

Introduction

Cornelius Eady

There are many roads that lead to what we now know as the Cave Canem workshop. Perhaps mine partly begins here, in December 1990, talking to Charles Rowell for an unpublished interview for *Callaloo*:

ROWELL: Well, we could ask, Is it worth it all? There are those young black writers who could be crushed by such a program and such hostile professors. Should we be going about trying to construct certain alternatives in African American communities? I can't think that white communities, as collectives, would be seriously interested in identifying, encouraging, nurturing, and developing young African American writers.

EADY: Well . . . I really wish in my heart of hearts, I wish there were some way we could set up MFA programs just for black writers. I mean, I know that sounds kind of extreme, but I really think that there are a lot of writers out there who are going to go into those other programs. Like my own experience in an MFA program . . . I didn't see myself, my life, reflected in any of the writers that got discussed or were assigned. We simply didn't exist. And after a while I had to start thinking, "Well, wait . . . what does that mean about how they perceive me as a student? I don't exist on their level. I'm not there. They don't teach me. They don't teach me because they don't know me." I was there for two years, and that was my experience . . . I am being told to write from my life, but yet on the other hand they don't understand why I'm talking about this or why I'm bringing this in . . . So what if there was a summer workshop for just minority writers? They could come in and talk about literature but also know one thing they would not have to worry about when they walked into the workshop is . . . being the only black person, or the only Latino, or . . . It would be nice if there were ways that we could simply let these young writers know that isn't really an issue in terms of developing themselves as writers. That in fact it could be looked on as a plus. And don't

get me wrong. I'm not saying that I want to forgive every mistake that they make as writers, or that we should encourage bad writing. I'm not encouraging that at all, but I do notice that there is this other criterion that sometimes enters into the discussion of what a poem is, or what makes a poem good or not good in a workshop . . . It would be nice if sometimes, occasionally, you could have a situation where a black writer didn't have to worry about that, if you talked about the *poem* as opposed to "oh you're a black person talking about being a black person, and I'm a white person, and that makes me a little nervous, and I don't know if I want to talk about that." . . . For a black writer, there is always a possibility that you are going to have to deal with it.

I could tell you that this part of our conversation was regarding the low level of minority representation in MFA writing programs; or that I'd had a similar conversation a few months earlier with Herman Beavers (who ironically would be in the first group of Cave Canem fellows) at the bar at B. Smith; or that another part of my reply came from a problem that Cathy McKinley, one of two African American students in the poetry workshop I taught at Sarah Lawrence College, had trying to convince the others in the workshop that a poem she had written about her grandmother was indeed a poem—how it was less about the draft's merits, an attempt at praise-song, than the impatient tone in the room, the realization that this discussion wasn't just about poetry, and the look on her face that said she was *suddenly on her own*, a feeling I knew and had swallowed (and was swallowing with her) but couldn't yet fully articulate or defend myself or her against.

All of that was informing my response to Charles, but what haunts me most in rereading my words, fifteen years later, is the intense longing inside them: *Wouldn't it be great to build a space where you didn't have to apologize? Where you didn't have to explain?*

I was talking tough, but I was pining for a home. So was Charles, so was Herman, so was Cathy. And most important, though we had yet to meet, so was Toi.

How best to describe Cave Canem? We have been at this for ten years now, and quite frankly, it's still tough to get a handle on it. On the surface, our core program is still a workshop/retreat, like all the few dozen or so that take place every summer across the country. People show up; workshops are held; drafts are picked at; ideas and numbers are exchanged.

Plus, we're certainly not the only workshop that has dealt with poets of color. Years before Cave Canem began, Tom Ellis and Sharon Strange and others from the Dark Room Collective invited me to come and read for them at their space in Cambridge, Massachusetts. It was like being

part of a Sunday revival meeting. A crowd showed up (I couldn't tell who actually lived there and who didn't), some furniture got moved, some chairs unfolded, and Pow! Their living room turned into a salon. I guess I refer to the energy of a revival because that's how they all seemed to take it: with a serious joy and pride in their belief in being black *and* being wordy, which totally disarmed me. Perhaps that was the first time I saw that sort of idea acted on.

