

Poetry

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violence, low self-esteem and racial self-destruction are obviously intended to move the reader toward a greater appreciation of the beauty and potential of the African-American.

That beauty, though, is never glimpsed in Brantley's political poems; it shines radiantly only through the love poems he has written to his wife.

"My Woman in Black" makes explicit the connection between her color and her lovable qualities. But it's in *Love, the Power and the Harmony*, the only poem in Brantley's book "Ink" that does not deal with the issue of race at all, that his capacity for profound and tender love is revealed: "My strength/is the power to cut weeds/and grow flowers. /My love is a garden/of ever-blooming harmony. / You are my sunshine and rain. / I am Earth and seed. /Blessed is our garden. /Blossoming is our love."

Brantley's poetry is sophisticated and polished. He co-hosts an ongoing weekly poetry workshop with Pendelita Toney at the Westside Cultural Arts Center, Saturday afternoons from 2:30-4:30. The focus is on black poets.

He hopes to attract poets, especially shy ones to the workshops. Though he has been writing poetry since his high school days, he started acknowledging his gift in his mid-twenties.

"There's a certain shyness in male poets," he said. "They think it's unmanly to open themselves up, and that's a stupid attitude."

The workshop is open to kids ages 10 to 17, but Brantley hopes to begin including adults. "We have to get people coming so they can inspire each other," he said.

Cosmo Coley: Poets are soul of our society

Cosmo Coley could also be called a social critic, although her poems are less angry, more sad.

"I don't believe in hitting someone over the head with poetry," she said. "Poets are the soul of our society, and we must write about those things that people are afraid to look at, like child abuse, sexual abuse and battery. We're responsible to put it in a palatable way, so people will be able to feel the pain and will want to do something about it."

Coley, 32, has been a domestic abuse investigator since graduating from college in 1987. One Friday night, she said, she walked into the emergency room at University Medical Center, to do an investigation and saw battered women lined up on the benches waiting for treatment.

"I thought, 'Where are the reporters? Why isn't this being covered?'"

So in her work, Coley tries to speak through and for the abuse victims of abuse she works with. The words can be stark and powerfully ironic, as when she takes on the voice of the child, as in "The Rescuers":

"Mothers love their children and tell the truth.
When our enemy found us they put us
in a safe place and there was no more war.
My mother told me we were at war. Lie."

Most of Coley's poems focus on domestic violence, child abuse, racial prejudice and women's issues. She believes that minority women have an especially hard time, being both ethnic and female, but hopes to speak to the lives of all women, regardless of color and creed.

"As women, we're put in categories and boxes right from the get-go, and even though we have to work, take care of the house and take care of the children, still and always we have to prove our worth."

Coley dreamed of being a writer, but was told in high school not to pursue it. So she stopped writing. She picked up a pen 10 years later. "It was such a burning passion," she said.

Recently, Marcia Robinson, director of the West Las Vegas Arts Center, a place Coley frequents, saw a poem Coley wrote lying on a table and asked her to read it during the center's Black Literature and Humanities Festival.

"I don't know how," she said at first. She did know how. And her performance yielded other opportunities, including a collaborative exhibit at the center featuring her poetry and photographs by James Broussard.

Coley, who wants to make it as a writer, is looking to publish a novel she began in 1996 and recently finished. Titled *The Culture Zone*, the novel addresses issues of racism and sexism.



COSMO COLEY



Angel Washington talks life through art

Angel Washington shares that aspiration. She wants to build on her local success and go national — she has read her poetry at the Martin Luther King Jr. banquet for the last two years and has performed twice at the Rose Awards.

Washington aims to write about "things that are true." "I will not become a victim of society / he who does nothing but complain," she declares in an untitled poem. Her poetic stance defiant, not aggressive.

In *Just Passing Through*, she explores the dilemma of having a negro heritage and a fair complexion: "All my life, I've been 'passing' as white." Toward the end, the poet decides to stop passing: "I found there's nothing to hide/'cause while taking the negro ride/I've come to like my negro side."

She stands up for gender in *Damsel in Distress*: "No, I don't think so, my brotha/I'm a woman with a plan/As capable as any man ... I refuse/To be used/Or abused /By anyone including you..."

Washington tries to make a statement in her poetry. "I would like for people to understand each other, racially and sexually," said the single mother who uses poetry as a vehicle to demonstrate her self-respect.

Rodney Lee performs through poetry

Rodney J. Lee took a circuitous route to poetry: He started with theater.

Since childhood, Lee has worked with Las Vegas's top acting companies. But when he got a job in a local hotel as a graveyard-shift cook, his acting career was shelved.

Lee began writing poetry in his late teens, and, missing the stage, used it as a creative outlet. He found the cafe poetry scene offered a venue where he could perform without a care; no rehearsals, costumes or backstage snafus.

Readings at Espresso Roma and other cafes, punctuated by Lee's stage-honed presence and forceful projection made him a hit. He commanded attention.

