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The choices I made between 1960 and 1970 would determine how I would spend the next fifty years. My introduction to intellectual life came through an off campus group of black intellectuals, which included the poet Lucille Clifton. I also made the best of my years at the pre SUNY University of Buffalo, where the curriculum was limited, narrowly, to the works of Europeans.

Nevertheless, I was attracted to the works of Joyce, Yeats, and Pound. Yeats’s cultural nationalism; Pound’s multiculturalism. In fact, Pound’s example might fit one version of post modernism. That of expanding the experiments of the modernists. In a letter, Pound refers to the Nigerian god of thunder. Having studied Yoruba religion, I can identify that entity as Shango. Richard Wright wrote Haiku in English. Having studied Japanese, I have written a couple of Haiku and a song in Japanese. Another example of an artist extending the experiments of a modernist. Duke Ellington wrote “The Far East Suite.” In Anthony Brown’s version of Ellington’s piece performed by Brown’s Asian American Orchestra, authentic instruments of the region are used.

My first fictional effort was imitative of Joyce, T. S. Eliot, and Nathanael West, who introduced me to collage making in fiction (Eliot in poetry). Especially, West’s *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* (1931). I was also attracted to his critique of American society in *A Cool Million* (1934) and the worship of celebrity in *The Day of the Locust* (1939). I was also influenced by a book entitled *The Tower and the Abyss* (1957), a work about discontinuity, written by Erich Kahler and translated by W. S. Merwin.

For me Yeats’s writings were useful. The Celtic Revival seemed a reliable response to a nation under occupation. A way to preserve yet modernize the old ways and ward off assimilation. Later, in New York, I was to learn that the idea of blacks as members of a separate nation had been kicking around since the 1920s. The Celtic Revival led me to something I called “Neo HooDooism,” which was a primitive attempt to use a non-Colonial Neo African source for my work. A response to the cultural occupation of the black nation by those who desire to drive the arts of minorities to extinction or cooptation in the name of assimilation.

Yet, a traveling show, based upon my Neo HooDoo manifesto, published in *The Los Angeles Free Press* in nineteen sixty nine, showed the reach of Neo HooDooism, whose roots lay in Nigeria. The show, sponsored by Houston’s Menil Collection, not only included works by Hispanic and black authors but a piece by John Cage based on the Zen philosophy. As one Brazilian temple mother put it when attacked by a Catholic bishop, “All roads lead to god,” but as a writer, living in Buffalo, writing for a newspaper, all roads led to New York. I found a group of fearless writers, who, unlike the old days, were not seeking sponsorship.

Before the 1960s, black writers attracted white readers by being recruited by a sponsor. The sponsors keep changing. In the 1930s and ’40s some got their start by writing for the Communist Party. Currently, white feminists have the power in publishing and academia to influence trends in black literature, which has led to what critic C. Leigh McInnis calls the black boogeyman books in which saintly do-no-wrong women are surrounded by cruel and heartless men. What at one time were called melodramas. Toni Morrison, bell hooks, J. J. Phillips have commented about the power of white feminists, who, with their buying power, can decide which tokens might advance. They’ve been censoring me since the early 80s. **Ms. hooks even writes that white feminists told her that in order to get over she had to write for them.

But in the 1960s, the younger generation of black New York writers weren’t concerned with wooing white readers or serving a white constituency. With printing techniques that were becoming less expensive, black writers were able to publish their work using new formats. I joined them in 1962. Meeting Malcolm X and listening to Miles Davis and reading about Ted Joans’s readings in coffee shops and also the prodding of Dave Sharpe, a Buffalo poet, who admired my work, led me to New York.

Coming in contact with the Umbra workshop in 1963 gave my writing some kick. Before that I was writing in an overwrought busy imitative and pretentious manner. By the time I submitted part of my novel, *The Free-Lance Pallbearers* (1967), to Gilbert Sorrentino, then editor of Grove Press, he commented on its lack of clutter.

