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Komunyakaa, Yusef.

Callaloo, Volume 28, Number 3, Summer 2005, pp. 521-530 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: 10.1353/cal.2005.0136

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A CONVERSATION WITH YUSEF KOMUNYAKAA

by G. F. Mitrano

1. Childhood and Apprenticeship

MENA MITRANO: Memories of your childhood in Bogalusa, Louisiana, often crop up in your poetry. In your well-known "Venus's-flytraps," the child protagonist at one point wonders why "the music in [his] head" makes him scared. I wanted to ask you about the connection between that child and the poet you grew up to be. What is that "music in [the] head"? What made it so overwhelming for the child, and what makes the music—if this is still the case—overwhelming for you?

YUSEF KOMUNYAKAA: Well, I think of the music as a point of departure, the moment of awareness. And perhaps music is also the sounds of life. If one thinks about laughter, how it can shift and drift into cries—cries of pain, of pleasure. So, I'm thinking about music played on instruments as well as the music of life. I did listen to music growing up. It was always through the radio, at a distance—the surprise happens inside this immense distance. So, there are different kinds of music I am addressing.

MITRANO: In that poem, particularly, music is such a powerful metaphor because the child is trying to patch up and balance different sets of things, different worlds: the whispering of adults, which he cannot totally decipher, and the facts, the music of the natural world. Music as it returns, if I'm not mistaken, in "Rhythm Method": the pulse, the basic throbbing of a natural law.

KOMUNYAKAA: Right. A lyrical insistence. A music that defines itself, says what *it* is.

MITRANO: One of my favorite poems is "My Father's Love Letters." Your father comes back home from the mill; he is in his carpenter's apron bulged with nails and he is transfigured, it seems to me, into a model for the writer. He is laboring over simple words, focusing on wooing back his reader—your mother. The poem strikes me as the masculine version of Alice Walker's "mother's garden" or Paul Marshall's "poets in the kitchen." In other words, it stages—in the best sense of the word—a scene of apprenticeship in which a parent or an ancestor who sometimes can only sign his name, nevertheless becomes the young writer's mentor and first teacher. That seems to happen in your poem. As he stands there, "redeemed by what he tried to say," the father transmits to the child a core knowledge about language. The achieve-

ment of the poem to me lies in its capacity to preserve the power of this transmission despite the violence of the father, which is very clear in the poem. Is your father—was he—a mentor to you? How much of his world of labor has made its way into your philosophy of composition?

KOMUNYAKAA: Growing up, I don't think I was actually conscious of that influence from my father. But in retrospect, as a matter of fact, years after writing the poem, I realized that yes, as an untutored mentor, his precise ways of looking at the world and his techniques as a carpenter were instructive. I think the first thing I remember him building was a birdhouse for me. It was a replica of a larger house, everything in place and so fine-tuned. I think he taught me something about revision: how to go back. If something didn't work for him, he would dismember it and approach it again. Maybe that's how I learned to return to a poem and look at it in a different way, to tear it apart.

MITRANO: This is a wonderful way of talking about revision: this idea of taking the experience of labor and then making it work for the composition on the page.

KOMUNYAKAA: Also, when I think about my father, though, I think he was ashamed of not having been educated, so he used physical labor to measure himself against the ones who, particularly, had been to college, for instance, and came back to Bogalusa as teachers. He built for himself three houses. I think he began to measure himself in material things, to at least make himself feel that he had achieved something in his life.

2. *History*

MITRANO: You trust words. That is clear to me when in some poems you make words paint things…

KOMUNYAKAA: Yes, sometimes I wish I were a painter. I love art. Giacometti, Beauford Delaney, Bourgeois, Bearden—artists have influenced my care for imagery.

MITRANO: I was struck by "The Whistle": the men capping their thermoses and switching off Loretta Lynn, the blue jays and redbirds, your father in overalls wading through the field of goldenrod and mustard weeds, his lunch of "red beans & rice / with ham hocks & cornbread. / Lemonade & peach jello." Words are good enough to convey a sense of place, of location, and a sense of the culture in which that place is drenched, for better or for worse. Words are good enough to describe rituals. In the same poem, after the 5 o'clock whistle the men go home and the women wait for them, setting the table with flowered oilcloth. But there is anger boiling under this rich canvas of which "The Whistle" is only one example. In that particular poem the anger is conveyed by the image of your father caressing a .38 on the seat of a pickup. Now,

if words are good enough to describe—almost painterly—a sense of place and culture, do you trust them equally when it comes to writing about conflict and violence?

