

Jeffery Renard Allen: An Introduction

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Some authors defy easy characterization, their texts wistfully escaping categories and boundaries. The best of them become important to us as readers and scholars because of our need for exploration and discovery. Jeffery Renard Allen is one such author, and his novels *Rails Under My Back* (2000) and *Song of the Shank* (2014), his short stories collected in *Holding Pattern* (2008), and his poems collected in *Harbors and Spirits* (1999) and *Stellar Places* (2007) are works that take us on journeys to places where we quickly realize we need to be but only after we arrive. An experimental writer who builds on and draws from a wide range of traditions and cultures, Allen embraces the *world* in his writing and offers complex development of characters and themes to present insights into the human condition from the perspective of his own revelatory imagination. In his poetry and his fiction, he renders the convolution of twenty-first century experiences--even in *Song of the Shank*, a narrative set during the antebellum and reconstruction eras--with the complexity these experiences demand, and he does so with an artistic finesse unmatched by many of his peers. His concern with the contemporary, his all-embracing awareness of literatures and writers held in high regard (past and present), and his concern with and command of form, among other things, distinguish him from most of the writers whose books rest beside his in both hardcopy and digital formats.

The poetry in *Harbors and Spirits* and *Stellar Places* is largely image driven, with a blues impulse fueling its linguistic sounds and rhythms. His works of fiction are bebop symphonies that offer full exploration of the limitations and possibilities of individual existence. Without a doubt, readers of popular fiction and lyrical poetry may find several of his works to be more than a bit intimidating in the way many music listeners were left to scratch their heads in wonder when the likes of Charlie Parker and Thelonious Monk appeared on the scene. It is important to remember how their elevated and intimidating styles helped to change the course of American musical expression. (They raised the stakes of the game, to use an Allen-like aside.) Allen's work as a writer promises to have a similar influence on how literature is both written and read. There are already those who read his poems and stories, short and long, with expressions that might resemble those of the people of Macondo on their discovery of ice.

The reference to Macondo is not meant to imply a dominant influence of Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* on Allen's fiction, but it is to say that Allen explores far-reaching galaxies of expression, as did the late practitioner of magical realism. Some critics and scholars have already tried to point out what they see as elements of magical realism in Allen's work, not realizing that magic has more than one source of origin in our world and the worlds that exist both within and beyond it. It might seem more appropriate to view many of the extra-realistic moments in Allen's fiction as spiritual realism--rooted in the same belief system that transported New World African expressive culture to the Americas on the Southern road that Jean Toomer once called "a goat path in Africa"--but Allen, an African American writer *who has strongly developed his ties of kinship with Africa, its people, and writers*, cannot be understood through the limitations of specific ethnicities and cultures. His works are both magical and spiritual, bluesy and gospel, rural and urban, formal and improvisational, American and transnational, and downright funky.

At an early age, Allen learned to absorb books like a sponge, and the books he read were not always by African American writers. In fact, when word circulated about the new "black" student majoring in creative writing in the English department on the University of Illinois at Chicago campus in the mid-1980s, students in University Hall began to call him the Black Kurt Vonnegut. Whether it was meant as a compliment or joke, it did not faze him one bit. He was raised in the midst of an African American cultural community and felt no obligation to exclusively read black literature in an effort to learn how to write "black." Instead, he read broadly, selecting both well-regarded and innovative works of literature, which included Vonnegut at that time, because he sensed that in order to master the forms of great literature, he needed to consume the DNA of great literary works. He bowed down at the feet of literary masters to learn from them the secrets of how to turn what he knew of the lives of those who might be best described as blues people into representations of high art on the printed page. Although several black writers and jazz musicians articulated a dream of a black planet in their performances during the Black Arts Movement, and at least one prominent group of rappers has done the same, planets exist, figuratively speaking, for those who are willing to take the risk of living on them, and, likewise, Allen's works are there for anyone willing to inhabit them.

The essays, stories, poems, testimonies, and images in this issue focus on Allen's work as an author, teacher, critic, literary activist, and member of family and community. Also included here are works in different genres by Allen himself, and they are meant to help offer insight into Allen's ambitious literary project. The writers and scholars whose works appear in the following pages not only help us to understand Allen as a writer but also to celebrate him as a man who is, in the language used to characterize his creation of Blind Tom, *Half Writer, Half Amazing*. In some ways, a celebration of this nature may appear to be a bit premature since we generally honor writers who have surpassed the apex of their careers, but Allen has already surpassed the heights reached by most

really good writers, and those of us who know him well will testify that his career is set in an orbit that might not ever bring him back down to earth.

