

Chapter 46

Black and Blues Configurations: Contemporary
African American Poetics

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For much of the twentieth century, critics, scholars, writers, and readers often set American literature's parameters to exclude African American literary artists. For much of that century, African American writers produced art designed to represent and affirm black humanity as part of a larger, unscripted, multilateral effort to win citizenship and political, sociocultural, and economic equality for all black Americans. Along the way, African American writers, critics, and scholars began theorizing and defining the aesthetic practices and critical techniques used in generating black literary art. A large portion of the theorizing and defining was drawn from the body of African American expressive practices. Whether considering Zora Neale Hurston's anthropologically driven essay, "Characteristics of Negro Expression," or Hortense Spillers's dynamic deconstruction of American English's gendered grammatical structures, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," one finds African American artists and critics demonstrating how black aesthetics reinvent forms and genres while expressing America's sociopolitical realities.¹

The tradition's wide array of poetic voices and approaches has forced poetry critics and scholars to develop various interpretive modes. Although the African American literary tradition has its impetus in earlier poets such as Phillis Wheatley, Jupiter Hammon, George Boyer Vashon, and Benjamin Banneker, not until the mid-twentieth century did critics begin reading black poets as, say, literary modernists, rather than walling them within racialized or sociological categories. Gwendolyn Brooks's and Robert Hayden's poems widened the possible formal and intellectual lanes African American poets could traverse. Space emerged for Bob Kaufman and Ted Joans, urban and urbane Surrealists; Sonia Sanchez and Haki Madhubuti, political poets and Black Arts theorists; Jay Wright, Audre Lorde, and Carl Phillips, modernist antiessentialists; and Sherley Anne Williams and Yusef Komunyakaa, blues-idiom experimentalists. During the twentieth century's second half, poets as diverse as Melvin Tolson, Etheridge Knight, June Jordan, Al Young, Ai, Toi

Derricotte, Thylas Moss, Cornelius Eady, Elizabeth Alexander, and Thomas Sayers Ellis defined an improvisational modernist poetics that emphasized African American aesthetics while redescribing America's literary history.

The story of contemporary African American poetics begins with Gwendolyn Brooks and her collection *A Street in Bronzeville*, published in 1945. Brooks's clearly envisioned poems detail African American lives on Chicago's South Side while calling attention to structural racism.² Brooks is the "queen of the poetic tableau"; her poems interweave black life in public with the intimate interior lives of black folks.³ Raised in Chicago, Brooks (1917–2000) began writing poems as a middle schooler, publishing her earliest efforts in the *Chicago Defender*. Although she was a student in integrated educational environs, Brooks's literary efforts exhibited her exclusive, close attention to the specific practices of African American life. Brooks is a central figure in the story of "the Indignant Generation." Made up of black writers who were part of the massive black population shift from America's rural south to its urban north and west, known as the Great Migration (1915–1970), these artists came of age during the period between 1934 and 1960.

Brooks documented both the Great Depression and the Great Migration as they flowed on Chicago's South Side in the final years of World War II. Early on, Brooks polished her modernist aesthetic in the house magazines for the NAACP and the Urban League, the *Crisis* and *Opportunity*. Her style evolved in part from her personality – she was naturally curious and sensitive. Brooks's participation in an artist/intellectual group that included writers like Theodore Ward, Fern Gayden, Frank Marshall Davis, and Edward Bland also enhanced her poetry. Bland, a student of dialectical materialism, helped Brooks evade racially idealizing the black voices in her poems. Rather than connecting her characters according to ephemeral self-conscious race values, Brooks devoted closer attention to the way that the material experience affected her characters psychologically and emotionally.⁴

Brooks focuses on lives in kitchenettes, among the street hustlers and ruined youths, among poor mothers, and in blighted tenement buildings. In finely tuned poems like "a song in the front yard," "The Sundays of Satin Legs Smith," and "mentors," Brooks yokes her social observations to her modernist formal arrangements. In "a song in the front yard" Brooks offers the voice of a young girl who wants to explore the backyard, alleyway dangers of the "bad woman" lifestyle: "And wear the brave stockings of night-black lace / And strut down the streets with paint on my face."⁵ "The Sundays of Satin Legs Smith" is a rambling ballad about a South Side playboy whose "ancestors lean against / Him. Crowd him. Fog out his identity," interrupting his

hedonist foray through life. Brooks can also turn macabre, as in "mentors," a sonnet spoken by a young man whose "best allegiances are to the dead."⁶

Among Brooks's influences are Emily Dickinson, John Crowe Ransom, James Joyce, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Merrill Moore, Robert Frost, and Langston Hughes. With all these artists Brooks shares the ability to control structure tightly, present detail precisely, and highlight the pleasures of the English language.⁷ Although these literary ancestors all offered Brooks models for using older forms in new ways, it's Hughes who presents a model for Brooks's desire to express black experience through the absorption of blues-idiom music and African American vernacular speech into modern lyrical forms. In fact, Brooks's sense of the blues is pervasive throughout this collection. The collection even boasts a blues poem dressed as a ballad, "Queen of the Blues," Brooks's homage to the spirits of Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith. Although Hughes's blues lyrics did not influence Brooks's poems formally, she did want *A Street in Bronzeville* to illustrate the poetics of Chicago's ordinary black working people, as Hughes had done for Harlemites, Washingtonians, and Kansans.

One of Robert Hayden's strongest early poems, "Middle Passage," was first published in the journal *Phylon* in 1945. "Middle Passage" is a poetic dramatization of the traumatic journey of African slaves across the Atlantic. The poem's formal movement and multivocal sound evokes a narrative of African victory: it tells the story of Joseph Cinque's seaborne slave revolt. Drawing on biblical narratives, looping funereal black wailing throughout, and riffing on historical evidence, Hayden formed an antiphonal exchange between the voices of the Christian slavers and the rebellious Africans. The poem's speaker shepherds readers through the narrative, pointing out significant historical details with the refrain "to flower stubbornly." Stubborn flowering was the new fate of the descendants of the stolen tribe, a new anchor for black identity. Hayden's masterpiece also marks his awareness of black artists and intellectuals' precarious cultural position at midcentury; they, too, were trying to flower stubbornly in a place without mentoring or succor.⁸

Brooks and Hayden did not receive extensive literary mentoring from established poets. Both poets believed that African American history and culture were inextinguishable artistic founts able to instruct and advance their literary works. During the 1940s, those reservoirs fed a new revolutionary African American music: bebop. Bebop is special within the context of American arts and, specifically, African American aesthetics because the black musicians who developed it presented ways of taking up various modernist traditions (visual art, dance, literary arts, and music), revising and reorienting

their elements improvisationally. While Brooks and Hayden had crafted their poetics with their ears attuned to the innovations of Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, Louis Armstrong, Nat King Cole, and Duke Ellington, the black poets coming of age in postwar America created a new poetics that corresponded with Thelonious Monk's, Dizzy Gillespie's, and Charlie Parker's inventions.

Parker, Gillespie, and Monk, along with Coleman Hawkins and Max Roach, theorized progressive musical concepts that emerged both from inherited American and European musical traditions and from the conditions of urban African American life during the 1940s. Developed in a range of locations from Kansas City dance halls to Harlem jam session parlors like Minton's Playhouse, bebop accentuated solo improvisation during group performance. Jam sessions featured house rhythm sections (piano, bass, and drums) that created improvisational space by layering generous chord sequences over angular, second-line bomb beats and pedal point or strutting bass lines.

