

***Synchronicity: The Oracle of Sun Medicine, Tureeda Mikell (Nomadic Press, 2020)***

At my job, I'm usually studying for exams, prepping, commenting in subject-object consciousness, of grammar as social relations, feeling separated from the body, but it has often been said, "the teacher will come when the student's ready" and sometimes a single line can have a force that comes like slow medicine. "To disengage one subject from life's circle would paralyze the rest." (155). This wisdom in this line, however, becomes even more uncanny when I consider the context in which these lines came to Tureeda Mikell:

"If I hadn't experienced migraines while studying for three exams, looking for subject-connectedness in a circle, reading a book given to me, titled Muntu, and find a quote that read, "For the African, to disengage one subject from life's circle would paralyze the rest," and have the migraines disappear shortly thereafter," (155)

This is just one of the ways in which Tureeda Mikell, in her debut collection, *Synchronicity* (2020), is able to show the healing powers of certain words, and also how sharing some words can make people feel less alone or less crazy, especially against cultural normative institutions that pathologize nature. Yet, as a healer, she also knows how deep these cultural institutions have their claws in us, even if we think we've escaped them once and for all, as if a pill can purge these demons.

Mikell's most salient critiques in the lyrical discursive poems (which, at times straggle, and other times, transcend, the old 'page' vs. 'stage' distinction) are against normative institutions more than individuals, a spiritual realpolitik. As a word warrior who uses "wordplay as a weapon," as Judy Juanita writes, Mikell's struggle is often on the level of ideas and language and cosmologies, the metaphysical foundations of often uninterrogated institutions, including The Big Food Industry/FDA/HMO pipeline, the church, the school, and, the very 'governing principle' of the English language itself, to name but a few manifestations of the diseased culture most of us are born into.

To see, to feel, evil as sickness, as Mikell does, shows tremendous empathy for victims under the systemic linguistic (manifestations of) regime that has done a number on so many of us. By "number on us" I mean casts a spell, even if it's a "secular" spell (commercial, electronic, etc). Mikell, in this book, uses by any means necessary to expose this spell to undo it to make room for deeper, more embodied, ones, "Shattering myth with older myth," as Juanita writes.

Many of the poems involve a hilarious and savage critique of Imperial Christianity that take up where Amiri Baraka's poems like "When We'll Worship Jesus," "Dope" and "Allah Mean Everything" left off, utilizing silly soulful puns and jokes so ridiculous they can make you cringe with awareness, for instance:

"Why did the son of the sun worship with warship,  
Prey on those who pray for peace,  
Set sail for sale of piece with pair-of-dice for paradise."  
*("Spell's Labyrinths: Double Talk" 7)*

Rhyme and reason come together---Mikell's no snob against nursery rhymes--but on a level of drabber discursive prose the wisdom here would take paragraphs to unpack. In lengthy pieces such

as “*Worship Warship*” and “*Questions for SS*,” she lyricizes rhetorical and oratorical devices as she interrogates the churchmen who mouth such sanctimonious pieties as ‘God is Love,’ by syncretically juxtaposing the patriarchal church definition of love with both Aretha Franklin and Tina Turner’s anthems against the hypocrisy of the male use of the word:

What did you say, Churchman?

God is love?!!

What love got to do with it?

Where the *respect* what we’d like to know!” (37)

“*Questions for SS*” is an elaborate metaphysical/linguistic history of the character of “God” as revealed in the bible, or at least the men who acted and still act in his name on the back of the dollar. In her psychoanalysis, she convincingly characterizes this “god” as a bipolar narcissist and depressive megalomaniac, and asks such questions as:

“Did you consider God a good model for your parents?

“Did God sound like a loving god, or a bully?” (96)

“Did you feel an emotional disconnect from your soul?”

Did you learn psych means soul/light in Latin?

Did SS break you from feeling your soul light?

Did your body feel less alive?

Did life become bleary or unclear?

Were you afraid to trust your insight?” (97)

Yes, I say! As one “razed Catholic,” I feel this is a better and more embodied diagnosis of much American pathology than Freudian psychology’s emphasis on the “family romance.” This portrait of “God” also shares much in common with her dramatic monologue spoken in the voice of the corporate lobbyists and advertisers who propagate America’s unhealthy addictions to food and drugs (whether legal or not) in “*Devil’s Advocate*.” Such Devils (such as Richard Berman of the Center for Consumer Freedom, dubbed Dr. Evil by Rachel Maddow, or the other “profits over people” engineers with their Ph.Ds in the manipulative psychic warfare known as “consumer psychology”) may be very similar to that biblical junk food devil Jesus tried to resist in his 40 day cleanse fast. Yet, even in this dark poem, Mikell hints at an alternative in the “spiritual psychics who say/ our soul sends and receives/ with electro-chemical impulses/ that sense with intuitive release.” (67)

Such intuitive releases abound throughout *Synchronicity* beyond the hell these God-devils make of the world, beyond beyond in the betweening, twining, twinning, the emptiness, or say the soul-sol, the serious fun of Isis trapped in a Greco-Roman dog-eat-dog star world. One way to access this, as the book’s subtitle announces, is through, “sun medicine.”