And though June Jordan's tenure as director of the Poetry Center at the State University of New York at Stony Brook (and later of Poetry for the People in Berkeley) didn't focus solely on African American poetics and poets, June did run her reading series on this premise: what do you get if the only standard is the excellence of the telling? Suddenly, reports were coming in from different generations, different schools, different classes, sexes, and neighborhoods, on how wide and beautiful and varied and complicated the definitions of *America* and *American* happen to be. It was a subtle and subversive idea at a time when the majority of the big reading series held a very narrow definition of what constitutes "good" American poetry.

Both these places turned out to be havens for me, *haven* being defined in this case as a place where you are *seen, understood, challenged, and encouraged* at what you are doing as a poet.

These are only two places that come to mind without thinking hard. How many others before us practiced the very old and venerable African American tradition of "making do"? How many unsung church basements, living rooms, community centers, branch libraries, coffee shops, and black-owned bookstores gathered us up, kept (and keep) us going?

I think if you asked a Cave Canem fellow for a definition of the workshop, you would hear some variation of the word *home* sooner or later. This might be a bit misleading, since in fact it's less a house than a tent we've been raising and tearing down every summer for the last ten years. No two summers have ever felt or run the same, and each summer has had its share of joys, angers, and sorrows.

But it's a good idea that Toi had, so clear, simple, and powerful that it spoke to the bruised part of me that had grouched to Charles Rowell five years earlier but still didn't fully know what it was looking for that afternoon we all were on vacation in Italy. The same way it spoke to the first twenty-four poets who answered the flyers and ads we posted in the spring of 1996, not knowing the door we all were about to open. By the second evening of that first week, that first summer, everyone knew that this space was special and needed to be preserved. I feel this is the great irony of Cave Canem: the idea was that the space was to protect the poets, when in fact it's the poets who protect the space.

This anthology is a small sample of what has come out of the space

we have all had a hand in making. Though it can't give you the sense of celebration, revelation, and healing that comes when all these folks get together in a room and start to blaze away, it might give an idea of what all the fuss has been about: the spoken-word poet tries on the skin of the MFA poet; the MFA poet buffs stanzas with a little street noise; a silence is broken; a hurt or dream or dread is aired; chances are taken; traditions are borrowed, broken, claimed, and reworked. May this surprise and amaze you the way it does us each summer.

I will now break a confidence and tell you that for the last ten years there has always been a moment, usually around the third evening in, after everyone has pretty much gotten travel and the shock of shifting gears out of their systems, when I simply walk around the joint and listen. There's this buzz: someone will be trying to make some deep point about something; somebody else will be agreeing or trying to get a word in; folks will be in the halls or gathered where they've decided the cool spot to hang will be for the year; laughter and music will be spilling from various locations. Books change hands, and drafts are passed around. They're making do.

Toi Derricotte

If I think backward about the success of *Cave Canem*, for certainly I had no idea that anything like what has happened would happen that first year, I would have to give credit mostly to forces operating of which none of us were aware.

I could tell you I had thought about a writers' retreat for years, had tried to get funding for one and failed in the early nineties; I could tell you about how I met Sarah Micklem and Cornelius Eady at a writers' retreat and loved them instantly for their companionability and honesty—I desperately needed someone to talk with about my experiences as a black poet in academia. Cornelius and I talked for days, knowing from others we were not alone, knowing we needed something better. I could tell you about our vacation two years later, about sitting with them on the veranda in Capri one afternoon surrounded by bougainvillea, a limestone mountain on one side, a city of bells and the green Mediterranean beneath us, and feeling ripe enough to burst open my idea and ask them to share it. I could tell you about how excited they were, how they said yes, and how where I voiced fear—"but we can't get funding!"—Sarah made a bridge—"we can do it out of our own pockets." I could tell you how the next morning, in the burned, buried, and recovered city of Pompeii, in the House of the Tragic Poet, we saw the first "Beware the dog" sign, on

