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The Audible and the Inaudible: Bob Kaufman and the Politics of Silence

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Abstract:
The American poet Bob Kaufman took a vow of silence during the 1960s and 1970s. For nearly ten years he neither spoke nor wrote. "The Audible and the Inaudible: Bob Kaufman and the Politics of Silence" is an attempt to read Kaufman's silence as a kind of political speech for the anonymous, marginal and inaudible. In part, the essay relies on the recent work of Jacques Rancière on speech and politics. For Rancière, the political can only take place through speech, through the taking part of those who have no part. Kaufman's silence, however, is a refusal of speech and taking part; the essay, then, is an exploration of silence as a political speech that remains withdrawn and inaudible but calls, nonetheless, to recognize those who remain speechless within our democratic commons.

Keywords: silence, bob kaufman, politics, poetry, rancière

Resumo:
O poeta americano Bob Kaufman fez um voto de silêncio nas décadas de sessenta e setenta do século passado. Durante quase dez anos, não falou nem escreveu. "The Audible and the Inaudible: Bob Kaufman and the Politics of Silence" ("O Audível e o Inaudível: Bob Kaufman e a Política do Silêncio") é uma tentativa de ver o silêncio de Kaufman como uma espécie de discurso político em nome das massas anónimas, dos marginais, dos que não conseguem fazer-se ouvir. O ensaio baseia-se, em parte, na obra recente de Jacques Rancière sobre discurso e política. Para Rancière, a política só pode ser exercida através do discurso, através da participação dos que não são vistos como parte activa. No entanto, o silêncio de Kaufman é uma recusa do discurso e da participação; assim sendo, o ensaio procura explorar o silêncio como um discurso político que se mantém socialmente isolado e inaudível, mas procura, ainda assim, reconhecer todos aqueles que continuam a não ter voz nas nossas instituições democráticas.

Palavras-chave: silêncio, Bob Kaufman, política, poesia, rancière

I. In Silent Ways

John Keats, in a letter to Richard Woodhouse, writes, "A poet is the most unpoetical thing in existence; because he has no Identity – he is continually in for – and filling some other Body.... If, then, he has no self, and if I am a Poet, where is the Wonder that I should say I would write no more?" (337-338). Keats is here describing the loss of agency and identity that writing demands; that "negative capability" that makes poetry possible. Yet it is curious that within poetry itself, as Keats defines it, there is inscribed a counterlaw or contradiction: writing writes into – in fact demands – the possibility of its own "no more." And, indeed, there are many poets who have written into that "no more" of poetry. While the experience and sense of poetry that precipitates a departure from it may vary, literary history is full of poets who have fallen silent, either permanently or for extended durations. Rimbaud, perhaps, remains the exemplary instance, but we should recall, too, the less absolute silences or refusals of Paul Valèry, Gerard Manley Hopkins, George Oppen, Carl Rakosi, Laura Riding, to name a few of the poets for whom the "no more" of poetry has hovered just off the page.

There is, then, a proximity of silence to poetry. George Steiner gives it this mythic and categorical formulation in his 1966 essay "Poetry and Silence": "To speak, to assume the privileged singularity and solitude of man in the silence of creation, is dangerous. To speak with the utmost strength of the word, which is the poet's, supremely so. Thus even to the writer, perhaps to him more than others, silence is a temptation, a refuge when Apollo is near" (39). According to Steiner, silence is a "refuge" that tempts, threatening to mute the poet's "privileged" and heroic speaking. Yet writing, and poetry especially, in this formulation always risk wordlessness and the incapacity of Keats' "no more." The temptation of silence is not, that is, an exception to poetry's practice, but, rather, constitutive of it. For Steiner, the siren song of silence that tempts the poet is an inevitable outcome of that "privileged singularity" of a speaking and writing subject who daringly and "dangerously" interrupts the "silence of creation." In a universe such as the one Steiner invokes where only the gods have the right of speech, the singular audacity of the poet is also his peril.

Yet, too, there are more worldly prohibitions on speech that might produce the poet's silence. Rather than the perils that result from the "privileged singularity" of an audacious poet tempting the wrath of Apollo, this is the silence of being silenced in the face of earthly disasters. As Maurice Blanchot comments in 1941, "When art receives from the world more enigmas than the world receives from it," writers often become silent ("Silence" 26). Certain "enigmas" that the world might put to art and writing are readily, if inadequately, named: war, suffering, catastrophe, genocide. During that catastrophic enigma of Vietnam, for instance, Oppen, who had given up poetry for twenty five years, comments, "... 'and the women and children were sold' Herodotus, Josephus, Thucydides and anyone else the heart freezes [sic]. Every time. No end of it, it can freeze you in ice, destroy the

poetry, the will to poetry, no one can hear it - - Sick, paralyzing, rational despair" (*Letters* 407). There is, as Oppen writes, "no end" to these worldly enigmas that put into question writing – and, indeed, all art. There is, we might say, an ongoing disaster, a continuous barbarism that is always putting into question a "will to poetry." In this sense, then, we might agree with Blanchot when he remarks that "so natural would it seem were no-one to write again" (25). If disaster puts writing into question and jeopardy, then writing is always in crisis, always about to fall silent in the face of an ongoing disaster.

