

Third Coast Nineteen (Fall 2004): Interview with Jason Olsen

Major Jackson received his bachelor's degree from Temple University and his MFA degree in creative writing from the University of Oregon. He has taught at Xavier University of Louisiana and is currently an assistant professor of English at the University of Vermont and a member of the low-residency MFA Creative Writing Program at Queens College in Charlotte, North Carolina. His work has been published widely in journals and magazines such as *American Poetry Review*, *Boulevard*, *Callaloo*, *The New Yorker*, and *Post Road*. He was a member of the famed Dark Room Collective of Cambridge, Massachusetts and the recipient of many honors and awards, including a Pew Fellowship in the Arts and commissions from Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia. He is currently a Witter Bynner Fellow of the Library of Congress. He is the author of *Leaving Saturn* (University of Georgia, 2002), a collection for which he was nominated for a 2002 National Book Critics Circle Award in Poetry and awarded the Cave Canem Poetry Prize.

After meeting and chatting with Jackson in February about issues as wide ranging as basketball and Robert Lowell, he and I decided to engage in a more formal poetic correspondence. That correspondence took place over e-mail in March 2004 and this is the interview that resulted.

First of all, I'm curious about the Dark Room Collective. It's something I often see attached to your name and I was hoping you could tell me a little about it.

The Dark Room Collective was composed of a group of young writers who sought to increase the visibility of emerging and established black authors in Cambridge, Massachusetts during the late 80's and mid-90s first by hosting a reading series in their home. The scene attracted from area universities and artist communities young, aspiring writers who eventually begin to workshop and share their poems and short stories with each other. Eventually, the crew would start to publicly read their work together at coffeehouses, art centers, and universities. I left Philadelphia and joined up with DR in 1994, when the loose collective had moved its reading series to a larger venue, the Boston Playwrights Theater, after having a stint at the Institute of Contemporary Art. What is great about the collective is that it inaugurated a few of us as writers of poetry and fiction. Some of the Dark Room alum include co-founders Thomas Sayers Ellis (author of *The Maverick Room*, *The Good Junk*, and *Genuine Negro Hero*) and Sharan Strange (author of *Ash*), Natasha Trethewey (author of *Bellocq's Ophelia* and *Domestic Work*), Carl Phillips (author of *The Rest of Love*, *The Tether*, *Pastoral*, and other fine books), John Keene (author of *Annotations*), Tracy K. Smith (author of *The Body's Question*), Kevin Young (author of *Most Way Home*, *To Repel Ghosts*, and *Jelly Roll: A Blues*) and a host of other fine writers.

How do you see it influencing your work?

What was important to me about the Dark Room was the camaraderie and pitched engagement around books and ideas. It is the kind of fetish that a parent dreams for their child. There was a high regard for the intellectual, creative self unparalleled at any other time in my life. If you are young and attempting a life of the mind, I think it crucial to have a peer group, or intellectual equals, whom you can run to share your excitement about concerts, exhibitions, art, music, books. In the Dark Room, we would come to know each others passions, swap tapes of musicians and poets we admired, pass on exhibition catalogues or rare first editions unearthed from moldy shelves of used bookstores. Some of us still do feed each other that way.

A striking aspect of your poems is your ability to weave together allusions to popular culture with allusions to classical, literary, and religious work. How do you maintain these elements? How do you see these sources as speaking to each other?

Allusions are probably one of the most effective means to narrow that gap between you and the reader. To some degree, I am a student of Robert Lowell, who packs and crams biblical, historical, and personal references into his poems, so much so that the poems begin to feel like overstuffed luggage where shirts and underwear and pants legs poke out from the sides. This is especially true of the Notebooks. However, when a balance is struck such as in the poem "For The Union Dead," what you have is enormous power achieved mainly by the poet's attention to how the allusions orbit around their primary subject or theme. In my own work, allusions allow me to set context, to signify a period in urban life. However, they also seek to transcend their milieu and become active and persuasive agents of larger meanings.

