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Lemma

Jay Wright's Idiorrhythmic American Theater

Spatial History, or Where Is Jay Wright?

The figure of Jay Wright presents a compelling paradox. He is one of the most highly decorated and esteemed poets in the United States, on the one hand. On the other, this leading voice of American poetry seems to echo within the penumbra cast by canonical literature, producing a sound in a register that only a few can hear.

This essay resists the question “Who is Jay Wright?” with its interrogative weight tied to matters of stable identity, and chooses instead to begin with a spatial investigation framed by the question, “Where is Jay Wright?”

There are two sides to this question. First, when we acknowledge Wright's astonishing body of work, which has garnered many awards and fellowships, and its contribution to the poetry of the Americas, we wonder why we do not often find him in the various anthologies devoted to African American literature and poetry. Given that his writing includes not only fourteen published books

of poetry but also more than fifty dramatic works for the theater, we might also puzzle over Wright's absence in *The Kenning Anthology of Poets Theatre* (2010), a volume that specifically seeks to shine light on neglected, hard-to-classify works for the theater by poets in the twentieth century. In other words, when we seek to build a historiographic dossier for Jay Wright, we look for his presence only to ask, "Where is he?" Or, to rephrase the main question as an answer: Wright is absent from the history of Black theater in the United States.

Here, however, I choose to negate that version of the question as well as the statement formed in the question's declarative mode. This constitutes a negation of the negation, insofar as I mark the perception of Wright's historiographic absence but counter it with a clear yet also oblique answer. Where is Jay Wright? He is somewhere else. His is a present absence. He is off conjuring the unthought. He's making new ground for himself. He's producing territory, a territory formed through a unique rhythm of thought and language.

My approach here is not strictly dialectical, but the deployment of the negation of a negation helps to frame the paradox of the living, historical figure of Jay Wright. He is not anthologized with other thinkers from the Black Arts Movement (BAM), for example, because he left that scene. Historians are right, therefore, to exclude him from that group. Likewise, despite the fact that he is both poet and playwright, his absence in anthologies of poets' theater is acceptable, for Wright's musical dramaturgy and the staggering breadth of his source material make of his theatrical work something as yet to be explored in both mainstream- and fringe-theater environments. Thus, Wright's seeming absence and his identity as the poet not anthologized by canonical publications deserves to be rectified not through an alternative historical narrative that would prove how he was or should have been there all along; rather, his absence transforms into a negative presence, one very much *not* operating within canonical territory. My proposal is to negate the underlying premise that he ought to be remembered as a Black American poet (understood as an individual belonging to the set of people known as members of the Black Arts Movement, for example) in order to visit the world he made, and is currently making, on his travels. This world is America, too, but is dissonant when heard alongside the America of BAM and the Black Power Movement. Where is Wright? He's here, in his theater, making America.

Treating *Lemma* (2007)¹ in this essay as a work of dramatic literature rhythmically producing territory leads to my primary historiographic maneuver. Overall, I perform a double procedure. I will demonstrate how Wright's work constitutes a historiographic intervention through his arrangement of texts and the methods he deploys to reveal the entanglement of thought systems typically kept apart by

¹ Jay Wright, *The Dramatic Radiance of Number: Selected Plays of Jay Wright*, vol. 1 (Chicago: Kenning Editions and Every house has a door, forthcoming in 2022).

academic disciplines. At the same time, I want to forward my claim that Wright's art of arrangement allows his audience (i.e., us) to reflect upon ways in which individuals make themselves out of others' texts and memories, an act of making that ultimately reveals a tangle of intersubjective selves. These selves are not formed from historical certainties; neither are they themselves static in the present. They exist only through their performance. After Wright, to think "American theater" is to think America as the product of a historiographic operation of arrangement and enaction.

Meeting Wright on His Ground

Lemma builds on an undeniable ritual framework—though "ritual" here carries a precise meaning. Wright's essay "Desire's Design, Vision's Resonance: Black Poetry's Ritual and Historical Voice" (1987) names "a process of separation, transition and incorporation" in the poetry of Christopher Okigbo placing "the poet on the mystic blade."² Such a process, also called "ritual," is found in contemporary Black poetry where it shows itself as a mode of knowing the world marked by the valorization of both human intellectual and emotional capacity, the incorporation of multiple forms of historical knowledge (from myth to science), and the tendency to dig beneath one's historical situation to uncover the profound pain and joy that grows there. Such ritual is prevalent in the poetic tradition of Black Americans, as Wright says; yet it is also present in the Afro-Cuban milieu, in cultural remnants of the Gaelic world, and in the theatrical expression of the ancient Greeks, to name but a few specific sites. Thus, the play's ritual form, that is, the way in which historically transmitted linguistic and gestural codes unite the characters with their ancestors while simultaneously preparing the ground of the present for new growth, is not a strictly religious or spiritual undertaking. It is something marked most dominantly by the precise cut it makes in the here and now. This cut—brought to mind by the phrase "poet on the mystic blade"—severs a ritual's performers from the mundanity of the contemporary moment while also suturing those performers to a trans-historical network of people, places, objects, and beliefs that collaborate in the epistemology of a given culture. This dual cut, emerging as both sever and suture, helps to maintain or restore order to the world, though this act of ordering cannot be understood outside the notion of change and transformation. Order and the disorder of transformation fuse through ritual activity, and the success of this fusion relies greatly upon theater's

² Jay Wright, "Desire's Design, Vision's Resonance: Black Poetry's Ritual and Historical Voice," *Callaloo*, no. 30 (Winter 1987): 23. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2930633>.

effervescent quality, the way theater accommodates both scripted realities and performers' improvisations.

