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(March 23-April 12, 2012)

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“sound moving / skyward:” experiencing the oral poetry of Kamau
Daaood, a Griot in Bordeaux
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Entering “the zone” with Daaood. Poetry reading with
jazz bands at Librairie Georges, Talence (March 23), at
Bordeaux 3 University, Pessac (March 26) and at the
Théâtre National de Bordeaux en Aquitaine (TNBA),
Bordeaux (April 1)

- 1 The tall imposing African-American man is standing in the middle of the improvised stage at the Librairie Georges on March 23. The university bookshop has turned from an academic haven mostly attended by students and professors from the campus in Talence, into a gathering place for poetry lovers, jazzmen and onlookers intrigued by the news of the griot’s exceptional residency in Bordeaux. Flipping through the bilingual collection of his works, *Griot Notes from L.A.*,² while the audience is filling in the rows of chairs and the musicians are tuning their instruments, Kamau Daaood stands out from the surrounding hustle like a sturdy, ageless oak rising amidst a dappled haze of foliage and shadows.
- 2 “This is our first meeting, so we feel and see what happens,” he announces before the jazz trio led by saxophonist Shekinah Rodz starts playing, adapting to the poet’s rhythm at times, initiating it at other times. Daaood’s smooth yet slightly hoarse deep bass voice soon wraps us up as he opens his performance on “Griot Notes:” “freedom in this sound / spinning and turning at the edge / of possibilities quivering / in some

naked speck of time.” Daaood readily invites us in, disclosing the very place which his writing and performance both stem from and strive for, namely an emotional state without the heart-numbing boundaries of intellectual frames and artistic conventions. His eyes closed, his whole body beating time, the poet generously consents to “lose [him]self in the performance,” to go into “the zone” as he calls this particular trance-like state, freeing his utterance from mental constraints, from self-consciousness, and letting his words take on life in the here and now.

- 3 Only when it is uttered – that is, only when it is spoken, told, chanted and sung – can the “word musician[’s]” poetry exist; only then can it be felt and experienced by the audience: “I do the words in performance,” Daaood explains, insisting on the performative nature of his poems whose rhythms differ according to the dynamics that take shape between the poet and the musicians accompanying him. This is what is unsettling about Daaood’s performances: one attends the artist’s very first meeting with the band, bearing witness to the making of their onstage relationship. One needs to overcome one’s cautious reluctance to see a performance free of the constraints of a scripted rehearsal, for Daaood’s poetry is necessarily improvised, therefore powerfully uneven, forcefully deconstructed.
- 4 One cannot merely sit still, listen to Daaood and *understand* his poems; the heart can fathom his words better than the mind for the griot resorts to language as a musical instrument, choosing and combining words as he would write a score, delivering them as he would stroke the keys of a piano or of a saxophone. In Daaood’s poetry, communication lies in sounds more than in words. If words conjure up images that enable the reader/listener to visualize the artist’s memories and feelings, they are mostly used as elements composing the specific soundscape of each poem. One can experience the word musician’s notes only by letting emotions take over reflection, by valuing phonetic harmony over cognitive cohesiveness. Sound is part and parcel of Daaood’s poems, hence one’s irrepressible need to hear them being uttered or to read them aloud.
- 5 Although he performed with the same trio a few days later at the Théâtre National de Bordeaux en Aquitaine (TNBA), both the poet and the musicians avoided indulging in the comfort of familiarity and repetitiveness, therefore allowing spontaneous creativity to occur. Sometimes the griot would interrupt his reading and stand back to look up his *Notes* while the band kept playing; he would search for the verses that could fit the ambiance he had started to build with the musicians. Here is the art of a wanderer, I thought, as I watched him deliberately walking about onstage to let his artistic performance shape itself on the spur of the moment. I was discovering Daaood’s poetry in amazement and awe for I could sense his trust in the audience’s ability to lose their grip and to shed any expectation, the sole condition for his poetic intercourse with the present musicians to take place.
- 6 When he introduced the band which would play the accompaniment to his poems at the Students’ House in Bordeaux 3 University, the poet underlined the impromptu character of his encounter with the student musicians directed by Luc Lainé, from the music department: “We’ve never met before and we have no idea of what we’re going to play in the next minute and the minute after,” he said, inviting his audience to follow the unmapped trail he and the musicians were about to take. Then he started reading “Papa, the lean griot,” a tribute to his mentor Horace Tapscott, letting the band

“begi[n] whenever they [felt] like it,” waiting for artistic symbiosis to spring from the moment: “If we had rehearsed, we would have messed things up but this was perfect.”

