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### **"Woven Into the Deepes of Life": Death, Redemption, and Memory in Bob Kaufman's Poetry**

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**“Woven Into the Deepes of Life”:  
Death, Redemption, and Memory  
In Bob Kaufman’s Poetry**

Peter A. Davis

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Submitted to the Department of English  
of Pomona College in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the Senior Exercise.

Aaron Kunin, Faculty Advisor  
Will Alexander, Faculty Reader

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Peter Davis". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Peter" and last name "Davis" clearly distinguishable.



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**I kept my secrets.**

– “The Ancient Rain”<sup>1</sup>

**THE IMAGE OF THE POET**

**IS A**

**SECRET**

– “The Poet”<sup>2</sup>

The scholars who have taken up the task of writing about Bob Kaufman have most often done so in response to a perceived demand: the lack of Kaufman scholarship, readership, anthology, publicity, canonization. The basis of this need is clear: Kaufman is almost never included as even a third-string Beat, a fringe Surrealist, or an underappreciated Jazz performer. To the committed readers of Kaufman – and almost all of his readers seem to be committed ones – it’s unforgivable. These various canons, major (mid-century American poets, Beat poets) and minor (Jazz poets, American Surrealists), are clearly missing one of their most important members. The task is to reintegrate Kaufman into the company it seems he has been omitted from, the company he deserves.

This process had worked before – plenty of forgotten, marginalized, underappreciated writers have been, to varying degrees of success or fullness, posthumously canonized along with their white/male/western/popular contemporaries, decades after their work had been underappreciated. The goal is an important one, and has been at hand for literary scholars for quite some time. Kaufman is a clear candidate for retroactive canonization, so clearly central to mid-

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<sup>1</sup> Bob Kaufman, *The Ancient Rain: Poems 1956-1978* (New York: New Directions, 1981), 81.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 70.



century American poetry and so thoroughly wiped from its collective memory. All that is needed is literary-critical access. The writer uncovers the buried Kaufman, digging past layers of publishing and reprinting inattention, writing through police brutality and shock treatment, reimagining a Guinness award, jealously acknowledging the superior Surrealist sensibilities of little French journals – voila! The muted Kaufman is silent no more.

The problem is that once the critic has overcome all the resistance – the capitalist publishing industry, the prison system, the white-dominated west coast poetry setting, the public demands of aesthetic production – she is resisted by the poetry itself, and by Kaufman the poet. Along the lines of Claude Pelieu’s back jacket blurb of *Golden Sardine* – “in spite of his continuing exclusion from American anthologies, both Hip & Academic” – Kaufman has *excluded* the anthology, the academy. His public, and his poem, are not theirs. I am not suggesting that Kaufman isn’t critically neglected, or that this critical neglect is inconsequential: I am simply not considering Kaufman’s critical neglect as a critical prerogative of mine, or its rectification a priority. It’s certainly not a priority of Kaufman’s.

Every time they elect me President, I hide in the bathroom.  
– “Song of the Broken Giraffe”<sup>3</sup>

If i can’t be an ugly rumor i won’t be the good time had by all.  
– “The Traveling Circus”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Kaufman, *Solititudes Crowded With Loneliness* (New York: New Directions, 1965), 34.

<sup>4</sup> *The Ancient Rain*, 25.

Old? Whole university loads  
[...] Carrying heavy styles,  
Lead forms, tradition colored.  
– “Query”<sup>5</sup>

I only want privacy to create an illusion of me blotted out.  
– “Blues for Hal Waters”

So my thesis should, maybe, end here. The academic cannot write on Kaufman without un-writing his subject. But is all readership oriented toward a project of public canonization? Is every critical reading “tradition colored”? After all, Kaufman un-writes and re-writes himself and others all the time. What if my goal is to read and comment, and not to reorganize the bookshelf of the canon? Kaufman’s poetry has its own form of criticism, readership, and commentary. Titles like “Hart . . . Crane,” “The Night That Lorca Comes,” “Picasso’s Balcony,” “Camus, I Want To Know . . .” hint toward my readings of Kaufman as cultural, artistic, literary critic. What if I learn from Kaufman’s readership, and write, or hope to write, “Kaufman, I Want To Know”? This is the task, to *ask* Kaufman’s language, not to remove, reorient, or reintegrate his poetry, but simply to ask it, following the sorts of critical interrogations Kaufman has written himself. He asks the dead Camus (perhaps his text-corpse): “Camus, I shall scream but one awesome question, does *death exist*? Camus, I want to know . . .”<sup>6</sup>

This is also my question for Kaufman, and I will ask him several times, each time a bit differently. The theme of this thesis is *death*, Kaufman’s “one awesome

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>6</sup> *Solitudes*, 47.

question.” Organized this way, my reading circumscribes much of Kaufman’s work. Kaufman writes: “Lately, since formulating mystic parables of my own, / People ask me what do I know all about China [...] When I answer that I am writing the Great American Suicide Note, / They sniff my clothes and leave.”<sup>1</sup> I will read death through various critical lenses – some with nearly universal critical currency among readers of Kaufman, some with little – as Kaufman’s “FOUNT OF THE CREATIVE ACT.”<sup>2</sup>

But this thematic circumscription is also a reading of endurance, even of life. Kaufman writes: “[THE POET’S] DEATH IS A SAVING GRACE”<sup>3</sup>; “LORCA SURVIVES IN HIS POEM, WOVEN INTO THE DEEPS OF LIFE.”<sup>4</sup> This becomes the vital relation at the center of my project: how does Kaufman, like Lorca, survive in his poem? How does Kaufman’s political poetry relate with poetic death and redemption? How does jazz involve these things? Does *death exist*? I want to know . . .

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<sup>1</sup> *The Ancient Rain*, 39.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

## **“THE FOUNT OF THE CREATIVE ACT”**

One of the most frequently quoted texts<sup>1</sup> of Bob Kaufman comes from the beginning of Raymond Foye’s introduction to *The Ancient Rain*, from an interview conducted by the editor himself: “I want to be anonymous [...] My ambition is to be completely forgotten.”<sup>2</sup> It’s odd that these quotes are more friendly to the writing of critics than similar language found in his poetry: “I only want privacy to create an illusion of me blotted out”<sup>3</sup>; “If i can’t be an ugly rumor i won’t be the good time had by all.”<sup>4</sup> The texts are very similar, and the poems are much more interesting than the interview. So what makes the poem more difficult than the quote?

Maybe our answer is in our approach to Kaufman’s poetry, printed as it is in books, published in houses, bought with money. How can we take Kaufman’s professed “ambition” seriously? How is it possible for us to read the *ink* of the word “*blotted?*” Kaufman’s erasure and forgetting is more legible to us when whispered privately in “a deserted Chinatown bar” than it is when etched in print. But, as Kaufman writes in “The Poet:” “THE BLOOD OF A POET FLOWS / OUT WITH HIS POEMS” and “THE REALITY OF THE POEM CANNOT BE DENIED.”<sup>5</sup> The headline quality of the all-capital text (a common feature of Kaufman’s manuscripts) reinforces the undeniability of the poem: Kaufman’s poems are not whispered.

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<sup>1</sup>Damon, Fisher, Fragopoulos, Rice, for example.

<sup>2</sup> Raymond Foye, Introduction to *The Ancient Rain: Poems 1956-1978*, (New York: New Directions, 1981), ix.

<sup>3</sup> Bob Kaufman, “Blues for Hal Waters,” in *The Ancient Rain*, 28-29.

<sup>4</sup> *The Ancient Rain*, 25.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 69-70.

There is a real confusion here. The goal, the purpose of the poet and his poems is to be blotted out & forgotten, while the poems he writes have an undeniable reality, containing the blood of the poet. How can he be *blotted* out if he is *inscribed* in the page? Interestingly, the word “blotted” itself anticipates its self-opposite nature. Peculiar in its own contrariness, a “blot” can be a drop of ink or an erasure, a mark or its removal. So our question might be reoriented with respect to one single word in Kaufman’s text: how can he be *blotted* in the full and contrary sense of the word?

Our answer is in the subject of Kaufman’s forgetting and blotting. Our typical reading is “to be completely forgotten [by others].” What else can it mean to be forgotten? Others forget, and to *write* & be *read* are agents of memory or preservation, certainly not forgetting and erasure. To be forgotten and to be read are opposite. But what if “to be completely forgotten” is not Kaufman’s ambition for others, but for himself, the poet? What if to bleed into the poem, into undeniable reality, is to be blotted out?

In this way we read the passive “to be forgotten” as Kaufman’s poetic *act*. To look further we read “Clap Hands, Here Comes the Lindbergh Baby” for an instance of this self-blotting gesture:

I reject those frozen  
injections  
of last night’s junk  
tragedy,  
memory,  
blotted survivor  
no longer remembers  
chromed elbows,  
rosy highways,

pinned submission,  
eyeless skull faces  
socketless eyes  
screwed in<sup>6</sup>

Here we find the language we are reimagining clearly expressed; the poem pulls together writing, forgetting, and blotting into one identical poetic act, one poetic event.

Immediately we read *rejection* before anything else, before we read the “injection” that is rejected, an erasure prior to presence. Only then is the “injection” named as *memory*, precisely, after which there remains a “blotted survivor.” Here we read a new, opposite poetic maneuver of *survival* tied to blotting, a survival *through* erasure. Another impossibility: the written poem accomplishes the erasure of the poet and also his survival. But we are confronted again with the same questions as before: what might it mean to survive and be blotted? *Is Kaufman’s writing a sort of erasure?*

Yes: this written erasure is demonstrated immediately. The “survivor” is blotted progressively in the coming lines, in the list of the things no longer remembered, the injections that are rejected. Each line is an expulsion of memory – again, not forgotten by the reader, but forgotten by the *poem*, as it were, becoming poetry, the site of forgetting, blotting, and survival – no longer memory. Each line is forgotten at its point of rejection on the page, blotted by its inscription. Kaufman’s punctuation allows this reading very naturally: between series of lines broken by commas on either side, Kaufman writes the enjambed lines “blotted survivor / no

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<sup>6</sup> *The Ancient Rain*, 15.

longer remembers / chromed elbows [...]” syntactically connected. The series of images that follows is the list of these no-longers, the memories injected *after* their rejection, injected into rejection, and blotted precisely in the moment of their writing. What does the poem reject next, what is blotted out? We read on:

eyes that have no history,  
eyes that darken brows,  
eyes that have no lids,  
eyes that never blink  
broken into &  
entered eyes.

These lines complete a twofold rejection: first the memory is blotted visually (chrome and rose), and then the eyes themselves are blotted, over and over.

“Broken into & / entered” is the image of the injection, written again and erased, an exemplum of the erasure accomplished in every other line. But it stands out from the others as an expressly unwilling injection, intruding again after its initial rejection. Is the written rejection incomplete, or insufficient? We read further in similar language from another poem, “Blue Slanted into Blueness:”

NO SEBASTIAN, NOT AGAIN, NOR FOR A FIRST TIME EITHER  
WHO WILL BE THE FIRST TO BREAK THE ICE,  
REST FOREVER IN THE AMMONIA TANK, IN AN ICE HOUSE  
HUNG BY THE THUMBS.

I AM NOT A FORM  
I AM ME, SACRED & HOLY  
I AM UNIMPALABLE  
THE FORM THAT MEMORY TAKES  
HAS BLED ON ME  
AND BURNED RIMBAUD TO ASHES

NO ONE ELSE CAN EVEN THINK OF THAT FORM  
BLEEDING THEMSELVES OR OTHERS.<sup>7</sup>

Here the rejection is threefold: “no, not again, nor for a first time either.” And again the poem *begins* with rejection.<sup>8</sup> We might claim this as fundamental to these two poems: the poem begins with rejection because the poem *is* rejection: one begins with the other. The injection (of last night’s junk tragedy, of Sebastian) is unheard, unwritten until it is blotted in its rejection. So too is Kaufman, in memory and “the form that memory takes,” absent, formless, until the rejection & erasure of his writing (he is formless, but his *ambition* is to be forgotten). His memory is rejected, then his form is rejected, then curiously “the form that memory takes has bled on me.” Both form and memory survive through their rejection, bleeding memory and form onto the poet. Is this similar to the “eyes with no history” that are nonetheless “broken into and entered?” Our question persists in both cases: is the rejection incomplete? It seems at the beginning that Kaufman is already resigned to its insufficiency: “Who will be the first to break the ice”? The poem expresses the possibility, even the necessity of its failure, then doubles down on its rejection: “Who will be the first to break the ice, / rest forever in the icebox.” This seems to be the essential anxiety in Kaufman’s written erasure, his survival through blotting. The poem is its expression and its demand, its necessity and its impossibility, but not its resolution. What might such a resolution look like?