a tile in the foyer, a black dog with the words “Cave Canem,” and agreed to use this (Sarah’s graphic design broke that dog’s chain!). That very day we called my friend Father Francis Gargani in New York, and he agreed to let us use Mount Saint Alphonsus monastery the next summer, each fellow with a room overlooking the Hudson. I could talk about everyone’s efforts, about good fortune, about Carolyn Micklem, who it seems spent her whole life in the hard work of social justice to gain the spiritual strength and political savvy to direct Cave Canem. I could tell you all this, but I can never show you the most important thing: how, sitting around in a circle on that first night of the first workshop/retreat, almost every one of the twenty-four fellows broke down in tears to the question, “Why are you here?” We poured forth a lifetime of loneliness, hope, and gratitude that we had found each other; we had been given a place that we had longed for, a place of acceptance and encouragement, a circle, a house where our treasures were to be protected and honored. Cornelius and I walked around with our mouths open for days in a profound sense of shock and joy. “Who’s in charge here?” we asked each other, smiling dumbly.

I had been writing since I was ten. In all my years of study—from grade school through graduate school—I had never read a black poet. I had never been taught by a black teacher. I was skeptical when I was presented with poems by Langston Hughes when I was sixteen, when I heard the “angry” poems of Haki Madhubuti and Amiri Baraka. There was a suspicion that black people weren’t really good enough to be published, to be poets.

My journey as a poet has been to face the locked places in myself that have blocked expression—shame, self-loathing, doubt—finding, inside me, that dead eye that is able to discern its way down deeper than what is stopping it. I felt that among black people, because of some love I saw present in my childhood, even with the torture we did to each other, there was a knowledge of reasons, a whole-making vision. I hoped for a place beyond the graduate rooms where I was afraid to write about race, and a place beyond the communities of black poets where I was afraid to write about anything else. As I taught in programs where I was the only black, that place became more necessary, clearer.

Looking back, I don’t think I had the will to do it alone, to push through adversity; I needed the support and validation of a community of like-minded people, which I found in Cornelius and Sarah. Cave Canem is a partnership. It would have been a different place if it had been started by one person. The hardest work for me perhaps happened before I said anything; this was the underground work, the willingness to want this space enough to trust. If Cave Canem is a safe space, it was first of all a

safe space for us—not that we always agreed or didn’t argue, but we were and are bound by a desire. There’s an unsteady steadiness in the number three that made things move and kept them stable at the same time. It bespoke the respect we had for each other, which was a hallmark of the safe space we wanted to encourage. I think the first participants felt this. Maybe part of the success came from our love and trust of each other.

Cave Canem is a community of people who share their most intimate desires during a week-long workshop/retreat; it is also about e-mails year-round among two hundred people, about poetry and day-to-day life, about aesthetics, about everything. One year a fellow had to leave on the first night because her grandmother had died; that same year, the first Cave Canem baby, the first baby from among our fellows, was born.

Cave Canem is a hard place. Safe space is paradoxical. It doesn’t mean freedom to write anything without critique. Cave Canem is a place where you are free to risk. This means that you will be critiqued, truthfully, but that you are in a place where you know your critics are on your side, where what you write is deeply important.

Cave Canem is a kind of heaven, yes. It’s not just that we are speaking to each other there as black people; it’s that we’ve lived the lives of black poets. We’ve faced the fears, the hurts, and we’re still poets. To undertake and stay with this task, usually so unrewarded, creates a kind of strength and compassion that is enormous.

Ten years. I was completely amazed when a fellow last year said she hoped that Cave Canem would be around when her new baby was grown. It’s hard to imagine that this thing that began as a tenuous reaching has gone on to become an established organization with staff and an office in New York, made possible by a Ford Foundation grant. And that this “dream” could go on much further into the future. Toni Morrison says that all writers eventually realize that all their writing is about longing for the ancestors. Cave Canem has helped me to understand my usefulness, between those who came before and those who will come after.