Daaood's celebration of the transcending power of music

- 7 Back to the very first day of Daaood's residency. I had come to the Librairie Georges, expecting to attend the poet's public reading of his work. Instead, I found myself lip-chanting the griot's praises of jazz icon John Coltrane, “freedom fighter / Liberator of the spirit from the shackles of form;” I could almost hear myself droning along with him as he urged the audience to “hummmmmmmmm,” his head bent down, his eyes half-closed, gradually giving himself over to a vibrant *ommm-karan* as though to summon the transcultural gathering power of music in all its forms. If Daaood's oral poetry imparts some of the mystical aura of mantras, it also partakes of the devoted passion of litanies: it owes its fieriness and hypnotic cadence to the sermonic tradition to which the poet has been exposed mostly through his poetic tutoring in the Watts Writers Worskhop in Los Angeles in the 1960s. Looking at the mesmerized audience in the bookshop, it seemed I had become part of a mass of believers to whom the fundamental musicality of life – “music music / all is music / music music / life is music” – and therefore, the sacredness of music, were eventually disclosed: “life is a saxophone / playing a sacred song.”
- 8 That feeling was not to leave me throughout Daaood's performances in Bordeaux: whether he addressed his audience onstage from behind a score stand at the TNBA like a preacher standing at his pulpit, or read/sang his poems from the platform of the Students' House amphitheater in Bordeaux 3 University, he invariably made me feel I was part of something bigger. I could hear him appealing to our primal sense of humanness while he celebrated Coltrane's visceral music, his raw jazz notes, “becoming whole notes / not quarter notes / not half notes / becoming whole notes, whole notes...” All differences – be they ethnic, socio-cultural, political or religious – seemed to be transcended and to melt into one ecumenical faith in love and sharing: “ONE GOD / ONE WORSHIP / ONE SACRED PLACE / ONE HOLY BOOK / ONE WORSHIPPER / ONE,” the poet chanted, his steady voice carrying the quintessential wholeness, the fundamental oneness that lies within each and every human being.
- 9 To Daaood, music is obviously transcultural; it necessarily overflows boundaries, blooms in excess and variations. Multiplicity provides the breeding ground for “world music” whose cohesion and unity stem from the notes of the myriad wind, brass, percussion and string instruments – “one thousand saxophones / seven hundred kotos / (...) / three hundred violins / six hundred fifty bagpipes” – from the infinite number of sounds, animal and human, shouts and noises that make the world continuously sing: “ten thousand midwives carrying fresh fruit / seventy purple banjos / half a million Muslims chanting Quran / six thousand birds of paradise / (...) / eight thousand waterfalls / seven trillion ten billion six hundred and / one million two hundred and four tubas / and one black chopstick.” Listening to Daaood, I could hear the whole world's music pouring into and resonating out of one man, that one black poet.

Concert and Master class with Build an Ark at Rocher Palmer Hall, Cenon. April 7-8, 2012

- 10 What is striking about Daaood's poetry is its collective resonance: far from being circumscribed to the artist's personal experiences and individual subjectivity, it is meant to be collaboratively performed. His writing is definitely generous, its frame of reference expanding out of the confines of the self into the broader communal space of artistic exchange, as was obvious during his performance with the Los Angeles jazz collective Build an Ark at Rocher Palmer concert hall in Cenon. The multifaceted band, whose composition and size vary according to the pieces- up to thirty artists can board this musical ark- was founded and is directed by multi-talented and prolific Californian musician, arranger, producer, DJ and poet Carlos Gabriel Niño. The griot looked perfectly at ease onstage, his voice alternating with vocalist Dwight Tribble's, the soundscape and rhythmic color of his poems starting off myriad different conversations between Miguel Atwood-Ferguson's viola, Mark de Clive-Lowe's piano, Trevor Ware's string bass, Dextor Story's percussion and Niño's cymbals and bells.
- 11 That love for communication and common creation underlied the band's instructions and advice to the students who participated in their Master class on the following day at the concert hall. Musicians of varying age, ability and background were sitting onstage next to the members of Build an Ark, surrounding Daaood and Niño, who was to direct the jam session. The griot's voice would set the tone of the piece which the musicians progressively "built" together as they played in tune with Daaood's vocal mood, soliciting and answering each other. Walking about the stage, Niño would dose out the contribution of each musician, occasionally inviting two instruments to pair up: "the goal is to connect to each other and to create a common environment around Kamau," he explained. "That [session]," Trevor Ware later noted, "was about listening and contributing with what you felt- a sort of collective trance within which each was searching for their right place." Indeed, to Build an Ark, music is about reaching out; it is fundamentally global, transcultural: "the music that we play is creative soul music. It gives a collective vision of the world, how we live."
- 12 Being the heart of that improvised orchestra, Daaood insisted on the necessity for musicians to "be there" so that they could listen to each other and properly communicate by playing "from the heart," just as a poet needs to tell stories from the here and now, freeing his emotions, letting them out. His words provided a proper medium for artistic collaboration as they prompted the various instruments and sensitivities of the attending musicians to interweave and dialogue with each other. As a true storyteller, Daaood initiated the class's on-the-spot creation of a collective musical narrative: "we try to help each other tell our story. [This man] is speaking now so how can I help him tell our story." To Daaood, this is what the griot should do: to act as the "emotional historian of a people."

