

EN986: Forms of African-American poetry

Dr David Grundy

(This module will run in term 2 of the 2019-2020 academic year)

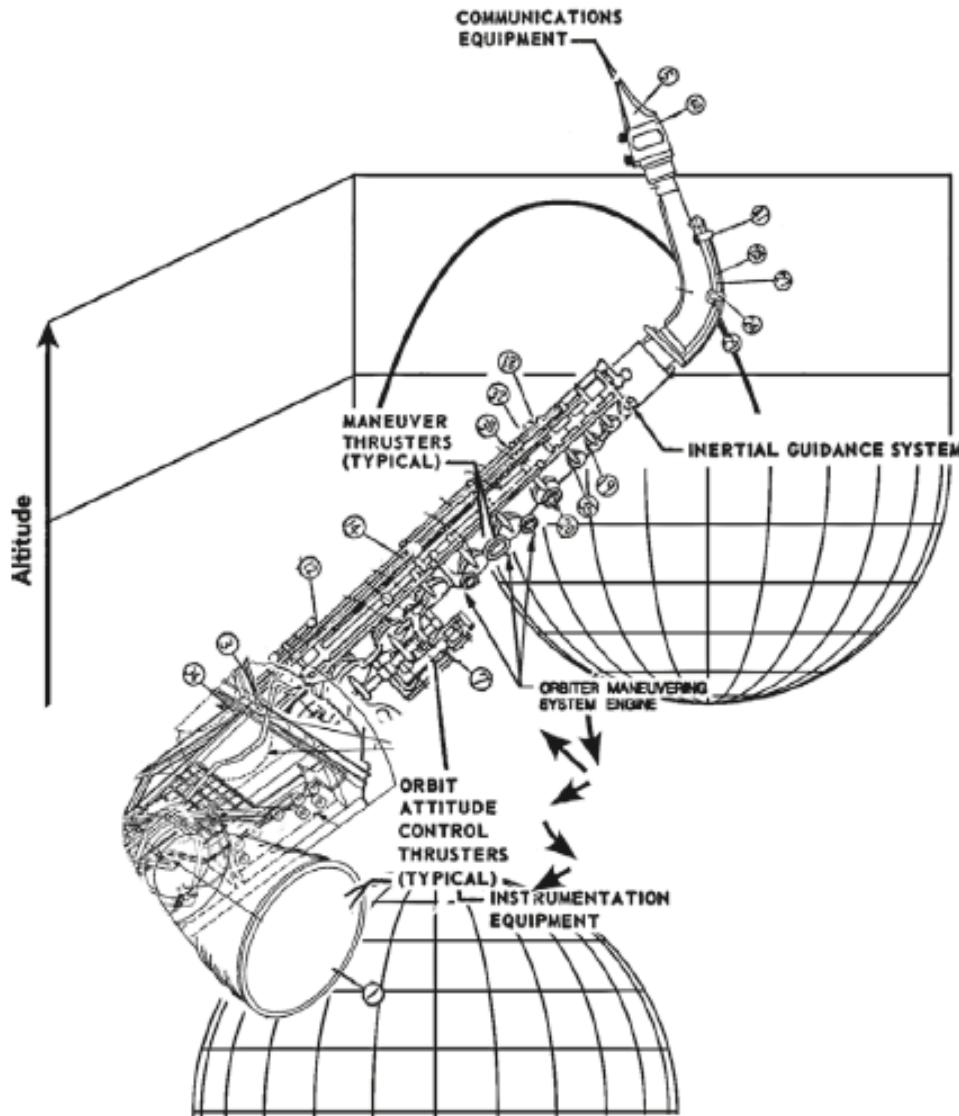


Image from Douglas Kearney, *over deluxe af* (2018)

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Weekly breakdown of reading, with brief introductions to that week's theme and suggestions for further reading.

Week 1 – Breath

Week 2 – Blues

Week 3 – Sonnets

Week 4 – Signifyin' and The Dozens

Week 5 – Prose Poems

Week 6 – The Coltrane Poem

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Week 8 – Experiments in Page and Sound

Week 9 – Hip-Hop: Roots

Week 10 – Hip-Hop: The Twenty-First Century

Secondary Reading 12

Some suggestions for secondary reading as a general introduction to the field.

Assignment 12

Information about the term's assignment: one 6,000 word essay.

General Introduction to Course

Reduced to simplification, distortion, or simply ignored, the forms of African-American poetry have not been well understood. By contrast, this course proposes that a study of those forms has much to tell us about past, present and [Future](#). Beginning with the breath (the fundament) and ending with contemporary hip-hop, this course covers some of these numerous forms, from sonnets to sound poetry, signifyin(g) to prose poems, the blues to free jazz, the dozens to trap, suggesting various through-lines that might enable us to move all the way from [Claude McKay](#) to [Migos](#). Through this, we'll address just some of the many debates throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries around, for example, the role of vernacular language, ebonics / AAVE, 'high' and 'low' speech, tradition and innovation, orality and literacy. Over these ten weeks, we'll look at (and listen to) poems that challenge conventional distinctions between the 'mainstream' and the 'avant-garde', the aesthetic and the political, the written and the spoken. This term's reading forms a sort of anthology of poetry, music and criticism, with the aim to provide a close focus on a relatively small selection of poems, rather than venturing across entire books. Much of this poetry is closely connected to music, and we'll do a good deal of *listening*, to both poetry and music, throughout: as well as set reading, each week also contains around an hour of audio material, provided via a youtube playlist. Please see this as of equal importance to the reading. Some of this poetry can be hard to obtain, and material will be circulated in advance. (A number of out-of-print texts are available at the ECLIPSE web archive, "a free on-line archive focusing on digital facsimiles of the most radical small-press writing from the last quarter century" – in particular, material relating to the Black Radical Tradition: <http://eclipsearchive.org/projects/>.)

Each week I'll get a number of you to give presentations (not assessed) on that session's material in order to initiate discussion. The course will be assessed by one 6,000 word essay at the end of term.

Finally, a **Content Warning:** Please be aware that some of the texts and audio we will be studying contain inflammatory language and material, including racial and sexual slurs.

