Contents

ARTICLES

001 "Cannot Understand / Feels Deeply": John Ashbery, The Tennis Court Oath, and Queer Affect
Brian Reed

008 From Luminous Detail to Luminous Debris: Ezra Pound, Gustaf Sobin, and the Modernist Imaginary of Ruins
Patrick Pritchett

021 Be Bop Ghost in the Machine
Alden Lynn Nielsen

028 History, Poetry, and the Social Relation: Maya Angelou, Bruce Andrews, Claudia Rankine, and Barrett Watten
Herman Rapaport

037 Did You Hear What They Said?: The Symbology of Mass Media in David Henderson’s “They Are Killing All the Young Men”
Jean-Philippe Marcoux

056 Ambivalent Aestheticism: John Butler Yeats’s Legacy to His Son
Robert Archembeau

063 Bounded and Unbounded Field Functions in Atkins and Olson
Tyrone Williams

069 Accountable Relationality
Jonathan Stalling

078 "But What’s Nationality These Days?": Cosmopolitanism Old and New in the Prologue of in a Free State
Weiwei Xu

085 Free Your Mind: Funk Transfigured as Black Cultural Aesthetics
Tony Bolden

100 Relationality and Analog: Henry James’s Queer Portraiture in The Wings of the Dove and The Golden Bowl
Weonwen Guo

114 Virtual Worlds: Hypothetical Focalization in William Faulkner’s Absalom, Absalom!
Paul Jaussen

128 Integrating “The Classical” and “The Creative” in Literature: Friedrich Nietzsche, Oscar Wilde, and T. S. Eliot
Zhuoyun Jiang

134 The Categorization and Functions of “Overhearing” in Narrative
Yizhong Ning

BOOK REVIEW

141 The Poetics of Process Repeated in the Sky
Zewei Jiang
Be Bop Ghost in the Machine

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Abstract: Larry Neal's collection of poetry, *Hoo Doo Hollerin' Bebop Ghosts*, offers a sort of "hauntology" for examining the legacies of the Black Arts Movement in the fields of poetics and cultural studies. Even now, with new work on the era appearing, the literary institutions have relied heavily on stereotypes of the movement rather than on close readings and critical engagements with the diffuse ideologies of the time. Neal's ghostly demarcations serve as a metaphor for the current position of the Black Arts Movement in American thought, perpetually viewed but seldom really understood.

Keywords: Black Arts Movement, Poetry, Larry Neal, Haki Madhubuti, Amiri Baraka

"And me? I'm from everywhere?"
—Larry Neal (*Visions* 175)

A specter is haunting American cultural studies.

It is the specter of the Black Arts, about which so many have the merest ghost of a notion. It is as if, as Larry Neal writes in "Colloquies," when you speak of the Black Arts, "even in your speaking, you are vague and beyond word" (*Hoodoo* 85). It is as if America had said to the Black Arts, even as we read in later lines from those same colloquies, "I fear your hauntings, even though you are quite familiar. // Hey! // What star was that anyway?" Has any phenomenon in America's intellectual history been quite so surrounded by misprisings and misapprehensions, so walled off by presuppositions and the preposterous, so tuned out and turned upon as the Black Arts? Has anything which has so radically altered the thinking of America ever been so hysterically historicized, so manifestly misconstrued? "I was birthed in *Conundrum*," we read in "Colloquies," so perhaps we should not be surprised by the haunting figures that possess the texts of Larry Neal. Neal’s poems are his familiaris, ghostly emanations that visit us now. There are the Ghost Poems, numbered one through four. There are the "Hoodoo Hollerin' Bebop Ghosts" inhabiting the title poem of Neal’s 1974 book of verses. There is Shine in his "Sermon on Cosmology" wondering aloud "Whose ghosts walks there" (79), and a check of the reappearance of that poem in Neal's subsequent selected writings confirms that this sibilance is Shine’s own; he really does ask, "whose ghosts walks?" And that spectral sibilance, that ghost of grammar and consonance, trails in consciousness like something we aren’t entirely sure we heard back then in the sixties, something we have to double back to be sure of.
Larry Neal had a thing for ghosts, something that has never been in danger of going unnoticed. In an interview that first appeared in Drum, cited and sighted again in Mae Henderson’s essay “Ghosts, Monsters, and Magic,” Neal reported: “I remember growing up and hearing ghost stories. Ghost stories are fun. I’m trying to deal with the world of the dead. The dead are not dead” (qtd. in Henderson 195). The past, Faulkner told us, is not dead; it’s not even past. In a litany of the departed that haunts that central essay of Neal’s, he invokes the ghosts of a national tension, and those ghosts are named Nat Turner and Martin Delany, James Monroe Trotter and DuBois, what Neal terms “a whole panoply of mythical heroes from Brer Rabbit to Shine.” And then Neal delivers the burden of that past into the present. “These ghosts,” he writes, “have left us with some heavy questions about the realities of life for black people in America” (Visions 8). Those questions remain heavy in the twenty-first century, and no amount of rapping has dispelled them.