Not only is the sun medicinal on the most physical and visceral level, but also on the metaphysical level, as Mikell finds life in a heliocentric tradition that first arrived, in English poetry at least, on these shores in Phillis Wheatley’s vastly underrated, “Thoughts on the Works of Providence” in the early 1770s.

For Mikell, beyond its colloquial reference to a beach bum, just trying to find a cheaper tanning salon, there is a political dimension to sun worshipping. “Sun medicine is an antidote against oppression. It is an act of resistance!” In *“My Sun,”* she offers prayer and devotion:

“I will speak for you  
Though scriptures mask  
Your testimony from eyes”

These oppressive scriptures:

“Tell us  
The rise of sun’s daily light cannot compare  
To god’s son who died for our own sins and rose  
From the dead who will return?”

In a world with “too many religious saviors,/too many competitive death plans,” all the miracles attributed to a once-and-for-all Jesus (“Walk upon waters”) are but etiolated versions of what we feel, directly in the activity of sunlight. And also, recalling Dickinson (“Some Keep The Sabbath”), “I need not wait for your return.” (2) In her celebration of the non-denominational sun, Mikell takes her place in the long-line of wise healer women, a tradition that predates the specialization called “poetry” or “religion.”

For her, beyond the Christian cartoon, “synchronistic occurrences stun the mind with recognition of a greater *collective* at work” (emphasis added). According to Jung, synchronicity is an “acausal connecting (togetherness) principle,” perhaps like the “unified vitality affect,” community music therapists say happens in a group improvising music and dance.

The book’s final poem, *“If I Hadn’t,”* is a list of synchronistic experiences she’s had through her life that not only allow her to recognize a greater collective at work, but also have shaped her character. Sometimes the juxtapositions between stanzas show how the same feeling can be experienced in different languages, vocabularies, disciplines, for instance:

“If I hadn’t called and talked to a Zen Buddhist priest for 2  
Hours, who assured me I was not going mad or crazy, nor had I  
Committed a sin, but was merely entering my enlightenment,

If I hadn’t commissioned my astrology chart to be calculated 5 times,  
Aligning on earth as it is in heaven, as an active noun verb agreement system,

If I hadn’t recognized, while studying organic and inorganic chemistry,  
That iron is not only a common element found in the body but throughout  
The universe, causing life to be pulled or repelled in some way” (156)

By the time I get to the end of the third stanza, I get a visceral feeling of magnet(ism). In these stanzaic juxtapositions, Mikell enacts the quote she takes from “The Archeology of knowledge;” by ascribing to the ‘institutional site from which doctors make their discourse,’ whether it be organic chemistry (a “hard science”) or Buddhism and astrology (“soft sciences”), she enhances all three and

her open-minded syncretic curiosity that lead through our society's rigid specializations sees the beauty and wonder of other people in whatever terminology. And such doctors can be found anywhere, including "those who the world has discarded" (156).

Some of the poems focus on how the language norm has either caused, or been used to justify, a disenfranchisement of people for possessing, or being possessed by, one form of "mental illness," or many. In a spirit akin to Emily Dickinson's "Much Madness is Divinest Sense," and Martin Luther King's call to form a National Association for the Advancement of the Maladjusted, Mikell quotes Elanor Longden: "Inner voices are a sane reaction to insane circumstances, not abhorrent forms of schizophrenia to be endured, but complex meaningful experiences to be explored."<sup>1</sup>

Beautifully empathetic poems like *Look At Her*" and *Take Me Home Mama*" show how western medicine, even if it *were* universal enough to be affordable, often makes the problems or diseases worse, especially for poor black girls:

"Doctor's education lacking  
Neural ethnic mediation  
Does what he knows best  
Prescribes medication  
Yet,  
Forgets to mention drug  
Side effect could  
Make her see things  
That were not there" (40)

This elegiac tragic poem gets worse from here. And against the mental hospital in which "Doctors make the conclusion/patients suffered delusion," Mikell, in *Eyes So Bright: Blues*," is able to celebrate a man so diagnosed beyond mere pity:

"But I felt in my heart  
If he were in the land origin of his art,  
He'd be a priest seer." (42)

Access to health care, life care, accessible healthy food is a political issue, as the Black Panthers knew and know. I heard a documentary about Ruth Beckford, the Oakland Dancer and Dance instructor who co-founded the Black Panther free Breakfast programs. It reminded us that the reason J. Edgar Hoover considered them such a threat to "national security" was largely because of their survival programs and not, contrary to popular belief, because of their guns. In a similar vein, Tureeda writes in *Life Light Remembered*," her reminiscences on the Black Panthers who "gave better care than Kaiser dared."

