



(UN)WELCOME IN PRISON

African American Sonneteering and the Limits of American (Literary) Hospitality

Timo Müller, the author of *The African American Sonnet: A Literary History* (2018), draws attention to the sonnet-nation analogy in William Wordsworth’s “Nuns Fret Not at Their Convent’s Narrow Room” (5–6). Indeed, literary genres, as sites of social, political, and cultural struggle, mirror nations. Both feature dynamic tensions between tradition and innovation, power and oppression, voice and silence. Genres, like nations, have boundaries that may be defended or transgressed, solidified or blurred. Both can help either consolidate or undermine a group’s sense of collective identity. While genres and nations often contribute to one’s sense of liberty, they also restrict it. Although compelling, the genre-as-nation analogy can be problematic and should be employed with caution. Unquestioned, it may lead to implausible conclusions. Drawing on Jacques Derrida’s concept of “unconditional hospitality,” I will analyze whether it is plausible to argue, in line with the aforementioned analogy, that African Americans can be perceived as “newcomers” who “destroyed” the “sonnet-nation” established by white men.

Like nations, genres have their founders and places of origin. Sonneteering emerged in thirteenth-century Italy, with Giacomo da Lentini recognized as its founding father. Years later, Francesco Petrarca played a major role in expanding the genre beyond its country of origin (Cousins and Howarth 92, 100). The sonnet was introduced to England in the late fourteenth century through Geoffrey Chaucer’s translation of Petrarch’s Sonnet 132 into vernacular English. Thomas Wyatt and Henry Howard subsequently translated Petrarch’s sonnet into English, altering the rhyme scheme to ABAB CDCD EFEF GG. Later, Philip Sidney produced his most significant work, *Astrophil*

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and *Stella* (1591), comprising sonnets that adhered to English and Italian rhyme schemes alongside others written in hexameter (Robbins 37). Soon, several other notable sonneteers, including Edmund Spenser and William Shakespeare, came to prominence.

Müller recognizes Wordsworth's "Nuns Fret Not at Their Convent's Narrow Room" as "the most influential manifestation" of "conceiving the sonnet in spatial terms" (5–6). The poem follows a fixed rhyme scheme, is written in iambic pentameter, and features a volta that marks the shift between the octave and the sestet. Thus, it adheres to the strict formal requirements of traditional European sonneteering. These restrictions may be recognized as the poem's boundaries. Compact as it is, the sonnet resembles, as Wordsworth has it, "a scanty plot of ground." Notably, it is not just the poem's form that evokes a sense of enclosure; the content of this self-referential sonnet also brings to mind the notion of confinement. It goes as follows:

Nuns fret not at their convent's narrow room;
And hermits are contented with their cells;
And students with their pensive citadels;
Maids at the wheel, the weaver at his loom,
Sit blithe and happy; bees that soar for bloom,
High as the highest Peak of Furness-fells,
Will murmur by the hour in foxglove bells:
In truth the prison, unto which we doom
Ourselves, no prison is: and hence for me,
In sundry moods, 'twas pastime to be bound
Within the Sonnet's scanty plot of ground;
Pleased, if some Souls (for such there needs must be)
Who have felt the weight of too much liberty,
Should find brief solace there, as I have found. (Wordsworth 13)

While terms such as "narrow room" (line one), "cells" (line two), and "prison" (lines eight and nine) explicitly refer to the nuns' convent and its physical boundaries, they also implicitly reflect the compactness of the very sonnet form. This connection becomes clearer after the volta, when, in the sestet, Wordsworth directly addresses the genre itself. As noted, the poet intertwines imagery of confinement with themes of joy and freedom in this section of the poem.

According to Müller, the sonnet's formal constraints, paired with its expressive potential, mirror the paradoxical character of English liberty, where freedom has its boundaries (6). Such a statement encourages drawing parallels between genre and nation. Like England, one might say, the sonnet had long been a much-desired yet restrictive territory steeped in rich tradition. White men dominated both realms, shaping

and safeguarding the boundaries, be they geopolitical or poetic. Those who did not belong (e.g., people of color) were unwelcome in either realm. Once allowed entry, they were compelled to adhere to the norms set by the nation's or the sonnet's inhabitants. Many black poets agreed to assimilate. Over time, however, more and more African Americans began engaging in a critical dialogue with the well-established European poetic tradition. Their protests against literary domination translated into protests against sociopolitical inequality. Still, convenient as it may be, equating the sonnet to a prison or a country solely due to its formal limitation risks overextending the analogy, as one might feel encouraged to liken any compact or formally defined entity (be it a literary genre or not) to, for example, England or America.