The music's accelerated pace made the "cutting sessions" – battles that anchored the jamming by pitting soloists against each other – seem primal. Emulating its mother tongue, the blues, bebop is a matrix, adapting other styles (New Orleans syncopation, Ellingtonia, southwestern swing, rags, gospel, Broadway show tunes, popular songs, and classical music) through melodic quotation or technical integration. Although not a racially exclusive music, bebop's politically engaged avant-garde responded to the terrible realities of America's racial history by producing an aesthetic practice meant to stave off efforts by the mainstream, white-controlled music industry to co-opt and contain revolutionary black music.⁹

The most significant poets bridging New Negro/Harlem Renaissance modernist poetics and midcentury high modernism, Langston Hughes and Melvin Tolson, are also the key connectors between the high modernists and the experimental poets. Tolson is especially important because his late collections, *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia* (1953) and *Harlem Gallery* (1965), demonstrate his modernist revision of the canto and the epic poetic forms; allusive, improvisational sensibility; and scholarly renderings of African diasporic history.¹⁰ The African American poets who emerged in the 1950s and 1960s as the literary avant-garde not only referenced black music in their works but also shaped their poems through bebop.¹¹ For example, the poet Bob Kaufman followed Hughes's and Tolson's concepts, adopting blues-idiom music as an inspiration and bebop as an aesthetic and poetic model for his own New American poetics.

Bebop's revolutionary impulse informed Bob Kaufman's lineation and phrasing, and, like Lester Young or Charlie Parker, he grouped images or

linked them as if arranging an improvised solo around a set of sonic licks or riffs. In the middle of "Walking Parker Home," for example, Kaufman works a lyrical groove as he writes to join his opening ("Sweet beats of jazz impaled on slivers of wind") and closing (that fierce dying of humans consumed / In raging fires of Love) sound images together:

New York altar city / black tears / secret disciples
 Culture gods / mob sounds / visions of spikes
 Panic excursions to tribal Jazz wombs and transfusions
 Heroin nights of birth / and soaring / over boppy new ground.
 Smothered rage covering pyramids of notes spontaneously exploding¹²

Kaufman's poem expands on Hughes's imagist inclination, but it veers sharply from the solid modernist elements of Hayden's or Brooks's poetry. Kaufman's images compound, edging his bebop-inflected poetics into avant-garde experimentation.

European, Latin American, and Caribbean Popular Front-associated artistic radicals such as Aimé Césaire, Pablo Neruda, Rafael Alberti, Nicolas Guillén, Federico García Lorca, and Tristan Tzara inspired Kaufman to create a cosmopolitan, lyrical poetics that emerged from black American experiences but wasn't bound by racial categorization. Although he was too young to have participated in the Popular Front, Kaufman was attracted politically and aesthetically to the movement's continual, simultaneous address of American culture's "high / low" products – "popular / literary" genres, folk idioms / mass consumed forms, and cross-pollinated media and genres.¹³ Kaufman was also attentive to the Popular Front's concerted focus on racial and ethnic identities.

Although the poet and jazz critic Amiri Baraka was born nine years after Kaufman, he shares with the older poet similar influences (William Carlos Williams, Kenneth Rexroth, and Langston Hughes) and literary communities (Beats and Black Mountain poets). In his musicological works *Blues People* and *Black Music*, Baraka argues that bebop and avant-garde jazz are rooted in the African American experiential continuum but still offer listeners and other artists routes toward surreal, experimental, modern, and revolutionary practices. Additionally, Baraka's and Kaufman's lyrical innovations helped initiate the Black Arts Movement (BAM). Baraka's diverse literary skill set – he was also a top-shelf essayist and playwright – made him, arguably, the most significant BAM artist/theorist and an essential figure in twentieth-century American literature.

Across his first three collections, *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note* (1961), *The Dead Lecturer* (1964), and *Black Magic* (1969), Baraka grapples with the problems of identity, identity-in-transition, and blackness. In early poems such as "In Memory of Radio" and "Look for You Yesterday, Here You Come Today," Baraka turns to the representative heroes of his youth for guidance, the radio and literary heroes who might save him from falling prey to postwar, middlebrow / middle-class American life. Baraka's lineation in these poems shifts between long and short phrases, with some ideas broken and drifting down and across the page. In "Look for You," for example, Baraka shoves some stanzas hard against the right margin in order to create internal asides to the ongoing work:

Descriptions of celibate parties
 Torn trousers: Great Poets dying
 with their strophes on. & me
 incapable of a simple straightforward
 anger.¹⁴

In the same poem, Baraka breaks an image-idea mid-phrase – "old envious blues feeling / ticking like a big cobblestone clock" – emphasizing the ticking measurements of the clock while referencing a surreality similar to Kaufman's. Baraka eventually sheds this questioning pose and the desire for straightforward anger in favor of presenting his "self" as lyrical invention – the poet becomes the heroic interrogator of American ideals. He learns finally "what a poem is) / A / turning away" (BT, p. 41).

As Baraka turned away from his associations with white American poets and their literary movements, he turned toward jazz's improvisational practices and soul music's radical spirituality in order to narrate his changes. *The Dead Lecturer* is a dramatic testament to these transitions. While he does not eschew the technical influence of his Beat and Black Mountain contemporaries, Baraka does begin offering poetic resolutions for his philosophical changes. In "The Liar," Baraka ponders these transitions and the possibility of identification through self-naming. Although calling attention to his own fears about change and self-realization, the speaker relinquishes his "flesh" in search of his spiritual self. As the speaker changes, so does the poem. This transition plays out publicly and on the page, the poem disintegrating down the page toward the speaker's re-collected final thoughts: "When they say, 'It is Roi / who is dead?' I wonder / who will they mean?"¹⁵ The "Roi" mentioned here is some version of Le Roi Jones – the name the poet relinquished when he transitioned away from liberalism toward the leftist / radical black nationalism and

the moniker Imamu Amiri Baraka. Rather than essentializing Le Roi, Baraka announces that flesh or skin cannot count outside of its contextualization, that the improvisations of the soul begin a process of continuously *othering* the self.

Baraka's poetic concept of othering the self makes improvisation a metaphor for both intellectual work and African American identity. Baraka's "continual alteration," his changing sameness, is what has made his theory of literary improvisation an influential element of contemporary criticism of African American culture from avant-garde jazz to hip-hop. For Baraka, black music is held together by long-standing African sensibilities that survived the middle passage, slavery, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow to form gospel, blues, ragtime, jazz, bebop, free jazz, rhythm and blues, and soul. Even as we parse black music into separate styles with differing performance ideals, Baraka argues that the music's improvisational imperative connects these styles while maintaining the core of African American aesthetics. Thus, at the core of African American identity – blackness – is a need to change and shift while remaining wedded to foundational African sensibilities.¹⁶ As the titles of his collections suggest, Baraka's transitions are attempts to kill off the old selves in favor of newer, improvised selves. It is a progression, if you will, that moves toward a "blacker" American sensibility.

Baraka's poems offered initial ideas for the founding principles of the BAM. In the mid-1960s, when "black power" became the rallying cry among some young, radical intellectual participants in the civil rights movement, they had begun constructing a nationalist ideology. By developing a unified, conscious black proletariat – a black nation – the argument went, American apartheid could be ended forcefully. The artists among the intellectuals in the Black Power Movement argued that the best route for creating this collective black pride was through the arts, most notably music and poetry.