"I've been fortunate as a poet," he said, referring to the opportunity to showcase his talent at cafes, performance art productions and on radio shows.

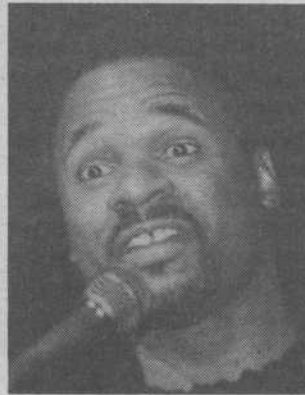
An artist-in-residence grant from the Nevada State Council on the Arts took him to schools around the state. When the council teamed him up with a saxophone player, a dancer and a percussionist playing African drums, the group found a groove and began racking up show dates.

At the time, Lee was finishing a degree in education. Now an English teacher at Chaparral High School, he continues his poetry performances in special events, such as at last week's "Poetry and Motion" dance recital at UNLV.

In "The Bones of Our Father," one of the poems he performed there, Lee manhood, contrasting the image crafted by pop culture with the image he knows via his life as a husband, father and teacher.

For Hammond, writing transcends all

Rocky Hammond likes working with children. After serving



RODNEY LEE

Upcoming poetry events

April is National Poetry Month, and Borders Books on Rainbow and Lake Mead has scheduled a roster of free events to celebrate it.

A week of live poetry kicks it off, beginning on Wednesday, April 1st and continuing with readings on Thursday, Friday, Saturday and Monday evenings at 7 p.m., with a matinee on Sunday at 2 p.m.

Cosmo Coley is one of the readers on the list for Friday, April 3. Keith Brantley and Pendelita Toney's Youth Writers Workshop will be the focus of the Sunday afternoon event, which also features children's music and poetry by Susie Pinjuv. All the evening events will include an open-mike opportunity for those who wish to sign up.

Later in the month, Borders will hold a reception for Andrew Carroll of the American Poetry and Literacy Project. In partnership with the Academy of American Poets, Carroll left New York on April 1st with 100,000 copies of two poetry anthologies, *101 Great American Poems* and *African-American Poetry*, which he will give away at bookstores, libraries, markets, prisons, zoos, schools and truckstops as he completes a month-long cross-country tour. The reception will be held on Friday, April 24 at 7 p.m.

Terry Wade and Kyle Heckard announce a new weekly poetry reading on Wednesday nights from 8:00 till 11:00 at the Thunderbird Hotel. Wade and Heckard, of the House of Flavors, have been arranging poetry readings for some time. Though they've focused primarily on African-Americans, anyone is welcome. The weekly readings will have an open-mike format. Admission is free for poets, \$5 for listeners. For information, call 383-3100 or 636-0343.

Also, there are weekly open-mike poetry readings at coffee houses throughout the valley almost every night of the week: Mondays, 8 p.m. at Cafe Espresso Roma, Wednesdays, 7 p.m. at Enigma Garden Cafe, Thursdays, 7 p.m. at Borders on Rainbow, Fridays, 7 p.m. at Brewed Awakening, and Saturdays, 7 p.m. at Jitters on N. Rancho.

in the Marine Corps, Hammond spent some time working with children, and learned that the greatest value of a uniform is what you can do with it off the job.

Visiting firemen, policemen and other professionals at his school when he was a young child left an indelible impression. He decided then, he said, that he wanted to be a fireman. He forgot about that dream, until recently.

Now at age 30, he's going through the Fire Department's testing process, and is confident that he can do the job. He yearns to visit every elementary school in the county, and, during his days off, wants to be a positive role model for local children.

During his tour of duty in the Marine Corps Crash, Fire and Rescue program, Hammond did a lot of traveling and saw a lot of pain. He emerged from that experience with a philosophy: "In all countries, on all continents, in all walks of life, we're all human, and we've all been put on this earth for a reason. Regardless of our sexual, religious or lifestyle preference and regardless of race, we all feel pain, we all laugh, we all cry, we all have a spirit. And it's not just the human beings, it's also the animals, the earth, the stars, the rain ..."

His experience enabled him to shed the cloak of racism. "Years before Tiger Woods hit the spotlight, I was saying that I don't call myself African-American," he said. "My ancestry is African, Irish, Seneca, Blackfoot and Chippewa." He's pleased with all of it. "You tend to take a person's soul away when you start defining everything," he explains. "There's no mystery left after that."

Hammond said he can put himself in anyone's shoes, such empathy feeds his poetic passion. Like Young, he believes the inspiration comes from the divine, and that he channels God's love, through words, to those in need.

Painfully shy as a child and with an older brother who always spoke for him, Hammond talked little until high school when he became interested in girls.

He wrote love letters to get girls' attention and got so good that his letter-writing skills were in demand.

Hammond wants his work to make people think and contribute to community uplift.

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