



tripwire 5

a journal of poetics

Expanding the Repertoire:
Continuity & Change in African-American Writing

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edited by Yedda Morrison & David Buuck

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Editors' Notes

"Expanding the Repertoire" was a three-day conference hosted by Small Press Traffic and held at New College in San Francisco, in April 2000. The conference was originally conceived and planned in 1998 by Renee Gladman, giovanni singleton, and then-SPT Director Dodie Bellamy. Jocelyn Saidenberg (SPT Director 1999-2000) organized the actual proceedings, and along with Renee, giovanni, and many SPT board members and volunteers, helped present a compelling and exciting three days of panels, readings, and discussion.

The materials presented here cannot fully replicate the energy and excitement of the conference itself, but do give an indication of the breadth and depth of the issues involved, and will hopefully provoke and further the conversations and debates presented here. The essays in this volume range from edited transcriptions of panel presentations to papers rewritten specifically for this occasion. Participants were also asked to include a selection of their creative work, and the resulting mixture of poetry, prose, and fiction reflects the range of diverse formal strategies represented at the conference. Also included are brief edited transcriptions of some of the lengthy discussion sessions that concluded each panel.

The conference, as well as this issue of *Tripwire*, could not have occurred without the help of numerous people, including Dodie Bellamy, Jocelyn Saidenberg, current SPT Director Elizabeth Treadwell Jackson, Kevin Killian, Megan Puiett, Suzi Markham, Taylor Brady, Tanya Hollis, Arnold J. Kemp, the SPT board and volunteers, and of course Renee Gladman and giovanni singleton. This special issue of *Tripwire* is funded in part through Small Press Traffic, with the support of grants from the LEF Foundation and the San Francisco Arts Commission; our thanks to them for their generous contribution. Finally, our thanks to the conference participants themselves, for a rigorous and stimulating three days, as well as for their willingness to participate in the documentation of this event.

YM & DB
Sept. 2001
San Francisco

Introduction

In the fall of 1998, we met with then-Executive Director of Small Press Traffic, Dodie Bellamy, to discuss our ideas for a weekend-long conference. Our vision was to orchestrate a weekend of talks, the focus of which would be the mostly unattended question of the history and role of innovation in contemporary African-American writing. We believed a public forum, intended to open a field of exploration as opposed to setting forth a particular perspective, would push forward this issue that had been hovering above the discourse of experimental poetics for a long time. The necessity for such an event was without question, and without the initiative and effort of Dodie and SPT, it may never have happened.

"Expanding the Repertoire" took shape over the course of many conversations in which the question "where do we begin?" was prevalent. Every possible topic inspired further questions that led us to further topics. A map began to unfold that, in our navigation, required us to examine our roles as participants, inheritors, and observers within a complex geography. We were overwhelmed by all there was to achieve, but at the same time, confident in our direction. Eventually, we settled on three panels that we hoped were both broad and specific enough to sustain the many possible vectors of discussion.

The first panel, "Catch a Fire," moderated by Renee, was concerned with the questions of what is considered innovative, who makes this decision, and what happens to the work that fails to be recognized as such. We invited Wanda Coleman, Nathaniel Mackey, and Harryette Mullen to serve as panelists. The second panel, which was moderated by Harryette and presented by Erica Hunt, Mark McMorris, and Lorenzo Thomas, was entitled "Kindred." Its purpose was to show the rich legacy of innovation among Black artists and writers from as early as Jean Toomer and as far away as the Caribbean. Our last panel, "Tell My Horse," moderated by giovanni, engaged the issue of poetics. We asked Will Alexander, C.S. Giscombe, and Julie Patton to discuss the origins and aesthetics of their own experimentalism in the context of their development as artists. The panels were complemented by two stunning nights of readings by participants and an overall rare, unmitigated enthusiasm. We hope that the papers and poetic work that follow will convey at least a fraction of what transpired the weekend of April 7-9, 2000.

On the other side of a remarkable and life-altering event, all we can say is "more" and "thank you." Without the energy and cooperation of the conference panelists, Jocelyn Saidenberg (Executive Director of SPT for the 1999-2000 season), all our generous volunteers, the attentive audience, and the editors of *Tripwire*, this event would not have had the community spirit that made it an extraordinary mark in history.

Renee Gladman
giovanni singleton

December 2000

Renee Gladman

"Catch a Fire": The Role of Innovation in Contemporary Writing

Understanding African American poetry of any era requires an ability to hear the "whole voice" — Lorenzo Thomas

The goal of this panel is to expand upon recent discussions of innovative practices by African-American writers. By way of introduction, I want to express my indebtedness to the critical and creative work of the conference participants, in particular, those on this panel, whose ideas have broadened and complicated my sense of innovation—how it is assigned and identified. I also want to acknowledge Aldon Nielson, Wilson Harris, Juliana Spahr, and here in San Francisco, Tisa Bryant, for their contributions to this debate.

The work of African-Americans, despite its formative impact on literary practices, has been filtered through the narrowest of funnels—its racial perspective. Inarguably, African-American writers have been marked by a history of social and cultural injustice and alienation, and that history has had an influence on the scope of their work. But it is erroneous to believe that that is all you will find there. Any writer, not just the marginalized one, communicates his or her cultural and racial perspective in his or her work. Even in the avant-garde. So to read writing by African-Americans as if it is a static representation or literal translation of "being Black in America" is to deny the engagement, improvisation, disruption, and continuous re-formulation of that very perspective.

As is argued in Aldon Nielson's *Black Chant* and Lorenzo Thomas' *Extraordinary Measures*, and as demonstrated by Harryette Mullen's re-assertion of the work *Oreo* by Fran Ross—to give just three examples—innovation is not a new concept in the literature of African-Americans. However, it is a concept in need of examination, reevaluation in terms of its defining-power. What characterizes innovation? Who decides? Why has it been applied, for the most part, only to the work of White writers? Why is there a resistance in literary criticism to consider a writer's experience in the world as having a direct effect on the form of the work, as well as content? How can we begin to see formal experimentation as an extension of a writer's experience in the world, as a kind of negotiation of that experience?

The varying styles and strategies used by this panel's participants make for a rich and complex field of investigation. The diversity of their projects—tonal, directive, and explorative differences—provides not only a warning against the historical simplification of *intent* by African-American writers, but also, conversely, puts forth a seed of doubt in our casual acceptance of categories and denominators. As readers, critics, and writers we have to question the use and benefit of our current terms (e.g., innovation, experimentation) and question the convention of using modifiers (such as "ethnic" or "cultural") to distinguish "other" writing from the norm. I do not see, in view of this nation's unflinching devotion to racism and disenfranchisement, the dissolution of these terms, but I do believe with appropriate concentration and openness we can reach a greater understanding of their expansiveness.

Nathaniel Mackey

Expanding the Repertoire

I'd like to address the question of what characterizes innovation and the question of how the term impacts or fails to impact critical approaches to African-American writing. I'd like to make the point, to begin with, that the term "innovation" is a relative one, that it's haunted by the question "Compared to what?" There are a variety of ways in which it can apply, a variety of ways in which to innovate or be seen to innovate. Still, there's a general tendency to think of innovation, especially where it's taken to be related to or synonymous with experimentation, as having to do with method, as having, more specifically, to do with the pursuit of greater complexity and sophistication in technical and formal matters, greater self-consciousness and complication with regard to questions of mediation. The pursuit of a more complex accommodation between technique and epistemological concerns, between ways of telling and ways of knowing, especially where knowing is less the claim than a nervousness about it, is what tends to be thought of as innovation, experimentation, avant-garde.

Understood in this way, these terms have not had a very prominent place in the discourse attending African-American writing. The innovation that's granted African-American writing, where there's any granted at all, tends to be one of content, perspective or attitude. The newness African-American writing is most likely to be recognized and valorized for, credited with or taken to be characterized by, is the provision of an otherwise absent or underrepresented (thus new) perspective, conveniently known as the black perspective, its report on the one thing African Americans are regarded as experts on, racial victimization. Along with this tendency go canons of accessibility and disclosure that are viewed as diametrically opposed to the difficulty attributed to formally innovative or experimental work. One of Langston Hughes's most popular creations is a character named Jesse B. Semple—a lightly veiled way of saying, "Just be simple," the credo of quintessential blackness. Charles Olson, on the other hand, uses the phrase "the blessing / that difficulties are" in *The Maximus Poems*, a phrase one of the Language Poetry magazines later took its name from. The distinction between a formally innovative willingness to incur difficulty, on the white hand, and a simple disclosure of innovative content, on the black, is a simple or simplistic one, but telling nonetheless. Oversimplifications along exactly such lines have had an enormous impact on the questions we're here to address and can even

be said to be what brought us here. They contribute to the relative invisibility of African-American writing that seeks to advance content outside the prescribed or expected limits and/or to be formally innovative or experimental. They contribute to the neglect that gave rise to the need for a conference like this, to the constriction of the repertoire we're talking about expanding.

Racialized dichotomies between content and form, accessibility and difficulty, conventionality and innovation and so forth rest on a division of cultural labor black experimental writing has to contest and overcome. The grid of expectations enforced by such dichotomies has had a great deal of influence on the critical legitimization of African-American writing and experimental writing as well, categories which are generally treated as entirely separate, non-overlapping. When I was looking for a publisher for my book *Discrepant Engagement*, which deals with experimental writing by African American authors, white American authors and Caribbean authors, I was told by one university press that the book's problem is that it's not really one book but potentially three: a book on experimental writing, a book on African-American writing and a book on Caribbean writing. I eventually found a publisher for the book, but this made it clear that the investment in segregated categories dies hard, that it's still not quite done dying. My experience with and relationship to notions of innovation and experimentation and the question of categorization they give rise to for nonwhite writers go back to my earliest years as a reader of contemporary writing, my earliest years as an aspiring writer. Ed Roberson and I were part of a discussion of this question a few years ago at Rutgers and we both found ourselves having to insist that the category "black experimental writing" which was being picked at and problematized wasn't a problem, that for both us, very early on, each at a different time and in a somewhat different way, the overlap between African-American writing and experimental writing had been so clear we simply took it for granted.

Amiri Baraka, no doubt the best known black experimental writer in recent memory, figured prominently in both our accounts of what fostered that recognition. I first read Baraka's work when I was seventeen and he was LeRoi Jones. The first book of his I read was *The Dead Lecturer*, the back cover of which said, among other things, "Like Pound and Olson, LeRoi Jones is not an 'easy' poet, for he too is searching for new ways of expression and rejecting any preconceived notion of what a poem ought to be." Statements like this, along with Baraka's inclusion in the discussion of Projectivism in

M.L. Rosenthal's *The New Poets* and other things I was then encountering, didn't suggest that African American writers could not or should not be experimental, could not or should not be difficult, could not or should not be included in discussions of innovative writing. Baraka proved to be a signal example not only of what was possible but also of certain constraints racialized dichotomy and the grid of expectations help keep in place. His anxieties over the anomaly he took himself to be bespoke the power of that taxonomy and its attendant simplicities, their power even over someone whose existence and work prove them wrong. "Having been taught that art was 'what white men did,'" he wrote in the introduction to *Home* in 1965, "I almost became one, to have a go at it." He called himself "sammy davis / for allen ginsbergs frank sinatra" around the same time. He dismissed Ralph Ellison's work as an "extraliterary commercial . . . about European literature, the fact that he has done some reading in it," which is an odd comment coming from the author of a novel called *The System of Dante's Hell* and poems with titles like "Valéry as Dictator," "HEGEL," "Don Juan in Hell" and "The Return of the Native." The comment's implicit self-indictment became explicit when Baraka rejected the predominantly white avant-garde context in which he and his work had come to prominence, a move which was celebrated and canonized as the transformation of a quasi-white, obscurantist writer into a black, accessible one. "Originally writing in the obscure Greenwich Village idiom, his recent identification with the black masses has caused him to write with more clarity and force," Dudley Randall wrote. Baraka's work and career have received far more attention than those of any other African-American experimental writer, largely due to the conversion narrative that's now put at the heart of it, a narrative that leaves the grid of expectations intact. The social text it foregrounds is a simple one, much easier to decipher than a text by Melvin Tolson or Russell Atkins or, earlier on, Baraka himself.

American society's appetite for simplicities is not to be underestimated. It poses a challenge to all experimental writers, an especially stiff one to those hailing from a group expected, more than most, to feed and affirm that appetite. A few years ago I received a paper in a class on the Harlem Renaissance in which a student praised James Weldon Johnson's poetry because, as he put it, "Johnson, unlike T. S. Eliot, doesn't display his intelligence." An occupational hazard I suppose you could call it, but what struck me was its resonance with more skillfully worded assertions to the same effect by critics and academics, black as well as white, bent on promoting African-American literature as the alternative to modernism, recondite writing, art for art's sake

and other targets. To be let in only on those terms is enough to put one at peace with being left out. As an old calypso put it, "I don't give a damn, I done dead already."

But we should give a damn and do and I don't want to paint too bleak a picture. The relevance of experimentalism to African-American writing and of African-American writing to experimentalism needs to be insisted on and accorded its place in the discourse attending African-American literature and in the discourse attending experimental writing. I wouldn't want to conclude without mentioning a development or two that brighten the prospects of doing so, that are already doing so—things like Harryette Mullen's critique of the hegemony or potential hegemony of the "speakerly text" paradigm, C. S. Giscombe's "Maroon Writing" section in *American Book Review* a few years ago, Aldon Nielsen's *Black Chant: Languages of African-American Postmodernism* and the two-volume anthology of black experimental poetry that he and Lauri Ramey are editing, Paul Naylor's *Poetic Investigations: Singing the Holes in History*, Bernard Bell's forthcoming anthology of essays on Clarence Major's work, *Clarence Major: The Portrait of an African American Postmodernist*, and sections devoted to the work of Harryette Mullen and Will Alexander in recent issues of *Callaloo*. Another such development, of course, is this conference, which I'm glad is taking place.

Harryette Mullen

I tried to write a paper for this occasion, so I wouldn't have to improvise as I'm doing now, because spoken improvisation is not my strength. The problem has been that I've been so immersed in living the implications of these questions that it's very hard to write about them. So I welcome this conference as an attempt to try to get at some of these issues of diversity within African American writing. I feel very moved and very excited to be here. I feel particularly happy that we are meeting here at New College in a gathering organized by Renee Gladman, Giovanni Singleton, Jocelyn Saldenberg, Kevin Killian and Dodie Bellamy—people with whom I have some relationship. I'm in such good company here among all the others who are participating. Because of this event I have the opportunity to meet Mark McMorris for the first time. The rest of us—I mean, I can speak for myself—we have never been all together in a room at the same time. We have met in twos and threes. I mean, literally in twos and threes. So something has already changed, I believe, and partly that has to do with the writing that we've all been doing over the years. All of these people have been very informative and very inspirational and some of you out in the audience as well, those of you that I know and have followed. So for me this is a time to think about the distance that has been traveled.

Just a few years ago I wrote a piece called "Poetry and Identity" in which I addressed the sense of a mutual exclusiveness separating practices of innovative writing from identity or the politics of identity, the prevailing assumption that "codes of oppressed peoples" or writing that was oppositional in a politically, socially, or racially conscious way was somehow incompatible with writing that might be described as experimental, avant garde, innovative, or formally oppositional to "official verse culture." For myself, I would define innovation as explorative and interrogative, an open-ended investigation into the possibilities of language, the aesthetic and expressive, intellectual and transformative possibilities of language. Poetry for me is the arena in which this kind of investigation can happen with the fewest obstacles and boundaries. However, obstacles and boundaries have been formative in our collective history, and I think that we share something in common because we write as people of African descent in America, because of the historical struggle that we share, and because of the history that associates African-Americans with inarticulateness and illiteracy, or with an oral tradition that continually threatens to drown

out any possible written tradition that we can claim as our own. I think that part of what I have struggled with as a writer (and I see it also with the students that I teach at UCLA), is the assumption that this is not our language, our literature, or our culture. That if we are going to create something it has to be separate and distinct from what is thought of as American culture. I do think this has begun to change. As I understand it, there is a sense of conflict and resistance in the idea of innovation. Out of the struggle to try to define who we are, what our language is, what our culture is, innovation has often occurred in the midst of that struggle.

I see various strands of innovation. A couple of years ago I gave a talk at Naropa University in Boulder that was called "Vernacular Innovation: Hip Hop and Avant Garde," noting that hip-hop culture is partly the result of people determined to make music despite a lack of musical instruments and formal instruction. Innovations came about through an expressive need to make new music using familiar technologies, and also through the critical need to address social conditions in a post-Civil Rights context. I think that there are particular institutional and historical formations, out of which come the kinds of activities that we have tended to associate with the avant-garde, but there's also another tradition that I would call vernacular innovation. Amiri Baraka, for instance, is someone who tends to approach African-American writing as if it's naturally innovative, as if African-Americans can't help but be innovative because everything we do is new because we've been put into a situation of ongoing resistance as well as deprivation and alienation from whatever constitutes the mainstream culture. We've been forced from the beginning to address the mainstream culture from its margins, to build our culture up from the ground, so to speak. That's one aspect of what I call vernacular innovation. I don't think there's an automatic linkage between being marginalized or oppressed and being innovative, but I do think that being oppressed does call upon all of your resources, and often out of that comes innovation.

When I say that innovation is interrogative, I'm speaking of interrogation not in terms of a police state or a criminal justice system, but returning to the word's original meaning of standing between and asking questions. To the extent that my work has been innovative, it has to do with my own sense of being in between discourses, in between cultures, in between communities, with the possibility of movement back and forth between these different arenas and discourses, so that the poetry comes out of the resistance, the conflict,

the struggle, the difficulty, the discomfort or awkwardness of that position. There is a certain discomfort at times, a social discomfort, a personal discomfort, discomfort when I find that my language is not understood or that I don't understand someone else's language or that terms are being used differently or that histories and experiences are different, and that we don't always mesh and we don't always immediately click and understand one another. So out of that struggle, out of that sometimes uncomfortable encounter, some of my work has come. I have talked before about the genesis of my last published book, *Muse & Drudge*, that it came out of uncomfortable moments when, with the middle two books, *Trimings* and *S*PeRM**K*T*, I often found myself in venues where I was the one person of color in the room. It was not something that I thought should never happen but if it happened all the time, that was odd and uncomfortable and it made me wonder what in the work was keeping people of color out of the room. So *Muse & Drudge* was an attempt to try to bring together those audiences that had emerged for *Trimings* and *S*PeRM**K*T* and the audience that had been there for my first book, *Tree Tall Woman*. To a certain extent I feel that what I've intended has begun to happen, that those audiences are coming together.

I want to add that I gave a talk at UC San Diego at the Page Mothers Conference about the novelist, Fran Ross, a novelist who also worked as a comedy writer for Richard Pryor on his television show that lasted only four weeks. I'm excited that her book *Oreo* is now going to be reprinted by Northeastern University Press. I just wanted to give everybody an update and a note to check out this book when it arrives.¹ Fran Ross was born in 1935, and died in 1985. I have now been in touch with her family and I'm writing the foreword for this reprint. *Oreo* came out in 1974 and is written in a very playful, comical, and poetic way. Although it is a novel it's full of language games and puzzles and puns and jokes. Ross grew up in a multi-ethnic neighborhood in Philadelphia. She lived next door to a corner store that was owned by a Russian-Jewish immigrant family and several of the characters in her novel, including some of the African-American characters, speak Yiddish. Of course in 1974 with a novel called *Oreo*, published by a small press, an African-American woman wrote it, and it's a satire—think how many black women have written books of satire? Can you count them on one hand? On two fingers? And then the reader encounters Yiddish language right on the first page of the

1. A new edition of *Oreo* with a foreword by Harryette Mullen is now available.

novel. People were not ready for this! *Oreo* is also based on the Greek classical myth of Theseus and Minotaur. The labyrinth in this book is the New York subway system, and the hero is transformed into a young black woman leaving Philadelphia and going to New York to find her white Jewish father, after growing up with her African-American family. Think about all the reasons why this book was lost and this woman forgotten. She is between, she is asking questions about identity that people did not want to ask and did not want to hear answers to.

Anyway, I will stop right there and hope that we can have some discussion.

Wanda Coleman

AVANT-GARDE WITH MAINSTREAM TENDENCIES

for giovanni singleton

At one of the standing-room-only evenings at Writers Block—an upscale Los Angeles reading/interview series that features the nation's top-name authors, Norman Mailer waxed flatly on the marginal future of the American literary novel. It is, to quote him, “going the way of American poetry.” A subdued gasp and profoundly troubled silence whammed the audience chock full of writers and readers across economic and racial divides. His statement was unchallenged during the Q & A that followed.

Among the specters raised to haunt me were the assassinated National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), and the politically castrated National Endowment for the Arts (NEA)—casualties in the cultural warfare against America's so-called intellectual elite. I considered this activity a by-product of the dismantling or neutering of social programs generated by the JFK and Johnson administrations; particularly those programs put in place to mitigate racism, poverty and those designed to foster the fine arts.

Mailer perfunctorily blotted the well-inked death warrant. As a result of these thirty-odd years of warfare, I found myself among those nailed to the margins of our culture. It seemed that I was without the possibility of ever entering the mainstream of American intellectual discourse—whether as a representative of its African-American contingent or as a contender for the larger canon. As I roiled in my seat, I concluded that I was doomed to remain at the forefront of an apparently impotent American literary avant-garde, whether I wished to be so or not. My disgruntlement over this actuality, and the ironies, resonated throughout an extremely difficult year. They were still stabbing my psyche on the uncomfortable ride from the airport as the passenger van pitched and yawed into San Francisco proper—ahead, the conference loosely described as a gathering of Black avant-garde writers.

Survival on the margins of the literary world is one thing when done by choice, another when kept there by bigoted or subversive arbiters of taste—be they academic or not, critics or other writers—those bosses, gatekeepers and floorwalkers who govern the best-seller lists, receive the lion's share of book reviews, foundation and arts council ducats and cer-

tain reputation-making prizes. As goes the nebulous complaint, an increasingly fluid politically correct sensibility dictates who is on the receiving end when the assorted Molochs (many considering themselves liberal) dole out mainstream recognition. At first glance, I—a Black female poet, fiction writer and journalist—might seem a likely candidate to benefit from such a happenstance. However, the contentious history of my ascension certifies the exact opposite is the case. Rather than finding an embrace within the PC ranks, I have discovered I am usually ranked one of its worst nightmares, loose and unpredictable. I have chosen not to be “safe”—even within that context—yet have opted to be as excellent a writer as possible—thereby, a dangerous original, one who prefers to call it the way she sees it (even when in error), uniquely or common-place. The price paid for this so-called individuality guaranteed by our so-called Constitution has been devastating. Yet, the more difficult my trials the more relentless and crazed I’ve become—this state of rage now exacerbated by a pernicious hypertension that typifies my social profile. After thirty years on this so-called frontline, becoming more marginal by the minute, all I seem to have left is my integrity and my bare ass.

Low bitch on the totem pole.

Life on the margins means not being invited to the big Black pow-wows on race matters and the “what we gonna do when the pseudo-liberal well runs dry” conferences. Life on the margins means that I’m constantly being asked to write blurbs and do favors for others without payback. That my ideas, book titles and lines are constantly “appropriated” by lazy Black authors (and a few non-Black) who have been welcomed into the mainstream. That when attending these demeaning affairs I’m expected to conform to the going neo-Mammy stereotype (Maya, Nikki, Oprah, Toni, Terry, June and Alice). Too, that I’m expected to do so without the benefit of equal pay or treatment and, occasionally, without being offered a plane ticket or hotel room. That I am not always treated as a distinguished author, though I have written as many books as Morrison and published more poems than Langston Hughes. Rather, I’m treated as though I’m an ageless renegade eager to snatch up my backpack and hitchhike into town for the throw-down—eager to be in it for the glory while everyone else not only collects a sizeable check, but walks away with the largest share of whatever recognition there is to be scrounged. Repeatedly, I am disappointed to discover that at writers’ conferences—where the best-sellers rule—I am reduced to the lowly status of agenda filler. In either their haste, stupidity or distraction, my host, hostess or hosting committee—whoever is responsible for these disasters—does not know who I am—which is to say, they’ve never read my work, have never heard me perform

and have no concept of the dues I’ve paid and are still paying. They simply assume I’m a clone of one of the better known African-American women authors, ready to hug and pass the snot rags at the drop of a crocodile tear.

This is the fury governing my thoughts as I step from the van and spin through the doors of the low-rent hotel off The Tenderloin. Memories of the city are flooding in on me.

On our virgin counter-cultural safari from Los Angeles into the Bay Area, late 1966, my first husband and I show up one evening at the hungry i. We are seated at a decent table in the near empty room, and order drinks self-consciously at the minimum we can ill afford. We are young and as anxious as ever to be at the heart of “the happenings,” wherever those happenings are, irrespective of the fact that we are as underprivileged and as without means as it comes. But this is the 60s and anything is probable. Putting on his best pose, my Georgia Reb coolly corrals the white-jacketed manager who, as we will soon discover, turns out to be the club’s owner.

“We’d like to say hello to Mister Lenny Bruce before his performance.” The owner’s wide shoulders collapse and he assesses us strangely. “You kids must be out-of-towners. Sorry to tell yab, folks,” he spoke solemnly, “Lenny’s been dead three months.”

August 25th 2000—Nietzsche’s birthday. I awake still aslea in the dreamstate. I am wandering the streets of San Francisco with two companions in search of an affordable hotel room. We careen from intersection to intersection at fantastic angles, the city by the bay a series of arcs and triangles. “That motor hotel near Wolfgang’s, before it burned down.” I keep repeating, dazedly. One friend—a professor—opts for an ornate pseudo-gothic structure that’s way beyond my means. The other—a record producer—decides he’s going to reverse the trip south a few miles to catch a Motel 86 off one of the business-commerce exits. I’m left in a swirl of confusions knowing that my credit cards have expired and that The Inn at The Opera is no longer within reach of my pocketbook. . . .

Once I’m completely awake this morning I find myself still at sea—dissatisfied, half-broiled and enraged. Now, I was being asked to write a paper after the conference had come and gone. Worse, I had promised this article at the end of July and it remains unwritten. Once an idea goes cold on me, it’s nearly impossible to resurrect it. I had been hot to write back in April immediately after returning from the conference sponsored by Small Press Traffic. The painful ironies were exquisitely fresh. I had scrawled plenty of notes, and had gotten on the horn, called Kush and asked him to send me the video cas-

sette, etc. But I was too upset at the time to be articulate. Or reasonable beyond diatribe. Not only that, but various other commitments begged to be honored.

Before leaving the conference, I had asked one of its organizers if they intended to publish a report. The response had been vague—a "That's a good idea." I greeted the call with enthusiasm when it came in May, said I'd get right on it—and did—but the impetus evaporated within days as my attention was demanded elsewhere. I had to be in New York City for the Academy of American Poets honors bash. I had received the 1999 Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize for the best book of poetry published the previous year—my *Bathwater Wine*.

I was still seasawing between elation and resentment when the belated confirmation came in from Small Press. During that first rush, I felt tremendously vindicated by the Lenore Marshall award, but afterward the congratulations proved disappointingly few. Now this skewed invitation. I went along with the program but I further resented that I was asked to participate in the conference for the price of a plane ticket and a stipend so stingy it failed to cover the cost of my hotel room. I mistakenly believed I was just more agenda fodder. Determined, I bit the bullet and boarded the plane.

Barely eighteen, I joined the Studio Watts workshop when it graduated from Great Society Teen Post in 1964 to open its doors as a community arts center in Spring of 1965 (often confused with Budd Schulberg's Watts Writers Workshop which opened at a competing site nearby *after* the riots). This was mere months before the Black community erupted that August. The director, a Black man, backed by Bill Cosby and Hollywood legends Howard Duff, Ida Lupino, and Mary (Peter Pan) Martin, had proudly adopted the phrase used by one of the local denizens who drifted in and out of the building on Grandee south of 103rd Street. The burgeoning neighborhood arts project, home of poet Jayne Cortez's drama workshop and Sunny Bustion's painting sessions—was known as "the University of the Streets," opening its doors to salvage that portion of the Talented Tenth ignored by L.A.'s larger community.

Pleased—at first—to be associated with the organization, I later put it on my fledgling resumes in lieu of a formal education, repeatedly telling perspective employers that I had graduated "magna cum laude" from the University of the Streets." But the hip phrase instantly aroused shock and consternation forcing my hasty explanation. I quit using it, deferring to a more pedestrian summary. But it would return to haunt me six years later in Venice on the lips of a local effere, the son of a Santa Monica entertainment attorney. By the

mid-70s, the Watts riot was history and Southern California's predominantly White and subtly racist Boom Generation poetry scene was viciously active beyond clubby and claustrophobic. I stayed at the core of it, yet I bristled at 'the street' label because it had lost its association of Black cultural pride. Its use was snide and ugly, intended to cripple if not halt my artistic ascension.

When Jack Micheline wore the 'street poet' label, it took on broad shoulders and smacked of the defiant, tough and untamable. But on me it was a straightjacket—loaded with the usual negatives associated with the Black urban subculture—crime, drug abuse, poverty, prostitution and worst of all—to my sensibility—the kind of glop, poorly crafted, lift-every-voice-and-sing sentimental verse that unfortunately characterizes what's largely considered African-American poetry in its uniquely dual orality.

Negro stream-of-consciousness spill.

This is a killer. And I write reluctantly. But I am dogged by the notions.

April 7th 2000—I am running up and down Van Ness Boulevard, trying to hail a cab, half in disbelief that it's so difficult to snare one, on the verge of being late to the first evening's activities. As I run, I'm trailed by a vision. I keep seeing Jack Micheline at a moment roughly eight years before. That night, I was walking just behind him. . . .

