



MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY
POETRY AND POETICS

Will Alexander's Poetics

Readings Across the
Radiant Glossaries

Edited by
Joshua Schuster

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Modern and Contemporary Poetry and Poetics

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Founded by Rachel Blau DuPlessis, continued by David Herd, and now headed by Ann Vickery, *Modern and Contemporary Poetry and Poetics* promotes and pursues topics in the burgeoning field of 20th and 21st century poetics. Critical and scholarly work on poetry and poetics of interest to the series includes: social location in its relationships to subjectivity, to the construction of authorship, to oeuvres, and to careers; poetic reception and dissemination (groups, movements, formations, institutions); the intersection of poetry and theory; questions about language, poetic authority, and the goals of writing; claims in poetics, impacts of social life, and the dynamics of the poetic career as these are staged and debated by poets and inside poems. Since its inception, the series has been distinguished by its tilt toward experimental work – intellectually, politically, aesthetically. It has consistently published work on Anglophone poetry in the broadest sense and has featured critical work studying literatures of the UK, of the US, of Canada, and Australia, as well as eclectic mixes of work from other social and poetic communities. As poetry and poetics form a crucial response to contemporary social and political conditions, under David Herd’s editorship the series will continue to broaden understanding of the field and its significance.

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The poet, Will Alexander, sitting on a chair in his office, with a bookcase in the background teeming full of books and papers. Photograph, Joshua Schuster, August 2023

The original version of the book has been revised. A correction to this book can be found at https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-90002-0_25

For Will Alexander and the transported reader
“burning with itinerant phonemes”
“to blaze with convivial voltage”

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CONTENTS

Introduction: Will Alexander’s Poetics—A Transmutational Orchestra	1
Joshua Schuster	
A Glossary of Glossolalia: The Syntactic Conservation of Energy in Alexander’s Prose	19
Andrew Joron	
Wilderness Words: Exploring Eco-poetics with Will Alexander’s “The Stratospheric Canticles”	33
Megan Simpson	
Diffraction Index: Will Alexander’s Cosmopolitics	55
Jonathan Skinner	
“Organic Disorder”: Will Alexander, Surrealism, and the Renewal of Epic	89
Rob Turner	
Will Alexander’s <i>Spectral Hieroglyphics</i>: Surrealist Intimacy with Elected Precursors	105
Abigail Susik	

“Not subject to being object”: Questioning Calculation in Will Alexander’s “The Congo”	113
Marcella Durand	
“To Expose the Prior Mathematics of Monsters”: Will Alexander’s Poetics and the Re-counting of Mathematical History	129
Greg Londe	
Faunal Communities	145
Brenda Iijima	
The Plenitude Poem	165
Joshua Schuster	
“There Are No Nouns to Ensnare Me”: Decolonization of Identity in Will Alexander’s Poetics	181
Giorgia Pavlidou	
Astrobiopoetics: Will Alexander, Stellar Scale, and the Other Anthropos	193
Brad Tabas	
Out of Sync, Out of Sound: Three of Six Improvisations on Will Alexander’s <i>Divine Blue Light</i>	209
Jenna Peng	
Only the Weather Matters Anymore	217
Janice Lee and Will Alexander	
Generative Archives: Working with Will Alexander	227
Johanna Drucker and Maxwell Holland	
A Surrealist at the Kitchen Table	237
Aldon Lynn Nielsen	

Will Alexander’s Wild Syncretism Charles Bernstein	241
Will Alexander, the Inexhaustible, and the Unfeasible Steve Light	245
Trumpeting Tracie Morris	253
“Blaze as Unknowable Drift”: A Note on Will Alexander Garrett Caples	255
Will Alexander’s Cosmic Indigeneity to the Whole of the Earth Roberto Harrison	261
Will Alexander and Joshua Schuster—Interview—Conducted in Los Angeles, August 16–17, 2023 Joshua Schuster	263
My Poetics: Conscripted Notings as Mathematical Séance Will Alexander	283
The Sand Genie Will Alexander	287
Correction to: Will Alexander’s Poetics Joshua Schuster	C1
Will Alexander Bibliography	297
Index	299

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Will Alexander is a poet, novelist, essayist, playwright, and visual artist. He is the author of over 20 books. He has taught at several universities including the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics, the University of California, and Hofstra University. In 2022, The Huntington Library purchased his papers. He lives in Los Angeles.

