

Conditions of the Sale: A Review of Camille T. Dungy's *Suck on the Marrow*

"When folks figure you are their slave, your past belongs to them. / And mind you, they might try to grab your future too." —Ama Ata Aidoo. Thus begins the calculation that is Camille T. Dungy's second book of poems, *Suck on the Marrow*. In this impressive work, Dungy creates and explores the lives of several free (or freed) black Americans who found themselves the victims of the slave trade after the United States officially halted their participation in slave trafficking. Due to this perfunctory withdrawal, slave smuggling and breeding, as well as the kidnapping of free blacks in the US, steadily rose throughout the mid- and latter nineteenth century.

In Dungy's book, we are introduced to several convergent figures: Joseph Freeman, a free black kidnapped and forced into slavery in 1831; Molly and Shad, two lovers who find themselves entangled on the same plantation; Rebecca and Dinah, house slaves who take divergent paths while seeking escape; and Melinda Freeman, the wife and near-widow of Joseph Freeman. Readers are introduced to Joseph Freeman via the voice of the slave trapper in the book's opening poem, "The Trapper's Boast." It begins: "Give me a crowd of colored men and I can spot the new arrivals—/freed men or fugitives—/I can tell them from those born with a claim to their flesh." Here, Dungy sets the precedent for many of the book's underlying themes. The slave trapper, much like those stolen back into slavery, is a mythic character in American history. His voice is seldom heard and certainly unwarranted now that the institution has been repudiated by the powers that be. *Suck on the Marrow* begins with a slave trapper delineating the various types of soon-to-be slaves: runaways about to be re-indentured, freedmen desperate for any sliver of civility, and free men born outside of the institution but endangered by it nonetheless. Throughout the book's six sections, Dungy resurrects and humanizes some of those lost to history's short and feeble memory.

In a seven-section poem titled "From the Unwritten Letters of Joseph Freeman," the book's pinnacle character writes to his wife, Melinda. Freeman's letters span a period of seven years and describe in snippets the long heartache that is plantation life. In the first letter, the speaker intones: "Melinda, I've been preparing to write . . . but tonight Lila got caught up/ under the good Doctor's whip/ for such a little offense. I am frightened." The strength in Freeman's voice most often lies in its honest simplicity. Another letter asks, "Do you ever start at night believing/ I might be dead? I leave my body/ sometimes, Melinda. Is that all dying is?" and, after a dead slave was brought back after attempting escape, the news is grisly, "Jackson used Ben/ like a scarecrow, his shirt hooked on a pole,/ his body meant to warn us

Remica L. Bingham-Risher

earned an MFA from Bennington College and is a Cave Canem fellow. Her first book, *Conversion*, won the Naomi Long Madgett Poetry Award, was published by Lotus Press and shortlisted for the Hurston/Wright Legacy Award. A book of her selected poems, *The Seams of Memory*, will be translated into Arabic and published in 2010 in conjunction with the Kalima Project. Currently, she serves as the Writing Competency Coordinator at Norfolk State University.