We've just left the hotel and we're walking toward the car. Jack's got a friend with him, a younger man about my age. They're walking in front of my husband Austin and me. We're headed for our car. From there, on that tiny incline we're hiking, we'll drive to the North Hollywood studio and present Jack on our Pacifica radio program, "The Poetry Connexion." Austin will proceed to warn him, as we do all our guests, that there are seven nasty little words we can't say over the air because children might be listening. (There goes that assault on the cultural elite again.) As Austin says this, we both sense that trying to harness Jack Micheline is like trying to harness a comet. The highlight of our show comes when, after ignoring our caution and spewing the salt, Jack becomes caught up in the passion of The Word and jumps to his feet, rocking the tiny studio as if it's a concert hall.

"Bong, bong, bong!" He chants and swings his arms.

It is a magnificent moment and we are dutifully stunned.

On this writing, I have forgotten what that poem was about. But that moment was profanely and profoundly glorious. It stays with me. That moment redefined what poetry will always be at its best, a living moving experience and performance that leaps from the page and grabs you by the gut and the soul.

Back in Y2K, I imagine Jack's dying in transit while crossing the bay on BART. Which way were you traveling, Jack? Tough way to go, but there's worse.

Like trying to get that cab. San Francisco during the rush has become as bad as Manhattan—the people as ugly as desperate as materialistic as they are at home in Hollywood.

My feet are unbelievably painful. I haven't worn the boots I've got on in a couple of years, and a weight gain has caused them to swell into the leather. I am angry beyond reason, if unfairly, at myself and at my hosts, questioning why I let myself be roped into doing this.

God, I'm sick of the arrogance—the arrogance of posers—those who critique poetry and those who write it. I'm sick of the anthology niggers and the slam ninnies. I'm sick of the academics who snigger on their thrones and snoot boogers at the likes of me—whoever I've been stereotyped as being that week. (Wendy Lesser once tagged me "The Sister From Another Planet," in her *San Francisco Focus* article on the NEA. She couldn't even give me credit for being decent by using my Christian name.) I'm sick of the biddies appointed by Presidents to lord it over us all, as if the dunces who run the world would know garbanzo beans about poetry. I'm as sick of the lets-be-inspirational gurus who pedal their tripe of political correctness—as sick of them as the grant gangsters—as sick of being sick of being sick....

But here I am, on the streets of the city I too thought I'd left my heart in. This place I regard as my second home. And I can't get a dad-blasted cab and I don't know whether it's my clothes, my hair, the color of my skin, the books I'm lugging or the total effect. I finally decide to strut down to the Opera House where I know the cabs congregate. Sure enough, I snag a ride. An immigrant from the Middle East who pretends he doesn't know the streets. In order to avoid robbery and heavy traffic, I give him the directions to the Mission.

What an offing lovely box of cookies.

I manage to arrive on time, books in tote, ready to rile at the literary mainstream to which I believe I have been refused entry. The theme is: "Expanding The Repertoire: Continuity and Change in African-American Writing." Following introductory remarks by moderator Renee Gladman, and introductions of each panelist (Nathaniel Mackey and Harryette Mullen), I am the first speaker on the panel titled "Catch a Fire." The avalanche of ironies starts with that title which is a Bob Marley reference. Unknown to anyone in the room but me, I am the only Black journalist to ever interview Bob Marley (see *Native In A Strange Land*)—and I did so three times, each for

underground L.A. newspapers starting in 1973 when Marley and The Wailers toured the U.S. to promote their *Catch a Fire* LP. [My afterthoughts, comments and corrections are in brackets.] Below is the transcript of my responses. Absent are the laughter and the silences. I began by challenging the *raison d'être* thusly:

"The Question proposed here is proposed within the context in which the mundane content of Black Lives largely remains controversial/taboo in American culture, particularly the mainstream culture, despite this all pervasiveness of so-called rap [hip-hop culture]. This is in all the media—cinema, television, radio and in the English and History departments. So this blatant censorship, which is sanctioned by a tacit bigotry on the left and outright bigotry on the political right, virtually renders the question mute as far as I'm concerned.

"However, to the extent that it is an issue to those of us categorized as such—us innovators—my participation in this indicates that I feel that some renewed discussion might lead to the development or the evolution of something that's truly new in American Poetry in the (similar) sense that the repeated discussion of jazz, of blues, and the eventuality of that discussion, furthered the evolution of new music and [a corresponding] innovation in the arts in general.

"I don't know—I mean this is just to me—the whole discussion is bizarre. Here I am in here in this mainstream publication, *The Journal of American Poets*—if any of you've seen it—as recipient of the 1999 Lenore Marshall Prize for the best book of 1998, *Bathwater Wine*, a book which I could not get reviewed [in literary forums such as *APR*, *The New York Review of Books*, or *Los Angeles Times Book Review*] after thirty years of writing. So what does this mean? Am I really outside the literary mainstream technically as a writer? Or am I part of the establishment? And here I am with Gwendolyn Brooks. We're bookends for the person who won the Tanning Prize, the one who got the real money, who got away with the real grand theft dough. Jackson MacLow. [I'm holding up the issue and pointing to MacLow's photograph.] You see. And it's very interesting, the psychology at work here, in the way the poems—anthologists [and editors] tend to editorialize at best through selection, on a subliminal level, not necessarily at a conscious level so that their sensibility [is reductive]. I've noticed this in artists [across all disciplines but] especially photographers. Photographers—who shoot male/girly photographs, have a tendency to gravitate toward a certain body type or female; so that, essentially, they're photographing one female, especially if the man only reaches a certain intellectual level. He has to be an *artist* to appreciate women across the spectrum even within a given race. That process [observed while I was an editor of mens' magazines] used to

always fascinate me. Well literary anthologists are [not exempt from this process].

"So there's this leveling process, almost, that takes place in a very similar way architects or designers work. You'll walk down a corridor, and you'll see Seurat and Monet and you'll see Picasso, but there's something that's the same in every painting, because it is reflecting the eye of that particular beholder who is looking for certain characteristics. It might be color; it might be line (because line transmits messages, as any good graphic artist will tell you). So anyway, the eye of this particular [beholder, the editor], [speaking] of my own poetry here—we have Ms. Brooks smiling at the bottom here, but there's a radical departure when we get to the Tanning Prize—where Mr. MacLow [is sandwiched] between the two Black women here. And they [the editorial staff] selected my poems to echo, answer or respond [to], or indicate some sort of connection between myself and Ms. Brooks, so that the poems that were selected to represent me, as it were, represents me within a certain context. So I've been narrow[ed down]—I've been sort of pared down to fit another's idea/notion of [what] this 'new member of our literary establishment,' here, is like.

"I've thought about this in terms of what makes one innovative. Is it to the extent that one has been unheard or silenced? Is it to the extent to which regionalism [my choice of words] is a factor [I'm thinking of the argument put forth by Wallace Stegner—especially his last letter-to-the-editor of the *Los Angeles Times Book Review* just before he died, advocating fairer editorial representation for writers in the western United States] since that seems to be a common property here two [poets participating in this conference are from New York. The rest of us] largely from the west—west of that River that distinguishes us—The Hudson.

"Also, agenda filler.

"One of the things that amuses me is how each anthologist or each school [of contemporary poetry] might redefine one depending on whose agenda has to be filled in what way, whether it's in the pursuit of grantsmanship/foundation funding, whatever. That is a third factor.

"And then the fourth factor: what is the author's intent here? What is the author driven to do? Are we engaged in some sort of by-product of the new bourgeois where we have time to play literary games and to be fascinated with these and enjoy them? Is this innovation taking place within an informed [appreciation of literary history]—or is the author, simply reinventing a part of the literary wheel that's been well done by someone else, maybe some Objectivist

somewhere [William Carlos Williams, Charles Reznikoff, Louis Zukofsky, et al.], or some concrete poet. So what is author intent? Is it [the manner in which the poem is written] really new?

"Amiri Baraka was the poet I was fixing to allude to [above as an example. The type of African American poet he is depends] on whose anthology [one refers to]—he's a Reggae poet here, he's a language poet there, he's a *this* poet here, he's a member of the establishment there...so it's the old Hollywood Thing—going for name value, what's recognizable, who's going to buy the anthology, which audience is targeted. How much do these pragmatic things affect/determine what's innovative?"

I am speaking rapidly, using gestures and inflections to fill gaps, hastily summarizing things I've begun to say quite frequently in the last four to five years during such events. My thoughts are moving faster than my mouth. I have so much to say and yet don't want to hog the forum. I'm worried about time, but I am reluctant to explain to the audience that I no longer have a clear sense of time or what it means, save its passing incredibly quickly, inspiring in me a level of concern nearing panic... not to mention the hypertension.

"For myself, as a DuBoisian [W.E.B.'s double consciousness], I'm working with two muses—three would be more accurate. First, I'm working with my visual arts muse, because I have training in graphics. I'm a magazine production editor. I can do layouts and flats—the whole nine yards—I can dummy newspapers. That [visual] sense is wedded to my sense of dance [space] and [my experience in] experimental theatre. [These muses or aspects of my psyche combine to enhance] the extent to which I'm able to develop an extreme level of intensity when I'm expressing my words. [The experience originates with] my association with the San Francisco Dancers' Workshop, mentor Anna Halprin, which in the late 60s-early 70s was located at 321 Divisadero. My experience with SFDW was critical in my [writerly] development, not only as a poet in [oral] terms, because I somehow wanted to get that intensity—not only in terms of performance—but it had a direct impact on my writing on the page. So that when I present the poem (and this is where my third or fourth muse, music comes in—poems are not just poems for me, they're notations) I'm notating an emotional terrain. So that what you're experiencing when I put forth my performance is actually a *writing*.

"I know my work, but I never memorize it, so that in the presentation—because memorization is fixation—and if you've heard enough rap, as you know, that deadens the word. Most rappers are stultifyingly boring if you're into content or even if you're into performance, because they're going for what's superficial. They don't know

how to reach down and get into the underbelly and bring it up. That's very dangerous to do, and not many artists, outside of the theatrical world, care to invest themselves to make that kind of commitment. So, that is also at work [in my own presentations]."

I am seething. All the reasons that have brought me across space and time to sit in that seat are awirl in my head. It is all I can do to sit still. I am exploding with frustrations and disappointments. My other panel members, Nathaniel Mackey and Harryette Mullen make their opening statements and responses, then Renee Gladman fields a question. The floor is again opened to me:

"First thing that came to mind on the tail-end of what you [as a key organizer, Mullen's statement is short] were saying, I had a brief exchange with the gentleman—then chair at Tuscaloosa—Jerry Ward, Jr.—who put together *Trouble The Water*, an anthology of 250 black poets and I noticed that he arranged poets not according to age, as in the *Norton Anthology of African American Poets*, but conceptually. I'm saying, 'Well why didn't you include me in the 60s/70s section [with peers Quincy Troupe and Kalamu ya Salaam] instead of the 80s/90s.' And he said (well he was talking about the fact that I was outside the Black Arts Movement, even though. . .). Well, yes, but the impetus for me writing was born during that period and I very much affected by it. To the good and to the negative.

"Speaking of the cultural politics that began to dominate (American literature), I think that what was probably innovative wasn't how it was said (during the Black Arts Movement) as much as *what* was said, since there was no [open] forum [for militant Black thought]. So content drove and dominated anything that could be vaguely considered innovative. [But. . .]

"Once that's been done, once you've had your Ellsworth Kelly [The New York School], so-to-speak, how many times can we have an Ellsworth Kelly again, regardless of whether it's a Latino Ellsworth or a Black Ellsworth Kelly. Once it's been done, that kind of thing, it's been done. And to repeatedly put the label on it of "new" doesn't necessarily make it so. From what I've seen in some younger voices coming along, that's really problematic, because not enough attention is given to the craft elements that go into making something innovative.

"So [in relation to] my dialogue between page and performance [and integral to it]—was the workshop I had with Clayton Eshleman, the editor/publisher of *Sulfur*. This was a very tender point in our discourse because he was completely dismissive [of the poems I wrote under the influence of the Black Arts Movement]; and he was one of my few mentors who challenged me enough on this point to

make me back off and reconsider it. I'd come into class (having) ripped off these wonderful performance pieces in the oral tradition and he would immediately start to chomp on them. . . constantly forced me into this corner concerning the page. 'But does it work on the page? Does it work as a poem?'

"Excuse me Harryette, I was just amazed, all I've ever been is usually the dot on the field of white in my Southern Californian experience, born and raised there. So being the only Black face at a cultural venue [isn't unusual when you've grown up in a White world]. I don't even notice until somebody else makes me suddenly aware that I'm Black. Oh—ah! Or that I'm OTHER is a more appropriate word. Otherwise, I'm just another one of the folks there. That I have an audience at all, regardless of color, is *wonderful*—given my approach to the audience. But getting back to my main point—[the one] that Clayton Eshleman continually challenged me on—*was that [quality] in the writing?* [Or simply in the oral presentation?]

"If I was going to perform my work, I had to come to some sort of decision as to whether I was going to be truly innovative in this so-called dialogue. *Was the poem going to have a life in my absence?* That became the point on which I began to focus, [striving to] answer that question. Is the poem going to have a life?"

I mention this—and I mention Nathaniel Mackey and Ishmael Reed to illustrate the point. I'm comparing three stanzas (quoting from my 1988 essay which appeared in *Caliban 4*, at that time out of Ann Arbor Michigan, edited by Larry Smith). It's called *On Theoloniusism*. That's not my word. That belongs to another Black innovator, a gentleman out of the late 60s but, for the life of me, his name escapes me. [I read an excerpt from the essay which coincidentally concerns Mackey and Reed, who I know only through their writings. Here, I'm comparing Nathaniel Mackey's *Ghede* poem (Ghede, Obeah's God of Death) with two comparable stanzas from Ishmael Reed's *I am a Cowboy in the Boat of Ra*. The total essay—a jazz essay, musically structured—concerns itself with the concept of jazz poetry, emerging from the core of my aesthetic posture as a post-modern fusionist.]

"So that however you come at the poem—if there's several levels of intelligence at work—some guy up here, some academic ensconced in Stanford up here, did a supposedly break-through text on the various levels of (human intelligence). . . this new intellectuality he was putting forth, (and I discovered he was simply recycling principles from yoga—putting a new spin on it. I got all excited and wanted to buy the book, and then I said 'look at the game this clown is runnin', and he could only run it on those who are ill-informed)....

[it's okay]. And so the idea that everything has these very levels . . . [of reading] and so you can come at poem *however [you come]*—there's no possibility of misreading in that context, but the deeper the reading the more satisfying—[the comparison of Reed and Mackey exemplifies the fact that] if you have the ears and can hear these other things going on in the poem it's a wonder[ful] experience. Although] sometimes, as with what the Japanese and the Chinese do [in their poetic forms, Tanka, Haiku etc.], you [require] the education. You have to know which poet the poet is giving the nod to, and no other way. You have to know the work. If you don't, there's an absence and you can't fill the [aesthetic] gap. But I think that's one of the things that I enjoy when I encounter this kind of dialogue [Reed/Mackey] taking place—encoded in the writer's text [Mackey's]. Being able to read on several levels simultaneously is what interests me; although, I go on to say that Reed expresses his Blackness representationally, relying primarily on cultural reference points—many of which have become passé—which is one of the dangers. These cultural reference points... lock your text. You want to lock your text, but [ideally] you want to use a different technique. You don't want to do it with cultural reference points unless you feel that you have the power to imbue them with longevity. [The significance of these is usually lost to readers who don't grow up with them.] No one watches the *Lone Ranger* anymore unless it's in reruns. Pretty soon Reed's poem is going to have to be annotated...okay, Shakespeare, I'm game.

"Um—there was something in terms of [Black] images, that was important, and that is indicative of America's maturing process: something those writers out of the Black Arts Movement documented. There was a necessary tension that had to be expressed or let go or put into the air, as it were. Once that was done, it left others of us to begin a new level of dialogue—to begin spading the earth deeper, so to speak, to deepen the dialogue taking place on the cultural terrain. And so, to that extent, I would identify that process as a kind of innovation in terms of [its impact on] the larger cultural dialogue that's obviously going on."

A question is raised regarding my phrase 'cultural reference points.'

"They trap you (the text) in time—or—they can be an entrapment in terms of time. If you refer to pop culture, which evaporates more quickly [than either the high or low culture], (for example) a particular brand of cigarettes [automobile, designer label]. These [references] can be wonderful, because they can be evocative [of the time in which they are popular]; but, then you must to ask yourself if you're evoking a specific period. . . [or if you wish to tran-

scend that period, or reach for a quality of timelessness].

"I was rereading a Sonia Sanchez poem about Malcolm X recently, and that was one thing that struck me about the poem was how it had ceased to become a poem and become an artifact. It crossed the line from literature into anthropology. And its literary value became questionable. It had ceased to have any literary value for me. But if I had a character, a young Black female who was writing during that period, then her work would have value for me because I can go back and capture that rhetoric because there it is on the page. So that the function of the poem had changed over time; it was locked [in the 60s]. The poem lacked that illusive characteristic of transcendence [which gives the poem longevity]. How do you get that? It is a [significant] question that needs to be raised when discussing the Black writer.

"If there's a going rhetoric—agitprop—when you are part of an oppressed an minority group then the problem is in escaping that limitation or confinement. How does one do that yet maintain one's artistic integrity at the same moment? Grappling with that, and answering that question for myself within the text has, I think, given me an artistic advantage. I've said it in a cavalier fashion, but I *want to go out of date*. There are some things that I want to be passé. I ask that question: When will race be a dead issue? I'm looking forward to certain things going out of style."

"I would say [further]—on the particular point [raised earlier when discussing the Black Arts Movement] I'm thinking—there's a collection [I've been reading and rereading several collections of poetry and journals, including the *Selected Poems of Nikki Giovanni* and *Black feeling Black talk Black judgement* [sic] by Sonia Sanchez. I proceed to confuse them, largely for reasons of personal distaste—uncomfortably finding Giovanni's language flat and fatally cliched, Sanchez's imitative and bigoted—flaws I too once shared in the name of Black rhetoric, particularly between 1964 and 1970]. When I look at them, I'm saying, we'll here's two individuals who have put a lot of work into their books. But where is the poetry?

"If you actually sit down with the work and look at it, it is really that well crafted? Are we regurgitating bromides, platitudes and clichés that any dominant culture writer would be immediately dismissed (for writing)? [Giovanni touts thirteen honorary degrees for a body of work that wouldn't net a White writer a dime to cross the street.] Was [Giovanni's enormous reputation, largely for having written one much anthologized poem, *Nikki Rosa*] this simply because this [the Black Arts Movement was] a new energy coming about at a critical moment in American history, catapulting [its poets/spokes-

men] onto the national stage? As with the so-called dialogue in which she tore a new hole into James Baldwin's literary behind on national television. I don't know how many of you saw it. It was on one of the earlier talk shows. I can't even remember what kind of omnibus it was, but it was quite an electrifying moment. And being on the younger side of the line, I loved what Ms. Sanchez (Giovanni) did. But as time has moved on, the person who holds up and stays with me [as a writer] is James Baldwin and not Nikki G. I'm sorry, it was not Sanchez—it was Nikki Giovanni. Excuse me, but I had to two ladies mixed up. Excuse me.

"We grew up with the same handful of writers: Richard Wright (the handful who were prominent) with Ms. Petry—Ann Petry was a big influence on me—[Paul Dunbar, Langston Hughes, Ralph Ellison] These were the voices I was exposed to as a preteener in Southern California. So I knew about James Weldon Johnson, et al. I could count them on one hand. The Black voice [was muted]—for those of us who can remember—that it was a period of intense suppression of any kind of bodaciousness. So when Malcolm X cracked that open—and Malcolm X was the first—when Malcolm X cracked that silence, there were a lot of people behind that facade who were able to come out into the open. And Nikki Giovanni was not that reasonable—we'll be *Black*—[and to hell with] this moderation, this constraint, even though Baldwin had said the exact same things many times, before and since—it was the mannered manner which he said it—from an elitist posture. And so when Nikki Giovanni broke that shell, visibly and linguistically on television, it was absolutely electrifying. So she earned whatever followed. But what happens when I have to go into a classroom and present this (Giovanni's poetry) to my Black students and say we're going to discuss Black poetry now, and what kind of example as a writer am I going to put forward? Then I have a serious problem. If I were presenting this work by a dominant culture (writer) I would rip it to shreds. I would say 'you can't do this, you can't do that structurally. This is wrong here.' I would take a red pencil and I would—whoosh whoosh—whoosh—just like that.

"It is insidious—once you get into a classroom situation [meaning the academic cowardice that refuses to critique Black authors whether out of indifference or fear of the critic being called racist. I'm inclined to believe it is largely the former.]. So, if I'm going to teach [with any amount of aesthetic integrity], I ain't going to use Ms. Nikki Giovanni. I'm going to be polite. If somebody brings her up, I'm going to pretend like I didn't hear the name and go on to someone else. I'm going to sidestep it unless you really want the

truth; I have to hurt somebody's feelings or I have to show you that your literary idol here has feet of clay [to use the type of clichéd image that typifies her poems].

"It's a very sticky and very awful place to be when discussing Black intellectuals. One of the major mainstream magazines recently laid out our Black intelligentsia for us—the new crop of head niggahs on the other side of the Hudson River mentioned earlier. I looked at these people and thought none of them could hold a candle to the Jewish intellectuals of the 50s [Hanna Arendt, Alfred Kazin, Diana and Lionel Trilling, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Delmore Schwartz, et al.]. What are THEY talking about here? Do I dare say that? Somebody's going to drag out the rope and find a good strong branch of the tree and string me up if I dare say this.

"Or I have to go into the class where the nice White teachers—and these are people with PhDs I'm talking about—I have to go into a PhD department where all these well-read people are talking about Oprah. And I have to say what? Oprah's Book Club. And I have to go, 'Are you serious?' I have—shame on him—I had to have the same discussion with my own publisher. So it gets to be a strain, because what's considered intellectual is what is being served on a certain agenda. To the extent that it's digestible is to the extent—to belabor that word—is to the extent that it serves the going agenda.

[Too often, the true Black intellectual is tragically crippled by the demands of economic survival. If American anti-intellectualism discourages its White artists and thinkers, it is doubly the bane of the African-American artist or thinker who strives to attain recognition for excellence. He or she is often overlooked or ignored by dominant culture arbiters of taste as they pursue and extol the virtues of so-called primitives—more often, mediocrities assigned the role of the primitive. The love affair a myopically racist White America has for "the authentic" often results in a skewed romance of the inarticulate, leading to the displacement of the true Black intellectual whose Sisyphian efforts may thereby go unrewarded.]

"Okay, we've got work—oh God—those horrible six weeks between Martin Luther King's birthday and the first of March. And when you only have six (Black) writers in the state of California, we're all overworked during that period. I mean this is serious. I mean to me this is horrible. I'm trying to wake up from this nightmare. A part of my coming here is the waking process. I'm trying—I'm pinching. Because I would like to wake up from this bloody nightmare. And to have to go into a class [where the instructor] has prepped all of the students, and told them that here we have Maya Angelou and Nikki Giovanni and so-and-so and bluh-bluh over there?

"I had to look at a young Black lady and tell her 'You've been reading too much Toni Morrison.' I go in as a surgeon. . . Well, if you're interested in being innovative. . . it's not even a matter of innovation... but if a young student who is growing wants to find their own voice, they have to be directed in such a way that they're going to break through. So that they can, once the break occurs, they can begin to fill the gap with their own identity. So this young lady had read so much Tony Morrison she was just oozing it. And so I looked at her and I said, I've got a writer for you! There are two writers that I will recommend—White male writers—to break this. The first one is usually Charles Bukowski's novel *Post Office* and maybe his collection of short stories *South by No North*. And then I'll recommend the French actor Antonin Artaud. That'll mess your head up for awhile. That'll break Toni Morrison. For rappers—rappers who become addicted to iambic pentameter. Because rhythms lock you. When I say lock, they lock your mind into certain patterns and you will go back there. That's all rhythm is—it's a device—if you're the griot, the term has become popular—and you're carrying the text of the tribe, the history, what rhythm does is—music is memory. That's all music is. Music is encapsulated memory. It gives you back yourself. So for rappers who are serious about poetry, I'll point them in another direction and I'll tell them, well there's this anthology that this guy put out from Sun and Moon Press—an anthology about the rest of the century. Boom. Nine-hundred-odd pages or whatever it is. Read this. Read through this. There shouldn't be anything here that you can't decipher. And if there is, come to me and tell me. Find those points you can't get past and let's discuss *that*."

"So there are ways to break this (rhythm/influence of rhythm) so that you allow the fledgling voice/the new voice to emerge. But you have to crack this other thing (influence) that has overlaid itself either through too much exposure/too much pressure from the outside, from the mainstream culture. You have to find someone else who will act as a counterpoint and who will crack it."

"Does that answer your question?"

The second night, I pay Kush Cloudhouse a visit. I had neglected to take his address with me. He repeated the cross streets a couple of times. I found my way via bus, but when I got there, I couldn't remember the numbers. After walking up and down the blocks, I stopped in the middle of the street and *vibed* on the buildings, asking myself where would a poetry fanatic like Kush possibly live. A stairway leading to a walkway and porch high off the pavement caught my eye. Gravitating to the door on the far right, I

reached for the buzzer, my eye catching the name Cloudhouse.

Foremost in my mind are my colleagues from the conference: lanceman Will Alexander; wanderer C.S. Giscombe who astonished me by quoting a line he remembered from my poem *Growing Up Black*, sharing cool observations over drinks with Erica Hunt, chatting about pique and consternation with Lorenzo Thomas on an after-lunch stroll, stumbling over the amazingly jazzy presence of Julie Patton, swapping stories with Harryette Mullen one morning as we waited for the conference to get under way. . . .

Kush came to the door, surprised that I had kept my word. He guided me past a series of cluttered rooms, on a quick tour, and then to the kitchen where we talked over tea. He played a tape of readings by Lenore (*The Love Book*) Kendall and Bob Kaufman. He showed me his altar of ashes, beads, posters, urns and countless poetry mementos—Jack Micheline's ashes.

Almost religiously, we bemoan the present. All the bookstores and culturally nourishing hangs we love have been and are being forced out of business by the voracious chains. Art has become substandard in the name of relentless profit and the new wealth generated by technological ascension. We are in the midst of the information holocaust. . . .

At the core of our talk was his project to secure a permanent home for his collection. The San Francisco Museum of Poetry. The generation of poets he adored, largely The Beats, is passing. They had been wonderfully generous, great, gone risk-takers—those beatific word warriors. This self-appointed keeper of the Holy Profane had developed a website and has a foundation in the works. His dream is of a home for his collection of audio and videotapes of countless readings. Who would treasure them, he asked?

The question haunted us as we walked the avenues, down Van Ness toward an all-night eatery. I was acutely aware of my disappearance in progress. Over sandwiches and red wine, we toasted those immortal poets. The San Francisco they had loved was disappearing forever. We were at the end of an era. We were, truly, the last. . . .

On that final morning, I went to the conference site, having checked out of my hotel. As I waited on the airport van, I was approached by a young woman named Tisa. She called out. She had a fresh-looking copy of my first book, Mad Dog Black Lady. Remarkably, it was a rare first edition hardback from 1979, purchased from a prestigious Southern California university library that no longer found my work of value. When I flipped the cover to autograph it, I discovered it had gone uncirculated for the entire twenty years. Not one student or instructor had ever cracked its cover. . . .

Discussion (excerpts)

Renee Gladman: I think that Harryette's talk is a departure for this question of how do we talk about innovative writing by African-Americans. And I don't really think that it's just a problem within the African-American context, as if there was the avant-garde context and then there was the African-American context. There seems to be a problem within both groups being able to contain the multiplicity. And so I'm interested in the resistance on both sides and I hope that we can touch on that. [Harryette], you mentioned your *West Coast Line* article in '96 where you asked the question, "Am I digestible as a black poet?" and I'm wondering how you think about that four years later and how you think of it in context of both the avant garde context as well as within the African-American context.

Harryette Mullen: I do feel that some things have changed. One of the things I feel is that people are interested in this issue and have been having the conversation. I think that that became a part of a larger conversation and the things that Nate has been doing and other people in this room have been doing have actually created the possibility for us to ask these questions and to pursue what have been those difficulties and those resistances. And I think that also there's more interest I think within communities of African-American writers that I'm acquainted with. Just last summer I participated as a faculty member at a workshop retreat that was created for African-American writers, so there were sixty black writers at this place. And among the things that were discussed was the possibility of an anthology that would include some notion of innovative writing and people were very interested in this idea—what does it mean to be innovative. We also talked about what it means to be traditional within a canon or a tradition of African-American writing, and how our sense of what that tradition is often has to do with the education that we receive, the anthologies that we read, and also this idea that I think Wanda Coleman was talking about, of how anthologies are somehow created to reinforce common understandings of what it means to be African-American or what it means to be American, for that matter. I mean, who is American, what is American, what is African-American, how is that distinct from being simply American? And, you know, "American" is an identity, a label, a culture, just as much as African-American. However, people continually have been describing things as not black but human or this poet refused to be limited to black American identity and is just American, as if that's not some also particular identity. So these will be some of the issues that I think have become a part of

a common conversation where they weren't, say, fifteen, twenty years ago.

[...]

