

Major Talent

UVM's most prized poet lines up between Langston Hughes and hip-hop by David Warner

“How can you stand it?”

Major Jackson, an award-winning poet teaching at the University of Vermont, has heard that question a lot since moving here two years ago.

The first time he heard it was from a white woman in Middlebury “who shall remain nameless,” says Jackson. “I knew exactly what she meant.” She was asking how Jackson, a black man, could stand to live in the 49th whitest state in the Union. Maybe she’d read his poetry. Much of Jackson’s award-winning debut volume, *Leaving Saturn*, is gloriously, bitterly urban — a paean and a dirge to the African-American neighborhoods of Philadelphia: “a bed of living gravestones” where “grand boulevards... make a fiction of suffering” and “all’s combustible.” Jackson sings of crack-addicted mothers, weed-choked back alleys and Mr. Pate’s Barbershop, with “the color television bolted to/ a ceiling like the one I watched all night/ in a waiting room at St. Joseph’s/ while my cousin recovered from gunshots.” It all seems a long, long way from Vermont. But Jackson’s quick to point out the assumption behind the recurring question is wrong.

“My world has never, ever been segregated,” says Jackson — not his Catholic elementary school, nor his competitive-admission public high school, nor Temple University, where he earned a degree in accounting. He did graduate work in the MFA creative writing program at the University of Oregon, where his students included kids from logging towns who’d never known a person of color. His wife, social worker Kristen Johanson, is white, and he’s happily ensconced in South Burlington with two kids, a dog and a tenure-track position. Even *Leaving Saturn* shifts its city-centric focus from time to time: The poet runs across Truro beaches, rides into a Kansas sunset, drives to “a pass snow-blocked” in the Cascade Mountains. The more relevant question might be, “How can you stand the expectations?” “I’m convinced that Jackson is going to be one of the voices they study when poetry of the early 21st century is written about,” says UVM English Department Chair Robyn Warhol. “That’s not something I’d say about anyone who’s been in the English Department in UVM in the last 100 years.”

At 35, with one book of poetry published and another scheduled for release next year, Jackson has won most of the prestigious prizes available to a young writer — 20 of them in the last decade — including the 2003 Whiting Writers Award, given to “emerging writers of exceptional talent and promise.” He’s received fellowships from the MacDowell Artist Colony, the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown and Bread Loaf. He got a \$50,000 Pew Fellowship in the Arts and a National Book Critics Circle nomination for *Leaving Saturn*. On the day after Town Meeting, under the auspices of a Witter Bynner Fellowship from the Library of Congress, he is organizing a reading by Vermont poets.

It seems Jackson’s mother had a feeling about her son’s accomplishments when she named him Major. And while he lives up to his name, his manner is unassuming. He’s a compact man with a deep, gentle voice and a steady air of amused watchfulness. His long-range project is not self-aggrandizement but to make poetry matter.

He wonders how a writer can come to grips with “social ills — abuse, class differences, all those impolite subjects for poetry... How do we make sense of it? I’ve been fed by that question,” Jackson explains. Truth be told, he did wonder at first whether he and his poetry would be able to stand the move north. “I expressed concern and worry about how being here might affect my work,” Jackson says. “But it’s a part of who I am to be drawn to these subjects, no matter where I am.”

He quickly discovered that the same social ills exist in Vermont as in North Philadelphia. A woman was killed in a crack house the week after he moved here. A homeless man died of exposure. He and his son were tailed by a security guard when they went shopping for snow gear at J.C. Penney — in short, plenty of fodder for a poet who opens his eyes to the worlds colliding around him, and uses poetry to face up to the damage.

“It’s easy to write about snow,” Jackson says. “It’s tougher to write about someone freezing in the snow.”

It’s a chilly afternoon on the last day of January when I find myself at the dining room table in Major Jackson’s light-filled home, piling lunchmeat and cheese on sandwich rolls. He and his wife are serving hoagies, a Philadelphia culinary staple, in homage to past connections: Jackson and I knew each other for a while in Philly in the mid-’90s when he was writing about hip-hop for the weekly paper I edited there. We briefly discuss the condiment question; traditionalists opt for oil, but there’s a camp that favors mayonnaise. “I’m bad, I used to work at a deli,” says Jackson. “And so I just put it all on.”

“Yeah,” concurs his wife. “You put a little of everything...”

“A little of everything.”

Jackson has always existed in at least two worlds at once. He experienced firsthand W.E.B. Du Bois’ famously controversial theory of “double-consciousness,” which reflected a time when black self-image and white America were at odds. Even though conditions have changed, that duality remains, says Jackson. You have “always a sense of yourself as part of the larger culture, but [you’re] also very much aware of your identity, your racial identity.”