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<sup>7</sup> Kaufman, *Golden Sardine* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1967), 35.

<sup>8</sup> Another rejection of memory, specifically: the story goes that at age 13 Kaufman was hung overnight in an icebox by a lynch mob.



We can engage more fully with this problem in the sixth of Kaufman's "Jail Poems:"

There have been too many years in this short span of mine.  
My soul demands a cave of its own, like the Jain god;  
Yet I must make it go on, hard like jazz, glowing  
In this dark plastic jungle, land of long night, chilled.  
My navel is a button to push when I want inside out.  
Am I not more than a mass of entrails and rough tissue?  
Must I break my bones? Drink my wine-diluted blood?  
Should I dredge old sadness from my chest?  
Not again,  
All those ancient balls of fire, hotly swallowed, let them lie.  
Let me spit breath mists of introspection, bits of me,  
So that when I am gone, I shall be in the air.<sup>9</sup>

Early in the poem we see the same struggle we have read in "Clap Hands" and "Blue Slanted," a demand being made that cannot be followed through, or that requires an impossible concession. The poet's soul *demands* its Jainist isolation, but *must* instead go on, existing in the "land of long night, chilled." The soul's glowing, hardened existence, precisely as it is constituted in memory ("old sadness"), again *survives*, goes on, just as memory *breaks in* and *bleeds*, incompletely blotted. It is the frozen injection of Kaufman's pastness, persistent in/despite its rejection. The balls of fire (memory, history, "old sadness"), "hotly swallowed," are "chilled" in the icebox of Kaufman's continuation. The past, memory, Kaufman's past mapped onto a body in entrails, blood, bones; these things "rest forever," Kaufman "lets them lie." There is no self-destruction (breaking of bones), self-consumption (drinking of blood), there is no self-absolution (dredging of sadness); the self is simply put to rest. But we

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<sup>9</sup> Kaufman, *Solitudes Crowded with Loneliness*, (New York: New Directions, 1959), 57.

know that Kaufman's blotting is incomplete: "I must make it go on." How does Kaufman's soul do both, going on "glowing in this dark plastic jungle" and remaining isolated, its memory rejected & locked away?

Kaufman makes it clear: "Let me spit breath mists of introspection, bits of me." Kaufman is expressed and expelled, disembodied in his glowing existence. There is quite a bit in this line, and it seems to be the declaration of Kaufman's poetics, a demand made of the poet to himself. "Spit:" Kaufman's poetics were nearly always spoken, but it is interesting that these jail poems were written and not spoken (except maybe to himself): our page is the air. Kaufman expresses this distinction later in the "Jail Poems": "Sitting here writing things on paper, / Instead of sticking the pencil into the air." There is an anxiety around the distinction between paper and air: is there any difference between writing on the paper and stabbing the air? Kaufman, it seems, does *both* with his "breath mists." Then, "introspection:" each expulsion, blotting, forgetting, is complete in its privacy – ecstasy and interiority are coextensive with each other. Kaufman looks *in* and blots *out*. "Bits of me:" the other paradox – Kaufman's preservation is in his disintegration. In this way the poet *is* and *goes on*, but is blotted and dispersed.

"So that when I am gone, I shall be in the air." Here we see the same process as before: Kaufman couples his demand for non-existence ("gone") with the persistence of his self ("in the air"). The poem finds its impossible resolution of both demands. But here we also read the failure as complete: what can be further from a cave than air? And what can be further from isolation than dispersion? How can Kaufman's "spitting" be private and interior?

For this problem we revisit the *air* specifically as the *page*, as poetry. Can the poem be both introspective and ecstatic, both “cave” and “air?” We read a brief poem, “‘Michelangelo,’ the Elder”:

I live alone, like pith in a tree,  
My teeth rattle like musical instruments.  
In one ear a spider spins its web of eyes,  
In the other a cricket chirps all night,  
This is the end,  
Which art, that proves my glory has brought me,  
I would die for Poetry.<sup>10</sup>

The echoes of “Clap Hands” and “Jail Poem #6” are quickly apprehended in the first four lines, the divestment of identity in a poetic voice that blots the body piece by piece. The speaker is alone in a body, yet somehow occupied by others, invaded by their sounds, even watched by their synthetic eyes – all of this is fitting to Kaufman’s speakers we have read already. But perhaps the most striking aspect of this poem is its bizarre and tangled grammar, reading at once as high-&-proper and freely associative, precise and inscrutable.

“This is the end,” like “let them lie,” performs its writing, but the poem goes on, unended. And, as we might now expect, Kaufman does not die in death, he is not absent when he is gone, and he is does not end at the end. What might this end be? On the one hand, the pen on the page is the *end*, the final goal and resting place, of Kaufman’s self-expulsion, his self. It is the air in which the breath mists are suspended in Kaufman’s “post-endurance” (a term of poet Will Alexander). It is death and it is the accomplishment of a goal, with purpose. It may, however, also be

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<sup>10</sup> *Golden Sardine*, 34.

the end of the “living alone,” a transition from vacated privacy to some other condition, the final *extension* of Kaufman’s self beyond the evacuated tree in which he is the pith. These two readings meet well: the *end* of the poem, its purpose and resting place, is also the *end* of the poet’s hyper-privacy. Both poet and poem interact in a poetic event that provides the destruction and endurance of both.

But there is much more in these last lines that is difficult to account for. “This is the end, / Which art, that proves my glory has brought me.” As written, the grammar of these lines cannot account for all their words and clauses. Of course we might expect this from Kaufman’s poetry, but the precision and archaism of the verse here draw our attention to its disjointedness. The nested clauses demand to be unraveled, but they become more and more tightly knotted under our treatment. There is one reading that accounts for all words and clauses, with minor modification: “This is the end which art, that proves my glory, has brought me.” Art does two things: proves the poet’s glory and brings the poet’s end. Is the proven glory the end? This is an implication, though it is one we would not expect from Kaufman. Being so clearly important in this poem, we will return to “glory” soon.

But the construction of these lines contains much more than this. “Which art,” standing alone as it does, teases a reading based in its old and grand grammar, magnified, perhaps, in its archaism. The end *exists*, has substance, is, “art.” Then, “that proves my glory has brought me.” When we read “art” as a verb, then “proves” is the other action of the “end.” There is now resolution, and though the grammar is sound, the meaning is wonderfully opaque. Where, or what, has glory brought Kaufman? Perhaps Kaufman is brought his poetic “end” by glory.

“I would die for Poetry.” Kaufman “would,” as we might typically read it, die: an action contingent upon some condition. Kaufman is *willing* to die for poetry; it is essential. But the archaic grammar suggested in our readings of the previous lines leads us to several other readings, which may seem even more germane to the poem. “I would die for Poetry” meaning “I *wish* to die for Poetry.” I *would like to*. And indeed he does: his death, dissolution, expulsion, explosion, are all in service of poetry: as we read earlier poetry is the *end*, the result, and this *end*, naturally enough, is death.

We also read: “I would die *but for* Poetry.” We have seen earlier that Kaufman’s poetry may be the site of a resolution, synthesis, or fundamental opposition of the poles of his dual necessity: death and indestructible existence (or eyes that have no history & never blink, being gone & remaining in the air, rejection & bleeding). This reading, against the previous one, provides the other pole, the continuity opposite the end, that completes the opposition of the poem (this is why I am reluctant to claim that poetry provides resolution: the poem is the thing that establishes the opposition and maintains its necessity on both sides). “I wish to and *do* die by or for poetry, and I also *would* die if it *weren’t* for poetry.” Poetry *is* certainly the end (“the end” is *in* the poem, after all; where else could it be?) and is certainly the continuance (it does not end), and both of these readings are contained in the final line of the poem, woven together in the jumble of Kaufman’s grammar.

But how do we account for glory? We begin with our clearest reading: art proves Kaufman’s glory and brings him his glorified end. But in all other places Kaufman is clear that he does not desire glory, or believe that he possesses it: “If i

can't be an ugly rumor i won't be the good time had by all" and, from "Song of the Broken Giraffe": "Every time they elect me President, I hide in the bathroom."<sup>11</sup> Are we supposed to believe that Kaufman's poetic motivation, or any part of his poetic project whatsoever, is concerned with the achievement of glory?

It is uncertain. We know, however, that Kaufman often writes the glory of other poets in odes. Must we assume that he counts himself among the company of the poets he glorifies? How might Kaufman understand his place in poetry, absent from and in the center of the groups he praises?

Despite what we might expect, our discussion of death, rejection, and erasure provides the perfectly appropriate figure for us to understand Kaufman's "glory." Where we have already read a bit, in "The Poet," Kaufman writes that "Lorca survives in his / poem, woven into the deeps / of life,"<sup>12</sup> strongly evocative of our readings of Kaufman's survival-erasure. And when Kaufman glorifies other poets in his work, their glory is nearly always according to the same phenomenon, the death (but) for poetry we read in "Michelangelo." He writes of Charlie Parker in "A Remembered Beat": "a poet in jazz [...] wore lonely death, / Leaving his breath in a beat."<sup>13</sup> And in an ode to Hart Crane: "They worship you, Crane.... you are enshrined on / suicide altars of pain [...] you are safely dead, but we know, / Crane, you never were, / They live you, Crane..." Kaufman as poet-critic is reading others exactly as we read him. His read poetics, as his written poetics, are likewise based in survival-death, written erasure. And his reading: "They want you, Crane.... stay hidden

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<sup>11</sup> *Solitudes*, 34.

<sup>12</sup> *The Ancient Rain*, 70.

<sup>13</sup> *Solitudes*, 44.

beneath shadowed bookstore tables....”<sup>14</sup> is conducted like his writing: “In order to exist I hide behind stacks of red and blue poems.”<sup>15</sup>

Kaufman’s poetic hiding brings us back to our original problem (how can the poet be blotted out and existent?) from a different angle. While we have read poet and poem to be related as private, interior, we know that Kaufman was a prolific performer of his work. For all his solitary mantric recitation, he frequently read aloud for others, and published his work. Was this a survival technique, or a business practice? Should we believe that Kaufman was disingenuous in his poetic solitude?

David Henderson’s introduction to *Cranial Guitar*, taken mostly from his 1991 radio show in Kaufman’s commemoration, expresses the difficulty of this question, if unwittingly, in language from Allen Ginsberg and himself: “Bob Kaufman was there on the mimeograph machine doing the actual work of putting out *Beatitude*’ [...] Kaufman was really into being a quintessential Beat who cared nothing for publication [...]”<sup>16</sup> These excerpts, of course, could hardly be more contradictory. And much more curiously, we need to believe both accounts. But we cannot rely on biography for our inquiries; we look to his poems. What do they contain of this opposition? What might be the nature of their *blotted* publicity and performance, and how does Kaufman hide behind his public, published poem?

This is most closely related to a question that critics have struggled with, perhaps the central question in Kaufman’s critical history, at times costing the

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<sup>14</sup> *Solitudes*, 16-17.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>16</sup> David Henderson, introduction to *Cranial Guitar: Selected Poems by Bob Kaufman*, (Minneapolis: Coffee House, 1996), 10-11.

omission of all other inquiries: how can we understand Kaufman's "silence?" Kaufman's biographical silence (or near-silence, more accurately) has been the favored fodder of his critics, naturally encouraged by his popular mythology as a shiftless jailbird street poet. A great deal of critical attention has been paid to Kaufman in order to configure his poetic career around the center of his silent decade from 1963-73. Maria Damon (certainly Kaufman's most committed and visible critic) writes that Kaufman's silence is "self-mythologizing and powerful,"<sup>17</sup> Thomas Fisher investigates Kaufman's "silence as a political speech,"<sup>18</sup> and George Fragopoulos treats Kaufman's years of silence as "an attempt to expand the horizons of the lyric."<sup>19</sup> The logic here is that all poets write poetry, and that they are more interesting when they don't.

