

I want you to take this self-righteous poem, soak it in this bedpan of crude oil, and shove it down your pleading, screaming throat.

Now get the hood back on.

In these ferocious lines, as throughout *Homage to the Last Avant-Garde*, one hears the voice of Whitman transplanted into the national security state: the self now dispersed, furtive, anguished, mocking, at times sadistically cruel. It is not an easy voice to attend to, but even in the springtime called Obama, it remains indispensable.

John Beer

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*The Oxford Anthology of African-American Poetry*. Edited by Arnold Rampersad. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. 424pp. \$45

*Every Goodbye Ain't Gone: An Anthology of Innovative Poetry by African Americans*. Edited by Aldon Lynn Nielsen and Lauri Ramey. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006. 224pp. \$27.95

*Rainbow Darkness: An Anthology of African American Poetry*. Edited by Keith Tuma. Miami, OH: Miami University Press, 2006. 226pp. \$17.95

*The Ringing Ear: Black Poets Lean South*. Edited by Nikky Finney. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007. 405pp. \$18.95

Does an anthology of African American poetry best explain its subject by beginning at the beginning? What do we make of African American poetry when there is no dutiful march forward through time? Chronology has always allowed African American poetry to demonstrate how it and its poets have progressed. Thus, the deictics at work in many African American anthologies—"that was *then*, this is *now*," "*look* how far we have come," "*these* poems show us what African American poetry is"—usually end up reverberating louder than the poems themselves. In other words, African American anthologies, in the pronouncement of their goals, are particularly susceptible to drowning out their poems. Time, but for the rare exception, pushes the anthology. But can the anthology push time back?

Enter *The Oxford Anthology of African-American Poetry*. It begins with Elizabeth Alexander's "Today's News":

I didn't want to write a poem that said "blackness is," because we know better than anyone

that we are not one or ten or ten thousand things  
Not one poem      We could count ourselves forever  
and never agree on the number.

and is followed by Lucille Clifton's "when i stand around among poets":

when i stand around  
among poets, sometimes  
i hear a single music  
in us, one note  
dancing us through the  
singular moving world.

The question implied by these poems and by *The Oxford Anthology* in general is: What do we continue to learn about poetry written by African Americans by putting together time and again anthologies that span from Phillis Wheatley to [fill in Youngest Established Poet here]? Antebellum poets, poets of the Reconstruction, poets of the Harlem Renaissance, the modernist poets, the Black Arts poets, the post-Black Arts poets, plus a sprinkling of the outsiders of the editor's choice. We know the routine. And in terms of making a discursive, repeatable subject out of African American poetry, the routine works. But it stiffens the poetry.

Instead of giving us what we've already seen or attempting to put out something akin to the footnote-laden Norton anthologies, *The Oxford Anthology* offers a different and idiosyncratic vision of the African American poetry anthology. And what are some of these idiosyncrasies? Arnold Rampersad writes in his introduction that he had no room for "a poem simply because it was thought to be of historical importance, or of some other significance, if we saw it was also technically flawed in some obvious way." Translation: this is an anthology built around personal taste. And Rampersad's taste is broad and unpredictable. In one section the experimental poet Raymond Patterson's "Black Power" precedes Carl Phillips' classically tinged "Blue"; "Holy Days" by Larry Neal, one of the foundational voices of the Black Arts Movement, follows on the heels of "Cavalry Way" by May Miller, a writer known most for her involvement in the Harlem Renaissance; and in yet another section is Claude McKay's stately and internationally renowned sonnet "If We Must Die":

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, O 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!  
O kinsmen! we must meet the common foe!  
Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,  
And for their thousand blows deal one deathblow!  
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, written in response to the wave of lynchings during the Red Summer of 1919, is immediately followed by Conrad Kent Rivers' "Watts," a lyric psychological portrait situated within the massive race riots that took place in that Los Angeles neighborhood in 1965:

Must I shoot the  
white man dead  
to free the nigger  
in his head?

This iridescent weaving of poems is typical in *The Oxford Anthology*. The poems resonate with a peculiar intertextual power.

