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Michael S. Harper. *Songlines in Michaeltree: New and Collected Poems.* Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000. ix + 389 pp. $34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-02144-2.

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Though it does not mark the emergence of a (so-called) academic monograph, the publication of Michael S. Harper's collected poems should be an occasion of interest for scholars of American culture, especially those with an interest in the popular. A critically acclaimed poet and former nominee for the National Book Award, Harper is one of the country's great historians and cultural critics in verse. With a complex style that erodes superficial divisions between the vernacular and the erudite, Harper's poetry is expansive in its observation of the American cultural fabric: its people, its history, its paradoxes. And perhaps unsurprisingly to those who know the music, it is through jazz that Harper is most often able to accomplish this. In tributes to the music's pantheon of innovators, in stylistic appropriations from the jazz aesthetic, Harper generates an ongoing commentary on American life that is at once densely allusive, playfully ironic, and unfailingly astute.

This is clear in what remains his most famous poem, the title piece from his 1970 collection, *Dear John, Dear Coltrane*, included here. Centered around Coltrane's famous composition, "A Love Supreme,"–the vocal refrain of which appears throughout the text of the poem to signify the poet's musical intentions–Harper's lyric simultaneously documents the horrors of slavery and the emergence of African American culture out of that experience, while it offers elegiac tribute to Coltrane himself. This narration of American history through jazz is a favorite gesture of Harper's; it allows for what are ostensibly two key directives in his poetic project: the dismantling of cultural hierarchies and the deconstruction of mainstream historical record. The sound of jazz evokes the cultural memory of African Americans and records an experience that might otherwise be lost to ideological bias and imbalances of power. Though Coltrane is a frequent muse, Harper's poetic style might be better compared to the genius of Charlie Parker, whose prodigious capacities for allusion and irony fashioned a similarly politicized aesthetic amidst the emergence of bebop in the 1940s. Like Parker, Harper is adept at filtering an encyclopedic array of cultural references through the individuality of his own unmistakable voice. Indeed, the poet can be difficult in his appeals to the past. His allusions frequently juxtapose the unique with the familiar; snippets of his own family history and fragments of the poet's local experience converge with the residua of national experience–the Lewis and Clark expedition, the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing, the Viet Nam conflict. In an Eliotesque move, Harper offers an appendix of explanatory notes to this collection, citing the anecdotes and experiences that led to the formation of each piece. While such might inspire unilateral readings of his impressionistic work for some readers, it is a benefit to those who have been confounded by the complexity of Harper's referential network.

One of the few disappointments about this collection is that it does not offer a comprehensive gathering of the poet's work. Harper's oeuvre is not so large as to preclude a complete, rather than a selected, collection. And this publisher has already offered a "greatest-hits" sampling of his poetry before–1977's *Images of Kin: New and Selected Poems*. My complaint here is not one based on mere consumer dissatisfaction, but rather on admiration for Harper's talent. A comprehensive collection would proffer opportunity to fully appreciate the variety of his approach and the vastness of his scope. Harper is not a poet best-read in small doses, in representative examples. Rather, his work demands broad perspective, much like the expansive culture he celebrates and critiques.

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