Poetry reading at the Librairie Olympique, Chartrons. March 28, 2012

- 13 Daaood's passion for music is manifest even when the poet performs alone: if music is the main thematic fabric of his poems, it also influences their aesthetics and rhythmic

composition. Therefore, the musicality of his poetry can be perceived without the support of a band. No musician accompanied Daaood's reading at the Librairie Olympique, a small bookshop nestled on rue Rode which is a short narrow street in the Chartrons district along the docks of Bordeaux. With its subdued lights and its maze of bookshelves and tables covered with uneven heaps of books, the place looked like a hideaway for onlookers yearning to slacken their pace and withdraw themselves momentarily from the overwhelming hustle and bustle of the city; as the bookshop's evening host, the poet was sitting on a high stool next to the entrance door which had been left open to let his voice drift out and invite passersby to join the audience already gathered in the warm intimacy of the place.

- 14 Despite the absence of a band, the room was suffused with music as Daaood evoked his artistic lineage, summoning the souls of jazz pianist and composer Horace Tapscott in the poem "Papa, the Lean Griot," as well as of singer Billie Holiday and saxophonist Lester Young- "Lady Day" and "Pres", as both liked to call each other- in "Deep River in Her Voice" and "Balm of Gilead." Reading "Griot Notes," the poet would stand up, freeing his chest from the sitting position, giving his lungs more air, his body more space to sway and dance to the beats of his lines: "a flock of birds, jailbreak from a throat / and fade into the image of some child / holding a toy saxophone / this moment improvised, a theme of passion / silence broken up into little pieces and / sprinkled like seeds in the tone."
- 15 Still, because Daaood was delivering his poems by himself, without any musical accompaniment, out of a stage, his performance stood out as a sort of aside during his residency in Bordeaux. The offstage proximity the artist was enjoying with his audience at the Librairie Olympique turned the event into a more interpersonal, intimate exchange, as it seemed to prompt him to dwell on the story of his origins, both as a man and as a poet.
- 16 "Blue Pachuca" revived the memory of his African-Filipino mother, Delores Keyes, whose sparkling cheerfulness and unconditional love and warmth would silence the rooted pain from incestuous abuse: "Blue Pachuca, / hair of Manila in blue light / you have taken your mystery with you / gone like the silent flight / of birds of paradise / (...) all I knew was that I was safe and warm and loved / I did not know the secrets buried within you." The poem hints at the paternal presence, a loving yet withdrawn counterpoint to the maternal energy: "daddy was gone in morning when I rose / he would return in the evening / with his silence, his privacy, his introversion / his love was large, always quiet." Then, a student who had attended the poetry class as well as the translation class with Daaood at Bordeaux 3 University³ asked him to read "The Watch," his request revealing the underlying echo between both poems and conjuring the reunion of the ghosts of the artist's parents. As Daaood evoked the last moments he shared with his dying father, his restrained emotion suddenly overwhelmed him, brimming over his reserve and making his voice break off on the last words of the verse: "they said you had congestive heart failure / they told me it was like breathing underwater / you said you were tired / mother silently chanting in my ear / 'tell your father you love him, tell your father you love him'." Taken aback by the maternal injunction he himself had simultaneously resuscitated and obeyed by reading the poem, the artist yielded to the performative power of his words- "my vocal cords hardened asphalt / a mute saxophone"- as his voice momentarily died away.