Idiosyncrasies, however, also have their drawbacks, and not all of the idiosyncrasies in *The Oxford Anthology* pay off. In a brief introduction to the anthology Rampersad explains the motives behind some of these sections with poignant clarity:

The flaws of the South were well known but so were its charms. The South bespeaks for many blacks not simply the pleasures of fertile fields, lazy streams, and cool, inviting woods but also the treasure of kinship and community lost or at risk in the North. Now, according to demographers, blacks are returning to the South in great numbers—a movement that the black poet prophesied in the many works that deal realistically with both its appeal and its violent history.

Yet others come off as generalized and forced:

The black child, too, has also served as a vital inspiration to the poet. Over the generations, the child has been perhaps the most poignant symbol of despair and hope, of cynicism and optimism. Here, too, might be seen an example of the ways in which African-American poetry must be different from its mainstream counterpart. In canonical poetry written in English, except in the works of poets such as Wordsworth and Blake, the child possesses little significance as a subject.... However, the social and historical reality surrounding the black child typically makes that child a more

compelling, freighted subject. The black poet has recognized the special, indispensable aspect of this subject.

Some of the best poems of Katherine Philips, Ben Jonson, Coleridge, Whitman, Bishop, Cummings, Merrill, Plath, and Roethke are too casually overlooked here for the sake of an unnecessary African American artistic exceptionalism. English is not bereft of poetry about children or childhood. The rationale is clear: black children have had a long-standing fraught relationship with the country they live in, and this creates a unique anxiety that has manifested itself in compelling ways in poetry written by African Americans. That this subject then is *inherently* different from the paucity of poems produced by “its mainstream counterpart” is simply not true. There is no need to sell the English poetic tradition short in order to emphasize the historical difference of the African American experience.

Also, a fair warning to anyone interested in using this anthology to teach African American poetry: a canonical poem like “If We Must Die” is the exception in the *Oxford Anthology*. This is not an anthology that seeks the comprehensive authority of, for instance, the Norton or Heath anthology series. Many, many well-known poems written by African Americans have been excluded. If we take Rampersad at his word, then he found technical flaws in numerous important poems. Phyllis Wheatley’s “On Being Brought from Africa to America” would seem an obvious choice for the section “What Is Africa to Me?” The fact that Countee Cullen has only one poem in this anthology is a shock—especially considering that it contains six poems by Colleen J. McElroy, four by E. Ethelbert Miller, five by Quincy Troupe, and nine apiece by Rita Dove and Harryette Mullen. Now don’t get me wrong: I can think of reasons to exclude Countee Cullen from an anthology of African American poetry (“I just don’t like Cullen’s verses” perhaps being the most reasonable). But implying in its absence that his work is “technically flawed in some obvious way”—that leaves me perplexed. If there is some obvious flaw that Cullen’s work suffered from, technique is certainly not it. Alas, Jay Wright is another poet whose absence disappoints, but by now I’m accustomed to it. We leave later generations to atone for our continued omission of his work, and they will.

My intention is not to enter into a fray of inclusion and omission. It is the burden of an anthology by nature to make these choices. Nevertheless, an anthology with the editorial trappings of *The Oxford Anthology* does seem to want to have it both ways. Rampersad’s introduction calls his anthology a “composite portrait” of African American poetry’s “orderly history.” Yet the best thing about *The Oxford Anthology* seems to me to be that these claims are exactly what the book avoids. Place more faith in the texture of this anthology than in its introduction. You will find something to cherish. This is a wonder-

ful occurrence. It means that at some point within the shell of the book, the poems took *The Oxford Anthology* back and turned it into a pearl.

Finally, the absence of footnotes will seem a pleasure for some and a curse for others. Readers unfamiliar with these poems or with African American history and culture (Who was Mary McLeod Bethune? Who was Glenn Spearman?) will have some heavy lifting to do. But there is a point to that as well: we are better off for the search and for avoiding the spurious belief that one book can suffice in giving us a full picture of African American poetry.