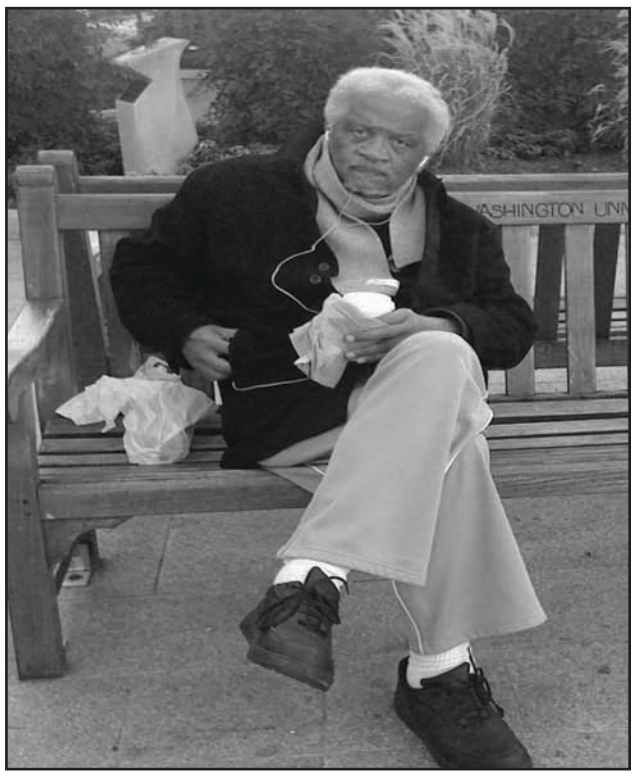
The *Pallbearer’s* mixing and sampling of different cultures created a novel that Sarah Blackburn of *The Nation* described as “ripping the establishment to pieces.” The best review appeared in *Liberator* magazine and was written by the late Toni Cade Bambara. In a comment about Newark writing, Carrie Stetler was on the right track when she called it a Newark novel. During my twenties, I managed a newspaper in Newark, New Jersey. It was called *Advance*. (It became the model for *The East Village Other* that was founded by the late Walter Bowart and me, and which I named). The novel began as a realistic treatment of Newark corruption but in succeeding drafts became more akin to the Science Fiction genre. In a letter to his editor, science fiction writer Jose Farmer said he was going to nominate it for the Nebula Award.

In 1977, the late Ron Sukenick and I conceived of* American Book Review *on a plane returning from Paris.

It was impossible to write a realistic novel in the East Village where you were surrounded by cutting edge musicians like Cecil Taylor, Albert Ayler, Sun Ra, poets like Calvin Hernton, Lorenzo Thomas, and painters like Joe Overstreet, Jack Whitten, Al Loving. New York provided members of a younger generation the chance to hobnob with members of the establishment. I arrived in New York in 1962. In 1964, I was reading on the same program with Allen Ginsberg and Amiri Baraka at Columbia University.

This was an example of how I moved between black cultural nationalists and counter culturalists. My collaboration with both led to the creation of new ways of delivering the arts. Walter Bowart, a painter who was a bartender at Stanley’s, and I founded *The East Village Other*. I named it. My collaborations with the white avant garde continued. In 1977, the late Ron Sukenick and I conceived of *American Book Review* on a plane returning from Paris. He wanted to call it *The National Book Review*. I preferred *American*. I remember it vividly because one of the plane’s engines caught fire. We didn’t understand what the pilot was saying and asked Ray Federman, who was sitting in the seat front of us, to translate. Very matter of factly, Federman said, “He says the engine is on fire and we’re returning to Paris.” Ron and I, who were having a good time drinking wine and talking, were shook. But I remember Federman’s calm in announcing the problem. I guess when your family is wiped out in the Holocaust, nothing fazes you. Ron called me later and said I’d have to put up six thousand dollars to become a partner. I didn’t have that kind of money.