But whatever expressive capacity might be found in Kaufman's silence is screamed in his *poetry*, which is often conveniently elided in the process, and plenty of which was likely conceived or written during his silent decade. It is already clear that in Kaufman's poetry death, history, subjectivity, and memory are tangled and reconfigured in ways we might not expect – the case is no different for silence, expression, and performance. For this reason it seems to be the case that Kaufman's mythological silence has actually been more legible to critics than his poetry – a delightfully fitting mystery, and a testament to Kaufman's lasting hermeticism. But

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<sup>17</sup> Maria Damon, *The Dark End of the Street: Margins in American Vanguard Poetry* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 42.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas Fisher, "The Audible and the Inaudible: Bob Kaufman and the Politics of Silence," *Babilônia*, Special Edition (2015): 273.

<sup>19</sup> Fragopoulos, George, "Singing the Silent Songs, Enchanting Songs': Bob Kaufman's Aesthetics of Silence," *Journal of Modern Literature* 40.1 (2016): 149.



to pursue our questions of privacy and performance, we continue headlong into the labyrinth, and read parts of “Fragment from Public Secret:”

REBELS, WHAT ARE REBELS, HERE IN THIS LAND OF REBELLION, THIS  
LAND THAT BEGAN WITH REBELLION – ARE THEY THOSE WHOSE ACTIV-  
ITIES CAN OBJECTIVELY BE ABSORBED OR ASSIMILATED INTO THE  
PATTERING TIME, REMEMBER, IT IS NOT IMPORTANT, FOR IN THE  
END, THE REBEL IS TIMELESS [...]

AMERICA, WHO ARE YOUR REBELS, WHAT SHORES HAVE THEY BEEN CAST  
UPON? IS IT BECAUSE YOU HAVE DISCOVERED A USE FOR EVERY-  
THING THAT THEY HAVE FOUND THEIR ONLY RECOURSE IS TO SEEK  
AMONG NOTHING, HOPING TO FIND COMPONENTS WHICH, IN THE  
FINALITIES OF CONSTRUCTION, MIGHT ASSUME THE POSTURES OF  
PRINCIPLES, AND DISCOVERING THE HORROR OF FRUSTRATION, TURN  
TO DEATH AS THE FOUNT OF THE CREATIVE ACT? [...] SEEKERS OF  
THE TRUTH HAVE ALWAYS WAKED EYES, AND ALWAYS WILL, AND IN  
TIME SHALL BE NAKED IN THEIR OWN LIGHT.

HERE IS A REBEL, ONE LARGE, MONSTROUS REBEL, WHO FIRST TEARS  
DOWN HIMSELF, AND SNEAKS LIKE FIREWORKS INTO THE PATHS OF  
OTHERS, HOPING TO EXPLODE, OFTEN SHOWERED, EXISTENT TO THE  
END.<sup>20</sup>

Kaufman’s language in here and throughout the poem serves as a guide to his odd poetic subjectivity: the voice in the third stanza (“here”) is transitory, between “the rebel” and “I.” The word “here” is an identifier both of “the rebel” and the “I” in the poem, separate from itself but pointing to itself, a vocal location without subject. So we notice when Kaufman writes “here is a rebel [...] existent to the end” that it is this “here” that pulls together the rebel and the I while pointing out their separation. The “here” is existent, tears down himself, hopes to explode, in its cohabitation and distance from both the rebel and the I, its referring us to itself. The poet is “here” but

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<sup>20</sup> *The Ancient Rain*, 18.

not identified as a self, a subject that only refers outward, a vocal/focal point with no innerness whatsoever.

“Seekers of the truth have always waked eyes.” Not only is Kaufman taking on a definitively social, perhaps political role, but he is also aligning himself with a social *history* of the truth-seeker and rebel. His role is toward others (their paths and eyes) and his company is with others (past and future). And another reading of this section also corresponds to the sorts of oppositions we have encountered already: “seekers have always-waked eyes” – despite the obscurity of the not-yet-naked seekers, who have nowhere to go from the halls of doom, they cannot blink, like the eyes in “Clap Hands.” In one case we read it as violative, an inability to blink, or even to be a proper subject; and in the other, as fundamental to the illuminative capacity of the rebel (similarly to death being “the fount of the creative act”). It is no accident that in one reading of the phrase we read the other: the seeker of the truth wakes eyes because his eyes are always waked.

Then the poet “sneaks like fireworks into the paths of others, hoping to explode, often showered, existent to the end.” The strangeness of this is evocative of the sort of process we’ve encountered previously, in its opposing “explosion” and “existence,” like “gone” and “in the air,” “I am not a form” and “I am me,” “death” and “existence.” But it points us elsewhere: “like fireworks into the paths of others.”

We might say that this explosion *is* the same as the formlessness, rejection, vaporization (mist-ification?) we have read in other poems, or the “creative act” of death we read earlier in “Fragment.” What, then, are the paths of others? In these other instances Kaufman is privately concerned, interior, silent, and invisible. Others

are denied or hidden, “fake” or “nerveless.” But here it is distinctly part of Kaufman’s design that he *is* heard, read, seen, like fireworks. He needs to wake eyes. But we hear very soon about the pains and impossibilities involved in Kaufman’s formless existence: “It takes so much to be nothing.” How, then, might he be expressed to others, “naked in his own light?” Another impossibility.

Kaufman’s performance, despite this impossibility, is to become naked, bright, expressed, precisely in the act of his explosion. We consider fireworks: oriented in their cause and creation purely toward their end in *explosion*, bright, large, magnificent. Kaufman’s performance, his waking of others’ eyes, takes its form in the firework: it *sneaks*, beyond & underneath notice, dark and surreptitious, and *explodes*, reveals itself, expresses itself violently and largely. It is not one and then the other; Kaufman’s poetic obscurity and poetic performance are equally oriented toward the same performance, his “waking of eyes.” He is not explosive *despite* his sneakiness or vice versa, but rather the two are fully and equally consistent in his poetic performance.

It is worth consideration that Kaufman, yet again, expresses the possibility of his failure: “hoping to explode.” This is similar to the incompleteness of his rejection and formlessness in “Clap Hands,” “Blue Slanted, and “Jail Poem #6,” but its expression is much more subtle. Here, whether or not he succeeds in “exploding,” in waking eyes, he is “existent to the end.”

Under what conditions might such a performance be possible? We look to the poem’s title: “Fragment from Public Secret.” It is patently weird, and tells us that Kaufman is engaged with the same question that we are asking here, caught

between radically private obscurity and public social performance, bound by necessity on both sides.

How might a secret be public? Can the public hold a secret? A “secret” is essentially private, entirely and definitively non-public; “Public Secret” is a proper oxymoron. We should not claim that this opposition is constructed or dealt with in the *same* way as the others we have encountered, but it is useful for us to consider that the death/existence opposition might be related to the secret/public one in some way, that it presents similar problems, moves toward a similar resolution, or similarly resists certain readings.

We return to Kaufman’s language in “Fragment,” not because the title demands answers from the poem, but because the poem itself calls our attention back to its title. Near the beginning Kaufman writes: “in the *end* the rebel is *timeless* [...]” (emphasis mine). The secret *becomes* public, our “public secret” being a state of transition for the “fragment,” the secret whose public-ness is its generative waking of eyes, in time. Or maybe, rather than through the passage of time, through fulfillment of some “end” – timelessness achieved or revealed in the accomplishment of some cause. What might the end be that accomplishes the secret publication?

Kaufman may give us some indication of this, the secret becoming public, or bleeding into the public, not only in the passage of time, but in a sort of secret publication. From language we have already read: “Here is a rebel [...] who first tears down himself, and sneaks like fireworks into the paths others, hoping to explode.” What is at stake in Kaufman’s simile? It is tempting to think that “sneaky fireworks” is an expression of the same oxymoron as “public secret.” But here there

are precise inscriptions of vision and performance. The rebel no longer looks among nothing for the action outside of use, in a private and morbid creative act. We now find use, intention, performance, a *mystery* that might resolve the impossibility of seeking among nothing and waking eyes at the same time. The spectacular death of the stealthy rebel, a *nothing* whose explosion is performed expressly for others, creativity and destruction joined in the sneakiness of the performance.

“Often showered, existent to the end.” “Showered” is a bit capricious here, a characteristically Kaufmanian disruption, but it is possibly adjective to several parts of the stanza. Most clearly it is the image of the firework in its explosion, showered in the paths of others, the act of purifying coincident with the waking of eyes from earlier in the poem. But it is also attached to the rebel, his purification coextensive with his fragmentation.

And finally “existent to the end,” which, on the back of the explosive language of performance and silence that sets it up, seems to undercut all of our readings. Here, again, destruction is attended with survival. But the language leads us elsewhere: “to the end.” To what end? To the goal of the performance, perhaps, the fulfillment of the awakening and purification, existent *toward* an end. Or the rebel is existent to “the end” that we read earlier in the poem, the event of revelation that bridges the secret and the public, that ensures the timelessness of the rebel. The risk here, though, is that the rebel is only existent *until* the end, gone in the waking of

eyes, fading like fireworks after a brilliant fragmentation. Is there indestructibility in destruction?<sup>21</sup>

We might read this “to the end” which closes the third stanza in sharp contrast with the “in the end” from the first. In the first case the timelessness of the rebel is *accomplished* in his end, while in the second case the rebel’s existence is *vulnerable* in its end, maybe. We have a few ways to understand this opposition: perhaps in both cases the “end” is the goal of the rebel, through which his timelessness is ensured and toward which his existence is oriented. Or otherwise the poem genuinely shifts from timelessness to temporality, the end of the poem enacting the end of the rebel. In this case we (impossibly) have it both ways: the end of the poem *ends* the rebel and is his ultimate goal. The rebel-poet ends in the rebellion-poem that is timeless. This depends entirely on the same opposition we are investigating, the relation between erasure and poetry, the distinction between one and the other, and their translations. The “indestructible existence” of the poet is exactly dependent on his destruction in the poem, his timeless finality. We find a mutually imposed risk embedded in the space between poet and poem, the poem depending on and ensuring the death of the poet, the poet’s existence and timelessness depending on his destruction in the poem.

In what ways might the existence-through-destruction that undergirds the relation between poet and poem also be related to our question of secret and public? We look to Kaufman’s language near the end of the poem: “opening on hidden universe [...]” In accessing this “hidden universe” does Kaufman populate a

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<sup>21</sup> “Death and indestructible existence” – from “Walking Parker Home” in *Solitudes*, 5.

“secret public?” The “Fragment” is an artifact of the public whose eyes are opened, a public united by its privacy and secrecy. We might gain further insight in looking at similar language from “Voyagers II”:

[...] poets  
Concealed inside unexploded bodies  
Of defective firecrackers, dreaming  
Secretly of blowing up  
In the face of Time.<sup>22</sup>

We read here that the *poet* is the secret firework, the rebel. This also seems to pull together the secret public rebel and the private poetic performance from “Fragment” in a way that may resolve the problem (that we encounter in Kaufman’s “hiding”) of the poem as both disguise (un-guise?) and display, as an artifact both private and public. There is a poetic realm that is secretly dreamed (what could be more private than this?) and also contains the public (and the political – if we might take “rebel” as an essentially political term). The rebel does not need to act *externally* to the poetic, or extend itself beyond the poetic, but is instead properly contained in the *private* poem, at least in Kaufman’s politics. Again, the poem strains under the weight of its impossibility: the firecrackers are defective, and their explosion is dreamed. But if the public is implicated in the private, or actually contained in the private poem, the defect and the dream do not have the consequence we expect. The poet’s defective dream *is* the proper site of rebellion.

We find this reaffirmed where we have already looked, in “The Poet,” where we read that our poet-poem relation is involved centrally in our question of private

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<sup>22</sup> *Solitudes*, 38.

