

Mediating The Inexplicable

An Interview with Major Jackson (Winter 2009)

[TRAPDOOR SUN](#): Where Authenticity Gives Birth to Inspiration

Stephen King once wrote, “Poetry is better than ever. ... there are also many brilliant practitioners of the art out there.” Poet Major Jackson is just that, a brilliant practitioner. We stole some time with Major to talk about our first black President, the city of Philadelphia, and his position as Poetry Editor of the *Harvard Review*. Once you are have finished the morning paper and have poured your second cup of coffee take a bite out of Major Jackson’s interview. There’s plenty to chew on.

TDS: In “Blunts” from *Leaving Saturn* you equate the writings of a poet to the “tongue of God.” In light of this, could you explain the poet’s responsibilities as you see them?

JACKSON: Poets have long mediated the inexplicable, mysterious aspects of human existence, even our murky interior lives, the thoughts we possess within such as love, envy, grief, explicit joy, acute angst and depression in language that divines our collective and individual journeys, somehow rendering life less dazzling and enigmatic.

To some extent, this means that the poet is responsible only to their own swirling through the cosmos, but his captured, stylized self, his lyric expressions, become emblematic of our own.

TDS: Do you feel the role of the black poet, and more generally the black artist, has changed since the election of Barack Obama? There’s no question that racism will continue to exist, but are there any specific goals of the black artist that have been reached with this event? And will it change your work?

JACKSON: I’ve been attempting to articulate the role African American humanists, poets, playwrights, novelists, artists, and musicians have played in the struggle for dignity and recognition in the election of Barack Obama. It is easy to draw a line between Martin Luther King or Malcolm X or Frederick Douglas and the countless number of unnamed African American religious and political leaders who have marched, demanded, and forcefully articulated a vision of America that is inclusive, a vision that led us to this point where we, as a polity, can elect an African American to serve in the highest office of the United States of America.

However, it takes not too much nuance to realize that those who most laid the foundation of that vision were those who had the imaginative capacity to create this moment before it existed in their plays, in their novels and short stories, in their improvised solos, to create songs, to utter, name, and represent a kind of freedom in their lyric poems, to bend the language so that it is not only “dreamed a world” but became that world. Ultimately, these folks saw the genius and capacity for what America could be as articulated in its founding documents.

African American artists will continue to write their lives, with great or little consciousness of their identity, but, maybe more importantly, because of their boldness of expression and lovely assertion, as has happened in the past with women writers and scholars, with Latino writers and scholars, with Gay writers and scholars, and so on, others have and will continue to follow.

But the work of African American poets and artists cannot be proscriptive or continue to take on the burden of leading the country into some moral awareness of itself as a nation of diverse beings. The talent of so many artists will wither and die. This cannot be the sole agenda of Black Art. The agenda can be both socially driven as well as formally and aesthetically adventurous, even despite its surface apolitical stance.

TDS: In his book [Catching the Big Fish](#), filmmaker [David Lynch](#) calls Philadelphia “a hellhole.” And even though you clearly hold Philadelphia in high regard, in your poem “Leaving Saturn” you call it “Death’s headquarters.” How does the dark side of Philadelphia inform your work?

JACKSON: I disagree with David Lynch. Philadelphia is paradisaical, even where blight exists. That phrase “Death’s headquarters” came directly from the mouth of [Sun Ra](#), who uttered these words after his arrival to Philadelphia, riffing and signifying on the notion of Philadelphia as the birthplace of freedom, where, of course, the United States of Constitution was signed at Congress Hall on present day Independence Mall.

Sun Ra believed the cosmos, and particularly planet Earth, needed healing and rejuvenation, and that it was his music that would revive it. I enjoyed that notion, and loved the antagonistic space Sun Ra and other artists occupy.

TDS: How has your position as the Poetry Editor of the *Harvard Review* and the move to a more rural area affected your work?

JACKSON: Editing is strenuous and unremarked work, but I enjoy whole-heartedly the process of reading and soliciting and seeing work into publication. For me, it’s curating of the highest order. My hope is that the poems delight and fill a space in the spirit that one did not realize needed addressed until the poem came along.

Editing does make me hyper-aware of my own work. How one is able to subject themselves and their work to such scrutiny is baffling at times. Being able to generate some psychic and emotional distance between the creative work and one’s self is one of the important developments a true artist has to make.

My Vermont is quaint comparative to My Philadelphia. Green in all the right places. I’ve yet to ponder seriously the move to Burlington, Vermont has made on my creative life. I mean: it’s a stunningly beautiful place, with its challenges, of course. It’s a kind of spiritual privilege to be here. I’m looking forward to writing poems about dreaming in green and noticing cyclical changes in the air.

TDS: Which poet has influenced your work the most? Are there any contemporary poets who excite you?

JACKSON: I'm reading [Cavafy](#) now. [Rilke](#), too. I'm looking for poets whose pitch and utterances reach for the heavens, the angelic, or for poets for whom Eros is meaningful. Sentimentality doesn't bother me. I've a problem with people who are troubled by emotion or consider certain kinds of utterances and imagery, assertions in poems. I've fallen in love with so many poets; sometimes three or four at a time. Who can resist [Neruda](#) in love? Seriously.

Contemporary poets? Too many to name and they are my peers and it's not typically a good idea to spotlight a few blades of grass in a field tall prairie: [Malena Morling](#), [Claudia Rankine](#), [Harryette Mullens](#), [Terrance Hayes](#), and on and on. Really, I could just name drop till the cauldron is over-running and we're standing above it stirring our stew of grass.

