Week 1: The Demographics and Production of Black Poetry

Resident Faculty: Howard Rambsy
Visiting Faculty: James Smethurst, Kathy Lou Schultz, Tyehimba Jess, Brenda Marie Osbey

Led by Rambsy, the Week 1 readings, activities and lectures will address significant recurring topics in the discourse on African American poetry—black aesthetics, history, cultural pride, critiques of anti-black racism, music and performance—and concentrate on major trends, popular poets and canonical poems and genres. We will identify and discuss several major poets, including Amiri Baraka, Jayne Cortez, Nikki Giovanni, Carolyn Rodgers, and Dudley Randall whose works began circulating widely during the late 1960s and early 1970s. We will consider how the BAM intersects with and distinguishes itself from other related poetry movements like the Beat Generation. We look at the configuration of contemporary black poetry, as poets become identified by subject matter, region, movement and/or collective like Cave Canem Poets, the Affrilachian Poets, and the National Poetry Slam Movement that began in 1990.

Rambsy, Kathy Lou Schultz, Smethurst and Graham will give lectures that provide NEH Summer Scholars with an overarching sense of poets in the field as well as major events and circumstances that have shaped African American poetry. As specialists who have written about poetry and literary history, Rambsy, Schultz, and Smethurst will collectively provide foundational concepts and material for understanding and teaching black poetry. The week will also include discussions and readings by poets Tyehimba Jess and Brenda Marie Osbey, which will give NEH Summer Scholars chances to consider persona poetry and the presence of history in contemporary poems. In addition, Week 1 activities will include workshops held in the Bangs Active Learning Lab on campus to assist participants with incorporating technology and digital humanities in the study and teaching of African American poetry.
Guiding questions

1. What have been the defining features of African American poetry over the last 50 years?

2. How can digital humanities and resources assist teachers and scholars in covering the large number of poets and expansive body of works poems and publications that comprise the fields of poetry?

Monday, July 13, 2015

9:00-11:30: Overview: “Why Study/Teach Black Poetry Now?” Graham & Rambsy

Graham’s and Rambsy’s opening lecture will provide an overview of the Institute and also make a case for why scholars in humanities (i.e. American Studies, English, African American literary studies, Women, Gender, Sexuality Studies, Performance Studies) might provide “added value” to their fields by focusing on black poetry.

1:00-2:15: Lecture — “Production Matters, Anthologies & Canonical Poems” with Rambsy

Rambsy’s lecture “Production Matters” will make participants aware of how anthologies have facilitated the rise of signature and canonical poems and the disappearance of others. The lecture will explain why and how Malcolm and Coltrane poems became so central to African American poetic discourse during the 1960s and 1970s, which paved the way for tribute poems and poems about or featuring music to become central to black poetic discourse.

2:45 – 4:30: Workshop: Ngram Viewer and Digital Audio devices with Rambsy

The workshop will introduce participants to Google’s Ngram Viewer an online phrase-usage graphing tool. The workshop will demonstrate how the tool can be used to assist with tracking patterns and word usage in African American poetry and literary studies. The workshop will also introduce participants to the use of digital audio devices for listening to and sharing audio recordings of poets reading their works.

Required readings:
Tuesday, July 14, 2015
9:00-11:30: Lecture — “The Legacies of the Literary Left” with James Smethurst

Smethurst’s lecture on the legacies of the literary left will explain how leftist ideology and politics contributed to the production of African American poetry during the 1960s and 1970s. Smethurst will also discuss how the politics of community organizers and literary institutions gave rise to folk poetry and a sense among writers that they should also assume the roles of activists, cultural workers, musical collaborators, and playwrights in addition to their interests as poets. Poets we consider include Haki Madhubuti, Marilyn Nelson, Vievee Francis, and Michael Warr.

1:00-2:15: Lecture — “The Geographies of African American Poetry” with Smethurst

Smethurst’s lecture on the geographies or regions central to the histories of African American literature will give Institute participants a more detailed look at factors such as hometowns, migration patterns, political affiliations, and alliances with particular editors in distinct locales have shaped black poets and their poetry.