(secret public) political rebellion: "WHILE THE POET LIVES AUTHORITY DIES. HIS POEM IS FOREVER."<sup>23</sup> On the one hand, the poet is destructive to authority, the definitive ambition of the rebel. And, on the other, this guarantees the lasting existence of the poem, accomplishing the end of the poet through his endlessness. But we read our poet-poem relation more precisely in the word "authority," at once "political authority" and "authorship." This is certainly not to suggest that authorship and political authority are the same to Kaufman, or function the same way in his poetics. But it is clear that Kaufman's poetic rebellion is similarly destructive to poetic authorship and political authority. The poetic act similarly dissolves its own authorship and participates in a secret rebellion that enacts the destruction of authority. And the similarity is no accident: the blotting and destruction of the author is necessarily and centrally involved in the political valence of the poem. In this way our instincts in reading "Fragment" have led, perhaps, to a resolution or progression of our question of performance: the relation between the blotted poet and his public performance is coextensive with the relation between the private poem and the political rebellion.

Indeed it seems, at several points in Kaufman's poetry, that there is a sort of Blakean mythologized political-poetic realm, or an oracular one, that may even be *prior* or foundational to the external political realm. We see that Kaufman *writes* the public secret, writes *to* the public secret, the hidden political.

The best places to look for this transposition (or reclamation to the private and the mysterious) of the political are Kaufman's long prose poems that often

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<sup>23</sup> *The Ancient Rain*, 70.



contained his most urgent political language. He begins “The Ancient Rain,” for example, perhaps his most clearly political work, invoking Crispus Attucks, Lincoln, Grant, the KKK, Nazis, FDR, MLK: “At the illusion world that has come into existence of world that exists secretly [...] All symbols shall return to the realm of the symbolic and reality become the meaning again [...] The Ancient Rain falls from a distant secret sky.”<sup>24</sup>

Kaufman strips all syntactical and punctuative distinctions between “the illusion world that has come into existence” and the “world that exists secretly,” and his prose form removes any other sort of formal distinction between the two. He truly *juxtaposes* the two worlds, confusing the realms of “symbol” and “reality,” leaving the phrases in associative freeplay: for example, we also read an “illusion world” that has *come into* the “existence world,” the symbol becoming *interior* to the real. In this freeplay the locative preposition “at” is shattered, and the poem is placed in a radically indistinct juncture between the poem’s external and hidden worlds. The political and the private collapse into this poetic-prophetic space, this “distant secret sky.”

None of this is simple to realize, as we find also that the *time* and *action* of the political realm exist in a similar confusion. Kaufman begins “Second April”: “anticipated comings, pasts denied, now time to frieze illusionary motion on far imagined walls.”<sup>25</sup> The far political past and the political future are “friezed” (recreated indefinitely, tessellated, also “freezed”) in the “now,” the “illusionary,”

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<sup>24</sup> *The Ancient Rain*, 75.

<sup>25</sup> *Solitudes*, 65.

“imaginary,” and indeed time-less realm.<sup>26</sup> Or, as Kaufman writes in the untitled recursive “reels” of his surreal prose film script on the death of Caryl Chessman<sup>27</sup> that opens *Golden Sardine*:

“Finally alone he unlocks the Acres of Unscarred American Love ..... hidden in the boney caves of his great Mountainous Shaggy Godhead, Across the Green Centuries of his Eyes [...] His ancient Dream pounds with life, long vanished [...] dead in the makeshift gas chambers of suppressed history.”<sup>28</sup>

And, later: “Battering with his monumental hooves he grinds the remains of his injected fear into the dust of multiplied generations, releasing the inhibited future. // Across the layers of centuries stacked in his eyes.” The publicly political death of Chessman is a martyrdom that awakens or reveals “America’s secret deaths,” and the body of Chessman becomes the poetic nexus of American death, waking eyes, “shining us with truth.” By Kaufman’s demonstration, the political is rightly returned to the private, the secret, the hidden, and the politics of particular historical events are actually revealed in “secret death.”

Kaufman finishes the Chessman reels: “OUR VOMITING ASSASSINS KILLED HIM, & DESTROYED THEMSELVES IN THEIR REPUBLICAN-DEMOCRAT HASTE TO EXTINGUISH HIS BURNING.” The killing of Chessman, along with the revelation of “America’s secret deaths,” is coequal with the destruction of the killers themselves. This sort of

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<sup>26</sup> “Timelessness” is rarely named so simply in Kaufman’s poetry. In other poems we find the words “tickless” and “secondless,” clocks are “handless,” and we read about a “remaindered” and “sleeping calendar” that Kaufman “eats.”

<sup>27</sup> This poem series draws our attention to the near-obsessive continuity of Kaufman’s political poems, which often contain the exact same characters and language. In this case, we notice that “Clap Hands, Here Comes the Lindbergh Baby,” which we have read at length already, certainly has to do with the “Little Lindbergh Law,” the famous legal basis for Chessman’s capital punishment.

<sup>28</sup> *Golden Sardine*, 13-15.

cryptic mass-murder-suicide is consistent with the ways Kaufman writes about death in many of his other poems. So we might find that Kaufman's *poetics*, in effecting the same self-opposite "death" that inscribes the political (as with Chessman), becomes the proper realm of the political, performing this exact type of death in the poetic act.

## **“This America’s Own Secret Deaths”**

My writing from here will be organized by a new and different principle from the first chapter. It is useful to consider Kaufman’s work, from beginning to end, as a continuous expression of his poetic individuality, and to bring all his poems together as a single text, or as comparative texts from an isolated, stable poetic subject. But in these next chapters I will read Kaufman’s poems instead in sets according to a reading of Kaufman’s poems in commentary with each other, in relations developed when we read Kaufman as a *poet-critic*: when Kaufman’s work deals with its being poetry or his being a poet, arranging his poems in relation to each other, or to the work of other poets.

The first of these sets is one I have briefly introduced already: the several entangled “reels” of Kaufman’s “horror movie to be shot with eyes” about the very public figure of Caryl Chessman, and the poem directly following these, “Tidal Friction,” Kaufman’s “comments at real movie,” a commentary on the Chessman saga. Chessman, a white robber, kidnapper, and rapist, sentenced to death, seems to be an odd choice for Kaufman’s poem, in which he becomes the last “American Buffalo,” a martyr for Native American genocide. But Kaufman was not alone in his advocacy on Chessman’s behalf: Aldous Huxley, Norman Mailer, Robert Frost, Eleanor Roosevelt, and other public figures advocated for clemency for Chessman, as the “Little Lindbergh Law” that allowed capital punishment for certain kidnapping cases had been overturned (although not retroactively) by the time Chessman went to trial.

What I have read already from these poems has established Kaufman's poetic politics as grounded in poetic myth-making, a secret and personal mode of history and subject. But, insofar as I have discussed it already, this seems insufficient, especially in its application to the tangled and shifty Chessman poems. How can we understand political urgency in Kaufman's mythological setting? And, since many of Kaufman's political poems conclude in some degree with an exhortation toward political action in a recognizable way, what could such political action mean in the secret, mythological politics of Kaufman's poem?

There are compositional considerations, readings of the poem's form and arrangement itself, which attract critical attention. Kaufman's division of the Chessman poem into "Reels" is certainly interesting, and may have real implications for our reading. In the way a typical screenplay might be divided into scenes and acts, Kaufman's poem is labeled "real movie," segmented into its Reels. We would expect Reels of film to be of no real concern for the writer of a script, or the director, or producer of a film, for that matter. Kaufman plays the projector in the booth for this poem, the operator of its presentation. He handles the *material* division of the poem's product and performance, rather than the creative process of its composition. The Chessman saga is a movie "shot with eyes"<sup>1</sup> and shown with verse, produced, arranged, projected by Kaufman.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bob Kaufman, *Golden Sardine* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1967), 9.

<sup>2</sup> This realization of the poem's material form being projected onto a different site (from the reel to the page) is found elsewhere. The end of *Golden Sardine*, a letter to the editor of the San Francisco Chronicle, works on the same principle: the material artifact of the newspaper is produced in the performance and presentation of Kaufman's poem.

And in our reading of the poem we notice that the reels contain varied iterations of the same characters and the same language. So we may read several “takes” of the same scenes, different selections of performance, divided into various presentations of the same movie, even different observing subjects, the cameras as “eyes,” the film “not yet developed or developed already.”<sup>3</sup> Keeping this in mind also informs our reading of the poem, its images and figures, as perhaps types according to mythic or prophetic antitypes, according to the Christian theological typology which Kaufman makes a point to reinforce: “The Dying Buffalo Becomes the Scorned ..... Image of Christ.”<sup>4</sup> A signification, an *image* (or “picture,” “silhouette”) not symbolic but *real*, a re-exposure in the present, like Kaufman’s film: both not-yet developed and already developed. The gravestone according to the poet. And Kaufman’s pun connecting the “Real Movie” to its several “reels” is illuminating: each of the separate reels is the *real* movie, the poem as actual “image,” like Chessman as a type after Christ.

Fortunately for us, Kaufman has done much of the critical work on these poems already. Reel IV of the Chessman myth reworks and re-presents the language and iconography of Reel III, altering certain phrases and their presentations, inviting comparative readings (though in many cases withholding gratification from these efforts). The comparative criticism of these poems is affirmed by the poet in his “Tidal Friction” commentary, which swivels its focus to subjective poetic speech (and reinforces the poems’ core of withheld meaning):

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<sup>3</sup> *Golden Sardine*, 10.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

Remember I have never refused you my own humanness, tho' yours are but nerveless . . . bites, for which I am in you perverse debt, for you have allowed me to taste my blood, red with my own hot living, & it cooled my soul [...] & those know something intellectuals hang around together, & swap commentaries.<sup>5</sup>

This itself may show us how we might comment on myth: the myth is impassive narrative, the comment is subjective speech. The myth has no "I," or too many; the comment is fixed on the "I" as speaker. So, especially in this chapter, I will speak as I, and maintain as a principle of commentary not to "refuse you my humanness." I will do my best to write as a "know something intellectual."

Ahead, and into the words. Reel III begins with Chessman as the "Last American Buffalo," "dying of lonesomeness." And at the beginning of Reel IV, this language is reworked as "onesomeness" – drawing Kaufman together with Chessman, as *Golden Sardine* concludes in "Letter to the Editor:" "The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner is due to the oneliness of the Long Distance Runner."<sup>6</sup> Loneliness in these poems is an attitude of the individual subjective state, the "I" itself. The two cases are different: one expresses the loneliness of extinction, and the other of endurance – but Kaufman is certainly interested in the relation between extinction and endurance. When, for Kaufman, as I wrote in the first chapter, a single subject figures as a speaking individual in the poem, when he writes or dies, forgets or remembers, he exists both extinct and persistent. And one of the most consistent threads in Kaufman's writing as poet-critic (i.e. when his poem is

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<sup>5</sup> *Golden Sardine*, 19.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

poetically thematized) is the co-expression of death and endurance. From where I have already read, in “The Poet:”

THE POET LIVES IN THE  
MIDST OF DEATH  
AND SEEKS THE MYSTERY OF  
LIFE, A STONE REALITY IN THE  
REALM OF SYMBOLS [...]  
HE DIES LIKE LORCA DID,  
YET LORCA SURVIVES IN HIS POEM,  
WOVEN INTO THE DEPTHS OF LIFE [...]  
HE BECOMES THE ENEMY OF AUTHORITY.  
WHILE THE POET LIVES, AUTHORITY DIES.  
HIS POEM IS FOREVER.<sup>7</sup>

The death of the poet is the endurance of the poem, the endurance of the poet. And I read that this poetic death-endurance is precisely the source of the poet’s political potential, its opposition to authority.

But in these poems it is *America* that is realized (here in the sense opposite “symbolized” as we read in “The Poet”), mystified and mythologized in Caryl Chessman, like the Poet is realized in Lorca. So what is America’s relation of death/endurance in the Chessman poem? I defer to another commenter, with whom I can “swap commentaries.” Amiri Baraka placed Kaufman in his America as both “post American”<sup>8</sup> and “Native American,”<sup>9</sup> an odd distinction that complements my reading of the Chessman saga and its expression of Kaufman’s principles of “death and indestructible existence.”

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<sup>7</sup> Kaufman, *The Ancient Rain: Poems 1956-1978*, (New York: New Directions, 1981), 68-70.