In 1994, 23 years after volunteering  
At the George Jackson free health clinic,  
The Tribune calls, asks:

---

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.ted.com/talks/eleanor\\_longden\\_the\\_voices\\_in\\_my\\_head?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/eleanor_longden_the_voices_in_my_head?language=en)

How many guns did you have at the  
Black Panther Clinic  
I would have told them of certain grains  
To regain genetic memory...  
To reverse heroin dependence  
Reverse curse of opioid addiction  
Purposely placed in our neighborhoods  
To weaken black power base..." (74—75)

That she ends this poem by quoting, by chanting, Gil Scott Heron's "The Revolution Will Not be televised" highlights her contempt for this journalist's sensationalistic commodity questions to propagate a misrepresentation of the Black Panthers to help J. Edgar Hoover destroy them, because black community education and self-determined healthcare was at least as threatening to the U.S. power structure as a few black men with unloaded guns. You can televise the guns, if it bleeds it leads, but health care makes boring TV...

"*It's On*," another poem about the intersection between healthcare and politics, could be seen as a sequel to "*Life Light Remembered*" in recounting her racial reawakening not long after Clinton signed the "Crime Bill." I picture the speaker had been an activist at the intersection of health-care and politics, but then as she got older, realized self-care was more important, in part because of stress the racial battles she had fought when younger. Yet now, when a regal elder confronts her with white supremacists at least as bad as those she fought in her youth, she scoffs disrespectfully at the elder. Listening to herself respond dismissively, "we've come a long way, haven't we?" triggers a deeper racialized trauma inhabiting her body. This intensely dramatic, play-by-play account of being confronted with voices of urgency wake her from sleep about the news to blindly reach for a tape she hadn't remembered recording called "NeoNazis on the rise," as if to reawake her genetic memory to the collective voices of suffering of which she is part.

"I'm a synchronistic story junkie," Mikell writes in another poem. (117) "*It's On*" is one example of a synchronistic story, and so is "*Five-To-Six Hundred Years Old*." In this poem, a spirit tells the first-person speaker: "What troubles you today has a past/five to six-hundred years old." (64) Such a lesson strikes me as wise when applied to many situations in life these days, in breaking the spell of over-inflated self-worries that can get us down, but this historical emphasis can also undo the tyranny the contemporary 'present.' But beyond its more universal applications, what makes this poem so powerful is its subtle critique of racism and sexism on an experiential level even if it doesn't announce itself as about race. Although the word race, or white or black people is never mentioned in this poem, one couplet that occurs near the beginning of the poem: "Perhaps it's my African dress/ Gele' head wrap?"

Occurring as this line does, shortly after a mention of "avoid eye contact," it's hard not to picture a black woman in a white crowd (or neighborhood). But on further investigation, this line may not be so much about race as about culture. At this point in the poem, she's visited by a spirit that tells her to go to Chinatown, ostensibly only for the food, but this could also be a proactive alternative way of acting on an impulse to "get out of this white neighborhood," if I may translate it more negatively: two ways of looking at the same action. In Chinatown, the merchant sells her food healthier than that she'd buy in the funeral that is a white supermarket. Equally importantly, this merchant bows reverentially to give her the food of respect (perhaps even more, *because* of her African clothing?) in contrast to the suspicious glances of the (not racially specified) whites.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, 500 to 600 years ago would make up the bulk of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the century that Portugal and Spain, for instance, helped get Europe out of the so-called “Dark ages,” by inaugurating the transatlantic slave trade with its forced immigration of black people, and its genocide of indigenous people in the new world. Those who survived the first onslaught now found themselves in a culture that did not respect their traditions, beliefs and manner of dress. The race of the gypsy of not specified, and maybe that’s part of Tureeda’s point.

In selectively quoting several excerpts, I underemphasize many deeper aspects of this multi-faceted collection, but whether she foregrounds religion, economy, health, or education, or astrology, Mikell relentlessly works on reconnecting the circle to a subject that had disengaged itself from it, a subject perhaps like a disembodied god, some trust and some anti-trust (the space between profits and prophets). In making room for anger, humor, sorrow, confession, confusion, curiosity, and tenderness, Synchronicity can help provide a foundation for a new more empathetic and equitable society.

Synchronicities need not always be fortuitous in this collection (“the difference between a psychic and a sick psychic” 157), but when they are, there’s a syncretic symbiosis or a synergy exceeding the sum of its parts that one can feel in one’s body and psyche beyond the book’s covers.

In his foreword to the book, James P. Garrett writes, “We experience magic as she pulls us into the examination of critique of the meaning and mis-meaning of words and become a witness to the ways that she squeezes out and nourishes with her own juices the tiny bits of wonder they contain.” Slowly, I feel this book is imbibing me “with the courage to stand in the light of the sun and receive your oracle,” even in a cold, “winter in America.”

Chris Stroffolino