It is only appropriate that we begin this issue by taking a cruise down "Jeffery Boulevard," courtesy of one of our preeminent scholars of poetry, Aldon Lynn Nielsen. The "15 Choruses" in Nielsen's essay serve as improvisational responses to Allen's poetry and fiction. From retrospectives of "curious things" in Allen's work to the uncovering of allusions, Nielsen interprets *Rails Under My Back*, *Harbors and Spirits*, and *Stellar Places* creatively and becomes a representative reader, revealing the ways the texts connect with the full range of human experiences. In an interview with Reggie Scott Young, Allen talks about his efforts to make crucial connections in his works and notes how he tries to occupy a wide range of spaces as a writer. While he undeniably sees himself as an African American writer (and also a Southern writer, he tells Young), he is careful to note that being an African American writer all too typically leads to the imposition of limitations. For someone who heard himself referred to as "the Black Kurt Vonnegut" without feeling embarrassed, breaking the bonds of those limitations has been important.

A writer is the sum of everything she or he has read, and the sum we find when we measure Allen is an inestimable total. The folly of some who have commented on Allen's work is that they are too quick to point out the influence of the same writers who are cited over and over again when an African American author produces an outstanding work of fiction: Joyce, Faulkner, Ellison, Wright, etc., and now Morrison. But too few have discussed Allen as a person and writer in relationship to the likes of Gwendolyn Brooks, Leon Forrest, Cyrus Colter, Sterling Plumpp, Michael Anania, Lore Segal, and John Edgar Wideman--along with Vonnegut--in their attempts to define and categorize him. (These critics often overlook the fact that he is also a poet and therefore fail to look at his work in relation to other experimental writers who have written in multiple genres such as Jean Toomer, Henry Dumas, Clarence Major, Wanda Coleman, and Gwendolyn Brooks.) After all, Allen grew up within walking distance of where Brooks once lived. It is impossible for a young writer in Chicago to escape the influence of her shadow. The aspects of Allen's language that so often surprise us often echo Brooks's own performances in language. In writing about Chicago streets, alleys, tenement-building stairways, he walks in her footprints. The late Forrest, another Bronzeville neighbor of Allen's (at least if we think of Bronzeville in broad enough terms to span Chicago's South Side), might be a source from which Allen acquired some of the likeness to Faulkner his writing displays. Unfortunately, far too few people have read Forrest, a writer Morrison published during her days as an editor for Random House who also served as a direct influence on her. Forrest and Colter were Chicago writers to whom Allen was introduced while under the tutelage of Plumpp while a student at UIC, and it is the blues poet extraordinaire Plumpp, another highly undervalued writer, who provided Allen lessons in a blues aesthetic that was not as culturally restrictive as the aesthetic that defined the Black Arts Movement. While introducing Allen to blues clubs such as Rosa's, the High Chaparral, and the Checker Board Lounge, Plumpp also

introduced him to the works of John Edgar Wideman, as well as to Wideman the man. Imagine hanging out at night and discussing art and culture with the likes of Plumpp, Wideman, and award-winning harpist Billy Branch of Sons of the Blues in a South Side blues club! Few young writers receive that kind of education, especially outside of the confines of the academy.

In terms of Wideman, it is important to note that a long-standing relationship developed between the two, one that is still important to Allen. But after becoming familiar with him, Allen did what any young writer would do--asked him to read some of his work. Wideman's response, the response of a mentor and friend, might have discouraged another writer, because he told Allen that the language in his work was flat. Allen embraced the remark as a gift, and no one has ever had reason to say that about him since.

As a student--undergrad and grad at the same institution (UIC's English Department, knowing what it had, not wanting to let him go)--Allen took fiction workshops with novelist Lore Segal, among others, in the university's creative writing program. Segal encouraged his work as enthusiastically as anyone, something she still does today. As much as Plumpp served as a strong influence on Allen's development, so did Anania. As one of Illinois's finest poets, Anania's work at the time was neither classical nor overtly formal, and if nothing else, Allen learned from him the meaning of the word "adroit." Student-writers who study under the direction of established creative writers are invariably influenced by those professors. Professors not only influence who and what their apprentices read, but they are the ones who train them to read like writers. Too often, critics who are quick to categorize individuals like Allen by trying to place their works into convenient boxes of critical influence (*this one was influenced by Joyce, that one by Faulkner, that one by Wright*, etc.) fail to examine how their relationships with literary relatives, teachers, and mentors have helped to shape the works they have produced on their own.