KOMUNYAKAA: I suppose we have to trust words. Think about laws or principles of ethics relying on verbal symbols, think about sacred texts, think about prayers and curses executed through language. One of my rituals growing up in Bogalusa was the Church, and I remember "the Word made Flesh." This phrase stuck with me, foremost in my psyche. So, I suppose we have to think about language as tangible, that we can trust language when it is very concrete, the names of things. That was very important from early on. Not to name things in order to own or control them, but to name things in order to understand them and learn how those elements fit into one's life.

I remember early on when I was about five, six, seven, going out to play in the woods. I didn't want to know that a tree was a tree; I wanted to know what kind of tree it was, and how there were differences, even in the leaves, in the texture of the bark and so on. That's how I began to name things as well as the scientific names. Sometimes in rural Louisiana there might be two or three names for a given object, and one has more tonal value than the other. I do think that in trying to understand conflict and violence language has power. Now, I'm thinking of that poem by Claude McKay, "If We Must Die." The poem was written in 1919, of course right after the First World War. I think the poem is about the brutality visited upon black Americans after soldiers returned from the First World War. But it is ironic that Churchill recites "If We Must Die" to the British people during the Second World War. I don't know if he credits McKay, but I do know it has power: "If we must die, let it not be like hogs / Hunted and penned in an inglorious poet, / While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs. / Making their mock at our accursed lot. / If we must die—oh, let us nobly die, / So that our precious blood may not be shed / In vain; then even the monsters we defy / Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!" That's powerful language. And it is interesting that this is a sonnet, whereas usually we think of sonnets as poems about love, nature, or metaphysical inquiry. But this is a different take on the form; it is a protest sonnet. I think what Churchill realized was that he could trust the language to deliver—not just to the masses—the passion of determination to stand firm against the Germans.

MITRANO: You mentioned Claude McKay's poem on war. You wrote your own sequence of poems about war, about the Vietnam War. You were in Vietnam; you wrote for *Stars and Stripes.* If there was an inkling of history and violence in "The Whistle," in your acclaimed collection *Dien Cai Dau* these themes, which are acknowledged as *your* themes somehow, take on national proportions. It is as if we could finally get down and talk about the political without the power of words—the dazzling materiality of words—getting in the way. And yet I am very struck by the extent to which you engage a very political matter such as the war in Vietnam through the filter of intimacy and sexuality. For example, in "Tu Do Street" issues of war and race are almost drowned in a quiet nonargumentative interiority, with a Vietnamese woman's body that is kissed by both black and white soldiers who, in kissing the same woman, breathe each other's breath. So, is the body—female, foreigner, and perhaps,

from the reader's point of view, exotic—the most capable cultural historian? What is this body saying?

KOMUNYAKAA: Well, in a certain sense, that is a moment of humanization because there's conflict not only out in the field, there's also conflict back in the rear areas where the soldiers should be getting along together as fellow citizens who have put their lives on the line. But they are divided by race and the culture of social apartheid in America. They brought it across the sea with them. And, yes, they are divided within their collective psyche, but brought together, without them being conscious of it, through this nameless person, this lady of the night. They relied on her to keep them human.

I went back to Vietnam in 1990, and I remember a Viet Cong commando saying that oftentimes missions were made easier because of the women, the information they collected. That was quite revealing and quite frightening at the same time.

MITRANO: So, what would the women do?

KOMUNYAKAA: They provided information to the Viet Cong and NVA [North Vietnamese Army]. Troop movement, intelligence, et cetera. But also, I think that some lasting relationships were established as well, even though there was a tussle in the middle of the minds and bodies of many American GIs. How could one say the word love—and I think some did—and the next day aim guns at the same people? This isn't the first war where Americans were divided. In fact, race has entered every military conflict we've been involved: the American Revolution, the so-called Indian Wars, the War of 1812, the Civil War, World War One and World War Two, the Korean Conflict and the Vietnam War. I don't know about future wars, but I won't be surprised if race isn't at least a part of the psychological character of such conflicts. When considering our history, we can look at a single incident out of many: during World War One when American black soldiers were fighting in Europe, General "Blackjack" Pershing issued a statement to young French officers suggesting that they should not treat black Americans better than they would be treated when returning to the United States. So, there is this long, ugly history.

MITRANO: It is almost as if psychically, in that space of the poem, race disappears but to exist even more reinforced in the social sphere. It's like moving between a dreamy world and the real world.

KOMUNYAKAA: Yes.