“Every new reading requires a break from the established disciplinary modes, a break from regnant pecking orders, and a breakthrough,” write Aldon Lynn Nielsen and Lauri Ramey in their introduction to *Every Goodbye Ain't Gone: An Anthology of Innovative Poetry by African Americans*. Their aim was to put together a collection “[that] affords a fresh perspective on the more experimental poetics created by African American artists in the decades following the Second World War.” Some poets formed, and some were drawn in by, budding vanguardist literary groups that had sprung up in major American cities during the civil rights era: the Umbra Workshop group (and *Umbra* magazine), which was based on New York’s Lower East Side; the Dasein workshop group (and *Dasein* magazine), which was based at Washington, D.C.’s Howard University; and the Free Lance workshop group (as well as *Free Lance* magazine), which was based in Cleveland.

The idea behind *Every Goodbye Ain't Gone* is to revitalize our sense of African American poetic possibility by remembering the efforts of an avant-garde whose members have not achieved canonical status the way that comparable white American poets have. Instead of arguing that these are poets who have always been underappreciated—surprisingly, *Every Goodbye Ain't Gone* contains a number of well-known African American poets who moved in avant-garde circles early in their careers, such as Amiri Baraka, Jayne Cortez, June Jordan, Bob Kaufman, Clarence Major, Ishmael Reed, and one not-so-young poet, Melvin Tolson—*Every Goodbye Ain't Gone* begins with a discussion of how the center supported the margins. Langston Hughes was a strong, supportive influence on poets such as Russell Atkins, Julia Fields, and Calvin Hernton, for example. Later in his career, Hughes published in some of the same venues as these poets and encouraged them to meet one another and to write. Combine this with the fact that some of the finest African American poets of that era held regular teaching positions at universities—Sterling A. Brown at Howard and Robert Hayden at Fisk were easily accessible to a young, emergent African American student body—and what you have is a confluence of generations, poets, styles, and ideals after the Second World War and prior to the Black Arts Movement that is far more varied and chatoyant than is generally perceived. Given the

pyrotechnics of the Black Arts Movement and the dominant presence of Ellison, Wright, Brooks, Baldwin, and Hayden prior to it, the critical tendency is to consider this post-war period as the modernist era of African American writing. In this regard the Black Power aesthetic that follows makes sense as frustration, counterpoint, and revolution. Yet whatever the Black Power movement devolved into, its prelapsarian state fed on an almost *fin de siècle* practice of artistic activity and an intrinsic belief in poetic experimentation. We need to become better acquainted with it if we really want to speak of an African American literary tradition in its full complexity.

Michael S. Harper and Anthony Walton's essential *Every Shut Eye Ain't Asleep: An Anthology of Poetry by African Americans Since 1945* offers an intriguing mix of familiar and experimental poets and poems. *Every Goodbye Ain't Gone* gestures toward Harper and Walton's anthology by means of its title: together the titles complete the African American proverb "Every shut eye ain't asleep, every goodbye ain't gone." While *Every Shut Eye* collects a large number of remarkable poems that are thematic in their experimentations—Raymond Patterson's underrated "Twenty-Six Ways of Looking at a Blackman," for example—*Every Goodbye Ain't Gone* focuses more on poems that insist on technical experimentation. Some of the experimentation is typographical play at its most modest. One example is the use of underlining for emphasis in Lawrence S. Cumberbatch's conclusion to his "I Swear to You, That Ship Never Sunk in Middle-Passage!"

Tomorrow is for the planters.

Plantation people dance at the Harlem Inn, Winstonville, Mississippi.

