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The Social Dynamics Of Afro-American Poetry: An Evaluation

J. Clay Smith Jr.

To Gaynelle
who has shared his interest in
poetry with me as is evidenced by this
piece. J. Clay Smith, Jr.

54A

February 26, 1981

THE SOCIAL DYNAMICS OF AFRO-AMERICAN POETRY: AN EVALUATION*

Dear Stager, Michelle and Michael:

That poets are fundamentally a part of the social and political dynamics of their environment is not arguable. It is the social setting and the mood of the poet in such environments that allow them to flush out the congested crevices of their minds, giving rise to clear interpretative meanings to virgin metaphysical thought.

Afro-American poets are adequately suited to flush out the congestion of their minds - and indeed, this nation is better because of the creative forces of poetry flowing from their genius. That poetry by Afro-Americans is deeply rooted in their social environment and African heritage is the position taken

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*By Dr. J. Clay Smith, Jr., U.S. Commissioner, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. This paper is a humble response to the Board of Trustees of Howard University who honor Dr. Smith this week as one of the five 1981 Outstanding Alumni Award recipients at the Annual Charter Day Dinner. This lecture is being presented at the Sun Gallery in Washington, D.C., as part of the activities associated with Black History Month; and inaugurates the "jurisart movement" into the area of poetry.

Dr. Smith received his A.B. in 1964 from the Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska; the J.D. degree in 1967 from the Howard University School of Law in Washington, D.C.; and the LL.M and SJD degrees in 1970 and 1977, respectively, from the George Washington University National Law Center in Washington, D.C.

here as I address the subject of this paper: The Social Dynamics of Afro-American Poetry: An Evaluation.**/

This paper discusses several poetic subject matters arbitrarily selected to demonstrate the social dynamics of the poetry by Afro-Americans. I am not a poet; however, as a lover of poetic thought and the recipient of the meaning of interpreted metaphysical thought, I share these views with you. I shall approach this topic using the following categories for discussion: spirituals, Africa, liberty and slavery, justice, self-defense, identity, America, self-determination, overcoming adversities, the Negro Church, Black men, Black women, and hope.

I dedicate this paper to the first American Negro poet of whom any record exists: Jupiter Hammond, whose poem, "An Evening Thought," is dated December 25, 1760. Hammond lived in Queen's Village on Long Island and the publication date of his poem precedes that of Phyllis Wheatley, the first recognized Afro-American poet, by nine years.

**/ All of the poets included in this paper are Afro-Americans. Most of the poems selected for discussion or illustration were written prior to 1925. All of the poets referred to in this paper were born before 1903. These poems may be found in most anthologies on Negro poetry, but specifically in The Poetry of The Negro (edited by Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps, Doubleday & Co., N.Y. 1949); Negro Poets and Their Poems (by Robert T. Kerlin, Associated Publishers, Inc., Washington, D.C., 1923); The Book of American Negro Spirituals (edited by James Weldon Johnson, The Viking Press, N.Y., 1925); Caroling Dusk, (edited by Countee Cullen, Harper & Bros., N.Y. 1927); Black Voices (edited by Abraham Chapman, The New American Library, N.Y., 1968).

In recognition of Hammond and Wheatley, and their abundant dedication to religious themes in their poetry, the following stanzas are given as the seed for all poetic references that follow. Note the parallelism by their references to God, redemption, wisdom and love:

First, Jupiter Hammond:

"An Evening Thought"

Salvation comes by Christ alone,
The only Son of God;
Redemption now to every one,
That love his holy Word ...
(emphasis added)

Now, Phyllis Wheatley:

"A Poem for Children, with Thoughts on Death"

'Tis God alone can make you wise,
His wisdom's from above,
He fills the soul with sweet supplies
By his redeeming love.
(emphasis added)

I.
Spirituals: Freedom In God Over Me

For Afro-Americans, religion and the recognition of God has been one of the social dynamics which has had a strong influence on all art forms generated by people of African descent. Most of the poetry of Hammond and Wheatley bear out this conclusion. Certainly, the recognition of the existence of God stimulated the early creators of spiritual poetic words, which we now sing as gospel music and chants, to write these lines:

* I'm walking on borrowed land,
  This world ain't none of my home.

