

## Another Throat: Twenty-First-Century Black US Persona Poetry & the Archive

By Ryan Sharp. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2024.  
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At first glance, a book on twenty-first-century Black US persona poetry might seem to overlap with archives strictly through the process of engaging with archived materials, grappling with silenced and misrepresented voices captured within our collective archives. That certainly is a foundational aspect of *Another Throat: Twenty-First-Century Black US Persona Poetry & the Archive*. Yet, author Ryan Sharp also assesses the archives as a tool that dominant cultures have wielded with far more power than impartiality and analyzes Black US poets' response to this oppression through their use of persona poetry.<sup>1</sup>

Persona poetry features a speaker or voice that is distinct from the poet, or “not readily identifiable as the poet themselves” (p. 1). The title of *Another Throat* was inspired by an interview with poet and educator Patricia Smith, who recognizes poetry's power of providing the author another route of expression: “like a second throat; it's another way to speak” (p. 1). Sharp takes this analogy and complicates it, recognizing that the subjects of many Black US persona poems have been denied an opportunity to speak: “the silenced personae subjects that Black US poets have recently taken up have had a metaphorical—and at times literal—hand choking the words from their throat. Thus, via persona poetry, these poets are offering another throat, another opportunity to breathe” (p. 1). These poetic fabulations help to voice challenges to the archives' broad failure in collecting and accurately representing Black histories and provides an example for how to engage with that which is lost: “these personae represent silenced subjects who have been forced—or have escaped—into the archive's gaps” (p. 28). This is a powerful example of a potential way to grapple with gaps and silences within an archives.

Of course, persona poetry is not limited to working with loss or absence. Many archival professionals will recognize something familiar in the description of what persona poetry affords. In recent years, the conversation around recognizing and honoring the multiple voices within archives has blossomed, and many archivists and professionals in the field are increasingly comfortable with holding conversations where multiple voices and intentions overlap.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Sharp places those who work with and around records as part of the multiplicity of voices that informed his decision to change the title of the work from “second” to “another,” identifying archival professionals as participants in the conversation with persona projects and the archives they engage with: “these persona projects, themselves acts of poetic fabulation, are at least also in conversation with the archive, with those actors and

agents privileged in the archival records as registering in the chorus” (p. 1). The art of developing an ear attuned to polyphonic voices may not make it onto the average archivist’s curriculum vitae, but it certainly is a skill the profession is growing to understand as essential. With a poet’s keen control over language and impeccable academic rigor, Sharp brings a valuable addition to archives of all types: there is just as much here for scholars with interests in archival theory and social justice as there is for readers with interests in literary analysis and poetic fabulation.

Sharp is an assistant professor of English at Baylor University, and his first book, a collection of poems titled *My Imaginary Old Man*, was published in 2017. He conceived of *Another Throat* while completing his MFA at Pacific University, when he was required to put the creation of poetry aside to compose a critical essay. I wish every barrier between a poet and the pursuit of their craft could result in such a vital addition to the literary (or archival) field! Sharp offers a chance to understand the context and importance of persona poetry as it works to combat the erasure and distortion of Black voices in the archives, and he does so without requiring his readers to have a wealth of knowledge about either the art of persona poetry or the long history of exclusion and suppression of Black voices in the archives. As a result, the book is admirably appealing to both academic experts and laypeople alike.

Although *Another Throat* concerns itself with a broad representation of twenty-first-century Black US persona poetry, Sharp takes care to situate its rise among the many Black predecessors who made use of the art form. The introduction, “Signifyin’ on the Archive,” provides a framework to position this project within the recent history of Black persona poetry, and it also offers an excellent reading list of authors who have published works featuring persona over the past two decades. Readers of Victorian poetry might recognize persona in pieces authored by Robert Browning or Alfred Lord Tennyson, but as Sharp notes, the practice may go back as far as Chaucer and still earlier to griot traditions in West Africa. In between griot and the twenty-first century, Sharp fills in a few familiar names (such as Gwendolyn Brooks and Langston Hughes) and cites them as authors who have used persona to undermine the gaps and inaccuracies of Black history in the archives. He traces these early authors and their projects to illustrate the shift that occurred when persona poetry began to expand beyond addressing silences and started addressing the archives itself: “While previous Black US historical persona poetry typically alluded to archival gaps and silences, the speakers in ‘The Venus Hottentot’ [published in 1990 by Elizabeth Alexander] talk back directly to the archival narrators and narrative” (p. 4). If seemingly subtle at the outset, these shifts are profound, for they engaged the archives actively, and through that engagement, denied by implication the idea that the archives exists in an inert state: “The archive is not a passive objective storage space for historical documents,” Sharp writes, “but actively produces meaning and memory” (p. 14). What does Sharp mean when he references “the archive”? His conceptualization here transcends individual repositories and instead