Uptown critics made Amiri Baraka leader of the downtown Black Bohemia, but he, like Langston Hughes, encouraged the writers belonging to the younger generation. New York is where I developed my writing chops. Umbra broke up because of a clash between nationalists and integrationists, a New York based rift between the black and white left that might have begun even before Claude McKay traveled to the Kremlin in 1922 and complained about “White Chauvinism.” We also clashed with the owner of a coffee house called Le Metro. Paranoid about black male poets showing up to read at his coffee shop, he hired plain clothed security guards. One of them attacked Tom Dent, who was one of the founders of Umbra. I went to his aide and got punched.



Ishmael Reed

Walter Lowenfels was reading that night. We left the cafe, but midway home, I turned around and went back. I told Walter if he continued to read, I’d never speak to him again. He quit. The cafe emptied out. The late Paul Blackburn and I began a search for a new site. Rev. Michaels agreed to our holding readings at his church. That was the beginning of *The Saint Mark’s Poetry workshop*.

In 1964, I met Judson Church dancer and choreographer Carla Blank, who was introduced to me by the late poet, N. H. Pritchard, whom I had brought into Umbra. This was the beginning of my interest in writers and artists from different cultures. She was raised in a household that accommodated international visitors, and when I met her, she was in touch with the downtown Japanese avant garde. One of them, Isamu Kawai, would provide the author’s photograph for my first novel, *The Free-Lance Pallbearers*. Carla was collaborating with the Japanese dancer Suzushi Hanayagi. Their work was revived in 2009 as a result of a collaboration between Carla and Robert Wilson. Carla and Suzushi had fused dance traditions from both the east and west.

In 1967, Carla and I left New York on a high. My book would be published in October of that year and Carla had received a rousing reception for her collaboration with Suzushi Hanayagi on a work called “The Wall Street Journal,” one of the early anti war statements. I had arrived in New York, broke, but by the time I left I’d met Langston Hughes, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Robert Lowell, and attended a party at Norman Mailer’s home. From time to time, Carla and I would chat with Andy Warhol and Gerard Malanga in Max’s Kansas City.

For my second novel, *Yellow Back Radio Broke Down* (1969), I studied Haitian Religion, the HooDoo culture of New Orleans, and created the term Gumbo for a style of literature that would assemble materials from disparate sources and somehow making them stick. Painter Joe Overstreet opened the door for me. I asked him to identify the geometric designs in a painting of his. He identified them as Ver Vers.

In 1969, I began to apply my interest in multicultural literature. Doubleday gave me a contract

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to assemble an anthology of black writers. Instead, I included Victor Hernández Cruz and Frank Chin, whose work I had read in a newspaper called *The Great Speckled Bird* while teaching a class at the University of Washington at Seattle. At the book party held for the book, Japanese and Chinese writers who were unknown to each other met. This would be the beginning of the Asian American Renaissance.

We returned for one summer in 1970. We occupied an apartment located in a brownstone on St. Mark's Place. W. H. Auden was our nextdoor neighbor. He lived in an apartment building whose tenant at one time was Trotsky.

Our apartment was the scene of a stream of international visitors. Filmmaker Brian De Palma and painter Larry Rivers stopped by, but also black nationalist critics Addison Gayle, Jr., and Sarah Fabio. That was my last stretch of time in New York and my final collaboration with the counterculture in the form of an album called *The Other*. It included work by The Velvet Underground, Marion Brown, Tuli Kupferberg, Andy Warhol, Allen Ginsberg, Ed Sanders, Gerard Malanga. I read from *The Free-Lance Pallbearers*. In 2013 the CD and album were issued to commemorate the 50th anniversary of its release. I was also listed as three of the counterculture's favorite writers in the Woodstock official Program. I was exhausted by the town that put me on the map. I say that if I had remained there I would have perished from an overdose of affection. While *The Free-Lance Pallbearers* received little notice, my western, *Yellow Back Radio Broke Down*, got me some attention from Hollywood. Bernardette Mayer wrote a very poetic film script based upon the novel, and her backer, Michael Dayan, nephew of the general, proposed a large sum of money, but I held out for black filmmaker Ivan Dixon, who, in partnership with Quincy Jones, expressed interest. At the contract stage, Jones backed out. According to the late actor, D'urville Martin, Richard Pryor was set to do a film based upon the novel, but instead took it to the producers of *Blazing Saddles* (1974). So I got no picture at all. The most unusual bid came from Chuck Barris of *The Gong Show*. He flew me to Hollywood, put me up in the Beverly Hills hotel, yet didn't discuss the novel. Later, he confessed to being a C.I.A. assassin.