<sup>8</sup> Amiri Baraka, *Eulogies* (New York: Marsilio, 1996), 84.

<sup>9</sup> Baraka, 217.



I read Kaufman to be clearly dedicated to the Nativity and Indigeneity of the American Indian. He writes of America's "Indigenous murder cloth," stained in its "Native Baptism." His Chessman remembers "when Indians were red," death and race coequal signs in the presentation of American Nativity. But I also read Baraka's "post-American" Kaufman, and a post-American Chessman, that figures equally in the poem. My word Nativity is an intentionally complex one, if a bit clever, but no doubt present in this sense in Kaufman's own usage. The America typologically realized as Chessman is Native in both the sense of its Indigeneity – its bond to land – and in its Nativity – the connotatively Christic sense of birth and infancy.

Kaufman's relations of death and life inhere in both of these meanings, and each of these relations is inscribed also with Chessman's Christic redemption. The "hushed crucifixions," for instance, contains both death and redemption in its theological signification. But so does the Indigeneity of Kaufman's Native America as realized in Chessman. The native-ness expressly of *place* brings about the death of Native America: "Wild Peace-Pipe Saints, Martyred by their Undying Faithfulness to the caressing Earth."<sup>10</sup> But this Indigeneity, "undying," is also redemptive: "Finally alone he unlocks the Acres of Unscarred American Love ..... hidden in the boney caves of his great Mountainous Shaggy Godhead." The duality inheres also in the American Nativity: "His Iconed Hide decorated forever with the Christmas Bullets of America,"<sup>11</sup> equally Native and extinct, placing Chessman apropos Baraka's Native/Post-American characterization, both redeemed after death and newly born. And the Native (as Indigenous and as infant) redemption-death is redoubled in

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<sup>10</sup> *Golden Sardine*, 15.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 13-14.

Christian Baptism: "Black Banged Familiar Infants, The Native Baptism Stains America's Ragged Soul With Black Water."<sup>12</sup>

The same relations might also be presented distinctly in the poem in the simple understanding of *memory*; in other words, when Chessman "remember[s] when Indians were Red," this mythic memory is always indestructible and extinct, the redness of blood as a sign of death and of life. It may be too easy to say that the extinction of indigenous America is *brought about* through its mythic persistence in the same mythopoetic, mythopolitical sense we read elsewhere, or vice versa. Instead I think *memory* is presented as a medium of the mythopoetic mode, and the act of remembering as perhaps a "illuminating" event. We read the other language of Chessman's mythic memory: "he recalls cherished Memories of his past [...] recalling the Arrows Arc, Flamer the Soft Bull of the Skies."<sup>13</sup>

The word "recall" here is striking and informs our reading. To *call again*, or *name* again. And equally also to *call back*, recant, annul, withdraw. Just as in "Clap Hands," memories themselves are the first to me named again, called back as they are written: "I reject those frozen / injections / of last night's junk / tragedy, / *memory*."<sup>14</sup> In the final Chessman Reels, as in "Clap Hands," memory is recalled as specific images, equally "cherished" and *destructive*: "recalling the Arrows Arc." The relation of death and redemption is reinscribed in memory as in Nativity and crucifixion, the Arrows named and called back, "recalled" in both senses by the poem's erasure.

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<sup>12</sup> *Golden Sardine*, 15.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>14</sup> *The Ancient Rain*, 15.

Memory also links our thematic investments of this chapter to those of my first. Memory as the realm of subject which is “forgotten” in the poem, tragic “injections” forgotten in poetic writing. The palimpsest of the poetic written erasure. My earlier readings developed in “Clap Hands” and “Blue Slanted” seem to be especially salient and at-hand in this more directly mythical and political poem – “Clap Hands” continues, and Kaufman “rejects:” “memory, / blotted survivor / no longer remembers.” The poem is the space of forgetting; its “blots” are also “blotted out.” I think Chessman and America are forgotten in this same sense. This is to say that Chessman and America are, being written into Kaufman’s poem, mythologized, and passed into secrecy. The role of memory is here as it is in the other poems: to recall, to forget, to disperse, and to persist.

But death and indestructible existence, crucifixion and redemption, do not exhaust the subjective peculiarity and mythical potency of Kaufman’s mythic Chessman. In this poem the mythicity and dispersal of Chessman also serves a recognizable political reading. Kaufman explodes and multiplies the Chessman subject by name and by person: Carl Chessman, Carl Long-Distance Chessman (another thread of connection between the Chessman Buffalo and the lonely, only Long-Distance Runner), Chest-man, Carl Ruth, Caryl Melville, Old Left Bank Carlos, Call Chez-Main (French: “at hand”), Carl Darrow, Stonewall Chessman, F. Scott Chessman, etc.

These names operate in the Chessman myth in a way that recalls our reading of the poem’s “reels” and their relation with the Chessman myth, not-yet and already developed *types* after its antitype, just as Chessman is the “image” of Christ. These

many names, too, are typological re-presentations, types after the antitype of Chessman. The public event of Chessman's conviction, the history of the American West, the crucifixion of Christ – these are typological iterations of Kaufman's myth. And F. Scott Fitzgerald, Herman Melville, Babe Ruth, Clarence Darrow are typological iterations of Kaufman's antitype Chessman. Fitzgerald is (a) Chessman, Melville is Chessman, Darrow is Chessman, in the way that Chessman is America, and expressly in the way that Chessman is the "scorned image of Christ." The relation in these significations is not between symbol and real, but rather between *realization* and real.

The earlier *Solitudes Crowded with Loneliness* concludes with a similar gesture with Kaufman's treatment of himself in the various Abomunist papers, which he writes as "BomKauf," or in *Beatitude* magazine, which he writes and edits as "B. Kofman." The name is morphed into its language, the title its contents. And the subject resulting from these recombinations becomes mythically subjective, capable in their "timelessness" of re-figuring, substituting the symbolic (expressly as "name," even, the most essential form of the symbol as opposed to the real) for the real, materially severed (several), multiplied, and dispersed. And the repetition and re-writing of the myth within the Reels themselves reinforces this dispersal: Kaufman's re-writing and re-calling of his language brings them together in the manner of his chimeric Chessmans, as realizations of the myth. This is the manner of the enduring dispersal. For the final two Reels, Kaufman directly writes and rewrites the death of Chessman as the extinction of Indigenous America, dispersed not only in name, but also in number, time, space:

(Reel III)

Finally alone he unlocks the Acres of Unscarred American Love ..... hidden in the boney caves of his great Mountainous Shaggy Godhead, Across the Green Centuries of his Eyes, his Soul [...] illuminates the one hundred million hushed Crucifixions buried in the bloody weave of triumphant Blue [...] MILLIONS OF GENOCIDED CRAZY HORSE PEOPLE [...] CARL CHESSMAN WAS AN AMERICAN BUFFALO FILLED WITH GLISTENING EMBRYOS.<sup>15</sup>

(Reel IV)

he is dying of onesomeness [...] he unlocks the final hoard of raw American love [...] Battering with his monumental hooves he grinds the remains of his injected fear into the dust of multiplied generations, releasing the inhibited future.<sup>16</sup>

Life and death are further presented here in ways that qualify and develop our understanding of Kaufman's mythology, poetics, and politics. In the multiple, mass Christic sacrifice of America and Chessman, this myth and revelation of a hundred million crucifixions, the individual Chessman buffalo and the millions are equally the realization of America, in death and redemption. The sacrificial mythology is recursive and self-containing; one death as the "image" for millions, as redeeming them all, each a contained redemptive sacrifice equal to that of the Buffalo. The lonely and onely Chessman is equally millions of undead and unborn, and equally dispersed across time and geography, "centuries" and "acres."

And the revelation itself, the "illuminating" is the sacrificial act: this is Kaufman's writing of the truth, not of symbol. The histories and myths of

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<sup>15</sup> *Golden Sardine*, 13-14.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

Chessman's death, Christ's crucifixion, and the Old West genocides are all one myth, all real signs, realizations of American death.

Also in these reels what I have been calling "realizations" are often expressly *visual* signs: "dim pictures," "dim silhouettes," "Scorned Image." And as *images* of this death the realizations (Chessman, Buffalo, even Melville, for instance) *become* America itself, the Native America. The image of death becoming the reality itself is reflected and rewritten in "The Poet:"

A STONE REALITY IN THE  
REALM OF SYMBOLS [...]  
THE POET MUST BE A STONE [...]  
WHEN THE POET DIES,  
A STONE IS PLACED ON  
HIS GRAVE, IT IS HIM<sup>17</sup>

The sign (in the sense that a gravestone is the marker, the icon) of *death*, specifically, is or becomes the *real* thing, the realized thing, poetically *opposite* the symbol. The image of death is precisely non-symbolic. The converse should also be noted: the non-realized figures are imageless ("mirror-faced") or invisible ("ghost people"), their visibility as object (mirror) and as subject (ghost) are inverted. This peculiar relation of the poet and his grave is not an isolated idea: in writing "The Poet," Kaufman offers a commentary for the reading of his poetry, for the reading of himself as a poet, just as he reads and critiques Lorca's poem. Kaufman's critical reading of "The Poet" and the "stone reality" that is his grave also returns us to the

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<sup>17</sup> *The Ancient Rain*, 68-70.

relation between the poet and his poem, and I may read the poem, too, as the real image of the poet that marks his death. I read from “Bonsai Poem III”:

Lately, since formulating mystic parables of my own,  
People ask me what do I know all about China--  
And do I think Surrealism will spread to Iowa--  
Or would winning the Pulitzer Prize have saved Chessman,  
When I answer that I am writing the Great American Suicide Note,  
The sniff my clothes and leave.<sup>18</sup>

I read this poem, too, as commentary on Kaufman’s Chessman Reels, insofar as it deals expressly with the themes and figures from the Chessman saga, and is formulated as an *answer* to a *question*, a real *comment* in response to political, aesthetic questions, and a question about redemption from death. This poem calls forth questions, cites Kaufman’s work, and does analytical work to bring the work and the questions together – it is precisely a criticism.

And I think that this last question about Chessman *is*, actually, answered by Kaufman, when we trust our arranged network of Kaufman’s work as poet-critic. Kaufman acknowledges the demand of his own mythic poet-criticism, referring to his writing as “mystic parables.” I read Kaufman’s poem in the mystical sense, in that it defies public relations of subjectivity and knowledge, political, aesthetic, theological, etc. And I also read Kaufman’s poem in the parabolic sense, in that the poem demands and contains commentary, is a realized sign of its truth. The parabolic is the mystical commentary itself. So when reading these poems (the Chessman saga, with “Tidal Friction” and Bonsai Poems III as commentary) in

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<sup>18</sup> *The Ancient Rain*, 39.

definite relations of myth and commentary, I also read the “Great American Suicide Note” as Kaufman’s real poet-critical answer to the question about Chessman’s publicity and redemption, and the exegesis of his “mystic parable.”

There is a lot, of course, to uncover in this. The Suicide Note is a herald, a documentation, and a marker of death. It is real prophecy. It is the mark of both the extinction and the endurance we have read elsewhere. It is in some way the life in death, or *of* death. And in “Tidal Friction” the Suicide Note is also distinctly American:

& the literature  
of your suicide note is the significant  
arithmetic of the remaindered calendar  
that mark the filling of your hole in this  
American place, from which you have  
been gone a truly long time<sup>19</sup>

And suicide is distinctly political:

CARL CHESSMAN WAS AN AMERICAN  
BUFFALO, & OUR VOMITING ASSASINS KILLED HIM, & DESTROYED  
THEMSELVES IN THEIR REPUBLICAN-DEMOCRAT HASTE TO EXTIN-  
GUISH HIS BURNING. COME BY SMALL BROWN SON, TASTE HIS  
BREATH, SHINING US WITH TRUTH.<sup>20</sup>

The crossed wires of death and writing do not imply any sort of stable identification between Kaufman’s poem and the suicide note, or construct any model by which I should try to de-code Kaufman’s “mystic parable,” and I do not intend in any way to put this understanding to the test. I intend instead to add my commentary to Kaufman’s, again to “swap commentaries” with his “answer” from “Bonsai Poem III.”

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<sup>19</sup> *Golden Sardine*, 18-19.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.



