

Poetics and Precarity



Edited by **Myung Mi Kim**
and **Cristanne Miller**

THE UNIVERSITY AT BUFFALO
ROBERT CREELEY LECTURES IN POETRY AND POETICS

Poetics and Precarity

THE UNIVERSITY AT BUFFALO
ROBERT CREELEY LECTURES IN POETRY AND POETICS



Cristanne Miller, editor

Poetics and Precarity

Edited by **Myung Mi Kim**
and **Cristanne Miller**

SUNY
PRESS

Cover art: Susan Rankaitis © CT #2 2011. Courtesy Robert Mann Gallery, New York.

Published by State University of New York Press, Albany

© 2018 State University of New York

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission. No part of this book may be stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means including electronic, electrostatic, magnetic tape, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise without the prior permission in writing of the publisher.

For information, contact State University of New York Press, Albany, NY
www.sunypress.edu

Book design, Aimee Harrison

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Kim, Myung Mi, 1957- editor. | Miller, Cristanne, editor.

Title: Poetics and precarity / edited, Myung Mi Kim and Cristanne Miller.

Description: Albany, NY : State University of New York Press, 2018. | Series: The university at buffalo robert creeley lectures in poetry and poetics | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017032624 | ISBN 9781438469997 (hardcover : alk. paper) | ISBN 9781438470009 (e-book) | ISBN 9781438469980 (paperback : alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Poetics. | Experimental poetry. | Poetry--Social aspects.

Classification: LCC PN1042.P568 2018 | DDC 808.1--dc23 LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2017032624>

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Breath and Precarity

The Inaugural Robert Creeley Lecture in Poetry and Poetics

Nathaniel Mackey

And I walked naked
from the beginning,

breathing in
my life,
breathing out
poems

—Denise Levertov, “A Cloak”

live, remote, preoccupied
with breathing and black

—Fred Moten, “fortrd.fortrn”

... the tenor’s voice ... an asthmatic ambush of
itself...

—Nathaniel Mackey, *Bedouin Hornbook*

I.

WHEN I RECEIVED THE INVITATION to deliver the inaugural Robert Creeley Lecture in Poetry and Poetics, I had already received an invitation to deliver the keynote address at a conference at Columbia University titled “Improvising Agency for Change: Celebrating Twenty Years of the Vision Festival.” Organized by Arts for Art and Columbia’s Center for

Jazz Studies, the conference was convened to honor the twentieth presentation of the Vision Festival, a week-long festival of experimental jazz, art, film, poetry, and dance held annually in New York City. I recalled reading a short piece by Creeley in the 1966 anthology *Naked Poetry: Recent American Poetry in Open Forms*, entitled “Notes Apropos ‘Free Verse,’” in which he spoke of Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie and of bebop’s influence on his work: “I have, at times, made reference to my own interest when younger (and continually) in the music of Charlie Parker—an intensive variation on ‘foursquare’ patterns such as ‘I’ve Got Rhythm.’ Listening to him play, I found he lengthened the experience of time, or shortened it, gained a very subtle experience of ‘weight,’ all some decision made within the context of what was called ‘improvisation.’”¹ Given the jazz connection, it occurred to me to put together a lecture that would speak to both occasions—the Vision Festival conference and the Creeley celebration—which is what I’ve done.

In recalling Creeley’s “Notes,” I was at the beginning of a process of thought that continued to be, in many ways, retrospective, harking back to other mid-twentieth-century developments in poetry and music that impacted me during the 1960s and after. This gives something of a retrospective cast to the remarks I’d like to offer, a harking back that ranges, I hasten to add, from a span of decades to a much smaller span, one of months or weeks. I had recently, when I began writing this lecture, that is, written a poem that touches on many of the lecture’s concerns—this to such an extent that the lecture amounts to an unpacking or a repacking of a great deal that went into the poem, something of a retrospective on the poem. The poem is one in which I write, as I often do, of an invented band, a make-believe band of musicians, what might be called an air band, in this case the Overghost Ourkestra. The poem, “The Overghost Ourkestra’s Next,” is so integral to the matrix and the process out of which my remarks grew that I will let it conclude the lecture, comprising a second, verse part of the lecture, following this the lecture’s first, prose part.

In this prose part, then, I’d like to talk about a confluence of black music and experimental poetics, a confluence about which my thinking

goes back many years, back to my formative years. One way to put it would be this: as I was coming of age aesthetically, breath was in the air. What I'm referring to is an emphasis or an accent on breath and breathing that came into experimental poetics in the United States during the 1950s and the 1960s, particularly that of what came to be known as the New American Poetry via Donald M. Allen's anthology of that name. Charles Olson, the lead-off poet in the anthology, began his essay "Projective Verse" in a 1950 issue of *Poetry New York* by saying: "Verse now, 1950, if it is to go ahead, if it is to be of *essential* use, must, I take it, catch up and put into itself certain laws and possibilities of the breath, of the breathing of the man who writes as well as of his listenings." This he repeated a number of ways.

I take it that PROJECTIVE VERSE teaches, is, this lesson, that that verse will only do in which a poet manages to register both the acquisitions of his ear *and* the pressures of his breath.

And the line comes (I swear it) from the breath, from the breathing of the man who writes, at the moment that he writes . . .

Let me put it baldly. The two halves are:

the HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE
the HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE

He concluded the essay this way: "a projective poet will [go] down through the workings of his own throat to that place where breath comes from, where breath has its beginnings, where drama has to come from, where, the coincidence is, all act springs."²

Allen Ginsberg, the most famous poet in the anthology, then and now, wrote the following in his notes for the 1959 Fantasy recording of his reading of *Howl* and other poems:

By 1955 I wrote poetry adapted from prose seeds, journals, scratchings, arranged by phrasing or breath groups into little short-line patterns according to ideas of measure of American speech I'd picked

up from W. C. Williams' imagist preoccupations. I suddenly turned aside in San Francisco, unemployment compensation leisure, to follow my romantic inspiration—Hebraic-Melvillian bardic breath.

