

ED ROBERSON: RETRIEVALS

Introduction

This special section began with a visit to Ed Roberson in January 2015. Perched at the edge of Bronzeville, Roberson's high-rise apartment looks north toward Chicago's downtown skyscrapers and east across Lake Shore Drive toward Lake Michigan. Fanning out to the apartment's south and west is the neighborhood known during the Great Migration as the "Black Metropolis"—the scene of the cramped tenements near entertainment palaces in Richard Wright's fictions, the self-determining community inside racist restrictive covenants in Gwendolyn Brooks's poetry, and the soaring black humanity in Charles White's murals. From the apartment's broad bank of windows, one can watch weather rolling over the city out across the water, the advance and retreat of lake ice in winter, downtown lights, the flight of geese and gulls, distant passenger jets on the wing in and out of O'Hare and Midway, freight and commuter trains passing below, the decay and redevelopment of various local lots. Within the apartment are artworks and keepsakes from Roberson's travels in the Andes, the Amazon, West Africa, the American Southwest, and scores of books on shelves and every table: contemporary poetry, modernist masterworks, anthologies of ancient song and chant, ethnographies, philosophical essays, natural histories. This home, so filled with art and learning yet so permeable to city and weather, seems at once to contain the history of Ed Roberson's poetry and to open out onto its ever-shifting contemporary vistas.

During that first visit, we sat at Roberson's table for several hours, poring over yellow legal-pad drafts, scattered typescripts, perforated pages from a dot matrix printer, notes jotted on the folds of envelopes and corners of old phone bills, transcriptions of phone calls with old friends, postcards and letters from Pittsburgh and Nigeria, newspaper clippings, and photographs of motorcycles, mountains, and Roberson's family. Harris Feinsod, his former colleague at Northwestern University, had mentioned to us that Roberson was taking stock of his archives; we queried Roberson, he was interested in making a project of it, and so

there we were. Less a carefully preserved archive than a semi-accidental assemblage, Roberson's gathering of materials gave us plenty to work with—and plenty to talk about. As we sorted, read, and catalogued, he gave us a guided tour of his travels and writing life, complete with detours into the shark and porpoise tanks at the Pittsburgh AquaZoo, the Navajo White House Ruin, his thoughts on the power of music and chant, and his decades-long engagement with metaphor and simile. Since that first meeting, we have worked together with Roberson to reconstruct a chronology of drafts and papers and to assemble a set of previously unpublished poems and images that documents the development of his poetic practice between 1970 and 1990, decades during which he published relatively little but accomplished much.

The centerpiece of the section is the long-lost manuscript of *MPH*, a sequence of poems that grew out of a 1970 cross-country motorcycle trip, as Roberson describes in his preface. *MPH* was not among the materials we originally catalogued, and Roberson himself had not seen the manuscript for decades, but we agreed that it would be the crucial piece. The trick was to find it. Roberson searched for it in Pittsburgh, and with the help of his friend Nathaniel Mackey, along with Kevin Young, Courtney Chartier, and Dorothy Waugh at Emory University's Raymond Danowski Poetry Library, we hunted for it in Mackey's extensive archive, to no avail. *MPH* seemed lost for good, until Roberson called from New Brunswick, New Jersey one afternoon in the fall of 2015: while cleaning out his old house in order to sell it, he found two envelopes containing the immaculate original manuscript. As Roberson writes in one of the new poems included here, "When they are emptied, old houses / turn up a remnant they've all hid. . . . That moment unsatisfied within / the original born to always begin."

Encountering these materials in the context of Roberson's homes, one senses how intimately his poetry is bound up with lived particulars, how responsive his writing is to its environments, whether domestic, urban, or wild—and yet how concerned he is to communicate, to cast his voice out beyond his own personal circumstance in the hope of reaching others. Poetry, as Roberson practices it, helps us both to discern the differences among things and to find the elements of experience we might hold in common. The work is never done. In the selection of new poems published here, some written or revised as recently as March 2016, we can watch the poet rediscover and

recast images from his earliest works. This is lived-in poetry, but it is never exhausted. Indeed, as we sorted and selected, Roberson would sometimes scour a decades-old draft, pen in hand, as if he were about to steal a line from his former self.