Some of the poems push further, with varying degrees of success. Here are the first six lines of Norman H. Pritchard's "Metagnomy":

A mid the non com mit t e d  
 com pound s of t he m in d  
 an i m age less gleam in g  
 we at hers h aunts as yet un k no w n  
 & t a u n t s  
 thru a c he mist r y of ough t

And the beginning of Pritchard's "":

” ” ” ” ”  
 ” ” ” red ”  
 ” ” ” ” ” red ” ”  
 ” ” ” ” red ” ” ” red  
 red red ” ” ” red ” ” ”

Some poems are even more complex in their mixing of shapes, scribbling, symbols, and hieroglyphs with conventional writing. Others reach toward the more discursive side of the spectrum and are a welcome relief given the difficulty of weathering too many poems like these on the trot. That said, the polyvalence of experimentation displayed by the poets collected in this volume is remarkable. And not all of these poets were throwing their typewriters against a wall to see what would happen. Here is Ishmael Reed's lyric address "Paul Laurence Dunbar in the Tenderloin":

Even at 26, the hush when  
you unexpectedly walked  
into a theatre. One year  
after *The History of Cakewalk*.

Desiring not to cause  
a fuss, you sit alone  
in the rear, watching a re  
hearsal.  
The actors are impressed. Wel  
don Johnson, so super at des  
cription, jots it all down.

I don't blame you for  
disliking Whitman, Paul.  
He lacked your style, like  
your highcollared mandalead  
portait in Hayden's  
*Kaleidoscope*; unobserved,  
Death, the uncouth critic  
does a first draft on your  
breath.

Dunbar, Johnson, and Hayden coincide with Hayden's anthology *Kaleidoscope*. The poem, so attentive to literary history and to the interactions of African American poets of earlier generations, offers us in its quiet register, its "hush," an apt response to some of the skepticism toward avant-garde poetry's ability to be "properly" poetic, to instruct and delight lyrically. If upon seeing the words "innovative poetry" in the title of *Every Goodbye Ain't Gone*, you assume it merely contains a book full of "," think again. Reed was a transplant from Buffalo to the Lower East Side and found his way within the Umbra group. Upon first meeting Amiri Baraka at the Five Spot, he greeted him by saying, "I like your prose. I don't like your poetry." *Every Goodbye Ain't Gone* is by no means a monolithic expression of poetic experiment.

Ed Roberson's "poll," for example, uses a moderately distended poetic

line in order to meditate on race and identity. Note, first of all, the prismatic moods and textures of the title “poll.” Its meanings lie on top of one another like a palimpsest: the top or crown of the head, especially used in reference to horses; a common name for a parrot, as in *Robinson Crusoe*’s, “I taught my Poll...to speak” and the “‘Pretty Poll!’ (His yellow parrot beak gabbles nasally)” in *Ulysses*; to tally opinion and/or record votes; to behead, to steal, to sack and plunder, to extort:

skin that is closed    curtain.  
it is impossible to know.    how  
the light is cast.

a mark that is kept    the elect-  
ion determining the race  
before the candidate    runs.

darkie is the night is  
an old image given color.  
the skin is history,the dark horse

Roberson uses a triple-tiered play on the word “race.” Race is skin and culture; race is another expression of culture, an election run; and—with that full stop and field-space after “candidate”—“run” becomes more physical, the expression more literal, evoking an actual race. This resonance culminates, in the third and final stanza, in another triple-tiered play: Roberson leaves the final three words “the dark horse” open to speculation. Is it literal: the dark horse in the night that is difficult to see and can be used to escape? Is it “the dark horse” as in the underdog (an American favorite)? By placing “history” and the period immediately before “the dark horse,” does the line imply the end and beginning of two cultures—as Yeats did in “Leda and the Swan”—and point toward the Trojan Horse? Three plays within three in this three-stanza poem, and the manner in which the beginning and end act as hinges to a world beyond make Roberson’s “poll” a representation of expert and provocative work.

*Every Goodbye Ain’t Gone* is in essence the poetic incarnation of Nielsen’s 1997 study *Black Chant: Languages of African American Postmodernism*, and it makes the same argument, albeit through poetry rather than through archival research and literary theory. Both books are important contributions to African American literary history. Yet neither book is as strong without the other. The poetry (despite a fantastic introduction) lacks some of the important context that critical work provides. And the critical work, without a healthy dose of the best poems to invigorate the subject, is a little dry.