He went on to explain that “each line of *Howl* is a single breath unit. . . . My breath is long—that's the Measure, one physical-mental inspiration of thought contained in the elastic of a breath.”³ Amiri Baraka, the sole African American included in the anthology, a fact he protested years later, is the quintessential embodiment of the confluence I'm addressing here. In “Charles Olson and Sun Ra: A Note on Being Out,” delivered in Gloucester, Massachusetts, as the Fourth Annual Charles Olson Memorial Lecture in October 2013, only months before his death, he mentioned his Totem Press having published the “Projective Verse” essay as a pamphlet in 1959. The essay, he said, “changed the direction of poetry in the U.S. for many poets writing in the fifties and sixties.” He quoted from the essay and rehearsed the Olson-Ginsberg-Williams nexus that I just sketched out.

The lines are how you hear them, according to your breath, which Ginsberg set me on to when I first came to New York—that is, the breath phrase. That was William Carlos Williams talking, the breath phrase. What is your natural breath phrase? When you talk, where do you stop to breathe? What is your line going to be as a reflection of yourself, your poetic line? It's no arbitrary line. . . . You write until you stop, naturally, where you have to breathe.⁴

In the poem “Numbers, Letters,” he calls himself a “long breath singer.”⁵

I was reading these and related poets in my late teens and early twenties. I was listening to a good deal of relevant music as well, hearing the relevance of the music, so that when Ginsberg spoke of the “long saxophone-like chorus lines”⁶ of *Howl* I heard something very specific, as specific as Baraka naming Sonny Rollins's “Oleo” and Cecil Taylor's “Of What” as the music informing his novel *The System of Dante's Hell*.⁷ I likewise heard something very specific, Olson's open field composition or

composition by field and Robert Duncan's *The Opening of the Field*, at the outset of Taylor's liner notes to his album *Unit Structures*: "The first level or statement of three an opening field of question, how large it ought or ought not to be."⁸ I heard something very specific, the poetics of breath, in the title of those notes, "Sound Structure of Subculture Becoming Major Breath/Naked Fire Gesture." As I've already said, breath was in the air, a pneumatic turn that was diagnostic and symptomatic both. When breath becomes an object of attention, no longer unremarked on, no longer taken for granted, no longer an uninspected given, anxiety is also in the air. As a calming or quieting technique in yoga, various forms of meditation and everyday life or as a function thought or feared to be under siege or in danger of arrest, breathing attends anxiety, decreasing it in the first case, increasing it in the latter.

Olson's emphasis on breath reflects his interest in the performing arts, theater and dance especially, arts whose training and practice involve the learning of breathing techniques. It also reflects the increased attention to poetry readings during the fifties and sixties, the reading's increased salience as a mode of presentation in the appreciation and reception of poetry. In that sense, poetry itself became a performing art. I'm not sure, however, that anything instructional or curricular ever came of the call for more attentiveness to breath among poets, anything more than ad hoc, individual workings out of what such attention might mean in practical terms. Olson didn't clarify or specify how exactly the line issues "from the breath, from the breathing of the man who writes, at the moment that he writes." Does this mean the line doesn't end until the poet expels all the air that was inhaled at its beginning? This isn't borne out by Olson's own practice or by that of others. Ginsberg, in his notes to the recording of *Howl*, proposes the equation of line length and breath length as an ideal, one to which his reading on the recording, he quickly points out, fails to conform: "Tho in this recording it's not pronounced so, I was exhausted at climax of 3 hour Chicago reading with Corso & Orlovsky."⁹ So the breathing of the poet changes from occasion to occasion, breath length and breathing pattern change from occasion to occasion. What, then, is the value of notating, if that's in fact possible, the dictates of breath

peculiar to one occasion, of appearing to fix those dictates for all time, for all future readings? Might breath have been, in such discourse, less a precisely determined prosodic factor or a rigorously applied technique than a metaphor or a metonym for “the animal man,” as Olson puts it in “The Resistance,” “his own biosis, . . . his own physiology, . . . its fragile mortal force?”¹⁰

The “New American” poetics of breath, offering no consistent or comprehensive practicum, was primarily a figurative, theoretical discourse, a symbolically and symptomatically telling discourse. Taken literally, it merely states or restates the self-evident: verbal enunciation has to accommodate the speaker’s need to breathe. Taken otherwise, it animates thought, encourages thought to unbind what’s bound up in the self-evident. It was, among other things, a return to basics during a post-traumatic period, a return to primal or primitive doubts during the postwar years, with their Cold War jitters, a return to primal or primitive assurances as well. Williams wrote in 1941, referring to World War II as “the Death”: “One of the purposes of the Death among us is to terrify the world, to use a destructive ideology to push our culture so far back that it will take a full generation, another crop of flesh and mind, before it can begin to regenerate.”¹¹ Of the many forms of individual and collective anxiety and insecurity an artistic turn toward breath might signal and attend, especially during the post-World War II period, the threat of nuclear annihilation is the most obvious perhaps, as in Ginsberg’s “America” (“Go fuck yourself with your atom bomb”) or Charles Mingus’s “Oh Lord Don’t Let Them Drop That Atomic Bomb on Me” or Sun Ra’s “Nuclear War.”¹² On a more intimate, personal scale, Robert Creeley’s emphatic, signature pause following lines as short as one or two words, one or two syllables even, his veritable pronunciation of each and every line break, conveyed a trepidatious, anxious apprehensiveness. His insistent, asthmatic employment of caesura, his halting, hesitant delivery, accorded with a radical loss of assurance regarding such basic amenities and givens as identity, relationship, knowledge, perception and language. His Library of Congress reading of “For Love,” recorded on June 1, 1961, is typical:

Robert Creeley, “For Love,” audio site, selection 1

The following URL will take readers to the site “Breath and Precarity’ Audio,” where the five audio selections referred to in this essay will be found: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLpIn53PcIVhEQJoGcp5kj2MeOLItgjkwJ>, Section 1