In the early 1950s, like Toni Morrison and Lucille Clifton, Baraka was an undergraduate at Howard University. While there, Baraka studied with Sterling Brown, the author of the powerful poetry collection *Southern Road* (1932). Brown influenced Baraka to think seriously about mining the blues and jazz for both aesthetic and political concepts. The riches of these explorations are present in Baraka's sociomusicological study *Blues People* (1963) and his essay collection on avant-garde jazz, *Black Music* (1968). Baraka explains African American musical tradition as the expression of African American experience. Blues-idiom music communicates African Americans' history of oppression and marginality in the West; that music alters the way Western history is narrated, once it's invoked as a frame of reference.¹⁷ Embedded in

the various blues-idiom styles, especially in bebop, are constituent elements of African American nonconformist social protest.¹⁸ The best jazz criticism, Baraka maintains, will illustrate that the music is as much the emotional expression of a culture as it is a technical style of music making. Baraka's objective is to bring black cultural tools to bear on the criticism of black art – if white critics are to continue writing about jazz or any other black art, they must know African American history and culture and incorporate black cultural theories into their critical vernaculars and practices.¹⁹

Baraka's arguments about black music are useful for understanding the objectives of Black Arts poetry. Critics ought to read the poems in relation to the cultural systems that Black Arts poets negotiate. But Black Arts theorists like Larry Neal, Addison Gayle, Sarah Fabio, Hoyt Fuller, and Don L. Lee (Haki Madhubuti) wanted even more: they wanted to define a black aesthetic that was separate, exclusive from mainstream American culture, and unique to the African American condition and political agenda. Although the aforementioned writers used critical essays to crystallize and disseminate the principles of the black aesthetic, it was Baraka's poem "Black Art" that initially proffered the tenets. Beginning with images – "Poems are bullshit unless they are / teeth or trees or lemons piled / on a step" – Baraka launches a poetic assault against both the political and the literary status quo (*BT*, p. 142). Constructed from long thoughts enjambed so as to create a chant-like effect when recited, Baraka's poem layers combative, violent, surreal scenes, like Charlie Parker's twittering blues quotations in the midst of an improvised solo, or like John Coltrane's "sheets of sound" improvisational technique. At the poem's end, Baraka calls for a "Black World" created lyrically and spoken by all black people "Silently / or LOUD" (*BT*, p. 143). While the ideological desire and ethic meet the demands of the black aesthetic, Baraka's formal choices illustrate his collaboration with modernist and Black Mountain techniques rather than an alienation from them.²⁰

One of the most compelling and pervasive innovations of the BAM is the "Coltrane poem."²¹ As more poets came to view poetry and jazz combined as a powerful artistic weapon, they searched for heroic voices and figures to design their armaments around. If poets were to lead the assembly of black consciousness, they believed that formal and typographical evocations of Coltrane's sound and ethos were crucial to this community building. Baraka was one of Coltrane's most ardent and significant critics. His close listening led him to argue that Coltrane embodied both the emergence of new black expressive possibilities and the complete eradication of white thinking, white art. Coltrane's music communicated the nonverbal, musical theses of Black

Arts ideology. One urgent, strident example of this kind of writing is Sonia Sanchez's "a/coltrane/poem."

Born in 1934 in Birmingham, Alabama, Sonia Sanchez was reared in Harlem. Her cultural and political instruction began there, watching African American activists and cultural workers such as Jean Hudson, a curator at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture; Lewis Michaux, owner and operator of the National Memorial African Bookstore (1933–1975); and John Henrik Clarke, the renowned historian and pioneer of black studies. These Harlem luminaries provided Sanchez with models for merging aesthetic practices with collective community action.

Across her earliest collections, *Homecoming* (1969), *We a BaddDDD People* (1970), *Love Poems* (1973), and *A Blues Book for Blue Black Magical Women* (1973), Sanchez displays a dexterous use of both free verse inventions and the strictures of haiku. Writing about love and politics, these poems are infused with blues thinking and blues-idiom musicality. As a young reader, Sanchez took in Paul Laurence Dunbar, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Margaret Walker, and Gwendolyn Brooks. A student of Louise Bogan's at New York University, Sanchez absorbed modernist formal ideals. Among those styles, E. E. Cummings's lineation, lowercase typography, and meandering formal arrangements asserted the most influence on Sanchez's early poems like "homecoming" and "for our lady." At the end of *We a BaddDDD People* she urges these technical elements into her crafting of "a/coltrane/poem."

For Sanchez, Coltrane's sound and musical approach is best represented by lines that power down the page as if they are musical sounds descending a notational scale. The speaker hears in the saxophonist's music the murder and massacre of "all blk/musicians. planned / in advance." Coltrane clears space for the New Thing – both experimental black music and Sanchez as an avant-garde, revolutionary black female poet represent the new here. Sanchez contracts words to single letters or expands words by several letters throughout the poem, attempting simultaneous representation of the black vernacular voice, the voice of the political consciousness, and Coltrane's multivocal soloing:

... u blew away our passsst
and showed us our futureeeeee
screech screech screeeeech screeech
a/love/supreme, a lovesupreme a lovesupreme.
A LOVE SUPREME
scrEEEcCHHHHHH screeeeEEEcCHHHHHHH²²

Late in the poem Sanchez links Coltrane's "SOLO / SOUND OF YO / FIGHT IS MY FIGHT / SAXOPHONE" to African American freedom. Coltrane's screeching and screaming meant to communicate African Americans' righteous indignation and demands for full citizenship.²³ Sanchez's poem converses with and references poetic connections to other Black Arts Coltrane poems, like A. B. Spellman's "Did John's Music Kill Him?" and Haki Madhubuti's "Don't Cry, Scream."

While Black Arts poets used the Coltrane poem to demonstrate their bona fides, many African American poets who were not strict adherents to the Black Arts ideology still turned to Coltrane for his modernist artistic profile. Take Michael Harper's poems "Dear John, Dear Coltrane" (a poem also inspired by Coltrane's composition "A Love Supreme") and "Brother John," both from the collection *Dear John, Dear Coltrane* (1970). Born in Brooklyn in 1938, Harper spent his teenage years in Los Angeles; his poems draw together New York bebop heat and Los Angeles' cool modernism. Harper's conception of Coltrane's import turns away from sonic homage in favor of an elegant, formalized rendering of the musician's art. In the final stanza of "Brother John," Harper catalogues a set of interpretive angles on the line "I'm a black man":

I'm a black man; I am;
Black; I am; I'm a black
Man; I am; I am;
I'm a black man;
I'm a black man;
I am; I'm a black man;
I am:²⁴

Using semicolons to delineate the series of ideas he finds within the opening statement of identification, Harper plays through the concept in a fashion similar to Coltrane's style of stating a musical theme at the beginning of a solo, chopping the riff into bits, examining each claim thoroughly, and rebuilding the idea as an open, ever-evolving notion. Harper works this vein again in the penultimate stanza of "Dear John, Dear Coltrane" by mimicking Coltrane's habit of building call and response into his solos, one riff responding to another lick's call: "why you so sweet? / cause I am / why you so black? / cause I am / a love supreme, a love supreme."²⁵

Harper's controlled, brief, sharp lineation and sculpted free verse forms in *Dear John, Dear Coltrane* display his extension of the Brooks-Hayden-Tolson poetic lineage. By the early 1970s however, after the historic Black Arts writers' conferences at Fisk University (1966 and 1967), Brooks had reshaped her aesthetic to align with Black Arts criteria; Melvin Tolson had died sympathizing

with some elements of the younger poets' agenda, but without adjusting his literary subjects or personal poetics in alignment with the BAM; and Robert Hayden – recognized as a significant black poet but chastised for his lack of sympathy with Black Power/Black Arts theories – held fast to his personal modernism, refusing to politicize it explicitly. And yet it is important to acknowledge that Hayden's interpretations of African American experiences were politically oriented, even though his formal arrangements were not.