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If the poems gathered here from Roberson's papers help disclose the life involved in the writing, then they do so as documents of the poet's serious engagements with the signal movements of his literary generation. Roberson's relationship to the Black Arts Movement (BAM), as his comments throughout this section attest, has long been an asymmetrical one. That asymmetry has become a keynote of his reception since the special issue of *Callaloo* devoted to the poet appeared in 2010. He counts BAM among the early influences of his poetry, particularly in its idiomatic and realist-observational modes, but he hasn't ever counted himself a part of the movement. Roberson's reluctance to identify as a BAM poet has to do with his sense that the elements of a black aesthetic—music, speech, direct communication—should have a different role in the poem than that of cultural signifiers. Those elements, his work insists, must be combined with the deepest lyric resources to create a communicative medium with real force.

In one conversation, Roberson told us that he wanted his poetry to show that black artists could do more than reel off a *be-bop-she-dowaw*. This comment might seem like an off-handed dismissal, but it gets directly to what's at stake in Roberson's engagement with BAM. In the 1960s bebop took on an extraordinary significance in Amiri Baraka's jazz essays as the principal vein (alongside the blues) back to the original expressive culture of enslaved Africans on American shores. "Bebop is roots," Baraka wrote, "a beginning"—and in one's art it could be an index of origins. Roberson's previously unpublished poems from around the time of his second collection, *Etai-Eken* (1975), show him trying to get the culture of his upbringing, as he says here, into the writing. But spontaneity and an idiom saturated with musical referents are not enough. In "Black Poetry" Roberson writes, "this music has forms has always had," and he looks for such a form in what he calls "the continuous line" of his own poetry: "don't you know black people always thought / we were continuous in any form." The entire technical apparatus of the poem, and the full physical response of

poet and audience, must be involved. For Roberson, getting speech, music, and their communicative powers into the poetry is a bodily act of attunement that requires an exacting attention to form and prosody; the closest analogue, as Roberson stresses in his comments here, is the command of medium animating the ecstatic incantations of the African American sermon tradition.

The Roberson of “Black Poetry” would have agreed with Baraka’s description of black music as techniques for harnessing collective emotions. In “Puzzlin Blues” we see Roberson turn a restive feeling inside out, for closer inspection, by submitting it to his newfound “continuous line” and the ancient form of the riddle. And here is where Roberson sets out on his own course. If Baraka thought he had found in bebop and the blues the ground of black expressive culture, then Roberson wants to dig down to the ground of the ground. With Andrew Welsh, his lifelong friend and a companion on the motorcycle trip recorded in *MPH*, Roberson began studying non-Western oral poetry in the late 1960s in search of the generative structures of all verbal art. Roberson and Welsh drew from the same well of folklore and anthropology as the ethnopoetics movement of the same period, reading Joseph Campbell, Mircea Eliade, and Bronisław Malinowski. In Welsh’s *Roots of Lyric* (1978), based on the University of Pittsburgh dissertation he was writing at the time of *MPH*, what comes to the fore is a focus similar to that of Jerome Rothenberg and Dennis Tedlock’s massive cross-cultural anthologies of the 1960s and 70s: “Our search is not for primal sources but for basic structures of poetic language,” writes Welsh, “whether they are found in a Bantu riddle or a poem by Donne, in a Cherokee charm or a song by Shakespeare.” Roberson in his own poetry sought the shamanic force and efficacy to be found in these traditions. He turned to the riddle and also to the chant—for Welsh, the roots of poetry’s visual and musical powers, respectively. Searching for essential verbal resources, Roberson was locating the common substratum of the European lyric tradition and the sermonic poem-chants and spirituals of the church in which he was raised.