2:45 – 4:30: Lecture — “Poetry as the Language of History” and Poetry Reading with Brenda Marie Osbey

Osbey will discuss the use of history in poetry, and she will draw on her skills as a multi-lingual artist to discuss the impact of diaspora in her work and the works of other poets. Whereas modernist poets have been known to incorporate multiple Eurocentric languages in their works, Osbey’s presentation will address how the uses of different languages along the routes of black diaspora in poetry might enhance understanding of culture and diversity.

Required readings:

Wednesday, July 15, 2015
9:00-11:30 Lecture — “The Ongoing Legacy of Amiri Baraka” with Kathy Lou Schultz

Schultz’s lecture will concentrate on the late Amiri Baraka, one of the most prominent American poets. Schultz will discuss how Baraka’s work connects to older generations of poets, including Melvin Tolson and Langston Hughes as well as contemporary generations of poets.

1:00-2:15 Lecture — “African American Poetry Print Culture and Gender, Racial Counts” with Schultz
Schultz’s lecture will concentrate on aspects of print culture, including the periodicals and presses that have facilitated the production of African American poetry during the contemporary era. In addition, drawing on the annual count coordinated by VIDA, an organization that tracks gender disparity in leading publications, Schultz will lead a discussion concerning the “counts” or quantifiable presence of black men and women poets among publications and award-granting institutions.

2:45 – 4:30  Workshop: Digital resources in the study of African American poetry with Rambsy

The workshop will make NEH Summer Scholars aware of online digital resources featuring poetry such as the Poetry Foundation site, Poets.org, and PennSound. The workshop will also introduce participants to poetry pedagogical activities on the crowd-source annotation sites, Rap Genius and Poetry Genius.

**Required readings:**

**Thursday, July 16, 2015**
9:00-11:30  Bob Kaufman, Michael Harper, and Lorenzo Thomas: A Poetry Continuum with Graham

These three poets, in whom a number of different traditions converge (Beat critique, riffs on jazz and other musical forms, urban wit) have had often unacknowledged influence on contemporary poetry, its growth and organizational practices. We will look at this influence in terms of the continuities and changes that have established a new geography for contemporary black poetry. We look at the significance of affiliation by region and/or topic (Carolina African American Writers Collective, Affilachian Poets, black nature poetry), and sites of creation/production (Cave Canem, The Dark Room Collective, Slam [Performance] Poetry). Poets we consider include Erica Hunt, Wanda Coleman, Frank X Walker, Nikky Finney, Lenard Moore, Alice Walker, Patricia Smith, Major Jackson, Camille Dungy, jessica Care moore, and Jericho Brown, several of whom will join us in our webinars following the Institute.
1:00-2:30 Lecture — “Black Persona Poetry Then and Now” with Rambsy

Rambsy will give a presentation on persona poems, one of the most prevalent modes of writing by contemporary poets over the last 15 years. The lecture will highlight notable poems and volumes featuring persona poems by several contemporary poets, including Cornelius Eady, Patricia Smith, Lucille Clifton, Ai, Arian Matejka, Saul Williams, and Tyehimba Jess, who joins us following lunch.

2:45 – 4:30: Discussion and reading — Tyehimba Jess

Jess, a skilled performer of verse and former participant in spoken word competitions, will provide Institute participants with an understanding of how poetry might be optimally performed, offering us important insights into the contemporary performance histories of black poetry. Jess’s volume *Leadbelly*, which is fully comprised of poems written in the first-person voice of multiple characters, will extend our Institute’s conversation concerning the use of persona poems by large numbers of contemporary African American poets.

**Required readings and media:**

**Friday, July 17, 2015**
9:00-11:30: Workshop: Blogging African American poetry with Rambsy

Rambsy will lead a workshop on the use of blogs for the composition and presentation of historical and contemporary information on African American poetry. The workshop will also concentrate on involve undergraduates and graduate students in the process of producing online work on black poetry.