Lemma begins to come into focus as a theatrical container into which Wright transmits a grouping of historical knowledges for the purpose of ritual transformation. To this combination of ideas, I want to add a third ingredient, that of polyrhythm. *Lemma*'s undeniable musical sensibility—audible in the opening scene of “voices,” the presence of the agogo throughout the text, the specific focus on the Lydian mode, etc.—emerges from Wright's polyrhythmic *poieses*. Serendipitously, as I was drafting this essay, I received a package from Wright containing his most recent philosophical examination. The topic of this examination is “rhythm,” and the thinking presented in the paper outlines a clear concern of the poet: namely, the need to think rhythm without the notions of time and order. Can we, he wonders, think rhythm as spatial and having shape? His question leads to a mapping of rhythm's edge, that place where states of matter transform into something else, something different from what they have previously been. His philosophical questions prompt me to think of *Lemma* as taking place on that edge site of transformation, motivated by a polyrhythmic assembly of shapes of thought typically separated from one another within academic discourse, such as Spanish and Gaelic resonances, Western poetry and African epistemologies, and the forms of Ancient Greek theater and Mesoamerican ritual sacrifice.

Wright's rhythm is something that marks him as distinct from Black Arts Movement poets. Where they, acting as what Larry Neal calls the artistic arm of the Black Power Movement, sought to create a vision of a Black national identity that would free African Americans from the oppression of Whiteness and the institutionalized violence of racism, Wright's poetry taps out what might be called the idiorrhymy of Being. This idiorrhymy rhymes, in part, with what Deleuze calls the univocity of being:

With univocity, however, it is not the differences which are and must be: it is being which is Difference, in the sense that it is said of difference. Moreover, it is not we who are univocal in a Being which is not; it is we and our individuality which remains equivocal in and for a univocal Being.³

Wright's particular rhythmic sensibility and musical dramaturgy, however, informed in equal parts by Afro-Cuban jazz, Gaelic myth, Spanish modernism, pre-Socratic philosophy, and other seemingly far-flung reservoirs of cultural expression, sets him apart from Deleuze and asks that we approach his work with an interrogative spirit by continually asking “Where is Wright?,” “What is he making?,” “How does this all sound?,” and “How do we play it?”

³ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 39.

Given my particular arrangement of ideas and interpretations up to this point, Wright is hopefully beginning to appear as equal parts poet and historiographer. His plays make a laboratory space, one that should also be called a ritual space, despite the fact that laboratories and rituals are often invoked in completely different settings (or perhaps precisely because of this). That lab-ritual space showcases how multiple entangled systems of thought constitute the notion of self. Key to the creation and transformation of self is the notion of rhythm and its ever-unfolding nature. Throughout this paper, I hint at shifts into the sonic register to intimate that historiography comes close to the art of musical production in the way it arranges historical materials and through its belief in the matter of thought. That is, where musicians (including Wright) feel out the texture of frequencies borne within notes they play, historiographers sense the vibration of thought, the degree to which ideas make material changes to society and to the planet. The more historiographers think of their work in relation to music, the more chances exist to play the past in inventive ways that nevertheless remain tethered to historical material. In my case, and with this essay in particular, I am learning from Wright how to play the score of *Lemma* composed by a wildly diverse body of thought and artistic forms.

Getting Oriented: Themes and Variations

As I have written elsewhere,⁴ I believe that focusing on the “what-ness” of dramatic literature, which corresponds with “what really happened” in certain schools of historical thought, presumes a single, static thing to be found. I look instead to the arrangement of historical material and listen for harmonies and dissonances produced through the playing of specific arrangements. With this predisposition in mind, I want to share the findings of my field notes, the ideas that arose as I traveled through the map/script/territory that Wright has produced, to help us read the score of his dramatic text. By reading the score, I can sense the possibility of multiple meanings, or at the very least activate the production of meaning so key to thinking since Barthes’s declarations in “The Death of the Author” (1967) and subsequent postmodern variations on that theme. Before sharing those notes and reading that score, let me provide some essential information about the characters, setting, actions, and themes Wright mobilizes in the play.

The opening stage directions diagram the world:

Lights come up on a sextet of actors, each one carrying a particular property that each will use as a subtle shift in movement in the action that involves that actor—call it a change

⁴ Will Daddario, “Adorno, Baroque, Gardens, Ruzante: Rearranging Theatre Historiography,” in: *Theatre/Performance Historiography: Time, Space, Matter*, eds. Rosemarie K. Bank and Michal Kobialka (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 177–197.

in direction and a new placement of relationships. The actors move at first in a single line, then begin and carry out a series of differing positions with respect to each other, as though they were looking for the proper and perfect configuration of their group. They choose, and come to a first rest. Each one now sings an individual prologue.⁵

The actors form a sextet. The word “sextet” identifies a group of six, generally, and also, specifically, a musical group of six players. The actors are also musicians, as the instruction “sings an individual prologue” hints. The “singing” is not necessarily the kind of singing one would expect from a soprano or a bass voice; rather, it sounds to me like the singing in which poets across the ages have participated. The “song” is the story and the singing is its telling.

Next, Wright alerts us to objects carried by the actors. Throughout the text, certain objects will receive special attention and, in a sense, come alive. A white cloth carries extreme importance, as though it endows its carrier with a profound responsibility. Similarly, an obsidian knife will, perhaps, bring us into the orbit of Okigbo’s poetic ritual incantations. As with the “power objects” (*boli*) of the Bamana and the sacred ritual objects of the Yoruba, these “properties” are endowed with agency and thus actively participate in the arrangement of the ritual action.