While Steiner's assumption of the poet's "privileged singularity" is central to his formulation of silence's temptations, it remains largely unexamined by him as an exclusionary principle. Yet any consideration of silence and writing must include the recognition of those who – even as we are unable to name them – have been silenced before they even begin to "speak"; those, that is, who are denied that privilege speech requires. Tillie Olsen's *Silences* (1978) makes central what Steiner overlooks. As she writes, echoing Virginia Woolf's sketch in *A Room of One's Own* of the imaginary Judith Shakespeare, almost unnoted "are the silences where the lives never came to writing. Among these, the mute inglorious Miltons: those whose waking hours are all struggle for existence; the barely educated; the illiterate; women. Their silence is the silence of centuries as to how life was, is, for most of humanity" (10). "Most of humanity" "never comes to writing" – does not experience that "privileged singularity" that is, in Steiner's terms, the condition for writing, speech and poetry. Only an entitled some and few, as Olsen's *Silences* attests, have opportunity to come into the right of writing. These material, social, political impediments to speech and writing establish silence as a tragic and violent deprivation of a fundamental human capacity.

The silence of the poet Bob Kaufman, who gave up poetry and speech for roughly the ten year period between 1963 and 1973, is, in many ways, as I will argue, an instance of such a forcible deprivation, the taking away of words' privilege and possibility. Yet, too, Kaufman chooses silence; elects to withdraw from both speech and poetry. Kaufman's silence, then, can be understood as both elected by an empowered speaking subject and compelled by a coercive social order. As Maria Damon writes in her foundational study of Kaufman, "'Unmeaning Jargon' / Uncanonized Beatitude: Bob Kaufman, Poet": "Kaufman, one of the politically marginal and silenced, turns the table on authority by *choosing*, as an iconic poet-shaman, the silence of religious withdrawal and political disillusionment rather than *submitting* to the silence socially enforced on him as a black person" (42). As Damon explicitly indicates, Kaufman's silence takes place within the logics of both choice and submission; the poet's silence, that is, is elected as a subversive substitute for a silence that is "socially enforced."[1] This "turning of the table," as Damon has it,

1 Damon is aware of the risks such a framing of Kaufman's silence as elected runs. As she writes, "His withdrawal from the world helps to fuel the Kaufman legend among a handful of people; it also assures his ongoing obscurity, contributing to his continued exile from the American canon. The self-mythologizing and powerful aspects of Kaufman's silence are counterweighted by his actual critical neglect, a fate suffered

allows silence to function as its own antidote, as that which corrects, undoes or dodges the oppressive taking away of speech that is the act of a racist social and cultural order. Silence, then, in this framing of Kaufman's departure, is powerfully "expressive," decisively engaged in the project of speech and communication. Elsewhere Damon remarks that Kaufman "declar[ed] solidarity with the world's anonymous poor by informally adopting a 'vow of silence'" ("Introduction" 105). While it is important, I think, to note the shift, however slight, in Damon's framing of the motives for and meaning of the poet's silence and to explore, as I will later in this essay, the way in which the significance of "silence" is fluid and perhaps continually open, we should note that, again, silence, according to Damon, possesses an expressive function. The "vow of silence" that Kaufman famously took should be understood in the two ways its grammar formally makes possible: as a vow to be silent *and* as silence's vow – both a withdrawal into an inaudible wordlessness and a kind of speech made from speechlessness.

The tale of Kaufman's silence is fairly well known, but deserves short recitation. As Kaufman's editor Raymond Foye writes in his brief introduction to the 1981 selection of poems, *The Ancient Rain*, "... Kaufman took a ten-year Buddhist vow of silence, prompted by the assassination of President Kennedy. For the next decade he neither spoke nor wrote" (x). This version of the Kaufman narrative seems more or less canonical: Kaufman, moved by JFK's assassination on November 22, 1963, gives up both speech and writing for, roughly, ten years, until early 1973 "on the day the Vietnam War ended" (Foye x).[2] While Foye's description of his silence may suggest it was absolute, Kaufman's wife Eileen gives it this more probable rendering: "He saw [the Kennedy assassination] on television and just went to pieces. After that happened he didn't speak in any lengthy sentences or anything. He might say "Hi" or "You got a cigarette?" or something like that. But he really never started to elucidate until the Vietnam War ended" (qtd. in Henderson 16). Notably, Eileen Kaufman makes no reference to a vow and describes the silence as contingent and partial. I am not interested in contrasting the two accounts of Kaufman's silence (although as I will discuss in a moment, these slight incongruities are consistent with the sort of slips, distortions and ambiguities that mark the telling of Kaufman's life), but do find suggestive Eileen Kaufman's framing of the poet's silence as a refusal to "elucidate." Kaufman's silence, that is, is a withdrawal not just from speech but from elucidation, from the rational and explicative accounting of event and experience; and

involuntarily by many Black American artists" (42). While Damon has done much herself to remedy this neglect both through her critical and editorial work – namely the special issue of *Callalloo* (2002) dedicated to Kaufman – it persists. According the MLA Bibliography, only two essays, published as chapters in edited books, have appeared that exclusively or primarily discuss Kaufman's work since the *Callaloo* special section.

2 As Foye writes, "Kaufman broke his silence in February 1973 on the day the Vietnam War ended" (x). The "cease fire" to the war was signed January 27, 1973. The date is widely considered the "end of the war," though, of course, fighting continued well after. Not until April 30, 1975, when North Vietnam takes Saigon, does the war, in some final sense, end.

as a retiring from or rejection of the clarity and exposition that elucidation performs, Kaufman's silence appears to be, as I will argue later in the essay, in part a poetic act that takes place outside the demands of an elucidatory exigency and opens up expressive possibilities characterized by absence, refusal, enigma and anonymity.

