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The Anne Szumigalski Memorial Lecture

Frederick Ward: Writing as Jazz¹

For Diana Brebner (1956-2001)²

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Diagnosis of a Disappearance

One of the dull clichés, one of the dreary stereotypes, one of the drab platitudes, to be spouted by anyone deigning to comment on African Diasporic writing, is that the black author is a would-be or a used-‘ta’-be musician or singer. In the popular perception of popular cultures, every black writer is, at birth, swaddled in sheet music, and begins to sing even before he or she can speak. These conceptions also attach to African-Canadian writers, who, already viewed as bizarre exotica by their compatriots, are presumed to have taken up print keyboards because they have eschewed, perversely, the natural, musical ones.

Yet, there is—insidiously—bountiful reason for the common belief. For instance, an entire school of poets—the “Dub” poets—that is, Lillian Allen, Klyde Broox, Afua Cooper, Rudyard Fearon, Clifton Joseph, Ahdri Zinha Mandiela and Motion (Wendy Braithwaite), to name only a Toronto-based and principally Jamaican-born few, perform their works within a musical tapestry, often a form of Reggae (the Jamaican influence) or Rap (the African-American orientation).³ Certainly, Ghana-born, Jamaica-raised, Canada-educated poet Kwame Dawes performs reggae and drafts poetry (plus ‘lit-crit’). British Columbia-based poet Wayde Compton DJs at his own readings, while Montreal’s Kaie Kellough mixes French and English in ways as radical as any Jimi Hendrix guitar solo. Kenyan-Canadian novelist David Odhiambo sketches a novel-memoir of an acid-jazz band leader in skanky East End Vancouver in his *diss / ed banded nation* (1998). Toronto-centred poets Dwayne Morgan and Andrea Thompson release books and records that are recordings of their books. Literary figures like Trinidadian-Canadian poets Dionne Brand and Claire Harris, Tobagan-Canadian M. NourbeSe Philip, Barbadian-Canadian novelist Austin Clarke and the Haitian-Canadian novelist Dany Laferrière refer to African-American jazz and blues singers in their creative writings as well as in their

essays. If we add the Canadian poets (black) who often employ jazz in their performances, or as subject matter, then almost every African-Canadian poet may be said to be vested, one way or another, in music.

But the *baddest* (in the 1960s Black English sense), hippest and mos' def' word-composer-arranger in Canada is the least *sounded*, the least *heard*, the least *understood*. I refer here to Frederick E. Ward—or Fred Ward—whose published oeuvre consists only of three novels, two poetry collections and scatterings of stories, plays and poems among anthologies, one of them (edited by Ward himself), now forty years old (see *Anthology of Nine Baha'i Poets* [1966]). African American by birth—in Kansas City, Missouri, in 1937—and resident in Canada since 1970, Ward has received always ecstatic acclaim, yet remains as opaquely phantasmal as a ghost writer, save that his obscurity is not chosen. He is excluded from African-American anthologies and omitted from Canadian ones.⁴ One cannot find Ward in either *The Oxford Companion to African-American Literature* (1997) or *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature* (1997). All of his books are out of print. He is the Invisible Man of African-American literature and the Sasquatch of English-Canadian literature. That he lays legitimate claim to the attention of two national(ist) literatures explains his rejection by both. His one-time publisher, May Cutler of Tundra Books of Montreal, said, a quarter-century ago when his third novel appeared, “It’s just not permissible [sic] for a black American writer to live in Nova Scotia” (Kimber 37).

Cutler has a point: few African-American writers resident in Canada have won sustained attention. (One exception is probably Josiah Henson, the putative real-life model for Harriet Beecher Stowe’s ‘Uncle Tom,’ whose own ghost-written memoirs appeared in 1849.) Cutler’s assumption that white Canadians don’t want to hear about African America from a writer living here is also probably right. For complex reasons of nationalism, European-Canadians prefer to hear tales about the supposed degradation of African-American life from writers living *there*. Cutler is also depressingly correct to assume that African-Americans, for complex reasons of *their own* nationalism, may shy from expatriate writers (the later Richard Wright, the post-mortem Frank Yerby).⁵

Still, white ethnocentrism also plays a role in apportioning obscurity to black writers—especially those working in non-mimetic modes. This phenomenon transgresses borders. U.S. African-Americanist Aldon Lynn Nielsen, in his important book, *Black Chant: Languages of African-American Postmodernism* (1997), registers that “critics of white poetry simply seldom look at black writers while compiling their genealogies of aesthetic evolution” (13). Rather, shamelessly, there exists, he feels, a “disinclination on the part of most critics to discover African-American *literary* precedents for white avant-garde writing. . .” (71). In fact, “Historians of avant-garde movements in American poetry have tended to write as if black Americans had little direct involvement, and hence our histories have tended to elide the powerful influence of black poets on American verse in general and ‘experimental’ verse in particular” (259). Thus, T.J. Anderson III, in his article, “Body and Soul: Bob Kaufman’s *Golden Sardine*” (2000), argues that “Writers like Kenneth Rexroth and Jack Kerouac have received more notoriety for their jazz-inspired verse than have innovators like Bob Kaufman, Amiri Baraka and Ted Joans. Why have there been several documentaries done on Jack Kerouac that highlight the importance of jazz to his writing, but few done on Amiri Baraka? Even a recent compilation by Rhino Records called *The Beat Generation* fails to include any work by

these three African American innovators” (345, n.1). European-Canadian editors and critics have been no better at chronicling black participation in the construction of either Canadian literature or music. A current, flagrant example is the treatment of the Spoken Word movement. Certainly, discussions of the development of ‘Spoken Word’ poetry in Canada have focussed, naturally, on supposed white innovators such as the sound-poetry quartet, The Four Horsemen (bp nichol, Steven McCaffrey, Rafael Barreto-Rivera and Paul Dutton), active mainly between 1970 and the mid-1980s.⁶ But nothing is said of Brand’s work with the Gayap Drummers, or of the championing of Dub poetry by Allen, Joseph and others, yet these black creators were disseminating rhythm backed with reasoned dissent throughout the 1970s and 1980s—in Toronto, the capital of English-Canadian, media culture, while Ward was melding poetry and drama in Halifax and Montreal. In his review (1999/2000) of *CARNIVOCAL: A Celebration of Sound Poetry* (1999), a compact disc anthology of Anglo-Canadian sound-poetry edited by Stephen Scobie and Douglas Barbour, Spoken Word poet John Sobol recognizes that the implicit canonization practised by the editors enacts some salient omissions:

In their liner notes, Barbour and Scobie contend that ‘[w]hile sound poetry borders on and sometimes overlaps other performance-based genres (song, rap, dub, slam), it is distinguished by its relative nonreliance on syntax and discursive statement.’ But wait a minute. If sound poetry at times overlaps with dub, rap or slam poetry, why is there no non-discursive dub, rap or slam poetry on *Carnivocal*? How can the editors claim, as they do, to be representing ‘the range of contemporary sound poetry in Canada,’ when that range—by their own admission—encompasses so much more than appears on their cd?” (“Anti-Anthrax” 40).

Sobol continues on to ask, with just irritation, “what is gained by creating an almost exclusively white, male, Anglo-Canadian sound poetry canon? And what is lost? Why are the editors manning the aesthetic barricades when the real carnival is underway outside?” (“Anti-Anthrax” 40).⁷

While Eurocentrism—and African-American-centrism—bedevil the acceptance of Ward’s work, he is not just relegated to obscurity because he is a minority in two challenging contexts (an African-American expat in Canada; a Canadian relocatee *ex* African America), but also because he is a writer whose texts are profoundly, ambitiously, grounded in music, particularly jazz. His plight is not just one of ostracism from the “national” literatures that should be most accommodating for his work. It is much worse: he is the devotee of a deviant genre, namely, jazz-inflected poetry; jazzy fiction.