* We'll stand the storm it won't be long.

* Oh, walk together children,
  Don't get weary.

* Oh, freedom! Oh freedom! Oh freedom over me!
  An' before I'd be a slave,
  I'll be buried in my grave,
  And go home to my Lord an' be free.

Hence, we see the consequences of the dynamics of horrible social conditions rendering a statement of "I'm walking on borrowed land."

Afro-Americans enslaved and unrecognized as human beings rejected the contemporary view of their state of legal non-existence and chose to "stand the storm" and "walk together." They buried the word "weary." The concept of freedom and liberty remained poised "in essence" but the hope that freedom and liberty would vest "in being" always remained. Hence, for the early poets, the concept of freedom was not attainable on earth: Freedom existed "over me" and the poet made it clear that the Afro-American symbolically chose the grave over slavery for it was only with their God that they could partake of freedom.

II.
Poetic Rootage in African Culture

That poets of Afro-American hue have understood the rootage of their being and that its unfolding maturity is manifested by the early Black bards. Paul Laurence Dunbar reminds us that Afro-Americans have a duty not to forget

the roots of their African culture even in the face of human degradation. In his poem, "Ode To Ethiopia," he prods Afro-Americans to have pride in their African culture. Dunbar writes,

O Mother Race! to thee I bring
This pledge of faith unwavering,
   This tribute to thy glory.
I know the pangs which thou didst feel,
When Slavery crushed thee with its heel,
   With thy dear blood all gory.

* * *

On every hand in this fair land,
Proud Ethiope's swarthy children stand
   Beside their fairer neighbor;
The forests flee before their stroke,
Their hammers ring, their gorges smoke, -
   They stir in honest labor.

* * *

Then Dunbar moves mightily into the theme of race pride in the following selected lines:

Be proud, my Race, in mind and soul
Thy name is writ on Glory's scroll ...

Thou hast the right to noble pride.

Finally, Dunbar reaches the high watermark in the "Ode" by stating what makes Afro-Americans noble:

No other race, or white or black,
When bound as thou wert, to the rack,
   So seldom stooped to grieving;
No other race, when free again,
Forgot the past and proved them men
   So noble in forgiving . . .

III
Liberty and Slavery

However true Dunbar's perception of how "noble in forgiving" the Negro is, Dunbar, I'm sure, was fully aware of a slave poet from North Carolina named George Moses Horton, whose poetry doesn't appear to be so forgiving. In fact, Horton grieves, indeed, he outwardly complains about his bondage in a poem entitled, "On Liberty and Slavery," in which he proclaims:

> Alas! and am I born for this,
> To wear this slavish chain?
> Deprived of all created bliss,
> Through hardship, toil and pain!
>
> How long have I in bondage lain,
> And languished to be free!
> Alas! and must I still complain-
> Deprived of liberty.
>
> Oh, Heaven! and is there no relief
> This side the silent grave-
> To soothe the pain-to quell the grief
> And anguish of a slave?

While George Moses Horton strikes out in a direct way against his deprivation of liberty, he does raise the question uniformly raised by Afro-bards of the early period: "Oh, Heaven! and is there no relief This side the grave ...?"

The theme of death before liberty comes is repeated by Frances Harper, a female Afro-American poet of the same period as George Moses Horton. Harper wrote:

> Make me a grave wher'er you will,
> In a lowly plain or a lofty hill;
> Make it among earth's humblest graves,
> But not in a land where men are slaves.