Creeley’s reading style is only the most extreme instance of a style that became pervasive during the fifties and sixties, one in which the reading, rather than following cuts and demarcations dictated by the putatively natural or normal regularities of breathing, constructed an alternate breathing pattern fraught with apprehension, insecurity, and duress.¹³ Jittery times call for jittery measures. Creeley’s work, which he repeatedly said was influenced by beboppers Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie, struck me as the poetic analogue of the introvert, convolute playing of postbop saxophonist John Tchicai, who Baraka wrote of as “playing the alto like a metal poem.”¹⁴ Tchicai’s slow, deliberative parsing and meting out of breath, phrase, query, and assertion on the New York Art Quartet’s 1965 recording of “Everything Happens to Me” is a good example:

New York Art Quartet, “Everything Happens to Me,”

***Mohawk* (Cool Music 2044774), audio site, selection 2**

The following URL will take readers to the site “Breath and Precarity’ Audio,” where the five audio selections referred to in this essay will be found: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLpIn53PcIVhEQJoGcp5kj2MeOLItgjkwJ>, Section 2

A poetics of breath belabors the obvious: without breath we lose vitality, without breath we die. It defamiliarizes the obvious perhaps. Obvious or not, the salience of breath, had at, harped on or exulted in, remarks a return to primal conditions or an apprehension of never having left them, a return to primitive conditions or an apprehension of never having left them. As Baraka wrote of Sun Ra: “Sun Ra’s consistent statement, musically and spoken, is that this is a primitive world.

Its practices, beliefs, religions, are uneducated, unenlightened, savage, destructive, already in the past.”¹⁵ A poetics of breath is all the more palpably evident in black music, particularly the music of wind instruments, a radical pneumaticism in which the involuntary is rendered deliberate, labored, in which breath is belabored, made strange. Breath becomes tactical, tactile, textile, even textual, a haptic recension whose jagged disbursements augur duress. Back in those days, my late teens and early twenties, the late sixties, I especially heard this in Sonny Rollins’s version of “On Green Dolphin Street” on the *Sonny Rollins on Impulse!* album, recorded in 1965, a record I nearly wore out. Sonny’s teasing out and toying with the head of the tune, his heavily marked withholdings and expenditures of wind, as though subject to spasmic or spastic dilation or detour, as though breath or the apparatus of breathing were jerked one way and then another, bespoke extremity and strain, albeit done with virtuosic mastery and command. I could never get over and I still can’t get over the hectored, put-upon way he opens the piece, running the gamut between a stop-and-go, halting attack, a tossed, asthmatic shortness of breath, a catching of breath, and a relaxed assurance of breath so nonchalant as to barely evince effort, bely blowing. To echo Ezra Pound on Béla Bartók’s Fifth Quartet, it has the sound of “a record of struggle,”¹⁶ a struggle prolonged in our hearing of it. Nor could I or can I get over the sotto voce accompaniment he offers Ray Bryant and Walter Booker during their piano and bass solos, the under-his-breath or just-above-his-breath comments that are a kind of growl, a kind of hover, a kind of heavy breathing even. I used to play this track for poetry classes when I began teaching in the mid-seventies. I would say, “This is projective verse.”

Sonny Rollins, “On Green Dolphin Street,” *Sonny Rollins on Impulse!* (Impulse! IMPD-223), audio site, selection 3

The following URL will take readers to the site “‘Breath and Precarity’ Audio,” where the five audio selections referred to in this essay will be found: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLpIn53PcIVhEQjoGcp5kj2MeOLItgjkwJ>, Section 3

To call it a beautiful, prolonged panic or anxiety attack is probably going too far, but I'm tempted to do that. W. Alfred Fraser, one of Washington, DC's *Dasein* poets, does, after all, refer to the members of the sixties band the "JFK" Quintet as "five bundles of controlled panic"; Rahsaan Roland Kirk did title one of his albums *Rip, Rig and Panic*; and the word *panic* does go back to the piper-god Pan.¹⁷ Is it the precariousness of breath, its being provisional, without guarantee, or the blessing and bounty of breath that's highlighted by Rollins? Could it be both, a reveling in—while recognizing, lamenting, even protesting—the transient boon that breath is? I wondered then and I wonder now.

Music, like speech, is made of breath. Breath is music's open secret. To linger with its disclosure, insist on and belabor its indispensability, is a signal impulse found in the music we call jazz. Radical pneumaticism I call it, one of the music's defining features, I think. Roswell Rudd named a 1973 composition "Numatik Swing Band." Chris McGregor called his band Brotherhood of Breath. Henry Threadgill, Fred Hopkins, and Steve McCall named their trio Air. I heard and I hear it in Bill Dixon's recourse to untempered, raw expulsions of air on an album such as *November 1981*. I heard and I hear it in Archie Shepp's "incandescent croon," to borrow a phrase from Araya Asgedom, the raspy, gruff, blustery, spendthrift way he has with wind on a piece like "Cousin Mary," or his Websterian tack on ballads like "In a Sentimental Mood." I heard and I hear it in Ben Webster himself, the signature culling of subtones we hear on pieces like "Tenderly," where breath is made to tail or to shadow itself, a sonic shimmer seeming to bask in leakage, in air's propensity to escape or to be taken away. Each breath is exactly meted out and drawn out, lingered with as if it were his last:

**Ben Webster, "Tenderly," *King of the Tenors*
(Verve 519 806-2), audio site, selection 4**

The following URL will take readers to the site "Breath and Precarity Audio," where the five audio selections referred to in this essay will be found: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLpIn53PcIVhEQjoGcp5kj2MeOLItgjkWJ>, Section 4

Ben's caressive, savoring way with breath celebrates the amenities of caring and warmth, proffers the amenities of caring and warmth, trafficking in drift all the while nonetheless. It advances an essay on frailty and fragility with a certain lightness of touch, a fleetingness of nuance and lightness according with diagnostic finesse. I've long wondered about that and I still wonder about it. Leakage, air's propensity to escape or to be taken away, seems both to halo and to haunt the piece, giving it a ghost escort or the intimation of ghostliness, making it also, whatever else it is, the tenderness of address it obviously is, a meditation on transience, mortality, expiration. On the other hand, such radical pneumatic practice parallels Olson's assertion that "breath allows *all* the speech-force of language back in (speech is the 'solid' of verse, is the secret of a poem's energy), . . . a poem has, by speech, solidity."¹⁸ In Webster's "Tenderly" and other such work, breath is rendered solid, bodied forth as texture, tactility, palpability, an abrading aurality one feels one could reach out and touch. Is its implied purchase, the solidity it bestows on breath, a resilient measure making breath all the better to be held on to? Granted solidity, audiotactility, does breath become less airy and thus less fleeting, less ephemeral? Is radical pneumaticism as much a holding action as an elegiac lament?