Observe that practically every significant *black* jazz-poet or jazz-novelist is, ironically, correspondingly obscure—save for Amiri Baraka and Ntozake Shange (who is known, really, for one *great* work: *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* [1977]).⁸ In the Preface, then, to their influential work, *The Jazz Poetry Anthology* (1991), editors Sascha Feinstein and Yusuf Komunyakaa proclaim that they include “a large percentage of lesser-known poets, many of whom deserve more recognition than they have received” (xviii).⁹ Avant-garde jazz and avant-garde poetry are both minority discourses. Thus, commentator after commentator speaks of shadowy or forgotten black jazz-poets—as if he or she were conducting a *séance*. T.J. Anderson

realizes that African-American jazz-poet Bob Kaufman (1926-1986), despite receiving awards and prizes, “was to remain fairly anonymous, financially impoverished, and addicted to methedrine for most of his life” (333).¹⁰ Nielsen complains that “Once more [now] we see repeated a pattern whereby entire groupings of African-American poets once widely anthologized and seen as contemporary contributors to the innovation of new black poetics are deaccessioned from the steadily constricting canon of black poets available for critical attention and university instruction” (60-61). These ‘lost’ poets include several jazz-performers of the 1950s and early 1960s. Nielsen goes on to lament, “. . . the texts of this early period of black postmodernity are mostly fugitive, having passed out of print or never having been printed in the first place” (82). Unsurprisingly then, one review of Ward is headlined, “Halifax’s Hot, But Unknown, Author” (Kimber 33). An announcement for a reading series at the National Library in Ottawa, Ontario, in which Ward was a reader/performer in 1988, charges, “It is an undisputed fact that the work of those writers whose inspiration comes from a strong sense of ethnocultural heritage has not as yet achieved full recognition in the mainstream of Canadian literature” (Cayley 11), particularly Ward, whose “musical training never left him and music informs all his writing” (Cayley 11). Ward is just one more jazz-attuned poet to see his offerings fall into the blank, silent Limbo dividing orality and literature.

Founding a Poetics of Jazz Literature

The reception—or non-reception—of Ward underscores the notion that the critical problem for critics is the practical one of ‘reading.’ In this case, they (we) do not know how to read Ward. One journalist-critic notes, rightly, that Ward has a “sometimes difficult, complex, *avant-garde* writing style” (Kimber 37). But difficulty in poetry is akin to dissonance in jazz, and perhaps just as enjoyable, if we can discern the *beat*. But one dilemma remains: Canadians cannot hear the jazz in our literature. Too often, efforts to appreciate what one reviewer calls “literary jazz” (Kimber 37), either by Ward or by others, dissolve into cranky impressionism or bankrupt silence or skanky dismissal. In a 1996 article contesting various critiques of Miles Davis’s trumpet playing, Robert Walser offers this pregnant insight:

Prevalent methods of jazz analysis, borrowed from the toolbox of musicology, provide excellent means for *legitimizing* jazz in the academy. But they are clearly inadequate to the task of helping us to *understand* jazz. . . . They offer only a kind of mystified, ahistorical, text-based legitimacy, within which rhetoric and [the African-American vernacular technique of] signifyin’¹¹ are invisible. (179)

Unable to generate an “analytical vocabulary that [can] do justice to their perceptions” (Walser 180), critics have been unable to articulate convincingly either their approval or their disapproval of Davis’s playing. Let us sound Walser again:

. . . Davis’s consistent and deliberate use of risky techniques and constant transgression of genre boundaries are antithetical to “classicism” and cannot be explained by formalism; from such perspectives, unusual content looks like flawed form. That is why so many critics have responded to Davis’s music with puzzlement, hostility, or an uneasy silence. (172)

In other situations, the paucity of responsible and responsive intellectual apparatus in jazz criticism leads to the most medieval racialism. Hear here Ronald M. Radano's revelation of the treatment of Anthony Braxton by a 1977 *Newsweek* writer: "*Newsweek's* characterization of Braxton, the 'free spirit,' as the modern version of the antediluvian noisemaker captures the mass of stereotypes of 'the most innovative force in the world of jazz'" (209-210):

Braxton is a virtuoso on the saxophone, and the instrument has never been subject to such assault. He squeezes out bizarre sounds and clashing, hitherto unheard tone colors. He plays like a man possessed, in a paroxysm of animalistic grunts, honks, rasps, and hollers. He rends the fabric of conventional musical language as he reaches into himself—and back into pre-history—for some primordial means of communication. (Saal 52-53)¹²

Deliciously—or seditiously—Radano opines that, for some critics, "Braxton represented the supreme anomaly: while possessing the 'calculating mind' of an 'intellectual,' he reinforced traditional images of jazz through his blackness . . ." (208). The promulgations of duplicitous depictions of jazz emphasize, again, the relative lack of a vocabulary that can assess jazz forensically. But if jazz music poses explanatory difficulties for its auditors, jazz-infused writing is just as challenging. Hence, in the article, "Jazz," in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (1997), the anonymous author anticipates—hopes—"in the years to come, students of African American culture will find more ways to talk about the elements of jazz—its vamps (or introductory statements), breaks (or solos), riffs (repeated structural phrases), choruses (main themes), bridges (secondary, connecting themes), call/response patterns, improvisations, syncopated cadences and other definitive structures—and the ways in which they operate in the pages of a book" (56). In the meantime, given this absence of critical proficiency, one of the most deft practitioners of the jazzed-up literature genre—Mr. F.E.W.¹³—languishes in *our* deaf illiteracy.

But what do we mean by 'jazz poetry' or 'jazz literature'? Generally, definitions fluctuate between emphasizing styles—such as phrasing or line breaks or a sense of stream-of-consciousness liberty—or just subject matter: a paean for saxophonist Charlie Parker, even if written in strict sonnet form, is a 'jazz' poem according to this criterion.

To go further, however, we need to think about jazz music and the ways in which it can be manifested in print. Significantly, jazz is a vesper of oral African-American culture.¹⁴ The anonymous *Norton Anthology* author provides this sound recording of the anthropological origins of jazz in Black U.S. speech:

. . . jazz was primarily an instrumental music strongly impacted by the sound of the African American voice. What this music can sound like more than anything else is the jam-session-like talk and song from the Harlems of America and from its southern roads. In a real sense, the sound of jazz is that of the African American voice scored as band music, with all of black talk's flair for story-telling as well as the dirty dozens, understatement as well as braggadocio, whispery romance as well as loud-talk menace, the exalted eloquence of a Martin Luther King and the spare dry poetry of a pool-hall boast or a jump-rope rhyme. (55)

With this conception in mind, it appears that ‘jazz-directed writing’ should be focussed on the voice, according it primacy. Ward achieves this poetic: his writing aspires to the condition of jazz vocals—or vocalized jazz. The *Norton Anthology* writer stresses that jazz music and musicians dialogue with speech:

All of that “talking and testifying” and “speaking and speechifying” boldly make their way into this music, giving it great force and flavor. Once singers got into the jazz act, they tended to follow Louis Armstrong in using their voices as if they were jazz instruments—which meant, ironically, that they were voices imitating instruments that were imitating voices! (55-56)

Ward’s work is nothing if not flush and plush—or chock-a-block—with voices. In his key article, “Poetry and Jazz: A Twentieth-Century Wedding,” Barry Wallenstein establishes the importance of oral religious performance to the development of a jazz-styled vocal delivery:

Jazz with poetic elements actually has origins in the church services of plantation blacks, where the preacher was one of the community who had a way with words. Like the poet/priests of ancient times, these preachers were said to have received the “call” from heaven. Their sermons moved emotionally and fluidly from speech to poetry: “to song to dance to moaning and back again,” as one ex-slave has said. (598)