As the play progresses, the ritual affixes to a certain temporal window, one that is both past and yet to come (around again). The characters refer to this as the “third hour.” “I want to know what happened in that third hour” (2), Bricco says to Fuadach. A few pages later, Lorg tells Bricco, “Fuadach will never tell you what happened in that third hour” (8). Throughout the text, this time signature emerges within the dialogue and then disappears into the background of the action. The third hour has passed, but the characters also work to revive it, as one might recall and relive a memory.

The third hour is most notably a time of the Christian temporal scheme, specifically one of seven dedicated times of prayer. Known as *Terce*, it corresponds, roughly, to 9am, or three hours after dawn. Its original importance is recorded in Acts 2:15 when, during that time, the Holy Spirit descended upon the Apostles. This was precisely fifty days after Easter and gave rise to the holy day known as Pentecost. In *Lemma*, however, this temporal destination, the third hour, a time-space coordinate that some characters can return to via memory but that remains an unseen destination for other characters, is tinted with a distinctly pre- or simply non-Christian color. We see this fact in certain references but also in ways the characters prepare the space with a ritual design on the ground. Altogether, then, the temporal nexus of the third hour evokes something like a neo-Baroque hybrid of Christian (Spanish), Gaelic, West African, Aztec, and other indigenous

⁵ Jay Wright, *Lemma* (unpublished manuscript, 2017), 1. Subsequent references in parentheses are to page numbers in this manuscript.

ritual traditions. The hybridity so common to Baroque and neo-Baroque thinking intentionally destabilizes the ostensible certainty of Christianity's linear and teleological temporal scheme. Here Wright shows his work as a historiographer by making sure that the play's audience understands the specific notions of time and space in which all this action unfolds. This is not *Terce* as woven by Christians. It is more like a *Terce* third space, a liminal threshold of change and transformation that unites physical and spiritual change through one swift passage.

The final sentences of the opening stage direction reveal the importance of arrangement throughout the play. As the characters prepare the space and arrange themselves in different combinations (through dialogue, stage position, etc.), it becomes clear that the group is engaged in a kind of ritual invocation. They are attempting to evoke a memory, it seems, or perhaps to distill a pure memory from the overlap of multiple disparate (narratives of) memories. The picture they are seeking to develop involves three sisters, Carmen, Elzbieta, and Peregrinas. At one point, Spalla and Polso, yoked together as a kind of ancient Greek chorus involved in movements of strophe and antistrophe, ask directly "Did the sisters survive?" Ginocchio, another of Lorg's names, replies "No" (41). The specific details of these sisters, their deaths and their engagements with the six main characters who are producing this ritual remembering, becomes the focus of the play's second half. In Wright's opening stage direction, however, at least as much emphasis is placed on the act of arrangement as on the arrangement's actual effect, if not more.

Historico-Poetic Entanglement

Playing *Lemma* requires that the spectator discerns the harmonic resonance produced by weaving together multiple systems of thought. One way to do this is to linger on direct citations from existing literary, philosophical, and other historical sources that Wright puts in his characters' mouths. For example, among the prologues sung in the opening moments, Voice D says:

Her nests, when one comes across them in dreams, lodged in rock-clefts, or the branches of enormous hollow yews, are built of carefully chosen twigs, lined with white horse-hair and the plumage of prophetic birds and littered with the jawbones and entrails of poets. (1, then repeated 66)

These words come from Robert Graves's mytho-history *The White Goddess* (1948). In that work, Graves excavated what he believed to be the source of poetry's "true" language; namely, the magical language bound up with the ritual praise of the Moon-Goddess in the Old Stone Age. He claims that the matrilineal origins of this true language were overwritten by the patrilineal heritages of invading/migrating tribes who sought justification for imposing patriarchal systems of governance.

From the 1950s onward, as Fran Brearton argues, much of Graves's poetry attempts to embody precisely the sonic quality of this ancient poetry where "Language itself is a honey trap, words a web in which we can be caught."⁶ We could describe the language of *Lemma* in similar terms, and add that Wright subordinates the words' content (i.e., their meaning) to their sonic qualities, which in turn carry the ability to produce magical effects, such as the resurrection of a memory or transportation to the third hour.

There are six of these direct quotations in the play, and the words come from a surprising cadre of historical figures: Robert Graves, Luke the Evangelist, E. M. Forster (from an essay considering the presence of Giorgos Seferis's poetic spirit in C. P. Cavafy's work), the philosopher Elizabeth (G. E. M.) Anscombe, John Donne, and Nicholas of Cusa. Wright's quotations blend together like notes in a chord and produce an invisible yet sensible matrix of thought from which *Lemma's* action springs.

When we listen to Wright's chord, what do we hear? There is a consideration of poetic genealogy first, or a meditation on how the lives of many poets live within a singular body. Graves, Forster (who comprehends the nested dyad of Seferis and Cavafy), and Donne sing of poetry's ability to enthuse (*ἐνθουσιάζω*, from Ancient Greek) or in-spirit other beings and remind us that poetic language makes palpable the limen between birth and death.