After Nielsen's essay and the interview between Young and Allen, the rest of the issue is organized into several distinct but unmarked sections. The first focuses on Allen's first novel, *Rails Under My Back*. Critical responses are provided by French scholar Anne-Marie Paquet-Deyris and writer/scholar Pamela R. Fletcher. Paquet-Deyris examines the polyphonic dimensions of the novel--the discussion unravels the novel's use of music, quest motifs, and fictionalized histories as structural devices. The novel's rhythm (oscillating between repetition and discontinuity), the linguistic violence of its verbal exchanges, and its fragmented storylines contribute to her characterization of *Rails* as post-postmodern. In its innovation, it redefines notions of plot, disrupts concepts of character (and of blackness, which Jennifer Jordan also observes in her discussion of Allen's stories), and deconstructs ideas of protagonist and antagonist or hero and antihero. Pamela R. Fletcher, in an excerpt from a longer discussion of the novel, focuses on the character of Jesus while examining his depiction from the

perspective of Jungian thought.

The next focus is on Allen's collection of stories, *Holding Pattern*, and following a reprint of the story "Toilet Training," is Jennifer Jordan's essay that examines how the works resist conformity with the idea of ancestry as it is traditionally presented in African American literature. This reinforces Allen's assertion that he draws from many traditions, even as he situates these experiences firmly in African American culture. Reading the stories of *Holding Pattern* through a postmodernist lens, Jordan reveals the ways Allen critiques racial essentialism and challenges notions of historical and racial continuity. The stories in *Holding Pattern*, she argues, do more than deconstruct the idea of the ancestor as healing and protective; instead, in many instances, the ancestors are the source of much of the dysfunction that informs the contemporary moment. She contends that it is this dysfunction, "not some racially connected otherworld," that gives shape to Allen's use of the magical, which is invoked to present a surreal and incomprehensible fictional universe for his characters, even those would-be ancestors who are disconnected from and un-embracing of traditional values and wisdom.

No study of Allen's work as a writer can ignore his work in poetry. The next section includes discussions of Allen as a poet and also poems in celebration of him by some of the leading poets writing today, as well as works by several of Allen's former students. Terese Svoboda published one of the first reviews of Allen's poetry, and it is only fitting that she update her earlier critique in these pages. In addition, Lucy Biederman offers a reading of Allen's "Days." The collection of poems that follows features new pieces by Allen and poems contributed by Sterling D. Plumpp, Evie Shockley, David Mills, Cynthia Oka, Kitso Kgaboesele, Ed Pavlic, Rachel Eliza Griffiths, and others. The penultimate section offers a look into the life and legacy of Jeffery Renard Allen. Included are personal reflections by René Steinke, Lore Segal, and Arthur Flowers, along with photographs, ranging from his youthful days in Chicago to his professional travels in the United States and Africa, and artifacts related to his different publications.

The remaining pages focus on *Song of the Shank*. On the eve of its release, *Song of the Shank* received an outstanding front-page review by Mitchell S. Jackson in the Sunday Book Review section of the *New York Times*. Other glowing reviews followed in newspapers and literary reviews online such as the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *Barnesandnoble.com*, and *Kirkus*. For those preparing to approach the novel for the first time, we have included the original manuscript version of its first chapter followed by Ethan Nosowsky's "Entering *Song of the Shank*," an early commentary that appeared on Graywolf Press's website to provide prospective readers insights about the text. Nosowsky's is an informative piece that introduces the characters from the novel's early pages while also providing an impression from an informed reader. Since *Song of the Shank's* publication is still very recent, there has not been sufficient time for literary critics to respond in conference papers and fully developed critical essays. But we are fortunate to have our own early responses to the

novel by Thadious M. Davis, Horace A. Porter, and Michael A. Antonucci. With the novel's first chapter and essays are documents and images related to Allen's work on the novel and its central character, the legendary "Blind Tom."

The critical essays, creative expressions, and the interview collected here only begin to assess Allen's works and will, perhaps, initiate further critical discussions of his poetry and fiction. Yet to be examined still are his critical essays, his interviews with important writers of our time (Leon Forrest, Percival Everett, David Bradley, John Edgar Wideman, and Abdulrazak Gurnah among them), and his work as cofounder and director of the Pan African Literary Forum. In short, the full measure of Jeffery Renard Allen's contribution to literature as a primary and secondary source is a story yet to be told. Since it took over a decade for *Song of the Shank* to appear after the publication of his first novel--during which time he worked full-time as a faculty member while teaching workshops elsewhere, traveled extensively to give readings, lectures, and participate in conferences, published other books of poetry and fiction, organized and coordinated an international writers' conference on another continent, and after the conference had to overcome a near-death experience with malaria--we are left to wonder how long it will take for the next novel to appear, one that will explore the life and legacy Jean Baptiste Point DuSable, the man who is credited with being the first settler of Chicago. After Allen's exploration of the life of Thomas Greene Wiggins in *Song of the Shank*, it is certain that what he does with the DuSable story will make us consider the historical record in a new and very different light.

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