The Ga(s)p
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Women and slaves belonged to the same category and were hidden away not only because they were somebody else's property but because their life was “laborious,” devoted to bodily functions.

—Hannah Arendt,
The Human Condition

WE ALL BEGIN life in water
We all begin life because someone once breathed for us
Until we breathe for ourselves
Someone breathes for us
Everyone has had someone—a woman—breathe for them
Until that first ga(s)p
For air

We begin life in a prepositional relationship with breath: someone breathes for us. We continue that prepositional relationship, breathing for ourselves until we can no longer do so, and it appears that this most fundamental of acts is always a contingent one—breathing for, with, instead of, and into. Survival demands that we learn to breathe for ourselves, but the sine qua non of our existence is that first extended act of breathing—a breathing for and being breathed for in utero. We can, perhaps, call it a form of circular breathing or even circle breathing. Are there wider theoretical and possible therapeutic implications to breathing
for someone and allowing someone to breathe for you? Further, how do the prepositional modifications change these implications—is breathing for the same as breathing with or instead of? Finally, while “I breathe” is semantically complete, its completion would not be possible without that original, prepositional act of breathing for.

These are the thoughts that surface on reflection a few months after listening to Nathaniel Mackey's inaugural Creeley lecture (SUNY Buffalo, Spring 2016). In the moment, as I listened to him, my memories ran along parallel tracks, thinking of my own very different arc of coming to voice and therefore breath.

After observing that Creeley discovered that reading poetry out loud often required a conscious manipulation of breath, Mackey takes us through the idea of precarity as it affects African Americans, referencing the now tragically iconic phrase by Eric Garner, “I can't breathe,” as he explains the technique and use of circular breathing in music, all of it grounded in and illustrated by musical samples of jazz.

My memories take me back to my early years in Canada, and the beginnings of my very tentative presumption that I might have something to say that others would listen to or be interested in hearing. As I listen I am conscious of a heightened awareness of the flexing of empire both old and new and the very different trajectory of my writing life; I recall how my concerns as a “young” lawyer-poet were held fast by the residues of the British empire. I read the British poets—Andrew Motion and company (mostly male), the Caribbean poets and writers (mostly male), most, if not all, of whom were understandably oriented toward England. Brathwaite’s “path- / less, harbour- / less spade,” with Sahara dust on her feet, trying to find a place to land on in the shadow of empire epitomized the plight of the formerly colonized. Wynter, Walcott, Lamming, Cesaire, C. L. R. James, and St. John Perse—these were the writers who engaged my imaginative and still incipient poetic life during those years. In my then still-unimagined role of writer-poet, determined by a colonial childhood where we, descendants of the enslaved, sang of Britons who “never never never” would be slaves, one aspect of the mental luggage I had brought with me to Canada was important: one had to engage with the polity and be a part of the struggle for liberation—the writer as public intellectual (long before the term became fashionable). It would throw a long shadow over my writing life.

There was no one to follow, it seemed, in those early days here in Canada, the literary tradition among Black and African-descended people appearing very different from that of the United States, the United Kingdom, and even of the Caribbean. I had heard of the novelist Austin Clarke, but not of Sonny Ladoo, whose brilliance was too quickly cut short. A pulse of joy at discovering the brilliant poet, Claire Harris, but what was she doing all the way out in Calgary? So locked was I in my Toronto-centric mind-set. Meantime the Jamaican oral tradition was exploding in the United Kingdom into the dub sounds of Lynton Kwesi Johnson (LKJ) and Benjamin Zephaniah, as well as in Toronto with the dub poetry collective De Dub Poets.

The tunnel of memory I enter as I listen to Mackey brings to mind the Four Horsemen, the Canadian poetry group comprised of Steve McCaffery, bpNichol, Paul Dutton, and Rafael Barreto-Rivera. They rehearsed in a building on Bloor St., Toronto, in the Annex area. How I had heard about them or why I attended their weekly practices, I have no recollection, but I must have liked their experiments with language and there was clearly something about what they did that spoke to me. I don't recall what I did apart from watching them. At the time I stopped attending, they were exploring the work of the Canadian composer and environmentalist Murray Schafer. I continued to practice law while “trying” to write poetry.

At that time Canada allowed me a certain freedom both to explore what appeared to be the negative space around me and to consolidate a commitment to the aesthetics of that aching archipelago of islands, the Greater and Lesser Antilles, better known as the Caribbean—a commitment that would have been more forcefully challenged in national spaces like the United States or the United Kingdom, both of which have longer and more consciously developed traditions of Black writing.
aboriginal traditions and cultures having been disrupted by European colonization, was for me an (un)settled land, which would become a frontier of sorts (with all the problematics of that term) with the hinterland behind and the promise of discovery and exploration ahead.

All of which brings me back to the idea of circular breathing and, as he calls it, the poetics of breath raised by Mackey, as well as those ruminations and questions raised at the opening of this piece. "Ongoingness, unending abidance, everlasting life" are some of the qualities Mackey ascribes to circular breath, and my thoughts turn to that first extended period of circular breathing we all experience. An experience that, more often than not, ends in the gasp heralding another stage of breathing—breathing for one's self.