Poets like Dunbar who understood the nothingness of humanity in slavery, but who were alive or were born after the emancipation proclamation, begin to shift the theme of death before liberty to the value and meaning of the words liberty and freedom as it related to the freedman. An example of this social dynamic is gleened from a poem by James Madison Bell, entitled, "The Progress of Liberty," which I quote in part,

> O Liberty, what charm so great!
> One radiant smile, one look of thine
> Can change the drooping bondsman's fate,
> And light his brow with hope divine.

In one stanza of "The Progress of Liberty," Bell talks about the manhood of the slave rising up from the tomb -- an indication that liberty brings hope and life as opposed to despair and death. Bell wrote,

> His manhood, wrapped in rayless gloom,
> At thy approach throws off its pall,
> And rising up, as from the tomb,
> Stands forth defiant of the thrall ...

Frances Harper shifts from the gloom of the grave regarding the denial of liberty, but only to project a brighter day in years to come. Of course, for her generation the gloom remained. In connection with liberty, Harper wrote,

> It shall flash through coming ages,
> It shall light the distant years;
> And eyes now dim with sorrow
> Shall be brighter through their tears.

Harper's words are sad and joyful in the same breath for her generation was on its death bed and sorrowful about having been deprived of liberty; and yet, though their eyes were filled with tears they could see a brighter day for the new Negro.

IV.
Justice

Justice as a poetic theme is deeply interwoven into Afro-American poetry as a social dynamic. For example, Walter Everette Hawkins, in his poem entitled, "Credo," talks about himself as an iconoclast, an anarchist, and agnostic. However, when Hawkins talks about justice and freedom, he echoes a theme which has always undergirded Black Americans. He wrote,

> I believe in Justice and Freedom,
> To me Liberty is priestly and kingly;
> Freedom is my Bride,
> Liberty my Angel of Light,
> Justice my God.

The Afro-American poet has yelled the loudest when justice has been disparate or summary. The complaint against injustice echoes as loud as poet George Moses Horton grieved against his bondage. In fact, injustice based on race alone has been viewed as a badge of slavery.

Lynching as an act of justice by whites has been the subject of the poetry of many Afro-American poets. Indeed, for Black bards, lynching and injustice are synonymous. This is apparent from a poem by Raymond Garfield Dandridge, who wrote:

Yes, I am lynched. Is it that I
Must without judge or jury die?
Though innocent, am I accursed
To quench the mob's blood-thirsty thirst?

Yes, I am mocked. Pray tell me why!
Did not my brothers freely die
For you, and your Democracy--
That each and all alike be free?

Here, Dandridge, seemingly speaking from a state of death asked why he must die without a judge or jury. His claim of innocence falls on the deaf ears of a blood-thirsty mob for whom Black men died to preserve their freedom and their democracy.

Yet, in a nation where law and the judicial process are the centerpiece of liberty, some Americans never believed that the lynching of Blacks was ever used as a substitute for the courts. The poet Joshua H. Jones, Jr., offers testimony to the contrary by these words:

They've lynched a man in Dixie.
O God, behold the crime.
And midst the mad mob's howling
How sweet the church bells chime!
They've lynched a man in Dixie.
You say this cannot be?
See where his lead torn body
Mute hangs from yonder tree.

As the twentieth century gave birth to a young nation struggling to survive and a world war which tested its fiber, the gloom of pre-emancipation days filled the pages of the Afro-American poet as it related to justice. This is evident in the hard hitting poem by James David Corrothers entitled, "At The Closed Gate of Justice," written in the first years of this century. There is a cynicism in the following lines,

V
Self-Defense

While some Afro-American poetry weep with sadness over the dynamics of social conditions, other poems call upon the oppressed to "fight back." This theme is the focus of a poem, entitled, "If We Must Die," by Claude McKay, which reads:

> If we must die, let it not be like hogs
> Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
> While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
> Making their mock at our accursed lot.
> If we must die--oh, let us nobly die,
> So that our precious blood may not be shed
> In vain; then even the monsters we defy
> Shall be constrained to honor us, though dead!
>
> Oh, kinsmen! We must meet the common foe;
> Though far outnumbered, let us still be brave,
> And for their thousand blows deal one death-blow.
> What though before us lies the open grave?
> Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,
> Pressed to the wall, dying, but--fighting back!