identifies the act of curation alongside the philosophies that drive the work. His definition of archives as an active entity whose elements give shape to what we find meaningful and memorable is shaped by Michel Foucault, Michel-Rolph Trouillot, and Jacques Derrida. Sharp's interest in the power that hegemony has over archival practice is matched by his interest in how curated materials are read and interpreted by the archives.

Sharp divides the rest of the book into three sections whose titles pay homage to Saidiya Hartman's "Venus in Two Acts," acknowledging the challenges and risks associated with counter-historical imaginings of Black archived subjects (p. 27). The first section, "Translating Misconstrued Words," features personae whose subjects have been recorded within the archives and whose voices have frequently been whitewashed or otherwise misrepresented (p. 31). This section contains the majority of the persona poetry that engages in "talking back" (p. 76) to the archives, as these voices are in active conversation with their conservators/oppressors. The second section, "Listening for the Unsaid," covers persona poetry that gives voice to subjects that have been silenced. "These poets," observes Sharp, "'and the poets listening for [and imagining] the unsaid' in general, are driven by the questions and curiosities that emit from their subjects' silence" (p. 79). The third section, "Refashioning Dis/Nonfigured Lives," focuses on how nonhuman, inanimate subjects can speak that which is unutterable. Not only do poems in this section give voice to that which is unspeakable for reasons related to white discomfort and fragility, they also indicate a knowledge that gestures beyond Western understanding: "Black US poets are objects or concepts as a means to embody the silenced spaces that exist beyond the bounds of Western notions of being" (p. 131). In each of these sections, Sharp brings his poet's eye to address the angles of argument and strategies available to each writer to further delve into the affordances of the poetic form. He harnesses imagery to help his readers visualize the wide range of persona poetry that appears within his project's pages and refers to a spectrum with a broad plane that functions as a mapped grid to chart the relationship dynamic between entities, be it between author and subject, or the subject's relationship to its own preservation and representation. In taking into account both the poet's closeness to, or ability to identify with, their persona, as well as the subject's agency relating to its archived state, Sharp presents multifaceted angles of approach to the survey of personae.

But how can *Another Throat* inform and impact our work of preserving, promoting, administering, and curating archival materials? An obvious answer would be to focus on the social justice aspects of Sharp's work and on the ongoing effort to meet the annihilating violence of the archives with the counteraction of giving voice, reimagining, and recentering Black historical agency; this focus naturally lends itself to instruction, and the power of poetic fabulation and the necessity of interrogating archives can be incorporated into education and creative collaboration with students as they learn about meeting gaps and misrepresentations there. *Another*

*Throat* can also help us gain a better understanding of how art rises to meet fluctuations within the political sphere and how the development of Black US twenty-first-century persona poetry spoke in response to Nixon- and Regan-era policies, the Black arts movement, and the civil rights movement more generally (p. 12). Beyond all this, however, is yet another opportunity to reflect on how archives professionals are in conversation with the materials they steward. If we “[register] in the chorus” (p. 1), we would benefit not only from an awareness of these shifting conversations but also from a deeper understanding of and engagement with them.

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> In the introduction, Sharp writes: “Integral to this project is a critical reading of the archive that serves as an instrument for the dominant culture to maintain sociopolitical power and control over historical and cultural narratives. . . . As a result, the early appearance of Black US Americans in the archive constructed a black identity shaped by its commodification and oppression” (p. 32).
- <sup>2</sup> I think back to 2014, when incoming Society of American Archivists President Kathleen Roe announced her initiative “A Year of Living Dangerously for Archives” and specifically to her “Call to Action #6: Voices from the Archives,” <https://www2.archivists.org/living-dangerously/voices-from-the-archives>, captured at <https://perma.cc/5K27-PLY6>.