Eventually, the sonnet reached various non-European countries, including the United States. John Quincy Adams, William Cullen Bryant, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, to name a few, were pioneers of the genre. Early American sonneteers often conveyed nationalistic sentiments through their poetry. Bryant's "To an American Painter Departing for Europe" is one example:

Thine eyes shall see the light of distant skies:
 Yet, Cole! thy heart shall bear to Europe's strand
 A living image of thy native land,
 Such as on thine own glorious canvas lies;
 Lone lakes—savannahs where the bison roves—
 Rocks rich with summer garlands—solemn streams—
 Skies, where the desert eagle wheels and screams—
 Spring bloom and autumn blaze of boundless groves.
 Fair scenes shall greet thee where thou goest—fair,
 But different—every where the trace of men,
 Paths, homes, graves, ruins, from the lowest glen
 To where life shrinks from the fierce Alpine air,
 Gaze on them, till the tears shall dim thy sight,
 But keep that earlier, wilder image bright. (Bryant 4)¹

Bryant's sonnet is a romantic celebration of the untamed, yet beautiful and dear American landscape. It seems ironic, though, that it employs such a restrictive form—fourteen lines, fixed rhyme scheme, adherence to iambic pentameter, volta/turns after lines eight and twelve—to capture the grandeur of its subject. The image of wild but homely America overshadows that of contained and foreign Europe. Within the constraints of the European sonnet form, Bryant delves

1 Thomas Cole (1801–1848), renowned for his Romantic landscapes and founder of the Hudson River School, was a painter who emigrated from England to America.

into the richness of his own (and the painter's) homeland. While keeping the poem's formal boundaries intact, he transcends the traditional limitations of content. Not only does he meet the basic formal requirements of the sonnet, but he even goes a step further, showcasing his mastery of this kind of formal writing. In doing so, he seems to assert, as Müller would phrase it, his claim to the "sonnet-space." His apt use of sound repetition is particularly noteworthy. Through assonance, consonance, and alliteration, Bryant subtly shapes our perception of the poem, enhancing its rhythm and, consequently, aesthetic appeal. This effect is especially palpable when the recurring /s/ and /j/ sounds evoke in readers' minds the sudden gusts sweeping across the vast American landscape.

Traversing continents, the sonnet was at the time primarily the domain of white male poets. Engaging with a socially esteemed poetic form, they were able to express their perspectives and sentiments about others freely. Robbins notes that, since black sonneteers' contributions have been largely overlooked, the form has been commonly associated with privileged, highbrow white culture (21). Over time, those who might be considered "outsiders" within the genre-as-nation analogy—including non-white, non-male, and non-heteronormative poets—have crossed the formal and thematic boundaries traditionally ascribed to the sonnet (but not imposed by the form itself). In my analysis, I focus on African American poets, who not only embraced the form but also transformed it in significant ways.

According to Derrida, unconditional hospitality requires that you "give up the mastery of your space, your home, your nation" and "accept the risk of the other coming and destroying the place, initiating a revolution, stealing everything or killing everyone" (70–71). Historically silenced, African Americans have sought ways to articulate their opposition to the injustices they have endured. While they have attempted to voice their concerns and needs through various cultural outlets, their engagement with the sonnet form is especially noteworthy. At this point, it is again tempting to rely on the genre-as-nation analogy. Just as unwanted newcomers can be excluded from a foreign land's society, African American poets were excluded from several anthologies edited by white men (Robbins 67).² One might say that in fear of poetic exile, the early black entrants into the sonnet-

2 See, for example, Braithwaite, William Stanley and Henry Thomas Schnittkind, editors. *Representative American Poetry*, Richard G. Badger (The Gorham Press), 1916; Thornley Clarke, Jennie, editor. *Songs of the South: Choice Selections from Southern Poets from Colonial Times to the Present Day*, introduction by Joel Chandler Harris, J. B. Lippincott Company, 1896; and Griswold, Rufus W., editor.

realm usually adhered to the formal and thematic conventions set by the genre's "older inhabitants." As a result, they entered the sonnet as guests expected to obey the well-established norms.