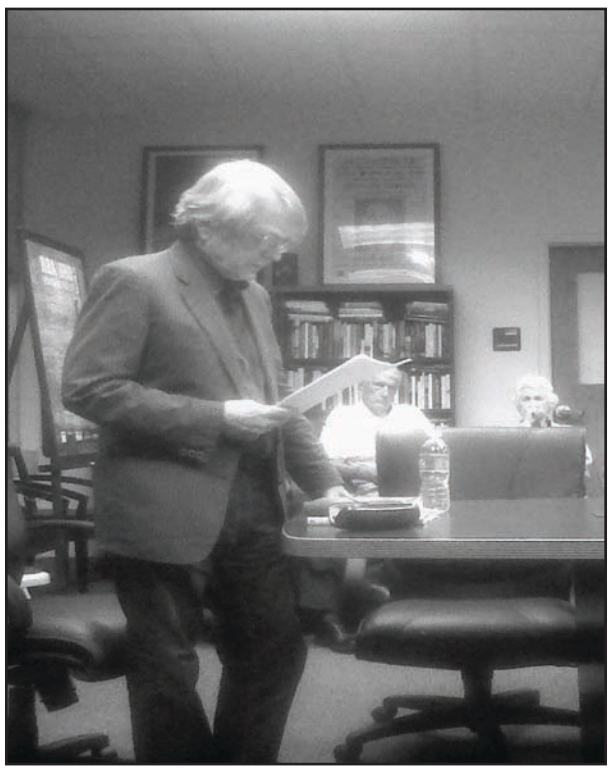
And so even though *Pallbearers* is still in print, it was overlooked. But, because the late professor and poet Thomas Parkinson reviewed the book on KPFA radio in Berkeley, it was *Pallbearers* that got me a thirty-five year teaching job at the University of California at Berkeley.

I took what I learned in New York and applied it to the West, where I founded the *Before Columbus Foundation* and PEN Oakland. I made some foolish unforced errors between 1960 and the 1970. I could blame it on youth. But among my wisest decisions were to arrive in New York and to leave New York.

Ishmael Reed is the author of over twenty titles including the acclaimed novel Mumbo Jumbo *(1972), as well as essays, plays and poetry. Titles include:* The Free-Lance Pallbearers *(1967), The* Last Days of Louisiana Red *(1974),* Yellow Back Radio Broke Down *(1969),* Japanese by Spring *(1993), and* Juice! *(2010).*

The '60s at 50

Robert Coover



Robert Coover

As a conceit, the graying of a decade makes a certain whimsical sense when speaking of the 1960s, for it was a decade dominated by the very young, now not so young, and our perceptions of the decade have probably aged along with them. Authors who began to flourish at that time, however, were not for the most part themselves baby boomers, as that relatively affluent postwar generation got named and marketed. Rather, they were people who had known the Great Depression and a testing World War, only at the end of which were most of the young people of the '60s born. These writers had grown up intellectually in the era of relativity, the uncertainty principle, civilization & its insoluble discontents, ever-expanding knowledge about inner and outer space, theological skepticism, existentialism and other forms of philosophical pessimism, but they had also seen the rise of religious fanaticism and the violent clash of ideologies; the banalization of American life; continued racial, class, and gender oppression and conflict; the invention and dismaying use of nuclear weapons; gangster ethics; and—right on into and through the glorious globalizing '60s—ceaseless human horror stories.

The dominant narrative forms promulgated by the knowledge and entertainment industry and their academic champions seemed to many of us inadequate for the task of confronting this new, often baffling and disconcertingly irrational world. They were forms that tended, even in opposition, to defend the status quo simply by prolonging it structurally. They were profitable to the industry and were called mainstream literature, but they were not mainstream.