I read the Suicide Note as a distinctly written & literary *image* of real death, the realization of death, just like the gravestone of the poet, which becomes the poet himself. The Suicide Note brings together the ideas of death and writing in a way that allows us to read the principle of writing-as-erasure as parallel to America's killing-as-self-destruction. While this might have been expected in some ways, the link is strikingly presented in Kaufman's work, constructed as it is across poems related by myth and commentary, antitype and type, poem and criticism, allowing us in turn to understand each of these various designations according to Kaufman's *whole* mythic poem.

While it might be noted that this is a similar expression to the critical principle I claim to leave behind in this chapter (treating all of Kaufman's work as a continuous aesthetic project from a single creative subject), it is important that my reading here does not operate under that principle. The relations undergirding my readings in this chapter are specifically developed from the understandings of poem and commentary that are presented in Kaufman's work itself. The critical principle is one taken from the object of the criticism itself.

And it strikes me that Kaufman has, in some ways, anticipated my critical readings: my two chapters are necessarily expressions of a similar poetic principle. I read a specific, though difficult, inclination on Kaufman's part to *arrange* his work and its presentation in a way that totally breaks with the arrangement of the public and publication, or any critical arrangement we might expect or intuit. The most vexing (and romantically mystifying) aspect of Kaufman's work and legacy has been the apparent disarray and disorganization of his output, and what has been

understood as the ephemerality of the bulk of his poetry, evaporated into the air of coffee shops, jail cells, and street corners.

Critics consistently respond to these difficulties, the aspects of Kaufman's work which disqualify it from the realm of usual literary criticism, by indulging in the indeterminacy, or lamenting the canonical erasure of Kaufman on this account. Fragopoulous indulges, writing that "Kaufman's life and poetry have a mythic resonance [...] his tragic death after years of drug abuse, mental breakdowns, and living in poverty have all contributed to his growing legend."<sup>21</sup> And Damon laments, noting that the "multiple and conflicting accounts of Kaufman's genealogy, his life story, and other putatively relevant aspects of his life's work" have removed Kaufman from literary-critical landscapes, even those in which "indeterminacy is an intellectual value."<sup>22</sup> Almost universally the critics who write on Kaufman maintain what is understood as a natural or imposed opposition between his work and any sort of criticality or critical reading. There is very rarely any attempt to read the distinct critical poetics of Kaufman's work itself, or any acknowledgment of the need to read Kaufman's mythic *commentary* as such.<sup>23</sup> Amiri Baraka summarizes: "others opportunize around his myth."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> George Fragopoulous, "'Singing the Silent Songs, Enchanting Songs': Bob Kaufman's Aesthetics of Silence," *Journal of Modern Literature* 40, no. 1 (2016): 147-148.

<sup>22</sup> Maria Damon, "Triangulated Desire and Tactical Silences in the Beat Hipscape: Bobs Kaufman and Others," *College Literature* 27, no. 1. (2000): 143.

<sup>23</sup> Lindberg does acknowledge the critical potentials of Kaufman's work: "Without stacking up academic proof or analogues [...] I take Kaufman as a serious poet-critic," but also readily expects that his criticism "is readable in terms of recent Third World, feminist, and/or identity politics," falling short of identifying the mythic and *secret* nature of Kaufman's poetic criticality: Kathryn Lindberg, "Bob Kaufman, Sir Real, and His Revisionary Surrealist Self-Presentation," in *Reading Race*

But Kaufman's work in commenting on his own poem and operating the interchange between public & secret suggest a very present but entirely different sort of organization and arrangement, a secret and mythic critical structure. Reading Kaufman as poet-critic, and his "comments" *as commentary*, we read a critical system as unfamiliar to public critical convention as his political and subjective orientations are to public conventions of politics and subjectivity. The *poem* is the space of the real expression, the realization, of the myth and the commentary equally, both the poem and the criticism.

I would like to develop this reading of Kaufman's poet-criticism, formed in continuity with the typological relations I have read in Kaufman's poems themselves. The relation of the Chessman poem to its commentary is one of "recalling," re-writing. The concurrence of endurance and extinction. So this relation (of poem and commentary) is subject to both the poetic condition of Kaufman's *writing*, in that it carries a reciprocal relation of erasure, and the poetic condition of *memory*, in that it carries the reciprocal relation of forgetting. And Kaufman's commentary being the "Great American Suicide Note" carries the reciprocal relation of extinction and endurance to the mythic political body of America.

I had introduced the relation of the *I*-subject to the mythic poem at the beginning of this chapter as a distinguishing aspect of the relation between commentary and myth. But the commentary is also the *type* after the antitype of the myth, its realization. The commentary is a "take" of the myth after the fashion of

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*in American Poetry: An Area of Act,*" ed. Aldon Lynn Nielsen (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 164.

<sup>24</sup> Baraka, *Eulogies*, 84.

Kaufman's "Reels." So having dealt briefly with the implications of Kaufman's poet-criticism and the relation of commentary and myth, I realize that I, in my project of commentary, should consider the relations at hand in my own writing – Kaufman's critical structure is necessarily a metacritical one.

In extending the typological relation of poem and commentary to my own writing, my work and its goal aim to join the critical realization of Kaufman's own commentary. In this way Kaufman's myth interpellates my own subject and commentary as its typological realizations – the reading and comment become real types after the myth, and my I-subject a type after the mythic subject, a Peter Kaufman as Fitzgerald becomes F. Scott Chessman.



## **“Jazz, (Don’t) Listen To It At Your Own Risk”**

Following my writing in the last chapter on the poem/commentary relation, my project in this one is to proceed with a similar reading, connecting Kaufman’s poems according to his own critical designs, following his own threads of commentary and revision. Without presuming that Kaufman’s commentary structures proceed in the same way, I shift my focus from one major theme of Kaufman’s work to another, from America to jazz.

Jazz has been one of the most convenient and popular aesthetic categories under which critics place Kaufman, the few that have written. Jazz is, of course, a central theme to much of Kaufman’s poetry, but the mythos of Kaufman’s critical disorganization is often located equally in Kaufman’s biographical apocrypha and his reputation as jazz poet. I do not mean to say that Kaufman was not fully “dedicat[ed] to the oral and automatic sources of poetry,”<sup>1</sup> as Raymond Foye asserts, or that we are not indebted to the labor of others in order to be reading Kaufman’s work published in its current form. I mean to construct from Kaufman’s orality and spontaneity a new and distinct critical arrangement, to draw a different conclusion from the apparent disorganization of his poetry. From what many critics read as a life and literary oeuvre that is “haphazardly pieced together from various legends, hearsay, fading memories,”<sup>2</sup> I intend instead to read a *secret* organization,

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<sup>1</sup> Bob Kaufman, *The Ancient Rain* (New York: New Directions, 1971), ix.

<sup>2</sup> Amor Kohli, “Saxophones and Smothered Rage: Bob Kaufman, Jazz and the Quest for Redemption,” *Callaloo* 25, no. 1 (2002): 165.

Kaufman's own "mythic parables" as parables: necessarily interrelated for the purpose of interpretation, or exegesis.

What I read in Kaufman's poetry is a complex and thorough critical connectivity, despite (or even because of) the spontaneity of so much of his work. Kaufman's wife, Eileen, is quoted in an epigraph to Maria Damon's chapter on Kaufman: "You must mention Bob's eidetic memory capacity. It was extraordinary."<sup>3</sup> My reading of several poems from the first chapter, that Kaufman's *memory* is both blotted into the poem and blotted out by the poem, is coupled with this capacity. The fabric of Kaufman's work is held together by memory, and is equally obliterated by it. The structure of Kaufman's literary work is as secret, as private, as his politics, and as "mythic" as his parables.

His *jazz*, too, is secret in this way, its spontaneity also ordered in memory. But while much of Kaufman's jazz thematics are rooted in jazz music, the significance of jazz in Kaufman's poetry is not limited to its spontaneity, its musicality, or even necessarily its status as strictly an aesthetic category. Jazz – Kaufman's jazz – is a poetic, critical, mythical space, and sometimes a mythic actor. Kaufman's jazz provides a basis for Kaufman's politics and serves as one focal point for his mythic history/prophecy, his racial & international politics, and the poet-subject himself.

A series of poems composed and published variously throughout Kaufman's work serves as the perfect field for my concentration in this chapter: "War Memoir," "O-Jazz-O," "O-Jazz-O War Memoir: Jazz, Don't Listen To It At Your Own Risk," and

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<sup>3</sup> Maria Damon, *The Dark End of the Street* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 32.

“War Memoir: Jazz, Don’t Listen To It At Your Own Risk.” Right away it is apparent that in reading these poems we are again engaging with Kaufman as poet-critic in the way I established in the last chapter, a poet who refashions and responds to his own work, each poem as both myth and as commentary, or revision. I recognize in this reciprocal poem/commentary series the same relations I introduced in the last chapter, the series of poems each recalling, remembering, re-inscribing the others, several realizations of the same myth.

And in the titles of these poems we recognize the typological organization of the myth and its real image from the Chessman poems, but with distinct uses and potentials. The typology of the myth in these poems takes the particular form of dispersion and multiplication through *naming*, just as Chessman is refracted in his many typological variants: Carl Darrow, Caryl Melville, etc. The *name* is the *realized* sign for the types of Chessman, not the symbol. So in the “War Memoir” poems, the real sign of *title* is used in a similar typological way. H. William Rice writes:

I propose here a reading of Kaufman’s “War Memoir” poems based on the theoretical context [of “versioning,”] that Kaufman created these poems in the same way that a jazz musician might improvise, playing the run in a slightly different way on any given performance of the piece, recognizing that the piece in question has no fixed form. Every performance is a version.<sup>4</sup>

With the effect of reintegrating this reading with my last chapter, I read Rice’s “versioning” as performance in Reel I of the Chessman poem: “Caul enters the plaza dressed in blinking RED-LIGHTS singing clap hands ..... here comes the

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<sup>4</sup> H. William Rice, “Bob Kaufman and the Limits of Jazz,” *African American Review* 47, nos. 2-3 (2014): 405.



lindberg baby.”<sup>5</sup> Here we recognize the exact title (save an alternate spelling of “Lindbergh”) of Kaufman’s poem “Clap Hands, Here Comes the Lindbergh Baby,” written here as *song*, drawing political, legal critique together with performance, and drawing Kaufman’s poems together in commentary according to Chessman’s political “song.” When Kaufman re-calls “clap hands...” he “sings” it. So under Rice’s critical structure of “versioning,” we also read Kaufman’s own poet-critical structure – one of recalling and performance, even a critical structure of improvisation and spontaneity. “Clap Hands, Here Comes the Lindbergh Baby” acknowledges and denies these same “versioning” structures – it begins: “NO, NOT AGAIN, NOR FOR A FIRST TIME EITHER.”<sup>6</sup> Kaufman at once re-iterates and silences, re-writes and erases, in his poem commentary.

The foundation of the series is the juxtaposition of *war* and *jazz*, a realization which gets us nowhere in reading the poems themselves – the terms and relations of war and jazz are never stable in the poems, often entirely at odds with each other from one reading to the next. Since I am reading these poems distinctly under the structure of versioned commentaries – spontaneous critique as the re-creation and re-calling of myth – it is necessary and right in my reading to read this first version of Kaufman’s poem while also reading the others. It would be contrary to the nature of Kaufman’s poet-critical structure to read the poems as several isolable myths themselves. Kaufman writes in “The Celebrated White-Cap Spelling Bee,” affirming this critical contemporaneity (and suggesting its relation with music in a way we will read again later): “I CHANGE MY MIND AND THE NEW ONE IS OLDER . . . A DRUM

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<sup>5</sup> Kaufman, *Golden Sardine* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1967), 9.

<sup>6</sup> *The Ancient Rain*, 15.

BEATS BEHIND MY RIBS.”<sup>7</sup> Each version, then, I read in and with the others, each one both “parable” and interpretation; productive structures of time, order, and publication are subjected instead to Kaufman’s own *secret* arrangement. So each revision must be read also as a pre-vision, so to speak – each version a prophecy, a revision, and a commentary with the others.

