

Mother Earth Responds: Green Poems & Alternative Visions

reviewed by Kamaria Muntu

In the seminal anthology *Black Nature: Four centuries of African American Nature Poetry*, editor Camille Dungy imports “For years, poets and critics have called for broader inclusiveness in conversations about ecocriticism and ecopoetics, one that acknowledges other voices and a wider range of cultural and ethnic concerns. African-Americans specifically, are fundamental to the natural fabric of this nation but have been noticeably absent from tables of contents. To bring more voices into the conversation about human interaction with the natural world, we must change the parameters of the conversation.¹”

Askia Toure, award winning poet and one of the original architects of BAM (the renowned Black Arts Movement of the 1960’s¹), could safely assert that he has been lyrically engaged in ecopoetic conversations for all of his writing life. Yet, with *Mother Earth Responds: green poems & alternative visions*, Toure solidifies his ecological passion and commitment with poems and short narratives that speak directly to the womb/beat of the natural world; the properties of *Ile* (Earth) and the interdependent nature of variegated realms of creation. In his introductory narrative, “We Call, Mother Earth Responds: From the Doctrine” Toure asserts “What we fail to realize is that all things are connected. This earth and its creatures are interconnected, so that what we wish, think, feel affects all life. A spiritual web connects all creatures in the subtle web of Being; and if you despise Black people, red people, brown people, yellow people, women, gays, lesbians, the subtle, psychic Web of Existence picks up and records your vibrations.”

In his considerable breadth of work Toure has consistently positioned his art in defence of the oppressed African nation at home and worldwide. His aesthetic valuation has invested as much in Black people’s historical memory of origin as it has in prevailing conditions of institutionalized racist offensives. In fact, thematically central to his work is the concomitant character of past, present and future tenses of *being*. Toure writes, “I walk across time-zones, centuries, a myriad of Kaplas, World Ages, groping for a Way, a Path leading to Memory and Meaning...”

This pursuit of “memory and meaning” is illuminated in Toure’s narrative wherein he poses the question “What Is the Essence of Sacredness in Our Modern Lives?” He answers:

...”Here in the programmed confusion of the Post-Modern Era, a Place/Time ruled by Anglo materialists bereft of a sense of the Spirit, who only claim God in a text, and use said text to whip to lash Humanity with their heinous World-view.”

Not unlike previous books “African Affirmations: Songs For Patriots,” American Book Award winning “*From the Pyramids to the Projects: Poems of Genocide and Resistance!*” and the classically brilliant “*Dawnsong!: The Epic Memory of Askia Toure,*” the textual composition of *Mother Earth Responds* continues to underscore BAM poet Larry Neal’s¹ assertion that the Black Arts movement was a “spiritual sister” of the Black Power concept. In his speech, “*To the Poets of the Future,*” Toure seeks to further a legacy of resistance to cultural apathy and enslavement to Eurocentric ideals by engendering a sense of activist history and communal responsibility in poets to come.

“From the young, gifted Bards of the Harlem Renaissance, who heralded a “New Negro” informed with Garveyite and Duboisian Pan Africanism, to Langston Hughes’ radical “Racial Mountain,” the voice of the poet and the popular voice were one bright jazz trumpet solo above the racist psychosis of lynch-driven White America.” Askia Toure (Clark Atlanta University)

For Toure, a way to heal, to re-evolutionize his people scarred and traumatized by the psychological wounds of slavery, centuries of dehumanizing treatment by “rabid racists” and current debasement, exploitation and horror at the hands of institutionalized white supremacy and neo-colonialism, is to restore the genius and eloquence of African cultural contribution to the world of history and art. He and other BAM pioneers have consistently upheld African-American Classical Music/Jazz as a foundation to build upon Black aesthetics. In “*Sketches of Black African Dance*” Toure bedazzles us with the spectacle of lithe and rhythmic Black dancers in a descriptive narrative cadence where we almost pat our feet to King Oliver’s pithy West End Blues blown through his soulful ragtime cornet. Toure writes:

“Capture the flash and dazzle of the syncopated ‘20’s, ‘30’s and beyond. Muntu, the Harlem cabarets where we shuffled to the multi-rhythms of Jazz arriving “up the river” from New Orleans, via the griot genius of Satchmo, King Oliver, Bessie Smith, Mr. Jellyroll. Those saints of Congo Square refused to allow a mighty heritage to die, became our collective spirit as we revived, restored, transformed a legacy, innovating with black bodies and European instruments, a new Culture upon American soil.”

Toure’s fine-tuned hearing and voice has always conjured the stylized vision and discipline of Jazz, insofar as he does not merely contextualize the music through verse, but through the skillful manipulation of his craft; a circular transcendence evolves. Like the masters he so often venerates... Miles, Monk, Pharoah, Trane, Sun Ra; in an array of rhythmic constructions, Toure spans African existence from humble beginnings to epic signifiers of antiquity in euphonious lyricism such as...

*“Horns arouse deathless
Beauty, resurrect
Possibility, here
in the human universe.
Primordial laughter flows
in fiery voices
mastering
Magi language: lean
saxophones scream into
Wonder-realms...*

*Ra invokes
miracles- hekas, power-chants
resurrects from slave-hordes,
Ancient Kemet on the Nile
Nommo: sound as text,
Parable’s in Ra’s Eye,
rising in the “West”.*

Mother Earth Responds: green poems & alternative visions is not so much a departure from Toure’s previous work as an expansion thereof. With these writings, he demonstrates his prolific range of poetic ambidexterity, and ease with a variety of styles not previously employed in past books. As a consummate artist, Toure understands that no volume of verse rooted in the aesthetic of green-consciousness could be complete without the ancient Japanese literary form of haiku. The results are at once ethereal, taut, haunting and whimsical.