This poem appeared in several newspapers after the race riots in the District of Columbia in July, 1919. I'm sure that McKay was branded as a dissident by whites when his poem was published. However, his poem spoke the true feelings of several authors and leaders of the time. McKay's poem is one of the few directly highlighting the concept of self-defense. You will note that McKay in no way believes that liberty should be sought in the grave.

To be a Negro in a day like this
Demands forgiveness. Bruised with blow on blow,
Betrayed, like him whose woe-dimmed eyes gave bliss,
Still must one succor those who brought one low,
To be a Negro in a day like this.

To be a Negro in a day like this
Demands rare patience--patience that can wait
In utter darkness. 'Tis the path to miss,
And knock, unheeded, at an iron gate,
To be a Negro in a day like this.

To be a Negro in a day like this
Demands strange loyalty. We serve a flag
Which is to us white freedom's emphasis.
Ah! one must love when truth and justice lag,
To be a Negro in a day like this.

To be a Negro in a day like this--
Alas! Lord God, what evil have we done?
Still shines the gate, all gold and amethyst
But I pass by, the glorious goal unwon,
"Merely a Negro"--in a day like <u>this</u>!

The theme of lynching and injustice is also carried in a stanza of "The Negro" by Langston Hughes paralleling the treatment of Blacks in Africa and the United States: He wrote,

I am a Negro:
...
I've been a victim:
The Belgians cut off my hands in the Congo.
They lynch me now in Texas ...

During all periods of public lawlessness regarding the civil rights of Afro-Americans, many poets have reached out to God for salvation and protection. The last two lines of Lucian Watkin's poem, entitled, "A Prayer of The Race That God Made Black," is an example of this:

God! save us in Thy Heaven, where all is well!
We come slow-struggling up the Hills of Hell!

VI
Identity

Turning now to the subject of identity, the Afro-American poet has never had any difficulty with this word. However, the poet has focussed on the identity issue to validate the self-worth of Afro-Americans and to show a contradiction in the logic of whites that race difference measures the level of one's existence. This theme is evident in the lines of a poem written by Leon R. Harris in which he writes:

> We travel a common road, Brother,--
> We walk and we talk much the same;
> We breathe the same sweet air of heaven--
> Strive alike for fortune and fame;
> We laugh when our hearts fill with gladness,
> We weep when we're smothered in woe;
> We strive, we endure, we seek wisdom;
> We sin--and we reap what we sow.
> Yes, all who would know it can see that
> When everything's put to the test,
> In spite of our color and features
> The Negro's the same as the rest.

VII
America

As an American, it is in the context of the identity of the Afro-American that poetry about America by Black bards has emerged. And, perhaps we can understand Claude McKay's hard hitting poem on self-defense much better by focussing on McKay's poem entitled, "America":

> Although she feeds me bread of bitterness,
> And sinks into my throat her tiger's tooth,
> Stealing my breath of life, I will confess
> I love this cultured hell that tests my youth!
> Her vigor flows like tides into my blood,
> Giving me strength erect against her hate.

Her bigness sweeps my being like a flood.
Yet as a rebel fronts a king in state,
I stand within her walls with not a shred
Of terror, malice, not a word of jeer.
Darkly I gaze into the days ahead,
And see her might and granite wonders there,
Beneath the touch of Time's unerring hand,
Like priceless treasures sinking in the sand.