The results of Roberson’s experimentation in the work presented here are a singular contribution to what may be thought of as two major currents in late black modernist poetics. Oral poetics charm their listeners with figurative devices like riddles and emblems, a principle that Roberson’s poems spin into devices on the scale of

Homeric similes and Metaphysical conceits. The result is something like aesthetic totality: the poems unify themselves around complete and integrated structures of perception and imagination. Roberson explained to us in conversation that his best poems hinge on this rhetorically elaborate practice of making it all cohere. Meanwhile, the poems go down to the roots of lyric in order to cast off the hegemonic forms of totality at work in everyday uses of the English language. The result is an aesthetic negativity with liberatory aims: if our language has no outside to the colonial vocabulary for non-European realities, as Roberson suggests in the conversation published here, then writing truthfully about black life means breaking open English from the inside and releasing other ways of saying. Both of these currents flow through “Putting Lyric to ‘All Blues,’” published here for the first time. In the poem, multiple “lines” converge into a far-ranging conceit—the lines of Miles Davis’s solo, the lines of the Atlantic and Pacific coastal horizons, the lines of hieroglyphs on the walls protecting the Mayan city—until the end, when Ferdinand and Isabella appear and “hear the dying mysteriously / cry out / in the pharaonic westering of spanish.” Both that cry and that “westering” of a hegemonic tongue are at the heart of Roberson’s work, nowhere else more than in the travel poems.

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Charles Edwin (Ed) Roberson was born in Pittsburgh in 1939. He was raised in the Homewood neighborhood on the city’s eastern edge, where he and his family were members of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. After graduating from George Westinghouse High School in 1959, he studied chemistry and English literature at the University of Pittsburgh. During his student years at Pitt, Roberson also began his life of travel and various work: he joined a limnology research team for studies of inland freshwater bodies, traveling from Northwestern Pennsylvania across Canada to Kodiak and Afognak Islands, Alaska; he became a member of the Explorers’ Club of Pittsburgh and its South American Expeditions, hiking the Andes Mountains in Peru and Ecuador; and he found employment in workplaces as different as the Pittsburgh AquaZoo, where he cared for the sharks and porpoises, the Film Graphics advertising agency in Pittsburgh’s downtown Oliver Building, and the steel mills along

the Monongahela River. Roberson also served as the editor of Pitt's student literary journal, *Ideas and Figures*, where some of his earliest poems appeared. He graduated in 1970, the same year that the Pitt Poets Series published his first book, *When Thy King Is a Boy*, edited by university friends. During the early 1970s he traveled across the US and to Mexico, and in 1973 he settled in New Jersey, where he began working at Rutgers University. His daughter Lena was born in 1976. In 1980 he made another important voyage, this time to Nigeria and elsewhere in West Africa.

The materials gathered here from Roberson's papers shed light particularly on these exploratory years of his early career. This special section is divided into four parts. *MPH* is a 60s-generation "Song of the Open Road," at once ur-American and Mesoamerican, recording a range of ethnographic encounters that have continued to inform Roberson's work for decades. In "Unpublished Poems 1970–1990" ethnographic encounter extends into ethnographic research and formal experiment with a range of poems related to his only two books from the period, *Etai-Eken* (1975) and *Lucid Interval as Integral Music* (1984). The section's photo folio documents Roberson's early years in Pittsburgh and his work and travels as a young man. It includes a fuller sequence of the *MPH*-era snapshots that appeared in the Roberson issue of *Callaloo* mentioned above, and it is accompanied by a special foldout insert: a 1978 poster-poem titled "The Multitude," illustrated with a woodcut by the Pittsburgh artist Michael Opalko. "New Poems" is a selection of Roberson's writing from the last several years and suggests the shape of work to come. The poems and visuals in this section invite new ways of reading Roberson's work in connection with his life, and we present them as a first look into an archive that should generate a wealth of future critical studies. Discussions of contemporary African American poetry have for a long time fallen back on old dichotomies between oral and writerly, message-driven and form-driven, politically radical and aesthetically ambitious poetry. Roberson's work upsets those dichotomies but remains something other than a nice hybrid of opposing tendencies: it speaks to its audience the history and culture that is theirs but at the only frequencies where either can be heard—the deep ones.

Acknowledgments

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