These slight discrepancies, however, between Eileen Kaufman's and Foye's characterization of the poet's silence – its status as a vow; how absolute it was – are significant and point to the mythologizing that takes place around and within Kaufman's life and work.[3] Like the rest of his life, Kaufman's silence remains slightly enigmatic to us; just out of reach, perhaps, as it plays with and takes place along the border of the authentic and the invented, the inaudible and the audible, the engaged and the withdrawn, the personal and the public, the individual and the communal, the spiritual and the political. Here, I am interested in exploring Kaufman's silence in a way that permits a discussion of these multiple tensions and possibilities. Following Damon and others, I would like to read Kaufman's silence as not – at least exclusively – a withdrawal from words and writing, but itself a kind of speech for and of the dispossessed, the marginal, the anonymous. Kaufman's silence in this reading is a political and communal silence that makes audible the wordlessness of others. It is not, however, a redemptive restoration of rights to a population denied speech and writing; rather, Kaufman's vow turns the very absence of voice into a kind of political speech. With reference to Aristotle's well known definition in his *Politics* of human beings as the only "political animal" because of their possession of speech, I'll explore Kaufman' political silence as a refusal or subversion of this kind of Aristotelian politics that privileges the audible speaking subject. Instead, Kaufman engages a political possibility for the marginal, the anonymous, the inaudible without restoring silence and the silenced to the prestige and privilege of speech and writing.

I am guided in part by Jacques Rancière's critique of Aristotle's foundation of the political upon the endowment of speech, but Rancière can only be so helpful here. For Rancière, "Politics," as he remarks in *Disagreement*, "exists when the natural order of domination is interrupted by the institution of a part of those who have no part" (11); or, as he puts it later in the same text, "Politics exists because those who have no right to be counted as speaking beings make themselves of some account" (27). In other words, politics is constituted, exclusively, through the speaking of those who have been denied the right to speak by an order that has rendered them capable of only "noise" (23).[4] Politics, then, for Rancière is the disruptive speaking of those who had, hitherto,

3 For the most through, nuanced and probing account of Kaufman's life, see Damon's "'Unmeaning Jargon' / Uncanonized Beatitude." But as James Smethurst points out, even Damon's account "generally relies on sometimes conflicting interviews of uncertain reliability that tend to lead back to Kaufman or his brother George" (161). Smethurst capably indicates those points of the Kaufman story that are most problematic (if, that is, we are to view reliability as a virtue).

4 Rancière's definition of the political is quite narrow, including as it does only disruptions and interruptions of dominance that produce a radical democracy of dissensus and disagreement. Rancière is, of course, well aware that he uses the term in an unconventional sense. As he writes: "Politics is generally seen as the set of

been "doom[ed]… to the night of silence or to the animal noise of voices expressing pleasure or pain" (22). Kaufman's silence, however, does not mobilize a "taking part," does not make for an "accounting" of "speaking beings," but, rather, constitutes a politics based on disengagement, detachment and keeping silent. In order, then, to articulate the politics of Kaufman's refusal to speak, the political valence of silence, detachment and disengagement must be explored. The "not doing" that Kaufman's silence is a commitment to as a spiritual practice – its seeming monastic-like reclusion from world – is not a retreat from the political but an opening of the political up to the inaudibility of speech's dispossession.

II. "The Silent Beat"

Before Kaufman formally or decisively takes his vow, he anticipates his silence in two poems, "Small Memoriam for Myself" and "Letter to the Editor." According to Foye, "Small Memoriam" was the last poem Kaufman wrote before his ten year silence, composed just three days before the JFK assassination. The two stanza poem in its entirety reads:

> Beyond the reach of scorn, lust is freed of its vulgar face.
> No more blanch of terror at reality's threat of sadness.
> No blend of grief can cause the death of laughter now.
>
> In remembrance of certain lights I have seen go out,
> I have visualized pathetic rituals and noisy requiems,
> Composed of metaphysical designs of want and care. (*Ancient Rain* 51)

The poem, written shortly after Kaufman's return to San Francisco from three years in New York City characterized by, in the words of Foye, "poverty, addiction and imprisonment" (ix), announces itself as a "memoriam for myself," a eulogy or remembrance, that is, of the poet's "self." And indeed the first stanza of the poem reads as if it were written from the place of death, outside "scorn," "vulgarity," "sadness," "terror" and "grief." In this sense, the poem resembles the Japanese jisie, or death poem, in which a person, often a monk, writes a poem in full knowledge of their imminent death. We might read the poem, then, as Kaufman's eulogy to his east coast "self" upon his "return home" to San Francisco from New York.[5] "Small Memoriam," then, eulogizes the death of the exile,

procedures whereby the aggregation and consent of collectivities is achieved, the organization of powers, the distribution of places and roles, and the system for legitimizing this distribution. I propose to give this system of distribution and legitimization another name. I propose to call it the police" (28). The political for Rancière, then, only takes place through an encounter with "the police" that disrupts or unsettles its order. "This means," as Rancière writes, "that politics doesn't always happen – it actually happens very little or rarely" (17).