Müller observes that those early black poets are notable for having modified (often implicitly) the sonnet form (3–4). He illustrates this with "The Montenegrin" by Albery Allson Whitman, who is regarded as a trailblazer of African American sonneteering. The poem goes as follows:

Undaunted watcher of the mountain track,
Tho' surging cohorts like a sea below,
Against thy cliff-walled homes their thunders throw;
Proud, whilst thy rocky fastness answers back
The fierce, long menace of the Turk's attack,
Thy eagle ken above the tumult flies,
The hostile plain spurns, and its prowess black,
And lights on strongholds terraced in the skies;
There thou wilt quicker than the roe-buck bound,
If bolder dangers mount to force thy pass;
But not till thou a signal brave hast wound,
That hears responses from each peak around,
And calls thy comrade clans-in-arms, to mass
In high defence, when battle stern begins —
Then who can conquer the Montenegrins? (Whitman 227–228)

The juxtaposition of "The Montenegrin" with "To an American Painter Departing for Europe" reveals that Bryant's landscape is relatively peaceful, even if wild. Whitman's space, on the other hand, is a stark battlefield. While Bryant's sonnet praises his homeland, America, Whitman's sonnet praises Montenegrins defending their homeland.³ Müller discerns implicit references to African Americans' fight for freedom in Whitman's poem (4). He notes that the poet engages with the oppressor's form, changing it into a refuge for the oppressed. Notably, "The Montenegrin" comprises fifteen instead of fourteen lines. Müller believes that the fifteenth line marks a break from traditional limitations. For analogical purposes, Whitman employs enjambment to destabilize the rigid structure of the "sonnet-prison" (4).

Throughout history, several scholars and poets have discerned parallels between the sonnet form and prison. Oliwia Loksing Moy,

The Poets and Poetry of America: With an Historical Introduction, 4th ed. Carey and Hart, 1842.

3 Montenegrins are a South Slavic people inhabiting the region now known as Montenegro. They fought numerous battles to defend their territory against Ottoman domination.

for instance, speaks of the sonnet in the context of “female confinement,” explaining:

Used by major poets of the 1800s, the Gothic trope of female confinement assumes an additional layer of meaning, where the sonnet’s form serves as a metaphor for prison itself, and the imagery of female confinement is used to justify or celebrate such prosodic structures. Through close readings of important nineteenth-century sonnets by William Wordsworth, John Keats and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, [...] [it can be seen] how the language of trapped female bodies and spatial confinement was incorporated to create a tradition of “Gothic sonnets”—sonnets that utilize imagery of female bondage as an analogy for the structural limitations of the form’s 14 lines, rigid rhyme and strict meter. (“Radcliffe’s Poetic Legacy: Female Confinement in the ‘Gothic Sonnet’”)

Debra Fried, to provide another example, also refers to female sexuality and the limitations imposed on it, as she makes the following remark on Edna St. Vincent Millay’s sonnet “I will put chaos into fourteen lines”: “In Millay’s posthumous sonnet on the sonnet, the form appears [...] as an erotic prison” (9), also observing that “the sonnet figures poetic form as a cage for a wild creature” (10). In the African American context, Robbins similarly comments on “The Turncoat” by Amiri Baraka (also known as LeRoi Jones), a prominent figure in the Black Arts Movement who criticized the use of the European sonnet form by Black poets:

Without a defined meter and rhyme scheme, Jones’s poem still embraces the sonnet form. The double-voiced, disordered, self-hating speaker of the octave broods over secret speech and ponders his own shadow, the sonnet cage evoked by the lines “locked in / with dull memories.” (173)

Referring to Claude McKay, a prominent African American poet known for his “protest sonnets,” Antonella Francini states: “In his hands, the tight cage of the sonnet ultimately turns into a dynamic vehicle for freedom and social justice” (40). These are merely a few examples that associate identity-related confinement with the sonnet form. However, any parallel between genre and identity should be read metaphorically rather than literally, to avoid ideologically overstretched interpretations. African American poets deliberately engaged with a form so often associated with confinement. While some adhered to established norms, multiple black poets have openly transformed the genre.