Thinking of some of the pieces in Life Studies, most notably perhaps "91 Revere Street," Lowell certainly creates a separate myth-like reality for his early childhood. Do you see yourself as mythologizing your childhood memories?

Not in the way that Lowell, Wordsworth, or Yeats for that matter, compose these lamentations to their loss of innocence which is, as you know, often correlated with childhood. But, to some extent I guess every poem is an assertion of a certain period. The material reality my poems call up will inevitably evoke, for someone, pangs of sorrow at the dogged insistence in which time and ways of seeing and knowing the world pass and give way to other frames. Yet, mythologizing suggests a kind of usefulness beyond the immediate temporal moment. I guess my reluctance is that I probably will not be alive to discern whether or not my poems, especially the work derived imaginatively from my childhood, will have any import for subsequent generations of poetry readers.

In terms of carrying on to subsequent generations, storytelling is significant and, it seems to me, both storytelling and "story listening" are important elements in your work. How does the idea of storytelling educate your poems?

Narrative was one of the first modes of writing I consciously sought to master. Mainly because the greatest poets I admire have exhibited remarkable skill at 'storying'. The illusion of selecting and introducing elements of a tale is that it comes forth from the speaker as if it were memory; this act of 'remembering' is seductive and seems to reach from some subterranean collective reverie. Storytelling, no matter what genre of art is employed, is the one sovereign act of communication which commands so much of our total attention, that makes listening and awareness appear effortless on our behalf, where the present world collapses and another replaces it. That kind of magic has such concentrated pleasure when employed in a poem. My hope for poems like "Blunts" and "Mr. Pate's Barbershop" for example is that the story serves as a frame, so that larger claims about who we are can be cast without the artificiality and mendacity that failed lyrics will suffer in their quest for a pure emotive moment.

I've heard you mention before that some people have confused you, the poet, with the speaker in your poems, especially thinking of "euphoria." Why do you think people are so ready to believe a poem is true?

I could address the larger cultural and social codification of personal stories which poetry seems to serve as some sort of analogue for this kind of discourse, however, I will simply assert that readers trust poets. We are harmless eccentrics. We are perceived as decent, law-abiding and sensitive. Why would we be prone to lying? This could also possibly have something to do with the dearth of metaphorical propositions in poetry, which is

what alarmed Plato, right? the alleged false deceit inherent in envisioning? The illusory intimate voice on the page is a construction that must be immediately dealt with everytime a reader sits before a poem.

So do you consider these reactions when you are creating your poems? How do you perceive "audience" when writing your poems?

The walls of time collapse and matter disintegrates to only teleport in art. During the act of creating, there's that momentous, ontological millisecond when the interior self veiled as the speaker in a poem joins the chain of the living, the dead, and the yet-born. All else is vamping.

In Leaving Saturn, you begin sequences of poem that you are continuing in your more recent work ("Hoops" and "Urban Renewal"). How much do you feel a part of a sequence should depend on the whole? More directly, I guess, do you think that dividing these sequences disrupts their integrity?

It is no more disruptive than a president who breaks up families to send young men and women under false pretenses to fight a war. Hopefully, there is a reunion at the end of the terror.

And the poems themselves, specifically?

A collection of poems is like a family and book publication is another type of reunion. Said PSAT-style, Poems:Family::Book Publication:Reunion. So what is a poet's "Selected Poems"?

So how do you feel about this idea of the integrity of the poems being threatened?

To answer the question more dead-on, the question of integrity is not an issue for me. Popularly said, the sections of a sequence poem should hold their own aesthetic sway, provide their own independent pleasures. However, the composite movement of a sequence poem and interstitial bliss that occurs when sections speak to each other is a very different kind of experience. It is the difference between enjoying Rita Dove's "Thomas & Beulah" and "Promises," a poem within that magnificent suite.