5 This phrasing is borrowed from Kaufman's "Blood Fell on the Mountains," the poem written, according to Foye, a week prior to "Small Memoriam" that invokes the Odyssean tale of the wanderer returned to wife

the nomad, the lost Odysseus, that Kaufman was during his time in New York. Yet, too, we might read the poem as an anticipation of his own silence that is to begin formally three days later.[6] In part, this reading is supported by the Rimbaudian echo the poem performs in its second and final stanza. Rimbaud's "A Season In Hell," in which the poet announces his notorious "Farewell" to poetry, is strikingly composed in the past perfect: "I have tried to invent new flowers, new stars, new flesh, new tongues. I believed I had acquired supernatural powers"; or, "At least I will ask forgiveness for having fed on lies/ Let us go now" (207, 209). Likewise, Kaufman's final stanza engages the past perfect, signaling an emphatic priorness to his aesthetic activities: "In remembrance of certain lights I have seen go out, / I have visualized pathetic rituals and noisy requiems, / Composed of metaphysical designs of want and care." Kaufman, reproducing a Rimbaudian sense and syntax, invokes the poet's "adieu" to poetry in anticipation of his own. The "death of self" that the poem memorializes is more than that of the nomadic self that Kaufman's return to San Francisco signals the end of; it is, following the Rimbaud invocation, a memorial to poetry and the aesthetic life.[7]

Kaufman's poem, then, is, as Jean-Luc Nancy remarks on Rimbaud's "Adieu," "last words of poetry that are still poetry," an enunciating within poetry, that is, of a departure from it. While it may not be as explicit as Rimbaud's, nor as absolute, Kaufman's "Small Memoriam for Myself" is that rare instance of a composed renunciation, a written "no more." We might well wonder, then, whether the assassination of JFK was the exclusive prompt for Kaufman's informal vow; rather, it seems Kaufman was already initiating his departure from words in the "memoriam" he composed to his own aesthetic self and practice. Moreover, as a renunciation or departure from poetry that "is still poetry," Kaufman's last poem shares the contradictory structure of the vow of silence that will follow. Each,

and home (as well as, perhaps, the tale, as told by Hesiod, of Kronos' castration of his father Ouranos): "In the left hand is the dreamer / the ballad at the source / the singer and the song, / poem for Eileen on my / return home, / I am a lover / Bob / Me to you."

6 It should be said here that I am relying largely on Foye's chronology, which may not be entirely dependable. Foye writes in his "Editor's Note" that "Blood Fell on the Mountains" was "composed upon his return to San Francisco in 1963" and that "Small Memoriam for Myself" was "was written the following week" "three days" before the vow of silence "prompted by the assassination of President Kennedy," which took place November 22, 1963 (ix-x). This would date "A Small Memoriam" as having been composed November 19, 1963, and "Blood Fell" the week before, which would date it sometime between November 10-16, 1963. However, the poem "Letter to the Editor," which I will discuss in a moment, is dated "Oct. 5, 1963" and explicitly thematizes Kaufman's return to San Francisco. Whether more than a month later, at the very least, constitutes "upon his return" seems debatable. In my estimation, Foye's chronology – as well as his narration of the terms of Kaufman's silence – is consistent with the fuzzy accounting of Kaufman's work and life that marks it.

7 The comparison of Kaufman to Rimbaud has frequently been made – indeed the similarity has become part of the Kaufman "legend." David Henderson gives it this typical rendering in his introduction to the most recent selection of Kaufman's poems, *Cranial Guitar*: "So much did he embody a French tradition of the poet as outsider, madman, and outcast, that in France, Kaufman was called the Black Rimbaud" (1). As with many of the Kaufman facts, that the French named him the "Black Rimbaud" is often repeated but nowhere confirmed. For an excellent reading, however, of Kaufman alongside Rimbaud (as well as Artaud) see Jeffrey Falla's "Bob Kaufman and the (In)visible Double."

that is, must announce a departure or withholding within the very discourse that will be suspended, abandoned or left behind. Both the vow of silence and the "farewell" to poetry open up, then, a relationship between language and silence that permits their simultaneity, co-presence or mutual speaking. "Small Memoriam" writes its own end of poetry, and in so doing opens poetry to the possibilities of its own refusal.[8]

Written, according to Foye's timetable, just over a month prior to "Small Memoriam," Kaufman's poem "Letter to the Editor" is an explicit engagement with silence as a constitutive modality of the poetic. Dated "Oct. 5th, 1963," Kaufman writes to the "Gentleman" of the *San Francisco Chronicle*:

> Arriving back in San Francisco to be greeted by blacklist and eviction, I am writing these lines to the responsible non-people. One thing is certain I am not white. Thank God for that. It makes everything else bearable. (*Cranial* 96)

The letter begins with the poet "greeted," hailed, with "blacklist" and "eviction" upon his return to San Francisco from New York. Language, here in this initial moment of the letter, is the agency of social/legal authority and exclusion. Considering that Kaufman, at letter/poem's end, signs off as "poet," this "blacklist" and "eviction" evokes Plato's notorious expulsion of the poet from his ideal republic. While 1960s San Francisco may seem a far cry from the philosopher's "well governed city," the poleis share an inhospitality to the writer.[9]

Kaufman's letter, however, is not a plea for his reinstatement; is not the "argument" Socrates allows the poet to make for his or her place in the "well governed city." Kaufman, rather, gives thanks that he is "not white" and for the blacklist upon which his name is inscribed and seems to welcome the marginalizations and alienations consequent that make "everything else bearable." Kaufman here, then, inverts the logics of oppression and claims as a redemptive value his "non-whiteness," the very identity, that is, that produces his eviction and exclusion. Such socio-creative structuring of marginalization is consistent with the strategies of the emerging Black Arts Movement which will forge radical political and aesthetic valences from experiences of marginalization and oppres-

8 My phrasing here borrows from the language of Blanchot's comment on Rimbaud: "With Rimbaud, poetry establishes itself on its own refusal" ("Sleep" 155). In the case of Kaufman, this might mean, among other things, that poetry establishes itself as silence, as a not saying that opens a poetics of the inaudible.