1:00-2:15 NEH Summer Scholar Presentations

6:00 NEH Summer Scholars Poetry Reading

**Required readings:**
Week 2: Contemporary Black Poetry and Poetic Form

Resident Faculty: Evie Shockley
Visiting Faculty: William J. Harris, Ed Pavlic, Harryette Mullen, Keith Leonard
Panel: Poetry and Its Futures: Jerry W. Ward, Kevin Young, Frank X Walker, Megan Kaminski, Joanne Gabbin, moderator

Week 2 of the Institute approaches the field of contemporary African American poetry with an eye towards the poets’ formal choices and what attention to the structures, devices, and techniques the poets use can teach us about their aesthetics, individually and collectively. While the criticism on African American poetry has for many years privileged the “content,” or subject matter, of the work over its form(s), more recent scholarship has begun to put productive pressure on the idea that form and content cannot be effectively separated—indeed, that form is a kind of “content.” This shift has occurred more or less simultaneously with a wave of re-evaluation of the Black Arts Movement and the question of “black aesthetics” raised by the artists and theorists of that Movement. This critical reassessment rejects the notion that the Movement’s investigation of black aesthetics can be reduced to its most rigid and narrowly defined articulations of what makes a poem “black,” while nonetheless acknowledging that prescriptive (and essentialist) definitions of “authentic” blackness were often strongly advocated and have remained influential for subsequent generations of poets and critics. As a result of both trends, there has been renewed attention to both African American formalism (in the traditional sense) and African American innovation (in the avant-garde sense). Additionally, scholars and critics of contemporary African American poetry have found it rewarding to revisit the concept of “blackness,” asking how and where one might locate it in relation to black poetry and how it is informed and inflected by such factors as gender, sexuality, class, and geography.

The lectures, poetry reading, workshop, and panel discussion planned for this week will illuminate and explore these possibilities and concerns in relation to the poetry of the last few
decades and the future poetry anticipated by this group of leading scholars. Various
understandings and types of “black aesthetics” will be taken up, including “jazz aesthetics,”
“avant-garde aesthetics,” and “diaspora aesthetics.” Participants will be introduced to a wide
array of poets, from Margaret Walker, Amiri Baraka, and Sonia Sanchez to Harryette Mullen,
Will Alexander, and Natasha Trethewey.

Guiding Questions:
1. What is the relationship between African American poets and canonical avant-garde
   movements? How have poets writing during and after the Black Arts Movement
   approached the question of “traditional” form? What structures and techniques
   characterized the sizeable body of contemporary black poetry that is neither narrowly
   formalist nor radically innovative?

2. How does the work of younger poets, whose careers began in the 21st century, continue to
   reflect the cross-cultural experiences and negotiations of their late-20th-century
   predecessors, especially with regard to gender, sexuality and class?

Monday, July 20, 2015
9:00-11:30 Lecture “Contemporary Black Poetry: Tradition and Innovation” with Evie
   Shockley—and Discussion

   The week’s opening lecture offers an overview of the African American poetry of
   the last few decades, taking the Black Arts Movement as a touchstone and moving
   both synchronically outward and diachronically forward into the 21st century. It
   sketches out major movements and trends, both acknowledging and troubling the
   boundaries that have categorized black poets within different groups. Key figures
   for this talk include Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, Yusef Komunyakaa, Harryette
   Mullen, Terrance Hayes, and Lyrae Van Clief-Stefanon.

1:00-3:00 Visiting Faculty Lecture—“Poetry and Jazz Aesthetics” with William J. Harris—
   and Discussion

3:30-5:00 View Documentary: “BaddDDD Sonia Sanchez”

   The afternoon session provides an exploration of jazz aesthetics, a time-honored
   mode of poetic practice among black poets. Harris will discuss major contributors
to the discourse of jazz poetry such as Amiri Baraka, Jayne Cortez, Michael Harper, Sonia Sanchez, and Quincy Troupe, among others. Participants will learn not only about the music and musicians that have been especially inspiring for African American poets, but also how using jazz music as a model has shaped the formal approaches poets have used.


**Tuesday, July 21, 2015**

9:00-11:30 Visiting Faculty Lecture—“Poetry and Music at Intersections of Time” with Ed Pavlic—and Discussion

Taking off from the widely referenced passage of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* describing the impact of Louis Armstrong’s jazz upon the experience of time, Ed Pavlic’s morning session will offer participants a way to think about how Afro-modernist poetry structures itself conceptually in relation to black music. The lecture will cover the importance of music (gospel, blues, jazz, soul, and hip hop) to African American poetic voice in thematic terms.

