

Bob Kaufman and Urban Pastoral

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Bob Kaufman is known as the silent beat, the American Rimbaud, or as a street poet whose jazz-enthused rhythms enlivened San Francisco's North Beach. He published only a few broadsides and three slender volumes of poetry in his lifetime, while falling silent for long years during which his poetic reputation faltered. Critics such as Maria Damon and Aldon Lynn Nielsen have done much to rehabilitate Kaufman's reputation as a jazz poet and to untangle the web of myth with which he surrounded his life. Still, the picture of Bob Kaufman that emerges from Barbara Christian's 1972 essay, "Whatever Happened to Bob Kaufman," remains largely intact today: he is a relentless critic of an increasingly conformist America, a forerunner of the radical Black poetry of the 1960s, and a writer dedicated to "the sacredness of jazz" (29).

Looking at Christian's essay we find her time and again reading Kaufman's poetry in relation to the cities in which he lived. She describes the Manhattan's Lower East Side as filled with "its newly arrived exiles, Bowery drunks, disenfranchised citizens [and] crazy niggers," as a place that "exploded with color," as "a haven for the dreamer," "as a no-man's land." I agree with Christian that Kaufman is a poet of the urban fringe, though I do not wish to relegate him to the urban fringe or to confine him in a Beat ghetto. Instead, I contend that Kaufman's poetry investigates an American urban environment that is in the process of "dualizing," that is becoming spatially polarized along class lines, while becoming increasingly media-dense and riven by ethnic and racial divisions. Urbanists such as Saskia Sassen and Janet Abu-Lughod have shown how such polarization is integral to the creation of contemporary American cities, especially

American global cities in which a management class accrues social goods such as wealth and education and adequate housing, while the precariat struggles to provide the basics for themselves and their families. Kaufman's poetry refuses to be contained in what Loïc Wacquant calls "territories of relegation," instead, his writing opens up the city as a space of circulation not dominated by exchange-value and not controlled by the police.

Kaufman's poetry is thoroughly urban. The title of his first book, *Solitudes Crowded with Loneliness*, evokes an atmosphere of alienation and anomie that would be familiar to readers of Georg Simmel's "The Metropolis and Mental Life." Where for Simmel, writing in 1903, the modern metropolis was relatively new and the impact of urbanization on consciousness only beginning to be explored in close detail, by the time Kaufman writes in the late 1950s cities have exploded across the terrain into larger, megalopolitan forms. Like Simmel, Kaufman was a keen observer of urban life and his poetry articulates with a surrealist precision akin to his contemporaries the Situationists' ideological and cultural faultlines in urban space. Kaufman's poetry moves well beyond the locodescriptive to the critical, where that means, to quote Loïc Wacquant, pursuing an "epistemological and social critique by questioning, in a continuous, active, and radical manner, both established forms of thought and established forms of collective life" (97). The city is the instance and the symbol of collective life, comparable only to language in Lewis Mumford's estimation, and older, as Deyan Sudjic notes in *Endless City*, than the modern nation state. Kaufman's urban pastoral poetry does not simply describe city dwelling or depict colorful denizens of the urban scene; rather, his poetry presents the complexity of the social production of urban space.

The poems in which Kaufman presents urban space as a social production belong to a literary mode called urban pastoral. The urban pastoral mode brings traditional pastoral's oppositions between nature and culture, simplicity and artifice, country and city to bear on a changing disposition of space in which cities are increasingly dominant. Pastoral is traditionally urban mode, as Henry Weinfield and Frank Kermode have argued, but the cities in which pastoral came into existence, Theocritus's Alexandria and Virgil's Rome are far different from the sprawling London and Paris of the nineteenth century or the factory cities of Manchester or Pittsburgh to say nothing of the megalopolis of the Boston-New York-Washington, D.C. seaboard described in Jean Gottman's 1961 *Megalopolis*, which put the term into everyday usage. My approach is to historicize pastoral's modal oppositions, attending to the change in urban form and the organization of urban space as closely as possible. The historicity of the city and the country as distinct spaces and in mutual relationship is integral to my understanding of urban pastoral.