Such a meditation as Webster's is one we often find N. and his fellow band members advancing in my serial fiction *From a Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate*. Here's what N. writes about a Websterian moment during the band's performance of a piece titled "Half-Staff Appetition," about tenor saxophonist Lambert's "performative discourse having to do with fugitive breath, tasted breath."

"Half-Staff Appetition," I may not have said, is a ballad. A balladeer to the bone once he got into it, Lambert expounded its ballad marrow as he apportioned its ballad blood with a sound whose breathy/breathless caress brought Ben Webster to mind—the Webster of, say, "Prisoner of Love" or of "Tenderly." This Websterian recourse to subtones made for an accent which fell on wind as rudimentary voice, an insinuating return to basics, as it were, whose flirtatious, make-believe bite—a fugitive lover's blown breath or kiss—one could

never not woo the enjoyment of. Thus it was that ballad bone was a now asthmatic, now respirated baton which had made the rounds from time immemorial, a broken, half-staff capacity for aspirate expulsion, aspirate escape.

Lambert's Websterian celebration of breath couldn't help but be infused with a spectre of loss, an intimate acknowledgement if not embrace of expiration's most ominous undertones, in dialogue with which a consoling image of "inspired" leakage came into play. The latter made for a reading of aspirate expulsion (savored aspiration, inverse breathless ascent) as a cushion for what might otherwise have been unbearable, an inspired albeit merely implied pillow talk to soften its blow. Such implicative talk sugarcoated a pill which was hard to swallow, though Drennette [the drummer], it appeared, was by no means entirely won over. She bit or bought into it only to bargain for something more, keeping up her end of what was a bartered embrace with a not-to-be-bought barrage of post-romantic rescissions played on cymbals and high hat. The rest of us gradually pulled back. This was obviously between the two of them, an expulsive-appetitive pillow and rug rolled into one.¹⁹

Drennette, whose joining the band was announced by the male members dreaming of Djennine (jinn, genie), embodies the spirit of repercussive critique, a disconsolate spirit that will know no consolation, know no solace, take no prisoners. She brings a stringent demand to bear on fugitive breath, the pneumatic beauty or pneumatic sublimation Lambert exacts from precarious premises, such premises the price, Drennette never tires of remembering or of reminding him, with which pneumatic beauty is bought. She would both have it and not have it, given what it's tied to. She would give it up, she implies, for it to be free of such premises, but short of that, she seems to go on, she'll hold on. As Baraka writes of John Coltrane's "Afro-Blue," both having beauty and not having it, "Beautiful has nothing to do with it, but it is."²⁰

This not-having-to-do-with or having-nothing-to-do-with has to do with not settling. It wields a lever against present conditions, the precarity

or the precarious premises Lambert sublimates or pneumaticizes, redeeming expiration or leakage as inspiration, seeming to say, alongside Wallace Stevens, “Death is the mother of beauty.”²¹ Drennette says whoa to that, advancing a more capacious, ensemblist truth that wishes not to foreclose a less precarious future, wishes not to invest in precarity, wants to insist on alternate prospects. During the gig at Soulstice in Seattle, when the comic-strip balloons bearing inscriptions appear for the first time, ambiguous balloons that are by turns implied to be flat, two-dimensional placards and suggested to be three-dimensional rubber sacs inflated with breath, she advances an even more radical pneumaticism. N., who at one point in his letters to Angel of Dust mentions a two-stringed Korean fiddle called the *haegeum* that is classified as a wind instrument due to its unusual timbre and range, is aware of the microbreathing of ostensibly nonwind instruments, nonhorns, the perturbations of air, which can be called a kind of breathing, produced by plucked, strummed or bowed strings, drum heads rubbed or struck by sticks, brushes or hands, and so on. He may have, as I have on occasion, heard Don Pullen or Cecil Taylor execute a run that made the piano whistle, or heard Henry Grimes or Alan Silva bow the bass in such a way as to exact a sirening cry. He describes Drennette’s solo, following Penguin’s, during which balloons had emerged from the oboe, as the drum set becoming a wind instrument—this to advance an unforeclosed futurity or futurism, post-expectant and postprecarious perhaps.

Post-expectant futurity brought one abreast of the ground, Drennette announced, annulled, in doing so, any notion of ground as not annexed by an alternate ground. This was the pregnancy, the unimpatient expectancy, she explained, Penguin, albeit put upon and perplexed, had been granted rare speech, rare fluency by. Djeannine Street, alternate ground par excellence, inflected each run of heavy bass drum thumps with ventriloquial spectres, Drennette’s recourse to the sock cymbal insistent that she and Djeannine, long spoken for, had spooked (her word was “inspired”) wouldly ledge, atomistic ledge.

It was a wild, outrageous boast, but she had the chops, it turned out, to back it up. The drumset had become a wind instrument by the time she finished her solo. A gust of wind arose from each roll and with each roll the storm she brewed grew more ferocious. We felt it at our backs when we joined in again, pressing as it pestered us toward some occult articulation only Drenette, not looking ahead, saw deep enough to have inklings of. Not so much needling as pounding us now, the needling mist partook of that wind—mystical hammer rolled into one with atomistic pulse. Wouldly ledge, needling mist and Penguin's auto-inscriptive high would all, post-expectancy notwithstanding, turn out to have only been a beginning.²²

Has such a beginning begun? If not, when will it begin? These are the questions radical pneumaticism, in both poetry and music, asks.