The best thing an anthology can do is to activate a thirst to find more poems or poets encountered within that collection. In this sense, a good anthology is paradoxical by nature: its finest characteristic is the one that urges you to turn away from it. An anthology's second best quality is its ability to draw you back to it. And an anthology's third best quality is its most perfunctory: convenience. Every page of an anthology is marked with the editor's taste and judiciousness while the editor, one hopes, fades away into the poems. It is a difficult game of presence and absence that is difficult to explain and at which it is even more difficult to succeed.

*The Oxford Anthology* and *Every Goodbye Ain't Gone* are two examples of getting it right. Nikky Finney's *The Ringing Ear: Black Poets Lean South* is an example of getting it wrong. Finney's formulation of her subject is bizarrely arch even in the mere act of laying out its claims:

Not all of us on these pages have come to or from the South by the same dirt road. We have not chosen our dark olive words from the same patch of earth.... We who are here claim the South in what and how we hear ourselves say do and wonder. Our South, with its ghosts and fiddles, its fine sugar waters and shine.

Dirt roads, olive words (dark olive words, at that), patches of earth, wonder, ghosts, fiddle, sugar water, and shine. That the poems in this collection do not fall far from these conceits is a shame, as some of the poems are quite good. But collected as unevenly as they are, they seem repetitive and derivative of a South that has already been poeticized repeatedly both within and without the realm of African American poetry. Why an editor would decide in the twenty-first century to introduce Southern poets in terms so flat is confusing. And more so when you look again at this passage and see that Finney's goal is to talk of the diversity of the poets in the collection. They are not all from the same patches of earth, but all of their words are dark olives. They have not all walked the same dirt road, rather they have gathered from different dirt roads. Perhaps the intention was to take ownership of the lingua franca of the Southern imagination of the days of old; I don't know. But the formulation here is awkward and contrived.

Worse, the poems for the most part respond tautologically to the editor's mission statement and reinforce, instead of challenging, tepid claims. There are so many poor poems that the strong ones don't stand a chance. *The Ringing Ear* contains far, far too many dirt roads and cooked meals and wise grandmothers. At times they all appear in the same poem. Here is how Joanne Gabbin's "Pot Meals" begins:

Pot meals hold so many possibilities.  
Not like meat, potatoes, beets

Discriminately sectioned on the plate,  
No red touching brown, or brown  
Intruding its rudeness on white fluff.  
In Mama's kitchen neck bones add  
Their gray-brown juices to string beans and potatoes  
Whistling and sputtering in the family pot.

This has been the case for my mother and grandmother, too, bless their souls. Empathy can lead an enthusiastic editor to think, perhaps for that reason, that this poem says something interesting. But this poem can only be one of two possible types: a workshop poem or a poem by someone who is not a poet. Either option would inevitably yield the same end resolution: a dash of remembrance, the introduction of the speaker as an active participant, a return to the same central object from the beginning of the poem (which is also undoubtedly in the title), the penultimate addition of an enlightened appreciation for something, and then the wrap up:

Now when I want to remember Mama,  
To bring back the woman  
Whose only vanity was her reputation  
As a scrupulously clean cook,  
In whose kitchen nothing was wasted  
And no one turned away,  
I get to the family pot, add love  
And cook up some possibilities.

Hayden follows this formula in "Those Winter Sundays" and produces one of the best poems of our language. But Hayden's ability to contextualize these elements into something poignant, rigorous, and surprising—from his use of the sonnet form to craft a love poem to his absent father, to having the speaker's lack of appreciation replace where the lesson would be, to the concluding question at the end of the poem—is beyond the reach of most poets. That's fine. "Pot Meals" does not need to be "Those Winter Sundays." But an editor has a responsibility to separate the wheat from the chaff.

