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# Dawnsong! The epic memory of Askia Toure

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Dawnsong!: The Epic Memory of Askia Touré by Askia M. Touré

Review by: James Smethurst

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self, the difficulty of crossing boundaries, including bounded notions of race and heritage, and the horror and solace of artistic creation, exemplifying how precision and integrity constitute both the aesthetic and the political substance of Harper's provocative and demanding art.

The volume thus reveals that the result of Harper's lifelong pursuit of these ideals is an opus that consistently provokes and demands new ways of thinking about the difficulties and distinctiveness of African American life. These new ways include Harper's unusual, sometimes personal reservoir of allusion and his non-European conception of artistic precision, through which he resists the aesthetic stagnation and imprecision both of the political rhetoric that sometimes passes for a black aesthetic and of the racial bias in mainstream literary appreciation that tends to underestimate the complexity of minority and non-Western cultures. This unconventionality sometimes results in poems that fail to yield their meaning fully, and their incommunicative beauty will frustrate many readers, especially given the defiant attitude with which they are offered. But largely, this difficulty results in a new sense of how poetic language conveys insight about the human pain and hidden truth of black experience. The second time through the volume, after digesting its two essays and the notes to individual poems, I had developed the requisite awareness of an omnipresent past and of Harper's critique of the racism of recorded history to appreciate both his unique sense of how history informs the personal and the beautiful continuity of his artistry. In his best poems about personal pain, about historical figures like Frederick Douglass or about musicians and writers and, therefore, about artistry, his chiseled, forbidding poetics effectively suggest the harrowing unity between vision and memory, Western and non-Western, pain and beauty, by which Harper defines black identity and resists literary convention.

Readers unfamiliar with Harper's work will find in this volume a comprehensive representation of how Harper pushes us to reconsider limited ideas of race and art, and given the volume's unique concluding material, scholars will have the means to assess more fully Harper's distinctive union of aesthetic and political ideals. As such, this volume deserves to be read, and Harper himself deserves to be remembered as one of the most important poets of his time.

**T**he Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s profoundly marked culture in the United States. It changed how basic notions of race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, politics, and art were (and are) understood. However, one of the most important literary legacies of the Movement is the continuing productivity of key Black Arts writers, such as Sonia Sanchez, Amiri Baraka, Jayne Cortez, Haki Madhubuti, and Askia Touré. Touré's *Dawnsong!*, a particularly ambitious example of that productivity, seeks to create a new sort of African American epic, fusing Black Arts mythmaking with a radical post-Black Arts historicism.

Touré, as has been noted by such scholar/artist/activists as Lorenzo Thomas, Kalamu ya Salaam, and Amiri Baraka, was a major architect of the Black Arts Movement, serving as a sort of "flying delegate" of the Movement. He participated in such crucial cultural/political institutions as Umbra, the Black Arts Repertory Theatre and School, the Revolutionary Action Movement, the

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Askia M. Touré. *Dawnsong!: The Epic Memory of Askia Touré*. Chicago: Third World P, 2000. 105 pp. \$12.95.

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Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, *The Liberator*, *The Journal of Black Poetry*, and *Black Dialogue*. His poetry (and his performance of this poetry) during the Black Arts era was notable for its combination of a mythic African sensibility, an epic voice, a tonality and phrasing rooted in African American popular song (especially r & b and gospel), and a jazz rhythm derived significantly from John Coltrane and the "free jazz" artists of the 1960s. Touré's post-Black Arts poetry, including the work collected in the American Book Award-winning *From the Pyramids to the Projects* (1989), merged this mythic African/African American landscape with the sort of concern for history and historical detail that he had always shown in his essays.

*Dawnsong!* extends this mythic historicism, creating the first book of a polyvocal epic, much in the vein of Langston Hughes's *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, Melvin Tolson's *Harlem Gallery*, and Amiri Baraka's *Wise, Why's, Y's*. It is literally a fusion of Touré's Black Arts and post-Black Arts work in that it recontextualizes such Black Arts poetry as "Juju," first collected in the 1970 chapbook *Juju (Magic Songs for the Black Nation)*, with later poetry, including several poems from *From the Pyramids to the Projects*. In this Touré recalls Hughes, who frequently mixed new work with older pieces (e.g., in the 1937 "poetry-play" *Don't You Want to Be Free* and the 1967 collection *The Panther and the Lash*) as a sort of polemic about the basic continuity of African American culture. *Dawnsong!*'s sweep also resembles the epic history of Pablo Neruda's *Canto General*.