Take, for example, Hayden's participation in Dudley Randall's collection *For Malcolm: Poems on the Life and Death of Malcolm X* (1969), which arose from those Fisk conferences. Hayden's contribution, the poem "El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz," is a four-section, elegiac poem about Malcolm X. Each movement has five parts, some parts as short as one line. In the third movement, for instance, Hayden exclaims Malcolm's rise in the Nation of Islam and as a national figure with the opening greeting "*Asalam alaikum!*" followed by two stanzas; an individual line; and an ending, unrhymed couplet.²⁶ Although the lines and stanzas are not governed by any specific metrics or rhyme scheme, Hayden is still able to plot Malcolm's character development through each instance, across the four movements.

While the poet illustrates awareness of both Malcolm X's cultural significance and African America's political reality, he refuses hagiography. Instead, Hayden argues that when Malcolm became "his people's anger," his iconic status ushered in faulty intelligence and faith, both. Hayden explains that, "Rejecting Ahab, he was of Ahab's tribe"²⁷; rejecting white racist constructs for black racist ones made Malcolm (and his tribe) into the kind of racist he battled to defeat.²⁸ Ahab, here, is both the biblical king and Herman Melville's questing captain. But Hayden also sees some semblance between Malcolm X and the protagonist of Richard Wright's *Native Son*, Bigger Thomas. All three literary characters resound in the poem's epigraph, "*O masks and metamorphoses of Ahab, Native Son.*"²⁹ At the third section's ending, when Hayden exhorts, "Strike through the mask!" he's commanding his Black Arts contemporaries to "look beyond a dogma that only transposed racial terms within an inherently oppressive ideological formulation."³⁰ In fact, the poem's final movement might best be read as Malcolm's unmasking. Those final stanzas describe Malcolm on the hajj, the holy pilgrimage to Mecca, on the road to his final conversion to Sunni Islam, en route to becoming the pilgrim Malik. Hayden envisions not an icon but rather a man bowing before a raceless Allah, in the process of self-revision and self-renewal, who, in that moment, became "much more than there was time for him to be."³¹

And yet, on the surface, it may be difficult to distinguish between Hayden's personal poetics and Black Arts aesthetics. In his mission statement, "The Black Arts Movement," Larry Neal exclaims that the movement "eschews 'protest' literature" in order to speak "directly to Black people."³² Although this argument seems to include most African American poets, Neal clarifies his directive, stating that this black aesthetic emerges from both the African American cultural tradition and the "useable elements of Third World culture"; charging through Third World culture and black American/diasporic experiences, the Black Arts poet finds herself addressing the demand "for a more spiritual world."³³ Once she's entered this realm of awareness, the poet will be creating and extending the movement's ethical tenets. Neal explains, finally, that "the Black Arts Movement believes that your ethics and your aesthetics are one."³⁴

Stephen Henderson's anthology, *Understanding the New Black Poetry* (1972), illustrates in its long introduction how postwar black poetics is the merger of African American musical traditions and oral expressive practices such as naming, interpolating blues-idiom rhythms, freestyle rhyme schemes, evoking experience through surreal image making, developing metaphysical ideas, signifying, coupling blues feelings with references to black musical figures, name checking or implying song titles, adapting song forms to lyrical forms, and invoking black vernacular tonalities in lyric forms to create Black Arts poetry.³⁵ Both Neal's manifesto and Henderson's critique were developed to guide poets (and other artists) toward defining the essence of black identity/experience. Once the Black Arts establishment had grounded blackness aesthetically and metaphysically, then they could describe a specific black audience whose members could identify themselves through poems emerging from their cultural traditions and, thus, could identify themselves as a conscious collective, spiritually and politically.

One of the places readers can see the aesthetic at work is in Gwendolyn Brooks's collection *In the Mecca* (1967). The collection announced Brooks's turn to Black Arts poetics and her departure from the Harper and Row publishing house. Subsequently, Brooks began producing books solely through African American publishers, including Dudley Randall's Broadside Press. Brooks's style changed, but her clearest goals never did: "Brooks never wrote directly or explicitly for a white audience. She was always concerned to represent, to speak to, and to sanctify Black life as she knew it."³⁶ "In the Mecca," the collection's eponymous, epic poem, is about African American families living in the apartment complex called the Mecca, at 34th and State Streets on

Chicago's South Side. Brooks uses the poem to demystify sociological and cultural claims made against African Americans. In so doing, the poet also "issues a prophetic call for radical reader-response and responsibility – even across the very lines of race and culture, time and place."³⁷ Brooks's blues-idiom speaker delineates these lines, illustrating how oppressive systems operate on inhabitants while naming routes to liberation. The speaker signals modernist techniques while developing a specific African American referential network.

With "In the Mecca" Brooks modeled a lyric mode that younger poets like Audre Lorde, Clarence Major, Ishmael Reed, Jayne Cortez, Jay Wright, and Lucille Clifton could retrofit for their own personal poetics. This group of poets illustrate that the BAM has at least two main waterways. One branch, the Baraka-Sanchez-Madhubuti stream, offers the strictest articulation of Black Arts poetics, while the other branch, the Reed-Cortez-Wright-Clifton rivulet, extends Brooks's combination into various aesthetics tributaries rather than adhering to Neal's and Henderson's shorelines.³⁸

Although most often read as a postmodern novelist and passionate cultural critic, Ishmael Reed became prominent when his novel *Mumbo Jumbo* and his poetry collection *Conjure* were both finalists for 1973 National Book Awards. Like Baraka and Kaufman before him, Reed's early poems are drawn from American popular culture, African American cultural particulars, and various mythological systems. Reed's experimentation developed in part through his time in the Umbra Poets Collective, which included writers and musicians such as Steve Cannon, Tom Dent, David Henderson, Archie Shepp, Lorenzo Thomas, and Askia Touré. In those workshops, Reed shaped poems that arose from what Aldon Nielsen calls the "Africanity of international modernism."³⁹

In "I am a Cowboy in the Boat of Ra," Reed retells an ancient Egyptian myth of divine conflict as a wild West showdown. Invoking Osiris, Horus, Set, and Isis, Reed plots his narrative of chaos and cultural regeneration as an exile's return. Reed's poetics are born of Western poetic traditions and textual representations of African American countercultural aesthetics. For instance, when Sonny Rollins appears in "I am a Cowboy in the Boat of Ra," he's an avatar of Egyptian/West African spiritual practices, vodun, gnosticism, and Western mythology simultaneously. Here, "Ra" references both the Egyptian sun god and the time- and space-traveling, avant-garde composer Sun Ra.⁴⁰ However, for all his polytheistic invocations, the base elements of Reed's blues-idiom aesthetic are specifically American.

Reed's prose poems "Neo-HooDoo Manifesto" and "Neo-HooDoo Aesthetic" detail this American amalgam as well as counterclaims to the Baraka-Sanchez aesthetic and Larry Neal's definition of the BAM. Rather

than forwarding the Black Arts determination of a politically conscious, collected black public, Reed translates African spiritual life into specific African American practices such as dance – "the Juba the Congo and the VooDoo."⁴¹ "Neo-HooDoo believes that every man is an artist and every artist a priest. You can bring your own creative ideas to Neo-HooDoo. Charlie 'Yardbird (Thoth)' Parker is an example of the Neo-HooDoo artist as an innovator and improviser" (IRC, p. 27). For Reed, the ibis-faced Egyptian god has a cognate in Parker and his trilling bebop progressions – "Neo-HooDoo is a Church finding its lyrics" (IRC, p. 32). If the incantatory "I am a Cowboy in the Boat of Ra" announces the spirit's return, then "Neo-HooDoo Manifesto" states the agenda: "Almost 100 years ago HooDoo was forced to say / Goodbye to America. Now HooDoo is / back as Neo-HooDoo / You can't keep a good church down!" (IRC, p. 33).