Sections titled "Music, Food, and Work: Heeding the Lamentation and Roar of Things Made by Hand"; "Swimming, Childhood, and Other Thunders: Don't Get Your Hot Hair Wet or Your Good Shoes Dirty"; "Religion and Nature: The Lord Looks Out for Babies and Fools; The Anvil of Heaven Murmuring"; "Love, Flesh, and Family: The Hush and Holler Portraits"; "The Echo and Din of Place: Turn in by the Silver Queen and Double Twisted Pine"; and "The Twenty-first Century Southern Riff and Shout: Modern Lullabies for Planet Octavia" don't allow us to make head or tail of where the anthology is going or what is being said through this collection. Again,

if the subject were something new I could understand better the enthusiasm behind the jumbled vision on display in *The Ringing Ear*. But between the moonlit trees in the Southern night there's not much to see here. Take, for instance, Kalamu Ya Salaam's "Quarter Moon Rise":

soft moon shimmers out  
of cloudy dress, stirred by night's  
suggestive caress

which makes me yearn for Etheridge Knight's "Haiku":

Making jazz swing  
In seventeen syllables AIN'T  
No square poets job

A haiku about a moon wearing clouds for a dress and enticed by the embrace of night in an anthology about African American poets writing about the South is exactly the type of cliché I would have hoped that this anthology would have avoided.

*Rainbow Darkness: An Anthology of African American Poetry*, edited by Keith Tuma, is the fruit of the Marjorie Cook Conference on Diversity in African American Poetry that was held at Miami University in September 2003. The collection makes no pretense of being more than a group of poems and essays from one hurricane-tossed conference weekend in Ohio. Yet in its modest shape and size provide an invigorating limit within which contemporary African American poetry is given a chance to explore some of its varied incarnations. If you are looking for a collection of African American poets in their element, *Rainbow Darkness* provides an energetic complement to, or an entire change of pace from, the other anthologies.

At conferences, poets tend to read work they know will be successful with the audience or they read work that they want to try out. Poetry events, which are like literary movements in miniature, are charged with an immediacy that prepares an audience for the more visceral effects of poetry. Tone is picked up well before form; speech acts are more easily recognized than are prose poems and sestinas. And so when these events are collected into print, they face the challenge of translating one series of real-time effects for the more delayed and distanced gratification one receives from reading poems in books. In the give-and-take between presence and print, *Rainbow Darkness* manages to achieve this. Keith Tuma, the editor, confesses in his introduction that the choices involved in making this transition are not easy:

We wanted a conversation at the conference, and we were happy that discussions did not result in everybody more or less agreeing. And there was little consensus even as I tried to get the poets included here to agree upon a title for the anthology. Eight or nine titles were proposed, most of them using phrases from poems by canonical African American poets, but I could not get a single poet to sign to a title proposed by another poet.

But that these struggles yield their rewards:

In the end I was left to choose between my two favorites among those that had been proposed, “Bessie, bop, or Bach” from Langston Hughes’s “Theme for English B” and “Rainbow Darkness” from Robert Hayden’s “Theme and Variation.” I opted at first for the phrase from the poem by Hughes because it speaks directly to the matter of several divergent streams as they inform African American poetic practice. As I have indicated, this was a key concept in imaging and organizing the conference. But I also admired the poem by Robert Hayden, in particular for its insistence on mutability and mystery, on a “changing permanence” and “an imminence / that turns to curiosa all I know.” The optimism, the idea that light might be a “rainbow darkness / wherein God waylays us and empowers”—well, in the end, I couldn’t resist. Let the phrase stand for the many possibilities for African American poetry still on the horizon.

The poets who read at the event were Jeffery Renard Allen, Wanda Coleman, C.S. Giscombe, Terrance Hayes, Kim Hunter, Honorée Fanonne Jeffers, Nathaniel Mackey, Tracie Morris, Harryette Mullen, Mendi Lewis Obadike, James Richardson, Tim Seibles, Reginald Shepherd, Evie Shockley, Lorenzo Thomas, Natasha Trethewey, Anthony Walton, Crystal Williams, and Tyrone Williams. And their poems, when read together, offer a richness and an element of surprise that *The Ringing Ear*, for example, so sorely lacks. Here is part of Evie Shockley’s “cause i’m from Dixie too”:

i am southern hear me roar i am burning flags crosses i  
am scarlet and prissy like a piece of carmine velvet at christmas  
don’t know nothing bout birthin no rabies so don’t come foamin  
at my mouth i am miss Dixie and a miss is as good as a guile i  
am a daughter of the con-federacy come on dad don’t you know  
me here let me put on this hood and sheet do my eyes look more  
familiar now surrounded by bleach i am southern damn it y’all keep  
forgetting my birth was our wedding till death do us part