What I will say, however, about contemporary poetry is that it is alive and well, and I suspect, I am predicting a shift and restlessness that will align itself with the changes of our age.

TDS: Tell us a bit about the Dark Room Collective. How has being a member of this group advanced your work?

JACKSON: Dark Room Collective was an important moment in time of black literature development in a greater, larger cultural moment in which black artists born between 1955 and 1975 found their voice and identity that coincided with a maturity of what black art could do in America post-Civil Rights. It could wear argyles and throw-up a Black Power fist. It could listen to Stravinsky and Public Enemy's Yo, Bum Rush the Show, in the span of an hour. It could absorb and read Robert Hayden, Jean Toomer, alongside William Faulkner and not miss a beat. So, it was in Cambridge/Boston circa 1987 with a group of aspiring black writers and artists who spanned outwards with large arms to embrace any black writer who had a sophistication and commitment to art and artfulness.

TDS: In *Hoops*, your longest poem is a letter to Gwendolyn Brooks. What does her work mean to you and what do you hope your poem does for its readers?

JACKSON: [Gwendolyn Brooks](#) was one of the greatest poets of the twentieth century. She modeled a way to live in the world and in the world of poetry. I hope my poem serves as an impetus for non-readers of her work to become aware and to seek her out.

To the initiated, I'm hoping to highlight some of the joy of writing poetry, of seeing, both with aesthetic eyes and political eyes, which is what she encouraged us all to do.

TDS: In "Designer Kisses," from your forthcoming collection, *Holding Company*, you refer to the "empire of blab." Could you elaborate on this? And how does this empire relate to world of the speaker in the poem?

Designer Kisses

I'm glum about your sportive flesh in the empire of blab,
And the latest guy running his trendy tongue like a tantalizing surge
Over your molars, how droll. Love by a graveyard is redundant,
But the skin is an obstacle course like Miami where we are
Inescapably consigned: tourists keeping the views new.
What as yet we desire, our own fonts of adoration. By morning,
We're laid out like liquid timepieces, each other's exercise
In perpetual enchantment, for there is that beach in us that is untranslatable;
Footprints abound. I understand: you're at a clothes rack at Sak's
Lifting a white linen blouse, at tear's edge, wondering.

JACKSON: That phrase just came to me one spring on a subway train up to Morningside Heights when I first taught at Columbia University. I was attempting to write a poem about sex and love and New York as the Empire State came to me. But, it also alludes to art, literature, and poetry as a kind of kingdom wherein multiple conversations are simultaneously taking place that leads us to a kind of babble in the end. How does individuality assert itself in art under such awarenesses?

TDS: Is "Going to Meet the Man," also from *Holding Company* , a description of a specific event? If so, can you tell us about the event and your immediate response to it?

Going to Meet the Man

As if one day, a grand gesture of the brain, an expired
subscription to silence, a decision raw as tabasco peppers
in the mouth, a renewal to decency like a trash can
smashing a storefront window, like shattering the glass face
of a time-clock, where once a man forced to the ground,
a woman spread-eagled against a wall, where a shot into
the back of an unarmed teen, finally, like a decisive spark,
the engine of action, as if a civilian standoff: on one side:
a barricade of shields, helmets, batons, and pepperspray;
on the other: a cocktail of fire, all that is just and good.

JACKSON: The poem is a commissioned response to William Cordova's brilliant painting of the same title. Both the poem and the painting are included in an exhibition currently up at the [Fleming Museum](#) on University of Vermont's campus where I work titled "More Than Bilingual."

In the painting, a cop car emits flames and smoke as if a molotov cocktail had been thrown into the interior. Thus, I imagined a riot, and recent images of protest around the globe, especially in relation to Bush's war, took root and evolved into that poem.

TDS: Do you have any advice for high school teachers and college professors who are trying to engage their students in poetry? Is there a bridge that can be built between the

lyrical writings of musicians whose work they incessantly consume and the poetry of someone like you?

JACKSON: Teach students to learn and cherish ambiguity; poems will give them glimpses into themselves, but that truth-telling quality cannot be anatomized. Teach students to discern the difference between rhetoric and cliché in poetry and true, lyric song, but it takes a special kind of teacher to create a lesson plan around [Terrance Hayes](#) work or [Harryette Mullens](#). That's the bridge, poetry as a "Song of Myself," but not mere self-expression, but a linguistic vehicle that amplifies the self.

TDS: Besides *Holding Company* , what do you have coming up next?

JACKSON: I'm still working on a verse play, a few collaborations with musicians and dances, and see on the horizon some poems that should have been written ten years ago, similar in scope and range to my first book *Leaving Saturn* .

Major Jackson is the author of two collections of poetry: *Hoops* (Norton: 2006) and *Leaving Saturn* (University of Georgia: 2002), winner of the Cave Canem Poetry Prize and finalist for a National Book Critics Circle Award. *Hoops* was a finalist for an NAACP Image Award in the category of Outstanding Literature - Poetry. His third volume of poetry *Holding Company* is forthcoming from W.W. Norton. He is a recipient of a Whiting Writers' Award and has been honored by the Pew Fellowship in the Arts and the Witter Bynner Foundation in conjunction with the Library of Congress. He served as a creative arts fellow at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University and as the Jack Kerouac Writer-in-Residence at University of Massachusetts-Lowell. Major Jackson is the Richard Dennis Green and Gold Professor at University of Vermont and a core faculty member of the Bennington Writing Seminars. He serves as the Poetry Editor of the *Harvard Review* .

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