Charles Bernstein is the winner of the 2019 Bollingen Prize for *Near/Miss* (2018) and for lifetime achievement in American poetry. He is the author of *The Kinds of Poetry I Want: Essays and Comedies* (2024), *Topsy-Turvy* (2021), and *Pitch of Poetry* (2016), along with dozens of other books.

Garrett Caples is a poet who lives in San Francisco and is an editor for City Lights Books, where he worked with Will Alexander on the books *Divine Blue Light (for John Coltrane)* (2022) and *Compression & Purity* (2011). He is the author of many books of poems, including *Lovers of Today* (2021), a book of fables, *Proses* (2024), and a book of essays, *Retrievals* (2014), all from Wave Books. He has edited or co-edited many books by Philip Lamantia, among others.

Johanna Drucker is distinguished professor and Breslauer Professor in the Department of Information Studies at University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). She is internationally known for her work in the history of graphic design, typography, experimental poetry, fine art, and digital humanities. Recent work includes *Visualization and Interpretation* (2020), *Iliad: Meta-Biography of a Modernist* (2020), and *Digital Humanities 101: An Introduction to Digital Methods* (2021). Her most

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Andrew Joron is a poet, essayist, and speculative fiction writer. His poetry collections include *The Absolute Letter* (2017), *Trance Archive: New and Selected Poems* (2010), *The Sound Mirror* (2008), *Fathom* (2003),

and *The Removes* (1999). His work of speculative fiction, *O0*, was published in 2022. *The Cry at Zero*, a selection of his prose poems and critical essays, was published in 2007. From the German, he has translated the *Literary Essays* of Marxist-Utopian philosopher Ernst Bloch (1998) and *The Perpetual Motion Machine* by the proto-Dada fantasist Paul Scheerbart (2011). As a musician, Joron plays the theremin in various experimental and free-jazz ensembles. Joron teaches creative writing at San Francisco State University.

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Steve Light a basketball point guard, is also a philosopher and poet. His most recent books are *The Emergence of Happiness* (2019) and *Against Middle Passages* (2017). Two volumes of essays, *Occasions of Happiness: Essays in Philosophy, Poetry, and Painting* and *To Give Just Weight to All Things: Essays in Politics, Race, Society, and Culture* are in preparation. A volume of philosophical aphorisms and essayistic paragraphs, *In All Expectation*, is in progress and two other volumes, *Jean Grenier: A Philosopher of Light and Shadow* and *Montaigne and Death*, are undergoing revision. He is also the translator of Jean Grenier's *Les Iles (Islands: Lyrical Essays* [2005]).

Greg Londe is a Senior Lecturer in English in the Department of Literatures at Cornell University. He is the editor of *The Cracked Lookingglass: Essays in Honor of the Leonard L. Milberg Collection of Irish Prose Writers* and the author of *The Poetics of Large Numbers: Long Poems, Imperial Metrics, and Cosmopolitical Space* (forthcoming).

Tracie Morris is a poet, vocalist, scholar, vocal coach, actor, director, and filmmaker. Morris was the inaugural Distinguished Visiting Professor of Poetry at the Iowa Writers' Workshop before joining the Workshop as its first African-American tenured Professor of Poetry. Tracie has presented innovative poetry, performance art, and theory in over 30 countries and is the author/editor of ten books and is included in dozens of anthologies. University creative fellowships include the Woodberry Poetry Room (Harvard University), Center for Programs in Contemporary Writing (University of Pennsylvania), and Visiting Professor of Practice, Brown University Arts Institute. She is a 2021 Guggenheim Poetry Fellow. Tracie is a Cave Canem alumna, former board member and designated a Master Artist of the Atlantic Center for the Arts.

Aldon Lynn Nielsen was the first winner of the Larry Neal Award for poetry. His recent books include *Back Pages: Selected Poems, Sufferhead, Spider Cone* and *The Inside Songs of Amiri Baraka* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

Giorgia Pavlidou is a clinical psychotherapist turned writer and painter who has lived in Benelux, California, and India where she studied Urdu literature at Lucknow University. She received her MFA from Manchester Writing School, UK. Her work appeared or is forthcoming in *Maintenant Dada Journal*, *Beacon Radiant Anthology*, *Clockwise Cat*, *Arial Archipelago*, and *The Anthology of Sparring with Beatnik Ghosts*. Recent full-length publications include *Haunted by the Living, Fed by the Dead* (2022), and *Female Body Retold* (2023). She's based in Greece.

