

Celebrating Black History Month with Poetry -- by Don Mathis

As far back as ancient Africa, the griot (gree-oh) would 'sing' the stories of the tribe. These rhyming histories would praise the king or memorialize the accomplishments of the empire. According to Paul Oliver in his book *Savannah Syncopators*, "Though [the griot] has to know many traditional songs without error, he must also have the ability to extemporize on current events, chance incidents and the passing scene. His wit can be devastating and his knowledge of local history formidable."

Griots may be remembered as oral historians but they may also use their verbal intellect for trivia, comedy, or political commentary. In short, these bards are poets in any sense of the word.

Such a history of oral story-telling continues into African-American culture. A young slave girl, Phyllis Wheatley (stolen at age seven from Senegal or Gambia) learned to read and write better than many 18th century slave owners. At twelve she began studying Latin and English literature, especially the poetry of Alexander Pope. Her legacy is remembered today in many of her poems, in names of buildings at schools across the nation and other memorials.

African American poetry goes beyond the legacy of slavery. Langston Hughes writes of ancient rivers in his first published poem – the Euphrates, the Congo, the Nile, the Mississippi. He was an important member of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, offering philosophical guidance to cultural pride and creating hundreds of poems, plays, and stories.

Modern poets, such as Yusef Komunyakaa, Nikki Giovanni, and Maya Angelou speak of today's African American experience. Other poets paint with words a broader picture of the human experience. All are to be realized as part of the American experience. And we celebrate them all during February, Black History Month.

The latest African American poet to enter the public's consciousness is Amanda Gorman who recited '[The Hill We Climb](#),' her poem for the inauguration of President Joe Biden in 2021.

Gorman's most recent poem in the public domain is '[New Day's Lyric](#),' a poem she says that will "celebrate the new year and honor the hurt and the humanity of the last one." Take a moment and read her words. Take another moment to contemplate the power of African American poetry.

The Hill We Climb -- by Amanda Gorman

*May this be the day
We come together.
Mourning, we come to mend,
Withered, we come to weather,
Torn, we come to tend,
Battered, we come to better.
Tethered by this year of yearning,
We are learning
That though we weren't ready for this,
We have been readied by it.
We steadily vow that no matter
How we are weighed down,
We must always pave a way forward.*

*

*This hope is our door, our portal.
Even if we never get back to normal,
Someday we can venture beyond it,
To leave the known and take the first steps.
So let us not return to what was normal,
But reach toward what is next.*

*

*What was cursed, we will cure.
What was plagued, we will prove pure.
Where we tend to argue, we will try to agree,
Those fortunes we forswore, now the future we foresee,
Where we weren't aware, we're now awake;
Those moments we missed
Are now these moments we make,
The moments we meet,
And our hearts, once altogether beaten,
Now all together beat.*

*

*Come, look up with kindness yet,
For even solace can be sourced from sorrow.
We remember, not just for the sake of yesterday,
But to take on tomorrow.*

*

*We heed this old spirit,
In a new day's lyric,
In our hearts, we hear it:*

*For auld lang syne, my dear,
For auld lang syne.
Be bold, sang Time this year,
Be bold, sang Time,
For when you honor yesterday,
Tomorrow ye will find.
Know what we've fought
Need not be forgot nor for none.
It defines us, binds us as one,
Come over, join this day just begun.
For wherever we come together,
We will forever overcome.*