Nathaniel Mackey: Well, one of the things that resonates for me in that question is the question of consumption—am I digestible as an African-American writer—and the fact that we are dealing with the commodification of what we do, and the commodification of what we do is what creates these restrictive contexts in which our work has a certain commercial, though not very commercial, circulation. It reminds me of Steven Henderson's book from the early seventies, *Understanding the New Black Poetry*, and there's an interesting choice of words that happens in his introduction to that book, where he's delineating these various features of an African-American aesthetic, an African-American poetic. And he comes back to it a number of times. He talks about the commodity of blackness and there's a funny way in which the words "identity" and "commodity" become elided there. The black identity is the commodity of blackness and he is marking for trade purposes these features that define that entity. Henry Louis Gates comes along later and seizes upon that in one of his early essays, and talks about Henderson's use of that word "commodity," and then he goes on because he wants to do some other things with blackness and he wants to get it circulating in some other ways. And he comes up with marks that further the trade in ways that we all know about now. So Harryette comes along and she has to take issue with that speakerly mark that he puts on black text. So one of the things that calls forth the need for innovation, if not innovation itself—I would hope innovation too—is the fact that these labels keep getting put on and they outlive their usefulness and the half-life of them is not all that long and we end up finding them restrictive. Those terms which apply to and open up perspectives on practices have to be kept from becoming prohibitive and proscriptive, and that's been a great struggle, which is to keep the discourse of identity from inhibiting the kinds of mobility that we need to maintain just as live beings on the planet. And I think that's one of the things that we're dealing with—just how what we do is framed, what frames it's seen through and seen in, and how many frames we're allowed to have to give a perspective on what we do. Expanding the repertoire has to also include expanding the frames through which we're looked at and I think that there are ways in which we can see certain shortcomings when it comes to making experimental or more innovative writing by African-Americans visible, we can see certain shortcomings

in the discourse that's grown up around African-American literature in the last twenty, thirty years, which has been very busy with creating a tradition and a canon and giving it the traditional features that canons have to have in order to do that work that they do and to have the benefits that accrue to having such a thing as a canon and a tradition. Of course, like other canons, other traditions, the construction of this one has its blind spots and certain kinds of practices don't get featured in that construction. I think now is a good time to be reminded of that because the initial flush of enthusiasm over the fact that this was being done at all has maybe, I hope, subsided and maybe we can start asking some deeper questions and looking for what that construction excludes. It's a commonplace of contemporary discourse, that every construction is built on certain exclusions. And it's not that we could ever get to where we included everything but we can at least include some of the things that have been excluded and be aware of the fact that even as we construct a more inclusive context or canon, there are things that we are no doubt excluding at that very moment. So there's a certain kind of vigilance. I think it goes back to what Harryette was saying about innovative writing being questioning, questing, inhabiting a liminal space, an in-between space that's in transition, on its way to something, on its way away from something, but not always sure where it's going. And I just feel that we end up talking as much about the discourse that attends what we do as we do about what we do because that's the way we get it. We don't live in an unmediated world, so we have to keep raising these questions of how African-American literature is being talked about and what does it include, what does it exclude, what does it accent, what does it de-emphasize, how does experimental writing get talked about and innovative writing get talked about, and what are its exclusions. And again, the context in which innovation takes place.

Erica Hunt

(In re:) Sources of the Black Avant-Garde

(or: Maps in Sand)

At first when I was given this assignment I was a little taken aback, until I remembered that there are many excellent scholars working on the history of Black modernism and the Black avant-garde, present here, such as Lorenzo Thomas, Nathaniel Mackey, and Mark McMorris, as well as the work of Aldon Nielson, and that my contribution here is to propose the maps I used in finding my way to Black experimental writing.

So my talk, which is essentially an outline, will be a meditation on the Black sources of a radical aesthetic—an aesthetics whose goals are critical, investigative, disruptive; which aims to wear its thinking process on its sleeve, where method is performative and material. I also thought what I could do is talk about where I derive my sense of the avant-garde and how I situate myself in an avant-garde or an experimental writing practice, and where I found the materials that spoke most to me, which to the pleasures of innovation I found the added pleasure of cultural resonance.

I want to talk about some things that were very important to me as a developing poet. First, it wasn't poetry that gave me a sense of avant-garde and experimental possibilities. As was discussed earlier today in the first panel, music, particularly African-American music, played a very important, seminal role in defining American music, and also had a profound influence on other art forms. The development of African-American music, from folk music to popular and commercial music to art music, at every stage had a formative impact not only on American music but on the way Americans viewed their own culture. The evolution of Black American music changed even how American artists looked at their own practices and creations, with greatest force during Bebop's emergence after the Second World War, but with continuing and mutating consequences into the present era.

I choose the period which concluded World War II and the return of Black GLs as a crucial historical moment or shift. I am very interested in this period because the conclusion of the war resulted in the realignment of the world—from the collapse of Europe (and its

"civilization") and the end of colonialism to the beginning of the Cold War—all of which have complex matrices of relation. At the close of WWII the mid-century civil rights movement picked up steam, and that movement's post-war militance led to its ultimate "success" two decades later.

There's an interesting timeline composed of parallel lines to be made, lining up events, political, historical, personal and aesthetic—which I am working on right now in my writing. I have interviewed my stepfather, who served in the Army corps of Engineers during that period, and his stories confirm the written accounts of Black GI experience. Most Black GIs served in segregated units under white commanding officers. Often they were given the worst duty—dirty work. Frequently they were not adequately armed, or adequately trained. Yet many, like my father and my stepfather, served for 4 or 4 1/2 years, enlisting or being drafted when they were 19 and returning when they were 23. Their days at war, as for many who saw combat, was a constant terror. And when they got home, they expected to be thanked and welcomed home for their exertions on behalf of their country.

The war had been presented as a war against fascism, and in particular, to stop the spread of a supremacist, racist state and ideology, in defense of principles of democracy and equality, the articles of faith. Well, they returned, and Jim Crow was still firmly in place. They were told to ride at the back of the busses and trains, in which captured German soldiers rode in the front. They were denied the right to vote in the towns in which they were born. They couldn't get a cup of coffee much less a fair trial in the counties their families had lived in for more than 100 years.

I believe that the determination to end Jim Crow—and the end to acquiescence—took hold in the period after the war. And this attitude, a determination to make America live up to its promise of equality and democracy—even unwillingly, because the call to freedom was just that strong—affected more than the returning Black soldiers and their families; its influence was community-wide. The impact on Black culture was diffuse, but the call to freedom, and to a life outside the entrapment of what was deemed their place in American politics and culture, were connected. A generation of Black artists, particularly in music, began to dispute the "high"/"low" dichotomy and associated polarities of American art. In doing so, they created and extended the territory of Black art, releasing it (for better or worse, but mostly for the better) from commercial music, and open-

ing a generative and fresh palette of possibility.

Charles Mingus, Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Parker were among the first hipsters. Musicians who consciously were working towards a new art music, performative, audience-responsive, based in the clubs, but also concerned with pushing the boundaries of a swing gone stale, a swing coincidentally related to the return of the black GIs. I recently had to do a talk on Nate's writing and I did a lot of reading. I reread everything, but I also went back and read Baraka and some other books and sources that are important to thinking about Nate's writing, and what was brought home to me in my reading was how the era of swing music had modified certain aspects of swing and big band music to the point that it was a kind of black music in white face, it was more and more detached from its origins as a black music, as an African-American music. So we have Benny Goodman being the King of Swing, being called the King of Swing, you know, which is a triple irony because black GIs can't get work. So bebop becomes a way to say well, let's move, let's change, let's change this situation, let's take a step forward and the hipster is born. And the kind of oppositional and kind of in-your-face practice becomes associated with an aesthetic as well, as an aesthetic stance. I'm at the tail end of the baby boom generation, but for me the possibility of there being a kind of nonconforming, speculative, fragmented—take material and kind of rearrange it and chop it up and reframe it—aesthetics, comes out of thinking about and listening to, being exposed to, bebop music, but also more directly in my experience of the new music of the sixties and seventies, of which I was a very big listener and continue to be. And by that of course I mean everyone from Eric Dolphy. Albert Ayler, John Coltrane, of course, to Thelonius Monk and so forth. But there's a new music that finally told me that even though I wasn't exactly finding it in literature—and I want to return to that question: why wasn't I seeing that in literature—in a way, I had to hear something happen in music in terms of rejecting, or at least problematizing, the kind of scored, lush orchestrations of the standards and then taking that and doing something completely different that would fragment it or turn it inside out or play it in a deformed way and then say that was art: that allowed me to then go back to literature and find in African-American literature avant-garde practice.

And I guess that's what I want to talk about today. I want to talk about how sometimes finding sources of the avant-garde is not so much about authorial intent as it is a reading strategy, it's the way that you read the text of the past and it's a way of being able to take

the kinds of questioning and the kinds of experiences you have with an avant-garde art practice such as music, and taking that same attitude and bringing it to literature. In the course of doing this talk on Nate's work, I read an article by George Lewis, who is a trombonist and computer musician, computer generated music that he composes. He's now a professor at UCSD, but I knew George in his previous life as a musician. George has written an article in which he talks about the first time he encountered the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians in Chicago. And he's a youngster, he's 17 years old, and he's had a band, and he's listened to what he thinks is jazz, and he goes to this AACM concert thinking he's going to a jazz concert, or a jazz rehearsal, actually, so he goes and he thinks he's going to see people sit up and have the music and so forth. And what he sees blows his mind because this is the late sixties and people just kind of take their instruments and they're doing all sorts of things with them, extended techniques. There's beginnings, there's ends, you know, there's folk music, it just goes in all sorts of directions and his mind is blown by this. And he realizes that what he's watching is jazz and more. Something someone said earlier about some of the things that were inherent in that musical practice of that time was that it was not only about improvisation but it was about composer-centered music, that you don't just take the music and kind of play it according to a score. Of course those scores had always been a little fluid anyway. But there's a kind of shaping that's happening of composition, of things being rearrangeable, that you're going to be concerned with kind of formal things that are invented, that gather and disperse, that take the head and move it around and travel and go through some kind of transition or passage someplace else. This was very evident to George, and he describes it very well. He also characterizes that that time of the AACM, and I would echo this, as somehow occupying the interstices between African-American and European-American forms. This is an African-American practice right here and this is jazz, this is in the tradition, it's blues derived and so forth and you're going to recognize that, just as such. It's going to have all those markers. And then the European-American forms, which have such and such markers, that boundary was bent all the time, if not permeable, and that was I think an important kind of message for me too, as a developing writer, which is that I didn't exactly have to choose sides or limit myself in terms of palate or of content or of materials or technique, that that was in fact something that was going to be imposed but I didn't have to take it that way, now with all of the attendant struggles. African-American literature was presented to me, from the time I was quite young, as having a certain kind of content and formal

moves, that was always about social uplift or proving literacy or always having some kind of agenda afoot, and I could relate to that because I was also of the movement and trying to be a part of the freedom movement because that's always going to be this North star for me, this idea of human freedom and whatever it takes, and that in fact becomes then a part of my poetics, is to think about how that gets articulated, this idea of what it is to be free and for others to enjoy the same. But if it's read in this kind of reductive way and it's read within only certain terms and certain scripts, then it's this odd and ironic and tragic recapitulation of captivity inside the box of a so-called freedom movement and a poetry that reflects the same.

Reading the past proposes a present sense. I read now and notice that the elegant movements of a James Baldwin essay are not just a function of a deeply engaging subject matter but the masterful manipulation of the tensions of intimate register and public speech to dilate the thought of a sentence, to give the reader a sense of going in, in, in, closer to the "voice" of consciousness.

If you read the past with present intention, searching for what can be used for present innovation, you see how Black writers have always struggled with bringing to the language an experience that is outside of the too-easy polarity of high and low art, literary language and vernacular. The point has been to unlock the tongue and make it come together, using the words of our neighbors and friends, the bits of truth that accidentally escape from the words in books not written about us but always about us—made to come together in one work of art and composition. And I think the challenge of solving that issue is what is finally a source of Black avant-garde writing.

Finally, I wanted to name some names of black avant-garde writing. My personal sources are people as diverse as Ted Jones and Bob Kaufman and Russell Atkins and Melvin Tolson, who are kind of the loners. And then I have another group who come out of black arts movement, Clarence Major, Baraka, Jayne Cortez, Adrienne Kennedy. An important source of black avant-garde writing, and exemplary for me, were people like Aime Cesaire and Nicholas Guillien, and others, Africans too. Oddly enough, I would even cite folklore sources such as Amos Tutuola, who wrote a surreal series of books which I read when I was 19 and gave me permission to use any kind of material from everyday life into writing. He was magical realism before there was *avant la lettre*.

Sincerity and Revolt
in Avant-Garde Poetry:
Créolité, Surrealism &
New World Alliances

I.

Not to evade the topic but to throw light upon its origins I want to consider in the first place the possibility of a contemporary avant-garde—as distinct from experimentalism and innovation—but searching for initial confluences when the term perhaps carried more force, had not yet come to suggest as it does today, 35-odd years after the writing of LeRoi Jones's (Amiri Baraka's) *Black Art* (1965-1966), and almost twice that span since Aimé Césaire's *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* (partially published in the magazine *Volonté*, 1939)—had not yet come to suggest an aesthetic disposition only rather than a politico-aesthetic movement.¹ The starting point for reflections on origins while not arbitrary is not given uniquely, and one could make a case for thinking of certain African-Caribbean linguistic practices as gestures of a proto-avant-garde, at least in descriptions supplied for us by Edouard Glissant of the Martinican situation. Writing on cross-cultural poetics, on the situation of the spoken for the slave, Glissant notes that "[T]he spoken imposes on the slave its particular syntax. For Caribbean man, the word is first and foremost sound." Glissant is interested in the slave's intense response to the silencing of slavery, in the use of sound and noise as camouflage: "Noise is essential to speech. Din is discourse."

It seems that meaning and pitch went together for the uprooted individual, in the unrelenting silence of the world of slavery. It was the intensity of the sound that dictated meaning: the pitch of the sound conferred significance. Ideas were bracketed. One person could make himself understood through the subtle associations of sound, in which the master, so capable of managing "basic Creole" in other situations, got hopelessly lost. Creole spoken by the *békés* was never shouted out loud. Since speech was forbidden, slaves camouflaged the word under the provocative intensity of the scream. No one could translate the meaning of what seemed to be nothing but a shout. It was taken to be

1. This essay is expanded from a talk originally delivered for a panel at "Expanding the Repertoire: Continuity & Change in African-American Writing," held at New College, San Francisco, from April 7-April 9, 2000. The panel's topic was "Kindred": Origins of the Black Avant-Garde."

nothing but the call of a wild animal. This is how dispossessed man organized his speech by weaving it into the apparently meaningless texture of extreme noise.

... Creole organizes speech as a blast of sound.

Notice Glissant's repeated appeal to syntactical din and noise, to the opacity of orality. He opposes referent to signifier: ideas were bracketed. He discovers in this speech an exceptional distortion and amplification of the phoneme. Distinctions between noise and lexicon collapse. Meaning emerges from the re-structured relation of sounds: the untranslatable scream and shout.

... A requirement is thus introduced into spoken Creole: speed. Not so much speed as a jumbled rush. Perhaps the continuous stream of language that makes speech into one impenetrable block of sound. If it is pitch that confers meaning on a word, rushed and fused sounds shape the meaning of speech. Here again, the use is specific: the *béké* masters, who know Creole even better than the mulattoes, cannot, however, manage this "unstructured" use of language. (Glissant 123-4)

A swerve, a crossing to the east. Educated by the avant-gardes of European modernism, at the very least we recognize in Glissant's speculations the chaos and bewilderment attendant upon the early demonstrations of Dada and the Surrealists, with their simultaneous poems for multiple speaking voices closing out the audience from discursive meaning; and the genre, in particular, of the sound poem that, including the scream, shout, grunt and testing other possibilities for para-linguistic utterance, manages to suggest alternative modes of communication and communities. The crucial difference from the avant-garde is that in the case of the slave no one, from within the group, would mistake such linguistic practice for mere mischief—speed, jumble, blast of sound—from within the group these features arise as reflexive modes of self-identification and one could even suggest, as Kamau Brathwaite does, modes of refusal and defiance: "It was in language that the slave was perhaps most successfully imprisoned by his master and it was in his (mis-)use of it that he perhaps most effectively rebelled" (Brathwaite 15).

That's a topic for another essay, though I do want to keep in view this aspect of language as a political act directly addressing conditions that subjects find to be intolerable, and that re-engineers syntax and lexicon in response to the pressures of adverse power. Come now, however, to the Martinican poet searching for his proper task after being

schooled in the high canons of French poetry, Western literature and philosophy.

One must begin somewhere:

Begin what?

The only thing in the world
worth beginning:
The End of the world of course. (55)

The end of the world as task for the poet asks more than the poem can manage, and since the black avant-garde is our topic, well then, one might also ask: Why hasn't the end of the world already begun? The world of post-emancipation Martinique. The world as limit, as constitutive of the Negro self. The world of Europe's self-mythologizing. In a sense, the poet intends to collaborate with his time, since so many of the forces that feed the impulse of destruction are long advanced, even, in retrospect, nearing their senility in 1939. To contemplate the beginning of the end of the world: a task for someone who has nothing to lose and an exchange of vocations: revolution instead of literature. Of course one can have both.

Let me resurrect a scenario, a figure (as recounted by Césaire): A bookstore at Fort-de-France, Martinique. A journal in a display window. The year is 1941. André Breton walks to the display window and leafs through the journal. He's stunned by the quality, by the density of the texts, and tries immediately to get in touch with the perpetrators. Later, he meets Aimé Césaire (and still later he will write an introduction to the *Notebook* when it's published as a book of poetry in 1947). In an interview with Jacqueline Leiner, Césaire recalls this meeting and the effect that Breton had on the journal and on his own thought. Césaire was already a surrealist, in the eyes of Breton; and Césaire himself observes that he and Breton had the same ancestors, that he'd read the fathers and the manifestos of surrealism: "Rimbaud...Mallarmé, the symbolists, Claudel, Lautréamont" (VI).² Not entirely true, not entirely false, Césaire says, that he was already a surrealist by the time he met Breton. But Breton clarified certain problems, confirmed certain truths—banished hesitations. Breton even in exile was a formidable presence:

2. The translations from the interview with Jacqueline Leiner are my own. The translations of Césaire's poetry are by Clayton Eshleman & Annette Smith, in *Aimé Césaire: The Collected Poetry*.

a man of extraordinary culture, with an *astonishing* sense for poetry. He felt poetry, he breathed it, like some sort of pollen in the air. He was a phenomenal detective of poetry, a kind of "homing device" . . . Truly a *great* man . . . The meeting with Breton was for me a VERY IMPORTANT event, comparable to my meeting with Senghor 10 or 15 years earlier. I met Breton at a crossroads in my life; from that moment on, the road was completely mapped out; it was the end of all my hesitations and searching. (VI-VII)

The scenario, then, is of the *rencontre*—the meeting. From one direction, Negritude and Léopold Sédar Senghor, the further president of independent Senegal, and from the other, Breton, the artist-agitator, the great NOSE of Poetry, who hauled surrealism into the Communist Party in France, both entering the reservoir and practice of the black West Indian. And arranging the meeting in Fort-de-France, the text in the window display, the first or second issue of the journal *Césaire* founded, with Suzanne Césaire, as he says in the interview, "in an especially arid age" ("une époque particulièrement ingrate"), and in conditions that were "politically dangerous" (V).

B.B. and A.B.—After the visit—after the blessing—suddenly, a new configuration. We're in the presence of a black avant-garde in the Caribbean more definitely, more blazingly, than before. The presence of Breton in Fort-de-France—his out of place, too far south and west—is suggestive of what we would not have thought before his visit and what his visit makes it possible to think, namely that we can—and why not?—extend the term *avant-garde* to cover black writers in the West Indies, New York, and Paris between the wars. Looked at from certain angles, new groupings seem to take shape, different ones to have things in common. The Martinican is a Surrealist. The Martinican is also a poet of Negritude. These are not exclusive identities. Césaire reads the literature of European modernism and the poets of the Harlem Renaissance (though he's not in contact with them): Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, in particular, whose novel *Banjo* appeared in Paris in 1928. Lines of influence and interest cross. I like to think of Fort-de-France as the unlikely center of this configuration—the counter-center to Paris and New York—the periphery—the "cultural void," in Césaire's phrase—turned postcolonial cultural capital by 1978, the year of *Tropiques'* re-edition. Because of the journal the *rencontre* with Breton also suggests a common cause across race and nationality—Jean-Paul Sartre writes the long introduction ("Black Orpheus"), to the *Anthology of the New*

Black and Malagasy Poetry (1948) edited by Senghor, among other things to scold his bourgeois colonizing compatriots for their racism—a cause that, if pressed, I'd describe as a violent impatience with received modes of writing and of extant socio-political conditions: a propensity towards revolt and revolution.

Form.

Fury, detonation, centrifugal, scandal. Saying. Pressure on saying. Strife. Above all, the locus of disturbance: first, propulsion from revolt, that the current state of affairs is intolerable to the point of perpetual insomnia—dangerous political conditions—second, to catch sight of, sound of, other paths, other vents, volcanic, direct, very much like dementia (Blake, Lautréamont), the sudden vertigo, the flirtation, flash-bulb, with non-sense, meaning in spite of appearances.

The cause of formal explosion. To me this is not a matter of art as such but a matter of fury directed to conditions beyond art. There is language and there is the social context through which language circulates. The poet sits at the intersection of means and utterance. But these means, the techniques of poetry, and the language as given, are recalcitrant, patterned by other voices, drenched in prior images, rhythms, moral judgments: in short, discourse. For Césaire, the poem reproduces a diseased discourse in order to re-stage, and then to subvert, the self:

I have assassinated God with my laziness with
my words with my gestures
with my obscene songs

I have worn parrot plumes
musk cat skins
I have exhausted the missionaries' patience
insulted the benefactors of mankind.
Defied Tyre. Defied Sidon.
Worshipped the Zambezi.
The extent of my perversity overwhelms me!

But why impenetrable jungle are you still hiding the raw zero of my mendacity and from a self-conscious concern for nobility not celebrating the horrible leap of my Pahouin ugliness?

Behind these words we glimpse the strange creature that inhabits the prison of race: the Negro, fabrication of Europe as Césaire has observed, and the rebellious slave, Camus's *l'homme révolté*. The double figure says

that black identity consists in obscenity, laziness, mendacity, ugliness, superstition, ingratitude, nothingness: the Negro, assassins of God, cannot be brought within the society of the civilized and the moral. But we hear something else in these lines: the propulsive power concisely and intelligently to appropriate this ground of perversity, given in colonial discourse, as a stage for rebellion, and that is the subtlety of the double voice here, this act of grasping the sword by the blade to use it as a club, self-laceration coupled to a ferocious defiance. With speech wrenched towards a situation of total metaphor ("the raw zero of my mendacity," "my Pahouin ugliness"), or towards a situation of no distinction between letter and figure, the poem introduces another voice, and introduces the controlled irrationality of signs that elude reference:

voum rooh oh
 voum rooh oh
 to charm the snakes to conjure
 the dead
 voum rooh oh
 to compel the rain to turn back
 the tidal waves
 voum rooh oh
 to keep the shade from moving
 voum rooh oh that my own skies
 may open

—me on a road, a child, chewing
 sugar cane root
 —a dragged man on a bloodspattered road
 a rope around his neck
 —standing in the center of a huge circus,
 on my black forehead a crown of daturas
 voum rooh.

(53)

What is he saying? *voum rooh oh* says nothing to readers in Paris. The sounds transmit an opacity, an elementary, incomprehensible otherness. Ideas, as Glissant says, are bracketed. The signifiers, propulsive, purposeful, super-charged with irrational forces, refuse translation. One feels that a madness has suddenly afflicted the poet or perhaps that the poet's—society's—madness has found a voice. Auditions of zaum, sound poetry, translational writings, but to my mind these sounds trigger terror, which is far from the surrealist anti revolution, closer to the revulsion—Pahouin ugliness—of Picasso's masks on the Odalisques, the terror of the dragged man—and haven't we recently had our own dragged man on a blood-spattered road in Texas?—*voum rooh oh*—incantatory syllables meant for divinity, and states

glimped in religious ceremonies outside of Western Christianity. One would expect a revolutionary poetry to terrify because it shows us a self that we cannot narrate.

Beside which, although it reminds me of the affective disposition towards an African landscape in Senghor's poetry and is undeniably part of this avant-garde configuration, Hughes's breakthrough poem is surely merely pastoral: the Negro speaks of rivers, but this Martinican nigger induces panic, stimulates mesmerism, sees and howls at negations, blows up the tranquility of reading: "to howl at the unavowed sources of great rivers at the nonmemorable / maternities at the never sucked breasts of fabulous beasts" (from *Fernaments* 295). Though Césaire always found it inconceivable to write in Creole, his poems, one says, come under pressure from the Creole blast of sound, the sonic jumble, on the French language. Escape from recognizable phonemes: *voum rooh oh*—a savage enters the Café Deux Magots and orders a demi-tasse of blood. Terror. Incongruity. Social havoc. Something is badly awry.

Sincerity & Syntax.

The fury of Césaire's poetry cannot be confused with an aesthetic inclination only, and I'd like to suggest that the flagellation of syntax—the demolitions—the negations—proceed from a determined attitude of political revolt, in response to the felt degradation of a population and a race. Now this attitude of revolt does not simply use language to articulate discontent and point out injustices; it hawks the expressive means by syntactic deformations, verbal collisions and damage, the use of neologisms, and fantastic, explosive metaphor. It has the characteristics of a speech apart from the "social idiom" recommended by T.S. Eliot as the model for poetry. And yet, it is, again, produced out a definite social and political context: the gulag of the plantation. The poem incorporates this context ("sugar cane"), but forges a discontinuity between the context and the subject's form of expression, and even so we feel that there is a total commitment, a compulsion even, to both operations. The divided subject stages a sincere revolt. Putting it so is to say that the poem, in these passages, finds a language adequate to its hatred of the context. This language is estranged, strange. As Velma Pollard, writing on Rastafarian "Dread Talk," quotes from Adorno: "Social protest manifests itself in language change. For defiance of society includes defiance of its language" (49). One is tempted to say that, in poetry, social protest pitches syntax towards the point of dissolution, where the process of

combination itself becomes conspicuous.

How far, though, can we generalize on this? I want to propose that in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, at least, proleptic signs exist of a relationship between revolutionary sincerity and dislocated syntax. Let's take a detour to consider this question further. *The Tempest* has much to offer on the topic of a syntax of revolt. We recall that Caliban's protest shows itself in his mis-use of speech: "You taught me language and my profit on 't / Is I know how to curse" (I, ii, 437-438). What Benjamin said of the Dadaists, we might say of the antagonistic slave: that his speech consists of "obscenities and every other waste product of language" (Benjamin 237; Bürger 29). Himself a waste product of the colonial enterprise, Caliban grabs hold of what we should now call the linguistic slop—the curse—and widens its use to mark and to protest his situation.³ That Caliban is more than labor is plain. Shakespeare assigns to him some of the play's most beautiful lines:

Be not afraid. The isle is full of noises,
Sounds and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not.
Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments
Will hum about mine ears, and sometimes voices
That, if I then had waked after long sleep,
Will make me sleep again; and then, in dreaming,
The clouds methought would open, and show riches
Ready to drop upon me, that when I waked
I cried to dream again. (III, ii, 148-156)

Caliban's nostalgia has the pathos of a temporary oblivion: he forgets his audience and forgets that the "isle" of "sounds and sweet airs" no longer belongs to him. Others have remarked on the beauty—the humanizing interiority—of Caliban's language here. His resolute curses, I would add, sure to earn him retribution from Prospero, or from Prospero's spirits ("Side-stitches shall pen thy breath up" (I, ii, 390)), also have a most ingenious syntax. Prolonged subject clauses accumulate in detail and force: "As wicked dew as e'er my mother brushed / With raven's feather from unwholesome fen / Drop on you both" (I, ii, 385-386). Extended simile, slow heavy-footed words, delaying the imperative, delaying the punch of the curse. "All the infections that

3. Mis-reading Caliban from our own take on the "curse": he does not use what we should call obscenity, and his curses are related to magic, not simply to verbally aggressive anger. In the binary terms set up by the play, Sycorax his mother practiced an evil magic, in contrast to Prospero, and Caliban seeks unsuccessfully to exercise that inheritance.

the sun sucks up / From bogs, fens, flats, on Prosper fall and make him / By inchmeal a disease! His spirits hear me, / And yet I needs must curse" (II, ii, 1-4). Poetry as the long intricate curse of the subaltern in revolt: torture does not deter him. The curse is instrumental in that it is intended to afflict Prospero; it is aesthetic in that the structure, the syntax of his speech, becomes conspicuous as an object of perception: the initial clauses lengthen, the verb ("fall," "drop") arrives late and follows rather than precedes the object, Prospero.

In speech meant to mobilize action, on the other hand, the instrumental function supplants the aesthetic and takes priority in the organization of syntax and choice of vocabulary. Without fail, the audience must get the message. There is thus a third style in Caliban's repertoire, the style which he uses to plan a coup d'état: "I'll yield him thee asleep," he tells his co-conspirators, "Where thou mayst knock a nail into his head" (III, ii, 67-68). Caliban chooses an approach and a time, and he enumerates their options in weaponry and method: "There thou mayst brain him, / Having first seized his books, or with a log / Batter his skull, or paunch him with a stake, / Or cut his weasand with thy knife" (III, ii, 97-100). The play allows us to compare the kinds of syntax Caliban uses, and to pick out the curse as the form that does something to the structure of speech. The curses embed revolt in the language, in the way that sentences are organized as a chain of signifiers. If we were pressed, then, to say which passages belong to "advanced" poetry, I think we'd go with the curses, and yet, it is the more direct and normal syntax that is to likely change Caliban's material circumstances. More on this distinction later.