Literature's mainstream is not a river that flows between fixed banks, but one that must be cut. It changes course and moves in different directions from decade to decade, century to century. It follows gravity for the most part, but sometimes needs individual inventiveness, not to back up and stagnate. When Cervantes wrote *Don Quixote* (1605), it was avant-garde, but he was actually, as it turned out, carving the mainstream's new directions. Which is the true meaning of avant-garde. When I think of that generation of innovative writers who emerged in the 1960s, I think of them as momentarily disruptive and multi-voiced benders of the mainstream's course, while those who stayed in the traditional flow are now seen to have been paddling about in the backwaters, no matter how gracefully or urgently.

Thus, when I launched forth in the late '50s, early '60s, I felt that if I wanted to do something meaningful in literature, I had to help cut the mainstream, not live in the backwaters of convention. But I did not set out to be "experimental;" I set out

Literature's mainstream is not a river that flows between fixed banks, but one that must be cut.

to find the inner essence of narrative art, and discover if I could be the next bend in the river. I thought of myself as a realist, as taught by the likes of Beckett and Kafka. At first I supposed that, except for a few ancient models, I was a lone explorer, but I quickly discovered other contemporaries in many different countries and cultures engaged in similar quests, as well as a few from the past I hadn't noticed before. The often self-conscious redirecting of the mainstream naturally meant a certain amount of "metafiction," which is to say, fiction thinking about what it is doing as it does it, taking all of the world's previous fictions into itself and playing with them self-reflectively. It is not a term that fully describes the '60's new fiction, but it is part of it, just as it was long ago part of the birth of the novel (Cervantes was a classic metafictionist).

In the previous decade, I had become engaged with the many tribal myths—religious, patriotic, literary, erotic, popular, etc.—that environed us. These were stories dreamt up by others and in whose dreams—often infantile and savage—we were living out our spellbound lives, in the same way that as writers we were laboring inside establishment forms designed by others. The lingering tribal myths and the stifling literary dogmas seemed to be part of the same constraining package. I had some scholarly pretensions for a short time, but critiquing this dreamtime stuff from the outside did not disturb the nightmare or chase the phantoms. It seemed better to get inside the stories themselves and disrupt them at the core. It was also more fun.

The making of art always has something to do with play; with me, more than something. There may be "meanings," reactions to worldly events, the satirizing of social mores, explorations of a field of ideas, and so on, but these are sidebar effects (one lives in one's time) of the essential play. The disruption of form as exhibited in *Pricksongs* (1969) was inspired in part by a desire for literary renewal (see the dedication to Cervantes), but also it was also for fun (see the dedication to Cervantes). I recognize that this matter of play versus realism may seem contradictory and probably is, though it doesn't feel that way when writing. To be playful is not to ignore substance, and that substance belongs to the world, even if sometimes only to the world of art itself. I think this applies equally to all the playfully innovative writers of the '60s across the globe. And to the young of the '60s as well, graybeards though they've become.

One thing the writers of the '60s shared with their younger audience and with the new generation of writers that emerged from it during the latter part of the century was the culture of the printed book. The roots of the playful anarchy of the young of the '60s lay in books like *The Cat in the Hat* (1957) and *Where the Wild Things Are* (1963) and in print-inspired movies like *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) or the Disney films, not in computer games or social media. But last of their kind. By the end of the millennium, the digital world had overwhelmed all the traditional art forms, and print itself, displaced by the flexible processing of word, sound, and image, was near to extinction. Fiction wasn't, but its mainstream was shifting course again.

Robert Coover's many works of fiction include The Origin of the Brunists *(1966),* The Universal Baseball Association, J. Henry Waugh, Prop. *(1968),* The Public Burning *(1977), and* Pinocchio in Venice *(1991). He is professor of Literary Arts at Brown University. His most recent novel,* The Brunist Day of Wrath *(2014), will be reviewed in the next issue of* ABR.