These matters resonate with the long state of siege to which black folk have been subjected, a long history crystallized most recently by Eric Garner's last words, "I can't breathe," and the rendering of a statement by Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* that it's been brought into alignment with in recent months, "We revolt simply because, for many reasons, we can no longer breathe."²³ *Bedouin Hornbook*, the first volume of *From a Broken Bottle*, ends with Jarred Bottle threatened by an encounter with the Los Angeles Police Department, an encounter he fears will end with his neck in a cop's chokehold. The book at that point recalls a letter in which N. writes of "alchemizing a legacy of lynchings,"²⁴ a history of black necks and black windpipes broken, whether by ropes or by cop strangleholds, characterizing Al Green's falsetto, his recourse to its attenuation of voice, as a way of saying, in so many words, "I can't breathe," albeit in a good way, a transmuted way. Transmutation or alchemization, the digestion and sublimation of antiblack violence, harassment, and predation, has been one of the jobs of black music, black art, black cultural and social life in general. Langston Hughes's Simple says something similar when he says that bebop came from police billy clubs, from "the police beating Negroes' heads": "Every time a cop hits

a Negro with his billy club, that old club says, 'BOP! BOP! . . . BE-BOP! . . . MOP! . . . BOP! . . . ' That's where Be-Bop came from, beaten right out of some Negro's head into those horns and saxophones and the piano keys that play it."²⁵ In remarking, famously, that playing bebop "is like playing Scrabble with all the vowels missing,"²⁶ Duke Ellington appears to agree with Simple's characterization of bebop as a definitively percussive—and, I would add, repercussive—turn in the history of jazz. In his autobiography, *Music Is My Mistress*, Ellington refers to bebop as "the Marcus Garvey extension."²⁷

Simple speaks partly in jest, a serious jesting characteristic of blues humor, Zen bluesism, a strain that gives us lines like "Life is a one-way ticket" (which gave Hughes the title of a poem and of a book of poems) or "Gonna lay my head on the railroad line, / Let the train come along and pacify my mind," gives us the Zen-bluesist restitution the word *pacify* gets. He makes light of police predation, makes light of it in more than one sense. We can say that he speaks lightheartedly, specifically holding in mind the nexus of heart, breath, and light found in *The Secret of the Golden Flower*, an ancient Chinese meditation text that appears to have influenced the "Projective Verse" essay and is explicitly referred to elsewhere in Olson's work. In a section titled "Circulation of the Light and Making the Breathing Rhythmical," we read the following:

Breathing comes from the heart. What comes out of the heart is breath. As soon as the heart stirs, there develops breath-energy. Breath-energy is originally transformed activity of the heart. . . . Since heart and breath are mutually dependent, the circulation of the light must be united with the rhythm of breathing. For this, light of the ear is above all necessary. There is a light of the eye and a light of the ear. The light of the eye is the united light of the sun and moon outside. The light of the ear is the united seed of sun and moon within. The seed is thus the light in crystallized form. . . . If the heart is light, the breathing is light, for every movement of the heart affects breath-energy. If breathing is light, the heart is light, for every movement of breath-energy affects the heart.²⁸

Where light is lightness and illumination, buoyancy and lucidity accrue to breath. Simple's comments both articulate and exemplify the light-bearing function of black artistic, cultural, and social life, the light heart it so often seeks to launch and to keep aloft. Black music, like other forms of black artistic and cultural expression, opens a space for reflection, a meditative space that bears critically on the precarious and predatory world in which its auditors and its producers find themselves. Simple's jest laughs not to cry and, more seriously, laughs not to go insane. "Focus on Sanity" is the title of an Ornette Coleman piece. Booker Little wrote a piece called "Strength and Sanity."

Violence, harassment, and predation form a backdrop that's never far from the music and sometimes, famously or infamously, very close, as when Miles Davis, in August 1959, was beaten and arrested by New York City police officers outside Birdland, where he had just finished playing a set. Such violence is only the most overt and sensational expression of a more wide-ranging program of policing and assault, whose quieter forms include poverty, unemployment, underfunded schools, underfunded infrastructure, and underfunded social services, all those factors that decrease the life chances of African Americans. *Precarity*, a word I've borrowed from a European discourse and social movement that emerged in the first decade of this century, a movement addressing the plight of immigrant or migrant workers, intermittent workers, female and young workers, is defined as "a condition of existence without predictability or security, affecting material and/or psychological welfare. Specifically, it is applied to the condition of intermittent or underemployment and the resultant precarious existence."²⁹ I carry it back and I apply it to the condition of black folk, marginalized or "remote," as Fred Moten puts it, and "preoccupied / with breathing."³⁰ The discourse and the social movement surrounding it arose from European labor discovering something emancipated African American slaves, for example, had previously discovered: Capitalism routinely, as it moves on to new profit-making strategies, abandons its workers (no forty acres, no mule). Horns are prosthetic lungs. Less obviously, strings, keyboards, and drums are prosthetic lungs, black music a prosthetic device more generally, tonally parallel, as Ellington

might say, to the precarity and the damage it weathers and rebuts. Titles tell: Joe Thomas and Jay McShann, *Blowin' in from K.C.*; Clifford Jordan and John Gilmore, *Blowin' in from Chicago*; Dizzy Reece and Ted Curson, *Blowin' Away*; Jonah Jones, *Blowin' up a Storm*; Willis Jackson, *Keep on a Blowin'*; Horace Silver, *Blowin' the Blues Away*. And so on.