Critics such as Terence Diggory and Timothy Gray have recently discussed, respectively, Allen Ginsberg's poetry and New York School poets in urban pastoral terms. Diggory traces Ginsberg's urban pastoral to Blake, while a 2006 book, *Blake and the City* by Jennifer Michael, explores the *Songs of Innocence and Experience* in urban pastoral terms. Urban pastoral's English roots reach back through William Wordsworth's "Book Seven" of *The Prelude* and such sonnets as "Steamboats, Viaducts, and Railways," to Oliver Goldsmith's 1770 *The Deserted Village* or George Crabbe's 1785 *The Village*, while Baudelaire's poetic account of Parisian modernity also needs to be added to urban pastoral's genealogy

Unsurprisingly, Kaufman's own poetry cites Baudelaire directly. In "Afterwards, They Shall Dance," Kaufman laments the passing of Max Bodenheim, Dylan Thomas, Billie Holliday, and Edgar Allen Poe, all artists compromised by alcohol or drug abuse, all of whom lived variously on the urban fringe. Beyond being an act of poetic self-representation, the poem offers complex images of urban life. In the poem, "Afterwards, They Shall Dance," Kaufman writes, "In the city of St. Francis they have taken down the statue of St. Francis." The monument's removal suggests an urban vacuity, an empty core, a meaningless nominalism. Billie Holiday, a few lines later,

Got lost on the subway and stayed there
forever,
Raised little peace-of-mind gardens in the out of the way
stations,
And will go on living in wrappers of jazz silence forever,
loved. (6)

While early English urban pastoral traced the rural displacements and the growth of cities brought about by the push of enclosure and the pull of urban industrialization, Kaufman's urban pastoral occurs within an already urbanized environment. In Kaufman's cities, displacement is a condition of internal exile and the alienating effects of the mass media. Were he a poet only of resistance, he would offer scant hope for an alternative, and his poetry would descend into cynicism, as for example one can see in the work of the underappreciated Fenton Johnson. There is a sense in which Kaufman's poems produce the opening in the urban fabric that they desire: Billie Holliday will continue to go on creating "little peace-of-mind gardens" forever, opening pockets of freedom off of the

established circulatory network. Under the subway, the song, Kaufman suggests, anticipating French students who would later insist, “sous les pavés, la plage.”

The pastoral oppositions between nature and culture and past and present are supplemented in my work by that between individual and multitude. Urban pastoral takes place in city environments in which the presence of the crowd is always palpable, as Walter Benjamin said of Baudelaire’s poetry. Kaufman’s famous predilection for anonymity is interesting in this regard. In Kaufman’s poetry, urban crowds occasionally appear, but more importantly, urban space is revealed as the product of a suppressed collective history. Kaufman presents such a history through his own genealogical self-fashioning, which Maria Damon has discussed so well. Kaufman’s poem, “To My Son Parker, Asleep in the Next Room,” traces a global itinerary for his son’s birthright of freedom, a birthright not yet legally attained in the United States at the time.

Kaufman depicts in his moving benediction a foundational hybridity: his son is the inheritor of the collective results of collective artifice, whether such artifice is sculptural or architectural, or found in sacral, civic monuments or language. Kaufman writes,

On this shore, we shall raise our monuments of stones,
of wood, of mud, of color, of labor, of belief, of being,
of life, of live, of self, of man expressed
in self-determined compliance, or willful revolt,
secure in this avowed truth, that no man is our master,
nor can any ever be, at any time in time to come. (49)

The poem's historical scope is an amplification of that found in Langston Hughes's 1921 "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" in which a vast historical panorama is geographically laid out. The hybridity Kaufman presents in "To My Son Parker, Asleep in the Next Room," articulates an opposition between past and present integral to the pastoral mode, and it ends with a determination to raise "on this shore," the far shore of the Middle Passage, the banks of Hughes's rivers, a new form of collective life.

Urban pastoral's inherent focus on the tensions between the culturally productive oppositions noted above produces a body of literature that generates an urban ontology of poetry. To cite Kaufman's fine-tuned, city poem, "East Fifth Street (N.Y.)":

Twisting brass, key of G, tenement stoned,
Singing Jacob's song, with Caribbe emphasis.

Flinging the curls of infant rabbis, gently,
Into the glowing East Side night.

Esther's hand, in Malinche's clasped,
Traps the fly of evening forever.

Ancient log-rolling caps of Caribbe waves
Splashing crowded harbors of endless steps.

Angry, fire-eyed children clutch transient winds,
Singing gypsy songs, love me now, love me now.

The echoes return, riding the voice of the river,
As time cries out, on the skin of an African drum.

The city is more than a representative backdrop for gritty lyricism, because Kaufman's poem offers a consciousness wholly at home in a city that gathers into itself elements of a temporally and spatially extended world. Such an urban pastoral as this asserts a de facto cultural hybridity as integral to the scene in which dramas of historical and cultural displacement are enacted in a touching gesture of personal union. You will not find any shepherds in this urban pastoral, though you will find song (whose?) registering emotions of loss, yearning, anger, love, and hope that create an affective archive of the street. The echoes of another time linger, though what they call to memory remains unsaid, perhaps unsayable.

