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The Deep Shovel:

A Conversation with Jaki Shelton Green

by Amber Flora Thomas

“I ALWAYS REMIND
THEM TO BE CAREFUL.
WRITING IS A
DEEP SHOVEL.”

AMBER FLORA THOMAS is the recipient of such poetry awards as the Dylan Thomas American Poet Prize, the Richard Peterson Prize, and the Ann Stanford Prize. Her publications include *Eye of Water* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005), which won the Cave Canem Poetry Prize, and *The Rabbits Could Sing* (University of Alaska Press, 2012). Most recently, her poetry has appeared in *Callaloo*, *Orion Magazine*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Saranac Review*, and *Crab Orchard Review*, as well as *Angles of Ascent: A Norton Anthology of Contemporary African American Poetry*. She is a Cave Canem Fellow and faculty member. She received her MFA from Washington University in St. Louis in 1998 and is now on the faculty at East Carolina University. Read another of her interviews (with North Carolina poet Anjail Rashida Ahmad) in *NCLR Online* 2014.

This interview was transcribed by **MAX HERBERT**, an undergraduate English major at ECU, who received grant funding from an ECU Undergraduate Research Award in the summer of 2015 to work on *NCLR* projects. Max then enrolled in the ECU English Department internship class to serve as an intern for *NCLR* in fall 2015.

It was my pleasure to meet with Jaki Shelton Green in early May 2015 to record this interview. The majority of the transcript is included here; however, I have adjusted some of the text for flow and economy in presenting the interview for publication. In conducting this interview, I was meeting this poet for the first time. I found that her many accolades and accomplishments, were an accurate introduction to her person, which can be described as generous and fearsome. She effortlessly brings together a passion for the written word and her humanitarian efforts to help disadvantaged people discover their potential through writing, and in the process guides all of us in upholding justice in our North Carolina communities. She is a kindred spirit and a visionary in the middle of a rich writing career.

Jaki Shelton Green was a recipient of the North Carolina Award for Literature in 2003 and inducted into the North Carolina Literary Hall of Fame in 2014. She is the author of five books of poetry published by Carolina Wren Press: *Mask* (1981), *Dead on Arrival* (1983), *Conjure Blues* (1996), *Singing a Tree into Dance* (2003), and *Breath of the Song* (2005). Her most recent book of poetry, *Feeding the Light*, was published by Jacar Press in 2014, and of course she has published her poetry in a variety of literary journals and magazines, including the *African American Review*, *Callaloo*, *Obsidian, Ms.*, and *Essence*. Her poetry has even been choreographed by dance companies, including Danca Nova at Colorado Naropa Institute for the Arts, The Chuck Davis African Dance Ensemble, Miami City Ballet, Two Near the Edge, and Choreo Collective. Green is also the co-editor of two anthologies published by Chapel Hill Press, *Poets for Peace* (2002) and *Immigration, Emigration, and Diversity* (2005), and she has written a play, *Blue Opal* (1994). In 2009, Green served as the North Carolina Piedmont Laureate and in 2016 as the Lenoir-Rhyne University Writer-in-Residence. She has taught poetry and facilitated creative writing classes extensively at public libraries, universities, community colleges, and public and private schools; and she has contributed her voice in various roles for the North Carolina Humanities Council Roads Scholar Program, the North Carolina Center for the Advancement of Teachers, the North Carolina Writers Conference, the Paul Green Foundation, and the UNC School of Law. As a community arts advocate, she creates and facilitates programs that serve diverse audiences and populations: incarcerated, homeless, chronically and mentally ill, survivors, elderly, public and private schools, teachers, hospice care providers, substance abuse counselors, literacy programs, libraries, universities, humanities councils, immigrants, community economic development, and social justice nonprofits. She is the owner of *SistaWRITE*, which provides retreats and travel excursions for women writers.

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