

Notes from the Editor

Writing North Carolina: A Homegirl's Homage



No thought is sweet but home.
From "The Traveller"
George Moses Horton, 1845

I constantly felt (as I suppose many an ambitious girl has felt) a thumping from within unanswered by any beckoning from without.

Anna Julia Cooper

When the world thinks of the creative energies native to North Carolina, it is often with our musicians in mind: Coltrane's signature genius, the keyboard dexterity of Thelonious Monk, the funk-filled—and long lived—vibrations of George Clinton, the satin politics of Nina Simone, the vocal and musical interplay of Roberta Flack. Max Roach, Maceo Parker, Billy Strayhorn, Tony Terry, Nneena Freelon: the list of those "playing" North Carolina is extensive. Less celebrated, though just as noteworthy, are North Carolina's writers of African descent. Of those "writing" North Carolina, it is perhaps certain that most readers are familiar with the North Carolinian writers of the nineteenth century: George Moses Horton, Harriet Jacobs, Charles Chesnutt, Anna Julia Cooper. Although contemporary North Carolina writers of African descent are internationally known—the list is long and noteworthy—there has never been a volume dedicated solely to the literary output of contemporary writers of African descent from North Carolina. This collection is a ground-breaking look at African-descent writers in North Carolina.

This issue of *Obsidian*, then, entitled *Aforebo: A Harvest of North Carolina Writers of African Descent*, is an answer to a "thumping" and "beckoning" of mind, the kind of creative and purposeful call and response that inspired Anna Julia Cooper, both born and buried in North Carolina, to write. This issue also echoes how George Moses Horton, the "Black bard" born into slavery in Orange County, North Carolina, who ends his poem, "The Traveller" with the passage that opens this essay; "The Traveller" opens with an adage that this issue also intones, "Tis sweet to think of home."

In fact, North Carolina has an understudied Black history that includes being home to Manassas Pope, the only city in the country in which a person of African descent ran for mayor in 1919, the year best remembered for the Blood Summer that defined the racial wars of the era. Pope was a graduate of another part of North Carolina history, the first and only four-year medical school for African Americans and the only four-year medical school in the United States, the Leonard Medical School of Shaw University, which educated Black physicians from 1881 to 1918. North Carolina is also the birthplace of Sarah and Elizabeth Delany, co-authors of *Having Our Say: The Delany Sisters' First 100 Years*. "Sadie"

and “Bess,” as they were affectionately known, are the paternal aunts of science fiction genius Samuel R. Delany who, though born in New York, writes in a way that echoes something of North Carolina. It is the state accused—falsely—of being the place where Charles Drew, the African American pioneer of blood transfusions, was denied the life-saving procedure he created when he died at a Burlington hospital in 1950. It is a place remembered for the Wilmington Race Riot of 1898 and of the Wilmington Ten of the 1970s. Yet it is also the place where the first dormitory built to support the education of African American women in the United States, Estey Hall, is located. North Carolina is the home of the Black Theatre Festival, a thriving intellectual and cultural enterprise. It birthed Romare Bearden, whose artistic talents captured the attention of his generation; Bearden was born in Charlotte, North Carolina in 1911. Jackie “Moms” Mabley, the multifaceted comic and actress also hailed from North Carolina. In 1931, “Moms” collaborated with a writer who spent several years writing plays and teaching at North Carolina Central University, Zora Neale Hurston, to create a Broadway play entitled *Fast and Furious: A Colored Revue in 37 Scenes*. It is this kind of rich, textual and textured history that we hoped to capture in this focus on contemporary African-descent writers of North Carolina.

When our guest editor Lenard Moore and I first discussed the possibility of an issue of Obsidian focused on African descent writers from North Carolina, it was in 2007. We initially planned to focus only on poetry. However, the more we engaged with the topic, the more we became convinced of the wealth of literary riches that we could tap into for this issue. We decided to present the range of literary talent centered in North Carolina. I do not believe that either of us imagined what a generous harvest that this issue would become. *Yet Aforebo: A Harvest of North Carolina Writers* presents drama, fiction, poetry and non-fiction from North Carolina writers, some renowned and some soon to be, whose texts write contemporary North Carolina.

Each of the authors featured in this issue have been shaped by North Carolina either as natives or as émigrés. For many, North Carolina is the place in which their literary genius was nurtured when they were students. For others, North Carolina is the space that became home both as a place of residence and as a place where their writing became realized. This issue has also drawn heavily on and is indebted to the creative energies of current and past members of the Carolina African American Writers’ Collective, which was founded in 1992 by the guest editor for this issue, the internationally acclaimed poet, Lenard D. Moore. The CAAWC has the distinction of having fostered the talents of many well-known and talented writers who we are privileged to welcome to this issue including Jaki Shelton Greene—celebrated as the first Piedmont Laureate in 2009, Carole Boston Weatherford—recipient of the North Carolina Award for Literature this year, L. Teresa Church, Evie Shockley, Camille Dungy, Ebony Golden, Gina Streaty, Darrell “SCIPOET” Stover, Diane Judge, Beverly Fields Burnette, Chantal James, and Gideon Young, as well as celeste doaks and L. Lamar Wilson, two amazing new voices that have previously been featured in Obsidian. The CAAWC is the longest continuously-running African American writer’s collective in North Carolina, and we are pleased to present many of the voices from the Collective in this issue. As Grace Ocasio, another CAAWC member, notes in her tribute to the Collective, the members of the CAAWC are truly passionate about their work.