*Wind over cane fields
invokes deep sorrow:
my wild flamingo departs*

*Moans of lost prophets
haunt the Harlem spring
When will freedom intervene?*

or

*This grim life, cries Val
in Katrina’s tsunami
as bright havens fade.*

The variance of styles in this book may also signal a different sound; a different music. In “Awakening the Troubadour” an homage to a generic bird who Toure dubs as “nature’s feathered diva” it is the shaman’s flute, or perhaps social justice troubadours, Taj Mahal or Richie Havens we hear as he trumpets the fragile, the marginalized, the oppressed through a tiny endangered bird, both actual and symbol. The poet embarks upon a linear style of free verse reminiscent of flight...

*What, little
bird, do you
remember
when
face to face
with the
horror’s
trauma
and memory
is seen
by some
as a curse?*

*Where, little
bird, do you
wander,
lost upon
the vast
highways
in the
starry
dynamo
of night?*

If the concepts of *Negritude*, *Black Power* and *Black Aesthetics* could be personified by an ancestral tree, rooted in African resistance to imperialism and the gaping wounds left by cultural alienation, and if the multifarious branches of said tree reached skyward; carrying a people’s maturation and memory, then it could be said that Toure has caught hold and elongated those branches even further in extension of the nationalist idea. By expanding the parameters of the dialogue with all that lives and breathes on earth, a definitive understanding bubbles to the surface with an intensity like the emotions of water. To do what is in the best interest of African people everywhere, is to do what is in the best interest of *people* everywhere.

Toure's outrage and concern about the devastating consequences of war on the Iraqi people and their land, compel his anti-war incantatory poem which positions the arcane sensibilities of a pastorally conscious Middle East in opposition to the devastating assault declared on the nation's sovereignty:

“...Crescents aligned with jewelled stars glowing
against Night's
nubiana to embrace you, kiss your warm
full lips ---in desert-lands aglow with camphor, spices,
ouds, and seductive hips, flutes, drums: Scheherazade's
immortal tales

to embrace Your inner Soul, before
Assassins, before missiles and “Smart” bombs, blond
“jarhead” ---Crusaders and their coons----demolish
Ancient Arks, obliterate our wondrous epics, ecstasies,
possibilities...”

The appreciable sensory consciousness and erotic evocation of images like “seductive hips” preclude any notion that Toure is speaking of the fundamentalist Islam that dictates sexual Puritanism or necessitates the wearing of *burquas* by women; to the contrary, he incants a spiritual landscape of “fertile complexity,” where the intention of *Amenta* (Mother Earth) in all her beauteous demography is wild, sensuous and primal.

Not surprising then is his commitment to extol the beauty of the Black woman whose indigenous physical attributes have been historically ignored and maligned; a recurrent theme in the poet's work and no less present here in “More Than Skin Deep: The Candaces (for Venus & Serena and the sistas)”:

“...In the symbolic Landscape
of American Media, a pale Goddess appears:
tossing-ash blond hair, she pleads, “Don't hate me
because I'm beautiful,” with apparent innocence.
And millions of dark women are “wiped out,”
scarred for life...”

Toure often locates and positions archetypes in accordance with restoring the regal and glamorous status once held by African women, he states:

“However, Venus & Serena Williams, Nubian Queens
of World Tennis, are *not* blonds, are *not* celebrated
as beauties by America; are *Black* in all its implications;
voluptuous, full bodied, broad-nosed, full lipped, wooly-
haired, sexy Nubians, primordial and sublime.”

In truth, the majority of the world's women are not Blonde, which includes most Caucasians. Thus, by challenging a standard that is both illusory and contrived in order to marginalize a considerable sector of humanity Toure liberates the self-esteem of women throughout the globe, enabling them to create their own standard of beauty and self-worth as defined by personal identity and choice.

Like the mutable montage of earth it's self, the eternal sphere of beginnings and endings, in *Mother Earth Responds*, Toure engages his own life as metaphor for birth and death, life and after-life, the inevitable turning of seasons...

“Like the various scholar-knights, I never aspired
to worry the Almighty with spectacular desires.

I merely requested a quiet, modest place
for Study, Prayer, Meditation, and to make

An honest contribution to literature and liberation
and so, raise the consciousness of a captive nation

I had to pry it out of the puritanical, Boston hide
with the aid of warrior-comrades. But quietly,
forcefully, the Creator answers prayers in stride

So now, the djali, Askia begins his Autumn Serenade
within the benevolent grace of Roxbury's shade.”

This all encompassing text is filled with the broadest dreaming, cries for earth and species-love and a kinder, more reverent earth consciousness with its precedent in the ethos of ecological sustainability; an African concept. *Mother Earth Responds* begs the question; what philosophical constructs constitute healthy existence? Toure responds with “alternative visions” and the heart-breaking beauty of his verse:

“Quiet moments
moments
bring peace
within
each breath.
The rain
beats its
own tattoo
upon ironic

rooftops,
singing
arias
of growth
Bright moments
we idolize,
when dusk
invades
our world.”

--Kamaria Muntu