Something of this cultural inheritance infuses Ward’s depiction of Rev. Mores in *Riverlisp* (1974):

Rev. Mores come out of th pulpit walked up th ile and stood afore Micah: “Th Lord welcomes every soul in th Kingdom. And th Kingdom here on earth is th church. Let’s hear you say amens.” (answered) “You, young man been a servant of His for our people with your Bible selling and all. Th community loves you as their own and what better than you show *your people* [Jews] what th Lord done tol and we here believes—that all th Messengers is one spirit and loves us cause we is one.” (40-41)

Lawrence W. Levine argues that “In their songs . . . , Afro-American slaves . . . assigned a central role to the spoken arts, encouraged and rewarded verbal improvisation . . .” (6). However, this dexterity is not easy to translate into print:

William Arms Fisher warned his readers that his attempts to reproduce the music of the spirituals he heard in the 1920s could not capture “the slurring and sliding of the voices, the interjected turns and ‘curls,’ the groans and sighs, the use even of quarter-tones, the mixture of keys, and the subtle rhythms.” (Levine 159)

Yet, Ward is attentive to the problem and inventive enough to attempt to overcome it (as we will hear). His ‘solution’ to the problem of ‘typing’ the voice is to explore fundamental literary adaptations of jazz technique, as identified by Siva Vaidhyanathan: “improvisation, syncopated rhythm, lyrics with such blues-influenced devices as call and

response, repetition, and . . . the practice of signifying: thoughtful revision and repetition of another’s work” (395). By utilizing these devices, the jazz-mused poet enacts an archival-prophetic role, recalling and reformulating mass, vernacular fusions of orality and music and text. Nielsen feels that the practice of such ‘recollective’ innovation illustrates the truth that “. . . African-American traditions of orality and textuality were not opposed to one another and did not exist in any simple or simplistic opposition to modernity and postmodernity” (34). For the jazz-bard, then, the emphasis must be on polyphony, that is, the stacking up of a series of different speakers or voices. Arthur Jafa terms this process, in “Black popular culture” itself, as “polyventiality” (253): “‘Polyventiality’ just means multiple tones, multiple rhythms, multiple perspectives, multiple meanings, multiplicity” (253). According to Eileen Southern, these effects are achieved through “collective improvisation” by jazz band members (qtd. in *Call* 807), or, by extension, by a series of speakers in a text. Hence, Ward’s work is also as multiculturally influenced as jazz is itself. In “The Death of Lady Susuma,” a prose poem about a black woman, then, Ward inserts a Gaelic lyric:

Ar bidh
Is sinn
Cridhe

Mor
An daimheach

Uidhe agus eadar
A

Ar cridhe bidh mor daimheach
Agus a is an uidhe eadarainn[.]¹⁵ (22)

Any truly jazz-auditing poet must attempt to replicate the music’s interest in mixing culturally distinctive sounds.¹⁶ The resulting potpourri, derived from the rambunctious, delirious *miscegenation* that must define jazz, licenses, as in Be-Bop, “. . . the use of nonsensical language. Jazz musicians sing words and phrases such as ‘hey Boppa Rebop’ for rhythmic effect and/or expression of ecstasy or joy” (Anonymous “Bop” 1101). Ward’s penchant for capturing orality, as in the sound of a whisper (“spish spish, spish spish!” [*Riverlisp* 108]), manifests the superficially nonsensical to mandate fresh sense. Associated with the ‘freed speech’ of the Bop idiom, as it is transferred into print, is the deployment of “tributes, boasts, and slogans . . . unified by internal rhymes—the virtuoso single-sound free-rhyming that Stephen Henderson first identified as a hallmark of black vernacular style” (Williams 165). Hear the style in these stanzas from Ward’s song, “Around 12 Bars in 3/4 Time”:

I made a
Song with your
Name.
Sort of

Whined it and
Cried it I made a
Song with your
Name—and when I
Sighed it, I
Put a spell be-
Side it what made a
Song. (“Around” 6)

Nielsen notices that the jazz poetic employs “virtual catalogues of jazzy rhythmic effects, virtuoso free rhyming, hyperbolic and metaphysical imagery, understatement, compressed and cryptic imagery, ‘worrying the line,’ and . . . black music as poetic reference” (14). Here is Ward’s system of ‘sound-writing’ catalogued and defined. (Examples will follow). Pertinent particularly is the notion of ‘worrying the line.’ One explicator senses, “. . . the tendency in Black music [is] to ‘worry the note’—to treat notes as indeterminate, inherently unstable sonic frequencies rather than the standard Western treatment of notes as fixed phenomena” (Jafa 254). The effect of ‘worrying’ is well articulated by African-American novelist Ralph Ellison *via* a character’s interpretation of the effect of his social ‘invisibility’ on his *black* consciousness:

Invisibility . . . gives one a slightly different sense of time, you’re never quite on the beat. Sometimes you’re ahead and sometimes behind. Instead of the swift and imperceptible flowing of time, you are aware of its nodes, those points where time stands still or from which it leaps ahead. And you slip into the breaks and look around. That’s what you hear vaguely in Louis’ music. (8)

Following these precepts, Ward’s style is, therefore, one of open-ended closure. Works aren’t written or plotted; they’re composed and they’re improvised. Combined with slang-shaded imagery or homely surrealism, jazz-banded lingo moves toward the condition of ‘scat,’ the *sine qua non* of improvised vocalization: “In the scat idiom are all of the characteristics of extreme, verbal ritual: special styles and registers, fast delivery, high pitches, broken rhythms, grunts, anomalous, mumbo jumbo words, and prosaically pleasing repetitions” (Leonard qtd. in Wallenstein 600).¹⁷ The logic of scat informs portions of Ward’s “Lady Susuma’s Dream”:

—SPLENDID SPECIALNESS!

She shouted it through her imaginings and greeted
her *impressions* in ancientnesses:

—Woyi bie! Woyi bie! Welcome! Welcome!
O Wedo, calling Wedo, O Wedo there . . .” (56).

If jazz disruptively subverts traditional European musical concepts, Ward’s writing makes English speak a new tongue. However, scating—a type of scansion—is only one aspect of a polyphonic jazz poetic. In his 1995 article, “Purple Passages or Fiestas in Blue? Notes Toward an Aesthetic of Vocalese,” Barry Keith Grant insists that jazz also

relies on “vocalese” which “involves the setting/singing of lyrics (almost always composed rather than improvised) to jazz instrumentals, both melody and solo parts, arrangement and solos, note for note” (287). Printed “vocalese” must allow odd spacings, irregular keyboard leaps, phrases instead of sentences, typographic shorthand and dingbats, and pages that look as if they had been vetted by Charles Olson in the most subjective episodes of his Projectivist project. Such work “tends to be tempered by a visual intelligibility . . . , a sense of coherence that resides in shape rather than message or paraphrasable statement, a sense impressed upon the reader by the placement of the words on the page” (Mackey 134). Now, Ward is conservative, playing his lines always off the left margin, and rarely venturing into the middle of a page. Nevertheless, he plants unusual spaces between words to separate a particular one or series into a breathing phrase:

*tears sometimes washes th stickiness of love
'way and put a river wall tween*

*separation bein on th one side and
justice on th other[.] (Riverlisp 92)*

T.J. Anderson III views Kaufman as an adept practitioner of both vocalese and scat precisely because he is able “to blend and blur their demarcations. He also emphasizes the ‘music’ of silence, the rhythms that occur outside our concepts of music” (331). For Anderson, Kaufman exploits a “jazz meter” (335), in which “the improvisatory gesture is a crucial element, rendering his use of regular meter unpredictable” (335). Ultimately, then, says Anderson, Kaufman “managed to apply the rhythmic and tonal techniques of be-bop in order to achieve [his] aesthetic purposes” (331). I believe that Ward is just as proficient in adapting jazz to suit the requirements of poetry. But Kaufman is not the only African-American poet who may be claimed by the jazz genre. Vaidhyathan reports that Amiri Baraka

employs jazz devices and his own loud, postmodern style to erase the line between poetry and prose. For example, in his short story “The Screamers” (1963), Baraka fuses syncopated sounds, sights, and speech to paint a powerful yet humorous picture of an urban jazz scene. The climax of the story, when the musicians lead their charged fans into the streets, is more than musical, it is political. The fury of jazz becomes a weapon for the oppressed in Baraka’s hands. (396)¹⁸

Wallenstein praises “The strong imagistic sense, the overwhelming rhythms, and the sophistication throughout . . .” a Baraka jazz poem (612). Gayl Jones tells us that, although “Baraka shares some of the techniques of the Beats—the juxtapositions, ‘loose’ structure, nonstandard or slang diction, he never shares with them ‘valuelessness’ but only nonconformity” (112-13). One of Ward’s clear influences is another African-American poet closely associated with music: Robert Hayden (1913-80). In a 1999 article on Hayden, Brian Coniff asserts, “[Hayden’s] poetry uses improvisation and linguistic heterogeneity as a means of constantly redescribing, and cultivating, human complexity and dignity” (503). Hayden’s interest in a humanistic and musical poetic, mastered by Ward, returns revived in the protégé’s verse.

Given Ward's utilization of the elements of a jazz poetic—the inking (blacking) of voices, their multiplication in polyphony and their diversification via multiculturalism, the enjoyment of improvisation (surprise—in rhythm and in imagery), the employment of non-standard rhythm (aiding vocalese), the openness to unintelligible speech (scat) and metaphors borrowed from conjure ceremonies (or their like)—render him a jazz poet. He attempts to mimic, to orchestrate, with words, the discordant, but stimulating, conjunctions jazz offers. “But if jazz strives to attain the syntactic logic of what [pianist Bill] Evans calls ‘a developmental language’ of its own, then poetry, without question, strives that much harder to achieve the emotional complexity and rhythmic drive of music” (Feinstein and Komunyakaa *Second* xi). Frederick Ward's work pursues that end—even if, perilously, by writing *via* jazz, he contributes to his inaudibility, his invisibility in the dull, bland canons of this Northern Confederacy. Now almost 70, he still awaits, with the gracious patience of a martyr, our discovery of his unabated, deathless illumination.

(Re-)Discovering Frederick Ward

The close reader of Frederick Ward will recognize hints of the American modernists e.e. cummings, Wallace Stevens and William Faulkner; the U.S. Black Mountaineer Robert Creeley; the British modernists Gerard Manley Hopkins, James Joyce and Dylan Thomas; but also those royally Romantic rebels—William Blake and John Clare. Skillfully combining words so as to produce a willful, Mallarméan obscurity (mainly in his novels), Ward is also indebted to an African-American assembly of music-tutored, music-touting poets: Jean Toomer, Robert Hayden, Bob Kaufman, Henry Dumas, and, probably, Ishmael Reed. (That European-Canadians are ignorant of these poets does not diminish their importance.) Indeed, Ward has come to his excellent poetic, compositional style not primordially through Canada but through his special past, flamboyantly African-American and flagrantly ‘artsy.’

Born in Kansas City, Missouri, in 1937, Ward was the son of Samuel, a tailor, and Grace (née Douglas), who encouraged him to play piano when he was wee. As a youth, following the sudden death of his mother, Ward quit the piano and studied art on a scholarship at the University of Kansas. Restless, he stayed only one year. Then, he returned to music, trying out composing at the University of Missouri Conservatory of Music at Kansas (graduating in 1957). Following a stint in Hollywood as a songwriter, Ward plunked jazz piano, studying with Oscar Peterson at Toronto's Advanced School of Contemporary Music, 1962-63. Next, he journeyed to Arizona, where he scribed poetry under the tutelage of the major U.S. poets Wallace Stevens and Robert Creeley. Ward's first book, *Poems*, appeared in New Mexico in 1964. His next book, the anthology *Nine Baha'i Poets*, appeared in 1966. This edited anthology included his own verse, but also that of his fellow African-American, the splendid poet, Robert Hayden, whose work—with its gorgeous imagery, ecstatic, symphonic lyricism and homage to black culture—Ward's own poetry resembles. Landed in Detroit in 1968, Ward, after watching that city burn in an apocalyptic race riot, left for Ville de Québec, staying for two years. In 1970, *en route*, by ship, to Denmark to scrutinize piano, Ward was stranded by a dockworkers' strike in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Here he met exiles from the recently bulldozed (in the name of ‘urban renewal’) village of Africville—a once-seaside enclave of Halifax. Bonding with this atomized community, Ward stayed in Halifax, writing and teaching,

into the 1980s. During this period, he published the bulk of his extant work: three novels, all inspired equally by Ward's own childhood memories as well by those of ex-Africville residents: *Riverlisp* (1974), *Nobody Called Me Mine* (1977) and *A Room Full of Balloons* (1981).¹⁹ Ward also edited an anthology of pupil-and-teacher verse, titled *Present Tense* (1972). In 1983, he released his second slim collection of poems, *The Curing Berry*.²⁰ Through the 1970s and 1980s, Ward also wrote plays, staged in Montreal, and three screenplays, all produced. At the end of the 1980s, Ward relocated to Montreal, where he taught, until his retirement, at Dawson College. Ward still lives in Montreal, though he also maintains a home in rural Nova Scotia. His work has attracted honours and prizes—an Honorary Doctor of Laws from Dalhousie University of Halifax, the Best Actor plaque, from the 1987 Chicago International Film Festival, in recognition of his role in a film he helped to write. Ward's odysseys among art, music, film and poetry, along with his steadfast adherence to the pacifism and the universalism of the Baha'i belief, inform his *synesthiac* aesthetic and his cosmopolitan attitude. Even so, his humanitarian vision is evinced squarely within a black—really, African-American—cultural matrix as well as within a black—usually, African-American—milieu. So, Ward's characters speak, sing and think in a 'black' lingo that is soul food, soul music, and *spiritualistic*.

There is no better place to begin to encounter the jazz-composer poet and the jazz-playing novelist than in his masterpiece, *Riverlisp: Black Memories*. Here Ward sketches a series of aural/oral vignettes of a community. But the overarching idea of "Riverlisp" is merely a fixed point the author "come'd round" (to use a favourite Wardism). That is to say, the idea becomes a melody that the author feels free to explore, to move away from as he wishes, just as the jazz artist may depart from a known melody, pursuing its ghost instead. In this way, music guides philosophy. In this book—only conditionally a novel and not a poem—Ward transfigures Africville, Nova Scotia, rendering the village as Ambrose City, a decidedly phantasmal relative. Indeed, although the back-cover, dust-jacket copy of *A Room Full of Balloons* quotes the *Vancouver Sun* as claiming that "Ward has given us the songs, stories, jokes and other poems of the citizens of Africville [in *Riverlisp*] . . .," the novel really uses Africville as a touchstone for scenes and characters out of African America. After all, for Ward, Africville is not a fixed location. His persona expresses this viewpoint in a poem, "You ain't a place. Africville is us. . . . [I]f we say we from Africville, *we are Africville*" ("Dialogue #3" 19). Thus, Ambrose City is merely an abstraction of Africville.²¹ It has the same relation to the actual Africville as Dante's *Inferno*, though salted and peppered with Italians, has to Italy.