The Graves quotation doubles as a historiographical procedure insofar as it deconstructs the Christian facade erected around earlier religious practices and reinfuses poetry with a magical ability. This is more than a metaphor. Deconstructing actual architectural facades of churches throughout Mexico, for example, would provide access to pre-Christian structures activated within indigenous belief systems. Prayers that took place in those original spaces appear to contemporary Western eyes as arcane magic, and that magic is an analogue to types of spirituality practiced by Celtic priests and priestesses for which Forster advocates. Forster's words that "material that has grown old in monasteries and libraries" provide more historiographical intervention, drawing our attention to the distinction between books collected in archives, on the one hand, and the performative capacities of those words, on the other. In the same essay from which Wright's quotation is drawn, Forster likens historical sources motivating Seferis's poetry to a kind of choreography requiring a dancer's body to bring it to life. Cavafy's work, according to Forster, was to sort out where his Greek countryman's poetry failed to attach a body to diagrams of their inherited choreography and to ensure that the historical material's richness did not become but an ornamental source for hollow hymns. Wright is engaged in precisely this activity: a bodying forth of ritual language seeking to ground the sounds of voices in the here and now of

⁶ Fran Brearton, "Robert Graves and *The White Goddess*," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 131 (2005): 300.

the ritual's unfolding. We see this in the way *Lemma* begins with Voices A–F and ends with characters affixed to those voices. Voice D, who speaks Graves's words, lands in the body of Bacán, one of two female characters in the play. The Forster quotation belongs to Polso, the character who generates the ritual diagram on the ground of the performance space and who enters “ringing an agogo in a syn-copated rhythm” (10).⁷

The last thread in the woven tapestry of poetic genealogy (other than Wright's voice, of course, which pulsates throughout the entire text) ties to John Donne's *Death's Duell* (1632):

We have a winding sheet in our mothers wombe, which grows with us from our conception, and we come into the world, wound up in that winding sheet, for we come to seek a grave.⁸

Interested in Nancy Selleck's notion of “*material embeddedness* of life and surround,” Hester Lees-Jeffries unspools the significance wound up within Donne's reference to sheets. For Lees-Jeffries, such significance ties to an “early-modern textile imaginary” that saw in the common bedsheet the same material that would eventually become a tool for a midwife's work and at some point, sooner or later, one's own funeral shroud.⁹ The sheet therefore links birth, sleep/stillness, and death and signifies this linkage throughout its life as a vibrant object. In *Lemma*, Donne's words come from the mouth of Bricco who, after citing Donne, promptly offers to handle the stage property-actant of the white sheet, which, we have learned by that point, serves a crucial function in the offing of the play's ritual.

Wright accomplishes at least two feats through the poetic family summoned together through his direct quotations. First, he calls our attention to the act of poetizing and the life experiences that tether poetry to bodies, thereby acknowledging poetry's material significance in the world. Words speak of people and things but that speech, when properly arranged, also opens up lines of sight into historical epistemes providing the conditions for poetry's mythic-religious-magical abilities. Perhaps this is where poetry becomes dramatic poetry. Second, the grouping of direct citations not only produces the connection between Graves, Donne, Forster, Seferis, and Cavafy, it also reveals the degree to which those figures were always already connected. This revelation helps us consider the entanglement of knowledge systems that scholars typically keep separated. More specifically, Wright prompts us to wonder how the existing entanglement

⁷ The *agogo* is a bell that comes from Yorubaland and was crucial in religious ceremonies of the Yoruba as well as in *candomblé* ceremonies in the new world.

⁸ Quoted in Wright, *Lemma*, 58.

⁹ Hester Lees-Jeffries, “Thou Hast Made this Bed Thine Altar: John Donne's Sheets,” in *Domestic Devotions in the Early Modern World*, eds. Marco Faini and Alessia Meneghin (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 269–287.

of these poets' material ideas live on, in, and through his characters' bodies, and perhaps our own, as well.

The web of entangled historical thought also contains strands connecting secular, analytic philosophy, and religious beliefs. Wright illuminates these strands by placing the words of G. E. M. Anscombe in the mouth of Bacán: "thus St. Peter could do what he intended not to do, without changing his mind, and yet do it intentionally" (37). This single sentence, which appears at the end of Anscombe's *Intention* (1957), concludes what is otherwise a seemingly areligious, philosophical essay on ethics, action theory, and agency. Wright provides Anscombe with a philosophical partner through the brief passing invocation of the surname Polkinghorne, which the characters in *Lemma* affix to the mysterious Elzbieta (and perhaps, by extension, the sisters Carmen and Peregrina). John Polkinghorne was a British mathematician, physicist, theologian, and Anglican priest whose work consistently invoked the harmonies between science and religion. Thus, taken all together, Wright provides a specific constellation for us to ponder: Elizabeth Anscombe, Elzbieta Polkinghorne, John Polkinghorne.¹⁰ The constellation does not mean something; rather, its identity-as-arrangement produces a container to hold a certain story. In *Lemma*, the words of (female) philosopher Anscombe are spoken by Bacán, one of the play's two female characters, who repeatedly embodies the ghost of Elzbieta, thereby making her memory dance within the play's ritual. The philosophical text that is quoted, when paired with the play's ongoing ritual action, alerts us to the entanglement between theology and science. More than that, Wright alerts his readers that any magic taking place through the play's ritual—i.e., its particular form that both severs and sutures past and/from present, providing order to the transformation of being each character is undertaking—has a rational underpinning.

Throughout the play, the entanglement of global thought systems continues to reveal itself in multiple ways. I will offer one more example. Building on the theme sparked by Anscombe's words, I am drawn to the ways in which Wright's hybridization of Catholic thought places *Lemma*—and much of his work—within a neo-Baroque register. That is, Wright's characters inhabit subject positions that re-code Christian tropes within indigenous belief systems that predated the arrival of Spanish and Portuguese colonizers to the lands now known as Mesoamerica and South America. Early in the play, Fuadach wryly cites Luke 1:77–79, "to give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our way into the way of peace."¹¹ Wright's character attributes the words to a "fraudulent physician," a moniker that summons the apostle's credentials at the same time as it dismisses the doctor's ability. Whatever ills Luke may have been capable of healing through

¹⁰ Probing deeper, we may also connect Forster to this trio by playing with the initials E. M., which appear in the poet's and the philosopher's names.