- 17 Asphalt– ubiquitous, overwhelming, hostile in the urban environment of the poet who was born and raised in Los Angeles. Daaood explained his ambivalent relationship with this sheltering yet smothering material; he identified it as a determining element in his writing since it represents both an obstacle to the artist's perception– the blinding screen of city walls– and a source of elevation urging the poet to see what lies beyond and to expand his vision of the world: “asphalt is the symbol of life in urban areas– hardness. In cities you can go days and days and not see the sky. You have a relationship with walls. Hardness can shelter us but the balance lies in softness, airiness, joy.” Thus, to Daaood, his “job is to get past the hardness” in order to reach lightness, “where you can learn and grow.” The artist traced his artistic journey back to his early encounter with creative writing in junior high school. However fortuitous this first experience– creative writing was not the class he had wanted to take originally– it shed light on the artistic and ontological nature of the writing process, beyond its mere communicative function: more than speech tools, words turned out to be instruments that could be tuned to his emotions and feelings– his own personal, inner music. Nevertheless, instead of drawing mostly on his negative experiences and feeding on sorrow, pain and anger, like most writers back in the 1960s– the time when Daaood started his writing career as a member of the Watts Writers Workshop– the artist would rather step over the muddled ruts along the path and keep in the sunlight, not only writing about what one is struggling with, but also about what one is striving for: “You can't talk only about darkness or make people feel only darkness. Balance it with lightness,” he said to conclude his reading at the Librairie Olympique, his words echoing his verses from the poem “Angel of Scissors”: “there is light and there is darkness / and then again there is light / lightness / melody of feathers.”

Screening of Leimert Park at Le Lacet film club, Mérignac. April 12, 2012

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- 18 Because his poetry was born outside the boundaries of mainstream culture, making community art visible- or in Daaood's words, making "light cutting away the tumor of darkness"- was what urged the griot and the late internationally famous jazz drummer Billy Higgins to found the World Stage, an educational and performance gallery born from an open, dynamic collective of artists and arts lovers in Leimert Park Village, the heart of LA's African-American community, in 1989. Along with major figures like the late pianist and composer Horace Tapscott as well as drummer Cornel Fauler, to mention only a few of them, they significantly nurtured the artistic turmoil surfacing in a city prone to violent ethnic unrest and profoundly affected by the 1992 riots.
- 19 The Stage spurred numerous initiatives and events such as Fauler's weekly jam sessions and Masters series- in which jazz legends like Max Roach, Ron Carter, Elvin Jones and Pharoah Sanders participated- as well as the Anansi Writers Workshop, set up by Michael Datcher and developed by Daaood, Akilah Nayo Oliver, Nafis Nabawi and Anthony Lyons. The collective intended to provide LA's artists with a jazz hub and a space for literary creation and performance by finding public open places where artistic encounters and exchange could occur, therefore enabling collaborative creativity to burst out onstage and helping closet artists to get out of the shadow.
- 20 The screening of Jeannette Lindsay's documentary film *Leimert Park* (2008)⁴ at Le Lacet film club in Mérignac and the ensuing discussion between the audience and Daaood himself concluded the artist's week-long residency in Bordeaux, focusing on his pivotal role as a community arts activist.
- 21 The film evokes the story of the area, built in South Central Los Angeles in 1928, and retraces its evolution from a white-dominated district to a mostly black neighborhood

since 1947, underlining the energy it drew from the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s-1970s and the socio-political tensions that stirred up its population, especially during the Watts riots in 1965 and the 1992 riots. In the face of persisting dissensions, there came a vital need to feel communal cohesiveness and to assert a local identity; thus, the idea of the World Stage, like other spaces that sprang up in 1992, was a way out of the ambient darkness since it provided “an arena or outlet for minority artists,” Dale Brockman Davis, the co-founder of Brockman Gallery which opened in the Village in 1967, explains in the documentary. “The reason why we started the World Stage,” Daaood insists, “was because there was a need for it – the need to express oneself and share in the community.” The Stage actually played up the communal spirit which pervaded Leimert Park and which prompted one of its charismatic residents, Richard Fulton, to open Fifth Street Dick's Coffee House on Degnan Boulevard in 1992. The place became the soul of the area, a necessary “foru[m] for people to gather” over a cup of coffee, around chessboards left on the tables which the owner had put outside for “conversations to occur” and above all, around jazz music because “music has a tendency to give a community rhythm,” causing people to gather and dance, Fulton observed.