By the time Kaufman was writing *Solitudes Crowded with Loneliness* or *The Golden Sardine* the opposition between city and country could no longer be maintained with the same distinction as that between an ancient circummural town and its cultivated hinterland. The city has enfolded much of the countryside within itself, while spreading out via lines of communication such as rail, highway, telephone, radio, and television networks across the continent. American cities had themselves become historical spaces, whose history was legible in its architecture, streets, and subterranean strata. The city had also become a decentered space of circulation, what Melvin Webber called in 1964 a "non-place urban realm." As Reyner Banham put it in his charming 1959 essay, "City as Scrambled Egg," urban form no longer maintained any clear core/periphery structure. Within the increasing pace and scope of urban circulation, the police come to occupy a

particularly important place. Jacques Rancière describes the police function as the promotion of continuous movement. In *Au Bords du Politique* he writes

The police are not the law that interpellates the individual (the “hey, you there” of Louis Althusser) unless we confuse the law with religious subjection. The police are above all a certitude about what is there, or rather, what is not there: ‘Move along, there’s nothing to see.’ The police say there is nothing to see, nothing happening, nothing to be done but to keep moving, circulating; they say that the space of circulation is nothing but the space of circulation. (cited in Ross 22)

Kristin Ross cites the passage above in her discussion of May 1968’s cultural importance. She pursues Rancière’s insight further, “The ‘police’ then for Rancière, are less concerned with repression than with a more basic function: that of constituting what is or is not perceivable, determining what can or cannot be seen, dividing what can be heard from what cannot” (23). The modernist cities of America, globalizing and dualizing, were increasingly being structured by police forces, in the larger, aesthetic sense Rancière and Ross mean, and in creation of neighborhoods and entire urban populations increasingly subject to police surveillance. While Kaufman’s legendary problems with the San Francisco and New York Police Departments are relevant here (he was arrested more than 30 times in one year in San Francisco), it is his poetry that represents the most serious challenge to the cities in which he found himself.

In “Jail Poems” he writes,

In a universe of cells—who is not in jail? Jailers.

In a world of hospitals—who is not sick? Doctors.

A golden sardine is swimming in my head.

Oh we know some things, man, about some things.

Like jazz and jails and God.

Saturday is a good day to go to jail.

In 1969, three years before Barbara Christian published her essay on Kaufman in *Black World*, Arnold Adoff¹ published a small gem of an anthology, *City in All Directions*, dedicated to the students to whom he had taught poetry: “for all my city students,” and to the memory of Malcolm X. Just below the dedications, Adoff added an epigraph, “Cities should be built on one side of the street,” taken from “Jail Poems.” Adoff’s preface clarifies the convergence of pedagogy, radical politics, and poetry with a disarming sincerity: “My students have asked for poems that were about themselves, and about their city. They wanted to see their world through the eyes of men and women who were like them, who spoke a language they could recognize, or who had walked down the streets they knew and had a special feeling about them” (xi). Adoff’s response to his students shows how potent a poem can be in shaping the urban imaginary and how easily political, educational, and experiential aspects of daily life mingle in poetry. The late 1960s students Adoff was teaching in New York did indeed find “city in all directions” even as poetry helped them to discover the city itself.

Kaufman’s epigraph suggests a strange urbanism in which the city is only half-itself, but fundamentally it asks that cities be open places, offering distance for the observation of and reflection on the built environment, where the built environment is what Manfredo Tafuri called “congealed ideology.” Kaufman puts the city’s other, the non-built environment—and here images of Central Park and Golden Gate Park

necessarily come to mind, though both are as fabricated as any city block of apartment buildings—into direct contact with the street. Imagine the views in such a one-sided city. Ironically, Kaufman wrote this while sitting in a San Francisco jail cell in 1959, where the view was doubtless less pleasantly green. The poem’s observational distance was wholly imaginary at the moment of its writing, just as the conformist ideology of McCarthy-era San Francisco was palpably physical. The imagination of the view is a counter to the ideological constraint to which Kaufman was being subjected. Against police surveillance and the enforcing of conformist norms of behavior, Kaufman offers a city from which one could step outside of a policeman’s line of sight. In short, Bob Kaufman’s urban pastoral poetry takes the reader out of what might be called the police conception of the city into a space of reflection or intellectual circulation not dominated by exchange-value.

Notes

1. Adoff’s anthology includes Kaufman’s poem, “Battle Report,” which ends with the lines, “Attack: the sound of jazz.// The city falls.” It is the carceral city that Kaufman’s poetry destroys, inverting the story of Jericho by infiltrating the city with jazz.

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