Reed's poetic practice allows African Americans to position themselves as "cowboys" and "priests" in the tradition. As "Neo-HooDoo Aesthetic" instructs, "*The proportions of ingredients used depend upon the cook!*" (IRC, p. 34). Reed amplifies this notion at the beginning of "The Reactionary Poet," from *A Secretary to the Spirits* (1978). Exclaiming, "If you are a revolutionary / Then I must be a reactionary," Reed's speaker pushes against the strictures of a so-called revolutionary art:

Enchantment will be found
Expendable, charm, a
Luxury
Love and kisses
A crime against the state
Duke Ellington will be
Ordered to write more marches
"For the people," naturally. (IRC, pp. 197–98)

For the speaker, the Black Arts revolution is unappealing: "If you are what's coming / I must be what's going"; his departure, his turn to hoodoo lyric, will happen on a sauntering steamboat because, he tells us, "I likes to take it real slow" (IRC, pp. 197–98). Sardonic and humorous, Reed eschews punctuation, allowing the chain of thoughts to become a long chant, pulsing in the final couplets, stalled by the end (near) rhymes. Reed's mocking code switch into southern dialect ("likes") dramatizes his desire for the past's pleasures rather than the regulations of the revolutionary future.

Like Reed, Jay Wright challenges essentialist conceptions of African American literary expression by rereading African American intellectual and

spiritual traditions as a complex mixture of sources without foundation. One version of this antiessentialist vision appears in Wright's second collection, *The Homecoming Singer* (1971), in "The End of an Ethnic Dream." After taking in a musical performance, the jazz bassist at the poem's center notes that his fingers were too soft "to rattle / rafters in second-rate halls. / The harmonies I could never learn / stick in Ayler's screams. / An African chant chokes us. My image shot."⁴² Here the saxophonist and composer Albert Ayler is a sign for revolutionary Black Arts. After John Coltrane's death in 1967, Ayler became the torchbearer for the free/avant-garde jazz sometimes called the New Thing. The apogee of black improvisational music, Ayler's angular sound recalled Coltrane's honking, screeching multitonality (think of Sanchez's earlier typographical representation of the Coltrane sound) and was said to bring forth African ancestral spirits. The speaker's soft sound and his inability to rise into Ayler's screaming ruins his reputation as a participant on the avant-garde music scene: "My image shot." But just as significant is the claim that the music's Africanity chokes the listeners.

Unable to perform, the bassist takes an imaginative flight over New York City's Hudson River. The poem takes its shape from the flight – shifting from the opening eight-line stanza to three consecutive three- and two-line stanzas, each one darting away from a specific meter or lineation. It is possible to read this opening musically, as a kind of eight-measure statement, deconstructed improvisationally in the next eight bars. Interestingly, this attempt at musicality ends the speaker's "ethnic dream." Here, blackness, Africanness, and African Americanness do not merge into a seamless ethnic identity. Rather, the speaker's turn away from performing such completion allows him to "shoot off / every day to new horizons." At the poem's opening, the speaker calls his bass a "fine piece of furniture" and attempts to "puncture the blisters"⁴³ in his brain by smoking cigarettes. When the poem ends, the bass still has not become a musical instrument, and the speaker's brain is riddled with sores. Wright's poem marks both the failure to accomplish a black/ethnic whole and the failure to make the mind whole through performance or accomplishment of the African/avant-garde sound.

We might say that Wright's subsequent poetry is an attempt to rectify or redescribe this blistered failure. Part of this effort has included an encompassing knowledge of West African linguistic/cultural systems, specifically Dogon and Bambara. In the mid-1970s Wright began describing the arc of his ongoing exchange between West African, Western, and African American cultural traditions; he achieved this transformative mixture by "developing and articulating a new kind of spiritual vision."⁴⁴ For instance, in *The Double Invention*

of *Komo* (1980), Wright lines out a complex Afro-Western poetic interaction that anticipates wholeness but avoids solidity, instead intricately shifting shape into more and more expression. Wright claims that his definition of spirituality arrives from attention to and reconciliation with what he calls the African American's "double / exile."⁴⁵ Feeling alienated from both African and American traditions, Wright's poetry attempts to announce and affirm his tenuous relation to both. Having no culture to call his own, Michael Manson explains, Wright turns to the Komo ritual in order to heal his "battered body with a care for belonging." So, in Wright's case, one way of healing the blistered brain and battered body is by producing an improvisational poetry that is steeped in and that embraces African, Western, and African American traditions at once.⁴⁶

Wright's encompassing poetics, Reed's neo-hoodooism, and Nielsen's conception of international modernism's Africanity help give contexts to Jayne Cortez's poetics in performance. Cortez was a major participant in what Daniel Widener calls "Black Arts West."⁴⁷ During the 1960s, performing with various Los Angeles-based BAM groups, Cortez developed her poetics in theater, dance, and experimental jazz settings. Cortez merged text and music as "interdictions within American musical and political discourse, as 'gifts' designed to prevent America from hearing what it had intended and desired of black people."⁴⁸ A strong example of Cortez's gift giving is the blues poem for John Coltrane, "How Long Has Trane Been Gone." Cortez's speaker charts Coltrane's rise from black music's deep well, tracing the saxophonist's route to becoming a representative figure for black manhood. Sharing poetic traits with Sanchez and Kaufman, Cortez's one-hundred-line poem draws together a Surrealist vision of the black experience with what Tony Bolden calls Cortez's revolutionary blues. For instance, when Cortez calls for black people to hear their experiences and histories in Coltrane's music, she implores her audience:

Rip those dead white people off
your walls Black people
black people whose walls
should be a hall
A Black Hall Of Fame
so our children will know
will know & be proud
Proud to say I'm from Parker City – Coltrane City – Ornette City
Pharoah City living on Holiday street next to
James Brown park in the State of Malcolm⁴⁹

Building a momentum through internal rhyme and repetitions that cross the enjambed clauses, Cortez approximates Coltrane's style of repeating riffs and creating dialogical runs within his improvised solos. Cortez describes a future time and place where "our children will know" representative Americans as black heroes, not Anglo-American ones. Coltrane announces that imminent tense, participating in both a jazz saxophonist genealogy – Charlie Parker, Ornette Coleman, and Pharoah Sanders – and the gamut of African American musical tradition from "[Billie] Holiday street" through "James Brown park," out toward a black nation, a separate (physical or psychological) "State of Malcolm [X]." A secular blues priestess, Cortez blends the Coltrane poem and the Malcolm X poem into a dynamic whole.⁵⁰

Just as jazz artists extend blues-idiom concepts by improvising on them, we can better appreciate Cortez's achievement, as Tony Bolden explains, by "comparing the poet's artistic method to common practices in blues culture," from the black preacher to the blues singer.⁵¹ With *Scarifications* (1973) and *Mouth on Paper* (1977), Cortez began producing simultaneously poetry collections and long-play recordings with her improvisational musical group, the Firesplitters. In her role as blues priestess, Cortez performs on the bridge between African American and Afro-diasporic poetics.

Writing about Cortez's recording *There It Is* (1982) and her poem "I See Chano Pozo," from *Coagulations* (1984), Aldon Nielsen finds the poet expressing a sonic history of black Atlantic aesthetic practices. Chano Pozo was a bongo and conga master who, working with Dizzy Gillespie, helped develop cu-bop. In Cortez's poem, Pozo's figure and sound embody the return of an African/Caribbean anterior already echoed in the structures of jazz. When Cortez and her band chant "olé okay / Oye I say / I see Chano Pozo," they return to a repeated, percussive internal rhyming similar to the kind in "How Long Has Trane Been Gone." However, here, Cortez has grafted Spanish, English, and African-derived words into an onomatopoetic line that carries the rhythm of Pozo's drumming. Additionally, this New World linguistic chain becomes a "technology of newness" that links "Nicolás Guillén to Langston Hughes and William Carlos Williams, that brings Chano Pozo together with Dizzy Gillespie, that Charlie Haden hears in Gonzalo Rubalcaba."⁵² These priestly expansions express African American poetics' atomic nucleus: cosmopolitanism.