This aesthetic distance serves to temper Ward's putative realism.²² Indeed, Ward is not interested in any serious degree of realist 'clarity.'²³ Rather, the sprightly surfaces of his fiction often gloss nasty subjects. His *recherché* realism borders on *sur*-realism, or *over-the-top* realism: "But some ladies took to hanging clothes lines from [a Japanese bridge over a sewer-pipe stream] and hung up the view" (*Riverlisp* 15). Occasionally, a cliché, a dead metaphor, such as 'knock-kneed,' is recast so as to cast a startlingly new spell: "knot kneed" (*Riverlisp* 56). Practical surrealism combines with jazz-jointed orality to explode any simplistic mimetic mode.²⁴ In *Riverlisp*, "thot" (to use Ward's orthography) is improvisation. And so is plot.

This jazz sensibility is documentary—a series of oral portraits (reports). The book is a set of musical sketches "to be read with indulgence...out loud" [n.p.].²⁵ (Note: Part III of *Riverlisp* is dubbed, illustratively, "Hear-Say" [61].) It is speech—and reports on

speech delivered in a spoken way. Here every text must be *heard*. Thus, this masterpiece is replete with agrammatical angst and ecstasy. One *Riverlisp* character—Jimmie Lee—believes

. . . *his dreams and lies . . .*
my thots and determinations
DAMN! they're musical . . .
perfect fourths and bent . . .
flated fifths . . . illusion . . .
disillusion . . . (119, ellipses in the original)

Another character declares, “*Joy is a stomp! / For the human race*” (110). *Riverlisp* is a tissue of musical rhetorics, of jazzy shiftings every expressive way possible.

To compose a catalogue of Ward’s oral and aural devices—the components of his print aesthetics, his text music, is almost as difficult as playing jazz. Begin with Ward’s use of ‘verbatim’ verbs: yell, shout, scream, holler; spit, snort, hiss; mumble, murmur, moan; giggle; “stutterin and stamerin and double clutchin for breath” (*Riverlisp* 58). These action words invest the text with the gabble of speech and near-speech. But the sonic sensibility of the text is heightened further by Ward’s usage of dialogue, interior monologues, repetitions of words and phrases, phonetic neo-orthographies that border on neologisms (“dimentions” [13]; “plup” [22]; “arguring” [24]; “payed” [35]; “s’pantion” [37]; “zageratin” [80]; “consomtrate” [117]); puns (“MANure” 15); editorial interjections (“He were always singing and whistling ‘Savior, Near To Me, Be’ a song he made up when he git kicked out of the church for hustling . . . ‘Th most sanctified of sisters is willing to be tempted . . .” [19, ellipses in the original]; “Mr. Jacobs run’d after him but Pee Dee shot him in the leg—where that child git a gun? !—Pee Dee were so scared he dropped his gun . . .” [24]); majuscule spellings (“I can imagine heaven CAUSE TH STREETS IS A REFLECTION!” [19]²⁶); pronunciation guides (“‘Sa-vior, near to me-e, be.’ (whistle)” [19]); concretely metaphorical namings (“Miss Pillor, Gin Drip and Skippin Daddy (cause he had one leg)” [19]); keyboard spacing (“‘O Miss Utah, what MY CHILD, MY PEE DEE DONE DONE!” [25]); dropped-out punctuation (thus, apostrophes vanish from contractions: “didnt”); the spoken-song-form that is poetry—either bluesy rhymes (“*What my baby done done / O LORD! what my baby done done*” [24]) or straight-forward *vers libre* (22); direct invocation of sound (“saw-noise-music” [25]; “somebodies child made a siren sound” [80]); plus oral expressions (“Ooo!” [20]; “huh, huh!” [39]); and excellent onomatopoeia (“murmurous yowlin” [22]; “squinged” [31]; “*crunch*” [55]):

Then the boy moved in close and b’gins to whisper in French—or some tongue—in her ear: spish spish, spish spish! English: spish; spish spish spish spish . . . ah shp spish . . . spish...shp spish? You hip? (108)

The ever-present orality of the text syncopates it; perhaps, it even stutters at times, but Ward’s ‘stutters’ are really episodes of melisma.

Ward’s techniques could likely exhaust even Richard A. Lanham’s *Handlist of Rhetorical Terms* (1991). Certainly, the jazzy writer tries out aischrologia—or foul

speech (“Damn dumb-ass fool hot damn dumb-ass fool!” [42]; “Woman, is this your nigger-boy or just a damn chicken thief?” [42]; “Hell naw, it was just a little scared white boy bastard. I tol him to kiss it” [54]); aphaeresis or ablatio, i.e., omitting a syllable from the beginning of a word (“[a]bove,” “[be]tween,” [24], “[re]members,” “[be]fore” [25]); apocope or abscissio, i.e., omitting the last syllable or letter of a word (“tol[d],” “th[e]” [25]); and aphorisms—or proverbs (“you’ll see that when God turns his head, th *devil* wont forgit” [55]). An alphabet of rhetorical ornaments is revealed in Ward’s unique novel. Poicilogia—“Overly ornate speech” (Lanham 116)—defines preachers like Rev. Mores and Rev. Jubilee Jackson. Polyptoton—“Repetition of words from the same root but with different endings” (Lanham 117)—is an incessant presence in *Riverlisp* (“the only womanly thing about the woman” [55]; “even didnt see things I seen” [63]; “backing back” [89]).²⁷ Parelcon—the usage of two words when only one is necessary (see Lanham [108])—is a rhetorical device Ward employs for *Riverlisp* verbs (“fill-heat” [39], “hiss spit” [55], “touch grab” [88]). Antistasis—the “Repetition of a word in a different or contrary sense” (Lanham 16)—is a cousin to parelcon: in *Riverlisp*, “a Mrs. Johnson” delivers a “mess of ‘greens’”—or veggies—to “Mr. Ward” who, noticing that the “greens” are buried in a broth of mud, sends his son out to a restaurant to ensure he will “eat no mess” (47). Alliteration doubles as a sonic device: “Bantu Banshee yell” (*Riverlisp* 55). Inverted words also appear: “friend-girl” (Nobody 47). An army of rhetoricians would find almost an eternity of work in cataloguing Ward’s oratorical-musical exploits in print.

An extended example of Ward’s expert word-singing and word-painting occurs in the section of *Riverlisp* titled “Purella Munificance.” The passage treats the interracial and trans-cultural love affair between a Black Christian woman, Purella, and a Jewish Bible salesman, Micah Koch. Their *amour* is bedevilled by so much anti-white bigotry that the couple disintegrates, Purella goes a ‘touch’ insane, and Micah accepts to be baptized in the Black church.²⁸ Before these tragicomic events unfold, Ward—through his narrator, Jimmie Lee, produces emphatically epiphanic poetry in prose:

Dear sweet Purella Munificance the huckster man on his produce wagon, put light to your meaning so we can understand huckster man be thinking on your continence [sic] he sing the painter’s brush strokes of your mouth; a low soft soothing: ahhhh sound of the sea bird, leaning on the air! and shout:

‘Oooo, tomatoes’s red ripe!
Cabbage tender peas from the vine
Sweet . . .’

and draws them who wish to buy in a voice that forgits [sic] what he be selling. The womens is moved, tho. Huckster man be so taken he neglec’d and one woman is put to ask for her change: ‘Owe up, what you owe me, man!’ (36)

Unorthodox orthography, white spaces, quirky but expressive grammar, ‘watercolours’ and ‘oils’ from an oral palette, onomatopoeia, interjections and suggestions of extra-textual sound (the sea bird, the vendor’s own song²⁹) all work together to produce an

oral-visual³⁰ rendering of a moment in cultural and personal time. The passage demands and deserves the recollection of a similar one in the work of Ward's precursor, Jean Toomer and his *Cane* (1923):