Wanda Coleman’s “American Sonnet 1” is not only experimental but radical in its form and content:

the lurid confessions of an ex-cake junky: “i blew it
all. blimped. i was really stupid. i waited
until i was forty to get hooked on white flour
and powdered sugar”

$$\frac{\text{white greed}}{\text{socio-eco dominance}} \times \frac{\text{black anger}}{\text{socio-eco disparity}} =$$

- a) increased racial tension/polarization
- b) increased criminal activity
- c) sporadic eruptions manifest as mass killings
- d) collapses of longstanding social institutions
- e) the niggerization of the middle class

the blow to his head cracks his skull
he bleeds eighth notes & treble clefs

(sometimes i feel like i’m almost going)

to Chicago, baby do you want to go? (Coleman 11)

At first glance, her poem resembles a peculiar mathematical equation, not a (traditional) sonnet. It has no end rhymes and does not follow the iambic pentameter. Whether it consists of fourteen lines is not immediately apparent. However, since terms like “white greed,” “socio-eco dominance,” “X,” “black anger,” “socio-eco disparity,” along with the two horizontal lines and the equal sign, seem to be contained within a single verse, the poem can indeed be interpreted as having fourteen lines. Still, identifying it as a sonnet would be difficult in the absence of its (or the whole sequence’s) title. This prompts a question of why Coleman, alongside several other poets, composes a poem deviating from sonnet conventions yet still designates it as such.

The poem’s content provides insights into the possible purpose(s) behind this choice. Unlike countless traditional European sonnets, Coleman’s poem neither features a suffering male poet lamenting his idealized beloved nor praises a cherished homeland. Sorrow and nation are indeed central to this sonnet; in this case, however, it is a sorrow voiced by a black poet, and a nation that warrants condemnation rather than praise. Thinking of the sonnet as a white canvas within a solid frame, one could argue that Coleman is a rebellious artist who shatters the frame and paints the canvas black. She redefines the art of sonneteering, one might say. In line with the sonnet-as-nation analogy, the poet can be seen as a rebellious guest who comes to disorganize or even destroy. Her unruly presence within this realm

becomes a political act, a protest. She refuses to adhere to the norms that help reproduce cultural and, by extension, socio-political inequality. Her sonnet uncovers the dark side of America.

Marilyn Nelson, another contemporary Black poet, does so even more explicitly in *A Wreath for Emmet Till* (2005), an illustrated heroic crown of fifteen sonnets, thematically and structurally intertwined. The eleventh sonnet of the sequence, for instance, goes as follows:

Trillium, apple blossoms, Quin Anne's lace,
woven with oak twigs, for sincerity...
Thousands of oak trees around this country
groaned with the weight of men slain for their race,
their murderers acquitted in almost every case.
One night five black men died on the same tree,
with toeless feet, in this Land of the Free.
This country we love has a Janus face:
One mouth speaks with forked tongue, the other reads
the Constitution. My country, 'tis of both
thy nightmare history and thy grand dream,
thy centuries of good and evil deeds,
I sing. Thy fruited plain, thy undergrowth
of mandrake, which flowers white as moonbeams. (Nelson)⁴

Like Coleman, Nelson does not idealize America in her sonnet(s). Hanging trees—emblems of lynchings turned into public spectacles and [sic!] a source of entertainment—cast long shadows over the “fair scenes” Bryant once celebrated. In Nelson’s vision, one might say, America’s “solemn streams” flow alongside streams of blood. Coleman and Nelson, among other contemporary black poets, challenge narratives that idealize the nation. Instead, they draw attention to the darkest chapters of its history. However, the question arises whether poets, such as Coleman and Nelson, can be considered “guests” at all. The answer depends on how one defines the term. Robbins notes that African American poets have not only embraced the genre but have ultimately come to dominate it (8). Their presence in this once-alien space has been long and prolific enough to allow for speaking of a distinctly African American tradition of sonneteering. In her Inaugural John Hope Franklin Lecture, Natasha Trethewey emphasized the influence of the European sonnet tradition on her writing, which piqued Rob-

4 The phrase “five black men died on the same tree” likely alludes to the Sabine County lynching of 1908, when, on June 22, a mob of white men broke into the jail and seized six Black men—five were hanged from a tree near the jail, and the sixth was shot while attempting to escape. Within 24 hours, nine Black men had been killed: five by hanging and four by shooting.

bins's curiosity. After the speech, Robbins inquired about Trethewey's decision not to acknowledge African American poets as influences despite the proliferation of acclaimed Black sonneteers. Initially puzzled, Trethewey reconsidered her viewpoint and admitted that, actually, she "received the form from Gwendolyn Brooks" (2). One thing is obvious: the Black sonnet has eventually evolved into a distinct genre. With that in mind, it becomes less clear who should be considered the sonnet's host nowadays.