In this poem McKay acknowledges his love for America - I suspect that is why he urges people to defend themselves against lawlessness. It is beautiful how in his poem, "America," McKay never directly defiles the image of America except in the line which states, "and sinks into my throat her tiger's tooth." This line is a description of the perception of how the Negro viewed his state of being as part of the underclass. McKay and Frances Harper seemed to be aligned: Harper looked for a brighter future for the progeny of the slave system. She grieved because liberty came too late for her generation. In "America," some years later, McKay, the beneficiary of Harper's struggle as a poet is saying, "Darkly I gaze into the days ahead." For both Harper and McKay whose poetry is separated by many years, their words read as if they came from the same mind, the same body, the same time and the same social condition in America.

Other poems bearing the name of America are worth reading, such as, "I, Too, Sing America," by Langston Hughes. In Hughes' poem, he facetiously tells us how racism is healthy when blacks are sent to the kitchen. He wrote:

> 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 . . .

The poetic words of Kelly Miller in his poem, "I See and Am Satisfied," amplify the hope of the tomorrow of the race in America. Miller wrote,

> I see that the great generous American Heart despite the temporary flutter, will finally beat true to the higher human impulse, and my soul abounds with reassurance and hope.

VIII
Self-Determination

Kelly Miller knew that the "generous American Heart" would not deliver Afro-Americans from the trappings of slavery without a recognition of self-determination. The self-determination of the Negro is illustrated in a poem entitled, "Self-Determination - The Philosophy of the Negro," by Leslie Pinckney Hill. Hill wrote:

> Four things we will not do, in spite of all
> That demons plot for our decline and fall;
> We bring four benedictions which the meek
> Unto the proud are privileged to speak,
> Four gifts by which amidst all stern-browed races
> We move with kindly hearts and shining faces.
>
> We will not hate. Law, custom, creed and caste,
> All notwithstanding, here we hold us fast.
> Down through the years the mighty ships of state
> Have all been broken on the rocks of hate.
>
> We will not cease to laugh and multiply.
> We slough off trouble, and refuse to die.
> The Indian stood unyielding, stark and grim;
> We saw him perish, and we learned of him
> To mix a grain of philosophic mirth
> With all the crass injustices of earth.

We will not use the ancient carnal tools.
These never won, yet centuries of schools,
Of priests, and all the work of brush and pen
Have not availed to win the wisest men
From futile faith in battleship and shell:
We see them fall, and mark that follow well.

We will not waver in our loyalty.
No strange voice reaches us across the sea;
No crime at home shall stir us from this soil.
Ours is the guerdon, ours the blight of toil,
But raised above it by a faith sublime
We choose to suffer here and bide our time.

And if we hold to this, we dream some day
Our countrymen will follow in our way.

Hill's poem is a terribly strong testament of the faith and support Black people have in America, even though its laws, customs and political structure have been used to maintain a controlled state of being. Such a philosophy, such a social dynamic deserves its just reward by the body politic because the theme of Hill's poem is extant today.

IX
Overcoming Adversity

Self-determination requires much more than philosophical statements. It requires the strength of a people to overcome adversity at any cost. This basic principle is illustrated by Leslie Pinckney Hill in the following lines:

My life were lost if I should keep
A hope-forlorn and gloomy face,
And brood upon my ills, and weep,
And mourn the travail of my race.

To press on, as James Weldon Johnson wrote, "until victory is won," has emerged as part of the social dynamics of Afro-American poetry as illustrated in Waverly Turner Carmichael's poem, "It's All Through Life." In the second

verse Carmichael wrote:

. . .

An hour of joy, a day of fears,
An hour of smiles, a day of tears;
An hour of gain, a day of strife,
Press on, press on, it's all through life.

Ethyl Lewis sums up the mood of the new Negro by a plea for patience --

"And carry your load with a nod and a smile."

However one carries his load, the Afro-American poet has recognized from the very birth of the Black bard that the hand of the strong must be stretched to the hands of the weak and the feeble. Frances Harper has beautifully captured this concept in a poem entitled, "Go Work in My Vineyard." The first stanza of her poem is meaningful:

My hands were weak, but I reached them out
To feebler ones than mine,
And over the shadows of my life
Stole the light of a peace divine.