Face flowed into her eyes. Flowed in soft cream foam and plaintive ripples. . . . The soft suggestion of down slightly darkened, like the shadow of a bird's wing might, the creamy brown color of her upper lip. . . . If you have heard a Jewish cantor sing, if he has touched you and made your own sorrow seem trivial when compared with his, you will know my feeling when I follow the curves of her profile, like mobile rivers, to their common delta. (16)

Where Toomer stresses visual imagery, however, Ward prefers to foreground sound. Toomer *shows* us—monologically—a portrait of “Fern”; but Ward *talks about* Purella Munificance, while also letting other voices trade notions about her.³¹ In *Cane*, Toomer presents a series of poetic sketches of black life and intraracial and interracial *amour* and its contretemps, all dedicated to revealing the existence of a universal Oversoul in Gurdjieffian style; in *Riverlisp*, Ward gives us a series of prose-poem cum sound-poetry with the same optimism (“vission pictures of lovers that fill-heat the heart”[39]), save that his concern, being a Baha’i, is to reveal the oneness of humanity and the revelation of this ideal in mumbling songs, loud sermons and screeching poems.³²

Despite all the beauties of Ward's writing, the author scruples to scrutinize the terrors and horrors that interrupt humanity's odyssey towards Oneness and Truth. On this journey, feelings and beliefs only carry one so far; knowledge and wisdom provide the best passports and the swiftest transports. In *Riverlisp*, then, the character Pause is ‘lost’ because he attempts to intuit music, but finds it is always beyond his ken: “A musician writer he were, always on the verge of ‘THE TUNE’ but never done. And life, poor soul, be a promise to himself: ‘Won’t be long’” (21). His existence is stymied. However, to know the “inner” or the “inside” is to know the heart of true truth. Ward's Baha’i faith informs this understanding. Hence, one must ask, “What is a Baha’i?” (Esslemont 83):

Abdul-Baha replie[s]: “To be a Baha’i simply means to love all the world; to love humanity and try to serve it; to work for universal peace and brotherhood.” . . . In one of His London talks He said that a man may be a Baha’i even if He has never heard the name of Baha’u’llah. (83)

J.E. Esslemont expands upon these sentiments:

He who would be a Baha’i needs to be a fearless seeker after truth, but he should not confine his search to the material plane. His spiritual perceptive powers should be awake as well as his physical. He should use all the faculties God has given him for the acquisition of truth, believing nothing without valid and sufficient reason. If his heart is pure, and his mind free from prejudice, the earnest seeker will not fail to recognize the divine glory in whatsoever temple it may become manifest. (85)

Ward articulates these precepts—the spiritual search for Truth and Oneness—in typical down-to-earth, plain-spoken, *plainsong* ways:

“Son, when I were little I use to play in the mud lots your whole body could git lost in th feelin of mud. I thinks mud and oneness is th same all earth mix with water—that’s mud—all peoples mix with the spirit—that’s oneness.” (*Riverlisp* 118)

To find “oneness” is to find peace (the “music”):

The tune—I sees it as a questionin voice turnin way from mens to some Essence, askin to join or be join’d—Sanctified!— the answer comin n goin. I were thinking of the sea when I writes it [music]. You is like the sea n maybe you will know the tune. I think its life is inside the line ’n not judged by its course. Git it? (Riverlisp 122)

The communion—or confrontation—with “spirit” is triggered by “feelings,” moods engendered by hate and love. However, in Ward, one needs introspection—a knowledge of “inner” things, the “insides”—to discover happiness. Only this wisdom can result in harmonious creativity:

. . . if you holds a willow seed in your hand to warm it afore it’s planted, the seed will remember your palm print and when the tree grows, its branches will take they direction from the thought. And if it grows to fruition in your lifetime, it will be caused, in its rememberings, to weep fer you throughout all your journeyings to God. (*Room* 68)

(This teaching recalls that of Baha’u’llah: “*Man must show forth fruits. A fruitless man, in the words of His Holiness the Spirit (i.e. Christ), is like a fruitless tree, and a fruitless tree is fit for fire*” [qtd. in Esslemont 83]). Our troubled quest for self-knowledge, the inner or inside wisdom, is indicated by Ward’s repeated line, in *Riverlisp*, “Fuss is round all beautiful-ness” (36), followed by “*Fuss is round /all beautifull- / ness*” (38).³³

In the end, to sound his humanitarian theology, Ward means to make everything—every noun—speak or sing. All’s alive: “. . . the mud sucked song from bout me ankles” (*Room* 85). In Ward’s (literary) universe, all is spirit—negative or positive—“come’d round”³⁴ the flesh.

Nevertheless, Ward’s humanitarian vision is rooted in a black (African-American) cultural matrix in much the same way as is that of his influential, Baha’i-brother poet Robert Hayden. Brian Coniff reports that critic Rosey Pool “used the example of Hayden to invest ‘négritude’ . . . with unusually extended, personal, and religious overtones: ‘In light half-nightmare and half-vision he speaks of the face of Baha’u’llah, prophet of the Baha’i faith, in whose eyes Hayden sees the suffering of the men and women who died at Dachau and Buchenwald for their specific *Négritude*’” (504, n.3). A similarly specific black humanitarian spirit animates Ward’s writing, whereby, like Hayden,³⁵ he eschews world-besotted politics, preferring to voice his philosophy *via* the ‘free’ stylings of jazz. The English-Canadian poet closest to Ward in style is, arguably, Jewish Montreal poet, Abraham Moses Klein (1909-72),³⁶ whose powerful fusions of English and French, informed by his profound knowledge of Yiddish, Latin and Greek, plus practice of a Jewish humanitarianism, create texts that approach the style and feel of song—as in “Montreal”:

O city metropole, isle riverain!
Your ancient pavages and sainted routs
Traverse my spirit's conjured avenues!
Splendor erabic of your promenades
Foliates there, and there your maisonry
Of pendant balcon and escalier'd march,
Unique midst English habitat
Is vivid Normandy! (42).

Ward departs from Klein in being less formal, less classicist, and the result is poetry that is so superficially simple that its dexterity and complexity is almost invisible.

See—hear—"Blind Man's Blues":

The best thing in my life
was a woman named Tjose.

We never had to sneak for nothing
strong woman

Put you in mind of a lone bird at dawn
standing without panic in the dew.

She kissed me so hard
she'd suck a hum from me

The best thing happen to her
were my own papa.

I found her
he had more experience

I think the hound in me sniffed out something—
something about her

And I caught her sucking that same hum from him.
I went dumb staring . . . and she seen it.

My to God, she tried to wave me off—
Papa say:

—O son
O son

And I don't think she wanted me
to look on my naked papa like that

She throw'd lye

in my face. (42, ellipsis in the original)

Because I believe in the status of this poem as great art, I beg your indulgence of my repetition, now, of my previously published (in 2000) analysis of its genius:

“Blind Man’s Blues” is simple,³⁷ almost irritatingly so. Really, its eleven (or, if you split the four-line ninth strophe in half, twelve) unrhymed couplets stage a dramatic monologue about backwoods filial love and violent sexual jealousy. The phrases—or cadences—are accessibly declarative and appealingly authoritative. The first couplet indicates the general style:

The best thing in my life
was a woman named Tjose.

The first line could be Tin Pan Alley cliché. But what redeems it is the piano-note-like—or singing—fall of each word into its cadenced place. The second line polishes the meaning of the first, and the position of “Tjose,” as its clincher, accents her position as “the best thing”—even as the word *thing* forces us to ponder the speaker’s objectification—though amiable—of this woman. The placement of “Tjose” reinforces the challenge of its pronunciation. Should it rhyme with *rose* or *rosé*? Of course, if pronounced in the first manner, the second line will possess—agreeably—the same number of syllables as the first. If pronounced in the alternative fashion, however, the name will sound more exotic. But how should the diphthong “Tj” be pronounced? To sound like “Ch,” “Th,” “J,” or “H”?