Introduction to the Question of Form

In 1979, poet and activist Audre Lorde famously [stated that](#) "*the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.*" Ever since the 'official' birth of African-American poetry, often dated to the work of [Phillis Wheatley](#), Jupiter Hammon and others, who worked in the borrowed forms (or 'master's tools') of European poetry, this has been a vexed and important issue. While Wheatley and Hammon worked largely within the presuppositions, both formal and moral, that came with those tools, theirs was not the only poetic course to be taken. Consider the emergence of forms such as work songs, field hollers, blues, gospel and jazz, which often served as "survival codes" / "survival forms", allowing for the expression of defiance, mockery, humour, sorrow and survival. As 20th century poet Tom Weatherly [wrote](#): "*That's our poetry, our tradition, [...] and if you put it down, you put down most of what is good in American song lyric and poetry, and you put down most of the base I build on.*" Yet this tradition was not generally acknowledged as 'poetry' per se for quite some, and African-American poets from Wheatley two the present have often faced the twin dilemmas of either exclusion from or forced inclusion in a Eurocentric poetic tradition.

Eight years before Lorde's assertion, critic [Houston Baker](#) had suggested two tactics by which African-American poets had addressed precisely this problem: 'mastery of form' – in which forms associated with the dominant, white supremacist culture are mastered – and 'deformation of mastery', in which those forms are deformed in order to tear them down. Baker focuses on the Harlem Renaissance writers of the early 20th century, whose work emerged at a time of 'race riots' (white terrorism), migrations from South to North, and debates on class, race and national identity, and whose work sometimes underplayed, sometimes romanticised, and sometimes drew on the strength of Weatherly's other tradition. If the Harlem Renaissance writers on whom Baker focussed had adopted both responses, into the turbulent 1960s, as militant response to the terroristic violence of white supremacy increased, African American poets increasingly came to emphasize the second alternative (the deformation of mastery), alongside a reclamation that other tradition of "work songs, field hollers, gospels, and blues". The Black Power Movement found its parallel in the nationwide Black Arts Movement: what its leading architect Larry Neal described as Black Power's "*aesthetic and spiritual sister*". Within the Black Arts, debates about form, propaganda, poetry and politics grew ever stronger. In this climate, the question of poetry's usefulness and uses became paramount, and debates about form become more heated than ever. As Black Arts poet [Carolyn Rodgers](#) put it, poems had to be "*as useful as shoes or coats, indispensable to the body, mind and spirit*". What forms, then, might bring about mental and spiritual, perhaps even revolutionary social change? Into the 21st century these debates about form still continue. From Douglas Kearney and Julie Ezelle Patton's seriously playful refigurations of spirituals, to M.NourbeSe Philip's address to the traumas of the Middle Passage through erasures performed on centuries-old legal documents, to hip-hop, sound art and continuing experiments within the 'changing same', poets are still trying to answer Lorde's question.

...But that's a very truncated history, and thus, of necessity involves various distortions. As Elizabeth Alexander notes in her 2011 [Hopwood lecture](#) on 'Black Experimental Poetry', form is something that is almost always a matter of hindsight. What precisely is traditional and what is innovative, what is conventional and what is experimental are by no means fixed, for "*we name the experimental, as we name any quality, moment, school, or movement in literature, in large part from the vantage point of today.*" Given this, Alexander asks us to rethink the relation between such well-worn categories as 'tradition' and 'innovation', 'convention' and 'the avant-garde'. Alexander's leading questions require us to think of form in social as well as purely formal terms. What if the blues, the dozens and other vernacular forms, with their own sets of conventions, were just as, if not more radical than more obviously linguistically experimental works? Likewise, the flipside of the coin: reducing African American poetry to 'folklore', 'vernacular' or to forms such as the ballad and the sonnet makes the conjunction 'African American experimental writer' an impossibility – one which takes place alongside the ongoing canonisation of Modernism as an (almost always) white and (very often) male phenomenon, with African American experimental writers only ever present as an adjunct to the work already done by white experimenters. (Needless to say, white experimentalism consciously and unconsciously took inspiration from 'non-western' sources). We need to bear these considerations in mind when we think about form. What assumptions undergird our readings? What is our critical vantage point, and how might it have been shaped historically?

For pianist and poet Cecil Taylor, "*form is possibility*". Taylor's musico-poetic model proposes the "[Intake of forms](#) [from] generations old" through a "*cross fertilization of registers*", as a means of accessing "*secret dynamism [...] transposed heritage*". Likewise, Houston Baker argues that, "*the term 'form' [...] signals a symbolizing fluidity*": "*form does not exist as a static object*", but is rather "*a family of concepts or a momentary and changing same array of images, figures, assumptions and presumptions [held by] a group of people*"; "*a center for ritual [that] can only be defined [...] from the perspective of action, motion seen rather than "thing" observed*". Form here means process as much as object; improvisation, adaptation, paradox, the interplay of tradition and innovation, what poet, playwright, critic and activist Amiri Baraka called 'the changing same'. If, as Baraka puts it in a [later interview](#), form "*is dictated by the time, place and condition, like anything else*", studying form(s) can tell us something about aesthetics' entanglement in the matrix of material life, of lived experience, individual and collective, from which it emerges and which it in turn influences – what Taylor calls the "*total area*". Studying the forms of African American poetry doesn't just tell us something about aesthetics in the abstract. Instead, to learn about these 'survival forms' is to learn about the lives from which they emerged, and the ways in which disguise, mimicry, resistance, defiance, anger, revolution and hope found and find expression, continuance and life.

Course Outline

[Week 1] Breath.

We begin with the fundament: breath. All poetry begins here, just as all life begins here. But what does it mean to think of breath in relation to form: the forms of poetry, the forms of music, the forms of social life and [social death](#)? In 1971, the following exchange between interviewer Pearl Gonzalez and the legendary jazz pianist and composer Thelonious Monk appeared in *Downbeat* magazine.

[Gonzalez]: What other interests do you have?
 [Monk]: Life in general.
 [Gonzalez]: What do you do about it?
 [Monk]: Keep breathing.
 [Gonzalez]: What do you think the purpose of life is?
 [Monk]: To die.

More than simply a sarcastic response to a journalist's bland and by-rote question, Monk's typically gnomic statement can be read as an encapsulation of the condition of living in the face of anti-black violence, of the white supremacist forces that choke, restrain, muffle, smother and strangle. Our central text this week is Nathaniel Mackey's recent essay on breath and precarity, written in the midst of the recent upsurge of anti-black police violence and the counter-response of Black Lives Matter, of activism, of riots and fightback, but also of the so-called 'New American poetry' and the 'New Jazz' of the 1960s. Like Mackey, we'll consider Eric Garner's dying words, 'I can't breathe' alongside other forms of breathing and not breathing, in poetry, in music, and in living, as well a telling phrase from Martinican clinician and revolutionary theorist of decolonial revolution, Frantz Fanon. Fanon's description, in *A Dying Colonialism*, of "combat breathing" as the state of perpetual bodily and existential tension faced by the colonised is brought to bear on African-American poetic experimentalism by the great poet / playwright Ntozake Shange in our second main text for the week. Our principal sources are, paradoxically, prose essays, but as we'll see in the course as a whole, we cannot understand the forms of African American poetry without understanding those moments where form as form becomes difficult to talk about. It's precisely the overspillings of genre, of form – prose to poem, poem to song, song to piece of free jazz – that constitute our understanding of genre, of form. So in this opening week we'll also be doing a lot of listening, following Mackey's reflections on the use of breath in the work of (free) jazz saxophonists in particular and listening with him to the diverse work of Coleman Hawkins, Ben Webster, Sonny Rollins, Eric Dolphy, Roscoe Mitchell, and Archie Shepp.