The exulting in breath and breathing I mentioned earlier is nowhere more evident than in the use of circular breathing in jazz, where it has a greater prominence than in any other Western musical idiom. Horn players use this technique to produce a continuous tone without interruption, a kind of hyper-pneumaticism, which they accomplish by breathing in through the nose while simultaneously expelling air stored in the cheeks through the mouth. The technique's origins are said to lie among thirteen-century Mongolian metalsmiths whose work with gold and silver required maintaining a pipe-sustained flame for an uninterrupted ten to thirty minutes. The technique was taken up by musicians, and its musical provenance down through the centuries remained decidedly Oriental, a technique used extensively in playing the Mongolian *limbe*, the Central Eurasian *zurna*, the Egyptian *arghul*, and other traditional oboes and flutes of Asia and the Middle East. In my early poem "Ohnedaruth's Day Begun," written in memory of John Coltrane, I have Trane pray, "Breath be with me / always, bend me East of / all encumbrance."³¹ Circular breathing is that prayer and the aim of that prayer, an uninterrupted hyperabundance of breath whose continuous flow intimates eternal ongoingness, unending abidance, everlasting life. Its turn toward or its appeal to the East beckons deliverance from the Occidental exile spoken of in the Sufism of Suhrawardi and other schools of esoterism, as well as from the exoteric legacies of Western captivity and subjugation we're much more familiar with. Jazz recourse to circular breathing thus animates a mixed-emotional, mixed-messaging traffic, a clandestine circulation of breath rotating between utopian intimations of assured, everlasting pneumatic amenity and a sirening alarm at the precarity to which breath, especially black breath, is subject—triumphalist and agonistic both, a boastful exulting in breath and a dystopian struggle for it,

not to mention the gradations and the qualifications in-between. Roscoe Mitchell's "The Flow of Things, No. 1" (another telling title) from 1986, a ten and a half minute piece on soprano saxophone, is a good example. Mitchell's pinched, high-pitched drone ups the ante on Oriental transcendence, as much a vehicle for Occidental embattlement if not more:

Roscoe Mitchell, "The Flow of Things, No. 1,"
***The Flow of Things* (Kepach Music 120090-OD), audio**
site, selection 5

The following URL will take readers to the site "Breath and Precarity' Audio," where the five audio selections referred to in this essay will be found: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLpIn53PcIVhEQjoGcp5kj2MeOLItgjkwJ>, Section 5

Black music's preoccupation with breath and blowing is a technical matter and more. Blowing is belief, a stubborn, mind-made-up magic or mantra (e.g., Shepp, "The Magic of Ju-Ju"), the straight lick hit with a crooked stick, the way made out of no way. The more wind you use, woodwind and brass teachers like to say, the more wind you have—as though flesh were spirit, spirit flesh, flesh willing. Baraka wrote about Marion Brown and Pharoah Sanders in 1965: "Brown and Sanders, at Sanders' insistence, have been practicing Yoga breathing exercises in an attempt to bring more flesh into their sound."³² The aim would appear to be to work breathing and breath in such a way as to highlight vulnerable and volatile flesh and blood, violable flesh and bone, to accent, in a way related to Webster's while different from it, mortal susceptibility, human exposure, respiration as what matters, even if at risk or especially if at risk. A certain universality resides in these black particulars, precarity being a widely human condition. That none of us is guaranteed our next breath is a truth that has to sit alongside another, equally obvious, which is that precarity has been and continues to be unequally distributed, some groups serving, for others, as a sacrifice to it or a shield against it. Black music, with its worrying of breath, articulates both, which probably accounts

for its global reach and reception. What David Marriott recently wrote regarding black avant-garde poetry, glossing Aimé Césaire's invocation of "a universal rich with all that is particular, rich with all the particulars there are, the deepening of each particular, the coexistence of them all," pertains to the music as well.

I can think of no better statement of why black avant-garde poetry should not be reduced to the usual modernist dilemma of aesthetics versus politics, or why its attentiveness to richly diverse modes of being should not be seen for what it is, i.e., a politics of the word defined by an incessant fidelity to creative negation. If this is a fidelity which can too easily be appropriated by the forces of cultural industrial control, that is because the value of its creation coincides with the terrible universal insecurity that is both its origin and truth, but one that also defines how each particular gives on to the world a newly embodied universal which provides for and bears along its own richness of meaning.³³

Black music says, as does an allied, radically pneumatic poetics, that breath, especially imperiled breath, matters. It insists that we can, for a time at least, breathe, that what we do with breath, from which, to belabor the obvious, animacy, agency and all possibility of action arise, matters most. This is the innate, implicit activism of the music, cognate with Charles Mingus and Max Roach's founding of Debut Records, Max Roach's *Freedom Now Suite*, Bill Dixon's founding of the Jazz Composers Guild, Muhal Richard Abrams, Jodie Christian, Steve McCall, and Phil Cohran's founding of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians, Patricia Nicholson Parker's founding of the Vision Festival and other such explicit manifestations. It says that black breath matters, black lives matter, at risk in multiple ways on a crowded, conflictual planet on which, though everyone is at risk and, yes, all lives matter, blackness is the sign and the symbol of risk, preeminently at risk in a scapegoating, sacrificial world order for which black is the color of precarity itself.

2.

THE OVERGHOST OURKESTRA'S NEXT

—“*mu*” *one hundred fortieth part*—

Nub's new facelift got old. War droned
on, money stayed on top. The abandoned
boy and girl went by every name known. . .

Still,

we bit the bullet and blew. “I will be and
I'll believe when I blow,” we announced.

“I will be and abide by sound, my slave day

done.”

We were back on St. Sufferhead's porch or
promontory, some same tune's temporizing
remit, reminiscent romance, the pharaoh's

black

torso reached for and found, polis plied as
eros again. . . We were the pharaoh's black

torso lost and found again, thick reed stuck to
a dry lower lip, chapped kiss calling itself song

all

sibilance, some same tune's high cry. We
were the pharaoh's black torso cloaked, a call
for cover, shot body sirening alarm we lost
and found again, pantomime's loose raiment.

