



vegetable dish) made with sweet potatoes.

Everything is intertwined. Rabbi Jeffrey Wohlberg and Pastor Charles Smith both lead the ceremony. The opening song of the Seder is “Go Down Moses,” a shared expression of pain and promise. African-American and Jewish children sing the four questions of the Seder, in English and Hebrew. In the Haggadah or Passover narrative, prophets from Abraham Joshua Heschel to Martin Luther King, Jr., foretell a peaceful age. Jewish and African-American songs bleed into each other, “Dayenu” and “Oh Freedom.” At the end, the *hallel*, or songs of praise, are “We Shall Overcome” and “Lift Every Voice and Sing.”

Why do I return each year?
It's satisfying to see old
friends from past Seders and
new faces, all of us savoring
the gift of freedom. With
affection, I call it the “Soul
Food” Seder.

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The Ubiquitous Poetry of Washington, D.C.

by Kenneth Carroll

The official history of poetry in Washington is told primarily by its scholars and formal institutions. Since the 1800s the Library of Congress has been a magnet pulling the great poets of the world to our city. Universities like Howard,

Georgetown, American, and George Washington have also hosted their share of poets. But the true story of Washington poetry is found in the neighborhoods where poets lived and the everyday lives of people they witnessed. Poets like Georgia Douglas Johnson, May Miller, Sterling Brown, and Jean Toomer all found considerable inspiration in the neighborhoods and the people

who inhabited them. Johnson's weekly “S Street Salon” hosted the likes of Toomer, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, and Angelina Grimke, who often introduced new works there.

Today, in addition to its vibrant written literary tradition, D.C. has become one of the most exciting cities for spoken-word poets and performers. Why is understandable if we examine two important D.C. community institutions that were born in the 1970s.

“It was when I began ‘The Poet and the Poem’ that I learned how ubiquitous poetry was in Washington, D.C.,” relates Grace Cavalieri, founder and host of the ground-breaking radio program that has captured the ears and hearts of Washington-area poetry lovers for 20 years on Pacifica outlet WPFW 89.3 FM. What Cavalieri discovered when she opened the airwaves for poets



to hear and be heard was that a deep folk tradition existed in D.C. It manifested itself through the barbers, grocery clerks, and church deacons who called in to be a part of Cavalieri's "Dial-A-Poem" program. "The Poet and the Poem" featured not only the literary greats who lived and performed in D.C., it also featured our neighbors in Anacostia and Brookland who wrote poetry to raise the everydayness of their lives to art. Many emerging poets have discovered themselves and been discovered as a result of Cavalieri's program, which now reaches poetry fans across the United States and around the world through its association with the Library of Congress and public radio.

"We announced our presence to the world in 1977 by coming on the air with the music of Duke Ellington and the poetry of Sterling Brown," says Cavalieri, who would continue this rich mix of music and poetry with her annual poetry and music celebrations at the famed DC Space nightclub.

"I wanted to create a reading series that would provide opportunities and access for African American, women's, and other voices which tend to get marginalized in our society,"

responds E. Ethelbert Miller, when asked why he started his award-winning

Ascension Reading Series. Begun in 1974, the Ascension readings are D.C.'s longest-running reading series. In addition to providing a platform for celebrated poets, Miller, like Cavalieri, would tap the unheard and uncelebrated voices of D.C. communities to fill out the over one hundred readings he has hosted since the program's inception. But what truly makes the Ascension read-

ings special is the way Miller uses them to bridge and create community. "Everyone here should leave with one new phone number of a person you don't know, and you should get together to set up your own readings," is a standard appeal Miller uses to begin or end his series. Ascension readings have acted as the basis for dialogue between D.C.'s Black, Latino, gay, and straight communities.

Ascension's ripple effect is evidenced by the proliferation of readings, slams, performances, and other spoken-word collaborations over the past two decades between poets who first met after braving the stairs at Founders Library on the Howard

University campus and finding themselves in Miller's domain — the Afro-American Resource Center. Ascension would be one of the first reading series to feature young poets whose primary poetic influence was hip-hop.

Miller's and Cavalieri's programs have made space and opportunity for the flowering of the spoken word in Washington, D.C., by sanctifying the voices of poets laureate and bus drivers, Pulitzer Prize winners and the homeless, academics and recovering addicts. What "The Poet and the Poem" and the Ascension Reading Series have done is to use the art of the spoken word to create new communities by building bridges and tearing down fences. Cavalieri and Miller have

found poetry everywhere in Washington, and have created safe and familial places for that poetry to be heard. "The Duke" and Sterling would be proud.

Kenneth Carroll, a native Washingtonian, is a poet, playwright, and a freelance features writer. His poetry, plays, and essays have been widely published. He is Executive Director of DC WritersCorps, an award-winning arts and community service program.

"BEFORE THE ALPHABET"

Jane Alberdeston-Coralin

Yo pledge Allegiance to the flag
of the place my Papi moved us to
and
to which republic where we to stand
buried in the tin heart of a tank
One family divisible
under God
Whisper Shango, Allelulia Dios
arroz con leche es la libertad
Where is the liberty
We have liberty?
Yeah —
just as we fall

Puertorriqueña Jane Alberdeston-Coralin came to D.C. in 1995, and found a home in the Black writers' community. She is a co-founder of the Modern Urban Griots, a local poetry performance collective, and one of the writers who has shared her work on "The Poet and the Poem." Her most recent collection of poems is The Afro Taina Dreams.