"A convulsive catching of the breath from exertion ... (One's) last gasp: the last attempt to breathe before death" is how the *Oxford English Dictionary* describes the gasp, otherwise known as a form of paralinguistic respiration. The first ga(s)p of the newborn who has, until then, been breathed for, signals a beginning; it is the same act—that of forcefully attempting to draw air into the lungs that will mark the final moments of a life—"I can't breathe..." The last words uttered by Eric Garner as he lay dying on a New York sidewalk.

—Trying to write poetry:

It meant that I had to find my own tradition and learn how to breathe myself. For myself. Once again.

Each of us has had someone, a woman, breathe for us. To keep us alive. Each of us has allowed someone, a woman, to breathe for us, our coming to life dependent on an Other breathing for us—a form of circular breathing this:

Circle breathing
Circle breath
Circling breaths
Breathing for the other

Could we, perhaps, describe this process as an example and expression of radical hospitality? Radical because although the fetus is genetically comprised of both the mother's and father's genes, physiologically the child is also a stranger. Ordinarily, the mother's body should generate activated T-cells, which would then attack the fetus's foreign antigens. There is, however, a complex and not-yet-entirely understood process by which the mother's body turns off the functions of her T-cells, which would normally result in the rejection of the fetus. It is a radical hospitality that entails housing the stranger, which includes breathing for the occupant until that child is able to breathe on its own. The process elaborates a complex act of acceptance of alterity.

Hannah Arendt's idea of natality as a universal founding principal proves useful here, less for its focus on the idea that we are all natals who begin life as individuals who are then welcomed into a "web of human relationships which is, as it were, woven by the deeds and words of innumerable persons, by the living as well as by the dead." It is an idea that the institution of slavery immediately confounds and complicates. The forced breeding of enslaved African women, not to mention the forced impregnation by white and European masters, immediately disrupts her model of us arriving into a world that welcomes us and where family and community are somewhat intact with links to the past. It is, instead, her attempt to use the idea of the universality of birth, natality, as generative of possible alternatives—symbolic, theoretical and therapeutic—to the erasure of the female body in general that interests me as a model. Not to mention her intention to offer a corrective to the patriarchal nature of philosophical studies, which emphasized individualism, alterity, the omnipresence of death and the world as an alien reality. Physiologically, the enslaved mother has no choice but to breathe for the child that is forced on her body. Does that make her doubly a slave—to her body and her master? There is, however, a sense in which we are all slaves to the needs of our bodies and our biology, and Arendt's analysis of how women's labor has historically been crucial to the satisfaction of those needs is important in understanding the gendered differences between labor (the work that women and slaves do) and work that creates materiality in the shape of things.
Birth, however, does not necessarily entail survival or life; it can be harsh, difficult, brutal, or isolating. I want, instead, to focus on the period before birth and the practice of breath: breathing for or allowing someone to breathe for you. The idea of the mother breathing for the fetus is commonplace but bears repeating: oxygen from the air the mother inhales is cycled around to the fetus, and the carbon dioxide from the latter returns to her and is exhaled in a circle or circling of breath. Riffing off Arendt’s theorizing of natality, this process of shared breath, strength, and dependency becomes useful as a model of community and connectedness in a more female-centered, embodied, symbolic universe. How then do we begin to think about shared breath, circular breath, or circle breath in the context of force—historical (enslavement) and contemporary.

Mackey uses the example of the horn player, primarily male, and his use of pneumatic breath, often in the form of circular breathing, in the playing of his instrument, within the contemporary context of the precarity of existence for African Americans in the United States today. However, in light of the seminal and formative role played by gay and trans women in formation of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, I would argue that it becomes imperative to lodge the poetics of breath as identified by Mackey in the Black female imaginary. An imaginary that enlarges the idea of labor so that our acts are not solely directed to responding to the necessity of life, but are extended to embrace engagement in active subordination to systems of terror and oppression that attempt to suck the oxygen out of the air we breathe, literally and figuratively, so that the refrain, “I can’t breathe” becomes universal.

These are my thoughts in August 2016, as I engage with the idea of circular breathing in Salvador, Brazil. Salvador, the beating heart of Africa outside of Africa. These are the un/remembered re/memberings that bear around my head and enfold me as I witness the profound power of Black women in community. As I look into the eyes of the Madres de Dios, the Mothers of Gods. In this extended minute I receive an e-mail from a friend and colleague about the anguish of parenting in an age in which we not only seem, but, indeed, are less and less able to carry out one of the most primal of acts—protection of our children.

M.N.P: I was thinking about when I was in labour with my last child and how I could only read poetry—that there was something about the breathing required for poetry that synched with the breath I needed to withstand the pain of contractions.

A.B.: I remember with my first, who was born in hospital after an induction, and it was all very traumatic and hard—that she got into distress and I was also panicked, and I could see that if I calmed down and breathed, her heart rate would slow too, we were in synch, and the recognition that our lives and bodies and breath only entangled from each other slowly, over a period of many days, was one of the most powerful discoveries I made as a human being in the process of mothering. It’s not separation as a bloody crash and severing, but a gentle unfurling, so that holding the newborn against your chest you stabilize their temperature and their breathing, and your bodily presence hour by hour calms and warms them. I’ve written about this in my book Mutability—which is about how both infant and adult are changed by each other, and about the “mute ability” of the speechless infant.”