MITRANO: In your Vietnam poems your voice sounds more like a murmur than a protest cry. But many of the Vietnam and post-Vietnam generations felt the pressure to say "No" out loud to the American establishment, to use a shorthand. I taught a seminar titled "Introduction to Critical Theory" this past year, and we read Eve Sedgwick's account of herself as a poet who turns to theory, who becomes a theorist

because she feels that poetry cannot say "No," that "No" is better said in criticism than in poetry. How do you feel about the power of poetry to say "No"?

KOMUNYAKAA: I think it's the opposite of that. In fact, poetry says "No" in many different ways. It really depends on the reader, or the listener, how many different ways "No" can be said. The reader, or listener isn't being told that this is "No" or this is "Yes," but one arrives at an approximate "No" through a connection to language—a language where the nerves are exposed, left bare and pulsing with possibility. In that sense, poems can be democratic.

MITRANO: It is interesting that you should say this because, in the same account, the poet-turned-theorist always speaks in melancholic terms of her first love, that is, poetry. And she sees an element of poetry in what has come to be known as theoretical writing. So, it is interesting that you should defend the opposite position, whereby, yes, it is possible to say "No" even out loud in poetry.

KOMUNYAKAA: There are many poets who have written against war. Whitman comes to mind. And, of course, voices from World War One: Siegfried Sassoon, Richard Addington, e.e. cummings, Georg Trakl, Wilfred Owen, Yvan Goll, Anna Akhmatova, Eugenio Montale, Osip Mandelstam, and Isaac Rosenberg. Well, a good example, which isn't really a war poem, is that McKay poem, "If We Must Die." That is a poem definitely saying "No," and is stated with a gutsy imagistic power. The fact is that, as I've said elsewhere, the reader, or listener, is the co-creator of meaning.

3. Women/Music/Aesthetics

MITRANO: The sensuality of women nurtures your writing. I can think offhand of "Jasmine" and "Woman, I've Got the Blues," but these are only two examples among many. I was leafing through *Pleasure Dome* the other day and I could see many others. At times women and their bodies belong in a signifying chain, so to speak, with the landscapes of your childhood, but also high art and African-American music, and they seem to function as a buoy, keeping the speaker above water, still speaking with a sense of self-confidence. In "Woman, I've Got the Blues," for example, the voice asserts itself after the dizzying spells of the MOMA high art and the mixture of glitter and pain of Charlie Parker's sounds with a final, earthy eulogy to a woman's ass. Do you ever feel you are walking a fine line between the celebration of women's sensuality and aesthetic abandon? Are you ever an aesthete in your poetry? Do you enjoy that?

KOMUNYAKAA: [Laughter] Well, I do think there is celebration. I think it has a lot to do with the presence of women around me when I grew up. They were the caretakers of ritual and the things that taught survival. I'm particularly thinking of my

neighborhood. The image of the woman is always the image of desire. It is an attempt to integrate and make whole the psyche of the male as well as the psyche of the woman. There is a negotiation that is taking place. Since I'm writing within the context of my own time, I think about each word chosen. Some words are rather direct and, at the same time, there are elements of the sublime woven through vernacular expressions. I think there are layers of diction in the poems. I know it's true, because that's probably who I am. It has much to do with how I came to language, the spoken as well as the language I read in books. Language is acquired in numerous ways and all of those ways can embrace poetry. At least, I hope so, that there is a weaving of expressions without one canceling out the other.

MITRANO: The reason why I asked about the sensuality of women is that sensuality in general plays an important role in your poetry, and your tone is never argumentative; it is not confrontational. I don't know whether this can be said to be a trait of poetry, but it is certainly there in your poetry and it seems to me that sensuality keeps your voice short of an argumentative vein or a confrontational tone. Does this make sense to you?

KOMUNYAKAA: Well, I've defined poetry as a composite of celebration and confrontation. However, when I say confrontation, I mean it in an imagistic sense: not as statement, but as image. Statement is problematic in poetic expression; it becomes argumentative; it becomes reductive. I like to give the reader and the listener some credit for his or her own capacity to negotiate the images. Likewise, when I read a poem I wish to be propelled back up to its beginning and work my way down through it again. I want to savor the language, to feel it take over, to give myself to the sensation of discovery. For me, poetry would not exist without the image, so I rely heavily on imagery.

MITRANO: Yes, it does. . . . We started out with music as a metaphor in one of your childhood poems. But music, especially bebop and jazz, has had an enormous influence on you. You are known, in fact, as the editor of jazz anthologies, and your writing teems with references to African-American music . . .