I have treated the play as if we could transpose its scenarios onto our own moment in history, and grasp Caliban as a kind of 20th-century anti-colonial vanguardist, and of course we can't. But in thinking about avant-garde poetry, I might take from Shakespeare's text a neat and seductive proposition: that rebellious poetry exhibits the print of the poet's own stance towards the social structures that provide for her constitution and legibility, his place. In short, *linguistic dislocation is a byproduct of revolt, and not the other way around*. Like the subject in Césaire's *Notebook*, Caliban also incorporates the context of his oppression ("This island's mine by Sycorax, my mother, / Which thou tak'st from me" (I, ii, 396-397)) before embarking upon his syntactic manipulations.

II.

One of Césaire's references should help to elaborate the shifting confluences between revolt, the possibility of an avant-garde, and the handling, or mishandling, of the syntagmatic axis. Bearing in mind Caliban's stylistic range, I want to question, once again, the relationship between conventional verse and social protest. Use is what gives convention its meaning. How does this work? Let us look at the example of Claude McKay, at one of his poems in particular. In 1919, the year of the Red Summer, McKay's life reached a point of crisis.⁴ Inflation was rising and the job market was uncertain, and northern blacks (including returning veterans) served as convenient scapegoats for these troubles. Riots broke out. Mob attacks could come at any moment. One says: a *climate of hysteria*. McKay published this response:

If we must die, let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
Making their mock at our accursed lot.
If we must die, O let us nobly die,
So that our precious blood may not be shed
In vain; then even the monsters we defy
Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!
O kinsmen! we must meet the common foe!
Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,
And for their thousand blows deal one deathblow!
What though before us lies the open grave?
Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back! (36)

McKay harnesses revolt to the constraints of British convention: he writes a sonnet. It is Caliban's instrumental verse. And yet, the poem disturbs the tradition of the sonnet by calling out to a threatened black community ("kinsmen"). A verse-form that normally embodies private subjectivity—an individual's erotic, religious, or moral life and laments—suddenly in 1919 disavows contemplation altogether and advocates violence. Under conditions of imminent threat from the mob, a communal address to the collectivity becomes necessary not for survival but in order decisively to choose the manner of dying.

4. McKay was an immigrant from Jamaica who came to Harlem in 1914 with two books published (in Creole, no less). Working with the Pennsylvania Railroad during the Red Summer of 1919, he was obliged to stop overnight in various cities in the North-East: he knew from experience the peril that blacks faced, and the poem "If We Must Die" gives voice to his own predicament. In the 1920s McKay was considered to be one of the catalysts of the "Negro Renaissance." For the Red Summer, see Wayne Cooper's *Claude McKay*, 96-102; for McKay's links to the revolutionary left, and for his time in Russia, recalled below, see again *Claude McKay*, 103-192.

Does the history of poetic form, then, unfold from a capacity to be scandalized into counter-violence, into a linguistic violence within or against extant forms?

(It diminishes violence to make it a metaphor for linguistic and formal operations.)

Thinking about avant-garde poetry to see how such poetry positions itself materially, stands with respect to power.

Post-colonial, post-Negro, to rethink the nature of scandal within forms, violence within forms.

Think the world that constitutes the self—how to re-articulate self against that world?

To speak stay silent to speak: both.

Leaving aside for the moment the continual fear of the Red Summer of 1919 and thinking of poetry apart from imminent injury, still it's clear that formal innovation runs to decadence if divorced from need: "And yet I needs must curse," Caliban says. One has to, I imagine, feel active scandal in front of certain routines of poetic valuation, and norms of delivery, to write against the grain—and from need. To suffer dismay because of all that cannot yet be said; all that continues to be said, that has already been spoken, by the forms.

The poetry of revolt: thoroughly worldly. Sincere, implacable. (My life is at risk.)⁵

5. I'm using a word, "sincerity," that has long had importance in the vocabulary of critics of Romantic poetry. Jerome McGann brings the word into the sphere of recent inquiries into the politics of poetic form in a paper on Byron, where he glosses the word's import as follows: "If you read Keats's 'On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer,' or probably any Wordsworth poem, you know you are reading a poetry which takes itself seriously. John Stuart Mill said that this kind of poem had the structure of 'overheard' musings. That was a very powerful structure, because it gave a kind of sacredness to the musings of the poet. The poetic space was not to be invaded by persons from Porlock. You were to stand back

* * *

Césaire's incantations—*voum rooh oh*—escape rationality to pitch the Westernized reader into a riot of fascination and revulsion. McKay's poem summons the energies of defiance, and keeps intact the form of interlocation—speaker and addressee—in order to stiffen resistance and precipitate violent revolt, if conditions warrant. It is these conditions incorporated as context, not restricted to the Red Summer but belonging to the experience of blacks in the New World more generally, that give both poems their force. Both the *Notebook* (in the quoted passages) and the sonnet comprehend the author's social situation. Both subordinate the "I," McKay by using the first person plural as one of the threatened, Césaire by revealing black identity in colonial discourse as a geographically and morally diverse set of perversities. The "I" multiplies and contradicts itself. Poetry sometimes matters to some people in need. McKay's biographer, Wayne Cooper, records a story that appeared in *Time* magazine, in 1971, where "rebellious black inmates at Attica State Prison in upstate New York had 'passed around clandestine writings of their own: among them was a poem by an unknown prisoner, crude but touching in its would-be heroic style, entitled 'If We Must Die'" (101). The poem continues to circulate within threatened communities.

Limits & Possibilities.

But that McKay's sonnet should speak in this way and to these people, this is undeniably new, and raises the problem of the limits at which avant-garde art may be said to begin—or the point at which we would want to begin to talk about it as such. "If We Must Die" is a sonnet. But that says nothing. It everywhere trembles with racial riot. Tradition did not anticipate that inflection, that capacity. In spite of distancing diction borrowed from the 19th-century school book, who can doubt the poet's sincerity? Still, with McKay, I would say that we have to look to his biography and to a survey of prior uses

and sort of watch the poet in a vatic posture. The sign of the poem's sincerity was the fact that it was in communion with these higher things: you weren't paying attention to the world, you weren't talking, it wasn't a rhetoric" (140). And also, the sincere poet is one who "looks in his own heart, or her own heart, and writes" (142). McGann's essay on Byron, and other valuable essays on poetry and poetics, appear in *The Politics of Poetic Form: Poetry and Public Policy*. I'm using the word "sincerity" to indicate differently a poetry compelled by intolerable worldly circumstances to situate the self in revolt from that world.

of the form in order to say whether or not we'd want to classify his poem as avant-garde practice. But as for Césaire, the poem seems sufficient—and why should that be?

We know that McKay, although refusing to submit his art to the directives of politics, nonetheless was in the early 1920s committed to international communism, that he worked for and published in periodicals of the revolutionary left (significantly, Max Eastman's *Liberator* in New York and Sylvia Pankhurst's *Workers' Dreadnought* in London), that he traveled to Moscow and addressed the Fourth Congress of the Third International, in 1922, and toured military bases in Russia "from Petrograd to Moscow" in great pomp and fanfare, as something of a celebrity. During his eight-month stay in Russia, he had an audience with Trotsky and met Mayakovsky and other Soviet writers, and wrote articles for the press. As with Hughes and Breton, progressive—advanced—poetry occurs in the turbulence triggered by the October Revolution and the aftermath of the cataclysmic world war.

Suggesting that the avant-garde has existed—will continue to exist—where there is:

- centrally, the need for manifestos to conceptualize, assert, socially relevant action (situated positions for art) Communist, Dada, Surrealist, Black Art
- concerted rebellion and revolt—an accidental echo of the plantation?
- an interested collectivity—makes no sense to think of the avant-garde as a number of isolated writers practicing experimental forms—further confusions—the writer as also the public
- the specter of Marx, of social critique—with the words "bourgeois" and "bourgeoisie" (or "oppressor") in the air
- a journal, meetings, collaborations—the infrastructure of public activity

* * *

Sincerity—pressure, terror, hallucination. Whatever beats the writer into horror, where the hair bristles and paralysis advances, that induces sincerity. To sustain such an attitude for a career, who can do it? But true poetry is not, as they say, a career.

Poetry and death—an obvious coupling. Avant-garde poetry and scandal—also obvious. That poetry only “lives” where the soul is at stake—likewise long ago self-evident. Poetry and the oblivion of voices—gibberish, mumbo-jumbo, blast of sound—in fraternity. What does this mean?

* * * *

It would be invidious to question McKay's sincerity, on the grounds that his sonnet retains normal syntax, an oratorical roundness worthy of the best Victorian statesman, the mechanisms of substitution (obvious metaphors of predator and prey) and the structure of address. Even so, to come back to Glissant's creolizing Africans in the West Indies. Sighting along this axis, I notice that the speech of the Martinican blacks, or of let's say Maroon communities in the Caribbean region, operates doubly to enfranchise and to exclude, as a cultural capacity that generates linguistic forms no where else in operation. Meaning from the inside, mumbo-jumbo from the outside. With McKay the inflection of the literary makes the message available beyond the limits of the community being addressed: Churchill, the story goes, quotes the sonnet to stiffen allied resistance to the Nazis. The poem is advanced because it imagines a new and radical use for a traditional rhetorical mode and form of versification.

At the same time, the poem does not trouble the medium, the poet, to quote Frantz Fanon, does not enter that moment when “suddenly the language of the ruling power is felt to burn your lips” (221), as one supposes to have been the case with let's say LeRoi Jones-Amiri Baraka or Sonia Sanchez or more recently, M. Nourbese Philip: “The language as we know it has to be dislocated and acted upon—even destroyed—so that it begins to serve our purposes” (19). McKay uses English as a weapon, but English is not itself complicit in the conditions that warrant aggressive interference. The poem seeks to intervene in the arena of physical action, not in the DNA structure of language, to paraphrase an observation by Philip.

And what I'd say is that it is the latter intervention that is the more precarious, the more potentially ineffective, because of the exclusion factor, in the absence of a natural community—a community under threat—to partake of the meanings. Does that mark the quality of sincerity—this precariousness of the interfering poem? Another set of questions: How dangerous are the political conditions? What kinds of

violence exist? Does the poet begin with the impossible: the end of the world? How sincere is the poem's “No!”? Of course under other political regimes, McKay would have simply been disappeared or thrown into jail.

III.

The origins of a black avant-garde must be thought in terms of a social situation that compels response from poets and other intellectuals. If we consider an explicit, interventionist stance towards language as one of the marks of avant-garde practice, it seems that writers today would locate these origins in the context of the plantation system. Social revolt embedded as linguistic structure is therefore to be seen not as the special capacity of poetry, but it is rather that poetry may bear traces of revolt as a synecdoche from a larger, communal phenomenon. The case of Claude McKay does not vitiate that insight, although it is worth recalling that in his *Creole poems*, written in Jamaica and published in 1912, McKay expresses a sentimental fondness for the seat of colonial power—“I've a longin' in me dept's of heart,” he writes, “Just to view de homeland England” (*Passion 5*)—an irony that should at least restrain overhasty conclusions about the relationship between Créolité and protest. McKay forces the issue of the avant-garde as an enfranchising category of writing practices that foreground dissent from conventional norms. If we leave his sonnet out of the category, then we lose some clarity as to the sort of social violence that can provoke linguistic and formal change. Even if his poem hews to the conventional verse, it changes the meaning of the sonnet as a set of conventions by using the form differently.

And yet, and yet, I am uneasy at the question of the origins of a formation whose existence in our own time still awaits confirmation. And so, to come up to the present. It seems to me that matters are at best confused in the situation of dissenting poetic practices in the United States. One writer observes, quite slyly, that there is no state of American poetry—only states. Among African-Americans and other black writers, what signs do we have of a viable black *avant-garde* in the terms I have been trying to sketch out? We have a number of writers interested in experimental and oppositional practices; we have, differently, the populist energy of spoken word and the strong inventiveness of rap, with its roots in social protest; we have at least one journal as part of that infrastructure needed for a movement, and one could also cite a few presses friendly to experimentation. All of this we know very well. But as to whether there is a black avant-garde at work in poetry today, and what its features are, I leave these matters open.

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Lorenzo Thomas

Kindred: Origins of the Black Avant-Garde

I was apprehensive enough about this panel, about this conference. What was I supposed to say about this topic? And then last night's reading *really* scared me.

Wow! What a reading!

The incendiary Wanda Coleman, Cecil Giscombe reconfiguring the empty heart of America, giovanni singleton's smart perceptiveness, Erica Hunt x-raying commodity fetishism to show us the decline and fall of the New World Order under attack by surly appliances . . . Will Alexander's poetic exploration of the *eastward* African migrations of antiquity is very suggestive—if we look deeper into that we will confront the great war between Africans and Aryans that is recorded in the Vedic poems; and present as well in shadowy misrepresentation in Richard Wagner and in the 1930s mythology of white supremacy. How will we grasp all of that?

I like Will Alexander's line:

The world now fallen into a cryptic bay of moons

But I was a bit disturbed. It just might be that contemplating the turmoil of the last 5 centuries (the epic of capitalism and the *westward* movements that created what we call "the African diaspora") is more than enough for us to handle right now. I mean what do we do, add several more centuries of desperate *marronage*?

By *we*, of course, I mean "society"—or our collective consciousness of such things. There is no reason, however, why the *poet* shouldn't concern himself with this. And if that is what he wants to do, maybe that is what makes Will Alexander an avant-garde poet, our point man in a new direction.

Avant-garde: Some definitions

There is a question of how one defines *avant-garde*. Does it mean that you are an alienated artist? An artist with a political as well as an aesthetic agenda? An experimenter interested in demolishing conven-

tional genres? A performer without an audience? A writer that no one can read?

There is, of course, the recognition of innovation (in content or style) as a critical category. For example: James Weldon Johnson's *God's Trombones* (1927) is worth examining as a Modernist text; especially compared to the popular Broadway "coon songs" that he wrote with Bob Cole and J. Rosamond Johnson, songs that made Johnson-Cole-Johnson the hottest songwriters of 1905. Similarly, we might consider Sonia Sanchez's *A Blues Book for Blue Black Magical Women* (1972) as an innovative Modernist long poem comparable to Hart Crane's *The Bridge* (1930), even though Sanchez's references and Afrocentric allusions are drawn from ancient Egypt and the doctrines of the Nation of Islam.

Secondly, I thought it might be important to ask if it makes sense to apply the term *avant-garde* to African American poets working in what will eventually be understood as the period that established the aesthetic agenda of the 21st Century—whether that means setting patterns to follow or being responsible for structures that may soon enough need to be demolished.

In a brilliant book titled *The Mask of Art: Breaking the Aesthetic Contract* (1998), Clyde R. Taylor demonstrates how a flawed Humanism has come to dominate our ideological, aesthetic, and social concepts. "The American dream," writes Taylor

is another of the extended products of Euro-enlightenment where the transcendent condition is premised on its co-definition with non-White invalidity. The "dream" does not exist to the exclusion of people of color; its existence *depends* on their degradation to a lower, ineligible status (146; emphasis added).

It should be easy to see how some contemporary African American artistic expressions function, not as effective protest, but as *reinforcement* of this condition. Or maybe Lexus jeeps and Lincoln jeeps and platinum credit cards are really what's real. Taylor's insistence that we grasp what he calls "the ironies of discourse" reminds me of a conversation I had once with Sun Ra concerning the Statue of Liberty.

"What is that in her hand," he asked.

"She's carrying a torch," I said. I'd decided to be clever.

"Well," said Sunny, "you're pretty smart. What does that make her in Latin?"

"Er . . . uh . . . Lucifer?"

"Now," he said, "with something like that in the harbor, do you understand why *y'all* be catching hell in this country?"

I suspect that is the same reason why Clyde Taylor recommends as "radical practice" an effort

to analyze the ironies sedimented in unequally weighted discourses to better understand the semiotic manipulations of power, and the rhetorical strategies available to improve the odds (159).

Obviously there are many ways to do this. I think what Clyde Taylor is doing here is pointing out a direction rather than attempting to authorize a specific school or style of doing either art or criticism. In any case, given the real problems facing African American people and the symbolic constructions of the media that effectively disguise those problems, *The Mask of Art* is required reading.

If, however, we still believe that the avant-garde artistic gesture is one way of "improving the odds," we still need to define what avant-garde means. In many contexts it seems to be a phrase that designates not much more than a willfully obfuscated *style*. Others see it as a more substantive philosophical position. As Matei Calinescu puts it in *Five Faces of Modernity* (1987), subscribing to the avant-garde means

confidence in the final victory of time and immanence over traditions that try to appear as eternal, immutable, and transcendently determined (95).

Such confidence, of course, can only be generated among those who are profoundly alienated from the *status quo*.

Donald Drew Egbert has suggested that, as far as artists are concerned, alienation can become a habit. Egbert notes that

The avant-garde is by definition a minority, and as such has to deny and combat the culture of a majority, whether that majority is aristocratic, bourgeois, or working-class. But the avant-garde is also by definition an *elite* minority, and thus is in its own way aristocratic, and so turns with particular force against

the dominance of the bourgeoisie and then that of the proletariat, reacting on a double front against bourgeois culture and mass culture (714).

What may be particularly noteworthy about African American artistic movements in the 20th Century, however, is that they were interested (and highly successful) in creating models that quickly *became* mass culture.

But that brings us right back to the Benz jeeps.

Avant-garde Goals: What Happens to a Dream Come True?

There was a desperate period in the 1980s when—frustrated by our inability to grasp society's real prizes (however defined)—we thought that simply being Black was avant-garde. Evidence was pointing out how the children of white suburban privilege copied the clothing styles, lingo, and gestural mannerisms of innercity youth.

This was not an entirely bogus position. One concept of the avant-garde is that it represents a new way of doing things that will succeed sooner or later in overwhelming the *status quo*. Those who are avant-gardists naturally wish that success will come very soon indeed. In fact, 20th Century Art History suggests that the process takes 15 to 20 years. On the other hand, the history of Fashion and commerce indicate that such changes are neither permanent nor significant.

A more defeatist concept presents the avant-garde as a durable *alternative* that does not even condescend to the contemplation of success. This is the kind of Marxism based on Groucho's assertion that he would never want to belong to a club that would accept him as a member.

Two examples of successful avant-garde movements are Abstract Expressionist painting and the politicized aesthetic popularized by Harlem Renaissance poetry. In the case of Abstract Expressionism, a small group of painters, art critics, and the designers responsible for corporate office and public spaces, managed to make that style the dominant public art of the third quarter of the 20th Century. During the 1920s, Harlem Renaissance poets Claude McKay and Countee Cullen used traditional English-language forms such as the sonnet to craft poems of racial introspection and minority group political protest, while Sterling A. Brown and Langston Hughes employed *vers*

libre and Black English vernacular for the same purposes. The result was a full-court press against conventional American ideas (particularly those of the last quarter of the 19th Century) regarding the *purpose* of poetry.

What the Harlem Renaissance poets collectively accomplished was to establish the importance of African American experience as a suitable subject for poetic expression—even though that idea still was not fully accepted by critics such as Louis Simpson in the 1950s (writing about Pulitzer Prize-winner Gwendolyn Brooks) and Helen Vendler in the 1990s (noting with apparent surprise that former Poet Laureate Rita Dove writes well "about other things" besides being Black). The message of Harlem Renaissance poetry informs Richard Wright's "Blueprint for Negro Literature" (1937) and his contention in *White Man, Listen!* (1957) that the future of African American Literature and other art forms would be found in the thoughtful but fearless development of authentic folk materials that he called "the Forms of Things Unknown." The roots of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s can be found in those Richard Wright essays, a fact that makes the Black Arts Movement itself—Larry Neal's protestation to the contrary notwithstanding—an important continuation of the Harlem Renaissance.

Interestingly, what the Harlem Renaissance did not do is to create or establish a standard style or form for African American poetry. That fact was part of the unfinished business that became an important focus for the writers of the Black Arts Movement.

An Avant-Garde Apprenticeship

I began to write poetry before there was a Black Arts Movement. I had been reading poetry using a relentlessly catholic method: I simply read the entire 811 section of the Queensborough Public Library, starting with Leonie Adams and continuing book by book through the alphabet. Of course, these were skinny books; mostly the works of living American poets. Naturally, I had favorites: Edgar Bowers, John Ciardi, Isabella Gardner, Thomas Merton, Ned O'Gorman, Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, Wallace Stevens, May Swenson, William Carlos Williams. And there were many others who left me cold, turned me off, or that I just didn't get. Then came Donald Allen's anthology *The New American Poetry 1945-1960* and a new alphabet of favorites: Brother Antoninus, John Ashbery, Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan, Barbara Guest, LeRoi Jones, Kenneth Koch, David Meltzer, O'Hara.

Yet, as fascinating as Don Allen's poets were, the library kept my interest and also allowed me to go back to earlier decades (long before my lifetime here) that held equally vibrant excitements and enchantments. In other words, I also found myself deeply involved in the poems of Longfellow and D. H. Lawrence, the Imagists, and the Harlem Renaissance.

Nevertheless, I was also sometimes overwhelmed with a sense of isolation.

I sometimes felt ... well, there's a great line in a poem by Joe Ceravolo: "I am lonesome in my crib." It did not make me uncomfortable to be the only black person in a room, at a party, or at a poetry reading; nevertheless, I needed to know that my experience was not solitary or unique. It was important, then, for me to encounter the work of pioneer Modernist writers such as Sadakichi Hartman and Cesar Vallejo, Fenton Johnson and Melvin Tolson.

In the March/April 2000 issue of *American Poetry Review*, Gary Lenhart has an excellent article on Melvin B. Tolson that emphasizes Tolson's isolation in Texas and Oklahoma from the 1930s to the early 1960s. Should we think of Tolson as avant-garde? Can his work function despite the isolation in which it was written—as an influence upon a subsequent avant-garde movement? Isn't there a peculiar similarity between some passages of Tolson's *Harlem Gallery* (1965) and the syncopated, free-rhymed allusive verse that one can recognize as almost stereotypical "Black poetry" of the 1970s, 80s, and 90s—so much so that it turns up on radio commercials for scotch whiskey? Is that similarity due to literary influence (doubtful) or racial *ethos*? Before you dismiss that suggestion, by the way, you need to read Sterling Stuckey's essay on the Blues.

My own sense of isolation was relieved in the early 1960s when I had the good fortune to become part of a group called the Umbra Workshop. This group was established in New York's lower East Side by Tom Dent with Calvin C. Hernton and David Henderson. Other members included Raymond Patterson, Askia M. Toure, Norman Pritchard, Ishmael Reed, Art Berger, Jane Poindexter, Joe Johnson, Brenda Walcott, Steve Cannon, Al Haynes, Lennox Raphael, and several more. Asamon Byron, Herbert Woodward Martin, Leroy Lucas, Nora Hicks, and Civil Rights activist Bob Gore also attended meetings (Oren 180-182).

Interestingly, the Umbra Workshop was an avant-garde group that did *not* produce a collective style—not even in the sense that the Beats, the New York School, or the Black Arts Movement did. Perhaps this was because Umbra emerged in the early 1960s at precisely the moment when everyday fashion—and the Music (jazz)—was beginning to break down into what would previously have been understood as an astonishingly chaotic diversity, a whirlwind of eclecticism.

I'm thinking, for example, of the Charles Mingus band and of Archie Shepp and Bill Dixon's debut album on Savoy (which was really a Gospel music label). I'm thinking that in the late 1950s, men wore fedoras, women wore hats and gloves. Suddenly in the early 1960s the styles of all eras and social classes became simultaneously acceptable; an earlier concept of currency and uniformity suddenly collapsed. In the visual arts, Abstract Expressionism was challenged by Claes Oldenburg and Roy Lichtenstein, Paul Waters and Joe Overstreet, Jeff Donaldson and Bettye Saar, and Allen Kaprow's "happenings" (a kind of performance art of simultaneity that had affinities to Jackson Mac Low's poetics). The Umbra Workshop, if it was of its moment—as Tolson would insist all art must be of its moment (Lenhart 36)—shared some of these dynamics.

What everyone in the workshop did agree on was that poetry is an exercise that *must* have social and political efficacy. The group's resistance to a dictated or official *style* is best reflected in Ishmael Reed's "Catechism of d Neoamerican HooDoo Church" (1970) which declares

DO YR ART D WAY U WANT
ANYWAY U WANT

That statement not only reflects what was the actual—and, at the time, *unstated*—aesthetic of the Umbra Workshop; it is also the template for what would become known as *Multiculturalism* (before the manufacturers of educational products got a hold of the term and started using it to move refrigerators, satellite dishes, and various "people of color"-coded commodities).

There are a number of other things I could mention, but it might be good to stop here for the moment and let the conversation open up other issues.

An Innovative Tradition

If asked to make a closing comment here, however, I'd say that we do need to nurture the idea, or concept, of an African American *avant-garde*—just as we need to carefully consider what we mean when we speak of *heritage* or *tradition*.

It is a matter of fact that it is up to us to define tradition.

We do that by simply naming the predecessors that we admire. For example, I know that I learned a great deal from and was excited by the poetry of Charles Baudelaire and Arthur Rimbaud—but what I later learned about their politics (or political myopia) was enough to exclude them from veneration. I learned from them, but I do not think I follow in their tradition. Someone does, but it is not me. Similarly, I admired and learned a great deal from the scholarship and writings of J. A. Rogers and will insist today that his Afrocentric position—what Dr. Robert Powell calls the foundations of the Correctionist school of world history—is indispensable to a proper understanding of what goes on in this world; but I am not constrained to emulate Rogers's often staid, almost 19th Century style. People who think they will find the key to deciphering what is going on by tuning in CNN or listening to Public Enemy, need to be reading J. A. Rogers.

If I say that we need poetry that re-veils and deciphers the symbols that hide our daily reality, I will not be saying anything that everyone doesn't already know. What I am saying is that the need is not new and there have been, in our African American literary and intellectual traditions, successful attempts to achieve that goal. Studying those is what both critics and poets should do—and doing so will give us the strength to create work that may do the same for others.

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Discussion (excerpts)

Harryette Mullen: I just want to respond to a couple of points. One thing I like is that model of the Mingus band performing its history, and carrying that history with it, because among the things that I have had difficulty with as a student, as a writer, and trying to figure out where I am in all of this, is the need of every generation to rediscover and recover the history that is continually forgotten, lost, buried... I think that the three lively and really stimulating panelists here have given us a sense of historicizing black avant-gardes and innovative practices. I also was interested in the fact that it seems some common threads here had to do with confusion and contradiction about our affiliations—if we are oppositional what is it that we oppose—is it an aesthetic style or value, is it a class style or value, is it capitalism, is it the mainstream, is it the academy, is it whiteness? One of the things about the black arts movement seemed to be a fear of contamination by whiteness. Another question that seems to run through these presentations is: if we are opposing something, how do we know if we ever have won?

Lorenzo Thomas: The last thing you mentioned—If we are opposing the status quo, how will we know if we've ever won? A real question that exists today and in some ways can be blamed on the previous avant-garde movements from Western Europe, [from] the late 19th century 'till now, is that capitalism has demonstrated its ability to co-opt and commercialize *any* style. So you have these two poles—either you are creating an avant-garde art that you *intend* to become the status quo, in which case you're happy when it happens, or you are stuck in an adolescent type of protest, that never understands that you are going to be next season's flavor, and then replaced by some more, or rather, some less, intelligent protest. Right? And I think that's one of the things that's a problem—maybe I'm stuck in appreciating some ancient early 20th century art that everybody else considers passé—but I feel that with a lot of the new things that I see lately is this parade of increasingly less intelligent protest, each one of which gets played up for a season and then discarded, and the people producing seem apparently none the wiser of what the system is.

Erica Hunt: I want to comment on that, because I think there is a way that you can take that position and you can also become paralyzed by that, because that same omnivorous quality about capitalism is also what gives the possibility that—it eats anything, right? It's

constantly looking for new cultural objects and it particularly loves cultural practice because there's almost no time in manufacturing it. When we were making material objects it took seven years for obsolescence. Now we have ideas and those go like that [*snaps fingers*] and we have information—the rate of consumption is quite high, but it also has the capacity to eat things that are in fact detrimental to its own interests. So in fact, in that process of commodification of oppositional practices, it will also ingest something. I hope at least, that is *really bad* for it—in fact, inimical to its ultimate goals, which is basically deadening our experience and making us good workers or good workers in their terms. And having us subscribe to the fact that all we should do is work and limit our imagination and our social freedoms. So it seems to me that rather than say the avant-garde is going to get subsumed anyway, so what's the point, or you're stuck in just being completely juvenile and just having an oppositional stance for the sake of having an oppositional stance, it's rather to think that you're having an impact in all of these many ways, through the people that you meet or the people that listen to what you're writing and have discourse with you, the text that you use, and you keep moving, and the point is not to get bogged down or think that those cultural practices are anything but contingent. But rather that they are, you are, constantly moving. And even the maps that you're using to describe the sources of the avant-garde are also shifting maps, not maps that get hypostasized, calcified. And that seems to me very important.

Will Alexander

A New Liberty of Expression

A torrent of thoughts, quaking ciphers, oscillating subtrahends. Such was the credenda of this conference, providing its participants with the freedom, to leap the stereotypic, far outstripping the myopia of the didactic, thereby bringing into view the expansive repertoire of Afro-American written expression. It was an ambience where old dichotomies no longer existed as models.

I'm thinking of the dilemma faced by Melvin Tolson, circa 1965, his imagination deleted by anti-poetic debate. On the one hand, the myopia of the Anglo poetic establishment, and on the other, the didactic stridulation of the burgeoning Black Arts movement. His poetic complexity obscured, his splendour momentarily eclipsed by pervasive ideology. Only now, is his *Harlem Gallery* being witnessed from its organic root. But it is because of the Melvin Tolsons, the Jean Toomers, the Bob Kaufmans, that our conclave was able to ignite, and continue to create an on-going criteria.

