

10-1-1975

## Book Review: The New York Head Shop and Museum

E. Ethelbert Miller

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### Recommended Citation

Miller, E. Ethelbert (1975) "Book Review: The New York Head Shop and Museum," *New Directions*: Vol. 2: Iss. 4, Article 8.

Available at: <https://dh.howard.edu/newdirections/vol2/iss4/8>

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34 Horton's first publication was reprinted as *Poems of a Slave* in Philadelphia in 1837. The following year, it was bound with poems by Wheatley and published in Boston. During this period, the style of Horton's poetry changed, and in 1845 another book, *The Poetical Works*, was published.

Richmond's book describes how Horton, in his bid for freedom, wrote letters to William Lloyd Garrison, the abolitionist editor of the *Liberator*, and to Horace Greeley, the celebrated editor of the *New York Tribune*, which he entrusted to Swain, who was then president of the University of North Carolina. The letters are now included in the papers of the university—never having been mailed.

Horton obtained his freedom in 1865 on Easter Sunday as the Union soldiers marched into North Carolina under the command of General William T. Sherman. Horton, then 68, did not wait in Chapel Hill, but walked to Raleigh to meet the Army.

In 1866, after moving to Philadelphia, Horton made his first approach to Blacks for assistance in publishing his works. The Banneker Institute, a small exclusive fraternity of educated Black men, turned him down. After that, there is no trace of him. The date and place of his death are unknown, but it is believed that he died in 1883.

Both Wheatley and Horton were married, but neither mentions much about personal life. Wheatley could be called the "Mother of Black Literature in America"; Horton the "Father of Black Protest in America." But how Black was Wheatley's poetry? How much could Horton protest? Whites have compared Wheatley to Alexander Pope, and Horton to Edgar Allan Poe; neither has been acclaimed great in her or his own right.

One is left with the feeling that

of the slave woman. Many questions go wanting for answers: What was the plight of Northern slaves—particularly the women? What was happening to Wheatley psychologically? Was her socialization such that she did not perceive herself as a member of the slave society, or for that matter any society?

If Horton's life was in any way representative of slavery, then one would deduce from this book that Southern slaves had time to actualize themselves—after completing their laborious tasks. One would develop the belief that the brutality in the North was mental rather than physical and that slavery in the South was better than slavery in the North. From this treatment, one should be thoroughly convinced that a few extraordinary Blacks were able to pull themselves up by their imaginary bootstraps . . . that Wheatley and Horton were and continue to be enigmas to the racist contention that Blacks are innately inferior.

The author gets into the psyche of Horton and permits the reader to see Horton as a man striving to fulfill his needs. When confronted by barriers, one sees him devising methods to circumvent these obstacles. His poetry gives a suggestion of power and imagination.

Wheatley's poetry demonstrates a sure taste. But based on the image of Wheatley the author allows the reader to see, one would certainly denounce the Black Matriarch concept as a myth and a great misconception of the Black female from an historical point.

The author crystalizes many ambiguities that have been long associated with these two early Black American poets. The book more than adequately brings to life the historical occurrences of their period, and one is left feeling sad that these literary giants lived in the right place at the wrong time. One can only believe that if these figures were

transposed into modern times, the vassal would surely soar.

*Bid The Vassal Soar* is easily readable. There is keenness in detail and simplicity in description. Richmond writes to the fullest measure all that the poets allowed to be scrutinized. She seems to dwell more intensely on Horton than on Wheatley. However, this may be due to Horton's own candor in his poetry. A few portions of the book move slowly, but the reader should not permit the slow passages to stand in his/her way of reading this book. □

## The New York Head Shop and Museum

By Audre Lorde  
Broadside Press  
56pp. \$3.50

Reviewed by E. Ethelbert Miller

Hopefully before this decade is over, someone will attempt a study of the influence of New York City on Black poetry. This study would offer additional insight into the work of several well-known writers. Included among them would have to be Audre Lorde. In her latest collection of poems she opens with lines that defy the Empire State Building, The Bronx Zoo, Riverside Drive, Greenwich Village and all of Harlem.

*There is nothing beautiful left in the streets of this city.*

*I have come to believe in death and renewal by fire.*

What is it like to live in New York? Ask any skeleton or read Lorde who writes:

*Have you ever risen in the night  
bursting with knowledge and the  
world  
dissolves toward any listening ear  
into which you can pour  
whatever it was you knew  
before waking  
Only to find all ears asleep*

or drugged perhaps by a dream of  
words  
because as you scream into them  
over and over  
nothing stirs  
and the mind you have reached is not  
a working mind  
please hang up and die again!  
The mind  
you have reached is not a working  
mind  
Please hang up  
And die again.

There is a need in this work for the author to make a long distance call. Her poetry changes in tone and texture when she writes of things outside the city of New York. She is funny in the poem "My Fifth Trip to Washington Ended in Northeast Delaware." Humor is unusual for Lorde who has a tendency to always be serious, and the poem offers a pleasant and different emotional release. The poem "Visit To a City Out of Time," which is about the city of St. Louis, ends with a mystical statement that sounds like the wisdom of Gibran.

In time  
people who live  
by rivers  
dream  
they are immortal

Several poems in this book demand closer attention. For instance, the poem "Naturally" is one whose quality forces the reader to genuflect and pray that what was read was not actually seen. "Naturally" is a poem which probably would have found better acceptance outside the book. It is an important poem to note because it shows the range which Lorde covers in her book, which contains very good as well as very poor poetry. "Naturally" is typical of the type of poem that was written in the late Sixties. It is a "Black is Beautiful" poem of elementary proportions. It begins:

Since Naturally Black is Naturally  
Beautiful  
I must be proud  
and, naturally,  
Black and  
Beautiful  
who always was a trifle  
yellow  
and plain  
though proud  
before.

The poem continues with Lorde giving up pomades and ends with a corny pun:

But I've bought my can of  
Natural Hair Spray—  
made and marketed in Watts—  
still thinking more  
Proud Beautiful Black Women  
could better make and use  
Black bread.

"Naturally" and two other poems, "Song For a Thin Sister" and "Ballad From Childhood," are not what one expects from Lorde—a poet who was nominated in 1973 for the National Book Award for poetry.

The poem "Sacrifice" finds Lorde at her best. So much of her mother knowledge comes through. She writes in a manner in which her words become a guiding light for the young and a pillar for those mature in years. It is instructional but not didactic.

Pulling down statues of rock from  
their high places  
we must level the expectation  
upon which they stand  
waiting for us  
to fulfill their image  
waiting  
for our feet to replace them

In "Revolution Is One Form of Social Change," one is given a glimpse of Lorde's feminist outlook on life. Her views are also captured successfully in the poem, "To Marie, In Flight." In this poem, her poetic interpretation of a woman's menstrual cycle gives new meaning to a regular occurrence.

For women  
perspective is more easily maintained.  
But something in my body  
teaches patience  
is no virtue  
every month  
renews its own destruction  
while my blood rages  
for proof  
or continuity.

Audre Lorde is a strong woman; a powerful poet. The *New York Head Shop and Museum*, however, is only one indication of her strength. It is important to read some of her earlier collections (*The First Cities, Cables to Rage* and *From a Land Where Other People Live*) in order to better understand her. □

The reviewer is director of the Afro-American Studies Research Center at Howard University.