There was a time when rappings were thought to be manifestations from the spirit world. I am at best agnostic when it comes to talking of spirits, having spent all too much of my youth in all night raps around knocking tables and rocking seances. Raised in captivity by Baptists, I am now long unchurched, impatient with appeals to anybody’s beyond. But if I am more on the Baraka side of things religious, at least the Baraka of the past three decades, I am under no illusion about the powers of illusion. I am a permanent convert to a faith in metaphor. There is a reason that the Black Arts has been so often treated as an unwelcome visitor returned from its premature burial. America in the sixties looked into the mirror and found that it didn’t have a reflection. America in the sixties tried to rush back to its native soil before the sunrise of the seventies, only to find that it had no native soil. America in the sixties was a place of heavy spirits, and the black artists of the age gathered together for a summoning of spells. It was Larry Neal, secretary to the spirits, who delivered to us the “Fragments from the Narrative of the Black Magicians”:

Blood of Christ, dew kissed the corn;
hieroglyphic numbers that shape into leaf-formed men.

I speak the vision, and he is the healed sinner,
suffering the purulent sores of the redeemed. (35)

When people tell you of the purportedly didactic and social realist language of the Black Aestheticians, they don’t seem to have language such as this in mind, nor do they ever quite know what to say about those lemons piled on the step or the nickle hearts left behind by the men of Baraka’s own “Black Art.” That hieroglyphic reading of Christ-kissed corn in “Fragments” derives from Nat Turner, who, a heavy reader, was never a literalist, though he was surely a revolutionary. We need some discourse of hauntology, if I might borrow a neologism from a Francophone philosopher born in North Africa, to negotiate now the conditions of being of the questions left us as Larry Neal’s legacy. “The rebirth of the concept of Black Power opens old wounds” he cautioned us in 1968 (Visions 10), and our own return to his texts now brings us the same dangers. Nat Turner saw blood on the corn, and he knew how to heed its hieroglyphs. If it is still far too early to talk of turning finally from fingering the jagged edge of the wounds, we can no longer tarry, tardy as we are, about the task of reading the hieroglyphs, the ghost writing that three decades of reaction have attempted to render finally beyond any comprehending. We have benefited in recent years from a slowly building body of powerful scholarship about the Black Arts, but we remain in the earliest Rosetta Stone stages of reading the leaves left us, the fragments from the narrative in progress lined out by Larry Neal before he was interrupted in mid-question in 1981.
Looking back over the years that had seen the mountain-top moments of the Civil Rights Movement, the rise of Black Power, the various articulations of the Black Arts, Haki Madhubuti wrote that “in the sixties when the words came in the early time, they ripped and tore at our insides / outsides while forcing some of us into the back rooms of our beginning” (King xvii). The remarkable thing about this poet’s retrospective is that it was signed by Don L. Lee, not yet “Haki,” proffered from his then academic position as writer-in-residence at Howard University, and, most remarkable of all, it was written in 1971. It was that kind of decade. Bob Dylan sang of his back pages when he was barely old enough to have had a preface. But Madhubuti was right; the words had come early and they brought us all up against ourselves in ways that poetry, even the poetry of the confessional, had not been doing so much in the years previous. It was a time when Motown Records called itself “Young America,” when pop music became art and broke the three minute play-time barrier on AM radio (Bob Dylan’s “Like a Rolling Stone” clearing the hurdle so that The Dells’s “Stay in My Corner” could follow in all its resplendent length), when poetry could be heard nestled next to James Brown