Jenna Peng is a writer and curator of autotheoretical, autopoetical thought experiments. But her friends consider her to be a poet, literary improviser, and writer who wants to be an artist. Her writing has appeared in *Harriet* and the *Asian American Literary Review*. In 2024, she co-curated "Read-Shifting Web," an Asian diasporic reading room/literary arts exhibition at Bunker Projects. She lives in Pittsburgh, where she teaches workshops in anti-ante-auntie criticism.

Joshua Schuster is Professor of English and Director of the Centre for the Study of Theory and Criticism at Western University in Canada. He is the author of *What Is Extinction? A Natural and Cultural History of Last Animals* (2023, winner of the Susanne M. Glasscock Book Prize), co-author with Derek Woods of *Calamity Theory: Three Critiques of Existential Risk* (2021), and author of *The Ecology of Modernism: American Environments and Avant-Garde Poetics* (2015). He is an executive committee member of the Association for Literature, Environment, and Culture in Canada.

Megan Simpson is Associate Professor Emerita of English and women's, gender, and sexuality studies at Penn State Altoona, where she taught multi-ethnic and African American literature, literary theory, gender studies, and composition and created annual African American Read-In programming at the college for more than two decades. She holds a doctorate in English from the University of New Mexico, a Master of Arts in creative writing from San Francisco State University, and a bachelor's degree in literature (creative writing) from the University of California, Santa Cruz. Simpson is the author of *Poetic Epistemologies: Gender and Knowing in Women's Language-Oriented Writing* (2000). Her scholarship has appeared in *Contemporary Literature*, *Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States*, *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, *Women's Studies*, *College Literature*, *Obsidian*, *Reader*, and elsewhere. Her poetry and fiction have appeared in such journals as *Black Warrior Review*, *Five Fingers Review*, *The Reaper*, and *Kayak*.

Jonathan Skinner is a poet, editor, translator, and critic, known for founding the journal *Ecopoetics*. His poetry collections include *The Archive* (2024), *Chip Calls* (2014), *Birds of Tiffy* (2011), *Warblers* (2010), and *Political Cactus Poems* (2005). He has published numerous essays at the intersection of poetry, ecology, activism, landscape, and sound studies—most recently on Documentary Environmental Poetics for the *Routledge Companion to Ecopoetics* (2023) and on Joanne Kyger's Eco-Dharma for *Poet in Place and Time: Critical Essays on Joanne Kyger* (2024). He teaches in the Department of English and Comparative Literary Studies at the University of Warwick.

Abigail Susik explores the intersection of international surrealism with anti-authoritarian protest cultures. Susik is author of *Surrealist Sabotage and the War on Work* (2021), editor of *Resurgence! Jonathan Leake*,

Radical Surrealism, and the Resurgence Youth Movement, 1964–1967 (2023), and coeditor of *Surrealism and Film after 1945: Absolutely Modern Mysteries* (2021) and *Radical Dreams: Surrealism, Counterculture, Resistance* (2022). She is a founding board member of the International Society for the Study of Surrealism, Joint Editor of the Bloomsbury Press Transnational Surrealism Series, and Associate Professor of Art History at Willamette University.

Brad Tabas is a philosopher. He teaches in the Department of Social and Human Sciences at the ENSTA (*École nationale supérieure de techniques avancées*) in Brest, France. He holds his BA from the University of Pennsylvania and has an MA and PhD from New York University. His recent work has been published, among other places, in *Terrain, Society + Space*, and the *L'espace politique*. He is interested in big-picture questions regarding deformations in language and thought at the intersection between literature and technoscience, space history and environmental philosophy, astropolitics and cultural criticism.

Rob Turner's research is focused on American literature, with a particular interest in experiments in the epic mode. His first monograph is *Counterfeit Culture: Truth and Authenticity in the American Prose Epic Since 1960* (2019). More recently, Turner contributed to *Tales of Dionysus* (2022), a collaborative reimagining of the fifth-century Egyptian epicist Nonnus, working alongside major contemporary poets and translators, including Stanley Lombardo, William Levitan, and Anne Carson. Other recent publications include book chapters on Ezra Pound and Samuel R. Delany. Turner also writes about music, contributing regularly to the *Wire* magazine, and he is working on an edited collection for Cambridge University Press, exploring the poetics of hip-hop. He has lived and worked in London and Cambridge but is now based in the southwest of England, where he teaches at the University of Exeter.