KOMUNYAKAA: Though jazz was invented by African-Americans, I think of it as an American music. And, yes, it has influenced my entire character as a person.

MITRANO: In summing up this influence of music in your poetry someone has described your line as "a banjo gone electric" . . .

KOMUNYAKAA: [Laughter] I've never seen that expression. Where did you find it?

MITRANO: In the *Boston Review,* a 1999 review of *Thieves of Paradise* that is available online. Could you explain the technical consequence of jazz on your writing?

KOMUNYAKAA: I suppose I admire the improvisation and the dexterity of the musician who is able to compose and play at the same time. I am still in awe of that ability. For me, its interest is in a certain kind of freedom and it makes me think about language as music, that the body is an amplifier. Language is our first music. Not that one attempts, as a poet, to imitate instruments or anything of that sort; but just being comfortable with language, and the sound of words. And the other thing: the surprises. That's why we often hear the musicians say, "I've played that tune twenty times but I've never played it the same way." That means that he or she has the capacity to surprise him or herself. And that is important in poems as well, where everything isn't so thought-out or plotted beforehand, where the form of the poem becomes the mold that we pour opaque expressions into.

MITRANO: Do you remember how we talked about revision, about going back to the poem to constantly readjust it. Does that relate to jazz at all?

KOMUNYAKAA: That's a very good point. Initially, a poem for me perhaps will be one hundred lines long and I'll go back and cut it to fifty or sixty lines. So, yes it's that kind of readjusting, not the music as much as the image. The images do not collide but they inform each other. And often, in the context of an improvisation, one isn't surprised by every phrase one writes, and one has to introduce silence as well. Silence is also part of music for me. So, if I scratch out a line or two or three lines, there is a silence, and it becomes a bridge from one phrase to the next.

MITRANO: I'd like to ask you about *Thieves of Paradise* (1998). In the Western tradition great geniuses have been thieves. I think of Picasso and African sculpture. In your book, among other things, you pay homage to the American and African-American genius of Charlie Parker, "Testimony." Could you talk about your pieces on Parker and his artistic influence on you? How does Parker's genius depart from the traditional notion of artistic thievery?

KOMUNYAKAA: Well, I wasn't thinking of Parker as a thief of paradise as much as I was thinking about, maybe in the back of my mind, manifest destiny. The cover of the book is an image by Benjamin West's *Penn's Treaty with the Indians.* That painting is in Philadelphia. There is an idea of manifest destiny throughout *Thieves of Paradise.*

I am fixed on that question about Charlie Parker. I don't see Parker as a "thief." If he stole anything he stole from himself, in that sense. His demise is so early and he's left such a legend. He dies at 34; that's amazing. I was just at the Charlie Parker Festival in New York City on Sunday.

MITRANO: I wanted to ask you about Charlie Parker so that you could give a concrete example of the role of music in your poetry. This time I am not referring only to the technical influence but to the extent to which writing about the genius of musicians of the past crucially nurtures your language.

KOMUNYAKAA: In my book of interviews and essays, *Blue Notes,* I talk a little bit of how that Parker poem came about. I was in Australia at the time and the director at the ABC [Australian Broadcasting Corporation] asked me if I could write a libretto. I said yes. Then I came back to the States and I realized I couldn't write a traditional libretto, that I had to write this series of poems. And that has been made into a musical piece in Australia. It is interesting to hear the words. The words have been sung. So, it's a poem but also, in a strange way, it's a quasi-libretto. And I relied heavily on images. I didn't want to get away from the image; I didn't want to write song lyrics. I wanted to stay very close to the poem. It was a way of capturing the spirit of Charlie Parker, because I admire his musical dexterity, what he was able to accomplish in his short lifetime, coming from the Midwest and traveling all over the world. I have this idea about the Midwest...

MITRANO: Why?

KOMUNYAKAA: This might surprise you. I have this idea that in the Midwest—I don't know if it's still true—time and space are so important for individual voices. It doesn't surprise me that Charlie Parker comes out of the Midwest and he had his own self-expression, his own individuality. Miles Davis is from the Midwest as well, out of East St. Louis. Also, we could talk about writers who have come out of the Midwest. T. S. Eliot and William Burroughs from St. Louis, Missouri, of Kenneth Rexroth from South Bend, Indiana, and Langston Hughes coming from Joplin, Missouri—all of these very individualized voices. Usually, when we think of culture in this country we think about the East Coast or San Francisco, but if we think of the Harlem Renaissance . . . that's why I began thinking about the question of time and space, because I was teaching this course on the Harlem Renaissance and I realized that most of the writers were not born in New York. They came there . . .

