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The Arts: Book Review: Understanding the New Black Poetry

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Understanding the New Black Poetry, which is also available in paperback (\$3.50), is Henderson's second book. The first, *The Militant Black Writer in Africa and the United States*, which he co-authored with Mercer Cook, was published in 1969.



Books

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By Stephen Henderson
William Morrow & Co., New York, 1973,
394 pp., \$9.95
Reviewed by Patricia A. Spaulding

Understanding The New Black Poetry, by Stephen Henderson, Ph.D., Professor of Afro-American Studies and Director of the Institute for the Arts and the Humanities at Howard University, is a delight to all who appreciate Black poetry and an inspiration to those who might not before reading his analysis.

But far beyond that, this book gives to Black poetry a historical perspective that Henderson refers to as, "the continuity and the wholeness of the Black poetic tradition in the United States"—a tradition that many people, both Black and white, not to mention most critics, have either not recognized or have failed to credit.

As a part of this Black poetic tradition, he includes not only the formal and written composition, but also the unwritten songs, the rhymes, and the speech of Black slaves.

"Art, of course, including literature, does not exist in a vacuum, and reflects—and helps to shape—the lives of those who produce it," Henderson writes.

Henderson contends, many crucial questions have been leveled at Black poetry, especially the poetry of the Sixties. And, while many Black poets have clearly stated their intentions, their positions are often ignored, misunderstood, or misinterpreted by the critics. "This Black poetry," he writes, "deserves much more serious attention than it now receives, especially from Black academicians and others who profess a concern with cultural clarity, historical accuracy and social justice."

Henderson raises three key questions which he considers essential in assessing Black poetry: What is Black

poetry? Who is to judge Black poetry? and How is it to be judged?

He discusses each question thoroughly but stops short of providing complete answers. He writes, "Each of these statements poses certain serious and wideranging problems of an aesthetic, sociological, historical, political, and critical nature. Each of them suggests a limited means for understanding the scope of Black poetry, and I raise them chiefly to stimulate discussion. I have no illusion about answering them completely."

However, Henderson describes Black poetry in terms of three broad categories: theme (that which is being spoken of); structure (some aspect of the poem such as diction, rhythm, or figurative language, which goes into the total makeup); and saturation (chiefly the communication of "Blackness" and fidelity to the observed or intuited truth of the Black Experience in the United States).

Structurally, Black poetry is most distinctly and effectively Black when it derives its form from Black speech and Black music, he writes. "It follows, then," he says, "if this is correct, that any serious appreciation or understanding of it must rest upon a deep and sympathetic knowledge of Black music and Black speech and—let us be plain—the Black people who make the music and who make the speech."

Henderson says, as Black people in the United States refine and clarify their conceptions of themselves, their poetry reflects this process. Thus, he believes, Black poetry of today—unlike that of the Harlem Renaissance—does attempt to speak directly to Black people about themselves in order to move them toward "self-knowledge and collective freedom."

"A difference in emphasis, in depth, in scope, and political maturity is thus

evident when one considers the Harlem Renaissance," Henderson writes, "but many of these developments were possible because of the changing world in which Black Americans of the post-World War II generation found themselves, a world in which articulate men and women rediscovered Africa and Pan-Africanism, rediscovered DuBois and Garvey, rediscovered the Harlem Renaissance itself and built upon its strengths while seeking to avoid its errors."

Though the first part of Henderson's book is an extensive overview of Black poetry, the book is really an anthology of Black poetry from which Henderson pulls sample poems and uses them in his 69-page introduction.

For example, he points out that contemporary Black poetry, even with its preoccupation with consciousness-raising and the celebration of Black cities, has a pronounced concern with the spiritual; sometimes exploring the Black Church, sometimes exploring other religious concepts such as Islam and traditional African religions. The example he uses is Larry Neal's "Morning Raga for Malcolm," with the lines:

*I now calm airily float
lift my spirit—Allah you
am me. space undulates
under me. space, to my sides
and under me nothing
I now calm airily float*

The author's collection of poetry includes that of the pre-Harlem Renaissance and the Soul-Field era with spirituals and folk rhymes—poems by James Weldon Johnson and Paul Lawrence Dunbar; the Harlem Renaissance, with poetry selections by Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown and others; and The New Black Consciousness period, with a variety of poems by H. Rap Brown, Imamu Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, Don Lee and Henry Dumas, among others.

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