Elizabeth Alexander

What has always been vital to me about the space that Cave Canem makes is that I believe we have truly made room for widely divergent spokes of black aesthetics, poetics, and identity. We live, as Lucille Clifton has said, not in “either/or” but in “and/but.” You can see that in the poems collected for this anthology. I always say—occasionally with astonishment—that the Cave Canem community has managed to make a “safe space” for all of us. To invoke Audre Lorde’s theories (and imagine

Audre Lorde as a teacher at Cave Canem, as I'm sure she would have been had she lived longer!), the space made for the apparent differences among us makes space for the differences within us, each of us, as we move through the journeys of our lives and our works. That which Cave Canem has affirmed allows this anthology to fairly represent (represent!) all the mighty multivocality of black poetry in the new millennium.

I think of this big book as evidence—no, as manifestation—of this full and glorious moment in African American poetry. This is the state of the art, and it is sound and robust. These poems range so widely in their subject matter and poetic approach that they remind me of what I am proudest of in Cave Canem: that we have managed to encourage and nurture the voice distinct and that the work does not succumb to received or invented doctrine. The faculty poems in this book set us up to understand that we are coming from many different places and that our community has always been multilingual, variously political, multi- and vari- and distinct as we commune under the metaphysical canopy that is blackness.

We have done something important that will last.

Por fin, I repeat the words of Mendi Obadike's poem (which is itself explicitly, stylistically multivocal): "I feel completely drained. The desire to know more." I would add, to describe my own condition: the desire (and yes, it is desire) to feel more and hear more from these poets who together make this a necessary community, not just Cave Canem with a line drawn around it but rather the wild wooly (yes!) universe of contemporary black poetry. This anthology thrills me, makes me say Yes! Teach! Word! Preach! And once again, YES.

Harryette Mullen

I am grateful to be associated with the diversity, innovation, and respect for tradition that Cave Canem allows and encourages. The idea of a designated space to dream, speak, and write poetry is implicit in the organization's name, referring to the ancient ruins of a poet's house that Cave Canem founders Toi Derricotte and Cornelius Eady visited during a tour of Pompeii. As African American poets traveling in Europe, they were aware that what is called "black experience" is only a part of the life that black people actually experience. They knew that pertinent experience of black individuals and communities often goes unrecognized and unrepresented in literature, art, and popular culture. They envisioned a productive space where black poets, individually and collectively, can inspire and be inspired by others, relieved of any obligation to explain or defend their blackness.

Cave Canem refers to a sign at the entrance of the poet's house, "Beware the dog," with a mosaic of an iconic canine protecting the space of inspiration and creation. As their dream became reality, Toi and Cornelius found splendid places to house the poets of Cave Canem, including a monastery on the Hudson River in New York and an art school in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. The result is not black utopia or a poets' paradise but a plausible and portable literary renaissance that has strengthened connections among black poets while also nurturing an expanding repertoire of black poetry; fostering a broader knowledge of black cultural traditions; and creating valuable institutions such as a public reading series, an annual anthology, a book-publication prize, and an archive of recorded poets' conversations, in addition to the original workshop retreat.

Until my introduction to Cave Canem, I had never entered a room that held as many as sixty black poets. That was inspiration in itself: the sight of all of us together, the range of our voices, the clamor of our work, as we wrote and talked and bopped around the clock. (Afaa Michael Weaver introduced a new poetic form, the bop, at a Cave Canem workshop retreat.) As a faculty poet at Cave Canem, I found many opportunities, as Elizabeth Alexander once said, to move "out of my ruts and predictable selves." I have been as much provoked as affirmed by the energy of our gathering. The Cave Canem poets whose work has been most instructive to me call attention to the myriad ways identity might be constructed. Persistently their poems interrogate the constitutive hybridity of African Americans within the multiplicity of American cultures. As a critical interrogator, the poet stands between opposing definitions of blackness, asking pertinent—and impertinent—questions. I have called it a discourse of "other blackness" as opposed to "black otherness." As Toni Morrison remarked about the various shades and nuances of blackness, it "might as well be a rainbow."