- 22 The community's concern for cultural sharing and transmission is palpable in Lindsay's film as one listens to the interview of Brian Breye, the founder of Museum in Black which displays only original African pieces as relics of a common African American history and culture to be known, (re)discovered and understood by people within and outside Leimert Park. To Ben Caldwell- his community arts center, Kaos Network, hosts a major, hip hop, open-mic stage led by the pioneering collective Project Blowed- offering a space where artists can “deconstruct the old Hollywood template” is essential to let a black aesthetic arise. Far from being frozen into a cultural memorial, one can see the Village undoubtedly enjoys remarkable artistic vitality, building and constantly renewing the testimony of its African American roots.
- 23 The documentary shows Daaood touring the teeming, effervescent environment from which his poetry has been more recently drawing its force and energy. Through the live performances and interviews of the late Billy Higgins and Horace Tapscott as well as a 1998 concert of singer Dwight Tribble and Tapscott's Pan Afrikan Peoples Arkestra, one can witness onscreen the gathering and healing power of art celebrated by the Stage, the community's passionate commitment to arts, fiery optimism and solidarity, which the griot conveys in his poem “Leimert Park:” “there are trees in Leimert Park / under which old men do divination / with the bones of dominos / Degnan a river, a nu Nile, on whose banks / young poets sharpen their hearts on the polyrhythms of Billy Higgins' smile / on the world stage where Tapscott fingers / massage your collective memory.”
- 24 A grim outlook seems to await Leimert Park as the end of Lindsay's film focuses on LA's 2006 redevelopment plan in the area, a project which many residents and shop owners have seen as a threat to the spirit of the Village. However, although the golden days of the Stage are over- “the area is far different from what you saw in the movie,” Daaood commented after the screening- the living forces of the collective, both the pioneers and the new generation of artists, keep fighting for art, not the money-making, business-obsessed kind, but true art which transcends barriers and brings all human beings together. Because the Stage was devised as “an offering of love,” there is no doubt that new grass will grow out of concrete again, reaching out for the sun- a

hopeful future which artist John Outterbridge, also featured in the documentary, envisions in his piece “And In the Hay Children Won't Play” (1991).

- 25 Daaood's unwavering commitment to the World Stage's fight for community arts in Leimert Park definitely struck a chord with the audience at Le Lacet film club. The viewers, most of whom were Mérignac residents, expressed their frustration about the lack of areas like Leimert Park in Bordeaux and their wish for places with a strong local culture and communal identity, where people could gather and connect thanks to shared artistic experiences- a desire which the griot and activist readily encouraged: “In Bordeaux, there are vacant spaces- if artists want to make them live, they can form a collective and do it.” This is how the poet ended the discussion and concluded his residency in France- by asserting his faith in the power of art to carve out skylights in the thickest asphalt roofs. A prayer and a gift that are shining through Daaood's dedication on my copy of *Griot Notes from L. A.*: “BRIGHTNESS!”

NOTES

1. During his residency in France, Daaood also performed with the band Build an Ark at the Banlieues Bleues festival in Seine Saint Denis near Paris on April 6 2012. He also performed with French guitarist Jean-Marc Montera, French cellist and composer Emmanuel Cremer and American jazz percussionist and drummer Famoudou Don Moyé at L'Alcazar Bibliothèque de Marseille à Vocation Régionale (BMVR) in Marseille on April 11. Pictures of the show at L'Alcazar are available online: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/mcyavell/6929716828/in/set-72157629812259199/>
2. Kamau Daaood, *Notes d'un griot de Los Angeles. Griot Notes from L.A.* Trans. by the collective Passages, Nicole Ollier and Sophie Rachmuhl eds., Bègles, Le Castor Astral, 2012.
3. The poet had been invited to participate in a class on live poetry conducted by Professor Sophie Rachmuhl, and a translation class for graduate students supervised by professors Nicole Ollier and Véronique Béghain at Bordeaux 3 University on March 29 and 30.
4. Jeannette Lindsay, *Leimert Park*, Foster Johnson Studios, Los Angeles, California, 2008.

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