for Mr. Charlie* by James Baldwin. In the nonfiction field, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*, Richard Griffin's *Black Like Me*, and Richard Wright's *Black Boy* are appropriate to a high school audience.

The Test Takers

Seated at desks,
 their backs bent in supplication, concentration,
 over parallel pencils poised,
 their faces reflect the white paper.

One sits,
 his neck pulled in between hunched shoulders;

One sits,
 slouching on the arc of his lower back;

One sits,
 stiffly upright,
 her arms and legs arranged,
 head carefully tilted,
 mouth pursed;

One sits,
 leaning close,
 her hair curtaining her desk top.

One thin, reedy boy works,
 folded in on himself,
 handling his test booklet from inside his rumpled plaid jacket,
 his brown wool pants bunching around his thin legs,
 his oversized scuffed boots knotted together.

The long graceful fingers of his right hand pull at his hair,
 stirring it softly awry around his sharp-featured face,
 with its wedged nose and sad eyes.

The slender fingers of his left hand hold the pencil,
 deftly crossing the page,
 swiftly swirling little o's.

The State wants to know something about him.

Kate Blickhahn