Your immediate response to the previous question was politically charged and I know you've said that poetry – not just yours, but in general – is political. How do you view contemporary American poetry in political terms?

Poetry undoubtedly introduces possibilities of existence. This is the practical concern of usage: how language is rendered new to meet and reflect our emotional needs and quotidian lives. The mere act of creative framing, choosing an aspect of lived experience, and determining how it is to be represented is fundamentally a moral undertaking. How a poet interprets life, what details he/she selects, and what shape reveals itself is contingent upon how much compassion he or she has developed for man's loneliness, the degree to which his/her imagination can express sympathy for our misery, and the joy for humankind's little pleasures which are always present. This is utterly political. There are poems that do quite a bit of distancing and help to create calloused hearts and others which awaken our spent eyes and have us reconsider the fate or blessing of breathing and walking in the 21st century.

I'll end this tirade by quoting the Father in Bernardo Bertolucci's latest film *The Dreamers*: "Le petition et poeme. Le poeme et petition."

How do you view your own poems to be working politically?

It is difficult for me to say how my work functions politically other than to expose my abiding belief that poems should make us laugh and cry, and others should stir our deepest outrage without surrendering the poem's integrity as a work of art. I will also add that I do not believe in safe subjects. I want to write and read poems that expose the tension of our conflicting desires, fears, and hopes. These are the poems I feel are worthy of taking into the next century.

You mention how important it is for you to not only write poems that capture a certain political charge or emotional energy, but for you to read poems such as this from others. How does your reading life affect your writing life? Not keeping it exclusive to poetry, what have you been reading lately and how have those things been influencing your work?

Needless to say, I try to stay on top of the books of poetry that are currently published – a gargantuan task to say the least. Publishing a book of poetry is no longer a novelty. I also read for a few journals and prizes. This exposes me to a wide array of poetry written today. It is then I feel as if I am on top of Parnassus, observing styles and approaches. I am also reading disparately: a book about New York gay club culture in the 90s; history of popular culture up to 1850; interviews by famous painters; and All Things Gwendolyn Brooks. The impact of what I read is thankfully indiscernible. There are the occasions when an author comes along and endows my intellect with a greater gift and it is pretty evident because I become entirely lachrymose or I quote them often, Susan Sontag or Ernest Gaines, for example. Eventually, a residue of their thinking is always present. Sometimes after a great amount of time away from work can I excavate an author's influence.

Let's talk about Sun Ra – he's such an important part of Leaving Saturn, it's impossible not to mention him. What is it about Sun Ra that made him such a compelling figure for you? What makes him an interest subject matter for a poem?

What makes Sun Ra compelling is his music, first and foremost. Like all good artists he grew and cultivated multiple styles over the course of his career as a composer and big band leader. His early bop compositions I feel the deepest pleasure, but his later, full compositions are simply heart-breaking. The same impression of play, erotic and intellectually stimulating, you hear in Erik Satie and Thelonious Monk, you hear in Sun Ra. My son Langston rightly mistook a Sun Ra composition for a Monk tune while we were on the road recently. Sun Ra's myth-making is to be dealt with: black nationalism meets sci-fi and theosophy. His ability to literally create an alternate world of possibility, albeit wacky and bizarre to most, is an achievement in of itself; it is the unspoken yearning of most ambitious artists. He is a model in this regard. But more than anything, his devotion to his music is stunning and is to be revered. Put simply, his steady faith and belief in his music to change himself and the world is heroic.

How do you see Leaving Saturn working as a first book? What was your strategy for it, if you had one, in shaping it as a first book?

The strategy was to write the poems as they came. I had no specific project in mind. The arc of the book came after I had enough compositions to consider an emotional spine that would hold the collection in place.

In what ways will your next book be different?

The next book is, regrettably maybe, more deterministic; it is an epistolary poem to a dead poet, and I am learning much about the significance of raising Lazarus.