MITRANO: I happen to know that young poets starting out now admire you a great deal. Perhaps your blend of European experience and black technical experience attracts young poets, especially those who, while wanting to own the racial heritage as a very important source of their drive and their art, nevertheless feel uneasy about being classified or pigeonholed solely as African-American poets. And I was introduced to your poetry by one of them two years ago. I wanted to ask about the reasons why young generations trust your judgment. Is it your ability to mix classicism and innovation the sole component of the trust they place in you as a poet and an authoritative figure?

KOMUNYAKAA: Well, in a way the ground was laid for me by Robert Hayden and the fact that he really saw himself as an American poet. However, one cannot get away from race as such, but it shouldn't be the nucleus of one's overall expression. It shouldn't define one, or confine one. I believe that there isn't any subject that is taboo. It depends on the aesthetics. And that's why, for the most part, one's impulse to insert statements into poetic expression can be problematic. One has to let the image, to let the language, do the work, and trust the reader. For a long time African-American

poets and artists were condemned to write a service literature and for the first time individuals can journey to the interior of themselves, to deal with that aspect of one's existence, and deal with the exterior as well. Does that make sense?

MITRANO: Oh, yes, it does. In fact, the question of aesthetics is so important because it seems to me—and I am speaking from the point of view of criticism—the temptation is still there to read, not only African-American literature, but race-related or class-related literature in allegorical terms and therefore to control the aesthetic side of the text, whatever it is, prose or poetry, and translate it into ideological issues. Not that that should not be done but . . .

KOMUNYAKAA: . . . that should not be the sole purpose of the work.

MITRANO: For many years people have talked about minority literature. Minority literature has been exposed to the risk of being read allegorically. Do you think that what you said about race—about it not having to be a confinement—is true of class as well? Or are the two issues different?

KOMUNYAKAA: Class is an interesting one. Recently I've been particularly interested in exploring the poet Nancy Cunard. She is really known for an anthology she edited, *Negro,* that was published, I think, in February, 1934. She comes from England. She is part of an aristocratic background. Her grandfather was a shipbuilder, so she grew up on this huge estate. She was very conscious of class, I think. She really bridged class and dealt with the problem. Especially in the 1930s, class was very much intricately interwoven with race. When I think about class now . . . it's a difficult one. Class is the major problem. W. E. B. Dubois talks about the color line, and today I think it should be reclassified as the class contrast. In fact, when we think about race, especially in this country, the bridge has contracted—the distance, I should say, between the two. I don't know how to approach that as a poet, but I do know that I'm looking at a number of poems that even use the word "homeless." So, poets are quite aware. And it seems to me, just that word alone will keep at least some of us abreast of what's happening in our cities especially. In some cities, and New York is a good example, San Francisco is another good example, I cannot see how it is possible to live on minimum wage. So, class is going to be even more of a pressing problem in the future.

Coda

MITRANO: A personal curiosity. I read that you acknowledge Elizabeth Bishop among your influences. You said her poetry is important. Could you say a bit more about that?

KOMUNYAKAA: Well, her care for the image is important to me. I don't care if it's "Man-Moth" or "The Fish." That's such an interesting poem to me because of what takes place within the context of those lines. I don't think I've ever counted the number of lines. But the number of images . . . just the fact of this survivor—that's what the fish is actually—with all the hooks in its mouth that has broken so many fishing lines. And yet in that poem the fish is almost beckoning for its own demise; it's almost given up inside. The poem is about endurance. It becomes a metaphor for human endurance, in a way, because it is almost depicted as a warrior, and yet we realize that humanity has a lot to do with this aspect of giving up inside for the fish because of that rainbow on the water—it's an "oily rainbow." It's a poem about nature.

MITRANO: Last question. On looking back at the way you made yourself into a poet, what do you consider as the most innovative aspect of your work?

KOMUNYAKAA: Innovative? . . . The most innovative?

MITRANO: Yes, I know once you said that you'd like to be remembered for your persistence . . .

[Laughter]

KOMUNYAKAA: Maybe the most innovative is subject matter. At the moment. I don't know about next week, but at the moment I would say subject matter. I'm going back to the idea that there isn't any topic that is taboo. So, I don't have to keep reminding myself about it, it's just part of who I am. We have to embrace many points of view in order to keep ourselves whole.