Reading: Nathaniel Mackey, 'Breath and Precarity' and 'the overghost ourkestra's next', in *Poetics and Precarity*, eds. Myung Mi Kim and Cristanne Miller (SUNY Press, 2018); Ntozake Shange, 'Programme Note to Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo', in *See No Evil: Prefaces, Essays and Accounts, 1976-1983* (Momo's Press 1984); Frantz Fanon, trans. Haakon Chevalier 'Algeria Unveiled' in *A Dying Colonialism* (Monthly Review Press, 1959/1965).

Listening: Tracks by Ben Webster, Coleman Hawkins, Eric Dolphy, Archie Shepp, Sonny Rollins, Roscoe Mitchell, and Roland Kirk on the [Week 1 course playlist](#). In particular: Roland Kirk, 'Saxophone Concerto' from *Prepare Thyself to Deal with a Miracle* (1973); Roscoe Mitchell, '[No.1](#)', from *The Flow of Things* (1991), 'Chant' from *Wildflowers* (1976) and 'Nonaah' from *Nonaah* (1976) (compare and contrast Eric Dolphy's solo version of 'God Bless the Child'); Ben Webster's 'Tenderly' (compare and contrast Archie Shepp), Coleman Hawkins' 'Picasso' (compare and contrast the Hawkins / Sonny Rollins version of 'Lover Man' and the other tracks by Rollins).

Further reading: Ashton T. Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* (Fordham University Press, 2016); M.NBourse Philip, 'The Ga(s)p', in *Poetics and Precarity*; Amiri Baraka (as Johannes Koenig), 'Names and Bodies' in *The Floating Bear*, 24, 1962 ([available online](#) – pp.271-273), 'Charles Olson & Sun Ra: A Note on Being Out' ([lecture](#), 2017)'Hunting is not those heads on the wall', in *Home: Social Essays* (Akashic Press, 1966); Charles Olson, [Projective Verse](#) (1951) – published as a pamphlet by Baraka in 1959.

[Week 2] Blues

The Blues was (and perhaps still is) generally thought of as a musical rather than a poetic form, but Blues became central to the embrace of vernacular traditions as a legitimate source for poetic creation within the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. Between South and North, the chain gang and the ‘ghetto’, and across the great migrations of the era, the blues gave voice to individual joy, despair, isolation and the impulse to movement: but, importantly, the individual voice is one that always intersects with collective histories. Likewise, in its sung version, blues traverses the boundaries of a fixed and regular form with a rough-edged, improvisatory cry that pushes at the boundaries of conventional articulacy (useful here is poet Nathaniel Mackey’s [figuration](#) of ‘telling inarticulacy’). In this week’s exploration of the blues and of blues poetry, we’ll both read blues poems and listen to blues song. One thing that might be worth thinking about is this: what’s the difference between a sung blues and the blues written as a poem in a book of poetry? There’s much great critical work: I’d highly recommend the Angela Davis selected here, for its work on gender, politics and class; as well as Baraka’s pioneering *Blues People* for its historical scope and pitch-perfect characterisations of mood, context and formal development.

Reading: Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey lyrics (see also listening); Langston Hughes, poems from *The Weary Blues* (Knopf, 1926) and *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (Knopf, 1927); Sterling Brown, ‘Ma Rainey’ from *Southern Road* (Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1932); Etheridge Knight, ‘feeling fucked up’ (and see recording below), ‘con/tin/u/way/shun blues’ and ‘[Poem for Myself](#)’ from *The Essential Etheridge Knight* (1986); Pat Parker, ‘going to the bridge now’ from *The Complete Works of Pat Parker* (A Midsummer Night’s Press, 2016)

Listening: Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, Virginia Liston, Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown, [Tom Weatherly](#), and Etheridge Knight on the [Week 2 course playlist](#). Note in particular Liston’s line “laughing to keep from crying”, famously used by Hughes to characterise the blues.

Criticism: Angela Davis, from *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (Vintage, 1999); Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), from *Blues People* (William Morrow, 1963)

Further Reading: Amiri Baraka, ‘Leadbelly Gives an Autograph’, in *The Dead lecturer* (Grove Press, 1964); Kevin Young (ed.), *Blues Poems* (Random House, 2003) and ‘It Don’t Mean a Thing: The Blues Mask of Modernism’, in *The Grey Album: On the Blackness of Blackness* (Graywolf Press, 2012); Lorenzo Thomas, *Don’t Deny My Name: Words and Music and the Black Intellectual Tradition* (University of Michigan Press, 2008); Ralph Ellison, ‘[Richard Wright’s Blues](#)’ (1945), Farah Jasmine Griffin, “Who Set You Flowin’?”: *The African-American Migration Narrative Race and American Culture* (Oxford University Press, 1996)

[Week 3] Sonnets

The sonnet might in some ways be the emblem of poetic form *qua* poetic form: conventional, classical, bolstered by long tradition, associated with matters of the heart, not obviously political, “the highest formal expression of lyrical poetry”...Such a reading, in any case, might be prevalent in a certain kind of formalism. But it would be entirely inaccurate. As several commentators have noted, sonnets began as a dialogic form: “an invitation to converse”, a “single voice launching an appeal to a chorus of voices” designed to be read with other compositions in a larger context, rather than in lyric isolation. Sonnets, then were never simply self-contained entities, and their subjects were never simply ‘personal’ (insofar as the personal is always political). During the Harlem Renaissance period, various writers experimented with the sonnet. Most notably, Claude McKay’s ‘If We Must Die’ served as an anthem of self-defense in the 1919 ‘Red Summer’ during which, in the wake of the first world war, white mobs launched a furious assault on black communities, and was famously found in the pockets of one of the prison martyrs of the 1971 Attica prison uprising in the era of Black Power. Yet it was also invoked, decontextualized, by Winston Churchill (himself no stranger to racism) in the second world war, and its references are fairly non-specific. McKay’s poem prompts those questions of ‘mastery of form’ and ‘deformation of mastery’ introduced earlier: can a form taken from European and classical tradition be renewed, revitalised, or even destroyed form within by the African American poet? In our selection for this week, we’ll think about the different qualities of writers by different