Inspired by Coleman, Terrance Hayes, an acclaimed African American professor and poet, who authored a sequence titled "American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin," begins one of his "American" sonnets as follows: "I lock you in an American sonnet that is part prison,/ Part panic closet, a little room in a house set aflame/" (*American* 11). Through his sequence, Hayes engages in a metapoetic dialogue with the genre's tradition, likening the sonnet to a limiting, fear-inducing enclosure. It is a "prison," a "panic closet," and a "room in a house set aflame"—in short, a hazardous place one desperately wishes to escape. While challenging, the endeavor is worth the effort. The "house set aflame" may represent (unwelcoming) America, of which the sonnet tradition — "a little room"—is a part. One way to overcome this entrapment, Hayes suggests, is by reversing the roles of speaker and addressee. The powerful "I" is no longer white, and the powerless "you" is no longer black. The guard becomes the prisoner and vice versa. The title of the sequence anticipates this reversal by positioning the "assassin" as the passive recipient of their victim's poetic agency.

The form and structure of the sequence may serve as another instance. Hayes's text resembles a particular type of sonnet sequence, namely, a sonnet crown. In a nutshell, sonnet crowns are cyclical sequences that typically consist of seven or fifteen thematically and structurally inter-related sonnets. The so-called heroic crowns comprise fifteen sonnets, with the final one designated as the master sonnet. In sonnet crowns, the final verse of one sonnet also serves as the opening line of the subsequent sonnet, either fully or partly. Hayes's sequence comprises four series of fourteen sonnets each, and concludes with a "sonnet index" that features five master sonnets. Thus, there are seventy-five sonnets in total. This suggests that Hayes encompasses five heroic crowns within a single work. However, *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin* significantly diverges from the strict formal (and thematic) conventions of a traditional sonnet crown. While Hayes's sonnets consist of fourteen lines, they do not follow a fixed rhyme scheme and, only occasionally, do they employ iambic pentameter. The very first poem of the sequence is a clear example:

The black poet would love to say his century began
 With Hughes or God forbid, Wheatley, but actually
 It began with all the poetry weirdos & worriers, warriors,
 Poetry whiners & winos falling from ship bows, sunset
 Bridges & windows. In a second I'll tell you how little
 Writing rescues. My hunch is that Sylvia Plath was not
 Especially fun company. A drama queen, thin-skinned,
 And skittery, she thought her poems were ordinary.
 What do you call a visionary who does not recognize
 Her vision? Orpheus was alone when he invented writing.
 His manic drawing became a kind of writing when he sent
 His beloved a sketch of an eye with an X struck through it.
 He meant *I am blind without you*. She thought he meant
I never want to see you again. It is possible he meant that, too. (Hayes 5)

Similar to Coleman's "American Sonnet 1," when considered independently from the rest of the sequence and its title, the poem would not be immediately recognized as a sonnet—at least, not a "conventional" one. Hayes points to the tragic origins of (black) poetry. It is born not of triumph but of despair, and cannot save the poet from loneliness, violence, or suffering. Moreover, no poem guarantees recognition and intended understanding. Hayes ironically contrasts poetry's uneasy history with its idealized, comforting image.

In sonneteering, as in other strictly codified genres, form and content are complementary. The former helps us better understand, reconsider, or even question the latter and vice versa. Coleman, Hayes, and other black poets employ formal and thematic innovations to speak their truths and, symbolically, assert their right to "inhabit" the sonnet. Yet, it was not the genre itself that constrained black poets in their long struggle for recognition. It would be unwarranted to attribute such agency to the genre itself and suggest that it is capable of racial discrimination. The opening sonnet of Hayes's sequence is explicitly metapoetic, directly addressing poetic tradition, and emphasizing its European roots. Notably, the poet himself provides valuable insights into the meaning of this particular, self-referential text, explaining:

I never had a favorite Phillis Wheatley or Anne Bradstreet poem. It was the language of Keats and the rhythm of Whitman, the weird obstinacy of Dickinson, that interested the young poet in me. The old English poet nodded; the experimental poet frowned. No Eliot. The old English poet and modernist poet frowned. The modernist poet interrupted, "Stevens was not a modernist." Though nearly all of them exposed their racism privately. The famous Pulitzer poet nodded. Even Whitman, it turns out. Frowns all around. I only covered half a century of American poetry with my time. I didn't leave room for reading my poems. I had not started writing the American Sonnets. Donald Trump was a few months from being elected. I grew obsessed with creating my own condensed

historical timeline of American poetry after that panel. In fact, the first poem of *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin* alludes to my notion of lineage and ultimately, the influence of myth and memory over fact and history. (Watch 8)

Hayes reflects in his work on periods characterized by a pronounced “host”—(unwanted) “guest” hierarchy, highlighting the particularly disadvantageous position of women of color within the (literary) landscape of America (“God forbid Wheatley”). He critiques literary canon by reimagining its traditionally esteemed representatives as “poetry weirdos & worriers, warriors,” to cite just a few examples. The provocative language he employs challenges established stereotypes.