9 Of course San Francisco at this time was a center for writers, poets especially. The "Renaissance" taking place included many of the well known Beats (with whom Kaufman was associated) but also those poets who constellated around Jack Spicer and Robert Duncan. But this profusion of poets was in no way the result of a formal or official practice or policy of the city. Indeed, *Howl* and City Lights had been put on trial for obscenity a mere six years prior. One recalls Giorgio Agamben's comment on the logic and outcome of Plato's expulsion of the poet: "Everything, then, leads one to think that if today we gave the artists themselves the task of judging whether art should be allowed in the city, they would judge from their own experience and agree with Plato on the necessity of banishing it" (6). Art thrives, Agamben points out, within a political/social environment which is hostile to it, in which – and to which – it seems a threat precisely because of its cultural and political centrality and force.

sion. Also, Kaufman's declaration that everything is bearable because he is "not white" racializes the Beats' critique of "straight" society in ways that parallel the Black Arts Movement and its commitments to a separatist cultural production.[10] Yet it is significant that in the four instances in which the word "black" occurs in the letter/poem, not once does Kaufman literally use it to denote race; rather it is used primarily to modify "list." I am alert here to Amor Kohli's caution: "If we ascribe too much voluntary racial fluidity to Kaufman, we run the risk of transhistorizing his work" (166). Indeed, in the eyes of the "gentleman of the Chronicle," Kaufman was, despite his claims to White and Jewish heritages, simply a black man; the early sixties US was incapable – as it perhaps still is – of recognizing race outside a white/black binary, a binary which Kaufman's poem attempts to undermine or complicate through an assertion that "all blacklists [are] white" and that "all light lists are black" (96).

Even though, then, we must be careful not to "transhistoricize" the possibilities for Kaufman's experience, we also must not hesitate to recognize the ways in which the poet, in both the writing of his life and his poems, subverts conventions for thinking and performing race. In this context, then, it is striking that "black" occurs, as already mentioned, literally as only an inscription, as the character of the marks of a list on a piece of paper. This is, of course, not to argue that Kaufman uses the word without regard for its racial connotations; indeed, he is careful to make a racial sense coincident with his experience of eviction and expulsion. However, in making the term explicitly modify list, Kaufman encourages us to recognize "black" as an effect of writing, as, that is, a discursive and textual identity rather than a given or natural one. Moreover, "black," within "Letter to the Editor," becomes directly conflated with Kaufman's identity as "poet." The identities are inextricable: each produces the expulsion and eviction that "greets" Kaufman at the beginning of the letter and both are marked by the silence the poet describes and claims at letter's end.

After referencing the "scale" of Duke Ellington in which "there is silent beat between the drums," Kaufman writes:

> That silent beat makes the drumbeat, it makes the drum, it makes the beat. Without it there is no drum. 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 the drum, his silent beat drowns out all the noise, it comes before and after every beat, you hear it in between[11], its sound is
>
> Bob Kaufman, poet. (97)

10 See Smethurst for an accounting of Kaufman's relationship to the Black Arts Movement. Smethurst points out that while Kaufman "seems not to have been much engaged with the Black Arts Movement," his work "was a crucial forerunner" of it (146).

11 Kohli and Damon cite this as "beatween," a highly likely pun. "Letter to the Editor" was first published as the last poem of *Golden Sardines* (1967). The reprint of the poem in the 1996 *Cranial Guitar: Selected Poems*, from which I cite the poem, fails to keep the pun intact.

At letter's end Kaufman's name both occupies the place of signature and completes the enjambment of the last line. Kaufman is both the poet who writes this letter to *The Chronicle* and is himself the "sound of the silent beat" – a telling pun on Kaufman's position within "Beat" culture. Despite the fact that "Letter to the Editor" is written some month or so before the assassination of JFK that prompted the poet's vow of silence, we can read Kaufman already claiming silence as an appropriate figure and vehicle for both his blackness and poet role. And just as silence for Kaufman is the constitutive in--between of the noisy drum beat, both blackness and poetry, one might say, are, in this poem at least, a sort of liberated and determining margin, exile and absence.