streaming from the dash boards of cars driving into what unexpected night lay ahead by the next turn. And it was a time when Motown produced poetry. Not just the poetry of great lyrics, what led Dylan at one press conference to produce the name of Smokey Robinson when a reporter asked him who the great American poets were, but the poetry of the page, spoken in the studio, performed for vinyl, long-playing. Motown essentially buried their few early efforts at adding poetry to the mix of records heading out of Hitsville, USA, but not before some of us had heard them. Before ever a rapper rapped, there was Amiri Baraka’s fusion of Black Arts verse with New Thing Jazz, released as Nation Time, and following hard on the heels of Gil Scott-Heron’s top forty success, “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised.” Scott-Heron’s first LP, Small Talk at 125th and Lennox had been released on Flying Dutchman records, produced by the same Bob Thiele who had produced the monumental sessions of John Coltrane and Pharoah Sanders for ABC’s Impulse imprint, and was now releasing a steady stream of the newest of the New Thing in jazz: Horace Tapscott, Ornette Coleman, Leon Thomas—there was even a record that featured Leon Thomas and H. Rap Brown. At the top of Gil Scott-Heron’s first LP could be read the headline, “A New Black Poet,” words that had never before heralded a popular record that you could buy in a store and hear on the radio. It was no great surprise, then, that Motown would want to join the newly emergent phenomenon of mass market poetics, but it would appear from their handling of the resulting product that they didn’t quite know what to do with what they had wrought. Baraka’s album bore the legend “African Visionary Music” on its sleeve, and was part of a new Motown line titled “Black Forum.” The forum wasn’t around for long, but it was open long enough to see the appearance in the series of the work that occasioned Madhubuti’s retrospective gaze, Black Spirits: A Festival of New Black Poets in America. Like Joanne Gabbin’s Furious Flower enterprise a quarter of a century later, an effort that encompassed conferences, video series, and at least three books, Black Spirits was a movement put forward on three fronts simultaneously under the direction of Woodie King. At the heart of the project were evenings of black poetry held at the Brooklyn Academy of Music and at the Apollo Theater. There was a subsequent anthology representing the works of the poets who performed in the festival, though not always the specific poems they presented on stage, and there was a Motown album capturing the live excitement of the Apollo event. Appearing at the Apollo and on the Motown recording were Johari Amini and Clarence Major, David Henderson and Norman Jordan. Larry Neal was there, as well as the original Original Last Poets, the ones who included Felipe Luciano (For some reason, Gil Scott-Heron had to spend the first decade of his career convincing people that he really had never been in that group). There was the now nearly forgotten performance poet out of Chicago,
Amus Moore reciting his work, "Hip Men." There was Stanley Crouch, before he'd been reborn as a reactionary and bad novelist and found the MacArthur grant as his personal savior, performing the poetry that would appear on his own first LP, "Ain't No Ambulances for No Niggas Tonight." Yes, it was just that long ago and far away. And there was the child poet Kali, a precocious fifth grader from Manhattan's P. S. 188 who had already published a book of her poems and who was co-editing Child's Play Magazine with her sister, Chandra. Kali's "What's Happening to the Heroes" begins:

AUNT JEMIMA DEAD
MOTHER GOOSE IS DYING
THE LAW FOUND THE
TRUE AGE OF ROBIN (Black Spirits 106)

Lines that would make you think she'd been reading Bob Kaufman, if only Bob Kaufman's poems had been in the library at P.S. 188—But they were in the air, and Kali was nothing if not observant. On the Black Spirits LP she performs her up-to-the-raging minute twist on a child's classic:

Ladybird, Ladybird, fly away home;
Your house is on fire and Rap's on the phone.