These questions tease out the suave primery of Ward’s music-based poetic. . . . Ward . . . writes with peculiar affinity for the linguistic and tonal music of speech, especially Black English, which he scores more sonorously than any other contemporary writer, whether one reads Toni Morrison or the Africadian poet David Woods. ’Times the *blackness* of the line is sounded in Ward’s use of a crisp, rich, vernacular utterance, as in the second strophe of “Blind Man’s Blues”:

We never had to sneak for nothing
strong woman.

(The second line must not be read as a continuation of the first; rather, it is a choral reflection on the first. Crucially too, the empty space after *nothing* must be read as a ‘rest’—or ‘stop.’) Or it is sounded in a haiku-like analogy, as in the poem’s third strophe:

Put you in mind of a lone bird at dawn
standing without panic in the dew.

(Hear the lush sonic correspondences among Ward’s words: the consonance between “nd” in “mind” and “standing”; the alliteration of “d” in “dawn” and “dew”; the inner rhyme between “you” and “dew”; the assonance between “standing” and “panic”; and the near rhyme between “lone” and “dawn.”) Or blackness is sounded in the biblical parallelism of the fifth strophe’s resonant reprising of the first:

The best thing happen to her
were my own papa.

Or perhaps it is sounded in the repetition of details such as the pleasure that the speaker
and his father derive from coitus with Tjose:

She kissed me so hard
She'd suck a hum from me.

.....

And I caught her sucking that same hum from him.

Ward deploys the resources of rhyme and repetition with consummate, breathtaking skill.

“Blind Man’s Blues” ends with the revelation that the speaker suspects that Tjose did not want him “to look on my naked papa like that // She throw’d lye / in my face.” At the same time, though, it was and is a revelation for African-Canadian literature, for, here, Ward liberates a black accent—and frees it to say what it likes. (Clarke “Reading” 50-52)

Because the world is perverse in its bestowal of recognition and non-recognition, critics and scholars—even jazz-literate Canadian ones—may continue to ignore Ward’s stellar prose, poetry and plays. However, no one may legitimately accuse Ward of “failure.” Rather, the stewards of canons must address their own failures of vision and failures of nerve.

Coda, or Ode

I commence my conclusion by asserting that Ward resembles Miles Davis, who, as Walser writes, “. . . constantly and consistently put himself at risk in his trumpet playing, by using a loose, flexible embouchure that helped him to produce a great variety of tone colors and articulations, by striving for dramatic gestures rather than consistent demonstration of mastery, and by experimenting with unconventional techniques” (176). In his efforts to sound what had not been sounded before, and to sound like no other sound trumpeter, Davis made mistakes: “Ideally, he would always play on the edge and never miss; in practice, he played closer to the edge than anyone else and simply accepted the inevitable missteps, never retreating to a safer, more consistent performing style” (Walser 176). For Walser, the untouchable, unimpeachable greatness of Davis resides partly in the daring, glorious errors of his playing. Yet, some jazz journalists and music-school musicologists cannot attend to Davis’s achievement because their conventional studies cannot analyze his playing technique: “Such methods cannot cope with the problem of Miles Davis: the missed notes, the charged gaps, the technical risk-taking, the whole challenge of explaining how this powerful music works and means” (179). Likewise, meditating on Kaufman’s masterpiece, *Golden Sardines* (1967), T.J. Anderson III enthuses, “The collection is . . . important because it is the work of an artist who is unafraid to take risks. The inclusion of poetic ‘failures’ and ‘successes’ certainly marks a

heroic moment in literature” (336). Kaufman’s resultant “miraculous unevenness of work” (T.J. Anderson 336) reminds one of the creative power of Davis’s ‘missed’ notes.

Yet, Frederick Ward requires, really, none of these defences (i.e., that miscues and mistakes are essential to his aesthetic). However, he does require deliverance from the misunderstandings and misapprehensions of Canadian critics who feel that only Leonard Cohen is able to marry music and print. Mr. Ward (and, in fact, a *tribe* of African-Canadian and other oral-heritage poets) needs critics able to understand that the tissue of jazz is so close to bone—to notes, not melody—that the naked ear can’t easily ‘see.’ To ‘get’ Ward, the reader must combine the sensitivities of musicologist, performer and poet. *Will you hear him?*

Notes

¹ This paper has enjoyed two previous incarnations: It was first delivered as the keynote address for Improving the Future: Jazz in the Global Community: The Guelph Jazz Festival Colloquium, University of Guelph, Guelph, ON, on September 7, 2000, and then as the Anne Szumigalski Memorial Lecture for the League of Canadian Poets, at Hart House, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON, on June 11, 2005.

² I dedicate this essay to the memory of Dutch/English-Canadian poet Diana Brebner.

³ Peter Hudson allows “The work produced by younger [African-Canadian] poets in the 1990s occasionally has less of an explicit debt to the Caribbean. While the influence of dub and reggae, as well as of dancehall’s elaborate, insiderist configurations of patois, can still be heard, often this more recent poetry is indistinguishable in form and content from that of their African American peers” (195).

⁴ Yet, in a beautiful contradiction, Ward appears in almost every *African-Canadian* anthology.

⁵ Paul Gilroy avers that the critical “consensus stipulates that as far as [Wright’s] art was concerned, the move to Europe [in 1947] was disastrous . . . It is claimed that after moving to France Wright’s work was corrupted by his dabbling in philosophical modes of thought [“the alien influences of Freudianism and Existentialism” (Gilroy 156)] entirely alien to his African-American history and vernacular style” (156). The result of this dismissive attitude is that the eight books “written or assembled for publication in Europe” have been ignored (Gilroy 155). Wright is celebrated for his early, American-centred writing. Says Michel Fabre, “When Wright’s collection of short stories, *Eight Men*, appeared posthumously in 1961, [African-American critics] expressed the view that he had been away [from the United States] too long” (271). An expatriate in Europe from 1952 until his death in 1991, the “successful popular writer,” Frank Yerby, who published thirty-three novels “which sold more than 55 million copies” (Hill 797), is now so unremarked that he lacks an entry in the encyclopedia *Africana* (1999), edited by Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. James L. Hill comments, “Too long discounted as an anomaly in African American literature, Yerby deserves more critical attention” (798).

⁶ John Sobol challenges the idea that any evolutionary connection exists between ‘sound poetry’ and ‘Spoken Word’: “. . . I don’t believe that sound poetry as a contemporary art form actually exists . . . Sound poetry . . . refers to a self-consciously avant-garde tradition of wordless poetic verbalizing whose origins lie in Futurism and Dadaism” (“Anti-Anthrax” 39). Sobol continues on to state, damningly, “. . . in 1999, sound poetry is history, but the SOUND of POETRY is all around us” (39).

⁷ One reason for Sobol’s poignant and exceptional racial inclusivity is, as he states playfully in *Digitopia Blues* (2002), “You should see my record collection. It’s as black as I am white” (xiv). Sobol confesses that “the quality that [draws] me to black music is characteristic of orality, of oral cultures. Collectively, Africans and their diasporic descendants possess an idiomatic musical vocabulary that is remarkable for its breadth, subtlety, and passion” (xiv). Appreciating the *vitality* of the musical-oral linkage is crucial for any critique of Ward, African-Canadian literature, and, for that matter, the development of a non-segregated English-Canadian literary history.

⁸ In a notable contrast, white *Beat*—and *Hippy*—jazz-poets have been practically automatically documented, remembered, celebrated, from Jack Kerouac to Kenneth Rexroth to Allen Ginsberg to Diane di Prima.