Introduction: Will Alexander's Poetics—A Transmutational Orchestra

Joshua Schuster

Will Alexander's poetics—encompassing all his writings, including poems, fictions, essays, plays, aphorisms, dialogues, interviews, and visual art, with over 20 books in print and many unpublished works—is among the most exceptional writing on the planet today. There is an immediate electrical effect one senses in each line and sentence of his work. This feeling of electrification is not simply a metaphor. Alexander aims to provide a new neural nourishment in the reader's mind. There is a kind of mental charge in the “lingual fire” that “ignite[s] the neural field with awakening”¹ when

¹Will Alexander, *The Contortionist Whispers* (Notre Dame: Action Books, 2021), 71, 16. In the same volume, Alexander describes his own mental transformations through writing: “This being cellular wizardry through amperage, neurological candescence, inner pyrotechnics” (61). Alexander finds “electricity being the difference between quotidian and poetic levels of language” and cites Artaud's “electrical revolution” as example in *Singing in Magnetic Hoofbeat: Essays, Prose Texts, Interviews and a Lecture 1991–2007* (Ithaca: Essay Press, 2012), 19–20.

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reading Alexander that makes the reader feel like having come upon something special.

One can feel it in the opening stanzas of Alexander's first major work, *Asia & Haiti*, two long poems published together in 1995. "Asia" is written in "a collective voice of rebellious Buddhist monks who hover in invisibility, vertically exiled ... conducting astral warfare against the Chinese invasion and occupation of Tibet."² This collective voice chants:

in this primeval penumbra
 in this heightened verdigris scarlet
 in this incisive analogical omniscience
 it is we
 who break the bells wide open
 it is we
 who signal the dead in their post-mortem frenzy
 with a turbulent flame of Yaks
 with dense in-vital stuffing lynxes
 with mixture by forboding [sic] & conundrum (12)

For the new reader entering into Alexander's vision of "this primeval penumbra," encountering these lines—compressed, rhythmical, oracular, teeming with animals, using a heteroclit vocabulary—feels like crossing a distinct threshold in poetics. It isn't just that the poetics appeared fresh and urgent, both strange and inviting, directly political and wildly imaginative. Reading these lines feels like entering into a different landscape and language, still in English and still earthly, yet also taking leave of these markers. The poetics appeared as if they were from the future but also were resurfacing from the archaic. Discovering Alexander for the first time makes you feel close to what Keats described in his fabulous simile on reading Homer in George Chapman's 1616 translation: "Then felt I like some watcher of the skies / When a new planet swims into his ken."³ In these lines, we are looking through Keats to Chapman to Homer to Odysseus. The alignment of these gazes all felt like looking through the eyes of the astronomer William Herschel, who is in his garden in Bath in 1781, peering through his homemade telescope seeing for the first time Uranus in transit through the constellation Gemini. Alexander's own poetics resonate in a comparative way with the alignment of his singular

²Will Alexander, *Asia & Haiti* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1995), 9.

³John Keats, *Poems* (London: Everyman's Library, 1947), 35.

style, referential density, avant-garde and historical tessellations, cognitive telemetries, and cosmological scope.

This volume of chapters and responses to Alexander's work is the first collective engagement of close readings of his oeuvre. These chapters provide some interpretive context for Alexander's multitudinous creative output with reference to African American poetics, the historical avant-garde, international surrealisms, ecopoetics, anti-colonial thought, the biological and geological wonders appearing in his work, and global practices of consciousness raising and spiritual transformation, among other topics. The respondents here have taken up the task to guide readers of Alexander's work, whenever and wherever they might encounter his writing. This book is designed to be used by readers of Alexander today, 10 years from now, in 100 years, 10,000 years, and so on. The readings and responses provide a sense of the range of poetics and historical situatedness of Alexander's transformational work. Inspired by Alexander's verbal intensity and oneiric precision, these chapters feature discussions of individual poems, his shapeshifting sentences, his philosophical epiphanies, and his expansive essays, along with broader observations on Alexander's work across his career.

To read Alexander, one must follow Alexander's invitation to step with him into the primeval lightning field, "take the noun ship,"⁴ and experience what Philip Lamantia called Alexander's "lexical magic." Alexander remarks of his poetics as drawn from "a magical insouciance" that appears in language as his writing travels from metaphor to metaphor: "there exists for me language as incandescence, as power which brews as magnetic food, capable of sustained hieratic foliage, where the upper and lower realms converse in aural bursts of transformative cinder, leaving the old partitioned capillaries behind."⁵ While there is pleasure in watching the magician work, this volume comprises a series of chapters and elucidations on Alexander that propose a pleasure in reflecting, interpreting, and responding to this "verbal fuel" (168). Alexander's writings combine detailed research and improvisatory associations; the chapters here take up a similar spirit. The contributors gathered together tell what it is like for them to read Alexander following their own pathways and demonstrating different reading methods to provide a variety of ways into the incandescent language of his texts.