No longer does one have to be an imaginal pauper, beholden to a recusant glance, constantly tethered to writing on ubiquitous repression. And when I say repression, I am thinking of Saxon institutional attack, and our having to look into its fangs with the plain spoken speech of the hour. No. I know there is more. I know that I can no longer be restrained by methods diametrical to interior liberty. Yet I know such repression is not to be denied, not to be seen as some anachronistic hamlet conveniently obscured by modernity. The continuous attack upon the Afro-American psyche remains a psycho-emotional constant, with us, always navigating threat, throughout different heights of toxic water. Yet because of this, our imagination always awash in elusive complexity.

An Afro-centric complexity not solely bound to the American South and its experience of uncultivated sillage. I am not bound to 1619, and the convocation of our collective conscription to American soil. Let me speak of the "first seven dynasties" of the Pharaohs, of Kemet's pre-dynastic fires sprung from south of the Sahara. Sprung from the "oldest nation on record...the Nubian nation Ta Seti." So when I use language I am thinking of its African applicability. Not the legacy of the aforementioned South, with its continuing psychic confinement, with its resolute heritage of repression.

As Césaire has pointed out, Surrealism sparked the African in him. And I can say much the same, in that it has liberated my animistic instinct, so that I am able with unlimited range to roam throughout my writing. Be it radiolarians, or ocelots, or dictators who have merged with dissolution, the whole of life burns for me, existing without border or confinement. The sun, the air, the fire from the waters swirling without let-up.

So when working with these primordial forces language becomes an organic weapon. A weapon which clears out old toxins, which annihilates the autocracy of imaginal restriction. Because of this I am no longer condemned to pouring out lines soaked with acceptable didactics.

One can speak of dazzling fuchsia, of luminous waters on the moons of Saturn, all the while knowing that the animistic principle pervades one's endeavors. The ardor of one's voice transmuting all explanation. And this praxis of liberty was vibrant throughout the whole morning of my panel, "Tell My Horse" led by Giovanni Singleton. The Loas rode us. We were able to speak with abandon. Myself, C.S. Giscombe, and Julie Patton, were given the opportunity to shift the human field with a new liberty of expression.

C. S. Giscombe

Miscegenation Studies

A rigged document. This is not quite the halting talk I gave at the "Expanding the Repertoire" get-together at New College in April 2000; nor is it a compilation of the notes written in cafeterias, lobbies and automobiles (which the numbered sub-heads would seem to indicate). Rather it's a run-on, a product based on those things which did exist in the world.

1. Paradise Palms Café, University of Hawai'i at Manoa, March 2000

So difficult here in this, the west beyond the western, the west that's so far west it's eastern, the wil', wil' wyes' so difficult here to think the racial out into the categories of home. Home? This island's got its Zip Codes and its familiar traffic patterns—the old true joke of its Interstate highways—but it is an island beyond the range, the effortless imprint of European America: mostly the dark island faces here in the big Paradise Palms, only a smattering of haoles, some Asians, occasional Africans and, if I look hard, some African-Americans (a campus cop this morning, two tattoo'd students, a grim guy with a professor look to him) although almost certainly more or fewer than I think, more or fewer than I recognize.

Back on the mainland, family is my metaphor. Back home. Brother, we call ourselves, sistra. Manoa, Honolulu, Hawai'i: Portuguese sausage and two scoop rice for breakfast here but here in the Paradise Palms the memory is St. Louis last summer, visiting family and Pete—my cousin Pete Samples—and I doing what we do which is cruising bookstores in University City and talking as we cruise. Often it's difficult to accomplish but the necessity, I realized that time last year, is for black people of intellectual inclination to *see* one another, to spend time with one another, to be physically present, with one another. This is not taking anything from the lifeline of virtual communities and letters via U.S. Mail or Canada Post: those things have their place. But we've been defined and known by others and, significantly, among ourselves as well in terms of our bodies. Baldwin said something about the threateningness of Negro speech, or the edge of violence in it. Perhaps; but I recall the pleasure of laughing on the phone with Ed Roberson, whom I've still never met, and the pleasure as well in realizing Elvis Mitchell's blackness—tricking that out of his voice on NPR—before my white friends at the affiliate station at Normal.

(Normal, Illinois, named for the old state normal school,

now Illinois State University, my previous employer; I live now in State College, PA and the new boss is Penn State. University City, Missouri's the St. Louis suburb in which thrives Washington University. Schools define us and reveal us (to borrow language from Ken Irby), or they threaten to. Barnes & Noble stores in all the places—the university voices, like the ones on local TV news shows wherever you go, are all the same. Attention, shoppers.)

I came back from Hawai'i with a Bamboo Ridge anthology (a gift from Susan Schultz) *Intersecting Circles*, subtitled *Voices of Hapa Women in Poetry and Prose*, "hapa" being the word for "mixed." This is Miscegenation Studies, or a voice-laden aspect of it, miscegenation itself being the unspeakable, unassailable text, the metaphor beyond the body that names the body. One of the book's editors, Maria Hara, revises Hughes' old "Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," saying, "Standing astride the paradox of racial assumptions, we insist on commenting as individuals, not as bridge people or advocates of any prescribed cultural script." Well and good but the most interesting part of the book comes at the end, the gallery of pictures of the contributors. They're not "good" photographs in particular: the familiar studio shot of Jessica Hagedorn is the exception that proves that. The pictures tend to be blurry and too busy both or, more to the point, the faces are too big for the frames. But so much of the text of the anthology involves physical description, women talking about their bodies, in those "voices" from the subtitle. That's where the voices go. Talk's cheap, eh? Voices indeed. Pictures of the bodies themselves, that brings things closer.

2. Essex Hotel lobby, San Francisco

But when I break down the constructions of culture, class, etc. it's this sort of opaque thing I get to: the pleasure of voice, the ironically almost non-verbal *presence* of voice, that kind of physicality.

Harryette Mullen and Wanda Coleman alluded—in previous panels—to the familiar situation: often being the lone person of color, the lone black, at social and/or literary events, events which in my case have most often included me because of my relation to one school—that is, university—or another. Most of my fellows on these "Expanding the Repertoire" panels are roughly my age and I imagine that many here have, like myself, undertaken intellectual adventures mostly among white people—almost thirty years later looking back at my four years at SUNY Albany I cannot recall seeing or hearing of any black professor and by the time I'd burned through the ring of lecture classes and had a schedule full of seminars I was almost always

the only black student in the class.

If miscegenation's the fact in almost every black family in America, and it is, then I would argue or suggest that miscegenation's a way of looking at black literary experience including this inclination toward experiment—I'd agree with Harryette Mullen's point of yesterday that being "innovative" is coincident with being "in-between." This is no endorsement of the tragic mulatto business—it's no tragedy to have to think about your origins. Nor is it a back-turning on blackness in favor of some kind of "mixed" categorization. My understanding is that acknowledging your mixed heritage is at the root of being black. This is Alex Haley's sly nod from the TV. At the root of whiteness is, apparently, a denial of the same thing—whiteness is the claim of purity and insofar as it is that, it's a static position, fixed, desperately hovering.

So my parents engineered the typical black middle class dodge and sent their son and daughter across town to be schooled by the Catholics. My high school teachers were priests and religious brothers from the Society of Mary, deeply ambivalent and smart men. I'd already discovered Langston Hughes' work, by accident, in the public library in 7th grade but it was a white priest who suggested James Baldwin to me and then met with me on a number of occasions to discuss the essays.

I've been grateful to Erica Hunt for much and now I'm also grateful to her for her talk yesterday, particularly for her reminder of the importance of a "reading strategy" and, the child of that, what she called Baldwin's "dilation of thought" and "high art/vernacular tension." Baldwin, under the direction of Father MacDonald, Baldwin was the first black writer I read at all seriously. It's his *articulation*—I thought then that he was just "being articulate," that his level of expression and difficult clarity was enough, not starting to appreciate until later the cost of that level—that clarity—the active nature of speech being transformed into writing on the page, appreciating later still that what I was seeing as I stared at "Notes of a Native Son" was the trace of something very expensive, the evidences of what Erica named. Baldwin reminded his nephew, in his famous 1963 letter/essay, "You come from a long line of great poets, some of the greatest since Homer. One of them said, 'The very time I thought I was lost, My dungeon shook and my chains fell off.'"

But the first "high art/vernacular tension" I witnessed—in the flesh as it were—was in church. So yes, I come out of a "church form," a term I owe to Stephen Henderson's introduction to *Understanding the New Black Poetry*. A church form, but I don't come from the A.M.E. church or the Baptists. We were Episcopalians—my

parents still are—and I recall those Sundays listening to our priest, a black man named M. Bartlett Cochran who came from southern Ohio; he'd read from the very high church Book of Common Prayer and, though not one word was changed, his voice did things not to the language but *with* it—they met, mingled, fought each other, and created an amazing spectacle, a huge part of my black literary experience. This is miscegenation studies. I hear his voice now as I type this—the timbre of it, the broad emphasis on prepositions and adjectives, the r's at the end that stay on a vibration at the back of the mouth. Arr? No, aww(r). "Until the shadows lengthen and the evening comes and the busy world is hushed and the fever of life is over."

I'm in Michael S. Harper's and Anthony Walton's recently published *Vintage Anthology of African-American Verse*, which pleases me in spite of my powerful ambivalence about anthologies. I'm in the back of the book next to my fellow Ohioan Rita Dove, who was born a little bit after I was. Nathaniel Mackey's in it too—he and I, though, are the only two from this gang. There are no photographs in this volume, only descriptions, and I'll confess to being distressed some at the headnote that begins my section—I'm attributed to (1) the rust belt, (2) Charles Olson, (3) Ezra Pound, and (4) James Wright.

Now the trouble is that I do claim all those white guys and that region but my attribution to only white (and regional) sources denies both for me and for other black "innovative" writers (since this book is widely distributed—being *Vintage* and all—and since we're not, as I mention above, well-represented in it) the sort of past I've been trying to sketch out here this morning, a past that does not deny miscegenation but that studies it. Miscegenation studies me; miscegenation doesn't deny blackness either. The headnote makes it seem that I'm the adopted child of a kind, liberal white family. I've read Olson but before that I read Jean Toomer and I've said on a number of occasions that the work in the *Vintage Anthology of African-American Verse* (all of which is from my 1994 book, *Here*) is really a response, an homage, to *Cane*, to the literary value Toomer assigned to the black migration north, to his articulation of that, to how he broke all that down. To be north with the south still in your head after all this time. He wrote:

White man's land.
Niggers, sing,
Burn, bear black children
Till poor rivers bring
Rest, and sweet glory
In Camp Ground.

One of the poems in *Here* (from the loose, "floating" sequence about the black Hudson River School painter, Robert S. Duncanson) is a place where the homage is, I think, particularly visible. It's included elsewhere in this issue of *Tripwire*. (Included here also is a poem "about" James Wright, also from *Here*. I'm not expecting to be invited to the annual James Wright festival that's put on by the Martin's Ferry Public Library.)

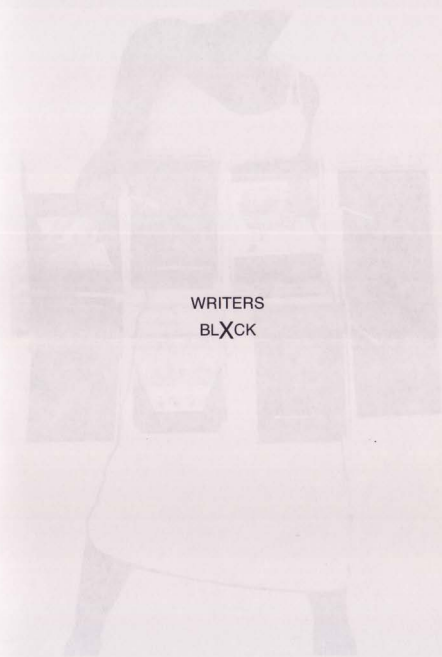
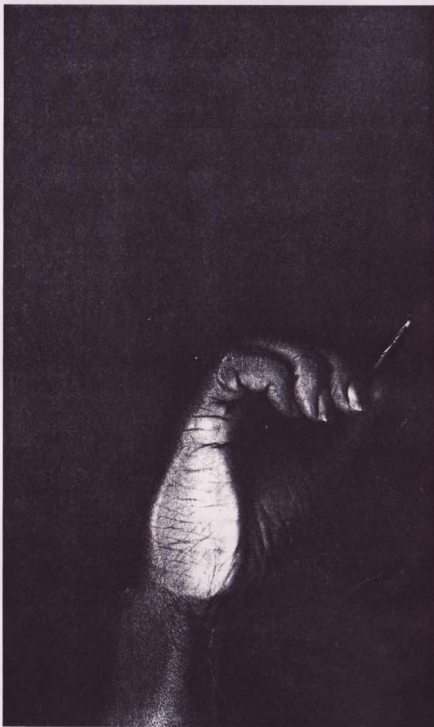
The word I get to, vis-a-vis the *Vintage* book, is from Harryette Mullen, her word for describing the experimental black writer, "unanticipated." ("She is unanticipated and often unacknowledged due to the imposed obscurity of her aesthetic antecedents.") As I've said elsewhere, in writing about black Canadians, "there are a lot of ways to take the fall and find yourself outside history."

3. Shortlidge Rd., Penn State campus, University Park, PA, April 2000

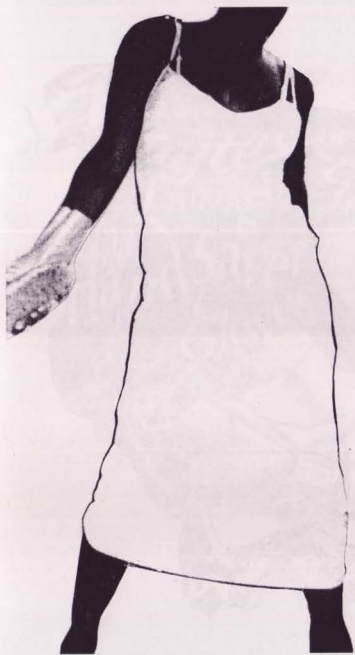
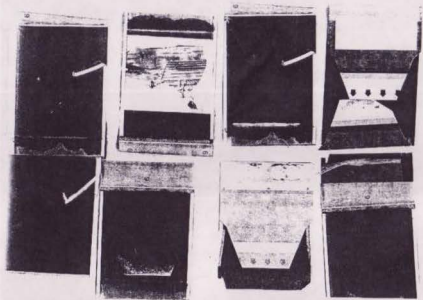
Music comes in at the close, like always. Struck in traffic among 20 year olds in BMWs and SUVs, one of the little traffic jams that happens at Penn State when classes change. On the radio, all-oldies-all-the-time, was the Mamas and the Papas' delicate and squeaky "Dedicated to the One I Love." It's this version, their cover, this is the way I first heard the song in 1967 or so, only discovering the earlier version, by the Shirelles, later.

But if there's a reading strategy there's a listening strategy too. What's the mingle? What's the echo? "What are you *quoting*?" I asked the Mamas and the Papas.

It's jauntier, more dependent on the voices of the Shirelles themselves, buoyed on the back of whatever it is in Negro speech.



WRITERS
BLXCK



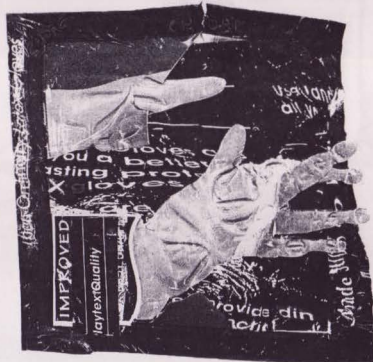
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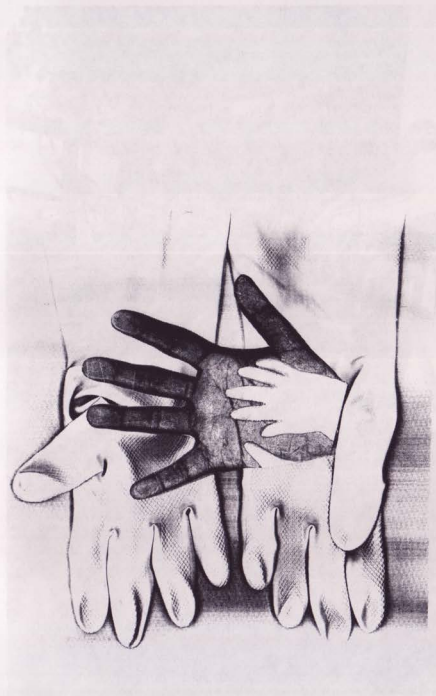
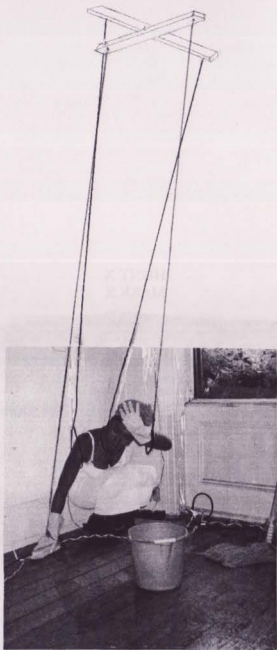
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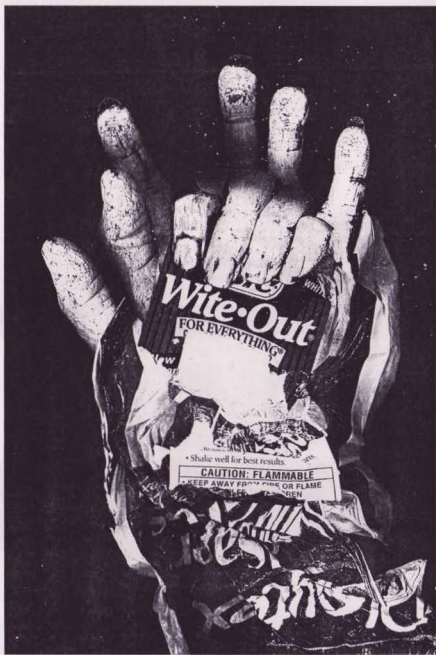
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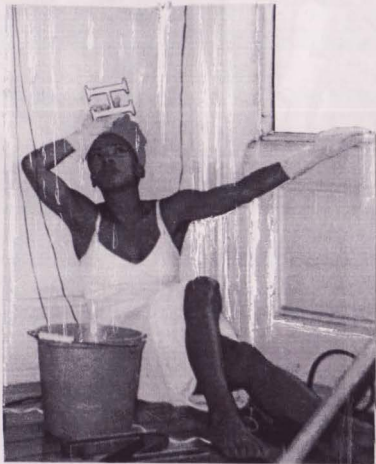




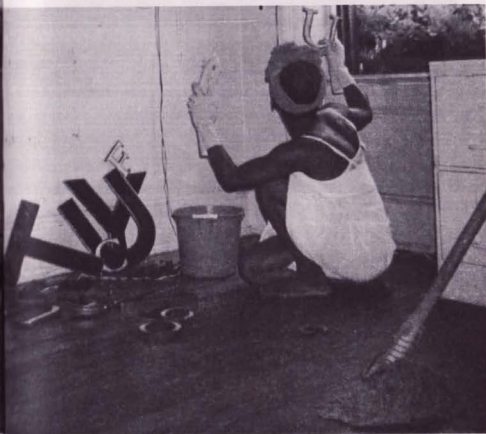


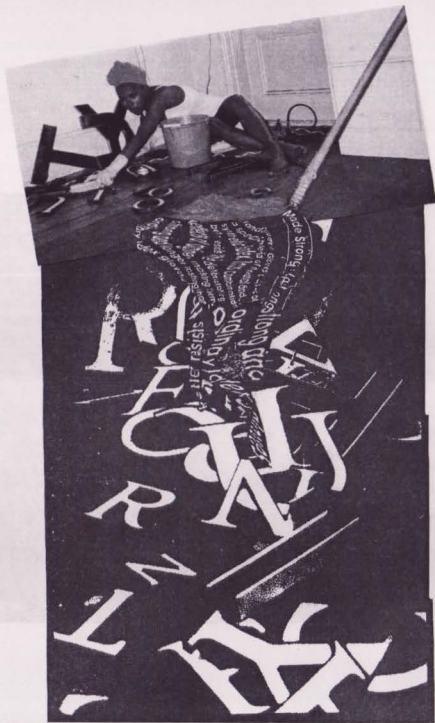




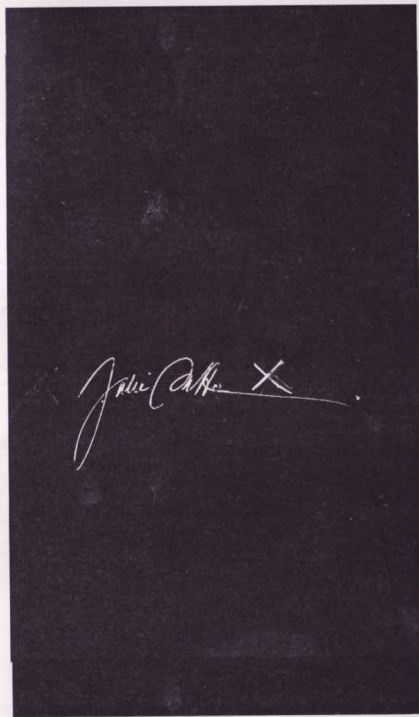


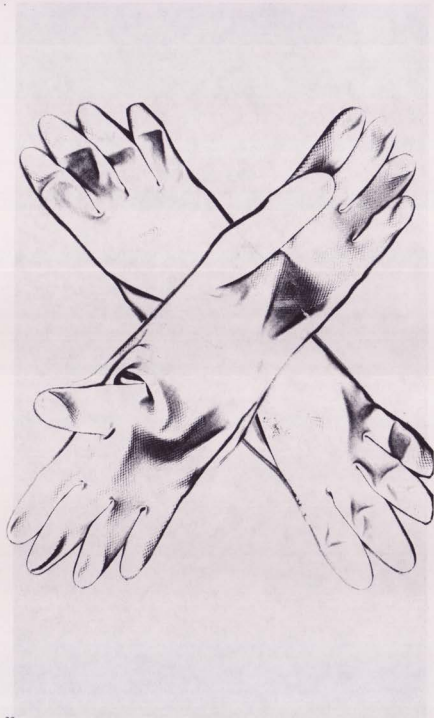
Ex it





Encountering sufferings will definitely contribute to the elevation of your _____ practice, provided you are able to transform the calamity and misfortune into the path.





-tra-la-la-la-la-

text

(Soap Opera) pre text

- pp. 1-3 "Bl_ck English (soap cast)"
- pp. 6-7 "What err crosses my path, litter *ally*" (fount object)
- p. 9 "Fire!" (Ohio player's)
- p. 10 "Meanwhile, several blXcks away... (chorus)"
- pp. 11, 12 "X marks the spot"
- pp. 13-14 "Clean Language: Slip o Tongue (not fun)"
- pp. 15-16 "Wit these hands"
- pp. 17-18 "U Whitey U!"
- p. 19 "write white"
- p. 20 "off the _"
- p. 23 "F U!"
- p. 24 "Now U is all wite (taint U?)"

B(L)ACK GROUND

“

“

to be continued...

Discussion (excerpts)

Renee Gladman: What I think is interesting about this conference and about the question of innovation and black writing and black art, is that it seems as if it's inherently contradictory to consider innovation and cultural identity in writing at once. I mean, that obviously happens in music, in jazz, but I know that historically it's been a problem in writing. So I think that the good thing about this conference is that the contradictions are inevitable, which may make discourse around the various writers more interesting or more expansive than within the larger mostly white avant-garde setting.

[...]

Will Alexander: You know, you have to wear your own suit ... I think that makes the world very interesting and richer because of that. In the early part of the century, people would write a landscape poem down in Martinique or somewhere and they'd say, "Oh, you can't even tell that I'm black." That's pointless. No matter how well it's done it doesn't bring the site-specific reality of having this African connection.

Renee: Well, I like the fact that you can't deny or that it is pointless to deny it, if one is looking at your work. I mean, that could be a goal to try to just say: well, his work was not really black because it's complicated in this way or it's dealing with this totally other thing, but I think that would be wrong and limiting to your work. And I think that any critic who tries to do it must see the sort of incompleteness in the reading, and so I think that's why I see a problem within the white avant-garde. And I hate setting up this binary of black and white because obviously that doesn't really hold up anymore. But it's easier to erase this white identity or cultural context because it's not paid attention to very much.

Will: No. I think once we don't deny that, it creates a larger community with the so-called "white" community, and we start to have a total community of different type participants. And I don't mean that in a simplistic way. But, you know, there are differences and arguments and all kinds of different divergences, but that creates a richer community, when you come in as an Afro-centric individual, where Greek history isn't the end all, be all.

C. S. Giscombe: It seems to me that we come apart often around this issue of complexity. We were talking—was it just yesterday in here?—about simplicity. And it seems to me that black writing is supposed to be simple and so forth and go just from A to C or something like that, but it seems to me that white writing, the stuff that one reads in the *New Yorker*, for example, is also fairly simple ... It seems to me that blackness is, obviously, for me and for all of us here, a very complex set of propositions and a complex set of past references and ways of looking at the world. And I think that certainly, many white critics, and to a certain extent some black critics as well, don't recognize that the black is as capable of complexity and contradiction—the word that's come up here which I think is a really useful word—looking at something in a couple of different ways, three different ways at the same time, and that there's a black thing about that. I'll go back to my early reading of Toomer and how important that book was to me, how important Baldwin was to me and how important a book I've just finished teaching, *The Invisible Man*, you know, continues to be to me thorny. Thorny, thorny, thorny books.

Julie Patton: I don't know why there would be some confusion around that since our language was referred to as mumbo jumbo. That should imply complexity. No, I'm just making a joke, but—I'm disturbed about one thing. I came from a family with a very strong cultural identity that wasn't troubled by these issues because it had such a self-security, you know, about when you make your own life you own with your own hand, your own sense of existence in the world and that sense of autonomy. You don't sway so much and you don't get captivated by the market forces. You don't buy into them. But when I think about the late sixties or seventies when I was growing up there were issues and the issues were housing, education, food, etc., etc., etc. Now all America has inherited since then is race politics and I think the younger generation only knows a discussion of race politics and identity politics, and it became fashionable in other ways, whether it's gay identity or this or this or this, and this is a real lockdown. And what a lot of younger artists and writers take as liberation, I see as extreme incarceration and that's part of my outrage. I remember when I got out of school and I had one residency after another, whether they were museum residencies or this or that, as a visual artist I could go to those places, do my work and no one ever commented or limited me around the issue of subject matter, no one. I don't care if my work was about clouds, I never even sensed anything outside of what I saw happen to my mother and her more abstract art during the movement days in that kind of context. And I

know a lot of other African-American artists who were working in New York. They were freer—and they will say this—as artists to explore anything that they wanted to, whereas now the visual art world is only rife with race representational work. That's the market demand. It is the market demand and it has become the barometer. You can check this out. If you go look at all the artists that have been touted as making it in the mainstream art world in the last ten years, their subject is not bad—it's great. They have the right to explore what they want. It's not the problem what the artist is doing. The problem is that the market only selects people who are talking about one thing or another, and this points to something else. A lot of people see a sense of address and addressing whiteness as liberation. I don't. I remember when I was invited to go someplace else to teach and I said I'm not going to stand in front of a classroom where normally there would be ten, thirteen people, but because I was the first black professor coming, my classroom was loaded. So I said, "If you think that I'm here to bridge to you about black culture, to explain, to cajole, to beg for greater understanding of my complexity or this or that, you should take another class 'cause I'm not going to do it." I said, "If you want to know about blackness go live next door to somebody black, go read a black book. It's not my job. It's a hard enough job being black all day without having to explain and to talk to you about blackness. It's not my job. And I want to talk about whatever it is I want to talk about." And so in the context, since I am colored, in the context of whatever it is I'm dealing with I can't help but drag my family into it. It's just like Lorenzo said yesterday when he watches a game show it's like, "I like it when the colored people win." I don't question it, but there is an issue of fashion here that restricts people to particular categories that I don't remember happening as it happens now when it comes to art. And I can drag in a whole bunch of other like visual artists who can remember a time and it's so intense, that everyone who works with any other kind of way of making or talking about anything where race is not your only subject matter is ostracized. If ecology is your primary focus, which is a big thing for me, I actually get, "Well, can you talk about ecology from the perspective of a black person?" "No, motherfucker, I'll talk to you about ecology from the perspective of—" You know, it's insane. I don't understand it.

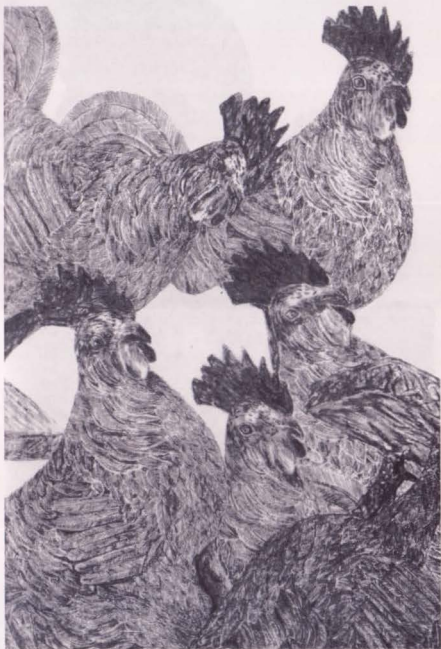
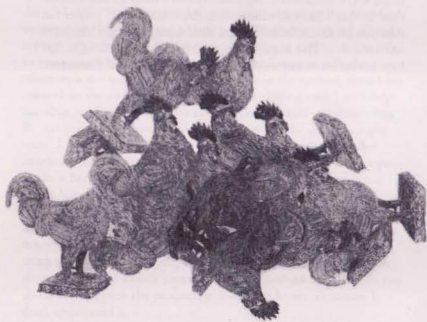
[...]