Malin Pereira suggests that readers think of African American poetic cosmopolitanism as a "revisionist universalism" that values the "racial and cultural particulars" of African American-invented forms as expressive of human experience.⁵³ By the late 1970s, even Baraka, whose poems often chafed against

Black Arts essentializing even as they promoted it, had recalibrated his literary and political positions. Practicing his own brand of Third World Marxism, Baraka produced two demanding, large-scale blues-idiom poems: his Coltrane biography "Am/Trak" (1979) and his history poem (inspired by the Arthur Blythe tune of the same title) "In the Tradition" (1980). Baraka's poems (as well as those of Cortez, Reed, and Wright) articulate New World black history as international history and African American aesthetics – specifically blues-idiom improvisational practices – as the ultimate systems of modern, international experience.

Although her early collections, *Good Times* (1969) and *Good News about the Earth* (1972), fit loosely within the Black Arts intellectual vision, Lucille Clifton's poems offered alternatives to long forms, clearing more routes away from essentialist thinking and poetics. Clifton captured the spirit and attitude of the late 1960s and early 1970s using short lyrics presented in fragmented, epigrammatic style, such as "malcolm" (about Malcolm X), "after kent state," and "the meeting after the savior gone: 4/4/68" (about Martin Luther King):

we was going to try and save you but
now i guess you got to save yourselves
(even if you don't know
who you are
where you been
where you headed⁵⁴)

Her formal idiosyncrasy – sparse punctuation and no capitalization – demonstrates a willingness to draw from referential systems both within and without African American literary reservoirs. On one hand, Clifton presents a careful distillation of Black Arts poetry: the political subject; the direct address of a black audience; and dropping the copula or using irregular conjugation, thus producing the black vernacular voice. On the other hand, Clifton's invocation of modernist, free verse forms suggests some aesthetic indebtedness to poets like E. E. Cummings, H.D., and William Carlos Williams. Clifton could be read productively and provocatively as a cosmopolitan, epic miniaturist.

Clifton has used her family's specific story to initiate her cosmopolitan project. She claims that "all of our stories become The Story. . . I am a black human being, and that is part of The Story."⁵⁵ Clifton places this family narrative in and on her body. Clifton's genealogical poems invoke the blues idiom, aiding her illuminating black life as human and diverse.⁵⁶ Clifton's corporeal concentration is an argument for "the special properties of the female spirit and body," placing her body and poems in "the long tradition of poets

mythologizing womanhood."⁵⁷ In the untitled poem that begins, "I was born with twelve fingers," Clifton explains that she; her mother, Thelma Sayles; and her firstborn daughter, Sidney, were all "born wearing strange black gloves."⁵⁸ However, fears of witchcraft and spell casting led consecutive parental generations to have the extra digits, these "wonders," amputated. Yet those "invisible fingers," powerful with the "memory of ghosts," connect, Clifton explains, "my dead mother my live daughter and me / through our terrible shadowy hands."⁵⁹ The spatial gaps on the page between the three linked subjects are the invisible fingers.

In another poem about absence and death, "speaking of loss," Clifton returns to her finger narrative, extending the myth as an explanation of her poesis: "someone has stolen / my parents and hidden my brother. / my extra fingers are cut away. / i am left with plain hands and / nothing to give you but poems."⁶⁰ Clifton's terrible shadowy hands are made plain but still deliver spells through her poetry. During the 1980s, in praise poems such as "poem in praise of menstruation," "poem to my uterus," and "to my last period," Clifton's bodily focus becomes singing for her "body electric" and its aging, while reaching for the cosmopolitan female ethos, those "animals / beautiful and faithful and ancient / and female and brave."⁶¹ Using the solidity of her personal and familial narratives, Clifton's poetics turn away from BAM notions of a large, amorphous black consciousness/collective.

Whether considering Clifton's bodily concerns, Brooks's intimate tour of Chicago's black South Side, Hayden's Malcolm X, or Reed's avenging cowboy, the nomadic blues subject speaks the poetic vision and triggers the "cosmopolitan interplay" among the various cultural streams black poets draw from in developing their poetic narratives.⁶² These connected concepts – cosmopolitanism and blues subjectivity – are especially useful when taking up African American poetry at the end of the twentieth century.

When the 1980s opened, African American poets who'd been practicing as apprentice artists adjacent to but not within the BAM aesthetic rubric began advancing various black aesthetics. That is, rather than hewing to the BAM ideologies, poets born during the 1940s and 1950s, like Toi Derricotte, Rita Dove, Yusef Komunyakaa, and Nathaniel Mackey, began forwarding personal aesthetics to correspond to their varied experiences of blackness and American life. A second wave of post-Black Arts poets, including Harryette Mullen, Cornelius Eady, Carl Phillips, and Elizabeth Alexander, were born in the 1950s and early 1960s and emerged on the heels of the first shift. Rather than advance a totalizing black aesthetic, these poets developed "a multifarious, contingent, non-delimited complex of strategies [for negotiating] gaps or

conflicts between their artistic goals and the operation of race in the production, dissemination, and reception of their writing."⁶³ Their negotiations of the gaps and conflicts still relied on their abilities to integrate the blues idiom into their aesthetic processes.

Dove is a quintessential post-BAM poet: her aesthetic leans on an array of European influences and classical references far away from what she's called the BAM's essentialist ideologies and "poetics of rage." Her open rejection is best described in "Upon Meeting Don L. Lee, in a Dream." Dove contextualizes her rebuke with sly references to the BAM's masculinist, Afrocentric, and Surrealist tendencies. Approaching the speaker with "lashless eyes" and "fists clenched," Lee (Haki Madhubuti) embodies black poetic rage.⁶⁴ With robed and beaded women stretching their arms to him and chanting "in wooden cadences," Lee begins to declaim within the poem – "Seven years ago . . ." – but the speaker cuts him off: "Those years are gone – / What is there now?" The speaker's questioning ignites fury: "He starts to cry; his eyeballs / Burst into flame" (RDS, p. 12). Dove's poem is also a deft critique: rather than accepting Lee's exhortation or inheriting the BAM's free-form, free verse, free-improvisational styles, Dove guides the speaker's irregularly metered lines into five quatrains, wresting aesthetic control from one of the BAM's leading figures while formalizing her rejection.