"Letter to the Editor" is a complex coming together of primary Kaufman themes: race, silence and the role of poetry and the poet. For this reason it is no surprise that among Kaufman's entire body of work it is, by my unofficial count, the most discussed of his individual poems. Kohli finds it to "provide a redemptive hope" in which Kaufman, through the resources of jazz, finds his identity as "poet" in a multiracial America (180-181); Aldon Nielsen provocatively argues that "Kaufman's silenced beat is the linking phrase, the passage through time that proves the portability of blackness, the middle passage, as the absented center of the postmodern" (138); T.J. Anderson III claims the poem to "convey the importance of poetry as an aural as well as a written creation" (331); Damon, by way of a detour through Miles Davis, remarks, "Jazz, breath, life-blood, poetic inspiration, compassion, all become coexistent, cofoundational, and they transform pain into beauty" (75). Nielsen's reading, from my perspective, is the most engaging and compelling as it links Kaufman's "silence" – both the silence within the poem and the silence that will mark the poet's life – to the larger elisions and absences that characterize black writers in the twentieth century. Invoking Lyotard's well known declaration that the postmodern precedes – is "anterior to" – the modern, Nielsen makes the compelling argument that "Kaufman unveils the black strata among the founding phrases of the modern, thus revealing as in a postmortem the blackness of nascent modernism" (140). Kaufman, in this reading, becomes the figure of an originary elision of blackness from the modern and postmodern American canon, as well as the occasion for the "unveiling" of its concealed presence.

Like Nielsen – and indeed like most critics who discuss "Letter to the Editor" – I am drawn to the positive valences that Kaufman gives to silence. It is not, perhaps to point out the obvious, exclusively privative. Rather, silence is "what makes the drumbeat"; it is the "in be[a]tween" that "drowns out all the noise." Silence, as this generative between, is what makes sound and speech possible. Yet, too, "the silent beat is beaten by who is not beating on the drums." That is, silence is the withdrawal or removal of agency, a withholding of action and doing, but one that opens up more pervasive or fundamental possibilities. As a contradictory event, silence "speaks" in two ways: it is both the inaudible condition of the marginalized, expunged and evicted and an originary (non)agency that

permits speech, noise and music to take place. Kaufman's poem, in other words, positions silence along the margins that remain outside of and inaudible to a central political or cultural (or racial) authority and positions it as the foundational ground that both precedes and takes precedence over speech.

III. A Political Silence

Kaufman's commitment to silence, evident in both his vow and the poems that precede it, is a remarkable contestation of Aristotle's foundational claim of speech as a uniquely human capacity and possession that establishes a political life. Aristotle makes the claim early in his *Politics* within a broader discussion of the household and the city-state as political sites or scenes:

> And why man is a political animal in a greater measure than any bee or any gregarious animal is clear. For nature, as we declare, does nothing without purpose; and man alone of the animals possesses speech. The mere voice, it is true, can indicate pain and pleasure, and therefore is possessed by the other animals as well (for their nature had been developed so far as to have sensations of what is painful and pleasant and to signify those sensations to one another), but speech is designed to indicate the advantageous and the harmful, and also therefore the right and the wrong; for it is the special property of man in distinction from the other animals that he alone has perception of good and bad and right and wrong and the other moral qualities, and it is partnership in these things that makes a household and a city-state. (11)

Unlike all other animals, "man" alone "possesses" speech, which is capable of indicating or signifying within – or in fact producing – a moral economy. The animal "voice," on the other hand, merely "indicates pain and pleasure" and is limited to the noisy language of sensation. Human speech permits that moral and juridical coming together of people that is foundational to politics in its root sense as polis. Speech, in this formulation, is always already political; always already participant in the production of the polis and the role of its citizens. As Hannah Arendt remarks, in clear agreement with Aristotle: "Wherever the relevance of speech is at stake, matters become political by definition, for speech is what makes man a political being" (3). Yet, as Rancière reminds us, that not all "men" possess speech compromises the egalitarian promise of an Aristotelian model and practice of democracy. He writes: "Man, said Aristotle, is political because he possesses speech.... But the whole question, then, is to know who possesses speech and who merely possesses voice. For all time, the refusal to consider certain categories of people as political beings has proceeded by means of a refusal to hear the words exiting their mouths as discourse" (*Aesthetics* 24). The privileging of speech as the political organ *par excellence*

means that the taking of it away – by silencing it or by rendering it the "noise" of a "mere voice" – takes away too the very possibility for a political action. Political action, rather, must, as discussed earlier, take the form an "accounting" by those who had not previously been "counted," to use the language of Rancière. There is, then, no politics of silence; to be silent is to forfeit the very capacity to be political.

Aristotle's argument for a political capacity of the "human animal" based in its possession of speech is, in fact, quite consistent with a fundamental understanding and practice of politics during the early sixties. Indeed, for example, less than three months prior to Kaufman's vow of silence, Martin Luther King delivers his "I Have a Dream" speech during the March on Washington in late August of 1963. The political power of speaking is on full display during this time as an entire political movement organizes around a commitment to challenge power through the rhetorical agency of speech. Speech, during the sixties – even that early part of it in which Kaufman initiated his "farewell" to words – is the privileged vehicle of resistance, dissensus, transformation, political and social progress. For Kaufman to become silent at the very moment – historically, culturally, politically – in which speech is coming into the full power of a political possibility, is significant. Kaufman, that is, elects silence precisely when not only is the power of speech flourishing but also when it is staging or producing a "political" encounter or event in the sense that Rancière gives the term. That is, those "categories of people" who had been denied recognition as "political beings" are the ones speaking; those who had been, systematically, given "no part" are "taking part" through a speaking that constitutes them as "political subjects."