sonnets, the different uses to which they put what turns out to be a surprisingly flexible form. As well as McKay, we'll look at Gwendolyn Brooks' sonnet sequences, written in the wake of another world war and its costs, the bitter ironies of the returning soldier, and the continuing depredations faced by those in under-privileged urban communities. Brooks' sonnets force us to think of this extension, and in themselves chafe at the self-imposed constraints of their traditional form. Brooks' urban settings sit alongside those of Lorenzo Thomas a few decades later; and McKay's concerns with violence, racism, and forbidden love bring us through to Wanda Coleman's biting and incisive revisions in the era of Reagan, and Terrance Hayes' recent revisions of Coleman's revisions in the era of Trump.

Reading: Claude McKay, 'If We Must Die', 'Outcast', 'The Lynching', ['Tiger'] from *Harlem Shadows* (1922); Gwendolyn Brooks, 'Gay Chaps At The Bar' and 'The Children Of The Poor' from *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945) and *Annie Allen* (1949), in *Blacks* (Third World Press, 1987); Lorenzo Thomas, 'MMDCXIII ½' from *The Bathers* (I. Reed Books, 1981); Wanda Coleman, from *American Sonnets* (Membrane Press, 1994); Terrance Hayes, from *American Sonnets for my Past and Future Assassin* (Penguin, 2018).

Listening (shorter this week): Claude McKay, Gwendolyn Brooks, Wanda Coleman, Terrance Hayes (and Harryette Mullen) on the [Week 3 Course Playlist](#).

Criticism: Elizabeth Alexander, 'New Ideas about Black Experimental Poetry' (2011 Hopwood Lecture) – Section 4: "again wild"); Antonella Francini, 'Sonnet vs. Sonnet: The Fourteen Lines in African American Poetry', *RSA Journal* 14 (2003).

Further reading: Timo Müller, *The African American Sonnet: A Literary History* (University of Minnesota Press, 2018)

[Week 4] Signifyin' and The Dozens

From the classical orientations implied by the sonnet in last week's class to the oral tradition of street speech, of verbal games, jousting, boasting, competition, this week focuses on traditions of signifying: larger than life stories which push obscenity, scatology and offense to a humorous limit such as the 'Signifying Monkey', the Dozens (a radical extension of the 'your mama' joke) and the story of 'Shine', the legendary African-American sailor said to be the only survivor of the Titanic. Signifying is a hard word to define. Poet, novelist and painter Clarence Major's useful dictionary of African-American slang, *Juba to Jive*, provides no less than three separate definitions: "to berate someone; negative talk; using irony"; "to censure in twelve or fewer statements; to goad; to harass; to show off"; "performance talk". One example of particular importance is that of the dozens, or 'dirty dozens', which Major defines as: "A very elaborate verbal rhyming game traditionally played by black boys, in which the participants insult each other's relatives – in twelve censures – especially their moushers. The object of the game is to test emotional strength. The first person to give in to anger is the loser [...] 'Dirty dozens' is an indigenous verbal folk game". A classic example is found in the excerpt from political activist H. Rap Brown's autobiography *Die N***** Die!*, as well as in the listening for the week – including Rudy Ray Moore, Johnny Brooks and a hip-hop update in Schoolly D's 'Signifying Rapper'. An ambiguous mode of group formation and identification, the dozens – previously a kind of poetry mainly found on the street, rather than in the pages of 'literary' works – found its way into those literary works, as the New Black Poets of the 1960s and 1970s embraced the vernacular, the vulgar, and the joyful aggressions of 'street speech', often using them for political purposes. There were precedents: as ever, Langston Hughes being one. Hughes' Simple (or Semple) stories, focussing on the street-smart, ironic Jesse B. Simple, form an earlier example of such work, as does his later, much-neglected poetry collection *Ask Your Mama: Twelve Moods for Jazz*. In the work of key Black Arts theorist Larry Neal, the dozens and other forms of signifying such as street graffiti and the Shine rhyme become key articulations of a new aesthetic: bold, defiant examples of resistance, defiance, and the strength of individual and group will. Neal's essay 'And Shine Swam On' uses Shine as a figure for what the new Black Art might do, and his own poems make much use of Shine. Likewise the work of Etheridge Knight and Amiri Baraka's own takes on the dozens (directed at then-president Lyndon B. Johnson).

A good twenty years later, Henry Louis ('Skip') Gates wrote *The Signifying Monkey*, an influential combination of then-fashionable post-structuralism and the African American written and oral tradition on which Neal, Baraka, Knight and Hughes had all drawn. Gates' coinage signifyin(g) ingeniously

combines the vernacular sense of signifyin', as defined by Major, with linguist Ferdinand de Saussure's distinction between the 'signifier' (the word used to indicate something) and the 'signified' (that which is indicated) to coin signifyin(g). The silent, bracketed 'g' in Gates' formulation – the sign that marks the fusion of the word's two senses – is indicative of his concept: a wordplay that uses indirect verbal strategies to exploit the gap between literal and figurative meanings of words. For Gates, signifyin(g) marked one of the ways that African Americans have resisted white interpellation and violence through humorous inversion and invention: something like pastiche, but not pastiche, like parody, but not parody, a term whose lack of precise definition is part of its strength. Since its publication, Gates' signifyin(g) has become so ubiquitous within literary criticism of African American writing that it can seem to signify almost anything in itself, but his essay still repays attention. Finally, it's worth noting the complex gender politics surrounding signifying. Often yoked to a masculine aesthetic in Black Arts writing, a useful corrective is provided in June Jordan's poem, which gets to the heart of some of the complex questions of gender, misogyny and suffering that intertwine with the joy, wit and flamboyance of these forms: likewise Robin D.G. Kelley's essay, provided in the critical reading.