The first version, simply titled “War Memoir,” begins: “Jazz – listen to it at your own risk.”<sup>8</sup> And I bring into my reading two other versions (a shift in realization, in type within, perhaps, the same mythic poem) whose names are: “War Memoir: Jazz, Don’t Listen To It At Your Own Risk” and “O-Jazz-O War Memoir: Jazz, Don’t Listen To It At Your Own Risk.” Two things are immediately at play in a comparative reading. Firstly the language I have been reading (“Jazz: listen to it at your own risk”) has been moved from the first line to the title of the poem, inviting a reading of “recalling) and “re-writing” that is played out at the level of *title*. My inclination to read title similarly to the way I read *name* in the last chapter, as a stage for Kaufman’s typological realization of myth, is anticipated and provided by the versions themselves. The versions are several poem-commentaries of one myth, like the several chimeric Chessmans are types of the real figure.

The other immediate focus of my reading is the modification of the language itself, the negation of the qualified imperative I read from the beginning of “War Memoir.” From “Listen to it at your own risk” to “*Don’t* listen to it at your own risk.” The precarity of *not* listening to jazz is the new and opposite basis for these versions. Listening is a type of not listening, maybe, audibility a version of

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<sup>7</sup> *The Ancient Rain*, 44.

<sup>8</sup> Kaufman, *Solitudes Crowded with Loneliness* (New York: New Directions, 1959), 52.

inaudibility. Or both listening and not listening are real types of our engagement the poem's audibility as poem, both engagements risky. The definite opposites of listening and not-listening are, in any case, joined in a sort of mutual risk. In the new titles Kaufman re-calls his first title, writing it again and *calling it back*, retracting it and inverting its terms. Perhaps, in this sense inaudibility and audibility are related in the way that erasure and writing are related, or death and indestructible existence. The several relations are predicated in part on *memory*, their relations set into poetic oddity by the poem itself, by their being poetic. In being "recalled," the death is revisited and redeemed, the writing is reinscribed and erased, the poem re-written and overwritten, the jazz heard and silenced.

Near the end of this first poem, "War Memoir," Kaufman elaborates on the risks and relations of listening and not listening:

What one-hundred-percent redblooded savage  
Wastes precious time listening to jazz  
With so much important killing to do?

Silence the drums, that we may hear the burning  
Of Japanese in atomic colorcinemascope  
And remember the stereophonic screaming.<sup>9</sup>

Here the risk of listening is double. Listening to jazz distracts the "one-hundred-percent redblooded savage" and the "fittest murderers" alike from the political killings, the "flag-wrapped cremation in bitter lands." And listening to jazz also distracts the readers from "hearing" the death, the listeners constituted in the

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<sup>9</sup> *Solitudes*, 52.

poem's "we." The reader, too, demands the silence of the drums in the poem. In this poem the risk is of listening to jazz, and of not hearing death.

The poem ends in a way that is not reflected in any of the other three: refusing jazz or turning it away, silencing it. In the other three "versions," jazz *acts* at the end of the poem; each poem closes in on jazz as the only voice that matters, in what we might expect to be *audibility* in its most necessary form. It is heard as "bombs;" or it brings life or death. In this first version, though, Kaufman calls for the music to stop, to draw attention to the death, the screams, to observe rather than to act or to play or listen.

But the interceding stanzas of this first version present relations between death and jazz that refuse such a simple reading, and enlist the same distinct & mythic critical structures I have read in my other chapters. I read from *War Memoir*:

God played blues to kill time, all the time.  
Red-waved rivers floated us into life.

(So much laughter, concealed by blood and faith;  
Life is a saxophone played by death.)

Greedy to please, we learned to cry;  
Hungry to live, we learned to die.  
The heart is a sad musician,  
Forever playing the blues.

The blues blow life, as life blows fright;  
Death begins, jazz blows soft in the night,  
Too soft for ears of men whose minds  
Hear only the sound of death, of war,  
Of flagwrapped cremation in bitter lands.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *Solitudes*, 52.

The analogical relations in the middle these stanzas are almost mathematical, like the “significant arithmetic” of Kaufman’s American Suicide Note. But they directly address, or seem to address, the specific relation of life and death in Kaufman’s jazz, so I feel a demand to reread and examine them, almost to decode the jazz, to understand my risk.

“God played blues,” and the heart “forever play[s] the blues”; in turn “the blues blow life,” which in turn “blows fright.” Death, too, plays life as a “saxophone.” Jazz accompanies the beginning of death, but is “too soft for ears of men whose minds hear only the sounds of death.” Those who hear only death cannot hear jazz, but the poem silences the jazz so *we* may hear death.

It cannot be untangled, or decoded. What we have already read, the call to “silence the drums, that we may hear the burning,” is irreconcilable here – here jazz blows “too soft for ears of men whose minds hear only the sound of death.” The opposite risks of *listening* and *not listening* to jazz are *both* actually present in just this first poem; the subsequent commentary versions, the inversion of the poems’ titles, are already present here. And it is *life* that is caught in this cross-fire, so to speak. The blues “blow life,” which in turn “is the saxophone played by death.” In the mutual obliteration and inaudibility of both death and jazz, life is silenced and re-silenced, once as instrument and once as music.

This idea, this reciprocal drowning-out, is really strange, and a bit familiar. The self-destruction of Chessman’s “extinguishers” comes to mind, as well as Parker’s jazz in its “death and indestructible existence.” In “War Memoir” it seems

that there is an ultimate or fundamental silence brought about by or under the overabundance of sound, not despite it. The realm of the symbolic, the public, is noisy, and in its own sense drowns out and conceals death; but the *real*, the secret and mythic, is silent. From “The Ancient Rain”: “The Ancient Rain falls silently and secretly. The Ancient Rain leaves mysteries that remain, and no man can solve [...] The music of the Ancient Rain is heard everywhere [...] silent, humming raindrops of the Ancient Rain.”<sup>1112</sup> The silence of the Ancient Rain, the silence of jazz, is certainly one of those mysteries, and though Kaufman can’t solve it, he listens to its silence and seeks it out:

THE POET LIVES IN THE  
MIDST OF DEATH  
AND SEEKS THE MYSTERY OF  
LIFE, A STONE REALITY IN THE  
REALM OF SYMBOLS  
[...]  
WHAT IS REAL  
IS THE PIT OF BONES HE COMES  
FROM<sup>13</sup>

Kaufman the Poet seeks after the unsolvable mystery, the silence heard everywhere, and in this he seeks his origin, “the pit of bones he comes from.” This is a surprisingly definite reading of the impossible relation of death and jazz: jazz is the silence of the *real*, the stone mystery of poetic origin and death, “the death that

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<sup>11</sup> *The Ancient Rain*, 76-78.

<sup>12</sup> In the poem’s “world that exists secretly,” the mystery of the Ancient Rain’s music is also secretly political: “The South cannot hear it. The South hears the Ku Klux Klan, until the bell drowns them out. The Ancient Rain is falling.” And the pun on “drowning” is a great example of Kaufman’s subtle humor, even in his most grave prophetic writing: the silent Ancient Rain “drowns out” the Klan as both sound and as mythic rain, a silent flood.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 68-69.

some cannot see," "heard everywhere," but not by all. And the silence in jazz, like the Ancient Rain, drowns out the noise. Kaufman writes: "When Parker, a poet in jazz, gave [...] His music, his life [...] Our poet wore lonely death, Leaving his breath in a beat."<sup>14</sup> Parker is a poet like Kaufman, seeking "the mystery of life." He leaves "his breath in a beat," just as Kaufman spits "breath mists of introspections" so that he remains "in the air."<sup>15</sup> But what do they, the Poets, seek in the "mystery of life"?

How do they seek the stone reality in the realm of symbols, or listen to the silence in the music heard everywhere?

I read from Kaufman's letter to the editor of the San Francisco Chronicle, which closes *Golden Sardine*, immediately following "O-Jazz-O" and "War Memoir: Jazz, Don't Listen To It At Your Own Risk:"

Men die, as all men come to know, sooner or later, at any rate either way,  
men die. On that all men can depend.

//

[...] there is a silent beat in between the drums.

That silent beat makes the drumbeat, it makes the drum, it makes the beat. Without it there is no drum, no beat. It is not the beat played by who is beating the drum. His is a noisy loud one, the silent beat is beaten by who is not beating on the drum, his silent beat drowns out all the noise, it comes before and after every beat, you hear it in between, its sound is

Bob Kaufman, Poet<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *Solitudes*, 44.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>16</sup> *Golden Sardine*, 80-81.

The drums silenced in “War Memoir” take on a new beat here. To silence the drums is to play the silent beat, to go “beatween.” To silence the drum is to drown out the noise. And when Kaufman silences the poem’s drum in “War Memoir” “that we may hear the burning [...] and remember the stereophonic screaming,” the first of these things (hearing) becomes for us like the second (remembering) and joins audibility to our readings of memory.

It is of some use for me to suggest that silence and hearing are to each other what forgetting and memory are to each other. I may connect the one relation, the new one, to the one I have read and discussed earlier. My earlier reading suggested that the poem is the place in which memory is also forgetting – when we “remember the stereophonic screaming” we also blot it out, silence it.

But this is not necessarily the extent of the connected reading; the *poem* is the place, to some degree, of Kaufman’s “mystery of life,” the place where we listen to Kaufman’s silent jazz, at our own risk. The close of Kaufman’s letter shows a real and very clever poetic arrangement along these lines: the silent beat, the beatween, both before and after, is a space between the poem and its writer, the blank of the letter before its final address. *And* it is also “Bob Kaufman,” and “Poet,” the silence beatween taking its form in the signature, a formal aspect of the letter which is in the poem, but is not poetry. In the letter’s fitting close Kaufman also slyly follows up his uncertainty from “Afterwards, They Shall Dance”:

Whether I am a poet or not, I use fifty dollars’ worth  
of air every day, cool.  
In order to exist I hide behind stacks of red and blue poems



And open little sensuous parasols, singing the nail-in-  
the-foot song, drinking cool beatitudes.<sup>17</sup>

Kaufman is “Poet” in the silent beat, but an ambivalent subject in the “nail-in-the-foot song.” The subject is a *poet in silence* – the silence of the beatween, the space on the page, is constitutive of Kaufman as poet. In the poem’s silence, the silence *in* (and) *between* the drumbeat, the poem’s beat does *not* “hide” its poet. The poet is *present* in the poem of silence, and “drowns out all the noise,” while the poet *hides* behind the poem of song – maybe a poet, maybe not.

And Kaufman frequently introduces the call to silence as constitutive of jazz itself, and not only in his figure as poet. His silence as poet is the silence of jazz. I read from other poems:

Unseen Wings of jazz,  
Flapping, flapping,  
Carry me off, carry me off.  
Dirt of a world covers me,  
My secret heart,  
Beating with unheard jazz.

Thin melody ropes  
Entwine my neck  
Hanging [...]

-“Tequila Jazz”<sup>18</sup>

Billie Holiday [...] will go on living in wrappers of jazz silence forever, loved.  
-“Afterwards, They Shall Dance”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *Solitudes*, 7.

<sup>18</sup> *Golden Sardine*, 40.

These bits of language plucked from their poems accomplish little for our reading of jazz and silence, but they establish a sort of pattern: the silence of Kaufman's jazz in "War Memoir" and his Letter to the Editor is not an oddity. It is a real and significant character of Kaufman's work as jazz poet. And I do not suggest that "jazz poetry" is Kaufman's "silent jazz," which could produce the boring and distinctly un-Kaufmanian point that Letters to Editors don't make sound, or that Billie Holiday was dead in 1965. What I suggest is that Kaufman's jazz is silent in the same way that Parker's jazz *music* is silent, that silence inheres in Charlie Parker's jazz as much as Kaufman's. The "silent beat between the drums" is part of *jazz*, is its beat, and drowns out all its noise. We read about Kaufman's memorial and mythical Charlie Parker in the prose poem "Hawk Lawker: Chorus":

[...] an unmistakable call to arms, to jazz, to him, as others put down their horns in silent thanks that he had come, as the drums had promised he would come, come to lead into the unpromised land, littered with pains, odored of death, come to lead [...] some of us are more familiar with the intermissions [...] and few of us have withstood the silence, wondering from where it came. Some of us have to know.<sup>20</sup>

Kaufman wonders at the origin of the jazz silence – he "has to know." And we also read another, simply concrete example of jazz silence, with a specific attitude. The silence of *others* who listen to Parker as he "sighs" the notes that come to him is a jazz silence. The silence of awe and gratitude in listening may be the same silence

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<sup>19</sup> *Solitudes*, 6.