⁹ For the record, Ward is also absent from this compendium.

¹⁰ Vitally, however, Kaufman is an influence for Afro-Jamaican-Quebecois and bilingual poet Kaie Kellough (see his *Lettricity*), who may also know that Kaufman was “held in high esteem in avant-garde Paris circles” (Fabre 268 n.2).

¹¹ Walser is referring to Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s theory of literary criticism that holds that black—African-American—texts participate in a form “of intertextual revision, by which texts establish their relation to other texts, and authors to other authors” (Mason 665). The relevance of this theory to interpreting jazz performance is clear.

¹² Maureen Anderson asserts, “In striving to analyze and to understand the concepts of jazz music, white critics often hid behind black stereotypes . . .” (135). In her article, “The White Reception of Jazz in America,” Anderson refers mainly to European-American critics of 1917-1930, but, as the attitude of H. Saal exemplifies, the need to ‘primitivize’ black-originated jazz remained *sound* well into the 1970s—if not until the present.

¹³ Here it means *Maestro*.

¹⁴ John Sobol feels that this oral culture reaches back to Africa, which “was, is, and always will be an oral world” (*Digitopia* 6). In fact, Sobol identifies characteristics of African-originated orality that, he implies, also extend to the African-American variant: Orality is “functional,” “public,” “communal,” “participatory,” “interdisciplinary” (involving music, song, dance), “experiential” (based in a sense of eternal *becoming*), “vocal” (“I am the drum. I am a talking drum” [*Digitopia* 7]), and “playful” (“Words open like windows” [8]) (*Digitopia* 6-8). Arthur Jafa adds, “. . . Black American culture particularly developed around those areas we could carry around in our heads—our oratorical prowess, dance, music, those kinds of things” (251).

¹⁵ Ward provides this translation: “Our are / Is us / Hearts // Great / The friends // Space and between / That // Our hearts / Are great friends / and that / Is the space between / Us.” (Clarke Fire 27,n.3.)

¹⁶ Jazz emerged “in the first decades of the twentieth century from the artistic meeting of elements including ragtime, marching band music, opera, and other European classical

musics, Native American musics, spirituals, work songs, and especially the blues. No seedbed for the new music was richer than that of New Orleans, where, in spite of separatist racial policies, musicians could tap into the city's spectacularly broad range of musical influences . . ." (Anonymous "Jazz" 55). Even avant-garde jazz is aggressively multicultural: "Characterized mainly by African, Asian, and Caribbean musical elements, this form of music emphasizes the importance of the collective ensemble rather than the soloist. Hence, its production, which may sound like chaos and disorder to some, is very Afrocentric in nature" (1393).

¹⁷ Sobol points out that, "In scat singing, black oralists found a means of escape, a playful arena where their improvisatory urges could be given free rein and they could explode the restrictive limitations of banal lyrics" (*Digitopia* 36).

¹⁸ Ward's *Room Full of Balloons* refutes any connection between jazz and aggression.

¹⁹ One must note that the already tenuous Africville connection in the first novel becomes further and further attenuated in the next two.

²⁰ As of 2005, no new, independent book by Ward has appeared in more than two decades, though new work by him surfaces, from time to time, almost always in African-Canadian anthologies.

²¹ But *Riverlisp* (Ambrose City) is also a locale where the author can test—no, *illustrate*—Baha'i teachings.

²² May Cutler references Ward's "way of making the human connection to poverty that makes you feel it when you read him" (Kimber 36). Stephen Kimber posits that Ward "has . . . brought the now long gone community of Africville to life for the rest of the world" (33).

²³ "Ward . . . maintains he isn't writing [in *Riverlisp*] just about the flesh-and-blood Africville or even about blacks; he is writing, he says, to bring to life the people—black and white—society finds 'insignificant. What I write about,' Ward says, 'isn't black or white. It's universal'" (Kimber 36).

²⁴ Discussing one African-American poet's work, Nielsen finds that it "makes the case for a black vernacular base for African-American surrealism, a jazz-and-blues-based surrealism . . ." (70). Ward's work fits this paradigm.

²⁵ This same instruction appears at the debut of *A Room Full of Balloons* (n.p.).

²⁶ Ward uses majuscules—and italics—to register sophisticated concepts, intellectual or religious, or simply to 'pump up the volume' of deserving, vernacular words and sounds. Ward's majuscules and italics embody preacherly insights or just 'loud' ones. See these *Riverlisp* examples: "orchestra" (25) and "DON'T LIE WOMAN!" (80).

²⁷ *Riverlisp* is characterized by the yokings of similar words, using both polyptoton and antistasis, but *Nobody Called Me Mine* features verb-pairs (the first colouring or illustrating the second), a type of parelcon—or deliberate, verbal redundancy.

²⁸ This event is two-sided: on one side, it *seems* a picture of integration (the black community accepts a white church member); on the other, it is a denial of Judaism. Most damningly, Micah's 'conversion' was unnecessary for him to love Purella—and his acceptance by the church is no remedy for their community-caused, racism-inflected break-up.

²⁹ Here one may flag again the links between black speech, other sounds, and jazz: Young [Louis] Armstrong's musical education included a pie man named Santiago who blew a bugle to attract customers, a banana man whose musical cries advertised the

virtues of his ripe yellow fruit, a waffle man whose customers enjoyed his mess call as much as his waffles, and the barroom quartets “who hung around the saloons with a cold can of beer in their hands, singing up a breeze while they passed the can around.” (Levine 204-05)

³⁰ According to Lawrence Levine, Bruce Jackson maintains, “Negro songs don’t tend to weave narrative elements together to create a story but instead accumulate images to create a feeling” (240). I think that Ward adopts/adapts this principal principle. By so doing he achieves what Nielsen, speaking of another poet, terms “the palpable nature of [his] imagery, the insistent physicality of even the most fantastic-seeming imagery” (226). The practice of this blues aesthetic means, as Barry Keith Grant’s reading of Samuel Charters insists, “. . . the blues creates poetry out of daily events and objects surrounding the singers, attempting to achieve in the frequent homeliness and concreteness of its language an articulation of lived experience” (295). The power of Ward’s imagery derives from his lyrical concretization of the workaday real and the everyday surreal.

³¹ *Riverlisp* is a revisiting of *Cane*, with Ward’s *Ambrose City* replacing Toomer’s Sparta, Georgia, Washington, DC and Chicago, Illinois.

³² Ward’s narrative of the shooting-lynching of “Miss Jessups’s Boy” employs a poem—“*meet me in th hills / sweet Miss Martha / I bring us a picnic*” (*Riverlisp* 42)—which recalls Toomer’s similar narrative, “Blood-Burning Moon.” But, just as Toomer is more Gothic than Ward, so is his verse: “Red nigger moon. Sinner! / Blood-burning moon. Sinner! / Come out that fact’ry door” (*Cane* 31).

³³ True: Fuss is actually, in this fiction, a cat. But I credit an allegorical intent in the feline’s contextually felicitous name.

³⁴ This eccentric construction is practically a *mantra* in Ward’s work.

³⁵ “A Baha’i by faith, Hayden was committed to ‘the affirmation of independent investigation of the truth’ and to abstinence from partisan politics of any kind” (Coniff 489).

³⁶ I do not liken Ward to Leonard Cohen—another obvious candidate, given his success as a musician, singer, songwriter, poet and novelist, because Cohen, although verbally experimental in his novels, is much less so in his poetry. Indeed, Cohen’s poetry invests in a medieval mysticism that upholds a linguistic conservatism (a point also true about his songs).

³⁷ But the poem is also fiendishly intricate. This black aesthetic understands Amiri Baraka’s existentialist statement: “Life is complex in the same simplicity” (“Changing” 162).

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