The significance of these lines is that the hands of the person reaching out "were weak," already worn from the trials and tribulations of life; and yet, these hands remained strong enough to embrace weaker hands.

It is no wonder that Afro-American poets, while observing the conditions of their people brought on by political and social policy decisions, have been critical of the don't care Negro. In fact, Joseph S. Cotter, Sr. wrote a poem entitled, "The Don't Care Negro." A few lines of this point satirically illustrates the don't care Negro:

Neber min' what's in your cran'um
So your collar's high an' true,
Neber min' what's in your pocket
So de blackin's on your shoe,

Neber min' who keeps you comp'ny
So you's gwine away from wuk.

Neber min' de race's troubles
So you profits by dem all.
Neber min' your leaders' stumblin'
So you he'ps to make dem fall.

* * *

Neber min' your manhood's risin'
So you habe a way to stay it,
Neber min' folks' good opinion
So you have a way to slay it.

Neber min' man's why an' wharfo'
So de worl' is big an' roun.
Neber min' whar next you's gwine to
So you's six foot under groun.

Cotter's poem rings a true blow for the don't care Negro for whom the bell tolls.

So, what is the Negro doing about the plight of his people? W. Clarence Jordan asked this question in a poem entitled, "What Is The Negro Doing?"

. . .

Tell me what's the Negro doing?
And what course is he pursuing?
What achievements is he strewing
By the way?"

Many say he's retrograding
Very fast;
Others say his glory's fading,--
Cannot last;
That his prospects now are blighted,
That his chances have been slighted,
That his wrongs cannot be righted.
Time has passed.

Friends, lift up your eyes; look higher;
Higher still,
There's the vanguard of our army
On the hill.
You've been looking at the rear guard,
Lift your eyes, look farther forward;
Thousands are still pressing starward--
Ever will.

X
The Negro Church

Questions concerning what the Negro is doing and the don't care Negro invariably force the poet to analyze the role and the responsibility of one of the cornerstones of the Black experience: The Negro Church. And why is this so? It is so because religion has been the mainstay of the race in bondage. A District of Columbia poet, Andrea Razafkeriefo provides us with his views in a poem entitled, "The Negro Church." It's a hard hitting poem:

That the Negro church possesses
Extraordinary power,
That is the greatest medium
For influencing our people,
That it long has slept and faltered,
Failed to meet its obligations,
Are, to honest and true thinkers,
Facts which have to be admitted.

* * *

Yea, the preacher, like the shepherd,
Should be leader and protector,
And prepare us for the present
Just as well as for the future;
He should know more than Scriptures,
And should ever be acquainted
With all vital, daily subjects
Helpful to his congregation.

Give us manly, thinking preachers
And not shouting money-makers,
Men of intellect and vision,
Who will really help our people:
Men who make the church a guide-post
To the road of racial progress,
Who will strive to fit the Negro
For this world as well as heaven.

XI
Strong Afro-American Men and Women

Above all, it is strong men and women who shall sustain the presence of Afro-Americans in this land. For as Sterling A. Brown reminds the nation in the closing lines of his poem, "Strong Men,"

One thing they cannot prohibit --
The strong men...coming on
The strong men gittin' stronger
Strong men...
STRONGER...

And yet, Irvin W. Underhill saw the need to counsel Black men about the necessity "to be men" in his poem entitled, "To Our Boys." A couple of stanzas of this poem are instructive:

I speak to you, my Colored boys,
I bid you to be men,
Don't put yourselves upon the rack
Like pigeons in a pen.
Come out and face life's problem, boys,
With faith and courage too,
And justify that wondrous faith,
Abe Lincoln had in you.

Don't treat life as a little toy,
A dance or a game of ball;
Those things are all right in their place,
But they are not life's all.
Life is a problem serious,
Give it the best you have,
Succeed in all you undertake
And help your brother live.