The point here is not nostalgia for the sixties; the point is that evidence such as Black Spirits has been sitting on the shelves all these decades to demonstrate that the black poetry of the period memorialized as words in the early time by Haki Madhubuti was always more various than our histories have been willing to credit, even the children's poetry.

And it was there among those Black Spirits, those recording angels, that I first heard the voice of Larry Neal. I wasn't to know him personally till many years later, toward the end of his period in Washington, D. C., when he was directing the D. C. Commission on the Arts and Humanities. I met him as, of all things, a substitute teacher. Amiri Baraka was writer in residence one year during my graduate student days at George Washington University, and it was due to his diligence in securing substitutes to cover his courses when he was out of town for readings that I met Gaston Neal and Larry Neal. I was impressed by Larry's quiet self-possession. I recognized his voice immediately, having heard it coming from a machine at home years before, from the long-playing album of the Black Spirits festival night at the Apollo:

Holy the days of the old prune face junkie men
Holy the scag filled arms
Holy the Harlem faces
looking for space in the dead rock valleys of the City

Holy the flowers
sing for the raped holidays
and Bessie's guts spilling on the Mississippi road

Sing for all of the faces that inched
towards freedom, followed the North Star
like Harriet and Douglass

Sing holy for all of our sinner and singers
and all of the shapes and forms
of our liberation

Holy, holy, holy for the midnight hassles
for the gods of our Ancestors bellowing
sunsets and blues chanting the truth that gave us vision

_O God make us strong and ready_

Holy, holy, holy for the day we dig ourselves
and rise in the sun of our own peace and place
and space, yes Lord.

_Now go on with your bad selves._

Like any good performer who graced the Apollo stage, Neal here departs from the published versions
of his text, adding the occasional grace note that marks the event as event. His reading of the poem on
this recording differs from both the text published in the _Black Spirits_ companion volume and from
his own _Hoo Doo Hollerin’ Bebop Ghosts_. Neal’s approach in the poem is familiar to his audience,
and not just from their church hymnal. It closely parallels a significant passage in “Fragments from the
Narrative of the Black Magicians”:

God holy for the whore and the juicy lips of sweet
mackmen. Do holy for th high boppin dancers
and the purple ooze of Islamic angels. Holy for
the lynched rumps and the whip torn carcasses
and the ho holy flesh swinging over the red clay
of Georgia. And holy for the sunsets that brought
us coolness and spirit breeze. Holy for the mellow
rub of you grandparents on the straw beds that
birthed us. Do holy for your hands and the hands
of our heroes and saints who spilled their holy
guts in this once strange place of meatskinner and pervert.

_“Who dat say, ‘who dat?’ when I
say, ‘who dat’??”_ (Hoodoo 37)

This is a passage that celebrates and sings its literary ancestry. In its final invocation of an old comedy
routine, we can read not only Larry Neal’s love of popular culture, but its close kinship to so many
poems of Baraka’s. In its sheer holiness we can read everything from half-remembered segments of
Sunday morning choral readings in church to the Beat inflections of Kerouac and Kaufman.

And that is at least part of the point that I want to make. The aestheticians of the Black Arts were pursuing a cultural nationalism, but it was of necessity a cultural nationalism that, even in its most separatist modes, drew upon everything in its environment. Writing in “And Shine Swam On,” Neal argued that “a workable concept” of effective Black Power must be one

which can encompass many of the diverse ideological tendencies existent in the black community. This concept would have to allow for separatists and revolutionaries; and it would have to take into consideration the realities of contemporary American power. (Visions 9)