But Dove is a learned student of African American poetics, including blues-idiom poetics. For example, see Dove's poem "Lightnin' Blues" from her Pulitzer Prize-winning collection, *Thomas and Beulah* (1986). The poem recalls one of Thomas and Beulah's family trips, a Friday jaunt to the country for fishing and relaxation. Dove, like an apt student of the tradition, can distill the blues in a simple line: "On the radio a canary bewailed her luck" (RDS, p. 157). The poet doesn't need to conjure like Reed or name-check a black pantheon like Cortez in order to establish her blues context. The bird calling out her bad luck announces and initiates the blues. At the poem's ending, however, the idiomatic voices coming from the car's radio have turned "trickster," as if devilish blues gods had made sport with their experience: "Turned around, the car started / meek as a lamb" (RDS, p. 157). Malin Pereira argues that "Lightnin' Blues" is an instance of Dove's negotiating "the racial particular and the unraced universal."⁶⁵

"Lightnin' Blues" has a cousin in "Canary," from *Grace Notes* (1989), a poem dedicated to Michael S. Harper. Dove displays a BAM revisionist sensibility: instead of a Coltrane poem, Dove builds a Billie Holiday poem, and she wants to debunk Holiday mythologies rather than reify them.⁶⁶ Although listeners are conditioned to think of Holiday's "burned voice" and "ruined face" as

descriptions of the blues, Dove argues that the blues arrive with as "many shadows as lights."⁶⁷ Rather than dwelling in those shadows, angling toward an ideological definition of blackness or feminine weakness, Dove faces the lights in order to speak a cosmopolitan truth about art and freedom: "Fact is, the invention of women under siege / has been to sharpen love in the service of myth. / If you can't be free, be a mystery."⁶⁸ Holiday turned blues and bad luck into art; she played the trickster, feigning fragility as style in order to communicate her human complexity. In blues-idiom musical expression and African American history Dove hears classical tonalities; we can find her chiming these tonalities in collections like *Mother Love* (1995), in which she riffs on the myth of Demeter and Persephone, and *On the Bus with Rosa Parks* (2000), in which she works through the civil rights movement.

Yusef Komunyakaa has concocted his own cosmopolitan blues-idiom blendings. Like Dove's sensibility, Komunyakaa's aesthetic emerges from his mixture of African American history, Greek mythology, European modernism, postmodern linguistics, and jazz and blues music, and of his memories of the Vietnam War. Komunyakaa is indebted to the tradition: three of his earliest poems are entitled "Mississippi John Hurt," "Langston Hughes," and "Blues Tonality." Derricotte argues that his layered lyrics interrogate "the most complex moral issues, the most harrowing ugly subjects of our American life" in order to illustrate in "deeper ways what it is to be human."⁶⁹

Komunyakaa's aesthetic turns away from the BAM but refutes the suggestion "that the primary ideal of the artist is to articulate some putative 'universal' that transcends the limits of race into models of cultural homogeneity."⁷⁰ In post-BAM poetry, as Komunyakaa demonstrates, blues-idiom markers don't need to be represented with the names of musicians or with lexical or formal arrangements that mimic the blues or improvisation. Komunyakaa's innovation has been to describe blackness as improvisational rather than as political loyalty or a pure cultural lineage. Komunyakaa's poetic improvisations express the individual mind's psychological, emotional, and cultural churnings.

Born in Bogalusa, Louisiana, in 1947, Komunyakaa was coming of age when exclaiming black beauty and chanting "black power" was in vogue. When he began his army service in 1968, the decade-long sociopolitical revolutions had forced many young Americans to reevaluate their definitions of Americanness. In poems like "Tu Do Street" and "Facing It," both from *Dien Cai Dau* (1988), Komunyakaa shifts between racial and national identities, writing as a Vietnam War veteran, an American, and an African American. From these tense, contingent subject positions, Komunyakaa's poetic vision arises. He can improvise on these oppositions, eschewing hierarchical arrangements

in favor of palimpsests. "Tu Do Street," for instance, is a poem about black soldiers entering a Vietnamese bar that white soldiers have claimed as their turf. In keeping with southern American ways, the white soldiers want to maintain racial segregation even at the Far East Asian front. Toggling between his memories of his southern childhood – "I am a small boy / again in Bogalusa. *White Only* / signs & Hank Snow" – and his attempt to order a beer in this "segregated" bar – "the mama-san / behind the counter acts as if she / can't understand, while her eyes / skirt each white face, as Hank Williams / calls from the psychedelic jukebox" – the speaker layers these moments against each other, using the two Hanks and country music to improvise a statement about the ironies of American blackness. Snow and Williams are blues-idiom white country musicians – they're both sonic signifiers of segregation and American music's biracial (at the least) roots.⁷¹

Komunyakaa amplifies the claim at the poem's end when the speaker notes how the music and the Vietnamese prostitutes connect these soldiers intimately and mythologically:

There's more than a nation
inside us, as black & white
soldiers touch the same lovers
minutes apart, tasting
each other's breath,
without knowing these rooms
run into each other like tunnels
leading to the underworld.⁷²

Komunyakaa's earlier palimpsest plays out logically as the black and white soldiers touch and taste each other through shared lovers. Noting the soldiers' "tunneling" among the bar's back rooms, their merger into "more than a nation," the speaker offers a subtle, deft improvisation on Derek Walcott's supposition in "The Schooner *Flight*": "either I'm nobody or I'm a nation."⁷³ For Komunyakaa, the Americans soldiers and Vietnamese sex workers represent more than nation-states. His idea silences the notion that racial essences identify these participants clearly. There is an orphic quality to the poem's last image, drawing our ears to the sound of music, as the poet-speaker searches for beauty and entertainment in war's hellish underworld. In "Facing It," an equally intense and beautiful poem, Komunyakaa generates a nuanced, ambivalent response to Maya Lin's Vietnam War Memorial in Washington, D.C. The polished, black granite walls, engraved with the names of fallen warriors, offer Komunyakaa's speaker the possibility to "watch himself look," as he reflects and as his reflection blends with the white visitors around him.⁷⁴

In "February in Sydney," Komunyakaa's looking, reflecting, and imagining blends Bob Kaufman's Surrealist bebop poetics with metaphysical modernist statement. Set in Sydney, Australia, the speaker rides a city bus home after watching Dexter Gordon's lead performance in the film *'Round Midnight* (1981). The speaker hears in bebop humiliation and pain distilled to jubilant art: "Bud, Prez, Webster, & the Hawk, / their names run together riffs. / Painful gods jive talk through / bloodstained reeds & shiny brass / where music is anesthetic."⁷⁵ Naming Bud Powell, Lester Young, Ben Webster, and Coleman Hawkins, the speaker generates a musicological pantheon and a sonic history. Thinking through bebop triggers an "old anger" as the musical memories merge with the speaker's recollection of an incident that occurred on his exit from the movie theater: "Another scene keeps repeating itself: / I emerge from a dark theater, / passing a woman who grabs her red purse / & hugs it to her like a heart attack." No simple emotion rises from this scene; instead the speaker feels "a loneliness" lingering "like a silver needle" beneath his black skin as he tries to "feel how it is / to scream for help through a horn."⁷⁶ The speaker's desire to "scream for help" "is important not for its sound or greater authenticity but for its model of improvisational self-constitution."⁷⁷

Komunyakaa's "tonal logic" is produced through his alternating accents, three or four per line, thus lengthening and shortening lines "to mirror the process of consciousness."⁷⁸ Ultimately, Komunyakaa's musical or poetic representation of self-reflection holds the possibility of unifying the self in the process of becoming and the self's various communities into a useful whole: "Jazz discovers the emotional mystery behind things; it provides a spiritual connection to the land, reconnecting us to places where its forms originated."⁷⁹ In later poems like "Changes; or Reveries at a Window Overlooking a Country Road, with Two Women Talking Blues in the Kitchen," "Palimpsest," "Testimony," and "No Good Blues," Komunyakaa has designed an array of original formal structures for presenting blues-idiom improvisation as the spiritual link between individual consciousness and group reconnection.

Nathaniel Mackey has explained that post-bebop jazz has inspired his poetics.⁸⁰ Mackey has developed an improvisational literary aesthetic that even he admits could be called "experimental, avant-garde, vanguard or difficult."⁸¹ It derives from the "intersection of the African American vernacular and Euro-American 'open form' poetics," making him the inheritor of Baraka, Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan, Clarence Major, Charles Olson, Wilson Harris, and Jay Wright. Like Wright, Mackey has been exploring Dogon culture, in works such as his serial poem *Song of the Andoumboulou*. Mackey also has been delineating the confluence of cultures in his second ongoing poem, "Mu."⁸² Of

these two extended poetic works, Mackey explains, "the two now understood as two and the same, each the other's understudy. Each is the other, each is both, announcedly so."⁸³ Both works are generated from Mackey's listening to the Dogon funeral dirge "Song of the Andoumboulou" and Don Cherry's "Mu"—the intersection of West African song and African American experimental jazz.