So

it was or so we said or so we played cant-
ing say-so, torn cloak's rule unrelenting, torn
cloak routing the day. . . Could we but be a

band

it would all go away we thought or we played
 like we thought, could we but be a band it
 would all be okay. So it was we were in a band,

so

it was not so the same. What we cut we'd call
 a release, release what we called out for. It'd been
 going on for only a minute, it'd been going on
 for as long as we knew, Nub said to be having a

con-

versation, no such one were
 we in

•

Unable to breathe though we were, we blew,
 the crook of Nub's arm on our necks. We
 played with our hands up, axes untouched,

re-

lease it was tej's bet would be sweet. . .
 "Nub held my neck in the crook of its arm," the
 unworded song we sang said. "Nub took me

down

but I got up swinging." Could we only band
 or bond we thought but it wasn't so, together
 as we were we suffered, original sufferheads
 for all eternity it seemed, wise ones and wounded

ones

it seemed . . . The Empathetic String Ensemble
 skipped out. A gig in the Czech Republic they
 said. So it was we were on our own, erstwhile

ac-

companiment the ground we got up from, hot

light spiraling behind. Pulling thread from string,
string from rope we'd have been had they been
there,
a fraught way to feel, a fugue for the wretched,
blows to the head as we blew. . . Hands up, wind-
pipes crushed, we blew, overghost embouchure's
be-
hest

•

A high falsetto wind put parts in our hair again.

We heard bells, an avid choir breaking glass
they hit such high notes, heads all honey house

it

seemed. Choked, held, haloed we wanted to
say but came up short, hot light popping sweat no
matter the high wind, no matter where we were,

wher-

ever it was we were, hot light a way we dwelt
elsewhere, it was never just there we were. . .

Wherever it was we were we were birds again,

each

with our own song, each with a tutor song, "Teach
me, tutor me," we sang. Notwithstanding we
couldn't breathe we blew, a masonic windpipe we

re-

sorted to circular breathing with we blew. L'ou-
verture we called it, church key, millet beer wet
what words there were . . . It was an underground
pipeline we got our breath back thru, "Teach me, tutor

me"

the words there were, thirst a way of knowing not
knowing, gnostic more stoic now. Our first day in the
land of the dead it was. Breathless though we were

we

blew. Took a stand we were taken down we testified,
arrest what of earth we remembered, all else taken
away. So went the record, what we read into the record,

New

Tears for Eric new tunes for another Eric, commis-
sioner, our posthumous release. . . *Live in the Land*

of the Dead we might've called it, notwithstanding
 we
 couldn't breathe we blew. No matter we couldn't
 breathe we blew we kept insisting, overghost trem-
 olo, overghost vibrato, overghost cul-de-sac come
 to
 and come back from, overghost conversancy no
 end. . . In the heart of New Not Yet, west of Egypt, no
 matter we couldn't breathe we blew. No pitch, no
 tone,
 pulse only, a tutor song police batons taught us,
 hex-
 ameters tapped out with a
 stick

(liner note)

The idea was we were dead, already dead,
 always, the saying went, already dead. The
 idea was we blew not yet knowing we were
 dead,
 to blow was to hope against hope we had
 air, no matter we couldn't breathe breathe in,
 breathe out, no matter we couldn't breathe
 keep
 breathing. The idea was we were a claim
 the dead made, the idea we were a strain put on
 the living. The idea was time turned back,
 put
 its back to us, back at some serial onslaught,
 back
 at us again and
 again

We convened around the corner from
Coltrane's house, the Toussaint L'Ouverture
Masonic Lodge. "Acknowledgement" hit,
we
bowed our heads. It was nothing if not
love's arcade and we wanted that, the idea
we'd round it off with that. . . *Live in Outer
Space* we might've called it. Why they send
us
off the planet so soon we wanted to know,
demanded someone say, got no answer.
Lynch law's return had it ever left, nightsticks
and
nooses, no new face-
lift now

Breath, even would-be breath, our eventual
 escort, hydraulic circles we blew.
 Better born a dog in Nub we squalled,
 call-
 ing up “Step” even so. “Giant Steps”
 no, not even “Steps,” “Step.” Step
 said everything, all that would out. . .
 Hit.
 Hoist. Hover. Hover. . . High cyclonic
 stair. . .
 Step

NOTES

1. Robert Creeley, "Notes apropos 'Free Verse,'" *Naked Poetry: Recent American Poetry in Open Forms*, ed. Stephen Berg and Robert Mezey (Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969), 186–87.

2. Charles Olson, "Projective Verse," *Selected Writings*, ed. Robert Creeley (New York: New Directions, 1966), 15, 17, 19, 26.

3. Allen Ginsberg, "Notes on *Howl* and Other Poems," *The New American Poetry*, ed. Donald M. Allen (New York: Grove Press, 1960), 414–15, 416.

4. Amiri Baraka, "Charles Olson and Sun Ra: A Note on Being Out" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KucCiMrCPSw>.

5. LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, "Numbers, Letters," *Black Magic: Collected Poetry 1961–1967* (Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969), 47.

6. Ginsberg, op. cit., 415.

7. LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, "Statement," *New American Story*, ed. Donald M. Allen and Robert Creeley (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 267–68.

8. Cecil Taylor, "Sound Structure of Subculture Becoming Major Breath/Naked Fire Gesture," *Unit Structures* (Blue Note BST 84237), 1966.

9. Ginsberg, op. cit., 416.

10. Charles Olson, "The Resistance," *Selected Writings*, ed. Robert Creeley (New York: New Directions, 1966), 13–14

11. William Carlos Williams, "Midas: A Proposal for a Magazine," *Selected Essays* (New York: New Directions, 1969), 241.

12. Allen Ginsberg, "America," *Howl and Other Poems* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1956), 31. Charles Mingus, *Oh Yeah* (Atlantic SD 1377), 1962. Sun Ra, *Nuclear War* (Y Records RA 1), 1982.

13. During a visit to Duke University in October 2015, South African pianist/composer Abdullah Ibrahim remarked, "Our concept is a concept of breath, the importance of breath," and went on to accentuate the ability to alter the rhythm of one's breathing, to construct alternate breathing patterns, as a distinguishing feature of *homo sapiens*: "Breath is automatic. You're not even aware of it. But we have the possibility to change the rhythm of the breath. We are the only creatures who are able to do this." See "Talking

Music: Abdullah Ibrahim and Nathaniel Mackey,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mSZonRCZzzM>.