And the fourth part of James Richardson’s “Parnassus Rising,” which opens up to reveal a pearl of a haiku:

IV. Calliope, muse of epic poetry

Rappers slice airwaves  
sword-fight AM/FM haze:  
afroed Beowulves

Richardson, who is a poet I did not know much about, also strikes a chord in *Rainbow Darkness* with “My Man Caliban!”

Were you (I suppose) expecting  
an angry, homeboy soliloquy,  
deep, gruff voice, spit cornering  
some nigga mouth, a staccato repartee  
replete with *muthafuckas*, *damn straights*,  
and you (of course) could liberally recoil,  
gape at those thick, angry lips,  
mythologize my passion,  
make sure you got first rights  
to the movie version?

But for some reason spring came  
today, and that gash on my head  
from the pop bottle you threw  
is sprouting roses (you thought  
was a scab). And that was you  
on the steps of the teatro del negro  
talkin’ ‘bout my momma and how  
we all got tails, wasn’t it?  
Well, that’s o.k.—I’ll fix you some  
punch spiked with collard green juice,  
and that escargot you liked—  
them’s chitlins! Now, look at you:  
greasy-mouthed, head thrown back,  
grinning, belching, farting:  
Caliban, my man!

The recently departed Reginald Shepherd offers with his poem “Refrain” more of the elegant lyricism for which he was praised: “Petrarch whispers leaves into my ear.” And the poem has Shepherd’s recognizable, sonorous probing all over it:

He loves me nowhere  
but in words (another of the several things

which I refrain from mentioning), boys' names  
on trees or boys named after trees:  
fixing beauty in the win, fixing hunger  
in the eye, the *x* of it.

*Rainbow Darkness* does not offer itself as an elixir to the world's problems, nor does it pretend to exist in a vacuum for the exceptional. Tuma is generous both to his readers, to the publication, to the event, and to African American poetry itself when he writes:

Readers seeking to learn something about African American poetry in the new century will do well also to seek out the work of some of the other poets we considered inviting, including...Rita Dove, Erica Hunt, Jay Wright, Marilyn Nelson, Fred Moten, Amiri Baraka, Tracy K. Smith, Mark McMorris, Renee Gladman, Ed Roberson, Carl Phillips, Michael Harper, and many others whose work is mentioned in the essays included here and still others whose work can be found in *Hambone* and *Callaloo*, and a dozen other fine journals.

You can add a name here or there, take another away from there or here. Regardless, a sense of scope and a belief in intertextuality always does African American poetry a world of good. We, who write poems and look to make sense of what has been written, canonized, forgotten or coming next, are all part of a search.

In this sense, if you want to find a collection of African American poets in their element, *Rainbow Darkness* provides a wonderful complement to *Every Goodbye Ain't Gone*, and both provide a wonderful complement to *The Oxford Anthology*. As for *Rainbow Darkness*, the structure of essays-poems-essays lends to the feeling of an event, a movement of concentration from one level of engagement to another, while the essays by Keith Tuma, Evie Shockley, Aldon Lynn Nielsen, Kathy Lou Schultz, and Herman Beavers, as well as a closing essay by the late Lorenzo Thomas (whose poetry, to bring this discussion full circle, appears in *Every Goodbye Ain't Gone*) frame the poems not as examples of prose theses but rather as art which livens their prose; the two dancing together instead of one dancing for the other. In this sense the closing words of Thomas, which are also the close of the book, seem the best way for me to close as well:

Now that I think about it, dancing may not be so bad after all. As a wise man once said, "We have got to dance our way out of this constriction."  
We, the poets, have the task of finding the words to go with the music.

Rowan Ricardo Phillips