Aptly enough, one of the poems in *Leaving Saturn* is entitled “Between Two Worlds.” It’s one of several — including the title piece — written in the persona of jazz musician and self-styled extraterrestrial Sun Ra. His personal cosmology embraced galaxies, but in this poem the musician is confined to the space behind a curtain so that his band won’t be seen by the white audience in a 1940s nightclub. Jackson uses the image as an acute metaphor for double consciousness: Sun Ra trapped by the system, but sailing on “Wind synths, organ/ Music. My Myth Space Lab, next best/ Thing to a crystal ball.”

Jackson’s writing soars whenever he writes about music. It’s in his blood: one of his grandfathers collected jazz records and took him to see Lionel Hampton; his father’s mother danced in the Cotton Club and dated Cab Calloway. Jackson recognizes, as Sun Ra did, that music can be a way to pierce the curtain of identity.

Still, Jackson has never found much escape from the sense of “betweenness,” even within black communities. Raised in North Philadelphia by his maternal grandparents until age 8, he was acutely aware that his family’s economic status was different from his neighbors’. “You say North Philadelphia, most people think impoverishment. That wasn’t my experience, but that was the experience of my friends — and that’s where the self-consciousness comes into play.”

His parents were separated, but both had solid middle-class jobs, and they lived in prosperous black neighborhoods. The contrast with North Philly “was very difficult for me,” he says, “because although the faces were the same, the pockets weren’t the same.” Eventually, Jackson’s mother remarried and he moved back in with her.

He remembers the way people reacted to “The Cosby Show.” “Most people in this country thought no way in the world could there be a household like that, black lawyer and a black physician... My best friend in high school, both of his parents were physicians, so when I’d come across people at Temple who’d say that could never happen, I’d say, ‘Are you kidding?’” He has been the target of such skepticism himself. Working in the computer lab at Temple, Jackson was playing an e-version of Jeopardy with another student, who was white.

“The Final Jeopardy question was very simple: ‘The art movement that sounds like a call to a parent.’ He didn’t know it was Dada, I got the answer correct, and he was furious. I’ve never seen someone so angry. He wanted to know, how did I know that? It just boggled his mind that I could potentially have that kind of awareness.” He accused Jackson of having played the game before — the assumption being that there was no other way he could have known the answer.

“It’s about accepting intelligence,” Jackson says. “We marvel at it.”

Who marvels?

“Specifically white people,” he responds first, but later adds that he’s encountered suspicion of black intellectualism among blacks, too.

“I think we’re all implicated.” Jackson’s high school memories include specific instances when he was challenged for being different. Once, a student tore his headphones from his head to find out what he was listening to. “It wasn’t Chuck D, it was The Cure, and it was like, ‘What is this?’” Another time, on the bus to a game with his basketball team, a teammate stole Jackson’s journal and began reading his poetry aloud. Everyone laughed. It was so embarrassing that he stopped writing for a while. “I felt exposed; it was my interior self being read back to me. That was the other thing — it sounded weird to me, like, ‘Who is this guy?’”

Now Jackson’s son is being assailed by similarly confused attitudes about blackness. Langston is 11; his mother, who is black, lives in Philadelphia. Langston has lived with his father in Oregon, in New Orleans, where Jackson got his first professor’s job, in Provincetown, and now in Burlington. The boy is polite and articulate, and his teachers love the knowledge of the world he brings to the classroom. But Langston came home one day and said that he’d heard a rumor that a friend had accused him of trying to act “more black than what he really is.”

“What is that?” asks Jackson. “What is acting black?”

“My mind spins,” adds Johanson. “So this kid [who is white] is claiming knowledge of blackness. He has the understanding.” “He has a blackometer!” Jackson says, laughing.

They can laugh about it, but Jackson’s been measured by the blackometer, himself — been accused of being an Oreo, he says, by other blacks. He was refused service in a black barbershop in a poor section of New Orleans. It’s as much an issue of class as race, yet the irony is that his poetry is celebrated for its vivid evocation of inner-city black culture. “I’m exhausted, to be honest, talking about race,” Jackson says.

But he can’t ignore indignities that involve his son — like the classmate’s comment, or the J.C. Penney incident. Jackson complained to management that he and Langston had been the victims of minority profiling, and his colleagues at UVM petitioned the store to condemn the practice. Corporate lawyers called Jackson to make sure he was mollified. Otherwise, Burlington is more likely to offer a surfeit of brotherhood. Johanson reminds him, “You came back from the health-food store, first week or two that we were here, and you were like, ‘Every white person had to say hi to me. I mean, I love alternative spaces, but jeez, I’m tired of smiling!’”