Reading: Langston Hughes 'New Kind of Dozens' from *Simple Stakes a Claim* (Rinehart & Company, 1957 – originally in *Chicago Defender*, 1955); [Ask Your Mama: Twelve Moods for Jazz](#) (Knopf, 1961); H. Rap Brown, from *Die N**** Die! The Autobiography of H. Rap Brown* (Dial Press, 1969); Amiri Baraka, 'Word from the Right Wing', 'TT Jackson Sings', from *Black Magic* (William Morrow, 1969); June Jordan, 'Getting Down to Get Over (Dedicated To My Mother)' (1972) from *Directed by Desire: The Complete Poems of June Jordan* (Copper Canyon Press, 2005); Etheridge Knight, 'Dark Prophecy: [I Sing of Shine](#)', from *The Essential Etheridge Knight* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1986); Larry Neal, 'Negliphcs' from *Black Boogaloo* (Journal of Black Poetry Press, 1969) and 'Shine' poems from *Hoodoo Hollerin' Bebop Ghosts* (Howard University Press, 1974).

Listening: Speckled Red (dozens); Rudy Ray Moore and Johny Brooks (Signifying Monkey); Schoolly D (Signifying Rapper); Rudy Ray Moore (Shine) (and compare Leadbelly's 'The Titanic' and Etheridge Knight, 'I Sing of Shine'), on the [Week 4 Course playlist](#).

Criticism: Henry Louis Gates, from *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* (Oxford University Press 1988); Robin Kelley, 'Looking for the "Real" Nigga: Social Scientists Construct the Ghetto' in *Yo' Mama's Disfunctional!: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* (Beacon Press, 1997); Larry Neal, 'And Shine Swam On' (1968), from *Visions of a Liberated Future: Black Arts movement Writings* (Thunder's Mouth Press, 1988)

Further Reading: Zora Neale Hurston, '[Characteristics of Negro Expression](#)' (1934); Richard Wright, 'The Literature Of The Negro In The United States', in *White Man, Listen!* (Doubleday, 1957); Claudia Mitchell-Kernan, 'Signifying, Loud-Talking and Marking' (1972), in Gena Dagel Caponi (ed.), *Signifyin(g), Sanctifyin', and Slam Dunking* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1999).

[Week 5] Prose Poems

In its simplest form, a prose poem can be defined as poetry with no line breaks. Instead of stanzas, paragraphs; instead of enjambment, the sentence unit. Prose poetry has in general been associated with Modernist experimentation, as poets pushed at the boundaries of what could be considered poetry at all. And, as Modernism, with its capital M, is too often understood as almost solely the realm of (straight) (white) men, so it's white modernist poets who are often credited with their innovations in the prose poem: from Baudelaire and Rimbaud in the 19th century to Gertrude Stein or John Ashbery in the twentieth. Meanwhile, as we've seen, in the eyes of white observers, black poets were restricted to either 'dialect verse' (damned with a faint, condescending praise that paid no attention to the actually subtlety, beauty and strength of 'folk forms' such as the blues) or to imitations of classical European forms. As a result, the African-American prose poem has gone almost completely neglected, and recovering it might help us tell a very different story, both of African-American poetry in all its diverse richness (formal, spiritual, political), and of the prose poem itself. The prose poems thus forms an important testing point for our observations as a whole on poetry and form. We'll also bear in mind Elizabeth Alexander's astute observations, cited earlier, of the relation between experimentation and tradition in African-American poetry, asking: just how 'modern' (or modernist) are these forms? What's their relation to dialect? To speech? The first selections (Fenton Johnson, Jean Toomer and Margaret Walker) in the main concern the American South, one possible source of reflection; the latter, Harryette

Mullen and Claudia Rankine emerge from different contexts as we move towards and into the twenty-first century. Mullen engages with the apparently opposed influences of the popular oral tradition (blues, dozens, jazz, rap) and the dense verbal experimentation of Gertrude Stein, while Rankine writes on micro-aggression and anti-black violence in the 21st century, using the often-noted device of the ‘lyric you’ that is both writer and reader(s) simultaneously.

Reading: Fenton Johnson, ‘[Tired](#)’, *Others*, 1919 (and frequently anthologized); Jean Toomer, Selections from [Cane](#) (Liveright, 1923); Margaret Walker, ‘For My People, ‘Southern Song’, ‘Today’, from *This is My Century: New and Collected Poems* (University of Georgia Press, 1989); Harryette Mullen, from *Recyclopedia* (Graywolf Press, 2006); Claudia Rankine, from *Citizen* (Graywolf Press,)

Listening: Recordings by Margaret Walker, Harryette Mullen and Claudia Rankine; Marion Brown, ‘Karintha’, from *Geechee Reccollections* (1973) and Gil Scott-Heron, ‘Cane’ (1978) (tracks inspired by Toomer). Available in the [Week 5 Playlist](#).

Criticism: Aldon Lynn Nielsen, ‘Black Margins: African-American Prose Poems’, in *Reading Race: An Arena of Act* (2000)

Further Reading: Stephen Jonas, ‘What Made Maud Hum’, in *Arcana* (City Lights, 2019); Ishmael Reed, ‘The Ghost in Birmingham’, in *Conjure* (University of Massachusetts Press, 1972); Lorenzo Thomas, ‘Hat Red’, in *Chances are Few* (Blue Wind Press, 1979); N.J. Loftis, *Black Anima* (Liveright, 1973); Bob Kaufman, [Abomunist Manifesto](#) (1951); Robert T. Kerlin, ‘The New Forms of Poetry: Prose Poems’, from [Negro Poets And Their Poems](#) (Associated Publishers, 1923) – provides a suggestive early survey of African-American prose poems, despite their continuing, almost universal neglect in surveys of the prose poem in general.

[Week 6] The Coltrane Poem

Much of the new, Black Arts poetry that emerged in the 1960s consisted of tribute poems to elders, figures of political or aesthetic inspiration, and those who had recently passed on, whether at the hands of white supremacists, internal dissent within black radical groups (often spread by the former), or from natural causes: popular figures included Langston Hughes, Billie Holiday, and Malcolm X. This week focuses on what Kimberly Benston has analysed as a genre (or form) in its own right: poems dedicated to saxophonist John Coltrane, who, having conquered addiction problems in the late 1950s, rose to prominence as perhaps *the figure of the New (Free) Jazz* of the 1960s until his tragically early death in 1967. We’ll place Benston’s important analysis alongside Coltrane poems by AB Spellman, Jayne Cortez, Haki Madhubuti, Tom Weatherly and Amiri Baraka, as well as listening to the soundings of these poems and to Coltrane’s work itself, a selection of which is provided in the course playlist. Particularly important here is Coltrane’s turn towards freer playing around 1965 (i.e. less tied to the rhythmic and harmonic conventions of previous forms of jazz, such as ‘chord changes’, walking bass, or regular time signatures, focusing instead on atonality, polyrhythms, multi-instrumentalism and the use of extended techniques). This direction is cemented by the astonishing big-band recording session *Ascension* (with liner notes by critic & poet A.B. Spellman). Coltrane’s influence also extends to the musicians and poets we’ll look at next week.