In addition to Touré's literary forbears, *Dawnsong!*, with its huge range of Egyptian (Kemetic), sub-Saharan African, and diasporic religious, historical, and musical references, resembles the work of composer and band leader Sun Ra, whose performances were a sort of multimedia pageant that ranged in material from Afrocentric myth through blues, New Orleans jazz, swing, bop, doo wop, and soul to interstellar avant garde futuristic jazz. Not surprisingly, music is (and has always been) a particular touchstone for Touré's work, which invokes traditional African music and dance, spirituals, ring shouts, gospel, r & b, bebop, and free jazz (including a tribute poem to Sun Ra).

Like Tolson's *Harlem Gallery* and Baraka's *Wise, Why's, Y's*, *Dawnsong!* has a heavily elegiac cast. The first seven poems of the collection engage Egyptian (Kemetic) myths of birth, death, and rebirth, particularly the myths of Isis and Osiris. This opening serves both as a sort of epic invocation of the gods and as a model for the African diasporic project of memory, elegy, and potential liberation that Touré had previously sketched out in *From the Pyramids to the Projects*. One of the primary tasks that the opening sets for itself is to place or replace African women at the center of this mythic vision. In some respects, such a placement is a return to older African American nationalist notions of Mother Africa. However, Touré's text differs from some earlier literary uses of this figure in that he does not cast Mother Africa and the African woman as a nurturing, but relatively static and unconscious, force. Instead, Touré goes on to link Kemetic goddesses and queens to a continuum of such African American women artists and activists as Bessie Smith, Margaret Walker, Gwendolyn Brooks, Gladys Knight, Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Ida Wells, Mary McLeod Bethune, Audley Moore, and Fannie Lou Hamer.

Kemetic mythology suffuses the entire collection, but the remainder of the book is primarily focused on the experience and destiny of black people in the United States and is basically a series of elegies dedicated to African American artists and activists, particularly jazz musicians of the post-World War II era, including John Coltrane, Sun Ra, Miles Davis, and Thelonious Monk. However, to say that these poems are elegies to individuals does not fully capture their substance, since the artists and their music are seen as having a metonymic rela-

tionship to the larger political and cultural landscape of Africa and its diaspora so that the names of Langston Hughes, Marcus Garvey, W. E. B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, Bessie Smith, Louis Armstrong, Malcolm X, Rosa Parks, Ella Baker, Elijah Muhammad, Charlie Parker, Billie Holiday, Otis Redding, and Aretha Franklin (to list a relative handful of those mentioned) mix with those of Coltrane, Sun Ra, Davis, and Monk.

In general, Touré's work is successful in realizing its ambitious project. At times there does seem to be a contradiction between the arrangement of the poems on the page and what seem to be the rhythmic intentions of the poems—unlike, say, the early poems of Sonia Sanchez, where lineation and use of space serve as guides to performance. This not only muffles the voice of the poems, but on occasion makes the diction of the poems seem a bit abstract or even slack in ways that are not the case when one hears Touré perform them. Nonetheless, even with these reservations, *Dawnsong!* is an important contribution by a central Black Arts activist and promises to be the beginning of a major African American epic.

When I was a young boy, the triumvirate in music was Marian Anderson, Roland Hayes, and Paul Robeson. In the realm of intellect, sports, and science the kings were, respectively, W. E. B. Du Bois, Joe Louis, and George Washington Carver. Carver alone astonished the world with the simplicity of investigating the peanut. He seemed never to be able to dismiss, or take for granted, the ordinary in the environment that surrounded him. I suspect he knew, as all wise men gradually learn, that the simple and ordinary have the ability continually to astound. In the middle of the twentieth century blacks would come to learn how many of their brothers and sisters were truly gifted, in a wide and ever expanding venue of disciplines.

What astounds me at this moment in history is that George Washington Carver still has the ability to amaze, inspire, and call forth the best in our imagination. This is what has taken place in Marilyn Nelson's brilliantly lyrical *Carver: A Life in Poems*. In this volume, one discovers Nelson's use of prayers, lyrics, letters, and an incredible application of place and differing voices. Nelson is able to give the reader vivid and sustained images and photographs of those individuals entering, influencing, and exiting the world of George Washington Carver. This book of poems is successful in suggesting that Professor Carver was and remains a gentleman for all seasons.

Marilyn Nelson richly sculpts out Carver's life, beginning with the moment he and his mother were kidnaped by slavers and John Bentley was hired to rescue them. It is ironic that Bentley was only able to bring the sickly infant George back to the Carvers. Nelson informs us that Bentley:

Tracked the bushwhackers  
two days south of here  
and caught up with them  
down in Arkansas . . .

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Marilyn Nelson. *Carver: A Life in Poems*  
Asheville, NC: Front Street, 2001. 103 pp.  
\$16.95.

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