Ginsberg gets at this alterability with his phrase “the elastic of a breath.” Working not with an unusually short line, as does Creeley, but with an unusually long one, he stresses its departure from what might be thought of as natural or normal speech and breath rhythms: “my own heightened conversation, not cooler average-dailytalk short breath. I got to mouth more madly this way” (*The New American Poetry*, p. 416).

14. LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, “New Tenor Archie Shepp Talking,” *Black Music* (New York: William Morrow, 1967), 154. In the liner notes to Shepp’s album *Four for Trane*, in the same volume, he writes, “Like Shepp, Tchicai carries the world-spirit in his playing, what is happening now, to *all of us*, whether we are sensitive enough to realize it or not” (158, emphasis in original). Tchicai, Afro-Danish, is an interesting, serendipitous embodiment of the intersection between free jazz and poetry in what has been called the Pound/Williams tradition. Valerie Wilmer points out that Tchicai’s father was taken from Africa to Europe by Leo Frobenius, the German ethnographer who was very important to Ezra Pound:

John Tchicai’s father was brought to Europe as a teenager in 1906 by the German ethnologist Leo Frobenius. Joseph Lucianus Tschcaya (later spelt Tschakai) was born at Pointe Noire, a village near the Congo estuary, and met Frobenius during the latter’s first African expedition. The youngster had learned French and German at a Belgian mission school and lived with Frobenius as a servant. He was a useful contact whom the ethnologist educated further, and moved with him to Berlin. He traveled to the Netherlands and Belgium in search of work, and eventually to Scandinavia, where he worked in restaurants and nightclubs as a doorman and cigarette seller. He had eight children with two partners before meeting Tchicai’s mother. The eldest of them was the drummer Kaj Timmermann, who in 1940 formed the Harlem Kiddies, the first black Danish band. Tchicai’s parents met at the Aarhus pleasure-gardens, where both were working

as waiters. Tchicai told me that his father's first words to his mother were: "I love you!" They were married soon afterwards.

The Guardian (October 11, 2012) <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2012/oct/11/john-tchicai>.

15. Back cover blurb for John F. Szwed's *Space Is the Place: The Lives and Times of Sun Ra* (New York: Pantheon, 1997).

16. Ezra Pound, *Guide to Kulchur* (New York: New Directions, 1970), 135.

17. W. Alfred Fraser, "To the 'JFK' Quintet," *Burning Spear: An Anthology of Afro-Saxon Poetry*, ed. Walter De Legall (Washington, DC: Jupiter Hammon Press, 1963), 15.

18. Olson, op. cit., 20.

19. Nathaniel Mackey, *From a Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate: Volumes 1-3* (New York: New Directions, 2010), 312-13.

20. LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, "Coltrane Live at Birdland," *Black Music* (New York: William Morrow, 1967), 66.

21. Wallace Stevens, "Sunday Morning," *Collected Poetry and Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1997), 55.

22. Mackey, op. cit., 430.

23. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 226: "It is not because the Indo-Chinese has discovered a culture of his own that he is in revolt. It is because 'quite simply' it was, in more than one way, becoming impossible for him to breathe."

24. Mackey, op. cit., 50.

25. Langston Hughes, "Bop," *The Best of Simple* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1961), 118.

26. *Look* 18, no. 16 (August 10, 1954).

27. Duke Ellington, *Music Is My Mistress* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1976), 109.

28. *The Secret of the Golden Flower: A Chinese Book of Life*, trans. Richard Wilhelm (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1962), 40-41.

29. "Precarity," Wikipedia <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Precarity>.

30. Fred Moten, "fortrd.fortrn," *The Little Edges* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2015), 2.

31. Nathaniel Mackey, "Ohnedaruth's Day Begun," *Eroding Witness* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 72.
32. LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka, "Apple Cores #2," *Black Music* (New York: William Morrow, 1967), 123.
33. David Marriott, "Response to Race and the Poetic Avant-Garde" (March 10, 2015) <https://bostonreview.net/blog/poetry-forum-race-avant-garde>.

At a time when wars, acts of terrorism, and ecological degradation have intensified and isolationism, misogyny, and ethnic divisiveness have been given distinctively more powerful voice in public discourse, language itself often seems to have failed. The poets and critics in this book argue that language has the potential to address this increasing level of discord and precarity, and they negotiate ways to understand poetics, or the role of the poetic, in relation to language, the body politic, the human body, breath, the bodies of the natural environment, and the body of form.

Poetry makes urgent issues audible and poetics helps to theorize those issues into critical consciousness. Poetry also functions as a cry to protest late capitalist imperialism, misogyny, racism, climate change, and all the debilitating conditions of everyday life. Hubs of concern merge and diverge; precarity takes differently gendered, historied, embodied, geopolitical manifestations. The contributors articulate a poetics that renders what has not yet been crystallized as discourse into fields of force. They also acknowledge the beauties of sound, poetry, and music, and celebrate the power of community, marking the surge of energy that can occur at a particular place at a particular moment. Ultimately, *Poetics and Precarity* fosters further conversations that will imagine the concerns of poetics as a continuously emerging field.

Myung Mi Kim is James H. McNulty Chair of English at the University at Buffalo, State University of New York. She is the author of several books of poetry, including *Penury*, *Dura*, and *Under Flag*, winner of the Multicultural Publishers Exchange Award of Merit. **Cristanne Miller** is SUNY Distinguished Professor and Edward H. Butler Professor of English Literature at the University at Buffalo. She is the author of many books, including *Reading in Time: Emily Dickinson in the Nineteenth Century* and *Cultures of Modernism: Marianne Moore, Mina Loy, and Else Lasker-Schüler*.

The University at Buffalo Robert Creeley Lectures in Poetry and Poetics
Cristanne Miller, editor

SUNY
PRESS

STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK PRESS
www.sunypress.edu

ISBN: 978-1-4384-6999-7