1:00-2:15 Visiting Faculty Lecture—"Modern Men in the Pepperpot: Continuance and the Legacy of Robert Hayden" with Pavlic—and Discussion

2:30-3:30 Workshop in Close Reading with Shockley

3:30-5:00 Collaborative research, reading, or individual conferences with faculty

Pavlic’s afternoon lecture explores how poets Yusef Komunyakaa, Rita Dove, Christopher Gilbert, and Tracy K. Smith carried forth Hayden's vision of a radically and racially democratic vista into the decades beyond Hayden's death in
1980. His talk will be followed by a workshop led by Shockley, in which participants will collaborate on close readings of poems by writers who have emerged within the 21st century, as a way of strengthening NEW Summer Scholars’ understanding of the relationship between form and subject matter in the analysis of poetry, as well as familiarizing them with a few of the most exciting “very contemporary” new poets (Dawn Lundy Martin, Douglas Kearney, and Aracelis Girmay).


**Wednesday, July 22, 2015**

9:00-11:30  Visiting Faculty Lecture—“Robert Hayden, Melvin Tolson, Gwendolyn Brooks, Margaret Walker, and their Poetic Heirs” with Keith Leonard—and Discussion

In the morning session, Keith Leonard will lecture on post-Civil Rights era approaches to “traditional” poetic form, tracing these forward from earlier exemplars such as Hayden, Tolson and Brooks. His talk will address the contested meaning of “traditional” in this context, returning to questions about which tradition(s) black poetry is indebted to for its formal structures and opening up consideration of “new traditions” of African American form invented in the contemporary moment.

1:00-3:00  (2) NEH Summer Scholar Group Presentations

3:00-5:00  Collaborative Work


**Recommended Readings:** “Margaret Walker and the Contest to Define America,” Ch. 3 of *Extraordinary Measures: Afrocentric Modernism and Twentieth-Century American Poetry* (2000), by Lorenzo Thomas.
Thursday, July 23, 2015
9:00-11:30  Lecture—“Redefining Black Aesthetics: Black Poetry After ‘The New Black Poetry’” with Evie Shockley—and Discussion

Shockley’s morning lecture will synthesize some of the conceptual threads of the week by surveying some of the ways we might think of “black aesthetics” in describing the strategies contemporary African American poets are employing to negotiate the ongoing challenges of making their art in a white supremacist society. The talk will center on contemporary representations of slavery and the role of the visual in poetry by Thylia Moss, Julie Patton, Thomas Sayers Ellis, and Natasha Trethewey.

1:00-3:15  Visiting Faculty Lecture—“Forms of Innovation in Avant-Garde Poetry”—and Poetry Reading by Harryette Mullen, followed by Discussion

3:30-5:00  Public Panel—“Poetry and Its Futures” with Kevin Young, Frank X Walker, Jerry Ward, and Megan Kaminski, moderated by Joanne Gabbin

The afternoon session will begin with a lecture and reading by Harryette Mullen. Mullen will provide participants with a map of the landscape of innovative African American poetry in which her own important and acclaimed work is situated. Her talk will distinguish types of innovation, such as language-oriented work, politically radical approaches, and visionary procedures, that (re)introduce participants to such “experimental” or “oppositional” poets as Lorenzo Thomas, Nathaniel Mackey, Erica Hunt, Will Alexander, M. NourbeSe Phillip, and giovanni singleton. She will then give a reading of her poetry, which cuts across and illuminates a variety of innovative strategies. The late afternoon panel will be open to the public and will invite important figures from various aspects of the poetry world—archival, editorial, critical, and creative—to speculate on the future of poetry from their specific vantage points.


Friday, July 24, 2015
9:00-11:30  Faculty Lecture—“Diaspora in Contemporary Black Poetry and Poetics” with Maryemma Graham—and Discussion

The final lecture of the week will open the discussion of contemporary African American poetry to a consideration of broader geographical and cultural influences. Graham’s talk addresses the influence and configuration of other (non-U.S.) locations and cultures of the African diaspora within the work of “traditionally” African American poets, as well as those who are themselves immigrants to the U.S. Key figures would include C.S. Giscombe, Audre Lorde, Nathaniel Mackey, Ntozake Shange, Ishion Hutchinson, Allison Joseph and Kwame Dawes. Special attention will be given to the UK-based dub poetry movement, and its major poets Linton Kwesi Johnson and Benjamin Zephaniah.

1:00-4:00  (3) NEH Summer Scholar Group Presentations
6:00-8:30  Closing Dinner