¹¹ Quoted in Wright, *Lemma*, 3.

medicine, his religious balm would not bring either light or peace to the inhabitants of the country now called Mexico. Each of *Lemma*'s characters is a mixture of Christian/Catholic beliefs and some other religious mode of knowing. This "other" quality does not, however, bar the characters from accessing the sacred.

The "other" quality of the hybrid sacred system of knowing demonstrated throughout *Lemma* is akin to the direct or gnostic experience of God familiar to mystics. This claim carries weight when we examine the final of Wright's six direct citations, which comes from the mystic Nicholas of Cusa's *De visione Dei* (1453): "I will attempt to lead you, by way of experiencing, through very simple and very common means, into a sacred darkness."¹² If we juxtapose Cusa's words with those of Luke, we notice a similarity that quickly gives way to a crucial difference. The familiar trope of light and dark plays out in both quotations, but only Cusa's words retain a hold in *Lemma*'s territory, for only they elucidate the true fusion of light and dark. For Luke, heathens remain in the dark until the light is brought to them. For Cusa, personal experience of God leads to direct knowledge of the sacred without a shepherd. That direct knowledge takes place within "sacred darkness," a kind of plenitudinous emptiness discovered by hollowing out or decreating the self and becoming inhabited by the divine. As Forster's dancing body needed to bring life to the choreography of historic knowledge, Cusa's mystic body is required, but negatively; it is required to be emptied out and utilized as a point of view by God. Wright, no doubt aware of the theatricality of this arrangement, brings Cusa and Luke into the agon of *Lemma* and requires bodies of performers to step into the portals prepared by the text and the characters. In particular, these characters work within a religious framework common in what is termed Latin America, thereby placing Wright's mystic-theatrical experience in conversation with the neo-Baroque subjectivities discussed by authors including Alejo Carpentier, Carlos Fuentes, Haroldo de Campos, and Severo Sarduy.¹³

Musical Dramaturgy

Moving through the web of thought revealed by Wright's assembly of textual citations brings us into contact with the playwright's deep, diverse reservoir of

¹² Quoted in Wright, *Lemma*, 63.

¹³ Neo-baroque subjectivities are constructed through playful invention forced upon each subject by colonizing forces. The discipline of the colonizing impulse metastasizes into a brand of excess that frequently finds expression in works of art. Regarding the authors listed here, please see the following for examples: Alejo Carpentier, *Concierto barroco* (México: Siglo veintiuno editores, 1974); Carlos Fuentes, "Elogio del barroco," *Boletín de la Biblioteca de Menéndez Pelayo* 69 (1993): 387–410; Haroldo de Campos, "The Rule of Anthropophagy: Europe under the Sign of Devoration," trans. Maria Wolff Tai, *Latin American Literary Review* 14, no. 27 (1986): 42–60; Severo Sarduy, "The Baroque and the Neobaroque" (1972), in *Baroque New Worlds: Representation, Transculturation, Counterconquest*, eds. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Monika Kaup (Durham, nc: Duke University Press, 2010), 270–291.

knowledge. We find ourselves attempting to produce understanding out of a precise entanglement of analytic philosophy, mystic theology, geometric diagrams, linguistic polysemy, and the music without which we would not be able to feel the movement of the piece as a whole. *Lemma* revolves around a quality of musical dramaturgy that connects Wright to the jazz aesthetic of the Black Arts Movement while also placing him in his own sonic territory.

Throughout *Lemma*, the Lydian mode catches our ears. For example, Bricco, having volunteered to handle the vibrant white garment, attempts to prove his worthiness by singing a Lydian scale. Fuadach, both impressed and perturbed, responds, “Well, bravo for you” (59). Later, near the end of the play’s action, the characters work to find the proper rhythm that will lead to authentically executing the ritual dance necessary to achieve the knowledge they seek. Fuadach offers to play a primary part in the ritual, but Spalla, the other female character in the play, hesitates. “Bravo. But you haven’t convinced me that you have learned to dance.” Wright inserts a stage direction, “Fuadach sings the Lydian scale,” and then Fuadach asks “Will that do?” (65). His singing is not enough, however; to give proper shape to the ensemble’s composition, the characters all need to sing together or they will “lose this moment.” After this decision, the actors repeat the opening stage direction of the performance.

What follows in the text is a repetition of the Voices, each assigned a specific set of lines to sing. These are the same lines offered as “prologues” in the beginning of the piece. Here, however, Wright affixes a name, and also a body, to each of the voices. Voice D lands in the body of Bacán. Voice E lands in Spalla. Bricco in Voice C. After reciting the text from the play’s beginning, the characters collectively approach the edge of the third hour and do their best to conjure the memory of Elzbieta and Carmen into the theater. After a few pages of dialogue, a Musician enters. This new character, who appears only at the play’s end, serves as a kind of choir master and arranges the bodies into one final configuration upon the stage:

I want to test your unadorned voices. (Once he has them rearranged, he skips among them cajoling and assigning scales.) From d to d octave, from e to e octave, from f to f octave, from g to g octave, from a to a octave, from c to c. You see that you can do this, can’t you? Sure, you can. We all have our voices; we all have something a voice must address, or even tame. (71)

As another stage direction tells us, “He points at each one for the assigned scale, then draws each one into singing a separate mode at the same time.” While the characters sing, the Musician takes the white garment and dances away. The audience hears another voice draw everything to a close: “There was a story that began with the usual drainage of certainties, but the tale was quickly delivered to the failing stars and propped upon inconceivable delight” (72).