⁴Will Alexander, *Towards the Primeval Lightning Field* (Oakland: O Books, 1998), 81.

⁵Alexander, *Singing in Magnetic Hoofbeat*, 168.

“BIOGRAPHY IS A LANTERN”

Will Alexander, whose family is of African American descent, was born in Los Angeles in 1948. Alexander has lived his whole life in the vicinity of the city. In one essay, he calls Los Angeles an “explosive Cimmerian fish.”⁶ In another it is “an anomalous maze”⁷ and “a lingual engine” (51) where over 200 languages are spoken. Bob Kaufman wrote of the dreamwork quality of the city, “I want to prove that Los Angeles is a practical joke played on us by superior beings on a humorous planet.”⁸ It is not a city, however, that appears very often in Alexander’s work (although his local friends, fellow writers, and institutions he is connected to are invoked in dedications and as sources of inspiration). Alexander’s writings more often visit cities like Paris, Kinshasa, Cairo, Mexico City, Jaffna (Sri Lanka), Philadelphia, ancient Babylon, Port-au-Prince, and Pompeii. His work makes references to mountains from all the continents, wades into trading gulfs, finds waters on a new Mars, and encounters many other geographies and places past, present, and future. Alexander has not travelled physically to these places to do research; rather they are sites that are magnetic with imagination and mental traveling for him. Harryette Mullen, discussing Alexander’s earlier publications, remarks that “His literary influences connect him to an international avant-garde, just as his experience as an African American connects him to a black diaspora and to the political struggles of Third World peoples. In Alexander’s work, the reader finds an expansive vision accompanied by an equally expansive vocabulary, as the poet avails himself of the opportunity to travel without boundaries while comfortably settled in the library, and he demonstrates how to conduct ‘astral warfare’ without killing a soul.”⁹ The library that one might use for diasporic and astral travelling is one that also now includes Alexander’s own books.

Alexander attended UCLA, obtaining a BA in English and Creative Writing in 1972, and subsequently worked assorted jobs in Los Angeles. As a student, he encountered the work of Arthur Rimbaud, introducing

⁶ Alexander, *Singing in Magnetic Hoofbeat*, 3.

⁷ Will Alexander, *A Cannibal Explains Himself to Himself* (Olympia: The Elephants, 2019), 48.

⁸ Bob Kaufman, *Solitudes Crowded with Loneliness* (New York: New Directions, 1959), 10.

⁹ Harryette Mullen, “‘A Collective Force of Burning Ink’: Will Alexander’s *Asia & Haiti*,” *Callaloo* 22, no. 2 (Spring 1999), 426.

Alexander to what poetics could look like driven by a relentless visionary belief. During the 1970s, Alexander frequented jazz clubs, formed friendships with local artists, and began to associate with writers hanging out at Beyond Baroque, a literary and arts center in Venice. Alexander continued to hone his poetics while connecting with a range of international surrealist poets and Black Arts Movement writers. By the late 1970s, Alexander formed friendships with Clayton Eshelman and Philip Lamantia, who provided crucial support and encouragement. In Alexander's own view, what expanded his poetics most in his early writings was his release from hewing to the denotative and chronological limits of language and the guarded stability of the conscious mind. Instead, his writing began to favor the pursuit of creation as transformation, searching for wider ranges of lingual discovery that would carry both writer and reader to states of what Alexander would later call "differential consciousness."

In 1979, Alexander's first published poem "Mountain Slope Swimming in Detroit" appeared in *River Styx*. This prose poem, comprising a series of short phrases separated by commas, loosely sketched scenes from Detroit in a hallucinatory flow of language: "on the John Lodge expressway there are boats the size of wind whipped martinis, cars are stripped to their essence, taken to Chicago as recycled horse paint, in the projects wind is pure as death, a needle the length of a lamp vein, sticking through the heart, freezing the heart with cocaine ice cubes smoking in ditches, Detroit, father of chrome and fire."¹⁰ Already in evidence are Alexander's characteristic use of hypotaxis and compressed imagery. But he had yet to develop a more concentrated use of recursive, cyclical language and the scientific and spiritual lexicons that will become aspects of his signature style. Alexander published his first book, *Vertical Rainbow Climber*, in 1987. The volume included 23 poems, 19 of which were prose poems with similar use of multi-perspective comma-laden phrases. Following this volume, his writing began to appear regularly in avant-garde little magazines, including *Sulfur*, *Hambone*, *Boxcar*, *Apex of the M*, and *Oblek*.

