

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

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

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

C. S. Giscombe

Miscegenation Studies

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2. Essex Hotel lobby, San Francisco

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

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

the only black student in the class.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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