Rancière critically comments, most likely with certain counter cultural strategies of the sixties in mind, that the concept of an omnipresent power "once allowed a certain well-meaning militancy to contend that 'everything is political' since power relationships are everywhere. From that moment the somber vision of a power present everywhere and at every moment can be settled on, the heroic vision of politics as resistance or the dreamy vision of spaces of affirmative action [are] opened up by those who turn their backs on politics and its power games" (*Disagreement* 32). Rancière, no doubt, would think Kaufman's silence to constitute such a "turning of the back" on politics and power motivated by "dreamy visions" of open and affirmative spaces. Kaufman, that is, says farewell not only to words but to the scenes of "power games" and power politics from which, as a black poet, he has been expelled; yet, for Rancière, this would remain a "well meaning" but nonetheless mistaken practice that can make no effective claim on politics. According to Rancière, "nothing is political in itself merely because power relations are at work within it"; rather, the political is that narrow event in which a "meeting of a police logic and egalitarian logic that can never be set up in advance" takes place (32). Moreover, politics must, as Rancière indicates time and time again, be executed through the

emancipatory agency of "taking part" and the active coming into a speech of dissensus and disagreement.

Kaufman's silence, then, cannot, within the political logic of Rancière, be assigned a political valence or effect. While Rancière's thinking of the political is a provocative frame for exploring Kaufman's silence, it provides little help in developing a way to understand silence itself as a political agency or vehicle. Twisting Rancière's language, then, I would like to claim that Kaufman's silence does not constitute a "turning of the back" on the political but, rather, a turning back onto the political the wordlessness it always misses, the inaudible itself which will not break its silence through a speech that demands an accounting of anonymous or marginalized subjects. Kaufman's silence, then, is the politics of "taking no part," of detachment and refusal. Undoubtedly, such a politics of detachment is rooted, at least in part, in a skepticism about the efficacy of participation and engagement, both as a citizen and as a poet. Indeed, it is not only models or possibilities for a political citizen that Kaufman is contesting or refusing, but also those for a political writer. Kaufman, that is, refuses not only a political speech but refuses to commit his poetry to a direct political service. As a political and poetic subject, then, Kaufman commits himself to a silence that remains silent, outside, inassimilable and useless; a silence that it is the interruption of a political and aesthetic economy that can only make use, make sense, make present, make speech.

Kaufman's disengaged silence – his refusal of both speech and writing – reminds us, then, of the voices that remain unheard, the wrongs that go uncorrected, unaddressed; his silence is the sign, or the absence of the sign, for what is always still left out, the remainder that is always yet to be accounted for, the inaudible that is still to be rendered speech within our democratic commons. Kaufman's comments to Foye are relevant here: "I want to be anonymous…. I don't know how you get involved with uninvolvement, but I don't want to be involved. My ambition is to be completely forgotten" (ix). The contradictions here – the desire for anonymity, the involvement with uninvolvement, the ambition to be forgotten – are the same contradictions that structure silence itself as Kaufman engages and figures it. Kaufman's desire for the uninvolved anonymity of the forgotten is, at least in part, certainly a turning away from the scene and possibility of the political; yet too, as we have seen, it is a turning of the political toward what (and who), even in its most emancipatory and egalitarian promise, is always just outside earshot.

IV. Breaking Silence

Kaufman, the story goes, does return to poetry. As Foye describes it in his editorial note to *The Ancient Rain*:

> Kaufman broke his silence in February 1973 on the day the Vietnam War ended. He stunned a local gathering one evening by reciting Thomas Becket's speech

> from T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* ("They know and do not know, what it is to act or suffer..."), followed by his own untitled poem [...] ("All those ships that never sailed..."), which, like many of the poems in this volume, has been transcribed from a tape recording. (x)[12]

While the martyr Becket is an appropriate figure for the poet to invoke and the speech's insistence on the continuous nature of suffering seems an incisive comment on the "cease fire," it is telling that Kaufman's return to poetry, his formal resumption of speech, takes place through the words of another. It is "Becket's speech" that is spoken, which is also Eliot's writing recited. Kaufman, then, breaks his silence by speaking the words of somebody else; and in so doing, he maintains, in a way, the commitments to anonymity and wordlessness that had marked his withdrawal. Kaufman, that is, still withholds speech at the very threshold of his return to it. Just as, then, his silence is not fully outside the economy of speech, so too the speech that "breaks" his silence maintains a remnant of wordlessness.[13]

Following the Becket speech, according to Foye and others, Kaufman recited his own "All those ships that never sailed" which continues the themes of agency, stillness, patience and eternity that the Eliot passage introduced:

> All those ships that never sailed
> The ones with their seacocks open
> That were scuttled in their stalls…
> Today I bring them back
> Huge and intransitory
> And let them sail
> Forever. (*Ancient Rain* 55)

12 David Henderson gives the moment this more detailed account: "In 1973, just after the Vietnam War ended, Bob and Eileen Kaufman were in Palo Alto with a group of friends attending an exhibition of photographs before visiting Kenneth Patchen's widow, Miriam. Eileen Kaufman recalls, 'There was a little chamber group playing. I was talking to some people and all of a sudden Bob began to recite "Murder in the Cathedral," by Eliot. And that was the first thing he said when he came out of his silence. And people were just startled, they had their cups halfway to their mouths. They hadn't heard him for years and years and he started just like that'" (18). Poets.org gives the moment this rendering: "After the assassination of President Kennedy, Kaufman took a legendary vow of silence that ended ten years later, the day the war in Vietnam ended, when he walked into a coffee shop and recited "All Those Ships That Never Sailed."" Not only does the discrepancy between the two accounts provide another example of the way in which the Kaufman narrative is ambiguated and unstable, but also the different scenes of Kaufman's return – a coffee shop and an art opening with "chamber music" – indicate the discrepant cultural registers his work takes place within.