In 1995, Alexander published two remarkable books: *Asia & Haiti* and *The Stratospheric Canticles*. These books immediately caught the attention of a wide range of readers and announced the flourishing of Alexander's innovative poetics. In an early review of *Asia & Haiti*, Marcella Durand found the two long poems achieved a remarkable

¹⁰Will Alexander, "Mountain Slope Swimming in Detroit," *River Styx* 4 (1979), 115.

“fusion and transcendence” of poetics and politics.¹¹ Durand noticed how Alexander’s poetics followed paths of the metamorphosis of its terms: “None of the subtleties and complexities of language, culture, geography, and struggle are lost in a larger incantation of eternal clash between ‘good’ and ‘evil,’ both entities appearing in myriad, changeable forms” (26). Of *The Stratospheric Canticles*, Keith Tuma found the poems inside “pressurized, turbulent, eruptive” and thought the book “simultaneously a defense and enactment of a poetics of apocalypse.”¹² These two works marked an outpouring of writing and publishing for Alexander, an output that befits the expansive scales of his work. Since then, over 20 books have been published, showcasing Alexander’s creative energies across multiple genres and media, and many more works are in manuscript. Alexander’s own paintings and drawings often appear as covers or imprinted in pages as a catalyst inviting the reader into visual journeying.

In more recent decades, Alexander’s work has flourished with proper accolades. Alexander has been awarded a Whiting Fellowship for Poetry, a California Arts Council Fellowship, and a 2016 Jackson Poetry Prize. An issue of *Callaloo* (Spring 1999) was dedicated to his work. Alexander has taught at several universities, including the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics, the University of California, and Hofstra University. He also has worked extensively with Theater of Hearts / Youth First that connects low-income students to arts education. In 2021, the African American astronaut Sian Proctor carried some of Alexander’s poems into space. In 2022, The Huntington Library purchased his papers.

These biographical details are helpful markers in charting Alexander’s oeuvre. Yet Alexander would also point the reader to what he has written on the title of “anti-biography,” where he states, “For me, biography is a lantern, burning in the midst of parenthetical opaqueness.”¹³ A significant part of Alexander’s writings passes through his own original sigils, fictional characters, heteronyms, assumed personas, speaking animals, historically real and invented characters, and many dedications to other writers. As with any great artist, Alexander has both discovered and invented his precursors. Among his early poetic influences are Arthur Rimbaud, Octavio

¹¹ Marcella Durand, “Review of *Asia & Haiti*,” *The Poetry Project Newsletter* 161 (April/May 1996), 26.

¹² Keith Tuma, “Noticings,” *Sulfur* 39 (Ypsilanti: Eastern Michigan University, 1996), 171.

¹³ Will Alexander, *Compression & Purity* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2011), 63.

Paz, and Aimé Césaire. Alexander first felt drawn to become an artist while immersed in listening and playing jazz, especially the music of John Coltrane and Eric Dolphy. Alexander's poetics extends the global Black radical tradition of writers, ranging from Phillis Wheatley and Langston Hughes to Léopold Sédar Senghor, Amos Tutuola, Franz Fanon, Jayne Cortez, and Nathaniel Mackey. Other touchstones include French, African, American, and Latin American Surrealisms, the Indian philosopher Sri Aurobindo, and the Senegalese historian Cheikh Anta Diop.

Even as Alexander tirelessly gathers these sources into conversation, his work has consistently startled readers with its explosive originality. One of Alexander's early poems, "Apprenticeship," which opens with a citation from Paz, finds the poet working on his craft and already intuiting the remarkable scales his poetry would take:

Here I am
 posing in a mirror of scratch paper sonnets
 sonnets as rare as a live Aegean rhino

 absorbing the cracklings of my craft
 its riverine volcanoes
 its spectacular lightning peninsulas
 emitting plentiful creosote phantoms
 from an ironic blizzard of unsettled pleromas¹⁴

Gathering poems from "riverine volcanoes" and "spectacular lightning peninsulas"—this is an extreme projective verse that exceeds Charles Olson's scope of the term. Here, one sees in full flourish Alexander's characteristic use of metalepsis (compression of tropes that induces highly charged language) in the layering of multiple visionary references. However, some initial readers of his work overstated the designation of Alexander as a self-taught outsider in an "exoteric" position within the landscape of American poetry at the end of the twentieth century. This appellation does not befit a writer who so overtly names his influences and shares his library with readers. Alexander brings his audience through compendiums of knowledge learned from the sciences and arts, especially from sources deemed minoritized or heretical in history. He also provides glossaries for a number of his importations from specialized vocabularies. Reviewers of Alexander's work often remark on his exoteric phrasing or