The central role of singing, the presence of musical modes, and the repeated reference to the Lydian throughout the text brings to mind George Russell's work of music theory, *The Lydian Chromatic Concept of Tonal Organization* (1953). Russell's theory does not form a system, "but rather a view or philosophy of tonality in which the student, it is hoped, will find his identity."¹⁴ This work instigated a paradigm shift in the sound of jazz improvisation and was championed by many well-known players, perhaps most assertively by Ornette Coleman. In an interview with Russell, Olive Jones provides a connection between Russell's work and Wright's play:

Russell believes the significance of his concept to be that it puts music back on the track where it started back in the time of Pythagoras and other Greek philosophers. He feels that the problem has been that certain laws of Christianity influenced the development of music to such an extent that it was pulled away from its most natural systems toward the super-imminence of the major mode. . . . The Lydian Chromatic Concept reestablishes the link between the relatively recent laws of equal temperament and the ancient laws with their emphasis on movement through pure fifths.¹⁵

A musical historiographical maneuver in Russell's work rhymes boldly with Wright's aesthetic sensibilities. By uncovering the quality of sound and its related theoretical system from underneath the edifice erected on ancient grounds by the Christian church, Russell frees up a pallet of musical relationships that provides contemporary jazz musicians with a new kind of song, one capable of telling a story outside the harmonic and ideological constraints of the major mode.

Russell has always been vocal about the social relevance of his Lydian chromatic concept:

it's o.k. to talk about black liberation and black this-and-that, but nothing is going to change fundamentally in this society which is ruled by laws that are so precious to their makers. One has to question the laws. That's what I did; that's what absorbs me.¹⁶

Musical laws penned by the church do not provide the conditions of possibility for a truly emancipatory musical language and expression. Likewise, laws touting equality will always harbor a principle of structural exclusion that makes of white people always-already deserving of equality and Black people always-almost-ready-to-deserve it. What would be needed for equality would be a completely

¹⁴ Georges Russell, *The Lydian Chromatic Concept of Tonal Organization: The Art and Science of Tonal Gravity*, 4th ed. (New Delhi: Concept Publishing, 2001 [1953]), n.p.

¹⁵ Olive Jones and George Russell, "A New Theory for Jazz," *The Black Perspective in Music* 2, no. 1 (1974): 65.

¹⁶ Jones and Russell, "A New Theory for Jazz," 72.

new language with which to pronounce new laws premised on new ways of living together. Unable to swing that, Russell finds a new (old) language that eventually becomes the bedrock of so-called free jazz.

In the same way that Russell's theory provides musicians "with an awareness of the full spectrum of tonal colors available in the equal temperament tuning," Wright's global web of entangled knowledge systems presents theater makers with a synesthetic fusion of sight and sound capable of producing a theater space that doubles as a site of ritual incantation. *Lemma* is a score from which players might produce a precise set of time-space coordinates that guide the performers and audiences to the cusp of the always-becoming present, an event horizon that leads not to firm identities and certain knowledge calculated in advance but, rather, to a fluid and improvisatory identity of both things and people. The text attempts to paint a wormhole into existence through its music, one capable of reviving memory and honoring the capacities of the "American" identity (understood here in its neo-Baroque, *mestizaje* shape). Similar to Wright's recently published *The Geometry of Rhythm* (2019), in which two characters explore a process of inter-subjective becoming keyed to the movement of the so-called "Gypsy" or Harmonic Minor Scale, *Lemma* produces a visual event (theater) from a musical dramaturgy that departs from the tonal potentialities inhering within the Lydian mode.

Wright's lemma

The play's name is a polyseme. A lemma in the discourse of logic is a passage forged through a minor proposition en route to a decisive proof. In lexicography, a lemma is the "canonical form" from which issues a set of related words (e.g., dance: dance, dances, danced, dancing). Psycholinguists use "lemma" to name the abstract concept of a word that the brain selects prior to uttering anything, a kind of mental model from which will sprout a sound laden with meaning. With Wright's play, we find a new valence to "lemma." The text is a transition point, a hinge, or perhaps a port of embarkation that doubles as a cellular matrix from which grows both potential and actual lives (which always contain pasts, presents, and futures). *Lemma* takes place at the horizon where a memory is given form through the precise language and musicality with which that memory is spoken. We might be able to claim that the memory in question is a history of love and death, generally, spoken of through the particular story of the sisters Elzbieta and Carmen. This history informs the identity of the characters in the present. Indeed, each is incomplete without the memory. At the same time, each character will remain precisely incomplete because the memory's repeated telling ensures no static identity for the figures and events that make up the past. *Lemma*, with its emphasis on the art of arrangement through which an individual makes him/her/

themselves out of the memories and texts of others, becomes legible as a passage, one that connects past and present in the unfolding of theatrical action.

To make a self within that passage, we must dance in a rhythm that allows the multiplicity within us to come forward in harmony, where “harmony” is a free(r) concept that eludes the constraints of the binary of harmony/dissonance. *Lemma* shows us the labor required of bodies attempting to find this rhythm. Here, it becomes possible to speak of Wright’s lemma as a study in rhythm, and more specifically of idiorrhhythm.