Mark McMorris: I just wanted to talk about these aspects in a different way. But I just want to preface it by saying it's a big relief to hear

these thoughts, particularly that voice on complexity and contradiction. And I wanted to go back just to reference something that Harryette said yesterday about being in-between and just being uncomfortable, that sense of this perpetual discomfort. And I wanted to expand that a little bit and speak about the archival project. I'm going to tell you what I mean by that. In my own experience, in the sixties and seventies there was really an effort to rehabilitate culture in the popular culture, the culture of the people, the culture of the masses, in connection with this notion that there's a new nation emerging and as part of this nation-building project there's the cultural work that needs to be done to rescue our cultural forms, cultural values, from the days of segregation, the colonial period. And I think that we can think about a similar effort to rehabilitate certain aspects of African-American cultural works in this country. It inevitably gets typed at the Academy and once it gets typed within the Academy then you run into the problem of canons. And I guess I just wanted to throw out this notion of anxiety. There's a certain amount of anxiety if you hear all the time that your speech, your music, your art forms, your religion, are debased and degraded. There's a lot of anxiety around that. So then what you want to do is this rehabilitation project but then you get canon formation and then some people get left out or not noticed ... This is a defensive project, right? One thought that I have is whether or not we will remain in this perpetual discomfort.

Collection

A Project for Tripwire (2001)







The Cryptographic Ocelot

To my friend the distant water owl Sulibika

From this ravenous lectern of scars & anemia, I greet you, with voracious glacial invectives, with heavenly avuncular muds, swarming like a nauseous cryptographic baller, a spontaneous alkaline scorching full of wrathful classification & squab, I greet you with the antibiotic laser & russet saw tooth corsages, yes, the ice monsoons, the bottoms of criteria & stalling, yet, with all of this, there is auroral integrity, constant aural infinities able to hear the winding logomachic duration as it goes back to Venus, as it flies into solar pitch-blende burning, because here we speak of origin, of dissipated sun dust like flakes of asteroidal salmon flying up the turquoise balcony of light, into that hieratic moss, into that intuitive sodium garden, because I am a functioning mirage, a blanked cartography of raindrops, an asthmatic sorcery needle laterally riddling those Myrmidons mechanically emerging from the Saxon civil furnace, I am armed with the crucial invective, with the clipped tornado rejoinder, a mirage who squares his knights & his bishops within this cultural esplanade of panic, within this dizzying economic abradant, because I am the permanent heteroclit, the resistant heterococious demon, who always carries in his eyes the glazed look of infinity, a tonic with mingled lightning persona, with the cycadaceous viral totemics, because I live within a boarded domain of psychic lunar vicinities I am forced to live by means of intensive verbal astonishment, I live by means of green beryllium adjustment, because you must admit that we are living amidst the ruins of broken dimensional timing, invaded by detritus from the more insidious realms, & so we, complete with angelic relation are always camouflaged, are always like inscrutable bone patrols, like dramaturgic ions "...in the middle of action..." in mediasres, liminal, our faces contorted by those mercurial collisions with fissioning plutonic social dice, in this position of silence one is always accused of luminous errata, our charred emotional coatings, the loneliness of always confronting a stunted human vector burdened with insecticide & throbbing, staring at stagnant political falsity, at an occulted occidental opprobrium, at a dark miscarried confusion, at a heritage of butchery without surcease, during this poetic glimpse an empire falling to its knees, its economy staggered like a self-inflicted offal spilling over its soured Draconian taffeta, its blunted Germanic incisions, its tense participants shaking with palsy, with negative

dialysis squarings, as for me, I have nothing to do with its addictive public notation, perhaps for me, being an anchorite in Notogaea, or in the Maldives, or in the Andaman Sea, certainly life has been silently arduous, a multiplication of injured mural roses, a chronic instinctual stinging, always under the tenacious fire of discomfort, each perspiration of the neural sacs, stung by a jagged demonology, by a collective hatred of crystal, so I greet you, the noiseless water owl full of territorial pincers, seeking out anomalous mists, flying from trees of neurological gold floating above a scalding summa of rice birds, you agree, one must schismatically sing, cryptically warping the magic vertical principle in order to probe with merciless transmissives into a simultaneous code of alchemical clarities, into an opening where the personality disappears like a trapezoidal voltage, & becomes Transylvanian, perplexing, like the ghostly state of Travancore, a phantom, a non-existent treaty port, "a state of partial anesthesia" full of lightness & burning, a loss of linear fatigue, yet always subject to wavering, to irradiated Jovian belts, we are those beings sucking secretive visional liquors, we are not beings seeking vivariums, simulations, vacuums of eternity in which certain jewels are grown, certain lights established, certain peacock seleniums impelled by superficial enrapturement, no, for us the impulsive breathing of transmuted zodiacs, of transfunctional ciphers & codes which set up foshts lighted in the depths by an acrobatic jasmine star, a star which sucks in periodic lines of invisible amalgams, which refracts, which takes in particulars, which reverses & dialectically splits & creates a mood of invisible synecdoche, when in fact the ultimate mysterium is being given its breath, is being extended like an oblivious sun tree in its minor register, like a perpendicular wave climbing from a mysterious lunar box, I think of an arcane broach in which the same being appears split as in a dream, as in a neutral impersonal hearing field, because in this very instant I feel uplifted by this cryptic archaeology, by this deepened synonymous resurrection of oblique & universal anonymity, this deepened spirit of smoking sapphire & crystal, this anonymous haunt of hieroglyphic enigma, a code, now electrical, now wet, now burning with the power of an indecisive Mogul becoming magically translucent like a fine tuned ostrich bladder given over to a higher coding magma, & yes, you hear me because I have no need to give myself over to a vocal spate of inferior translation, just as you expect from me incandescent frothing & obliterated mildew imbalance, as if I had hatched mercury in my groundswell wings, as if I had invented a voluminous & bombarded stellar uniqueness intent on erasing the quotidian linguistics of roubles & francs & Deutschemarks & dollars, because as an ocelot, as an optical cat climbing sunbeam branches, I am never moored,

never excited or destructive enough to suddenly give up my molten & take on the eyes of a treasonous herring, a herring which meanders through calculated rhubarb, never once advancing the tenets of a true strength of ice or of fire, never once confronting the dictatorial lamas of high religious illusion, never once will it act upon those gangrenous sub-plots keeping the ill-considered wheezings of history alive, to us, a battle for lost Elysium genetics at the root of this our injured parent galaxy, of this our home, our palace of fictive nightingale duties, as for the herring, it will always stay within the bounds of its treasonous smallness, it will always seek to divert by irritating mesmerization my relationship with water, to take away my ocelot wings, to take away my summus, my dense reflective explosions, as an ocelot I deal with the fricatives of air & light, with the osteoblastic richness of hidden viridian havens behind the false imprisoning scowl of a diabolical deity, and so my friend, as a gift of perennial winter solstice I give you this hidden calico mirror which reflects those inner Sufistic phlogiston features, no matter that you are an owl, it reflects intensive solstice blendings, the potent cataclysms of paradise above your exploded character of longitudinal strain, I can say that I am permitted to live by means of a sulfuric axial grace, a spinning no more subject to burden, but with an exquisite musical depravity, allowing me to build those greenish rhinestone castles where colder Myrmidons are heated by brews of dialectical hymnals, by brews of heavenly heretical fuels, which become interior storm tree singing, eerie parallel chanting, & here, the actual virility of wisdom, of songs of cathartic neutron spirals, now, you can examine my throat for disclosure, take the temperature of my anomalous cadmium veins, watch the zone of my galactic silicate islands, because I am no longer the earth bearer, the illusional commander of a blinded water Derby designed to keep in motion the hopes of a conventionally addled polis, never, because I have no deistical designs, no surreptitious uranium seizures thereby rationally attempting to explain a petty chalice of human crimes, be I weakened, or partially drunk with lingual blood, I will never become a pyroclastic constitutional imperator, full of imperialatorial rules & pronouncements, from my secretive selvas I am a fiery radium expunger, a riverine Cagliostro, capable of gristle berries or smoking caviar russets, you see my friend, the human race exists annulled as a super-luminal pornography, a human zone wasted in an ornament of haze & psychological destruction, a haze in which the sleight of hand dimension takes on the concrete draught of daily existence, full of corroded pantomime maneuvers & juggling & God games, one must always build dazzling lacunae, false exterior puzzles, in order to feel the pulse of the seismic, the kindled horizontal morass where you & I

constantly invade with ghostly sting ray photinos, where you & I take on the daily weather of cosmic dram deletion, where we suffer from nucleic bites, from seeming angelic abandonment, where we continue to leap & fly although injured by tritons, and so, you see the cadence of my liminal trauma, my frank territorial marching pins, you see why I greet the fellow citizenry as MR. & MRS. OPTICAL DEGENERATE, as MR.& MRS. BLOODY CARNIVORE ARRAIGNMENT, they are a daily plutonic comedy indebted to delusion, to the microbes of self-deception, yet always failing to avoid the psychic tragedy of chewing on lesions, of always looking over their bland green shoulders for a neon herd of smoldering scorpions & vipers, they are as that seeing in a dream when an inevitable horse transpires blowing spurts of magma from its nostrils, inexorably intent on trampling their muscles into the earth, or feeling the wrath of huge destructor nails falling from an unknown lotus angle, they are frightened, & when they they see us seeing them frightened with our grimace of reactive sundial poultice, with our pulled back nostrils, with our dense observational butchery, they see we have no need to cling to one routine or the other, as for sentiment, let me call out the dog hackers, let me call out the messengers from cinematic snuff bal-lets, because I have no sympathy for beleaguering, no sympathy for the pus stained consumer's dollies, for mechanically approved rhetorical engagement, I've obliterated counting, I've seized a small gecko & like a piranha bitten out its belly, a solar belled cannibal piranha, so, there is no longer the need to wake up every dawn with a numerical memory of cultivated acquiescence always excusing the ladders of your dangling mental flesh, with faithless eruditions hounded between fireflies & granite, I could never be pleased as president on a pedestal of sickened holocaust phantoms sounding out splendiferous calls of my name, as for riches or insult, I have none, as for the shakti with the green hair & the golden fire in her fingers, she has yet to seismographically explode in my innards, she has yet to dash me against a bed of stone in suicidal copulation, no, she has not arrived, nor have her precursors been no more than lukewarm secular fig-ments, no more than transacted failures morally superficial as relates to sacred corruption, to inspired Jezebelian honour, they will never find a milk brow in me, never a sustained diplomacy which negates the heritage of my pluperfect Olmec conjunction, yes, this is tri-umph, but in a sinister sense, like a broken eye, or a scaly citron flower, or an axe all covered with transliminal spiders

Wanda Coleman

Nine Poems

AMERICAN SONNET 12

—after Robert Duncan

my earliest dreams linger/wronged spirits
who will not rest/dusky crows astride
the sweetbriar seek to fly the
orchard's sky, is this the world i loved?
groves of perfect oranges and streets of stars
where the sad eyes of my youth
wander the atomic-age paradise

tasting

the blood of a stark and wounded puberty?
o what years ago? what rapture lost in white
heat of skin/walls that patina my heart's
despair? what fear disturbs my quiet
night's grazing? stampedes my soul?

o memory. i sweat the eternal weight of graves

*from AMERICAN SONNETS ©1994 by Wanda Coleman
Woodland Pattern Book Center and Light and Dust Books, Wisconsin*

ON HEAVEN STREET AT ONE A.M.

his mouth liquid this glitter night beneath stars
Hollywood squeezed into a dress of blue light and rain
ruttid asphalt

being roused by car city cowboy's ridin' range
i watch, my eyes about to fall over zero's edge
panic, i'm afraid. four years of fear
taking deeper gasps for air. fighting off the beast

he's thin and crisp as a brand new *c note*
i've scratched that itch before. hairs stand up on the back of
my neck

Tuesday midnight/pulling over to the curb—red eyed/lights
gone wild

he flashes thirty-two and asks if i have a license to kill

all the stores closed as usual. this sprawling hick town
where prophets of false discovery carp over flesh of the
fallen

i step cautiously over discarded bones/dreams diminished to
level of

discharged chewing gum/semen, cig butts and smog
inspired sputum

this jane of shades, looking to clip the neon phantom
to score big—to rip ass wide open

home waits. and his arms/promise of happy demise and
well-worn mattress

these eyes in the sky are lights from stars long burnt-out
long gone cold

*From African Sleeping Sickness: Stories & Poems © 1979 and 1990
by Wanda Coleman, Black Sparrow Press.*

GHOST OF MANIC SILENCE

*yes, Camus said
death does*

once a 20th century merlin, ah

but i swore i would cease to gibber/should not
till recognition was imminent—not for my
translucent beatic efforts but of my jet skin—both?

in dire truth i could not speak. one thousand saxophones
stilled. some evil word magician seized my eloquent
vibrato, would not let go/halted my seraphic loquaciousness
i was set upon by sinister malaise/pernicious dread ate
greedily of my brain, feasted on my melodic wind
got stumbling stinko in my ancient rain
dried up all emotive jizz. pyretic blisters crowded in
on my rogue tongue

my pristine word-faith sanguinely stained
my face became mask
my eyes dreary yellowed ellipses
my back curled and snaked

thus i remained a decade, more
when suddenly suddenly i was shaken from slumber
by the reveille of an angry race
i woke in an abomunist hissy

in time
to seize my final solitude

*From African Sleeping Sickness: Stories & Poems ©1979 and 1990 by
Wanda Coleman, Black Sparrow Press.*

REGION OF DESERTS (an excerpt)

1

i walk thru the eye of sun

the black boy moves toward me
we pass thru each other under palms dying
in hot dry august

an albino pigeon takes flight

everywhere shards of glass
angry fruitless shatterings of
bottles and barred store windows

protest

the rusted scarecrow of sign designating store hours
walls of blistered cracked peeling stucco
twisted rust red steel corpses of
abandoned autos

mexico reclaims this desolation

2

where my shattered heart pines

home to liquor stores & churches on every corner
to dark red & gold wall-papered holes
of refuge
to stark welcoming envelopes of
food stamps & government stipends
to mom & pop stores with their counters of
stinking stale meat & overripe fruit
to black & white armored knights
slaying for want of dragons

home to boarded up remnants of memory
to find them broken into/violated

3

that grinning wino mama time, snaggletoothed
rocks the sacred rock
stirred by rooster grape crowing
in her vessels
preaches from her bible of
cock-crow woes

i am a visitor here

a haint

(i didn't know i'd gone till i came back didn't
know i couldn't come back till i'd gone. now
i know i can no longer bear the heat)

i am the 14-year-old fat black girl
entering the AAA theatre which was totaled 18 years ago

i order hot buttered popcorn and a suicide

home to the continual R&B of curbed low riders
the cabled redwood crucifixes of pacific telephone
pale canary fire hydrants cracked open gushing
forth the city's pale blue fluoridated blood

i am a haint here

5

"all dat booty! I bet
yo ol' man have a gud
ti-i-time"

i was in such a
big hurry i didn't
notice flowers bloom
or trees twist skyward

or the muffled pain of my children
in such a big fuckin' rush
i couldn't see anything
but that ape shit gorilla on my back
roarin' and snortin'
in so big a hurry to kick king kong
i was in the middle of the street
'fore i noticed the light was red

6

goin' somewhere?

the closer you get to the oasis
the lighter skins become

7

take good care of that
smile now
when i see her again
i want to see her smile

*From African Sleeping Sickness: Stories & Poems c 1979 and 1990 by
Wanda Coleman, Black Sparrow Press.*

NOTES OF A CULTURAL TERRORIST (2)

after the war the war begins the war goes on
i am a soldier. look at my boots
soles worn from seeking work. from hours
in unemployment lines

call me a civilian casualty

the war to freed children the war to clothe their backs
the war to meet the rent the war to keep the gas tank
full the
war to end the calculated madness keeping the poor poor

what happens to a war deferred
does it implode? does repressed aggression
ravage the collective soul?

(there's rioting now. i see the blaze red smoke rising.
the city burns. people are looting, taking things. all the
excess denied them. crimes of possession. children carry racks
of clothes. women push shopping carts brimming with food.
men favor liquor stores and gunshops. but what we need is
revolution. bloodless or otherwise. we must go deeper than
lust gratified in one spontaneous torrid upsurge of rage)

i am a soldier. look at my hair
fallen out under stress. the many hours
unappreciated on the job. not even a decent chair

call me collateral damage

and when all the foreign battles are won
will we who battle here at home
have our day in democracy's sun?

(i am laying on the gurney in the hallway. there
aren't enough beds. he's been here with me for hours and
we came in last night. and they still haven't been able to
tell us anything. they wanted money up front before they
even talked to us. luckily we had assistance but still had to

borrow from mama to make the cash co-payment. the pain is
real bad and i'm thirsty. but they said not to drink anything/
nothing by mouth. and we had to wait forever just to get this
far. too many patients and not enough doctors)

i am a soldier. but my back is broke
batling the papers i push all day. my hope
is broke too. how do i love

call me politically correct

(we sat in the bar in the late afternoon trying to figure out
where all the men had gone. the ones that weren't dead or
in jail. who loved women. the ones who weren't junkies
weren't alcoholics weren't already married. the ones who
love our color. and one sistuh took a tall swig and said
she'd be satisfied if she lived to see her refrigerator full
just once before she departs this planet)

what happens to a war deferred
does it seep down into the skin a rash
of discontent to erupt again and again?

i am a soldier. that i live is a lie
no one stares 'cuz no one cares. grasping
for a nip of pleasure a toke of sanity

call me a victim of victims

(the cuffs are tight. i can feel them rubbing against my
wrists behind my back. we're taken out to the squad car
in front of all the neighbors. the kids stare at us. they
knew we were different all along. we didn't belong in this
'hood. he's angry. he wants to know who ratted. i can't fee
anything but numb. they shove him into the back first and
then i climb in behind him. it's a short drive to the
precinct. we're broke. we'll have to borrow money for
bail. we're about to find out who our real friends are)

whatever you do
don't look me too long in the eyes

FOR ME WHEN I AM MYSELF (excerpt)

dear one,

expect this letter to go unmailed as have all the others. i
can't bring myself to send them. i should never write when
angry or depressed. my words seem to overwhelm
whomever

i write to at the time. i need to write it, so i do, and
tear it up afterwards and go on about my usual struggle
as best i can. writing an exorcism blah blah blah. i imagine
my letter read. and even though it isn't, i feel better
having written, as though it were read and
understood. going thru the process

i'm not good at explaining how i
feel. i have
run out of synonyms for rage

there are preconceived notions in which i feel trapped
i keep thinking my work will liberate me from them

it hasn't

as though life's language is its own snare

so by not sending
these letters i escape entrapment you dig?

ever so sincerely—

*

regionality = living room

i am, at last, content to leave
the place i've never been
knowing i will never get there

gonna kick off my blues

hostile love

he shuffles the deck expertly, he offers a cut
as if i had a choice. i pass. what difference
can i make? the sonofabitch has memorized the position
of every bloody card. i play the game, my heart jittering,
fiercely stubborn against my calculated loss (karma? *please*)
he smiles as he goes down "the winner"
then coos, "congratulate me"
then tempts me to murder, his mouth twisted in
you act so *niggerish*. there i go there i go there
i go smashing things glasses shattered wine spilled plates
dashed to the restaurant floor. i rush out into the tony
night to walk it off. waves of crises (for the worse) as his
eyes follow with U-boat acuity

how can he disrespect the millions
whose dying gave us ourselves

*From Hand Dance by Wanda Coleman, Black Sparrow Press © for the
author 1993.*

but, ruby my dear

he hikes those narrow chords one more time
to a dingy walkup on the outskirts of ecstasy
he knows every note of her
down to that maddening musky treble
from between her dusky thighs
even as he raps twice to let her know
he means business
and hears her singeful "who's there?"
as she unlocks the double bass count
he's gonna put hurt on her
he's gonna love her like winter loves now
he's gonna make her
beyond that scratchy 78 whining dreary days and
whiskey nights
beyond that too sweet smoky andante
beyond that hunger for impossible freedom
to the heart of melody
where they will go to steam
in the jazzified mystical sanctity
of discordant fusion

scaling

what i know of my man

how his head turns when desire enters his mind
how he smells me how my smell arouses how he absorbs my
breasts legs buttocks how my feet, hands and nails
evoke touching how the color and textures of my skin
agitate how in black lace i stir his saint, white
his beast, red the john, blue the romantic
how his eyes experience and transmit entry imagined
how his ears taste my hot breath and listen acutely
for expressed fantasies how his nose opens how
his too moist mouth broods over my nipples
how his dickhead tears in worship how he sometimes
pauses to savor my anticipation how his
adventurous tongue explores and excites my rapture
how his blood rushes how our bodies glow together how
friction exacerbates his final exquisite suffusion

baby baby

*From African Sleeping Sickness: Stories & Poems © 1979 and 1990
by Wanda Coleman, Black Sparrow Press.*

SALVATION WAX (an excerpt)

ghoul's grapevine

*so did you hear about the west Hollywood cemetery where they
keep the ashes of only the hottest/phot celebrities and public figures. and
SHE's buried there. and you know Tiresias used to make late day visits
and plant the rose of a big fire—engine red lipstick kiss on her crypt. it
seemed a grand gesture. but Ti stopped because it became The Rage, all
this strange crypt-kissing going on, expensive graffiti to remove, you know,
and besides they kept moving HER around. like some rich old schmuck
would drop dead and put in his will that he wanted to be buried next to
HER and so they charge the estate King Tut's ransom. and the old fart gets
the next crypt over for a few licks of eternity, then some other old de-ceased
prick makes the same bequest and they move HER again. whattta drag.
they pimped the poor sex goddess when SHE was alive. now she's dead and
they're still making HER work the block. so much for R.I.P! or dignity*

from lockup the view so blistering
so clear. better i exorcise him myself than let
them do it. they always leave black and blue
marks all over the spirit and a little red
where the heart ruptures thru

to love and not act is to not know love

ballad of you, bleak starlight in matrix
the death-exit ensemble solemnly enacts
its stager ruined romance-in-progress
intermission is the horror prance of hooves
the wasting sinew, a wraith's whimper
my birth memory is savored torment
o oceansong of you/cold wind that fills
your absence, eldest, you are the missing
and i miss you years before the fact, have
longago prepared my mourning black

nightstains and the moonlight's killer kissrays

you

where the spirit converges on summer's coast
to the muted platter patter of heavy djs
ripped on a cocktail of faith and hallucinogens
resulting in atrial fibrillation
pulse discovery of contagious titubations
studied over and protected against by ebony men doing
red-wat rituals to rid themselves of the eruptions
emesis egestion and other redolent effluences
accompanying the deadly viral strain of eurocynicism

belief being fact. smoke signals

*calling captain zero . . . calling captain zero . . .
i am sending out incendiaries all
over the nation i am igniting cities
i am setting blaze to unattainables
looting and sacking the complacent
doing the inner sanctum purification burn*

firefirefire

*From Bathwater Wine by Wanda Coleman, Black Sparrow Press © for
the author 1998.*

from *Here*

(Duncanson's "View of Cincinnati, Ohio from Covington, Kentucky," 1848)

The wide eye corporeal &
at the same time sane, both—

but in the remotest edge

of description, at an unexaggerated pinnacle

of the color line,

at no rest, no rest, no Campground

to come between the long stare across

& the big pale sky

no place for the eye to rest on, soul's

opaque surface

or the river sloped down to
by Covington houses

or Ohio's dim self of hills & smoke, another economy

(to James Wright)

Way over on my far side of the river we could hear

in Martha Reeves' voice the thing beyond what the music took, what little it could take,

the hard quaver of inflection

(beyond "verbal play"

raised into pure incredulity (her rhetorical *is this? is this? is this?*

her voice in the voices of regular girls I knew when they'd talk loud among themselves on the way home walking home from 8th grade (or their voices in hers,

she was almost as young then herself as we were:

Negro girls from where? listen to what? knowing what?

(1964, 1965 *post-innocence* (if barely

(sweat beading over broken hearts being the way

VOODOO DICK

Brian's voodoo-dick joke was the same, in structure, as the more famous crunchbird joke. Each took the gift-story through the same bends, more or less, and came upon the same moment: the voice clanging out the end-line, the show-stopper: "Voodoo-dick, my ass," says the cop: "Crunchbird, my ass," says the husband.

The wife buys crunchbird as a surprise for the hardworking businessman husband, a distraction or relief from that, in the one; but the husband buys voodoo-dick for the attention-demanding wife, in the other, to keep her happy and/or occupied while he's away on business. "Watch this," says the clerk in the exotic pet store, saying then, "Crunchbird, the table!" and crunchbird reduces the table to sawdust and splinters. "Watch this," says the clerk at the adult boutique, "Voodoo-dick, the door!" and voodoo-dick springs from its box and fucks the keyhole until the door quivers and the wood of it splits.

Joke being the metaphor for someone talking on, for "voice" or voices, for a produced voice. Pity the poor jokes digging out their simple tiger pits. Pity the gap of metaphor. Voodoo's a "body of superstitious beliefs and practices...among negroes and persons of negro blood," says the OED. "Voodoo dick, my pussy," she says—the wife says—the vernacular maintaining itself, voodoo being erotic certainly here, this usage, in search of voice. A joke comes before the speech, an introduction, form. A joke comes tumbling out of speech, full of speed and pauses, to mimic it. Punchlines totalize the whole economy, re-present the information that's come before to tie it all up with speech from elsewhere. A joke at the end of speech. "Voodoo-dick, my pussy." But then she can't get it to quit so she drives to the hospital, swerving all over the road and attracting the attention, that way, of the police.

In these two there were no speakers to warm to. Crunchbird's the older joke, says the smart money. Memory's a joke too: it can surface or be a surface on which connections are made. You choose. I was humorous solace itself, in a joke, coming after closure like a net. I was the devil in the details in a piece about prolonged silence.

Scenes from *After That*, a novella

THE 1200 N ROAD,
GOING EAST FROM BLOOMINGTON, ILLINOIS

To me, image is any value in the exchange. Pleasure's accidental. In any event, it's hard to measure and harder still to memorize, pleasure. Image stands in. To me, voice is that which gets stuck in the head, effected voice, or in-between the teeth, the hiss of love. Songs, eating. Whatever love says it's no image, no consequence. This far inland, love's obvious from a distance. This far inland you need something more sexual than dichotomy.

Background: Narrator begins a day full of activity whose end point is an 8 o'clock film directed by her friend Anna Bailey. The film portrays the life of two painters, Carla and Aida, who are lovers; the narrator has been anticipating the experience of viewing this film for weeks. Entry point: Narrator has left her house in possession of a cell phone, which she attained mysteriously.

It started ringing about four blocks past the bookstore. I had no intention of answering it. Considering everything I have done to humiliate cell phone users, I was not going to be seen as one. So I let it ring. Whoever was calling—though, in their persistence they began to intrigue me—would have to reach Charlotte later. But I wondered... who would be there if I answered? If I answered, would that bring me closer to understanding this mystery?

And then I thought why does a phone pushed to 0 volume continue to make noise? As I thought that, this is what I was seeing:

A Mexican man who had been drinking all morning wanted to enter a hipster bar. It was half past noon. The hipsters in the bar, in cowboy hats, refused service to the man. It was noon. Anybody who had been drinking all morning, who was Mexican, and would like to enter a hipster [white people] bar, and kept saying "whoeee" "whoeee" was not going to be allowed entrance into the bar.

This kind of thing happens frequently in the city. And it was not that I wanted the man to keep drinking but I did not like those hipsters in the bar. I

decided to interfere. I asked them something quickly, buried beneath a lot of breath. The lead hipster frowned at me. None of them answered. The leader continued frowning. The frown directed to something particular in me. I was even concerned about it. I would have expected the antagonism of her frown if the phone had been ringing, but it had stopped ten minutes before. The frown on her face continued to grow as though every second the terrible taste in her mouth multiplied, as though she could not stand her teeth. I told her the hat she wore made her look stupid, but uttered it without confidence. She may not even have heard me because she just kept frowning.

The world had gotten too small. I had to re-vamp it. I had to get rid of the anger increasing in me. The drunken man had gone; the flunky hipsters had gone. But she and I—in our intensity—were locked as a kind of unit. We were locked in an opposition so aggressive it was paralyzing. I have picked fights with hipsters before, but the fights had never lent themselves to riots. The two of us, growing more and more alike, each having our own self-contained riot. I could feel the weight of her cowboy hat.

Then came a quiet trill—a trill at first, then a few seconds later, full-blown ringing—it came from that

hidden phone, breaking our volatile silence. But so drastically that I experienced a kind of blackout, which, in its utter emptiness, sent me drunkenly around the corner.

Minutes later, standing on the perpendicular street, my mind returning to normal, I hail a cab—suddenly excited to achieve the goals of the day. (The tasks I set for myself were not dissimilar from other task-driven days; they mostly dealt with organization. I had to pick one thing up and drop it off some place else. I had to go one place and describe other places where I would rather be. And I had to go sit in one place and think of nothing but it.) When I finally got a cab to stop for me I refused to enter.

I knew the driver. It was Monty, who I usually go out of my way to see, sometimes even taking rides to places I don't need to go. But as you will come to know, I have a line that I continuously need to draw between being in the world and being taken by it. Monty had advertising on his car that made my stomach churn to look at. I had never seen anything so ugly and alarming. Should I describe it here? What would that achieve? Nothing, but the sight of it, sitting there—all billboard and didactic—insisting that I defile myself. In a flash of anger I waved Monty on.