Since *Four for Trane* (1977)—the title of which references Archie Shepp's vanguard recording honoring Coltrane—and *Eroding Witness* (1985), in which *Song of the Andoumboulou* debuted, Mackey has been improvising, insistently and radically, a poetic/musical system. In Mackey's poetics, black music doesn't cohere as a singular individual voice. Rather, the music is "a figure for a pursuit of voice that questions, and is questioned by, the very limits of its expressive capacity."⁸⁴ Mackey's serial art presents poetry as an "irresolvable process of 'root-work'"—each series session offers a further excavation of language and origin.⁸⁵ "Song of the Andoumboulou: 13" opens, for example, with the speaker's bottom lip against his teeth "like a rock but unsteady," stuttering, "'Fa . . . / as in fox, as in Fon, as in fate."⁸⁶ As these lines skitter down the page, readers might imagine the speaker's stuttering as an aftereffect of his attempt to play a "Song so black it / burnt" his lip, in "Song of the Andoumboulou: 12."⁸⁷

In songs 12 and 13, Mackey invokes Eshu Elegba or Legba, the West African and voodoo deity standing at the crossroads between the heavens and earth, issuing passage and determining destinies. Importantly, Eshu also speaks all human languages. In the speaker's "fa" we hear the root sound for a perforated line of contingent connections: the fox in several Native American tribal mythologies is a cognate for Eshu Elegba; Fon, the Niger-Congo language, people, and religion, is a founding cultural system for voodoo and the black Atlantic diaspora; fate, in this human cycle described in Mackey's work, is yet to be announced. In fact, Mackey's admixture of Native American, Dogon, and African American cosmologies is a hoodoo healing concoction for the speaker, who tore his throat raw in his "green / attempt to sing the blues."⁸⁸ Mackey, too, has made a jazz record, *Strick* (1995), with the avant-garde musicians Royal Hartigan and Hafez Modirzadeh. Reciting sessions 16–25 from *Song of Andoumboulou* in conference with the musicians, Mackey's singing plunges toward Federico García Lorca's deep songs, *duende*, *cante jondo*, and *cante moro*. For Mackey, deep singing is the poet's calling: "World hollowed out, the Andoumboulou / beckoned. Echoed aboriginal / cut, / chthonic spur."⁸⁹

Harryette Mullen is also a deep blues singer. Her underground, aboriginal poetics offer ways of thinking through gender and racial concerns that acknowledge the BAM aesthetic while holding BAM ideologies at bay. As a

poet and critic, Mullen has forged an oeuvre dedicated to innovating dexterous claims about African American womanhood and identity. Mullen's earliest collections – *Tree Tall Woman* (1981) and *Baby Blues: Early Poems* (2002) – display BAM traits and are spoken by somewhat coherent black voices. In *Trimings* (1991) and *S*PeRM**K*T* (1992), Mullen worked through her interests in Language poetry, critical theory, and poststructuralist linguistics.

By the mid-1990s, with the publication of *Muse & Drudge* (1995), Mullen was working from the premise that “to be black is to be innovative.”⁹⁰ Written in a terse, pun-driven style, *Muse & Drudge* is a long, epic poem measured in quatrains, printed four to a page and rhymed irregularly. In these 320 stanzas, Mullen plays across languages and styles, mixing African American vernacular, urban slang, colloquial sayings, standard English diction, and Spanish phrases. Mullen's blues-idiom knowledge aids her seamless merging of her black lyrical voices and her formal innovations. Her ability to invent arrangements that work “black cultural material into an investigation of the particular question of black women's identity” sets her work in lively discourse with Cortez's, Clifton's, and Mackey's poems.⁹¹ Each stanza could stand alone as short, weird epigrams. But in sequence, the collection builds momentum as if Mullen were a soloist, riffing new ideas into her in-progress improvisation.

Early in *Muse & Drudge* Mullen's speaker names herself: “random diva nation of bedlam / headman hoodlum doodling / then I wouldn't be long gone / I'd be Dogon.”⁹² Mullen's Dogon Sapphire, whose “lyre styles / pluck eyebrows,” refers playfully and caustically to the ancient poetess Sappho and the negative American stereotype of black femininity. “Sapphire” signifies Mullen's literary history – Western literature, women's writing, and African American poetics – and initiates her recycling of those traditions. Mullen's quatrains are exploded and redescribed blues stanzas, and Sapphire is a “random [blues] diva,” improvising on her lyre. As with Mackey's *Song of the Andomboulou*, Mullen's drawing the Western/Greek reference into the blues context positions her as part of the Dogon practice, rather than as “long gone” down the road, blues hellhounds on her trail. Rejecting a single-voiced, linear narrative in *Muse & Drudge*, Mullen's Sapphire becomes many women's voices throughout the poem. As Evie Shockley argues, “Mullen . . . presents us with a collective hero, the great ‘tribe’ of black women who lived in the U. S.”⁹³

Mullen thinks diasporically through these traditions. When Mullen's speaker suggests restoring “lost nature / with hoodoo paraphernalia,” it's the charming Cuban “shaman in an urban turban” who offers “seven / powers of Africa la mano / ponderosa ayudame numeros sueños.”⁹⁴ The Spanish

invocation calls on the mighty hand of the seven African powers to fuel the speaker's dreams with the key numbers. Those numbers “help souls in misery / get to the square root / of evil and render it moot.”⁹⁵ Allison Cummings suggests that Mullen's improvising is linguistic play literally: her “text rephrases black orality as aurality. The wordplay takes place not in a conceptual realm of denotation and connotation, but over airwaves” between the page and the mind's ear.⁹⁶

Many of the strongest voices of the post-BAM third wave participated in the Dark Room Collective during the late 1980s and 1990s. Thomas Sayers Ellis and Sharan Strange founded the Dark Room reading series in 1987, while still Harvard undergraduates. When Ellis and Strange began inviting established writers to read in their Cambridge, Massachusetts, meeting space, they wanted to develop a black literary community that could include exchange and mentorship without being bound or determined by specific political ideologies or aesthetic agendas. As undergraduates or graduate students, Natasha Trethewey, Kevin Young, John Keene, and Major Jackson all participated in the collective.⁹⁷ By 2001 Dark Room poets had begun achieving national recognition. In Young's renewal of elegiac and blues poetry, Trethewey's lyrical explorations of southern history and African American culture, and Jackson's urbane, formal sophistication, blues-idiom poetics are extended, and readers can see the African American poetic tradition's influence on contemporary American poetry.

Over the past several decades, African American literary artists have introduced an array of new techniques and styles to Anglophone poetics. While some poets hew closely to modernist poetry, they have also innovated practices that allow them to balance African American expressive modes and blues-idiom tropes with formalist desires. Others' palettes are multicultural, multilingual, and postmodern, allowing them free improvisational range in length, versification, lineation, form, voice, and musicality. It's possible to read this lineage without thinking about groupings – modernists versus postmodernists, the BAM versus the post-BAM – because these artists all use the blues idiom as a touchstone. And when a poet invokes that idiom, she's also explaining that her aesthetic approach necessitates invention, improvisation, and innovation.

Notes

1. Angelyn Mitchell (ed.), *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism, from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1994), pp. 79, 254.