13 Too, it should be noted that in asserting the continuous nature of suffering at the moment of "cease fire," Kaufman calls our attention to those whose suffering will not cease. Just as his silence calls us to an impossible recognition of those we cannot hear, so too his resumption of speech takes place as a speaking of or for the suffering that is eclipsed by the "end" of the war.

Clearly, at least in part, Kaufman is offering here a figurative account of his own "breaking silence" as the ships that "never sailed" and were "scuttled" in "their stalls" are now permitted the possibilities of voyage. This theme of restitution and resumption is carried into the poem's second stanza:

> All those flowers that you never grew –
> that you wanted to grow
> The ones that were plowed under
> ground in the mud –
> Today I bring them back
> And I let you grow them
> Forever. (55)

An economy or experience of impediment, obstruction, sabotage, gives way to a repaired "natural" order of agency, growth and possibility. Kaufman elaborates this theme of resurrection and eternity by evoking the image of the crucified and resurrected Christ: "My body once covered with beauty / Is now a museum of betrayal…. / Today I bring it back and let you live forever." Here, Kaufman's resumption of speech and poetry is mobilized within the narrative of death, resurrection and salvation. Kaufman's return to words is a return of his "dead" and "betrayed" body as a gift to the "you" of the poem who can, thereby, "live forever."

One almost expects the poem to end here as the poet is restored to the messianic role of truth speaker and martyr. Yet the poem has more to say. In its final and most cryptic lines, Kaufman pronounces, "Remove the snake from Moses' arm... // And someday the Jewish Queen shall dance / Down the street with the dogs / and make every Jew / Her lover" (56). Kaufman here spins a web of Biblical references that tests our sense making powers. Perhaps Kaufman refers to the Gospel of John and the link made there between Moses lifting the serpent in the wilderness and the resurrection of Christ; perhaps, too, he makes reference to Jezebel, the excoriated Phoenician Queen who, according to the Book of Kings, marries Ahab and converts him to the worship of a false god, for which she is murdered and given to the dogs to be eaten; or perhaps Kaufman refers to the most famous of "Jewish Queens," Esther, who becomes, by disguising her Jewish identity, the concubine and the wife of King Ahasuerus, the King of Persia, whom, as celebrated by Purim, she persuades to halt a slaughter of Jews. While these possibilities are provocative, they fail to fit together like pieces of a puzzle to make a coherent sense of the poem's conclusion. Rather, Kaufman ends his poem by opening Biblical narratives to revisions and rewritings that bury revelation and clarity under the obscurities of the prophetic speech of "someday."

Kaufman's return to words opens up a kind of speech that, like his silence, remains outside audibility. The line of verse from *Murder in the Cathedral* that precedes the one

which Foye claims Kaufman recited from Eliot reads: "They speak better than they know, and beyond your understanding" (182). One is tempted to think that Foye is in error here and that Kaufman did in fact initiate his return to poetry through these first words of Becket's speech.[14] Regardless, this sense of a speech that is in excess of both a speaker and an auditor repeats within language the inaudibility of silence and anticipates Kaufman's "post-silence" commitment to a prophetic, silent not-yet. This commitment is most evident in Kaufman's last poem of his last published volume of poetry before his second and final "lapse into silence," "Ancient Rain." In this prose poem, Kaufman describes the "world that exists secretly" within an "illusion world" that we perceive as real where "humorous Nazis" are on TV. Indeed, the geography here is both metaphysical and political as Kaufman, in the mode of prophecy that defines this period of his writing, is interested in the apocalyptic arrival of the "Ancient Rain" that will restore the "secret" real and destroy Hollywood and the Ku Klux Klan, just as it had destroyed Caesar, the Roman Empire, Robert E. Lee and the Confederacy. The "Ancient Rain" heralds the arrival of the "secret" real world; but this heralding is silent: "The Ancient Rain knows but does not say" (77). And in response to this withholding of the speech of some absolute, the poet, too, refrains from words: "I make speculations of my own, but I do not discuss them, because the Ancient Rain is falling" (77) in "silent, humming raindrops" (78).

We read Kaufman, then, at the very end of his writing life once again turning toward silence. No doubt, this orientation is an outcome of his continuing commitment to a spiritual practice that prioritizes the ineffable; but, too, Kaufman's insistence on the absence of speech takes place within a political register and turns us toward the silence that underlies our speaking commons. If the political only takes place by way of speech, if human beings are political only by way of the capacity to make themselves of some account, how, then, are we to think of the speechless, those who remain outside the senses of the audible? Kaufman's work is a call to respond to what and who we cannot yet hear; those who are still inaudible within a political aesthetics that privileges speech.

14 It should be noted that Foye's is the only account to cite – albeit parenthetically – the Becket speech within his anecdote. Eileen Kaufman, for instance, indicates merely that her husband recited from *Murder in the Cathedral*. That, as Foye renders it, the first line of the speech is absent is, to my mind, either his own error or a deliberate and telling *occlusion* of Kaufman's. If the latter, then Kaufman in fact weaves into his return to words their exclusion and silencing.

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