¹⁴Will Alexander, *Kaleidoscopic Omniscience*, ed. Daniel Staniforth (Cheltenham: Skylight Press 2013), 131.

arcane vocabulary as his distinct style. This designation makes most sense when taken literally, as exoteric writing means “towards otherness.” Anthony Reed, in his discussion of twentieth-century African American poetics and jazz, takes up the term “outfulness” from Nathaniel Mackey. Reed remarks on the “production of ‘outfulness’ as self-liberation from constraining norms and ideologies Experimental violations of established norms evince both dissatisfaction and the contingent extension of techniques into new areas of thought, feeling, and desire whose effects are not known in advance.”¹⁵ The expression also seems particularly apt for Alexander, who gravitates towards outfulness as a generative resource for his art.

Yet, in another sense, Alexander’s work forces a fundamental change in terms like the arcane, and one could say that all of the language in his writing has taken up exoteric energy. This is another way of saying that there is no longer a meaningful oppositional distinction between insider/outsider or esoteric/exoteric categories after reading Alexander. In *The Combustion Cycle*, Alexander briefly addresses the question of the status of the exoteric in his writing:

never the exoteric letter
 superficially evolved
 from reading invoked by compositional errata

 it is by gainful self-instruction through voids
 that I am guided

 as in magic lightning exploration
 flying by dream across mongoose borders¹⁶

Alexander’s heavy use of a variety of gnostic terms across the spectrum of religions follows from a similar understanding that the purported difference between the hermetic and the standard truth (be it orthodox or scientific) is no longer tenable. This is not to say that there are no differences between such knowledges. The more important point is that ancient traditional or heretical wisdoms held to be outside the norm (because they are archaic, mystic, or non-rational) are storehouses of imagination and visionary care concerning how to live together on Earth. These

¹⁵Anthony Reed, *Freedom Time: The Poetics and Politics of Black Experimental Writing* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), 208.

¹⁶Will Alexander, *The Combustion Cycle* (New York: Roof Books, 2021), 121.

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INDEX¹

A

- Above the Human Nerve*
 Domain, 68, 181
- Abram, David, 42, 43, 45, 46, 48–53
- Across the Vapour Gulf*, 204, 206, 230
- Adorno, Theodor, 214, 215
- Alaimo, Stacy, 13
- Alchemy, 9, 13, 48, 54, 56, 58, 61, 187, 191, 211, 227, 230
- Alien Weaving*, 161, 277
- Archives, 17, 140, 146, 219, 227–236, 275
- Argüelles, José, 56, 77
- Artaud, Antonin, 1n1, 10, 24, 92, 105, 107–111, 230, 242, 257, 271, 273, 279
- Asia & Haiti*, 2, 5, 80, 81, 91, 125, 242, 255, 271, 280
- Astrobiology, 61, 75, 77, 195, 201
- Aurobindo, Sri, 7, 275, 276, 278, 279

B

- Barad, Karen, 56, 58, 59, 64, 87
- Bataille, Georges, 257
- Beyond Baroque, 5, 228
- Blumenberg, Hans, 194
- Boon, Marcus, 71, 72, 76, 83
- Breton, André, 11, 20, 23, 23n3, 31, 78, 89, 90, 98, 99, 103, 106, 109, 182, 230, 240, 264, 266, 279
- Brimstone Boat, The – For Philip Lamantia*, 92, 94, 99, 230
- Brown, Jayna, 178
- Brown, Wendy, 160

C

- Cabrol, Nathalie, 206
- Callaloo*, 6, 35n4, 238
- Campbell, SueEllen, 34, 35, 39, 40, 53

¹Note: Page numbers followed by ‘n’ refer to notes.