Reading: A.B. Spellman, ‘John Coltrane: an impartial review’ (1965), ‘Did John’s Music Kill Him?’ (1969) from Aldon Nielsen & Lauri Ramey (eds.), *Every Goodbye Ain’t Gone* (University of Alabama Press, 2006); Jayne Cortez, ‘How Long Has Trane Been Gone’ (1968), Don L. Lee (Haki Madhubuti), ‘Don’t Cry, Scream’ (1969), Sonia Sanchez, ‘a/Coltrane/poem’ (1972), all in appendix to Benston (below); Tom Weatherly, ‘the yellow brick road (for trane)’, from [Mau Mau American Cantos](#) (1971); Amiri Baraka, ['AM/TRAK](#) (Nadja Editions, 1979) (and [recording with Air](#)).

Listening: Recordings by Baraka, Cortez (from *Celebration and Solitudes*, with bassist Richard Davis, 1974), Sanchez, Madhubuti, music by John Coltrane: see [Week 6 playlist](#).

Criticism: Kimberley Benston, ‘Renovating Blackness: Remembrance and Revolution in the Coltrane Poem’, in *Performing Blackness: Enactments of African-American Modernism* (Routledge, 2000); Sascha Feinstein, ‘From ‘Alabama’ to A Love Supreme: The Evolution of the John Coltrane Poem’ (*Southern Review*, Vol.32, Issue 2, Spring 1996).

Further Reading: Bill Cole, *John Coltrane* (Da Capo Press, 1976); Askia Touré, ‘Juju: for John Coltrane, Priest-prophet / of the Black Nation’ (1970) and Amus Mor, ‘The Coming of John’ (1969), in Sasha Feinstein and Yusef Komunyaka (eds.), *The Second Set: The Jazz Poetry Anthology* (Indiana University press, 1997).

[Week 7] Free Jazz Poetics

In the wake of our Coltrane week, we extend considerations of the sonics of African-American poetry through the work of free jazz musicians who were also poets. The difficult and seemingly abstract work of Cecil Taylor finds expression in both his albums and the poems which were often published as their liner notes. Taylor’s ‘unit structures’ are at once a system of ethics, aesthetics, politics and musicology which exist in ‘adjunct’ relation to his music. The liner notes poems to *Unit Structures* think about form, about loss and violence, restriction and freedom, while those to *Embraced*, his controversial collaboration with undersung bebop pioneer Mary Lou Williams tackle the problems of innovation and tradition, of the apparent discord between earlier forms of African-American culture and the often abrasive’ new jazz’. Meanwhile, *Chinampas*, Taylor’s own recording devoted exclusively to his own poetry, moves into the realm of sound poetry (more on this next week), as Taylor tackles Aztec and Haiti / West African voodoo ritual practice. We’ll also examine the reflections on urban life in the work of Joseph Jarman of the Art Ensemble of Chicago, and the dramatic recitations of Archie Shepp and his collaborator Jeanne Lee, and use these to once more think about boundaries between genres, disciplines. For some useful context on free jazz in general, see the further reading: though less on free jazz’s interplay with poetry per se, there’s a lot of excellent criticism out there.

Reading / Listening: Cecil Taylor, *Unit Structures* (Blue Note, 1966) and *Embraced* (Pablo, 1978, with Mary Lou Williams) – music and liner notes; Taylor, *Chinampas* (Leo Records, 1987); Joseph Jarman, ‘Non-Cognitive Aspects of the City’ (text in [Black Case, Volume I & II: Return from Exile](#) (Art Ensemble of Chicago Publishing, 1977) and Nielsen / Ramey, *Every Goodbye* (2006); music and recitation on *Song For* (Delmark, 1966)); Archie Shepp, ‘The Wedding’, from *Live in San Francisco* (Impulse, 1966) and ‘Mama Rose’ from *Poem for Malcolm* (BYG / Actuel, 1969); Jeanne Lee (with Shepp), ‘Blasé’ (BYG / Actuel, 1969) and *Conspiracy* (Earthforms Records, 1974).

Listening: Taylor, Jarman, Shepp, Lee as per above, on the [Week 7 course playlist](#), with additional tracks by Shepp (with poet Ted Joans at the Pan-African Festival in Algiers) and the Art Ensemble of Chicago.

Criticism: Aldon Nielsen, ‘Other Planes of There’, from *Black Chant: Languages of African-American Post-Modernism* (Cambridge University Press, 1997).

Further Reading: Ekkehard Jost, *Free Jazz* (Da Capo press, 1974 – useful technical discussion of free jazz as a music); George E. Lewis, *A Power Stronger than Itself* (University of Chicago Press, 2007, excellent background on Chicago free jazz – see also this recent [Chicago Review feature](#)); John Litweiler, *The Freedom Principle* (Da Capo Press, 1984); Amiri Baraka, *Black Music* (William Morrow, 1967 – polemical but important, with a Black Nationalist slant); A.B. Spellman, *Four Lives In The Bebop Business* (Pantheon Books, 1966 – very useful for understanding the socio-economic background to the music, including an excellent interview with Cecil Taylor); Valerie Wilmer, *As Serious as Your Life* (Serpent’s Tail, 1992 revised reissue (originally 1977)– still perhaps the book on free jazz).

[Week 8] Experiments in Page and Sound

We’ve already seen in our work on Coltrane, on free jazz poetics and the prose poem, how formal experimentation in music was reflected in poetics, as new forms were created and old ones extended. But the work this week takes things further even than these works: into the realms of concrete and sound poetry, to work that proposes radical new directions in which poetry might move beyond language itself. Poet N.H. Pritchard wrote: “Words are ancillary to content”. In other words, they support them. But this formulation opens up a potentially dizzying vortex, in which the ‘content’ of a word moves away from its form, so that expression might not even be linguistic. Echoes, perhaps, of Henry Louis Gates’ signifyin(g) and its uniting of vernacular practice with Saussurian scepticism from Week 4. This moves us towards the question usefully asked by Elizabeth Alexander: “What genealogy can we think about that doesn’t trace contemporary black experimental poetry only and inevitably to [...] sources for white language and experimental poets?” Or to think of it another way: how have