While many African Americans adopted the sonnet form for its transformative potential, others dismissed it as derivative and limiting. The latter advocated for fresh forms of expression unique to Blacks, such as “the antebellum sermon, spirituals, folk songs, blues, and spirituals” (Robbins 9). In the late eighteenth century, white writers became increasingly apprehensive about the rising social and economic status of black poets and their growing acknowledgment in the literary sphere (61). To safeguard the sonnet from undesirable influences, white anthologizers frequently omitted sonnets by African American poets from their collections. David Bromwich’s anthology, for instance, exhibits “conservative biases,” as it regards Frost as an exceptional sonnet writer while overlooking the significant contributions of African American sonneteers to the genre (the anthology includes merely two “Black” sonnets) (70).

Having briefly analyzed the history and evolution of the sonnet, I agree with Carl Phillips, the author of “Whose sonnet? (A Transgression)” (it is a chapter in the book *The American Sonnet: An Anthology of Poems and Essays*), who argues that the sonnet form, contained as it is, encourages revolution or, as I would rather call it, subversion. African American poets paved their way into the sonnet, but their presence within this realm has been unwelcome not only by multiple white poets and scholars, but also their Black counterparts (especially the key advocates of the Black Arts Movement, such as Amiri Baraka). Many African American sonnets (think, for instance, of Wanda Coleman’s “American Sonnet 1”) feature so many changes that one might wonder whether such poems should be called sonnets anymore. Following the spatial parallel, one could say that by transgressing the genre’s traditional limitations, Black poets have sought to challenge the oppressive boundaries of the “sonnet-nation” or, to use the other metaphor, destroy and rebuild the walls of the “sonnet-prison.” In doing

so, African Americans have been voicing their protest against socio-political and cultural restrictions they found unjust. An example here could be McKay's protest sonnet "If We Must Die." According to Müller, "[t]he example of McKay shows [...] that African American poets evoked the boundedness of the sonnet not so much to assert national or cultural belonging, as to trouble the limitations such concepts imply" (7). However, it is worth reiterating that strong reliance on the sonnet-as-nation parallel may be problematic. Poetic subversion does not equate to destruction and, as a fundamental aspect of poetic experimentation, is not unique to African American sonneteers. In fact, since its very emergence in Italy, the sonnet has been continuously adapted and transformed across time and space by poets of various backgrounds. As argued by Müller and Robbins, ultimately, Black sonneteering has developed into a tradition in its own right. There is no host to the sonnet. African American sonneteers—continuously in dialogue with the genre's tradition and, as Harold Bloom would put it, in agon with their white predecessors—have subverted and enriched rather than destroyed the genre.

Abstract: According to Jacques Derrida, "unconditional hospitality" requires that you "give up the mastery of your space, your home, your nation" and "accept the risk of the other coming and destroying the place, initiating a revolution, stealing everything or killing everyone" (70–71). The concepts of unconditional hospitality and its inverse, conditional hospitality, apply not only to geopolitical analyses but also to literary studies. Genres and nations share several characteristics. Let us consider the sonnet. Its first "inhabitants" were White European men. The genre had well-established boundaries. Over time, however, non-white, non-male, and non-heteronormative poets have crossed the borders, demanding entry to the restricted space of the sonnet form, often called "prison" by literary scholars and poets. Like newcomers in a foreign land, these "alien" poets had long been denied their "citizenship" as sonneteers. The history of African American sonneteering perfectly illustrates this. To engage in dialogue with the genre's tradition and to question the culturally oppressive mechanisms of canon formation, Black poets have forced their way into the sonnet. Whereas many have remained within the genre's boundaries as "guests," several other African American poets have sought to transform it through formal and thematic alterations. Rephrasing Derrida, one might say that Black poets have "initiated a rebellion" within the sonnet-prison, or sonnet-nation. The question is whether African Americans "destroyed" the sonnet and what has been "the hosts" response to that "intrusion." In search of an answer, the article explores the host-guest tensions in the context of African American sonneteering, drawing upon Derrida's theory of "unconditional hospitality."

Keywords: sonnet, tradition, African American poetry, Jacques Derrida, Albery Allson Whitman, Wanda Coleman, Marilyn Nelson, Terrance Hayes

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