- Carrington, André, 12
 Carter, Brandon, 197
 Césaire, Aimé, 7, 11, 15, 20, 72,
 98–103, 103n36, 105–107, 109,
 111, 112, 131, 137–139,
 175–178, 190, 230, 242, 245,
 264, 271, 273, 274, 276
 Coccia, Emanuele, 217
 Coleman, Wanda, 231, 235, 247
 Coltrane, John, 7, 85, 184, 202, 203,
 216, 249, 265, 278
 Comaroff, Jean, 188
Combustion Cycle, The, 8, 15, 16, 55,
 58, 59, 62, 63, 69–72, 74–76,
 78–81, 83, 86, 87n40, 90, 91,
 147, 157, 173, 174, 178, 184,
 186–188, 197, 208, 230,
 258, 264
Coming Mental Range, The, 73, 116,
 120, 245
Compression & Purity, 256, 276
 Congo, Democratic Republic of, 15,
 113–127, 150, 205–206
Contortionist Whispers, The, In1, 245,
 250, 280
 Cortez, Jayne, 7, 20, 185, 240
 Cosmology, 11, 75–79, 162, 174,
 175, 178, 183, 196, 197,
 268, 274
 Culler, Jonathan, 206
- D**
 Daumal, René, 124, 190, 271
Diary as Sin, 277, 278
 Dickinson, Emily, 63, 64, 66–68
 Diop, Cheikh Anta, 7, 131, 137–142,
 269, 274
Divine Blue Light, 17, 171, 202,
 209–216, 256, 258, 265
- Dolphy, Eric, 7, 184, 247–249,
 265, 266
- E**
 Ecology, 15, 34, 35, 39, 43, 52, 53,
 61, 76, 78, 79, 87, 145, 151,
 161, 170, 178, 191, 196,
 201n22, 272
 Ecopoetics, 3, 33–54, 271
 Egypt, ancient, 102, 108, 279
 Eliade, Mircea, 70, 79, 80, 83, 187
 Emerson, Ralph Waldo, 208
 Erasmus, 166–168
 Ernst, Max, 106
 Eshleman, Clayton, 233, 242, 276
 Exobiology as Goddess, 9,
 203n25, 270
- F**
 Ferreira, Mariana Kawall Leal,
 132, 133
 Flax, Jane, 191
 Frank, Adam, 201
- G**
 Gilbert-Lecomte, Roger, 15, 105,
 107–111, 231
 Glossary, 7, 14, 19–32, 70, 78, 105,
 111, 137, 147, 188, 199, 290
- H**
 Hall, Stuart, 180
 Harris, Wilson, 186–188
 Hui, Yuk, 196, 199
 Hummingbirds, 15, 52, 55–57, 59,
 62–69, 71, 72, 74, 77, 80, 82,

83, 86, 87, 90, 147, 157,
172–174, 179, 187, 188, 272

J

Jameson, Frederic, 97, 98, 263
Jankélévitch, Vladimir, 247, 249
Jazz, 5, 7, 8, 15–17, 20, 61, 79, 185,
202, 261, 265–267, 271
Joans, Ted, 185
Jones, Donna V., 176, 177
Jonson, Ben, 16, 167–170

K

Kaleidoscopic Omniscience, 62, 68,
157–158, 230
Kaufman, Bob, 4, 72, 242, 256, 264,
266, 276, 279
Keats, John, 2, 16, 167, 169–171, 249
Kimmerer, Robin Wall, 167
Kripal, Jeffrey, 9n17

L

Lamantia, Philip, 3, 5, 20, 72, 94, 95,
256, 264, 265, 272, 279
Lara, Carlos, 139, 140
Lautréamont, Comte de, 97, 98, 242
Limón, Ada, 166
Los Angeles, 4, 20, 37, 57, 72, 84,
217, 232, 236–240, 263–281
Love, Glen, 40, 41
Lovelock, James, 194

M

Mackey, Nathaniel, 7, 8, 34, 91, 93,
95, 237, 238, 242, 276, 280
Mandelstam, Osip, 248
Massumi, Brian, 148

Mathematics, 10, 16, 116, 119–121,
129–144, 276

Mayer, Bernadette, 62, 63
Mbembe, Achille, 205
McKittrick, Katherine, 132, 133, 143
Merwin, W.S., 248
Michaux, Henri, 189, 190
Mondie, Levita, 36, 52
Montale, Eugenio, 250
Moore, Jason W., 161
Moten, Fred, 210
Mullen, Harryette, 4, 34, 35n4, 49,
81, 82, 91, 92, 125, 172, 238

N

Nielsen, Aldon Lynn, 17, 35,
35n4, 78, 265

O

O'Hara, Frank, 245, 249
Oloixarac, Pola, 194
Olson, Charles, 7, 10, 243
Oryx, 13, 125

P

Peacher, Georgiana, 72, 73
Pound, Ezra, 94–97, 99, 102, 265
Proctor, Sian, 6, 200

Q

Quashie, Kevin, 177, 178
Quint, David, 93–96

R

Ra, Sun, 157, 195, 247, 271
Rabearivelo, Jean-Joseph, 250