African American writers and their audiences reacted to experimentalism? Are the experimental and the political opposites, or, in fact, does the one further the other? This week's material includes poetry by two poets associated with the Umbra Poets' Workshop, N.H. Pritchard, a concrete / sound poet whose 'transrealism' raises all sorts of interesting questions on spirit, matter, race, page, space; and Lloyd Addison, whose 'After MLK' reflects on the death of Martin Luther King through an array of puns and scientific metaphors. Alongside them are Russell Atkins, a Cleveland-based composer and poet whose own experiments with what he called 'psychovisualism' date back to the 1950s: Atkins, Julia Fields, and, more recently Douglas Kearney and Julie Ezelle Patton all ring experimental changes on the watery legacy of the Middle Passage, including the spirituals 'Didn't It Rain' and 'Wade in the Water', provided on the playlist for comparison in versions by Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Paul Robeson, Mahalia Jackson and others. M.NourbeSe Philip's *Zong* yet more explicitly deals with the Middle Passage, addressed through taking court records of a particularly heinous incident from the slave trade and subjecting them to processes of (un)voiced and (un)written erasure that takes particularly effective form in Philip's often collective, ritualistic live performances of the work; further consideration in that regard could be provided by Matana Roberts' album *Coin Coin: River Run Thee*, which samples voice, text and melody, blending the technologies of 'sound art' (field recordings, electronic sound) with the older signifiers of the saxophone (itself a transplanted instrument of technology, adapted from Adolphe Sax's marching band design to music of a very different intent), the voice, hymn tunes and the broken rumours of the horrors of slavery.

Reading: N.H. Pritchard, Poems from *The Matrix* (Doubleday, 1970) and other poems on *Eclipse*; Lloyd Addison, 'After MLK: The Marksman Marked Left-Over Kill', from *The Aura and the Umbra* (Paul Breman, 1970); Russel Atkins, poems from *Here in The* (Cleveland State University Poetry Center, 1976) and *spyrtnal* (7 Flowers Press, 1966; Julie Ezelle Patton, 'When the Saints Go', from Nielsen/Ramey, *What I Say*; Douglas Kearney, 'Swimchant for N**** Mer-Folk (An Aquaboogie Set in Lapis)', 'Black Automaton' and 'Floodsong' poems in *The Black Automaton* (Fence Books, 2009); Julia Fields, 'Shuffled' and 'When That Which Is Perfect If Come (Or, On The Neutron Bomb')', in *Slow Coins: New Poems (and some Old Ones)* (Three cointents Pres 1981); M. NourbeSe Philip, from *Zong* (Wesleyan University Press, 2008)

Listening: Recordings of Pritchard, Atkins, Patton, Kearney and Philip on the [Week 8 playlist](#). You might also want to think about water/spirituals/the Middle Passage in relation to these poets via the recordings of spirituals ('Wade in the Water' and 'Didn't it Rain') by Mahalia Jackson, Sister Rosetta Tharpe and Paul Robeson; and the more experimental sound art of Matana Roberts. Julius Eastman also in the mix: perhaps some congruence in terms of repetition, reclamation, experimentation.

Criticism: Anthony Reed, from *Freedom Time: The Poetics and Politics of Black Experimental Writing* (JHU Press, 2014); Paul Stephens, '[The transrealism of Norman Pritchard](#)' (Jacket 2, 2019)

Further Reading: Kevin Young, 'Signs of Repression: N.H. Pritchard's *The Matrix*' (*Harvard Library Bulletin* 3.2, 1992); Philip, 'Notanda' from *Zong* (lengthy essay about the composition of the poem included as an appendix to the book). Useful secondary reading on Russell Atkins is available in a volume of the Unsung Masters series, *Russell Atkins: On The Life and Work of an American Master*, eds. Kevin Prufer and Michael Dumanis (Pleiades press, 2013), which combines essays and poems by Atkins with a range of useful criticism

[Week 9] Hip-Hop: Roots.

This week we'll be focusing almost exclusively on listening, and thinking about the ways in which poetry transplanted itself from and into an oral medium, with tracks often cited as the roots of hip-hop from the likes of Gil Scott-Heron and The Last Poets. We see here how the politicised concerns of the Black Arts Movement writers such as Baraka and Larry Neal intersect with those kinds of oral rhyming practices addressed in week 4. It's not far from Rudy Ray Moore and Johnny Brooks to Lightnin' Rod and Gylan Kain, and thence to the classic, and more familiar tropes of hip-hop; likewise for the Black Arts poets recording with music (Baraka, Giovanni, Fabio) or for the groups which we'd probably now call 'spoken word' whose polemical poems gained an increasing rhythmic emphasis through their accompaniment with a stripped-back drum backing: The Last Poets, The Watts Prophets (whose album title, *Rapping Black in a White World*, indeed marked perhaps the first usage of the term 'rap' in its modern sense) and, most famously, Gil Scott-Heron. Things to reflect on here: how does form manifest itself when it's heard and not seen, listened to and not read? What are the similarities and

differences between this week's tracks and the contemporary hip-hop with which many of you may be familiar? How does this material compare to the earlier use of blues and 'folk' material by poets such as Langston Hughes? And how does looking at work like this help us to make a bridge between the historical literary / musical forms of the Harlem Renaissance and Black Arts eras of the earlier twentieth century and our present climate: the world of hip-hop, trap music, mumble rap and the digital, globalised era (to be looked at next week)?

The tracks this week are aural and available on the [Week 9 playlist](#).

Reading / Listening: Charles Mingus, 'Freedom' from *Mingus x 5* (Impulse, 1961); Amiri Baraka, from *It's Nation Time* (Black Forum, 1972); Nikki Giovanni (with the New York Community Choir), 'Ego-Tripping', from *Truth Is On Its Way* (Right-On Records, 1971); Sarah Webster Fabio, from *Jujus: Alchemy of the Blues* (Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, 1975); The Last Poets, from *The Last Poets* (Douglas, 1970); Gil Scott-Heron, *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox* (Flying Dutchman, 1971); The Watts Prophets, from *Rappin' Black in a White World* (ALA Records, 1971); Gylan Kain, *The Blue Guerilla* (Juggernaut Records, 1970 – sampled by KMD); Lightnin' Rod, *Hustler's Convention* (United Artists Records, 1973 and later version by Grandmaster Melle Mel and the Furious Five).

