ForeWord Reviews

ESSAYS

The Grey Album: On the Blackness of Blackness
Kevin Young
Graywolf Press
978-1-55597-607-1
(March 2012)

"Tradition," writes Kevin Young, "is not what you inherit, but what you seek, and then seek to keep." In this book, winner of Graywolf Press's Nonfiction Prize, Young ranges over his own cultural inheritance, exploring, uncovering, and reclaiming the meanings embedded in the art of African American writers, poets, and musicians, and mapping their influence on white artists and American culture. In the process, he argues for "the centrality of black people to the American experience, to the dream of America."

Dreams are important here. Dreaming, "storying," the artful dodge—these are essential strategies for the survival of an oppressed people. Storying is a way to counterfeit, even invert, white authority and, eventually, counterfeit freedom provides for the real thing. And while he's not the first to suggest this, Young also notes that the idea of America is itself a dream, "a fabrication dependent on African-American labor."

This book is not quickly digested. Its length is matched by its density, and generous notes indicate that for everything Young packed into this virtuosic, encyclopedic foray into prose, there is even more that he could have included.

For sweep alone, this is an important book; it notes interconnections between artists, movements, and genres: Hughes, Wheatley, Wright, Dunbar, Kaufman, Eliot, Pound, Lady Day, The Bird, Satchmo, Tupac, modernism, hip-hop, soul, and blues. But these connections are complex. When white culture adopts black culture, it often misses nuances, instances where the latter is parody or resistance. Young considers this contraband: the "adopting of black masks and then mistaking them for a face." If, as Virginia Woolf wrote, "Anonymous was a woman," then "Pseudonymous has always been black."

Don't mistake this book as only of interest to African American scholars. Young's point: "American culture is black culture—and it is this unique African-American culture that in large part makes American culture popular the world over." And while the book is a big read, Young's voice—clear, playful, and flowing freely from one idea to another—makes it a pleasurable one. The final chapter, a lovely response to the periodic lament that poetry is dead,

is a must-read for poets. Just as he reilluminates cultural history, Young also, as Robert Polito writes in the afterword, reclaims “criticism as a form of experimental literature.” This book should be in every public American library and the private collections of readers interested in music, literature, and cultural history.

Young is curator and Atticus Haygood Professor at Emory University. He has written seven poetry collections, one of which, *Jelly Roll: A Blues*, was a finalist for the National Book Award.

Teresa Scollon