For that very reason, Neal reasoned, Black Power “has no one specific meaning. It is rather a kind of feeling—a kind of emotional response to one’s history” (14). This is why the Black Arts could never be the reductive monolith that some have tried to make of it in retrospect. This, too, is what I think has been overlooked in some early assessments of Neal’s interrupted trajectory. For example, Stanley Crouch, in his 1989 essay “The Incomplete Turn of Larry Neal,” appears to regret that Neal passed from the scene before he could evolve into Stanley Crouch. In Crouch’s estimation, Neal was en route to “shaping a more comprehensive aesthetic vision in light of all that had failed, in literary terms, by adhering to the doctrines of ethnic propaganda” (5). But what sort of “ethnic propaganda” is represented by the passage I have just read from “Fragments,” a passage that so closely parallels the holiness segment of Kerouac’s recitation in Pull My Daisy? What kind of ethnic propagandist carefully explains to interviewers that his poetic inspirations include not only the poets of Négritude, but also Gerard Manley Hopkins (“Interview” 12)? (And why should anyone, given Neal’s intense interest in poetic rhythm, be surprised to find that he was intrigued by Hopkins’s “sprung meter”?)

No, Neal himself left us an important cautionary note: “You’ve got to be very careful with blanket indictments. There’s always going to be someone who’ll turn up and mess up your a priori statement” (“Interview” 26). Nor am I claiming that Neal could never be wrong about anything. I think his judgment of Theodore Hudson’s book on Amiri Baraka was far too unforgiving. It is doubtful that many today would join fully in Neal’s condemnation of Albert Ayler’s New Grass [though I hasten to note Neal’s own remark in that same review, that Ayler is about something that relates to his black brothers and sisters “even though we be slow in digging you sometimes” (New Grass 40)]. But there is an important difference between being a tireless propagandist for the liberation of black people and being merely an ethnic propagandist. There is an important difference between announcing that one will not measure one’s address to the admonitions of white people and being simply an ethnic propagandist. And, let’s face it, a poet who name checks Melvin B. Tolson already has a more comprehensive aesthetic vision. There is no doubt that Larry Neal was in constant motion, and that the motion was increasingly comprehensive. But we do ourselves and history a disservice when we pretend that either Black Power or the Black Arts were ever just one thing.

That’s a lesson Larry Neal had drawn from the inner depths of the music. In his review of Pharoah Sanders’s early album Karma, published in Cricket in 1969, Neal, adopting an intriguing verb tense, says again and again of Pharoah that “he would make us dig ourselves” (8). The music, Neal saw, had this claim on the future, had this way of attaching itself to the conditional, making of reflection and meditation imperatives. That was the comprehensive aesthetic vision signaled by the names on the masthead of Cricket, a journal whose slogan was, after all, “Black Music in Evolution!” Cricket’s vision encompassed the varying aesthetics of Amiri Baraka, Larry Neal, A. B. Spellman, Sun Ra,
Milford Graves, Cecil Taylor, Gaston Neal, James Stewart, Haki Madhubuti, Norman Jordan, Ben Caldwell, Mwanafunzi Katibu and, as the masthead put it, “more to come.” The very same issue that carried Neal’s disapproving review of Ayler’s New Grass also featured Ayler’s own astonishing, Nat Turner-like statement, “To Mr. Jones—I Had A Vision.”

A workable black aesthetic, as Neal argued even at the height of the Black Arts Movement, would of necessity be encompassing; would out of necessity cause you to dig yourself; would rise to the necessities of the day. In this it was like the blues. There are twelve bar blues, eight bar blues, sixteen bar blues. There are three chord blues, one chord blues, and the who knows how many chord blues when of a John Lee Hooker. There are political blues like J. B. Lenoir’s “Eisenhower Blues” and there are blue lessons in economies, like Buddy Guy’s “The Mighty Dollar Done Fell.” There are Blues ballads, and there are blues as intricately scripted as the most hermetic of hieroglyphs. Larry Neal knew all of this, lived all of this, wrote all of this. At the end of his “Holy Days,” he told his audience, “Now go on with your bad self.” His words for Pharoah Sanders are words we can speak to ourselves as we recollect him now: “He would make us dig ourselves. So be careful how you talk about the blues; they are here too.”

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