* * *

On the other hand, Afro-American poets have generally been kind to the Black woman and has sung praises for her fortitude. Andrea Razafkeriefo, in his poem entitled, "The Negro Woman," exalts the honor of Black womanhood:

Were it mine to select a woman
As queen of the hall of fame;
One who has fought the gamest fight
And climbed from the depths of shame;
I would have to give the sceptre
To the lowliest of them all;
She, who has struggled through the years,
With her back against the wall.

Wronged by the men of an alien race,
Deserted by those of her own;
With prayer in her heart, a song on her lips
She has carried the fight alone.

In spite of the snares all around her;
Her marvelous pluck has prevalied
And kept her home together--
When even her men have failed.

What of her sweet, simple nature?
What of her natural grace?
Her richness and fullness of color,
That adds to the charm of her face?
Is there a woman more shapely?
More vigorous, loving and true?
Yea, wonderful Negro woman
The honor I'd give to you.

In a responsive cord, Georgia Douglas Johnson soothed the wounds of the Black male and acknowledged that their bubbles of hope have burst in air. In her poem entitled, "Old Black Men," she wrote:

They have dreamed as young men dream
Of glory, love and power;
They have hoped as youth will hope
Of life's sun-minted hour.

They have seen as others saw
Their bubbles burst in air,
And they have learned to live it down
As though they did not care.

XII
Hope

In the end, it is hope that becomes the intrinsic values and the lifeline of the Afro-American poet's assessment of the social dynamics of our people. This value does not and was never intended to replace religion and social protest but is emphasized by the need of mankind to dream for a better day and to laugh the tears away.

In 1906 J. Mord Allen published a poem entitled, "The Psalm of the Uplift." The poem talks about "triumph" as the hope of the future and the prospects for "the Perfect Thing to man." Allen wrote:

> Still comes the Perfect Thing to man
> . . .
> It's there ahead to him--and you
> And me. I swear it isn't far;
> Else, black Despair would cut us down
> In the land of hateful Things Which Are,
> But, just beyond our finger-tips,
> Things As They Should Be shame the weak,
> And hold the aching muscles tense
> Through th' next moment of suspense
> Which triumph is to break.

It is fitting to emphasize Allen's notion that "black Despair" can consume the race and "cut us down." Allen's message to Blacks is to hope for the "Perfect Thing to man." To Allen, despair breeds despair; hope breeds hope.

XIII
Conclusion

The social dynamics of Afro-American poetry in relation to the poetry by American poets must continue. We cannot

live, we cannot think, we cannot love ourselves or others ignorant of the poetry written by the bards of the Afro-American experience. Countee Cullen probably recognized that his poems were unread by his people when he wrote a poem entitled, "For A Poet." The closing lines of this remarkable poem touched me deeply. He wrote,

> I have wrapped my dreams in a silken cloth,
> And laid them away in a box of gold.

Countee Cullen's poem has deep meaning to the mothers and fathers of the Afro-American -- for who has deferred more dreams than they? These Black men and women, these mothers and fathers, grandparents, aunts and uncles, all had "a box of gold" in which neatly laid were their dreams deferred, wrapped up in a "silken cloth." Afro-American poets are among those who have wrapped up their dreams, their thoughts and their humanity in "a box of gold."

The purpose of this paper is to bid you to find the "box of gold." Take it in your hands and gently dust it off. Be careful not to force the lock when you open the lid. Make sure that your hands are steady and clean so as not to soil the "silken cloth." Indeed, the cloth may well have rotted due to time. However, time will not have destroyed the dream in which is encased the universal thoughts of the Afro-American poet bearing the truth which must be told. What good are beautiful dreams, what good is truth, what good

is beauty if they lay dormant in a "box of gold" wrapped up in "silken cloth"?

Anne Spencer, in her poem, "Questing," provides a possible answer: "But let me learn now where Beauty is."

J. Clay Smith, Jr.