This strange term comes from Roland Barthes’s 1977 lectures at the Collège de France, translated into English as *How to Live Together*. The word has Ancient Greek origins and comes from the fusion of *idios* (particular) and *rhuthmos* (rhythm, though in a particular sense, as I will explain), and belongs, historically, to “any [religious] community that respects each individual’s own personal rhythm.”¹⁷ It was, therefore, on the other side of the disciplinary continuum from what would become the Christian monasteries, insofar as the latter mandated a strict rhythm in accordance with a temporal scheme constructed around prayer and a long list of representational practices that bound individual monks to the larger body of the church. From this word, idiorrhhythm, Barthes develops a typology of communities, most clearly apparent in works of fiction, presenting multiple ways of living with each other. The tacit “we” here is quite global in reach, and thus we might read Barthes’s lectures as a philosophical fantasy aimed at conjuring a utopian space through art. Barthes’s conjuring skills are limited, however, insofar as no utopia pops into existence. Nevertheless, the thinking demonstrated in the lecture series prepares “idiorrhhythm” for a wide variety of uses in philosophical discourse.

In terms of *Lemma*, we find the six primary characters engaged in an idiorrhhythmic exercise. Their incessant work of arranging themselves properly, attempting to locate “the proper and perfect configuration of their group,” is precisely a syncopation of particular rhythms. They never fall in line with a single commanding rhythm, despite the hope that such a master rhythm will accomplish a performance of the play’s ritual. Instead, we see each of the characters assert his or her own mode of speech, philosophical inclinations, and styles of movement. Only when the Musician arrives at the conclusion of the play does the group seem to find their perfect configuration, but even then the arrangement permits heterogeneity. Each character sings his or her own scale. The scales overlap into a cosmological concert in which the particularity of the character evades complete subsumption into the group, much in the same way that a sextet of jazz instrumentalists can collaborate as a group, find a jam, yet never fully cohere into a homogeneous singularity.

¹⁷ Claude Coste quoted in Roland Barthes, *How To Live Together: Novelistic Simulations of Some Everyday Spaces*, trans. Kate Briggs (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), xxii.

The purpose of summoning idiorrhythm in this essay, however, has as much to do with Wright as a poet and historiographer as it does with the world of the play he has created. Barthes, in the lecture section from February 2, 1977, dedicated to “power,” offers the following insight:

Once again, what we’re dealing with is: a consubstantial relationship between power and rhythm. Before anything else, the first thing that power imposes is a rhythm (to everything: a rhythm of life, of time, of thought, of speech). The demand for idiorrhythm is always made in opposition to power.¹⁸

Let’s return to the question I posed at the start of this essay: Where is Wright? He was not in step with the rhythm of the Black Arts Movement, as it was the arm of the Black Power Movement, a movement committed to producing a single Black Power that could counter deathly Whiteness. Despite their revolutionary gestures (both successful and failed attempts), both BAM and the Black Power Movement more generally sought to impose a rhythm on Black thought. But Wright’s affinity for idiorrhythmic structures carried him off elsewhere. More specifically, both then and now, he understands the Americas to operate as an idiorrhythmic experiment. As such, the America for which he produces space in his poetry and his plays combines so many voices and cultural traditions into a heterogenous assemblage that preserves the friction between disparate knowledge systems while also demonstrating how difference can cohabitate with itself. In this way, Wright’s *rhuthmos* rhymes with the aesthetics of the neo-Baroque and the jazz improvisations imagined by Russell, Coleman, and other musicians of a similar ilk.

Just as Russell sought to bypass the harmonic laws imposed by the Christian church so as to revive for modern jazz the philosophical world of music alive in Pythagoras’s era, so too can we bypass the church of the Black Arts Movement to situate Wright in a historical trajectory that cultivates the Americas out of a radically heterogeneous combination of sources. To do this, we can borrow Barthes’s distinction between rhythm and *rhuthmos*:

rhythm ≠ *rhuthmos*. Idiorrhythmy: a means of safeguarding *rhuthmos*, that is to say a flexible, free, mobile rhythm; a transitory, fleeting form, but a form nonetheless. . . . *Rhuthmos*: a rhythm that allows for approximation, for imperfection, for a supplement, a lack, an *idios*: what doesn’t fit the structure, or would have to be made to fit.¹⁹

Characters attempt to figure out how to live together. They arrange themselves like notes in a scale and like atoms in a molecule, attempting to find the right fit.

¹⁸ Barthes, *How To Live Together*, 35.

¹⁹ Barthes, 35.

Their movements are supported by the certainties of historical voices but they also remain tethered to the uncertainties of memory. As such, there is always a lack or an imperfection in their arrangements. Wright is jamming here, and his own idiorrhhythmic sensibilities provide the overall tone of the jam session. Whatever we make of *Lemma*, we must preserve the act of making, showcasing that as a vital element to this work for the theater.

What Historiography Becomes?

Throughout Wright's work, poiesis produces strands in the great web of the world while also revealing the fact that entanglement was always already taking place. *Lemma* produces a different Black, American theater. What I am able to present of the play's ritual conjuration and jazz structure in this essay offers a soundbite of an idiorrhhythmic community of intellectual forces bodied forth in characters with their own particular aims and desires. We see here a glimpse of the multitude that might thrive in all of us who identify as Americans if we broaden the scope of our identity to include practices and harmonies that have been occluded by dominant narratives of belonging. At the same time, Wright is simply showing us what already exists. Anscombe, Donne, Russell, the Lydian mode, the sound of the agogo, rituals hinging on the swift blade of an obsidian knife: these atoms combine into the ever-transforming molecules of American lives. The question is: Do we hear all these sounds when we speak of a "we"?