<sup>20</sup> Kaufman, *Cranial Guitar: Selected Poems by Bob Kaufman* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 1996), 145.

whose origin Kaufman “has to know,” their own noise drowned out by gratitude, the silent jazz of listening. This is reinforced by some low-profile puns from earlier in the poem: “sounds smacking into his eardrums [...] causing him to finger his case and peer into doorways for that big hidden jazz womb.”<sup>21</sup> The “drums” that foretold to coming of the Messianic Parker are also the eardrums that received the call to jazz, and the eardrums of the listeners. So to “silence the drums” is to *listen* to the jazz silence, to hear the “beat in between the drums.”<sup>22</sup>

Related, too are the “intermissions” with which some listeners are “more familiar.” This word, “familiar,” is an important one, for jazz and for death. On one hand we read its colloquial meaning: recognizable, accustomed. In proximity of expectation and comfort: the intermissions are known and comfortable to some. But “familiar” is also “familial,” related as family, by the poem’s “blood,” even. Familial relation is essential in Kaufman’s jazz, and especially to jazz and silence as origin. Kaufman’s “umbilical jazz” in “O-Jazz-O” is also “My father’s sound, / My mother’s sound,” and “is life.”

“Or perhaps,” Kaufman writes in “O-Jazz-O”: “In memory, / A long lost bloody cross.”<sup>23</sup> In all these very “familiar” relations we read Kaufman’s “hidden jazz womb” together with Chessman’s buffalo, “filled with glistening embryos.” Jazz, too, is both a nativity and an extinction, its life and its death – like the life and death of

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<sup>21</sup> *Cranial Guitar*, 144.

<sup>22</sup> We read the silent beat also as the sign of life, the heartbeat: “My secret heart, / Beating with unheard jazz.” And from “The Celebrated White-Cap Spelling Bee”: “A DRUM BEATS BEHIND MY RIBS.”

<sup>23</sup> It might be noted here and in other places that the cross, even Chessman’s “image of Christ,” perhaps, is also part of a racially interpretable myth. Kaufman writes in “Benediction”: America I forgive you . . . I forgive you / Nailing black Jesus to an imported cross.” (*Solitudes*, 9)

Chessman “filled with glistening embryos,” of America in its “Native Baptism,” of the poet “BORN TO DIE”<sup>24</sup> – co-constituted “*in memory*.”

The comparative adverb here – “*more* familiar” – is also attractive to several readings: a rare group of listeners, into which the poem’s reader is interpellated as “us,” is more familiar with the jazz silences in *between* the sound than the sound itself, or: this same group, the poem’s “we,” is more familiar with the jazz silences in between the sound than are the other listeners.

This first reading aligns with what we have read from Kaufman elsewhere: there are some, it seems, who listen for the silent beat, the beatween. There are those who “silence the drums,” those who in listening to silence can drown out the noise and can hear the concealed deaths. And this is a poetic-critical gesture on Kaufman’s part as well, as Kaufman writes in “The Ancient Rain”: “I see the death some cannot see, because I am a poet spread-eagled on this bone of the world.”<sup>25</sup> From here Kaufman’s language leads us reciprocally back to silence, in “I AM A CAMERA”: “THE POET NAILED ON THE HARD BONE OF THIS WORLD, HIS SOUL DEDICATED TO SILENCE [...] HIS DEATH IS A SAVING GRACE.”<sup>26</sup> The jazz silence, the beats’ intermission, is the poet’s prophetic and political recourse and the dedication of his soul. And the death that the poet, in his silence, is able to see is a “saving grace,” like Chessman’s death in Kaufman’s movie “shot with eyes,” which we also read in the poem’s title: “I AM A CAMERA.” The death enacted and observed (“I see the death...”), enacted *in* its observation in the poem, is also redemptive.

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<sup>24</sup> *The Ancient Rain*, 69.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

And the winnowing-down of the jazz audience in this excerpt (from “some” to “few” to another “some”) develops and intensifies this second reading, that the poet is “more familiar” with the jazz’s silence than others are. The population of those who recognize these silences contains the smaller population of those who withstand them, which in turn contains those who are committed to them, who have to know them. In the several strata of jazz listeners we read the several degrees of poetic death: there are those “too busy to hear a simple sound,” there are some who “crawl back in time” to “hear a familiar sound,” and there are those, like Kaufman, who “have to know,” who “scream but one awesome question: does *death exist*?”<sup>27</sup> Kaufman asks Camus and Parker, equally secret Messiahs of jazz – Parker who leads as the drums prophesied and Camus whose “anticipation of recaptured seasons” is accomplished in his “internal crucifixion.” “Men die, as all men come to know,” but Kaufman sees “the death that some cannot see.”

But these questions introduce another prominent complication common to these jazz poems, and especially the War Memoir versions. The reader and poet are involved in any reading of these poems in the “we” subject, the subject-collective created in the poem’s language and mythologized like Chessman and Parker, mythologized *with* them. But Kaufman’s subjects are not only his readers in the poem. In the final two War Memorial versions the most immediately legible aspect of Kaufman’s commentary is an unelaborated “they,” written opposite the poem’s “we,” the opposition inconsistent and complicated. As a summary:

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<sup>27</sup> *Solitudes*, 47.

While jazz blew in the night  
 Suddenly they were too busy to hear a simple sound  
 They were busy shoving mud in men's mouths,  
 [...] But even the fittest murderers must rest  
 So they sat down in our blood-soaked garments,  
 And listened to jazz  
     lost, steeped in all our death dreams  
 They were shocked at the sound of life, long gone from our own  
 They were indignant at the whistling, thinking, singing, beating, swinging,  
 They wept for it, hugged, kissed it, loved it, joined it, we drank it,  
 [...] When guiltily we crawl back in time, reaching away from ourselves  
 They hear a familiar sound,  
 Jazz, scratching, digging, blueing, swinging jazz,  
 And listen,  
 And feel, & die.<sup>28</sup>

-O-JAZZ-O War Memoir: Jazz, Don't Listen To It  
 At Your Own Risk

While Jazz blew in the night  
 Suddenly we were too busy to hear a sound  
 We were busy shoving mud in men's mouths,  
 [...] But even the fittest murderers must rest  
 So we sat down on our blood-soaked garments,  
 And listened to Jazz  
     lost, steeped in all our dreams  
 We were shocked at the sound of life, long gone from our own  
 We were indignant at the whistling, thinking, singing, beating, swinging  
 Living sound, which mocked us, but let us feel sweet life again  
 We wept for it, hugged, kissed it, loved it, joined it, we drank it,  
 [...] When guiltily we crawl back in time, reaching away from ourselves  
 We hear a familiar sound,  
 Jazz, scratching, digging, blueing, swinging jazz,  
 And we listen  
 And we feel  
 And live.<sup>29</sup>

-War Memoir:  
 Jazz, Don't Listen To It At Your Own Risk

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<sup>28</sup> *Golden Sardine*, 78-79.

<sup>29</sup> *The Ancient Rain*, 32-33.

Kaufman's commentary is impossible to miss in a comparative reading of these versions. When "they" become "we," life becomes death. Listening to jazz can cause either redemption or death, or perhaps both. The difference is subjecthood: the "we" as subject is redeemed, "they" are killed. The jazz "let us feel sweet life again."

But Kaufman's versioning is not simply an operation of word-replacement. I read the conspicuous remainders, the language that is not inverted from one version to the other: "*our* blood-soaked garments"; "*our* [death] dreams"; "*we* crawl back in time, *reaching away from ourselves*" (emphasis mine). What belongs always to the listener, the reader, the poem – what is unambiguously *ours* – is blood, death, dream, the ecstatic "reaching away from ourselves."

We can look to some other poems in order to read relations of subject and non-subject, dreams, blood, and death, inside of and away from the self, and identify the relation of "we" and "they" in the War Memoir versions. Kaufman writes in "Tidal Friction": "you have allowed me to taste my own blood, red with my own hot living, & it cooled my soul."<sup>30</sup> The blood, like jazz, allows the poet to "taste sweet life again." This joins jazz to the poem in yet another way, as Kaufman writes in "The Poet": "[...] HE IS BORN TO DIE. THE BLOOD OF THE POET MUST FLOW IN HIS POEM." The poet's *blood*, as "the reality of the poem," joins the poet and poem in death and life, death and *nativity*, enacting the poetic fact that the poet is "born to die."

Jazz and *dream*, too, are related in Kaufman's poem – the dream involves death and life in a similar way. I read from the end of "Clap Hands": "Sometimes a

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<sup>30</sup> *Cranial Guitar*, 19.

sacred dream / is wrapped in a scarf, / circling an anonymous neck, / hung on a hook.”<sup>31</sup> Just as in “Tequila Jazz”: “This melody ropes / entwine my neck / hanging”<sup>32</sup> – the poem’s “sacred dream” is jazz’s “death dream.” Both “Bob Kaufman, Poet” and “Parker, a poet in jazz,” “TURN TO DEATH AS THE FOUNT OF THE CREATIVE ACT”<sup>33</sup> – the poem and the jazz both equally death and *creation*, (in both senses of genesis and nativity, origin and birth) – at once “In the beginning,” the “hidden jazz womb,” and the “long lost bloody cross.”<sup>34</sup>

In much the same way as memory,<sup>35</sup> the poem, and jazz function, Kaufman’s “reaching away from ourselves” also joins death and life in strange but perhaps expected ways. I read from “Unanimity Has Been Achieved, Not a Dot Less for Its Accidentalness”: “Sometimes in extravagant moments of shock of unrehearsed curiosity, I crawl outside myself [...] until I begin to feel my own strangeness; shyly I give up the ghost and go back inside.”<sup>36</sup> Here Kaufman expresses the experience of “reaching away from himself” from the War Memoir versions, “shocked,” perhaps, “by the sound of life” – his “own strangeness.” And the act of re-entering the self is rendered in the idiom “give up the ghost,” a perfectly polyvalent expression for Kaufman’s usage. The poet returns to the body and self, “giving up” the bodiless/selfless “ghost” existence, and also returning to *death*, “giving up the

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<sup>31</sup> *The Ancient Rain*, 15.

<sup>32</sup> *Cranial Guitar*, 40.

<sup>33</sup> *The Ancient Rain*, 18.

<sup>34</sup> Kaufman rearranges the terms of death, jazz, and birth in other ways. From “Second April”: “did the mother die of jazz.” (*Solitudes*, 68.)

<sup>35</sup> The title of these poems are important in my reading of memory, too: they are “memoirs,” an account of life in memory. Kaufman also wrote “Small Memoriam For Myself”: a memoir, one might think, written after death, a memory of death.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.



ghost.” Kaufman reinforces this in “Celestial Hobo”: “For every remembered dream / There are twenty nighttime lifetimes [...] Zombie existences become existence.”<sup>1</sup> The “remembered dream” joins life and death in “zombie existences,” the condition, as we have read, of both the “memory” and the “dream.”

So in these readings jazz and the poem, we reach “away from ourselves” and enact the death involved in this ecstasis. The ecstatic jazz moves the poem from the “we” to the “they,” away from the “I,” like in “Jail Poem 7”: “I am not me.”<sup>2</sup> Jazz is both extinct persistence (“Jail Poem 6”: “I must make [my soul] go on, hard like jazz”) and original birth (“umbilical jazz”). In all its continuities and fractures, the poetic voice of the War Memoir versions “seeks the mystery of life,” the “hidden jazz womb,” this silence of jazz, “wondering from where it came.” And Kaufman’s poem, we read, is a silent jazz, like jazz music: just as Parker leaves “his breath in a beat,” Kaufman spits “breath mists of introspection, bits of me/ so that when I am gone, I shall be in the air.”

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<sup>1</sup> *Solitudes*, 7.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

**all we are is, all we are is, air we are in a hole in space.**  
– “Second April”<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 72.



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