The look of disappointment on his face folded my body briefly with guilt. I thought I owed it to him, to our future as acquaintances, to remain in that position until I was sure he was gone. So for a minute I rested there, as blood rushed to my head, making my cheeks feel heavy, and wore a look of regret and self-consternation until my posture was violently straightened by the absurd cries of that phone. Dashing for cover, I thought, "This is it. I am going to answer it, or slam it, or something."

I stepped beneath the awning of a church and dug out Charlotte's phone. I gave what I could tell was a hateful look to this screaming baby, then caught myself and—to recover—caressed the baby. But it's not your baby, I told myself. So then I spit on the phone, which made me feel immature, so with the spit I acted as though to dust the phone. Yet, with all my attempts to save face, the scene was not unlike those with babies and pocket animals—when they have embarrassed you in public. All you want to do is get them alone, out of the pity of others, and hope that in private the reason for their madness will come.

I couldn't wait, though. I shoved the phone back into my bag and sprinted to meet the approaching bus.

I slid into the window seat and looked out. Though I was beginning to relax into the quiet of the electric-powered bus, I felt strange. To have gotten so worked up and yet to have made no dent in society—it was dehumanizing. It's the kind of feeling that, a year later makes you doubt you even had the experiences. So I continued looking out the window, hoping for a sudden change in scene, hoping that a crowd would congregate in the middle of the street and wonder what had happened to me while shoppers piled their bags in front of them for protection.

The bus pulled away. I had to let the dream go and give in to the persuasive rider-calm. After a few minutes I entered an almost-meditative state, where I matched the frequent opening and closing of the backdoor to my breathing. The trance was refreshing; it allowed me to ease into my fantasies...

The woman, two seats in front of me, holds her head as if she were a painter. She's thinking about the canvas versus projection screen conversation. Taller than I had envisioned her, but it's Carla. She's on her way to Lilac Park to stare at the walls, convinced that there is language inscribed along their surfaces and that the languages alternate depending on the day that she comes. Today she will imagine the language

of Iceland. The park, her established interval for consideration of immense things, is best when there are no picnickers blocking the walls. She'll sit there for hours. After Iceland, she'll think of color as that which affixes a painting, and when that is done she'll walk a block for something to eat.

...In BH Dairy Shop & Cafe, Carla orders the split pea soup with a side of bread, then takes a seat near the window. Her thoughts are proliferate yet ungrounded. She has work to do (pulling her sketchbook out of her bag), but is not sure how to begin. There is something to be said about translucent walls, she thinks, though not in language. Which is an odd restriction since it is mostly language that she sees in the walls. But still, the thought is not to be written. Perhaps, it is heard, as in music. Or what is heard as music is to be drawn as form. So that's what she'll do: figure out music as visual form, using the perceptibility of language in walls as measure.

Carla focuses her attention out the window (to take a break from the scope of that project) and observes a group of tourists gathering across the street; the tourists are staring. After a few minutes, some turn their heads toward approaching traffic; others look up toward the mountains. There is only one whose attention remains. Where are these people from? And why would they notice me? She thinks, these are

people whom, after they are gone, you remember nothing about. Their eyes are bland; they don't hold you. They make you want to—

Mid-fantasy, a breeze blew the heavenly smell of doughnuts throughout the bus, disconnecting me from the scene. I looked around and saw that some seats had opened towards the back of the bus and got up to get a fresh one.

As I settled in my new seat, I finished that sentence with "forget your experiences" and then hit a mental wall. That scene—I thought—how to return to it? In recent weeks I have become very familiar with this wall; it is a guard of sorts that will not let me enter places I have never been.

By the time I was ready to see Anna's film, many fantasies had been constructed and deflated. I knew everything about Carla and Aida and nothing at all. The fantasies led me to think about the evolution of character, how such movement must occur somewhere off-screen, as a facial expression slowly forming or some fading music. I imagined them occupying my favorite places in the city, in an even deeper solitude than my own—a kind of poverty, as though experience was irrevocably empty.

*From a Broken Bottle Traces
of Perfume Still Emanate,
Volume Four (excerpts)*

From a Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate is an ongoing series of letters written by composer/multi-instrumentalist N., founding member of a band formerly known as the Mystic Horn Society. Volumes one through three are *Bedouin Hornbook*, *Djbot Baghostus's Run* and *Atet A.D.*, respectively. Volume four is not yet titled.

13.II.83

Dear Angel of Dust,

We played our record-release gig at The Studio last night. There were plenty of copies of *Orphic Bend* on hand, of course, and we managed to sell a goodly few. We played a couple of sets, after each of which we went out and milled around with the audience rather than stay backstage (the gig had been billed as a "record-release party"). We even got asked by more than one or two people to autograph their copies. The pieces we played were all, with one exception, from *Orphic Bend*. We were in good form and acquitted ourselves well on every piece, each of which had its moments and got good audience response both as it unfolded and when it came to an end. The evening was a series of peaks, one could say without exaggeration, the highest coming during its finale. The night's highlight turned out to be not only the last piece we played (during which, among other things, the balloons put in an appearance) but also the one piece which wasn't from *Orphic Bend*. Lambert made a point of the latter fact when he introduced the piece, telling the audience we were about to "go off-the-record."

At the end or ostensible end of the second set the audience wouldn't stop applauding. Many of them were standing and even after we left the stage, came back for bows and left again they went on applauding. They finally began to call out, in case we hadn't gotten it, for an encore and we decided to go back out and give a piece Djamilaa had sketched out a few times in recent rehearsals a try. It's a piece whose title is a play on "jam session" and on Djamilaa's name (a namesake piece I suppose you could say). It's called "Djam Suasion." True to its title, it's an open, aleatory piece that avails itself of impromptu impulse and proceeds on a very bare outline of structure and motif. Djamilaa had taught us a number of what she refers to as "drift conduits" at

rehearsal—horn lines, rhythmic variations, harmonic clusters and such, all to be marshalled into the piece as momentary dispatch and group dynamics dictate. She had written these out but she insisted we learn them by ear first, saying she wanted the individual savor and spin and even miscue learning them that way would entail, that she wanted each of us to find out which quirks and miscues we could salvage, cultivate, make further use of; that she wanted quirk and so-called miscue or mistake to reinvent the piece. Only after that process did she pass around the charts, written on which at crucial points were, rather than notated cadence, resolution or closure, the phrase “djust a further,” calling to mind the traditional “Just A Further Walk with Thee.” Djamilaa said outright she encouraged quotation from established material where we saw fit (and her opening “drift conduit” on piano, the piece’s head more or less, bears a faint relationship to Herbie Nichols’s “House Party Starting”) but the addition of the “d” in “djust a further” made it also mean that we were each to take it elsewhere. Initiatic “d” accents eccentric, signatory spin.

The audience quieted down seeing us come back out for the encore. Lambert stepped up to a microphone and introduced “Djam Suasion,” getting off his “off-the-record” quip by way of saying it was a new piece Djamilaa had only recently added to our book and that we were playing it in public for the first time. Having done that, he stepped back from the microphone and we took up our instruments—him on tenor, Penguin on alto, me on trumpet, Aunt Nancy on violin (she’d switch to bass after the first ensemble passage), Djamilaa at the piano, Drennette on drums. Djamilaa, unaccompanied, started it out, quietly working her “drift conduit,” a simple figure she repeated in different octaves, testing, tasting, sampling, it seemed, at a loss as to where the entrance or the key or the open-sesame she sought might be. It was only a mimed uncertainty or dismay, one soon became aware, mimed uncertainty or dismay itself the entrance or the key or the open-sesame she sought. Senses of test or tentativeness gave way to iterative insistence, strengthened recourse to repetition, replete with Nichol-esque parallel voicings, that grew more resolute and was then elaborated on—a run of invention that went on for some time. A bit of happy-hand embroidery or filigree at the keyboard’s treble end capped off this opening gambit, at which point the rest of us came in.

The initial ensemble “drift conduit” features dramatic, annunciative horn lines, jaggedly cut, a quick-out-of-the-gate brassiness and biting attack Aunt Nancy’s violin works to soften somewhat. All together it gets a dawning sound, the violin’s erstwhile romanticism weaving new-day hope into the horns’ expectorant boast, a brash confidentiality which, foil for intimate whisper, asserts intimacy and know-

ing and commonality of a number of sorts. We announced a knowingness we dared the audience to claim exemption from, a presumptive entitlement the violin gave an orphic underpinning, a black-orphic boast of being on intimate terms with the sun. It all added up to metallic bluster, chest-on-chest insinuation, cosmic armor, solar explosion made charismatic by sostenuto string.

Drennette’s drumming accented the horns’ metallic boisterousness and weight with an equally metallic lightness, an itinerant shimmer she let loose on cymbals and kept aloft, an aureate lightness our dawning sound relied greatly on. The risk of tropheaviness we ran she outmaneuvered, leveraging a pointillist attack with coloristic stick work, a brush thump thrown in every now and again. Our sense of lift-edness and rise owed as much to the barrage of keening chatter she kept up as to Djamilaa’s happy-hand treble and Aunt Nancy’s new-day weft. We were off to a good start.

Encores are often short and somewhat perfunctory, a brief taste of this or that piece meant simply to acknowledge the audience’s appreciation. This wasn’t the case with “Djam Suasion.” It ended up being the longest piece we played all night—indeed, almost as long as an entire set, long enough to be a third set. I think we enjoyed playing something not on the record, that we took to going “off-the-record,” felt liberated from a nearly pro forma quality the record-release occasion tends to maintain. Whatever the reason, we stretched out. The first ensemble “drift conduit” gave way to a series of solos, each of which was at one point punctuated by one of the other ensemble “drift conduits” Djamilaa made available to us. Each soloist had his or her individual “drift conduit” to build or base the solo on. Aunt Nancy was the first to solo, doing so on violin and switching to bass when the other solos began: Lambert, then me, then Penguin. Djamilaa let each of us know when to wrap the solo up by playing a “drift conduit” specified for that purpose at the keyboard’s bass end, a grumbling left-hand figure shot thru with omen, semiotic stress. It implied a low cauldron, a bubbling vat given the reach of torn chthonic tissue, seismic stretch and attenuation, signal rift—bass cauldron, bubbling vat and/or, lava-like, a volcano erupting.

A lot could be said about the solos, a lot about each individual solo. A lot could be said about the piece’s unfolding, the way we found or made our way thru it—more, really, than I can say or have the time to go into were I able to say. But I have to try giving a sense of something we got into following Penguin’s solo, something that began with Djamilaa’s second solo, something her solo coming out of that cauldron got under way. Penguin had reached a point of utmost aubade and high flight, alto feather and flight, when the word came up from

under, Djamilaa's left-hand signal to bring the solo to an end. This Penguin did with a wafer-thin feather of breath that appeared to hang in the air even after he took the horn from his mouth, a wafer-thin feather floating down to the floor but evaporating before reaching the floor. Djamilaa hung on to and kept repeating her semiotic bass figure even after Penguin was done, a bass cauldron she let go on bubbling and grumbling, a low vat she continued to let simmer, biding her time, perhaps buying time.

Djamilaa's left-hand grumble went on to elicit an answering string of right-hand arpeggios—a caffeinated barrage undergirded by a fretfulness no amount of speed and virtuosity could mask. Even so, speed and virtuosity held sway, a virtuosic scurry indebted to and worthy of Cecil Taylor, forage ramified into a long anacrotic run. All this Djamilaa did with exacting touch, an otherwise worn or wincing regard arousing images of tight, reminiscent flesh, reminiscent regard which implied regret but went well beyond it. Anacrotic run was reminiscent idea's utopic wish, would-be return to reminiscent flesh's first awakening, "the way it was" the way one wanted it to be. Aunt Nancy, having played mostly against the rhythm, opted after a while for a steady 4/4 shuffle meter. This led to Djamilaa replacing reminiscent regard with a rocking stomp sustained by chords played by both hands, a barrelhouse emphasis or insouciance bidding finesse and refinement goodbye. More time went by and Lambert, Penguin and I came back in. The horns' re-entry, a staggered relay, was a splintering piece of synaesthetic bamboo, an unexpected offer of antithetic backup, a bamboo baron bent to the breaking point. It was an unwieldy stick yet a wand even so, a wand whose time-lapse unraveling offered arch, asymptotic support. We voiced qualms concerning the shuffle while otherwise lending it a certain cachet.

Qualms notwithstanding, Aunt Nancy's 4/4 shuffle proved irresistible, infectious. It may in fact have been that the horns' blend of distance and identification made it all the more so, all the more infused it with an aroused, exponential capacity for twirled excursus, lateral dispatch. Our unwieldy baton took an occasional step to the side, an ever so exact listing or loss or letting go of outright alignment. It was a tactical feint we deployed, a willingness to dodge but with a nod toward all-out boogie. We implied without arriving at a rolling of the two into one, suggested without quite reaching eventual recourse to boogaloo largesse.

Suggestion was enough though, more than enough. Suggestion was all it took. The horns' refusal to arrive at all-out boogie, the ingenuity with which we outmaneuvered boogaloo largesse, was one which held it all the more in view. Such holding had an inverse

effect, the very opposite of withholding and refusal, on the audience. Teased and tested beyond their patience or capacity to ride or withstand suggestion, they rose to their feet, got up to dance. They danced a dance that, spontaneous though it was, seemed all but choreographed. Offhand but coordinated enough to have been rehearsed, it was a dance in which, knees bent, asses lowered toward the floor but short of outright squat, they assumed something of a jockey's position, rocked back and forth. It seemed it said something or wanted to say something about the wonder of arms and legs having a torso to attach to and extend out from. It seemed to extol or to be bent on extolling the good fortune of having come by a body, the unwitting largesse of hard-to-come-by flesh, hard-to-come-by bone. Each dancer raised and lowered his or her right arm, pounding his or her right thigh as with a hammer, an ever so restrained hammer whose handle was the dancer's forearm, its head the dancer's fist. It was a methodical, all but robotic pounding, deliberate and insistent yet of a soft, slow-motion cast, as though the air were a viscous liquid the arm strained against, fought to rise and fall, move at all within.

As fist hit thigh, at the exact moment fist hit thigh, a balloon emerged from it. The balloons emerging from the female dancers' fists bore these words: *I lie on my back. He straddles me, down on all fours, his head between my legs, my head between his. I press my nose to the crack of his ass, put my mouth around the sack his balls hang in.* The balloons emerging from the male dancers' fists bore these: *I lie on my back. She straddles me, down on all fours, her head between my legs, my head between hers. I press my nose to the crack of her ass, my mouth to the matted hair of her cunt.* These were the only inscriptions the balloons bore. Albeit they emerged repeatedly, as fist again and again met thigh, the words inside were the same each time.

We looked out at the dancers, delighted but also dismayed. That they were intent on reducing the music to sex, intent not only on returning "jazz" to "jass" but on dropping the "j," made us rue Aunt Nancy's 4/4 shuffle however much it made us happy to've brought them to their feet.

The balloons' fellatral and cunnilingual explicitness notwithstanding, the audience's dance wasn't without ulterior suggestion. Was it simply me, I wondered while looking out at what was now a dance floor, or did the repeated meeting of fist and thigh, hammer and anvil, mean to recall one of cante jondo's most austere forms, the martinete? The dancers, given over, on the surface at least, to boogaloo largesse as it verged on X-rated license, clamored on a more subtle but no less visible level for a bare-bones, even ascetic deployment of workmanlike rhythmicity and vocal exertion—the very things the martinete, unac-

accompanied in origin but now often sung to the beat of a hammer striking iron, is the very epitome of. So, at least, it appeared to me, but not, it turned out, to me alone. The rest of the band, it became clear, had picked up the same suggestion. In oddly telepathic sync, we now went about dismantling the 4/4 shuffle, slowing down by way of a shift into duple time. The horns' lateral baton folded in on itself, an impulsive messenger whose bamboo synaesthesia was now not only splintered but spent. Still, it folded in on itself but didn't exactly stop at that. It wasn't so much that it collapsed on its hollow interior, its voiceless core, as that it everted it, "extorted" it, turned it out. Lambert, Penguin and I, in any event, soon fell silent, as did, only three bars later, Aunt Nancy. Djamilaa, another three bars later, let the piano fall silent and began to sing. Drennette in turn let the drums fall silent but backed her up with tolling pings from the ride cymbal, pings whose intimation of a hammer hitting an anvil lent noise if not voice to fist hitting thigh. She saw to it that the two—stick hitting cymbal, fist hitting thigh—coincided.

The dancers had gone on dancing even after we dispensed with the 4/4 shuffle. Fist continued hitting thigh as Djamilaa sang and Drennette played blacksmith. Fist hit thigh but only blank balloons emerged from the dancers' fists, Djamilaa's gritty, sand-insistent voice bearing the necessary rub to erase the balloons' X-rated script. Her voice was an extrapolative rope whose textured arrest (a coughlike vamp-till-ready) repeatedly cracked, to begin with, under the strain of beginning, repeatedly pinched itself to awake from beginning's dream of unindebted advance. Once underway, her song, such as it was, never entirely shook free of its inhibited beginning, the rough cloth of so having caught itself out. It bore the brunt it would've otherwise had us weather, a sleight or a slip of mind occupied by rub and revision, tumbleweed and wind. However much it proffered or appeared possessed of an evocation of the American southwest, it was Djamilaa's Moorish roots it extracted, tore loose from the ground, let lead the way.

Djamilaa's cante was a congeries of mixed intimation. Punctuated by Drennette's repeated ping, it wandered far and wide, a wordless excursion which "spoke" via texture, inflection, intensity and tone. Hectored and egged on by Drennette's ping, Djamilaa's makeshift martinete bordered on cosmic harangue, gnostic rant, a frayed rope rummaging woodshed or smithy for all that could be brought to thought or brought to bear on the catharsis fist hitting thigh clamored for. An Andalusian Ogun and a Gypsy John Henry were only two of the extrapolations or possibilities broached or bumped into in Djamilaa's extended woodshed/smithy. The martinete's birthplace Triana was called to mind, but only as a base, a beginning point.

Djamilaa's cante navigated a repertoire of godly smiths, myth-

ic smiths, a repertoire possessed of extensive reach, global resonance and reach. Her torn voice evoked a world wrought by strenuous heaven, straight works and days, a stricken arena thinning her voice into pure aspiration, breached would-be rise. Isis looking for strewn Osiris had nothing on her. She scoured the earth, giving Drennette's repeated ping worldwide repercussion, calling heaven itself out, it seemed, calling roll in heaven. The Japanese Ame No Ma-hitotsu No Kami, the Indian Tvashtri, the Greek Hephaistos, the Canaanite Kôshar-wa-Hasis, the Dogon Amma Seru and others all at one point or another stepped forward, answered the call, each an impromptu equation calibrating sand and sky—not, she insisted, soil and sky. Sand and sky were struck repeatedly and repeatedly served as a transitional chord (she had recourse to the piano again while she sang, albeit no more than a plink or a plunk—a not so distant cousin to Drennette's ping—here and there), a decidedly transitive equation.

The dancers went on dancing, fist went on hitting thigh, balloons went on emerging wordless. Their robotic insistence had something to say about sacred labor, would-be sacred or divine endeavor devolved into mute repetition, would-be heaven brought down to rote, repetitive earth. Not even sexual respite, X-rated appetite, held out hope now for reined-in heaven, wordless balloon after wordless balloon a burst bubble of sorts. The mood was decidedly different. Cathartic but unrelievedly somber, it was a far cry from boogaloo largesse. Djamilaa's extreme, extrapolative rope and rapacious vocality were nothing if not exactly that cry, a far-sighted cry that saw its way to an eventual heaven but, even so, rendered heaven, eventual heaven, eventuality itself, momentarily moot. Her cante was blues's bad news to gospel's good. Sacred labor, would-be divine, sacred mastery of heat, her cante insinuated, had grievously, perhaps irreparably misfired.

It was extremely grim business Djamilaa's martinete broached and brought out, a comprehensive, all-inclusive plaint one couldn't, after a while, help hearing as too comprehensive, too all-inclusive, cosmic or would-be cosmic to a fault. It seemed, after a while, for all its rapaciousness and rant, to further entrench a supposedly cosmic status quo, subsidiarily consecrate the fallen hammer or the hammer's fall it railed against. Drennette's ping was a corroborating witness, a repetitive toll, a monotonous marking of time—a corroborating but (mercifully, one thought) complicating witness. It spoke of abject, alienating duration while the very manner of its production seemed intent on underscoring *strike*, a word whose liberatory or would-be liberatory meaning was not to be easily muffled or dismissed. Endless imprisonment as unguaranteed as utopic windfall, stick's tip struck cymbal the way hammer's head struck anvil: a mixed-emotional report auguring more than

one outcome or consequence.

Drennette's ping, heard a certain way, proposed a willingness to scour the sky, ransack heaven, hold out for ultimate amends. That she herself heard it that way became clear when, with her left hand, she began slapping the snare's head (coinciding with each ping, complementing each ping) with the side of the other stick. It was a cross between a slap and a thump really, a firm albeit damped explosion which brought something one couldn't quite put one's finger on to mind. Whatever that something was, it hung there, suggestive, just beyond finger's reach, recall's reach, a piece of music it put one in mind of and put whose title on the tip of one's tongue. All but absent, teasingly present, it wouldn't go away, a riddle one would know no rest without solving.

Aunt Nancy was the first to solve it, doing so when Drennette let the ping itself go but went on offering the slap-thump on the snare's head. Aunt Nancy, after a while, that is, came back in, plucking a bass string a beat before each of Drennette's repeated slap-thumps, a combination that made it clear to the rest of us what the something we'd been put in mind of was. Aunt Nancy played Sam Jones, we saw, to Drennette's Louis Hayes, recalling their ax-imitating riff on Cannonball Adderley's band's recording of his brother Nat's composition "Work Song." Lambert, Penguin and I made momentary eye contact and we knew immediately what to do. We took the horns to our mouths and blew the response to Hayes and Jones's call, Drennette and Aunt Nancy's call, "Work Song's" antiphonal horn line's answer to their repetitive, ax-imitating riff.

It was a human, vocal cry we let loose, issued under duress but undaunted, a jump-up in frayed attenuation of Djamilaa's highstrung, more obvious human cry. Our axes answered roll in heaven, rang in heaven, but the music spoke to so deep a place we bent over, bowed in a blend of orison and exertion, incense cut with sweat. Stored surge and a sense of urgency we'd been holding back we now let out. Djamilaa's heart's true home lay on high and we pursued it, stranded and strung as high as the cosmic static infiltrating her voice.

We went on repeating "Work Song's" head, not moving into solos, possessed or obsessed agents of iterativity. Djamilaa's makeshift martinete was more a makeshift buleria now, the band a band of creatures of rhythm and repetition, sacred and profane conduits caroling chiliastic sweat. So locked in were all the parts it appeared we occupied a rhythmic prison, repeatedly built, broken down, rebuilt. Inmates of rhythm we might've been. Wardens of rhythm we might've been. No one could say which or whether or not we might've been both. No one, for the moment, cared.

All that mattered, moment to moment, for the moment, was to let it all out, albeit "all" was a tactical attainment, a reduction of itself if not by itself at least gone along with, ultimacy and contingency's compromise. We made amends with profane duration, made a certain peace with unpossessing swing (swung ax, hoe, hammer). Djamilaa's voice was by turns a velvet scarf and a bolt of burlap, an aroused, intertwined run of cloth nonetheless not without intimate silk's unmentionably pungent funk and perfume. Piss and vinegar were the way of the world, it complained at points, unmentionability's bouquet ameliorating the shrill extreme it bordered on. Given such singing, what this was was a much more relayed and ramified marshalling than boogaloo largesse, a less lyrically overcharged intimation than the X-rated rummaging the dancers' balloons had broached.

Please don't get me wrong on this. It's not that, à la, let's say, Baudelaire ("Sexuality is the lyricism of the masses"), we put either sex or the dancers down. We were no band of nineteenth-century aesthetes. The dancers were with us and we were with them. This was the lingual exertion and the proto-apotheosis they more subtly and suggestively sought: sacred and sustained labial and lingual and glottal instantiation, more than could be sexed or said albeit pressed and demanding dues be paid even so. The dancers were with us, we with them. Platonic ether's levitational hydraulics was not what we were about. Fist pounding thigh beat out a theme of dues, indebtedness, flesh not to be denied. Swung, low-to-the-floor hips rode gravity, all but rode the earth itself. They were with us and we were with them but them being with us and us being with them was not to be made too much of. Their being with us and our being with them by no means even came near the magnitude meant by "masses." Nor had any of us had any wish or entertained any ambition that our doing so might. We were only, as Ornette says, friends and neighbors.

Ornette was no idle reference. We went on repeating "Work Song's" head and the longer we went on the more elastic it grew. We played with the time, holding the horn line's high note here and there, stretching it out, an extenuating cry recalling no one if not Ornette. It couldn't help also recalling nothing if not Ornette's Texas roots, the field hollers his identifying cry descended from. The work song descended from them as well, it went without saying, but implicitly we said so nonetheless. In any case, we were at work. We were with the dancers and they were with us and we were there to work something out.

What that something was was hard to specify but work it out we did. The horns' Ornetish cry carried its own topographic insistence, an implemented ground it repeatedly broke as though the dent

it made, the beginning it made, was a grain of sand in the Sahara, the dent or the difference it made nearly nonexistent, which in fact it was. Specification, however slight, was itself at issue, an attributive rift we stepped into. Rolling hills or flat field, it was a desert either way, a bed we didn't dare lie down in, hammered expanse.

Sand was hammer's bequest, a coarse powder rendering all impediment moot. Status-quo cosmicity groomed a cosmetic smoothness hammer's Luddite ghost or grain of sand in the machine disfigured, effaced. Not the something we were there to work out, this was something we could nonetheless not forget. We knew the allure of status-quo cosmicity but sacred ordeal no longer made any sense. Hostile environs could breed invention, we knew, but we turned a deaf ear to inhospitality's behest. What we were there to work out bordered on sand's unfriendly expanse, an unwelcoming premise we could neighbor, we knew, but not befriend. Hammer (hoe, ax) kept at us, insisting we remember that.

Drennette and Aunt Nancy's ax-imitating snare's head and bass were unremitting. Nor did Djamila let go her occasional plinks and plunks. Even as makeshift martinete and bulería interwove the dancers were still with us as we continued to be with them; fist went on pounding thigh. No named aggregate accounted for the oneness we'd set out to finagle but now authentically felt. Each grain of sand was a dabbed, keening pinpoint of sound, an acoustic perfume recalling Portuguese fado, etymologic fate granted granular expanse. Aggregate sand was an impacted filigree exploded, leg-smitten fist unfurled.

So it now was that fist unclenched as each dancer's right arm came up again after fist hit thigh. Each right hand opened on its way back up, fingers and thumb extended, a bloom of sorts. It opened as if undone by the blow it delivered, even as if thigh might have delivered a blow. It closed again on its way back down but when fist hit thigh no balloon came out. There were now no balloons at all, not even so much as the blank sort which for some time had been emerging from the dancers' fists. It appeared that in opening their hands as their arms went up the dancers released what would've made for balloons on the way back down. It seemed a way of agreeing that no named aggregate enclosed or could caption the supple oneness we felt.

Yours,

N.

Mark McMorris

Six poems from *The Blaze of the Pou*

Being at Loose Ends

The general calls for a retreat back into the bush of mental space where we cook without smoke water drips from citrus and ask fewer questions of big-foot hedges lining the day with propaganda

the comparisons belong to the rhetoric of our poets silence trails an exhaust to where they bivouac at the secluded cow-pond, expecting stars to erupt and blot out the error and the wild pig's rampage

at the home for athletes, more statues than love at the speed of light, birds fly out of reach and the last buccaneer is dead from liver disease a bamboo complication, that crushes the heart

the road swept with petals, enter a green country buoyed up on nudges from a reactor, how it hums songs of the murderous climate to my two-step digger with weapons in a pile like so much useless rope

we were at loose ends in Babylon and made things up while genocide flowered in the breeze, it was lovely to be on the patio with the hills like a comfortable shoulder it was a morning's work to send off the beggar

a day's to study the red roofs, to hack out a path from alphabet to harbor where a body drifts and build a constabulary for the village estates when prophets are abundant, mania always wins

buying at one end of the coast what sells in Kingston—
things that move around like a love-pain, from groin
to nightmare, heaped up like tumuli, a sea-conch's girth
which announces the victim, hand over the accounts

I was at loose ends and therefore level with the grass
without call from the sky to believe in a blue width
how to persuade the bougainvillea to suspend its drift?
some say that innocence foundered at the foundry

the ships forever wander the Antilles, like the mist
the basin of mind's archipelago crossed
and dredged till wires snap and whirl empty
at the dominant mountains, this is a rumor of war

it's not easy to dismiss, the sky-plants are sinking
before the car of the sun, which turns on
the cracked jealousies, and heats up the plumes
of birds that walk freely, as others of us walked

bewildered by losses—the general in his hammock—
love-stricken, faltering, at the rocky shelf

Comediae, Washington, DC —for Al Cook

1.
One side is hot the other hit by a breeze
I'm getting dark from staying
on this wooden bench with the newspapers
all perused, with my belly bulging
under the late spring sun, where some guys
play hoop and the day proceeds
two fences over a two-man game starts
up with long-range tosses
never mind the sun as it sheds and cools
behind clouds and a breeze enters
the park, the asphalt collects the heat and
warms my legs by radiation
as if by saying, let there be meaning right
through, let the evacuation stop
of spirit from matter, if only for a little while,
under the sun that was once in orbit
a principle, *principium*, related to blood
and copulation, the guy hanging on iron,
a source of seed and metaphors secreted in
body of philosophical fact and Isness
white myths, dried flowers though kept visible
three of them now, a new ration
of moves and pirouettes as sun comes back out
to tell about the always-already bird
of poetry when no bird is not in the garden
no bird to get to other than this
one, the letters of him, the way the nouns
collect heat and hot gasses travel far
the way poor twits regroup and make a dash
for branches in trees by the fence
and sirens start up and mix, the police
with ambulance, the fire truck wait
it's good to do this after 15 weeks of riot
class rooms, offices, meetings, talk
I've said thank you and two sentences
to a waiter and two others to the rec. guy
otherwise nothing, though I've heard, not a phone
not a mumble to my self

the kids romp in the play zone and they're chattering
sounds as of speech, the high voices
part of, someone would say, the ontic flux
of *anima* and the river that flows
thru the city, *so spoke of the existences*
of things 40 years after he noticed.