Neither he nor Johanson feels that being an interracial couple is a particularly big deal. “Both of us are interested in working through issues of sexuality as well as race as well as class as well as you name it,” says Johanson. “It’s a fascination of mine as a counselor and a human being, and of his as a poet and a human being. But in the relationship I don’t remember that ever coming into play.”

Their baby, 18-month-old James Welden Romare Jackson, is adorable and, no surprise, highly verbal in a screechy kind of way. His name pays tribute to African-American cultural history through the black artist Romare Bearden, and to Johanson's Minnesota roots. James and Welden are names from her family tree. It's a nicely symbiotic coincidence that the name also recalls James Weldon Johnson, a venerated figure in early 20th-century black poetry.

Like any writer, Jackson must contend with literary ancestors. He is particularly attuned to the canon of great 20th-century African-American writers: Johnson, Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, Robert Hayden. A course he taught last fall traced a path from these poets through the Black Arts movement of the '60s — Amiri Baraka, Nikki Giovanni — through to the pioneers of hip-hop.

He's experienced firsthand the benevolence of that tradition. When he was an undergrad at Temple taking his first poetry class with Sonia Sanchez, she happened to see him on campus one day and asked what he was up to. Computer lab, he answered. "She asked me if I wanted to go up to Bard [College] with her and bring some poems." It was an impromptu invitation to share a trip to New York, courtesy of boxer Joe Frazier's limo company, and read on the same program as a famous writer — two, actually, because Nobel Prize winner Chinua Achebe was also on the bill.

"I ran home and grabbed my poems," Jackson recalls.

He writes about that experience in a poem dedicated to Sanchez and Achebe in *Leaving Saturn*. And he's now working on a book in verse that posthumously thanks another mentor for an unexpected offer. In 1994, just a few years out of Temple, he was literary curator for an arts center in Philadelphia where Gwendolyn Brooks came to read on her way to giving a major lecture for the National Endowment of the Humanities in New York City.

"She asked me if I could drive her. When we got up there... to the Plaza Hotel, she said, 'Do you happen to have any poems on you?' I just so happened to have some. She invited me and another young lady to read before her."

These may seem like moments of rare good luck, but Jackson sees both as part of a black writers' continuum. "You read Brooks' biography, she talks about the generosity of Langston Hughes. So it's almost like this is what they inherited."

Jackson is writing his poem to Brooks in the form of a letter. It's modeled after W.H. Auden's 1936 "A Letter to Lord Byron" and takes the same demanding rhyme scheme and witty tone. He thanks Brooks for the opportunity she gave him, but he's got questions, too, about the direction in which she took her poetry in the '60s. Brooks at her best combined social consciousness with impeccable technique, but after attending a black writers' conference at Fisk University in 1967 she seemed to pay less attention to formal considerations, vowing to write consciously "for, about and to black people."

In the poem, Jackson imagines confronting her about that decision: "...Why the conversion/ At Fisk in '67? Why dull the edge/ Of a weapon, then hand over your badge?" The critique, he says, is that "her work lost something in making that transition. Her work wasn't informed by dedication to the art as much as it was informed by race politics."

Major Jackson has different priorities — owing, no doubt, to Sanchez, who made sure her students knew their way around poetic forms from haiku to villanelle. Now retired but still living in Philadelphia, Sanchez recalls

that Jackson's poetry required "hauling in, like a lot of young people's work" when he first started out. He shows how far he's come in a poem from *Leaving Saturn*, in which he addresses race, class and the city without sacrificing craft.

From the LIBERTY BELL's glass asylum,
tourists emerge convinced of a cracked republic,
and for signs further join the edge of the human
circle where you break-dance the bionic two-step. Democracy depends upon such literacy.
Snapshots. Maps. The vendor's fist of stars and stripes —
She sewed pennants. The public gallery of bronze statues
whose Generals grimace frightened looks
at the darkening scenery. Your Kangoled head spins
on cardboard, a windmill garnering allegiance.
Here prayed those who signed for Independence.
Break beats blasting your limbs to Market,
you're ghostbloom in the camera's flash,
so they call you FURIOUS ROCKER, CRAZY LEGS, —
The circle tightens like a colony, horse-and-carriages
hemming OLDE CITY to scraps of time;
squirrels pretremble then leap to bark.
Tourists ease on shades to enhance the dark.

Major Jackson's use of classical forms in poems about jazz, hip-hop and the inner city is "unique as far as I know among serious poets writing today," says UVM's Warhol.