Criticism: Imani Perry, from *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop* (Duke University Press, 2004)

[Week 10] Hip-Hop: The 21st Century

Moving into the twenty-first century, in this final week we'll be looking at some pieces which riff off Gwendolyn Brooks' iconic 'We Real Cool', transplanting it to the present day, by poet Quenton Baker and rapper Mick Jenkins; and excerpts from Simone White's recent book-length prose-poem-essay *Dear Angel of Death*, which, informed by recent thinking of anti-blackness and social death (Afro-Pessimism, Black Lives Matter, police violence) and the emergence of trap music, meditates on embodiment, fungibility and the ecstatic nihilism of rappers like Future. In an era which has seen not only the first black president but, in Ta Nehisi-Coates' words, the 'first white president' in immediate succession, White meditates on rappers Future and Vince Staples' uneasy negotiation between hedonism and nihilism, between the trap house and the White House, the lumpen / 'bad' and the 'boujee'. Critic Simon Reynolds has argued that Future's use of autotuned revamps and rejuvenates the blues impulse, "reinvent[ing] the blues for the 21st century", as technology paradoxically provides a way into the human grain of the (de)humanised voice, the cry that chafes against its limits, the formlessness against form. Politics is here too, of course, as the focus on the acquisition of wealth, on drug dealing and material attainment, combined with the insistence on 'keeping it real', on the realities of urban experience in the face of gang and police violence, simultaneously seems to glorify and laments the conditions of its making. Richard Majors' and Janet Billson's influential coinage 'the cool pose' might be helpful here. As per last week's class, we might ask: what similar and differing attitudes can we trace to the earlier uses of 'folk' or 'street' speech practices? What does it mean to think of hip-hop as poetry? For different takes on the melancholy and malaise of individual struggles with addiction, politics, mental health and grief, we turn to Earl Sweatshirt's near-wordless 'solace' and his engagement with maternity, fathers, lineage and memory in the experimental video 'Nowhere Nobody' (Sweatshirt's father was South African Black Arts poet 'Bra Willie', Keorapetse Kgositsile; Sweatshirt's grandmother passed away shortly before 'solace' and his father shortly before 'Nowhere Nobody'). Meanwhile, the album by poet / musician Moor Mother – who has also collaborated with the Art Ensemble of Chicago, featured in Week 7 – links the experimentalism of Week 8 with the sounds of contemporary hip-hop in powerful and sometimes jarring meditations on anti-black violence, memory and pain.

Reading: Simone White, from *Dear Angel of Death* (Ugly Duckling Presse, 2018); Quenton Baker, 'Transient (2)' from *This Glittering Republic* (Willow Books, 2016)

Listening: Tracks on [Week 10 course playlist](#). Mick Jenkins, 'Gwendolyn's Apprehension', from *Pieces of a Man* (2018) (with reference to Gwendolyn Brooks, 'We Real Cool'); Earl Sweatshirt, *Nowhere Nobody* (video, 2018), *Solace EP* (2015); Future, 'I Serve the Base', from *DS2* (2015); Moor Mother (Camae Aweya), *Fetish Bones* (2019); Vince Staples, 'Blue Suede' from *Hell Can Wait EP* (2014), 'norf norf' from *Summertime '06* (20); also TI (for the origin of trap), Migos, 'Bad and Boujee', 21 Savage, and more Future.

Further Reading: Simone White interviews Vince Staples, [BOMB magazine](#) (2016); D. Scott Miller, '[Afrosurreal Manifesto'](#) (2009); Richard Majors and Janet Billson, *The Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America* (Simon and Schuster, 1993).

Secondary Reading

Elizabeth Alexander's essay 'New Ideas about Black Experimental Poetry' ([The Hopwood Lecture](#), 2011) is an extremely useful introduction to some of the central questions we'll be addressing, and has interesting close readings / case studies of texts : on sonnets, particularly those of Gwendolyn Brooks (on the reading for week 3), on Langston Hughes' *Ask Your Mama* (on the reading for week 4) and on the prose poetry of Fenton Johnson and Jean Toomer (on the reading for week 5). Stephen Henderson's *Understanding the New Black Poetry* was an absolutely crucial book when published in the early 1970s; it contains an exhaustive analysis of different categories and forms of African-American poetry, as well as an extensive example of poems themselves. Aldon Nielsen's *Black Chant*, published in the 1990s, was again pioneering, providing a useful challenge to the orality / literary binary which had dominated a lot of debates about form in African-American since the 1960s in particular, as well as to literary histories which denied the presence of African-American experimental / avant-garde writing. I'd recommend reading the whole book, but we'll be consulting chapters from it in our weekly reading. Evie Shockley's *Renegade Poetics* takes things up to the present, with some useful reflections on post-Black Arts Movement writings such as those of Harryette Mullen, who we'll be looking at in Week 5. Finally, two crucial anthologies: *Every Goodbye Ain't Gone* and *What I Say*, both co-edited by Aldon Nielsen and Lauri Ramey, the first collecting experimental writing by black writers during the mid-century period, the second taking things up to the present day. Many of the poets who feature in this course also feature in these anthologies.

This all merely scratches the surface, but is a good way of navigating the field.

Stephen Evangelist Henderson, *Understanding the New Black Poetry* (William Morrow, 1973)
 Aldon Lynn Nielsen, *Black Chant: Languages of African-American Post-Modernism* (Cambridge University Press, 1997)
 Aldon Lynn Nielsen and Lauri Ramey (eds.), *Every Goodbye Ain't Gone: An Anthology of Innovative Poetry by African Americans* and *What I Say: Innovative Writing by Black Writers in America* (University of Alabama Press, 2009 and 2015)
 Lauri Ramey, *A History of African American Poetry* (Cambridge University press, 2019)
 Evie Shockley, *Renegade Poetics: Black Aesthetics and Formal Innovation in African American Poetry* (University of Iowa press, 2011)
 Sylvia Wynter, 'Ethno or Socio Poetics' (*Alcheringa, New Series*, Vol.2, no. 2 1976)

Course Assignment

One essay, due in Week 11: 6,000 words.

For your essays, you may write about the material from any of the weeks of the course. You may find it easiest to concentrate on the creative and critical material that we've focused on in particular weeks, but you are also free to bring in relevant texts from the secondary reading or from elsewhere that you've discussed over the course of your reading. You'll come up with your own topic and question, but you are entitled to one meeting with me to discuss the essay.

When thinking about your essays, it might help to bear in the mind the following comments from scholar and critic Barbara Christian:

So my 'method', to use a new 'lit. crit.' word, is not fixed but relates to what I read and to the historical context of the writers I read *and* to the many critical activities in which I am engaged, which may or may not involve writing. It is a learning from the language of creative writers, which is one of surprise, so that I might discover what language I might use. For my language is based very much on what I read and what affects me, that is, on the surprise that comes from reading something that compels you to read differently, as I believe literature does. I therefore have no set method [...] since for me every work suggests a new approach.

('The Race for Theory', 1987)