M.N.P: It was like no other pain I had felt before or since. I did not think one could endure such pain and live; as I clung to a newel post in my home I recall begging my mother—she had once breathed for me—not to let me die, as I continued to breathe for the one who was coming through me.

A.B.: So much of my political thinking was shaped by this recognition that the elemental human being is not a monad, a liberal individual inside its domestic cell, but a dyad, the pair of mother and child, wrapped in mutuality and care, weakness and strength and dependency: this is the fundamental political unit, and the politics in which we live are distorted and wrecked because they are based on its repression. So a theory of the collective is not utopian, but a return to something we have all already known.
The breath and breathing of poetry—the poetics of breath—and the sounds of the African American acapella group, Sweet Honey in the Rock, singing the words of the Lebanese American poet Kahlil Gibran, helped me to breathe through labor: “Your children are not your children,” they sing. Yet we house them, I reply all these years later, “they come through you but not from you,” and yet we breathe for them; “though they are with you, yet they belong not to you.” They allow us to breathe for them, which I suggest is not as passive as it appears and is a vital part of the equation in the circle breath—the breather and the breathed-for.

Everyone has had someone breathe for them. Until the first ga(s)p. For air.

Do our cells carry this epigenetic memory of a form of sharing and exchange, a modeling of a “we” that we can take into our varied practices? Do they, our cells, remember what it was like to have someone breathe for us? And how, if at all, does the epigenetic cellular memory of the forced breeding of Black women affect this most generative and generous of acts? Are we marked by this—by having someone breathe for us? A memory that is a blueprint for community and interdependency. Despite the forced couplings.

What does it mean—breathing for an Other or Others? Or being breathed for? How is this affected by historical memory of enslavement? Do we ever re/present this act otherwise in our lives—on either side of the breath? And, more importantly, is there any significance to this act of radical hospitality within present day and historical contexts of systems of power that attempt to eradicate and erase the individual and those who are perceived as marginal, deficient, less than, and different?

Many of us through gender, choice, or life situation will never physically breathe for someone else, but we have all experienced being breathed for—here we come close to Arendt’s idea of natality being common to us all, so that we begin life within the womb in this relationship of exchange within this nexus of dependency and strength—the circle of breath between mother and child, host and guest.

I think of breathing and the difficulties associated with it because breathing and the breath were built into the text of Zong!, beginning with the opening poem, “Zong! #1,” which is in fact an extended ga(s)p, or rather a series of ga(s)ps for air with syllabic sounds attached or overlaid. The layout of the following four sections, “Sal,” “Ventus,” “Ratio,” and “Ferrum,” is determined by words or clusters of words seeking and finding a space in the line above so as to breathe—they can never come directly below another word or word cluster, and there is a constant movement upward to the surface of the previous line. For breath.

The conscious manipulation of breath that Mackey alludes to in the context of Creeley’s development translates for me into learning how to breathe. Again, Mackey speaks of the poetics of breath, and I think of the poetics of the fragment, which Zong! illuminates; fragments driven pneumatically by the energy of the breath in the spaces that enfold the fragments. Spaces that may be ga(s)ps, in-breathings or breathings-out, or a simple holding of the breath. This may be a distinction without a difference—the poetics of the breath or the poetics of the fragment—given that each breath we take is a fragment of the larger breathing and breath of the universe.

... each gap and gasp carrying the potential of a universe...

Someone, a woman, once breathed for us.

I return to the all-too-often erased presence of the Black woman, as the victimized, or as an individual with agency in the ongoing struggle against white supremacy; or in community as in the founders of BLM. I am reminded of Eric Garner who gasped his last words: “I can’t breathe.” I think of Sandra Bland whose breath was also forcibly stopped by hanging. I wonder what her last words were.

When I perform Zong!, I allow the words and word clusters to breathe for I ’n I—for the we in us that epigenetically we carry within the memory of our cells. When I invite the audience to read with me, we collectively engage in breathing for the Other—for those who couldn’t breathe—then can’t now and, perhaps, won’t be able to.

In doing so we give them a second life
I can’t breathe;

I will breathe for you.
NOTES


2. The line “Britons never, never, never shall be slaves” comes from a version of “Rule, Britannia!”—a patriotic British song; James Thomson’s poem “Rule, Britannia” was set to music by Thomas Arne in 1740.

3. In his criticism George Elliott Clarke has argued that sermons by Black Nova Scotian pastors constituted a literary tradition.

4. The present-day practice of surrogacy exemplifies this idea of housing of the stranger.


6. In *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (Manchester University Press, 1998), Grace Jantzen provides an in-depth analysis of Arendt’s ideas on natality as they underpin a more feminist approach to religion, as well as an exploration of Arendt’s many challenges to the patriarchal bias in philosophical studies.


9. “I ‘n I” is a Rastafarian expression suggesting a collectivity.