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Foreword Review POETRY

The BreakBeat Poets: New American Poetry in the Age of Hip-Hop

Kevin Coval, Editor
Quraysh Ali Lansana, Editor
Nate Marshall, Editor
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Authors from a wide range of marginalized existences compose modern poetry in this exciting, important collection.

The BreakBeat Poets: New American Poetry in the Age of Hip Hop offers a thrilling vortex of diverse voices. Born between 1961 and 1999, the chronologically assembled poets present a panorama "by and for the hip-hop generation." The editors—Kevin Coval, Quraysh Ali Lansana, and Nate Marshall—are all well-known practitioners of BreakBeat. In the introduction, Coval explains: "This is the story of how generations of young people reared on hip-hop culture and aesthetics took to the page and poem and microphone to create a movement in American Letters in the tradition of Black Arts, Nuyorican, and Beat Generations and add to it and innovate on top."

Although the writers all fall within the BreakBeat school and often tackle themes of identity and race, the forms range from conventional to experimental, from tightly constructed narratives to sprawling streams of consciousness. In "B-Boy Infinitives," Patrick Rosal riffs on nostalgia: "To suck until our lips turned blue / the last drops of cool juice / from a crumbled cup sopped with spit the first Italian Ice of summer." It's a poem that relies on imagery and internal rhyme. Others belie convention, channeling a beat, like Jamila Woods in "Defense": "black boy touch turn / anything weapon / him Grim Reaper / Midas / him smile." Joy Priest's wildly inventive "No Country for Black Boys" presents a poem in two columns, which is perfectly coherent whether you read across or down. The first few lines can be read either "when walking while black / i am always there" or "when walking while black / from a 7-eleven."

There are many ghosts that haunt this collection, from Amiri Baraka to Notorious B.I.G. It's not necessary to be familiar with their work, but sometimes it deepens understanding. As Coval notes, "Some references will fly over the head of the reader not immersed in the culture of generation." If this is you, try beginning with the "Ars Poeticas and Essays" section at the end of the book.

From slavery to Jim Crow, from gang violence to black identity, *The BreakBeat Poets* presents an enthralling and necessary overview of an often overlooked vein of contemporary poetry.

JOSH COOK (Summer 2015)

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