



Honorée Fanonne Jeffers, Poet, Novelist, and Essayist

“I wanted to write a book that I never read.”

Honorée Fanonne Jeffers

E. Ethelbert Miller, an award-winning poet, literary activist, and teacher based in Washington DC was part of a virtual team that helped me to identify writers to invite to the National Black Writers Conference (NBWC) sponsored by the Center for Black Literature at Medgar Evers College, CUNY. He told me about a young woman poet who I should invite to NBWC.

Ethelbert’s adage was that at least half of the writers we invited to the Conference should be at the beginning of their professional careers and that at least half of our audience should consist of young people. We needed intergenerational conversations at the Conference he advised. I heeded E. Ethelbert’s advice and invited Honorée Fanonne Jeffers to the Ninth NBWC.

Professor Jeffers was jubilant; she was so honored to be invited to this Conference which had been conceived by the late John O. Killens who held the first NBWC at Medgar Evers College in 1986. Her spirit and energy were magnetic; she could not believe that she was going to be a presenter at this Conference.

Jeffers's presentation focused on her blues poetry book, *Red Clay Suite* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2007). As I have watched Jeffers's body of work develop over the years, I have been impressed by her honesty and her ability to probe deeply into her consciousness as she creates beautiful soulful, poetry and prose. When I began to read her debut novel, *The Love Songs of W.E.B. DuBois* (HarperCollins, 2021), I anticipated that it would be a story rich with lyrical and descriptive prose that paid tribute to the legacy of W.E.B. DuBois. I was not mistaken.

Greene

Your novel, *The Love Songs of W.E.B. DuBois* covers many themes. You use the songs of W.E.B. DuBois to carry the story forward. What was the motivation behind writing this novel?

Jeffers

It is America. And I as an Afro indigenous person and an African American was reared in Black communities. So, I also always want to give the glory to my indigenous ancestors as well.

You know, Professor Toni Morrison says she wanted to write a book that she had never read. I wanted to read a book that I had never read or that centered both the indigenous as well as the African ancestral story.

I originally intended to write just Ailey's (the protagonist's) story as a "beach read," but about two years in, I began having dreams where I would see people I knew were ancestors. They would speak to me, and I would wake up and write

long lyrical passages that didn't initially seem connected to Ailey's story. About 18 months in, I realized that these were connected. The two voices were very different - the reverent, poetic "songs" about ancestors versus Ailey's more contemporary, sometimes humorous voice. Each voice in the novel is shaped by its historical period.

Greene

The title of your novel is *The Love Songs of W.E.B. DuBois*. One of the many themes you develop is the tension between Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois. Let's talk about that.

Jeffers

The legacy of W.E.B. DuBois is highlighted in the central character's reverence for her uncle Root, a man who calls on DuBois's legacy. Uncle Root is a retired history professor at an HBCU, and he is the only man with whom Ailey, the protagonist feels safe.

Jeffers reflects on the symbolism for choosing the songs in *The Souls of Black Folk* and the man W.E.B. DuBois as guiding forces in her novel.

Jeffers

One of the things about W.E.B. DuBois is if you go to an HBCU, you can't get away from W.E.B. DuBois. You read him at HBCUs; you read him in social work, history, sociology, and English classes. Originally, I just had quotes as an intellectual framework. Uncle Root (Ailey's favorite person) tells a story about meeting Du Bois. I wanted to show the class tensions between upwardly mobile Black people and working-class Black people. Though it may seem strange to

have a novel by a Black women called "The Love Songs of W.E.B. Du Bois," Du Bois was one of the proto feminists who championed Black women's rights.

Jeffers continues her discussion on why it was important to have a man like Uncle Root in her novel. She and her sisters had been victims of child abuse. She states:

Jeffers

I needed there to be a really beautiful Black man in the book. And so, I wanted to have a Black man who was just filled with love. And Uncle Root is that person. Ailey meets him when she's three or four or five years old and she says: "I feel safe and I love him." I never had an Uncle Root and so I just created someone on the page who would love me and tend to me.

Greene

But you not only mention W.E.B. DuBois, you also talk about Booker T. Washington.

Jeffers

Now my daddy had nothing but contempt for Booker T Washington because daddy had two degrees from Columbia. Daddy was a mixed-race person; his parents were mixed race; and he grew up in the Black bourgeoisie. But when you would go to Georgia, you would find older or middle-aged Black men; their names would be Booker T such and such. And they looked at Booker T Washington as a very great man. He was considered by my mother as a very great man.

And so, I thought about that sort of tension, right? There were class tensions because this is very much, believe it or not, also a novel of manners.

In discussing her mother's view of Booker T. Washington, Jeffers brings up the tension of classism and colorism. When asked about the autobiographical elements in the novel, Jeffers states:

I grew up in the Black bourgeoisie, and I always tell people I'm from the Black bourgeoisie but not of it. Because my mother was a very dark brown skinned woman, there was a lot of colorism. . . . She wrote an essay that was published in the *Black Scholar* years ago about the horrible colorism that she experienced when she was in college as a Black woman in the Black middle class.

Jeffers's discussion of colorism and class adds another dimension to the dichotomy between DuBois and Washington. DuBois's initial advocacy for a Black Talented Tenth was the antithesis of Washington's advocacy for strengthening the working class by emphasizing the value of vocational skills. Jeffers's recounting of the differences between her mother's and father's view of the two Black leaders illustrates that colorism may have "colored" DuBois's views on social and economic progress for the Black race.

Honorée Fanonne Jeffers is an award-winning fiction writer, poet, and essayist. She is the author of five poetry collections, including *The Age of Phillis*. See [Honorée Fanonne Jeffers - Poet, novelist, and essayist](#)

These literary meditations on the reflections on Honorée Fanonne Jeffers's *The Love Songs of W.E.B. DuBois* represent a window into the world of my book project. I would love to hear from you. Please visit my website at www.drbrendamgreene.com.

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