But if the mix is new, the subject matter is not. As Sanchez points out, "This is not the first time" writers have explored "the kinds of things Major's writing about."

So why has his poetry attracted such attention? Is it just about writing talent? Was his success at all due to a skill at politicking?

"All of it," Jackson says with a self-deprecating laugh. Then he reneges a bit. "I won't say all of it. It was just being aware of not so much the places to be but where I could go that would help me as an artist — and in turn that has allowed me to make connections."

Later, recalling his time in the highly social arts scene in Provincetown, he adds, "That's the other thing — you gotta go to all the good literary parties."

"He's made for 'em," Johanson agrees.

"Definitely," murmurs Jackson. "Love 'em. Love 'em."

Warhol compliments his networking abilities, too: "He's eminently easy to deal with."

Sanchez says it's a matter of timing — academia is finally paying attention to minority poets who not too many years ago would have been ignored.

Both Warhol and Sanchez emphasize that, first and foremost, Jackson is a success because of the quality of his writing. "I'm often surprised how many people think there's some kind of formula" for success as a poet,

Jackson explains. His schedule is grueling. With an infant in the house and parenting duties to share, he frequently writes between the hours of one and five in the morning.

Ambition may be as important as hard work. In graduate school, Jackson predicted to his friends that he expected to have his first book published two or three years after getting his degree, and five years out would be working on his second. “And they all thought I was fuckin’ arrogant!” he says, still sounding a bit bewildered at the reaction. His forecasting turned out to be correct.

Major’s not seen too often at Vermont poetry events, but he’s about to raise his local profile with the Town Meeting Poetry Reading March 3 at the Fletcher Free Library in Burlington. The lineup includes a number of UVM poets, including President Dan Fogel and occasional Seven Days contributors Angela Patten and Daniel Lusk. Jackson is hoping that at least some of the poems “address an issue of civil, national or global importance,” but it’s not mandatory. Issues of content aside, participating poet Lusk sees the gathering as potentially significant in itself. “I think it is important for poets to have a role in the community, and maybe this is the way to do that. Just to be there is an important gesture.”

Sanchez shares a belief that poetry can play a larger role in the world. Asked what advice she’d give him now, Major Jackson’s first poetry teacher recommends, “Go beyond just writing a good poem. Become a better human being and write poetry that will make people better human beings, and by writing good poetry come full circle to becoming a good teacher... I wasn’t making a lot of money, but I was making a lot of poets.”

Last December, in the final session of his Black Arts/hip-hop seminar, Jackson was making those connections naturally. The task for the day was the oral presentation of term-paper proposals. The mood was orderly yet relaxed, with students seated at tables arranged in a square, their backpacks, iMacs and Dasani bottles spread out in front of them.

Jackson, in slouchy but suitably professorial tan sports jacket and green corduroys, stood on the perimeter, moving during discussion to different sides of the room. Of 19 students, two were African-American, the rest were white.

The lopsided ratio lent some unintended irony to the discussion. A white female student suggested that Nikki Giovanni’s bourgeois background made her anger inauthentic. After another white student’s presentation on “nation-conscious rap,” a self-possessed black student named Bjorn Pink asked the loaded question, “What do you mean by ‘urban’?” Lit-crit jargon leaked into Jackson’s remarks every once in a while: “Nikki Giovanni problematizes the feminine other.”

But the overall mood was impressively open. It was, in the best sense of the word, a discourse, with students’ comments respected by one another and by the professor. And it was fun: Jackson rolled up his sleeves during a discussion of Robert Hayden and announced, “I wish he were alive, I’d love to talk to him about this.” Later, he went off on a tangent about Denzel Washington. “I always do that — start talking poetry, get into pop culture,” he confessed. His links to some of the figures being discussed — Sun Ra and the Philly hip-hop group The Roots — seemed, sweetly enough, to be a source of pride for his students.

Because it was the last day of class, Jackson had to wait outside the classroom so that the students could fill out their end-of-semester course evaluations. He told me that he’d been afraid his evaluations from the previous semester would come back negative because he’d had to take so many trips off-campus for readings, awards, dinners — the increasing obligations of an increasingly famous poet. But no one complained. In fact, one student told him he liked the fact that his professor was out and about; for him, “it was a bridge from the larger world into the classroom.”

Near the end of the class, Jackson asked a key question. “You’re about to graduate as English majors,” he reminded the group. “Really, can a poem affect the way we see ourselves, and see others? That gets to the heart of this enterprise: Can it be transformative? I’d like to see evidence of that.”

In many ways — in his own poems, in the lives of his students, in the hearts and minds of his readers — Major Jackson is producing a major body of evidence.