Lemma presents a specific set of historiographic maneuvers challenging three key aspects of contemporary thinking related to theater and performance studies. First, by staging his thought in theatrical form, Wright destabilizes the notion that both historical knowledge and historiographic consciousness in the present are ever readymade or complete. Throughout the drama's development, the perpetual arrangement of characters presents identities *in formation*. Likewise, the ritual frame subtending the play's action provides a repeatable structure but demands of the performers, like most theater, that they enact the play's action live, as if playing a concert. I understand Wright's lesson here as one that addresses the processual development of what things are. Things come to be. Nothing already is. The theater that houses *Lemma* is not one that pre-exists the staging of the play but comes into existence instead as the play is produced. Likewise, the past, any past of which historiographers speak, does not pre-exist the telling, and thus the inflection of the telling and the arrangement of notes effectively construct the past while also shaping and reshaping it in the present.

Second, the relationship between the identities of *Lemma*'s characters and their memories and histories challenges me to rethink the way historiographers drag the present into the past and represent past events in the present. Perhaps one reason that Wright's characters never fully or successfully reconstruct the central

past event of the play's action—i.e., the disappearance of the three sisters—is because that past event is always in flux. As such, without an objective and static past from which to draw any certainties, the characters in the present get hung up on how they are *playing* the past, so to speak. In terms of historiography, the parallel is clear. In the absence of a static and certain past event or a timeless space safely housing historical objects and personages, don't we always find a field of tensions produced each time that the present attempts to make contact with the past? Remembering correctly may not be possible, but the ethics of remembering *in tune* are nevertheless palpable. To play the past is to reveal how the past gathers concretely in the present, if even only temporarily before shifting form. Historiography thus takes shape as a spatial undertaking, not a science undertaking the revelation of temporal mysteries, but an art producing theatrical experiments in the present, the purpose of which is to examine the tensions between diverse thought systems shaping each and every historical figure, object, and event.

Third, any such identity must never succumb to the illusion that it emerges from a single original point. Black American theater is assembled each time a specific palette of relationships is activated. In the case of the Black Arts Movement, that palette had only a certain number of colors. All paintings were to be created from that color scheme, or else the resulting product would not and could not serve the movement. Wright is clearly unconcerned with such service. Rather, we find him several decades into a deep dig that has unearthed a surprisingly heterogeneous and at times dissonant tonal and chromatic matrix. Robert Graves and John Donne participate in Wright's American identity, but so too does Russell's music theory and Cavafy's uneasy Greek poetic inheritance. Ancient Greek drama provides a productive sense of communal or collective voicing. Beckett's contemporary uptake of Irish aesthetic sensibilities is in play, too. Spanish becomes a fruitful language through which to voice some of this aesthetic. Wright hears all of these sources and linguistic forms in the sound of the agogo and other instruments brought to the New World by enslaved Africans. He wonders what types of rhythms will be of use as Americans dance their way into existence. Could we say that the adjective "Black" takes a backseat to American in *Lemma*? Yes, but only insofar as the latter constitutes a theater in itself through which all the tensions of Blackness, and for that matter Whiteness, will play out and arrange themselves into ever-shifting and uncertain identities.

■

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Abstract

Lemma: Jay Wright's Idiorrhythmic American Theater

This essay presents Jay Wright's play *Lemma* as a historiographical challenge and also as a piece of idiorrhythmic American theater. Consonant with his life's work of poetry, dramatic literature, and philosophical writing, *Lemma* showcases Wright's expansive intellectual framework with which he constructs vivid, dynamic, and complex visions of American life. The "America" conjured here is steeped in many traditions, traditions typically kept distinct by academic discourse, such as West African cosmology, Enlightenment philosophy, jazz music theory, Ancient Greek theater, neo-Baroque modifications of Christian theology, pre-Columbian indigenous ways of knowing, etymological connections between Spanish and Gaelic, the materiality of John Donne's poetry, and the lives of enslaved Africans in the New World. What is the purpose of Wright's theatrical conjuration? How do we approach a text with such a diverse body of intellectual and literary sources? The author answers these questions and ends with a call to treat *Lemma* as a much needed point of view that opens lines of sight into Black and American theater far outside the well-worn territory of the Black Arts Movement.

Keywords

Jay Wright, *Lemma*, musical dramaturgy, American theater, idiorrhythmy, ritual, Blackness, performance philosophy

Abstrakt

Lemma: Idiorytmiczny teatr Jaya Wrighta

Esej przedstawia sztukę Jaya Wrighta *Lemma* jako wyzwanie historiograficzne, a także jako dzieło idiorytmicznego teatru amerykańskiego. Spójna z dorobkiem poetyckim, dramatycznym i filozoficznym Wrighta *Lemma* odsłania szerokie intelektualne horyzonty poety, które pozwalają mu skonstruować żywą, dynamiczną i złożoną wizję amerykańskiego życia. Wyczarowaną w jego sztuce „Amerykę” przenika wiele tradycji, które zazwyczaj oddziela się od siebie w dyskursie akademickim: zachodnioafrykańska kosmologia, filozofia oświeceniowa, teoria jazzu, starożytny teatr grecki, neobarokowe modyfikacje chrześcijańskiej teologii, prekolumbijskie autochtoniczne sposoby poznania, etymologiczne związki hiszpańskiego i gaelickiego, materialność poezji Johna Donne’a oraz życie zniewolonych Afrykanów w Nowym Świecie. Jaki jest cel teatralnego sztukmistrzostwa Wrighta? Jak podejść do tekstu o tak różnorodnych źródłach intelektualnych i literackich? Autor odpowiada na te pytania i podsumowuje wywód postulatami, by traktować *Lemmę* jako bardzo potrzebny punkt widzenia, z którego można zobaczyć czarny i amerykański teatr poza dobrze znanym terytorium Black Arts Movement.

Słowa kluczowe

Jay Wright, *Lemma*, dramaturgia muzyczna, teatr amerykański, idiorytmia, rytuał, czarność, filozofia teatru i performansu

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