I agree with Elizabeth Alexander that the language and labels we use as readers and critics can obscure significant developments in poetry, as well as interesting turns in the work of individual poets. While the international acclaim accorded to a handful of writers of African descent and the constitution of an African American canon cannot be the end of the story, these developments certainly underscore the truth that the work of black writers has "major" impact and "universal" appeal. To my way of thinking, the existence of such canonized authors allows any one of us more freedom to explore within, around, and beyond the permeable and movable borders of any established tradition.

I would say that African American poets today, as during the 1970s Black Arts Movement, are engaged in spirited, sometimes contentious conversations about aesthetics, identity, culture, politics, and their pos-

sible interaction in the lives and works of artists. What seems to characterize the current conversation is a greater tolerance of difference, uncertainty, and even confusion in our lives and in our work as poets. We can exist as black artists without hermetic definitions of art or blackness. I believe this attitude is a valuable legacy of black struggle for self-determination. Our embrace of diversity seems to me a consequence of the Black Arts Movement's bold and explicit declaration of a black aesthetic, positing as its foundation the beauty and integrity of black people and cultures. Rather than suppressing formal innovation, the poets and theorists issuing manifestos of the Black Arts Movement insisted that decisions regarding the artist's use of form, content, convention, and innovation should be motivated by the desire to transform the representation and reality of black humanity.

I also find the spirit of poetic innovation in unexpected places within traditions of black writing. It exists not only in the poetry of such African American antecedents as Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, Robert Hayden, Melvin Tolson, Stephen Jonas, Russell Atkins, Bob Kaufman, and Amiri Baraka but also in the fiction of Jean Toomer, Fran Ross, Henry Dumas, William Melvin Kelly, Clarence Major, Ishmael Reed, Toni Cade Bambara, and Toni Morrison. It seems likely that Toomer's mixed-genre novel *Cane* and Hughes's montage poems, along with the prose and documentary poems of Brooks and Hayden, have permitted other African American writers to break through boundaries of genre and to authorize innovative or alternative forms. I am thinking of risk-taking passages in notable works of fiction, such as the haunting poetic monologue of the supernatural voice in Morrison's *Beloved*, as well as such inventive works of quilt-stitched fiction as Alice Walker's *Meridian* and Ntozake Shange's *Sassafrass, Cypress and Indigo*. This innovative impulse also can be found in the theater works of Adrienne Kennedy, Ntozake Shange, and Suzan-Lori Parks and the films of Charles Burnett and Julie Dash.

This publication celebrates the occasion of the tenth anniversary of Cave Canem and displays the dazzling diversity of our black rainbow. CC writers, see what we have done! Every poet associated with Cave Canem was invited to submit poems for consideration. While the constraint of space limits each selected poet to one poem, the advantage is that 124 poems from CC-seasoned poets are collected in this volume, which includes faculty poets, first-book prize recipients, and workshop participants.

The anthology will mean different things to different people. Despite the belief I share with our founders and other Cave Canem poets that this organization is intended to support the creative process of the poet and the poetry community rather than to establish "any received or invented doctrine," some readers might regard this collection as simply

another exclusive anthology published by a self-proclaimed aesthetic school or literary faction defined in part by the politics of identity. For others it might offer evidence of accomplishment or a glimpse of the possible. For those of us who have entered the protected space that Cornelius Eady and Toi Derricotte envisioned and created, this publication is a virtual homecoming or reunion, an occasion to acknowledge and appreciate our individual and collective survival as poets. It may become an occasion for actual reunions as the poets published here meet again at public readings of these poems. In the pages of this book, as in the many rooms of the Cave Canem poets' house, I find writers cultivating traditions, committing transgressions, and contemplating just about anything that might be imagined between those divergent positions. This anthology, as selective as it is, offers—yes, as Elizabeth Alexander affirms—a tantalizing sampler of “the mighty multivocality of black poetry.”