

# Black Matter is Life: Poetry for Engagement and Overcoming

## Statement of Intent

By Dennis Britton

In her 1985 essay “Poetry is not a Luxury,” Audre Lorde writes, “The quality of light by which we scrutinize our lives has direct bearing upon the product which we live, and upon the changes which we hope to bring about through those lives. It is within this light that we form those ideas by which we pursue our magic and make it realized. This is poetry as illumination, for it is through poetry that we give name to those ideas which are, until the poem, nameless and formless--about to be birthed, but already felt.” For Lorde, poetry is a light that is uniquely capable of birthing new ideas, knowledge, feelings, and forms of existence because it is not bound to follow the rules of language and communication dictated by white patriarchy—language shapes reality and has often been used as a tool of oppression. As a Black lesbian, Lorde was keenly aware that in order to live and not just survive she needed to name and bring into being things felt but not yet materialized in the world. Through poetry, she believed, new possibilities for living could come into being. Lorde’s essay was directed specifically to women in 1985, but I believe anyone wanting to produce more inclusive, equitable communities can learn from “Poetry is not a Luxury.” Her insights frame my understanding of the Black Heritage Trail of New Hampshire series, “The Black Matter is Life: Poetry for Engagement and Overcoming.” In these arguably dark times, when so many are looking to recreate the American experience, we all could use better light to help us find our way.

The three programs within this series are designed to shed a specifically African American light through which New Hampshire residents and others can scrutinize their understandings of race and contemporary events—including, though not limited to, Black Lives Matter protests. Through poetry—an artform that requires close reading, question asking, and critical engagement to construct meaning—participants in the programs will be encouraged to think and ask questions about the diversity of ways African American poets have represented Black experience and what it means to be Black. The poems have been divided into what Dr. Reginald Wilburn (the program co-facilitator and Associate Professor of African American Literature at UNH) and I see as three important topics of African American poetry: tradition, protest, and love. From the very beginning, African American poets have grappled with their place within poetic tradition, and with what white racism constructs as oxymoronic: Black poet. The 18th-century African American poet Phyllis Wheatly would answer this question by demonstrating that she had mastered the language and forms that white Americans and Europeans esteemed, while poets of the Black Arts Movement (1960s and 70s) were more interested in working within a distinctly Black tradition. Regardless of how African American poets have positioned their work within tradition, this positioning is inherently a form of protest. The audacity to be a poet defies expectations regarding Black people's labor. But poets have also, of course, used poems to protest systemic racism directly. And it is impossible to have a program devoted to poetry and not discuss love as fundamental to human experience. Despite racism and injustice, African American poetry shows that love is still possible.

The series title, “Black Matter is Life,” of course, plays off “Black Lives Matter.” But Dr. Wilburn, who came up with the title, wanted the title itself to invoke thought: What is “Black matter” and what does it mean for “Black matter” to be “life.” We will of course be interested to hear how participants make sense of the series title. For me, however, the title points to the fact that there is a materiality—a tangibility—of blackness

that is life giving. In one of my favorite poems, “won’t you celebrate with me,” Lucile Clifton writes, “come celebrate with me that everyday / something has tried to kill me / and has failed.” Clifton captures a joy of living in the face of always imminent death. It is the ability to find joy in simply staying alive in a world hostile one’s existence—through the middle passage, slavery, Jim Crow, racialized misogyny, and systemic white supremacy—that participants will find in African American poetry. Black American experience is material and tangible—it can provide us with models for living.

In each program, Professor Wilburn and I will provide a brief introduction to the assigned poems. (Participants will be given poems and a study guide to work through before the programs.) We will then engage participants in discussion. Our guiding questions will be:

- How do the poems provide different ways of thinking about the specific topics (tradition, protest, love) and the overall theme?
- To what extent do the different poems treat the topics similarly or differently? And how might other aspects of the authors’ identities (e.g., gender, age, sexuality, class) and their historical situatedness explain similarities and difference?
- How do the poems complicate what we know about racism, both in the past and in the present?
- How might the poems offer solutions or courses of action to address racism?

We will gauge the success of the program by the number of participants who attend and the depth of engagement with the poems and guiding

questions. The hope is that participants will leave the programs with a new appreciation for how African American poetry can shed light on how we understand our nation's past and present, and how we might imagine our nation's future. In addition to this, I hope that participants will leave the series with a poem that will give them strength to create new tomorrows.