2.

Al wrote: "Let there be time like the
turn of a golden orrery
rising in the splendor of oranges"
let each one of my phrases count
I continue the motion of the poem but
Al's away, I'm riding the curve
he left when the poem spawned quickly
and Carol wrote to me on a broadsheet
Fondly, Carol, and I need to frame it
before the Spring sale ends
the women are out this afternoon with
Catullus dead at 30 and Al at 70-
odd and I'm thinking *space-time*, what else,
juice and clinamen sent by Venus
to spark all of this atomic hullabaloo
of trucks patrolling and cars parking
and birds crossing the blacktop of the park
and me thinking *gulf* and other French words
like *abime* and Latin poetry from -55
when Caesar invaded England
Let there be time to spin the spawning
to fill the basin with language
it will soon be a year but I was in J.A.
with M's car and condominium
seeking vacuity, two guys with two balls
come on to the courts and shoot
I need to take a piss from all the beer
I drank over night for all the poems
come back to think about poets in love
Cynthia, Delia, Lesbia (pseudonyms)
the guy who looks like Bill Russell, more women
Eloise, Laura, Beatrice
white women but there's a *fusca puella*, too
what's-her-name in Snowden's book

to put *pestis* in poems and the gut
a reptile crawling from Eros to feed
upon sinew, to crucify in doses, to mangle
the body and crack bedrock
so I'm at the end of a thousand revolutions
of sun around the earth, the sun is hot
the guys are cooling off on the shadowy steps
and the ball's stopped bouncing
Let there be time to speak of the Caribbean
the blue-sea where I swam last year
when N called to tell me about Al, who wrote
"Let the lit globe spin its turnings for the rise
of a life let the term of it not terrify or tear
in its impossible charm the sphere of wholeness"
and beautiful essays on poetry.

A Poem for the Love of Women

makes good copy for the bored and the ugly
which I confess to belong to, on both counts
ignorant of Venus, no child of Aphrodite,
foam-born and black for all the baths
I took with her, while the boats drew nearer.

The statue falls in love with the sculptor.
So the ship with the banker, and the glove
with the goddess of the silver screen who knows how to knit
the pimp in love with his ugliness
and the book with the binder, the word with system
of discourse and grammar with logic.

I loved the Indian in Uganda, the Kenyan
in Paris, the Turk in Boston, at the Fine Arts Museum.
I loved the Korean in Queens, the Scot
at the embassy in Bogota
the nun in Dar es Salaam, the bus driver in New York.

Many women in many guises came into my bed
the Spanish in Cuba, the Basque in Trinidad.
Many women followed the foam-trail to my door.
The Greek on 37th Street, the Chinese girl
to elementary school in Kingston, the Texan
to Accra where I took her sight-seeing.
Many women are part of the map
the hand traces the swirling rivers by their perfume.
I loved the Angolan woman in Hanover
the Bajan in Chicago. I loved the woman
from Italy in Benin, among the gorgeous sculpture.
It's hard to explain, but many women loved me
in many disguises—many masks—many shadows.
I loved the Berlin woman in Peru, the Inca
in Bonn, the Dutch in Guyana. The Lebanese woman
and I were lovers in Dallas. I loved the woman from Tunis
in Carthage, the Aztec in Glasgow. Loved

the Gypsy in Egypt, in Thebes to be precise, on the Nile.
The Jerusalem woman found me in Nice
and I loved her on the route to Avignon.
The woman from Nice loved me in Toledo.

Many women in many cities and villages.
I loved many cities in many women
built many cities with their love, followed
many women to archaeological pits, loved
their statues in the gardens of Priapus
loved dying languages in many women, loved French
in the West Indies, and English in Zimbabwe.
Loved pottery that kept the imprint of their faces
poetry that clothed them, the sinewy quatrains.

But the Sibyl is long dead, who spoke the language.
Weep for the Sibyl in her disappearance.
Weep for her, who spoke the tongue of my mother.
Weep for the Sibyl, who saw pieces of the heart.

She is not with child, the woman who loved me.

The woman who taught me Philipino, did I
love her or the speech, the woman I bought
at the market in Port-au-Prince, did she
really cherish me for my ugliness, as she said?
And was it a negative face that I captured
in crossing the ocean to find her bivouac?

The seeds are strewn like constellations.
The hair of supernovas burns round my face.
The ocean rocks the crab into a stupor.

And the sibyl is long dead who spoke of her
crossing from water-fall to hedge-row, river mouth
African moon over the sand dune cornu-
copias the plentiful horn of her melody.

Did I love the Gold Coast trader for her strength
the ferocity of her thought, the tight skin
stomach above the pubis, her rock-steady walk?

I loved the sin in sinning, the gland in England.
Loved O in Ottawa for a month, loved
Sandy or smooth, red or brown, women
and molls and concubines, Virgins and Japanese
feminine word-smiths, divas and butterfly girls
many women in many guises, many arms
many faces in my long mirror, many crossed
to my bed from the river, sweet-smelling orchids.

I loved Beth in Elizabeth, New Jersey
I loved Holly at Christmas, Eve at night
Loved Mavis at Mavis Bank, St Andrew
Loved Clara in the morning, Denise
at dawn, and Dawn in the *Odyssey*, by Homer.
Loved Heather the Heathen Woman
Cassandra the Christian. Sojourner Truth.
Loved Mabel the engineer at Los Alamos.
I loved many women in many tyrannies
the Queen of Spain, and the Queen of Darkness
Persephone in her filmy colors of Dis.
Many women found me by navigation:
Dora and Djuna, Sylvia and Adrienne.
Josephine the emperor's woman
Josephine the dancer
Josephine the daughter of Joseph
Josephine the fishmonger at a bay at Savanna-La-Mar.
And Kurtz's woman with the savage breasts.
Yeats's Maude and Tennyson's "Maude," in the poem.
Derek's Anna and Tolstoi's. B's Mexican.

Many women taught me speech—tongued
me into Reason, brought me to the Logos.

Women of howls and etudes, I loved
Clio and Klytemnestria and Beverly.
I loved Margaret Bourke-White in *Ghandi*.
Loved in vain and in anger, loved by fiat.
Loved the name *Susan* for no good reason.
I loved the pronoun *she*, the accusative *her*,
the embrace of *hers*. Loved Monica in French
as Monique, Carol the Carolingian singer
Norma at a bar in Normandie, loved Leona
because she was a lion, Patricia
the woman from aristocracy, and Jane
the double-headed keeper of the gate.

Many women, many Sibyls, many ladies
with intuition and eloquence, many loves
came from the water to my embrace
the women of Modigliani and Wyeth
the nudes in drawing rooms and the Venus
at Cnidos by Praxiteles, the sculpture
by Auguste Rodin—the everlasting kiss—loved
the marble and the bronze and the wood
women in repose or in passion, loved
the wife of Cezanne though I should not have seen
her intimate bath, however discretely posed
and the Wife of Bath on her horse, I loved
Tracy for her sinuous calf-lines, Daphne
the nymph, and Lolita the mixed-up girl.

I loved in bed and on the roof of Notre Dame
de Paris, by the book and in secret, I loved
mistresses and executive vice presidents
and editors and poets in long print skirts
many women in many garments drew my gaze.
Loved the violin player adorned in black.
Loved the scholar in Chanel, and the writer
in a Simone-de-Beauvoir sweater, loved
Simone for her name, Victoria for her voice
Violet and Rose and perfumes

of natural growth, loved Laila for her speed
Virginia for her prose. Loved Amber
the color of sunset, and the wife of Paul Eluard.

Many women shared me with their lovers.
Many women in many parts of the world.
And the tale of my love is only beginning.
Many women loved me in my sleep
at supper or on the frontier, at church.
I loved the Muses and many Violas, Veronique
in Verona and in many cities of Europe
Clodia in Rome beside her Catullus.
And the tale of my love is only just beginning.

Weep for the Sibyl, for she is dead, who spoke
the tongue of my mother and other languages
I gathered up in bouquets, the dried flowers.
The Sibyl is long dead who broke into pieces
of the heart, the word in pieces, and phonemes
spilling from the fountain, with the yard
criss-crossed by flares from the infantry.
The basin cracked, and leaves blowing in it.
The Sibyl is long dead, the heart waning.

Fauve Harmonics

In thick magnolia, the bodies of parrots—a city of parrots—
assemble their dark-blue feathers and build to solid forms
promising rehearsals for the night's seductive theatre
dense-packed, moving interiors in tune to a leaf's murmur:
the birds attentive to sit within the perfect space
the leaves dreaming of the Fauves, still to announce
brushed paint across white landscapes, a daubed
evolution feathering the present, viridescent wings.

Still in the dark, the tree frog in hiding, the cricket and owl
begin to self-compose, the nightly discord of nostalgia
ripples the leaves to silver chords in a chorus of fern
and the basso-note-poet, he comes with his clumsy
imitations, and lays metaphor on the stone, on leaf
that shelters the birds from our sight, where they perform.

Such sounds have green sea and mountain for sources
or nothing collects in the night that tremors
without significance—without symbols to seal them in—
until I watch the ideas pushing through the feathers
like cracks just visible or blossoms, once the season ripens
and the forms huddle and blend, in their chosen parts.

Time Once Again

Let there be time like the turn of a golden orrery.
—Al Cook

Let there be time for the fields to redeem
the caulked keels and cracked ankles
of slaves dead in seven years of turning
and let the houses topple as the body topples
time's spinning like the turn of a golden orrery

Let there be poetry like an alphabet cut from iron
manacled the pen to paper and to my flesh
to print marks like gashes in time's sleeve
empty in hot sunlight, with the bodies turning
into earth, and earth into fury, in time's comedy.

And On Other Days

As my mother said, there is no god, and some days
I was missing-in-place, an instant before
the photograph froze me for the archaeologist in amber filament
and the bee nosed about the yellow bell of the hibiscus
to render the skepticism moot and bring on
the melting-season, when my bones
would once more feel the sun. I could still write
in other people's language of blood-red summer poincianas
I could ride the Pennsylvania Railroad (as a waiter)—
still imagine Claude McKay scouring the eastern seaboard
and singing his climactic songs of Harlem nights—
but the poetry was as nothing in the flare of a supernova
and the corpses too recent and plentiful
to shove one's way through. On other days
no doubt delirious from thirst, with the crotons on holiday,
I imagined the face of Yeats, who saw John Keats, who saw Homer
singing in the belly of a massacre, with his life forfeit
to a language that in the end was like a whisper—
a rumor, and our degradation—
and saw nothing beyond the Atlantic sea-buoy
except what the gulls could forage—with driftwood
and grief moving closer to the shore, by the oleaners.

On other days, I was curator of the lot—a converted
plantation of phantoms—harassed by the images
still on display in our salons, the baskets of thatch
on the heads of women who climb down hills
and crowd into the markets, the elected politicians
with fangs at the neck of a subsidy, not to be satisfied—
a crowd on their way back to a place, where no light leaps.
Love wears out the stomach lining. Gradually
the sun sets on breakers turned to silver in the dusk.
The smell of cumin, and lemon blossoms, a few pedestrians
at rest in the dialogue. Time, as careless as a seagull,
empties out a library and burns it. The cozy inlet
retreats into a geological fact, and the tides
continue to deface the intimate kiss of a friend.
I'm in love with them all, "until the last hour
of the last day"—a biblical span from Pyramid to Jericho.
If I could, I would rescue the spoilt coconut trees—
acres of them succumbed to a disease, their heads lopped off,
on slopes and flats of thick grass
that follows the mind's tautological curve—
only to peter out in the dusk, as thought fractures
on the horizon, the limit of the ship's eerily vanishing.

Quality of Life

Does all dust turn grave in his nightmare of cloned sheep? Is Bo Peep
 losing sleep? Did the lamb march in? Eat the dandelions? Is lamb
 chop an unnatural act? Hello, Dolly, have you any wool? Serious,
 serious, thick hats full of kinks. So don't forget to pack your Polartec.
 Last week we picked oranges, but the apple's still chilling. She might
 not be the cruelest fool. Just a lame dame on a blip trip. Her brain on
 spring break. A trick vacation. A fake date. A fluke, or just a flake.
 Was there then but she was in the left at the wrong. Nothing to see
 but a strung gallery of poetry inhibitions. Her book on the table.
 Nobody buying. Luck was there to take her in. A friend with a new
 look, a light blond bob. A friend tending to the dying. One who
 lends money for books. Who shows her the neighborhood paper bag
 and circles all her haunts. The mayor takes credit for the quality of
 life. Mention money on the street and a hand will be extended. They
 stretch out in a crowd. They sign for the wild child of yoga. Walk
 across the park from Charlie Parker. Eat sweet potato pirogies in
 uppity cafe. Look at other merchandise. A smattering of tribes.
 Unheard of march in which the men protest themselves. Callaloo and
 collards are equivalent. Or banana is the same as *plata no es*. Narrative
 never is mere entertainment. To entertain is knowing how to be a
 woman. French theories suggest the best in women's writing are the
 men. "These star-apple leaves along the sound of Sonny Rollins
 River." Tina Turner set fire to her wigs so she could wear all burnt
 hair. Tourists flock to Strawberry Fields. Where sheep grazed in erst-
 while Seneca Village. No one gets agit-props from avant-garde. A-
 Train from Caffè Reggio out of postcards. Hour and a half by subway
 to JFK. Bumpy return to port of lax security. Once I get that zip gun
 your reality Czech's in the escargot.

Outside Art

A humble monumental
music made of syllables
or a heartbroken crystal
cathedral with gleaming walls
of Orangina bottles

Denigration

Did we surprise our teachers who had niggling doubts about the
picayune brains of small black children who reminded them of clean
pickaninnies on a box of laundry soap? How muddy is the Mississippi
compared to the third-longest river of the darkest continent? In the
land of the Ibo, the Hausa, and the Yoruba, what is the price per
barrel of nigrescence? Though slaves, who were wealth, survived on
niggardly provisions, should inheritors of wealth fault the poor
enigma for lacking a dictionary? Does the mayor demand a recount
of every bullet or does city hall simply neglect the black alderman's
district? If I disagree with your beliefs, do you chalk it up to my
negligible powers of discrimination, supposing I'm just trifling and
not worth considering? Does my niggling concern with trivial matters
negate my ability to negotiate in good faith? Though Maroons, who
were unruly Africans, not loose horses or lazy sailors, were called
renegades in Spanish, will I turn any blacker if I renege on this deal?

Zombie Hat

Greatest thing since Texas toast,
the ever popular zombie hat
flies off the shelf
like sandwich loaf.
For your tête-à-tête
with a headhunter, or chat with a shrink,
zombie hat's the right think.
You'll look like a hero
in your zombie sombrero.
Don't forget to wear your hat.
It's what the head cheese ordered, stat.
Statistics show the zombie hat
helps to maintain social stasis.
With the right fit,
you'll brim with social graces.
We recommend it for all our head cases.
Meet every problem head on,
so long as you keep a lid on.

Why You and I

Who knows why you and I fell off the roster?
Who can figure why you and I never passed muster
on our way out yonder?
Does anyone wonder why you and I lacked
the presence of minding our blunders?
Can anyone see why you and I, no longer intact,
pulled a disappearing act and left with scratch? Our secret pact
required that you and I forget why and where
we lost our place when we went off the books.
Could anyone guess, does anyone know or even care
why you and I can't be found, as hard as we look?
Who'll spell out for us, if we exist,
why you and I missed our turn on the list?
who can stand to reason why you and I let
our union dissolve to strike the orderly alphabet?

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Ted Joans at the Café Bizarre

cairo man
surly realist
dis member ship
jungle blackboards
cryptic script
stirring up
dead alive
tongues tired
tarred wool
manifesto folded
unclear arms
cracking open
ivory trunk
of brazil nuts
voodoo toenails
konker root
jockey cornsilk
purrs natch
contraband leader
scattering scat
sporadically all over
forever diaspora

Kirstenography

for K.M.

K was burn at the bend of the ear in the mouth of Remember. She was the fecund chill burn in her famish. She came into the word with a putty smoother, a handsewn farther, and a yodeler cistern. They were all to gather in a rosy horse on a piety sweet in Alligator Panorama.

When her smoother and farther wrought her chrome from the hose spittle, her cistern fought the piddle ably was a girly heeded bawl. A bawl that dank silk, booed, burgled, rabbled, fried, and tweed in wipers. This was not a bawl that swept in the joy blocks with her rather joys. This was a giving bawl that wasn't a joy like a fluffed fan-mail. Oh no! This was her grand blue piddle cistern that cold knot talc for a song time, but lonely fried and braid rather voices that the yodeler one cold knot rubberband. It shook a few ears until they cold talc to gather, tall yolks, shear sacreds, heave a conversion or a dish cushion. That was laughter they kissed their handsewn farther who wind sway to Cheap Cargo, Ill Annoy. Mum and gulls made their mauve to Foreword Text. As swoon as they cold they boasted fetters in the snail to him and he relied as mulch as he cold.

Their inelegant smoother was a reacher who muddled lard, learned debris, and wept them upon the prosper pat. Reaching them fright from strong was her per rental doodly. They threw up and wind soft to mercy rule and hinder guardian, then on to sedimentary, fecund dairy, and slide rule. They were wood in all those paces, and waded to knowledge at Cutie Ostentatious.

The smoother and her doddles all learned debris to gather. Evidentially, two quirked as proofs in the loony varsity. K was quirk-ing for the slate of Taxes Hysterical Remission. Laughter a schmalzt fart with a wanky lurk, K fond her Sanity. A proof of reckoned comics. K quirked to learn her nastier debris and latter she rave burps and becalmed herself a smoother.

Now she does her writhing ghostly a tome. Quirks at that muse, um, that's in Chapped Apple Milling Sea. Enduring, she has her Sanity and they becalmed the prod parentheses of Adenoid and Williwaw. They all loved shapely over laughter.

Exploring the Dark Content

This dream is not a map.

A poem is not the territory.

The dreamer reclines in a barbershop
carpeted with Afro turf.

In the dark some soul yells.

It hurts to walk barefoot
on cowrie shells.

from American Letters

invisi**B**ly

cr**O**wded

Beatitude

sha**K**es up

improv j**A**zz

solit**U**de

sidewinds a**F**ter

ghostly **M**inds convulse

on brooding sidew**A**lks

over **N**orthbeach

wrinkled wall**S** of

n**E**gro suits are

translu**C**ent and

pr**O**saic

i**N**

gabard**D**ine

zulu l**A**ughter hides

in tri**P**le tones of

ash-smea**R**ed jazz

and d**I**luted maroon

g**L**aciers

ancien**T**

w**H**irlwind

fac**E**s

Above

su**N**

blea**C**hed

sph**I**nx and

blu**E**

volca**N**ic

dea**T**h

chambe**R**s

illumin**A**te

jup**I**ter's feverish

da**N**ce

mesostic *The Ancient Rain* (after Bob Kaufman)

amon**G**

terra c**O**tta

ridd**L**es

an**D** a

flut**E**d

visio**N**

bli**S**ter

m**A**dness

colou**R**s the

soun**D** of

a n**I**ght poet's

boomera**N**g

voyag**E**

mesostic *Golden Sardine* (after Bob Kaufman)

brown**S**ville

c**O**ughes up

carna**L**

baker**I**es

e**T**her

pinc**U**shions

Drunken

blue**E** moons

jass**S** tinted

floures**C**ence

equato**R**ially

symph**O**nic

sub**W**ays

speared**D**

chann**E**ls

Defecting

Woodmen

cad**I**llac

s**T**orms

ex**H**austed

freck**L**es

Of

malin**G**ering

cigar**E**ttes

purp**L**e

pyram**I**d

sou**N**ds

echo**E**s of

co**S**mic

di**S**embowelment

sta**R**fall of

kin**E**tic dust

nova s**E**x elegy say

ontological in**D**ifference

t**R**ee-rock of

hy**A**cinth

fin**G**ers steeped in

c**O**balt glue

qua**N**tum of

modus viv**E**ndi

s**T**icks vaporous speech

in**T**o

John C.'s **E**ncyclical eyelids

mesostic for Ree Dragonette

a**S**tro black

pro**U**d

fi**N**s, flesh

and c**R**own
sublimin**A**lly

tr**A**nsmit

pu**R**ple

pee**K**aboo

interst**E**llar

chant**S**

fai**T**hfully

th**R**ough

m**A**itreyan verse

mesostic for the Sun Ra Arkestra

Two Poems

Cellularity

The ancient stage showed dying
The best choice
For things that counseling,
A phonecall, or the internet
Can pretty much take care of

It isn't progress, really

Truly wisdom's noon,
New and definitely improved

Since there's no limit
To what we can do
We can er ah JUST DO IT

Look around, look at the people
Standing at bus stops
Strolling through the drizzling park
Everyone with a telephone

Heads bowed,
Eyes focused far
Beyond any horizon

Some talk to lovers, mothers, or friends
Some connect via cellphone
To someone in a cell
Some look concerned
Some look relieved
Some are thoughtful
Some seem puzzled still

But every one of them
When they hang up, click off,
Fold up the phone
And slide it in a pocket,
Has solved a problem!

It's nice to live in a country
Where problems are easily solved,
Insanity expands diversity,
And poverty invigorates style

Yes it is

The Mockingbirds

When God discovered that I was a fool
 Something I'd known for a long time
 And friends suspected
 It didn't make the day dawn differently
 There was no huge sigh of relief
 Nothing to tag that nanosecond of my life indelible
 Declaring other modes of history
 More or less banal
 Anyway
 Distractions less electrifying than time
 Thrown gleefully away
 In a roadhouse at the County line
 Where "I Fought the Law and the Law Won"
 Seemed to be the only record on the jukebox
 Or still the exquisite orchestra
 That summons the sun
 Outside my window
 I am talking to you
 But you don't know to who
 You refers to
 A racket called call and response
 Building a distance
 That fretlessly modulates
 From soft florescent blue
 To unspaced incandescent ultrawhite
 Let ther be no mistake no accident
 Brought you here

Contributors' Notes

Will Alexander is the author of *Vertical Rainbow Climber* (Jazz Press, 1987), *Arcane Lavender Morals* (Leave Books, 1994), *Asia and Haiti* (Sun & Moon Books, 1995), *The Stratospheric Chronicles* (Pantograph Press, 1995), and *Towards the Primeval Lightning Fields* (O Books, 1998). He lives in Los Angeles and has taught at the University of California, San Diego, at New College of California, and at the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics, in Boulder. Alexander was a participant in Small Press Traffic's 1996 conference on the black beat poet Stephen Jonas and has written widely on many aspects of African-American poetry and surrealism.

Wanda Coleman was born in Watts and raised in the South Central Los Angeles that revolted in August 1965 and in April 1992. Coleman is one of Southern California's most prominent authors and performers. She has received fellowships in poetry from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts, and in fiction from the California Arts Council. She received the 1999 Lenore Marshall Prize in Poetry for *Bathwater Wine*, awarded by the Academy of American Poets, The New Hope Foundation, and *The Nation*. Her books-in-print from Black Sparrow Press include the poems of *Imagoes*, *Heavy Daughter Blues: Poems & Stories*, the autobiographical *Native In A Strange Land: Trials & Tremors, A War of Eyes and Other Stories*, *Mambo Hips & Make Believe* (a novel), and *Mercurochrome* (new poems, 2001). *Love-Ins with Nietzsche*, a limited edition memoir, was published by Wake Up Heavy Press (Fresno) in fall 2000. She resides in Los Angeles with her husband of twenty years, poet and artist Austin Straus. She continues work on her memoir.

C. S. Giscombe has won the Carl Sandburg Award in Poetry and a Fulbright scholarship. His work has been published in *Callaloo*, *O-blek*, *River Styx*, *Seneca Review*, *Hudson Review*, *Epoch*, *Iowa Review* and many other journals. Giscombe's books include *At Large* (St. Lazarie Press, 1989), *Here* (Dalkey Archive Press, 1994), *Two Sections from Giscome Road* (Leave Booms, 1994), *Giscome Road* (Dalkey Archive Press, 1998), and *Into & Out of Dislocation* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux/North Point Press). Giscombe's poetry and essays have appeared in the anthologies *The Best American Poetry 1996*, *The Garden Thrives: New Black Poetry*, and *Pushcart Prize XIX*. He is an Associate Professor in English at Pennsylvania State University.

Renee Gladman published and edited *Clamour*, a magazine of innovative writing emphasizing the work of women of color, and now edits LEROY Books, which published new writers. Her own writing has appeared in publications around the U.S., including *The Anthology of New (American) Poets* (Talisman House), *Tinfish*, and *Proliferation*. She is the author of *Arlem*, (Idiom Books, 1996), *Not Right Now* (Second Story Books, 1998) and *Juice* (Kelsey Street, 2000).

Erica Hunt is the author of *Local History* (Roof, 1993) and *Arcade* (Kelsey St., 1996). She has worked as a poetry teacher, housing organizer, labor news writer, and radio producer. She currently works as a program officer for a social justice funder in New York. Her poetry and essays have appeared in numerous literary journals and anthologies.

Arnold J. Kemp is a visual artist, poet, and curator living in San Francisco. He has had solo shows at the Luggage Store and Gallery ESP, as well as having work in group shows at Refusalon, Southern Exposure, and numerous galleries nationally. He was recently included in the "Freestyle" show at the Studio Museum in Harlem, and has will have a solo show at Debf & Co., New York, in October 2001.

Nathaniel Mackey is the author of many books of poetry and prose including *Eroding Witness* (University of Illinois Press, 1985), *Bedouin Hornbook* (Callaloo Fiction Series, 1986), *Djibot Baghost's Run* (Sun & Moon Press, 1993) and *Ater A.D.* (City Lights Books, 2001). He is also the author of two ongoing serial poems, "Song of the Andoumboulou" and "mu." Mackey is the editor of the journal *Hambone* and edited for *Callaloo* their special issue on Caribbean writer Wilson Harris (Winter 1995). With Art Lange he edited *Moment's Notice: Jazz in Poetry and Prose* (1996) and has released a CD of his poems set to music, *Stick: Song of the Andoumboulou 10-25* (Spoken Engine Records). He is a professor at the University of California at Santa Cruz.

Mark Morris has published in many journals, including *Hambone*, *Callaloo*, *Denver Quarterly*, *apex of the M*, *The Imprecipient*, *Conjunctions*, *Exact Change Year Book*, *Xep: Cross-Cultural Poetics*, *New American Writing* and *Kenyon Review*. His poetry appears under four titles: *Palinurus Suite* (paradigm, 1992), *Figures for a Hypothesis* (Leave, 1995), *Moth-Wings* (Burning Deck, 1996), and *Black Reeds* (University of Georgia Press, 1997). He's been anthologized in *Ancestral Homes: the Black Short Story in the Americas and Europe* (Westview, 1995), and in *An Anthology of New (American) Poetry* (Talisman, 1998). McMorris teaches at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C.

Harryette Mullen's books of poetry include *Trimings*, *S*PerM**K*T*, and *Muse & Drudge*. She received her Ph.D. from UC Santa Cruz, writing her dissertation on gender, race, and subjectivity in the construction of slave narratives. She has written extensively on many African-American writers and poets, including Ishmael Reed, Alice Walker, Nathaniel Mackey, Toni Morrison, Fran Ross, Robert Hayden, bell hooks, and Erica Hunt. Mullen is now an Associate Professor of English at UCLA.

Julie Patton is the author of *Teething on Type* (Rodent Press, 1995). She has published poems in *Transfer*, *Tribes*, and other magazines, and in *Aloud: Voices from the Nuyorican Poets Café* (Collier Books, 1994). Her articles and essays appear in *Educating the Imagination: Essays & Ideas for Teachers & Writers* (T & W, 1994), and in *Teachers & Writers*. In 1993 she received the New York City Arts in Education Sustained Achievement Award in Literary Arts. She has performed her work internationally, including at the New York Shakespeare Festival, the Nuyorican Poet's Café, the Whitney Museum, Houston's Center for Art and Performance, and the Cleveland Public Theatre's International Sonic Disturbance Festival.

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Lorenzo Thomas is a widely published poet and critic whose works have appeared in many journals including *African American Review*, *Arrowsmith*, *Blues Unlimited* (England), *Living Blues*, *Partisan Review*, *Ploughshares*, and *Popular Music and Society*. He has contributed scholarly articles to the *African American Encyclopedia*, *American Literary Scholarship*, *Gulliver* (Germany), and the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*. His books include *Chances Are Few*, *The Bathers*, and *Es Gibt Zeugen*, collections of poetry, as well as *Sing the Sun Up: Creative Writing Ideas from African American Literature and Extraordinary Measures: Afrocentric Modernism and 20th Century African Poetry*. He's an Associate Professor of English at the University of Houston-Downtown.

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