

PART I

Dedication to Professor Allen F. Roberts

In Honor of Professor Allen F. Roberts' Retirement

It is my immense pleasure to open this section of *Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies* in honor of Professor Allen F. Roberts who retired last year after an illustrious career spanning more than five decades. As evinced by the breadth and depth of the contributions contained in this issue, Al's scholarship and guidance have left lasting impressions on his students, both in the classroom and beyond it. In line with the mission statement of this issue of *Ufahamu*, I would like to focus on the impact that Al has had on his students, rather than on his academic accolades. For a reference to Al's scholastic prowess, I will let readers peruse (in the literal sense of the term) his nearly sixty-page CV in their own time.

I am especially honored to be a part of this dedication because the opportunity to work with Al was the principal reason why I chose to pursue a doctoral degree. As an anthropology undergraduate at UCLA, I had little interest in higher education beyond my BA, but after taking Al's Ethnography of Religions course in the last quarter of my senior year it was clear to me that I had to apply to the Department of World Arts and Cultures/Dance post haste. Auspiciously, I was notified of my acceptance to the WAC/D Ph.D. program while in Dakar, Senegal, a place I had dreamt of visiting after reading Al and his late wife Polly's monograph *A Saint in the City*. Since entering the program in 2017, I have participated in dozens of classes and independent study projects with Al, and, to my consternation, my academic interests unfailingly broadened with each encounter. Not only has Al published some of the most compelling and original literature on Africa to be found anywhere, but the scholarship produced by his students over the years has been of a dynamism and caliber that I continuously strive to attain in my own scholastic endeavors.

What I have cherished most while working with Al is his distinct pedagogy. Al's teaching style is primarily lecture-based, though he often complemented his lectures with vivid personal stories and physical objects to help illustrate points and generate discussion. (As the man himself has stated, "show and tell is a way of life"). Although it seems that this bare bones, anecdote-rich, technologically unsophisticated approach to teaching

is fading from the pedagogical limelight in universities across the globe, I have always admired its candid performativity, especially when coming from someone with as much eloquence and life experience as Al has. Indeed, Al's talent as an engaging and thought-provoking professor is twinned with his ability to distill important philosophical insights from a lifetime of "wearing different hats" (often simultaneously). As a "recovering" anthropologist, Distinguished Professor, NASA adviser, curator, illustrator, editor, translator, gandy-dancer, and lifetime member of the Museum of Jurassic Technology, Al has constantly sought to blur the strict disciplinary boundaries delimiting Western academic thought.

In Al's courses, each class meeting built on the last to create an admittedly dense constellation of what otherwise would have been far-reaching and potentially unrelated concepts, practices, and epistemologies. Yet, the ability to recognize and appreciate the nodes and links of such constellations comprised the very grist of class discussion. Indeed, Al's lectures were often ablaze with labyrinthine connections linking anything from object personhood to Congolese hippo-men, American vernacular architecture, Japanese forest-gardens, Senegalese mystical graffiti, and the liminality of South American movie theatres. Critically, the meaning of these abstruse and recondite connections was never overtly given but left instead to the student's own detection and interpretation. Al's skill as a professor lay not only in his ability to synthesize and weave together different practices and ontologies in the formation of compelling and original frameworks, but in teaching his students how to do the same. Accordingly, through his personal and course-based examinations of disparate forms of knowledge and knowledge production, Al imparted to his students a keen interest in the idiosyncratic, the amorphous, and the personal rather than the universal, the definitive, and the empirical. Al's greatest lessons were grounded in the active exploration of how ideas and knowledges could be juxtaposed to create new understandings of the world.

Not surprisingly, the DNA of this approach (one which undoubtedly mimics the "messiness" of lived reality) is evident in the impressive scholarship of Dana Rush, Manuel Jordan, Samuel Anderson, Adedamola Osinulu, Neelima Jeychandran, Elyan Hill, Elaine Sullivan, and Jeremy Peretz, to name just a few of Al's

mentees. It should be noted, however, that apart from instilling in his advisees a propensity for the unusual or overlooked, Al has also been an exemplary guide, resource, and confidant to us all. Nowhere is this more evident than in the fact that Al has written an infinity of recommendation letters on our behalf, often in the eleventh hour; improved our lackluster manuscripts and grant applications through his “scorched earth” editing wizardry; introduced us to endless texts and ideas that would have escaped us otherwise; and helped us shape our own critical thinking in fruitful and expansive ways beyond the confines of any one discipline, school, or field. (Luckily, even in retirement, Al’s encyclopedic emails are incessant).

However, it is not simply Al’s academic support, hat collection, or lecture style that distinguishes him from other professors. I would be remiss not to mention the palpable sense of family that Al and Polly fostered with their students, graduate and undergraduate alike, and the incredible effect this has had on all of us. My membership in this close-knit community—which, Al and Polly expanded over the years with seeming effortlessness—is as important to me today as it was in my first year as a graduate student. Not only has this extended family made my life in the often-overwhelming realm of academia an exciting one; it has also introduced me to a plethora of researchers from a wide range of fields whose work has deeply impacted my own. (“And isn’t that the point?” I hear him ask). This sense that one is in good company both intellectually and communally is central to how I and many of my colleagues view our relationships with Al, and we are ever grateful for it.

Congratulations, *Ninja Demento*. Onward and inward.

Degenhart Brown

Ph.D. Candidate

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My first two encounters with Al Roberts differ widely but speak to his creativity, heart, and wide-ranging interests. The first was reading his essay, “Insight, or Not Seeing is Believing,” for the book *Secrecy: African Art that Conceals and Reveals*. I was still a college student at the time and reading how he could make such complex ideas accessible, while also displaying such respect and humor, awed me. The next encounter, if you can call it that, was reading a quote by folk musician John Gorka that Al had copied and sent to Polly before they were married. I happened to be a John Gorka fan, but Gorka is not a very well-known musician, so I was deeply impressed.

Later, I would pursue graduate studies in Art History at the University of Iowa but take many a class with Al, most of them held in his and Polly’s living room. Thanks to him, I re-read Colin Turnbull, critiqued Paul Stoller, and delved into the writings of Victor Turner, the matrixes of memory, and the spiritual reach of Sheikh Amadou Bamba. It is Al’s line by line reading of my dissertation that is inscribed indelibly in my memory, however. He was at UCLA by this time, but still he made time to offer questions and prompts that fundamentally changed how I write and pushed me to think better and deeper. To this day I find myself wanting to discuss every project with him, and what is even more amazing, is that he will make the time to let me. Thank you, Al.

Karen E. Milbourne

Senior Curator

National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution

Notes from an Atholian in Atlanta

The Al Roberts I have known for nearly two decades combines a particular gruffness with genuine softness. His tough comments and human compassion have helped me grow. Al has also been part of a remarkable duo, Polly and Al, for as long as I have known him, and in reflecting on the role he has played in my career and personal growth, I cannot help but think of them both. The two of them—stars on their own and together—captured my attention years before I thought seriously about studying African art history at the graduate level.

During my first year as an undergraduate at Johns Hopkins University, I took the only course in African art history offered in my entire time there. Fred Lamp, who taught the course, encouraged his students to see Polly and Al's exhibition *Memory: Luba Art and the Making of History* at the Smithsonian Institution National Museum of African Art (NMAfA). The objects and ideas presented in the show fascinated me. Later, during my final year of study at Hopkins, I attended the 1999 African Studies Association conference in Philadelphia. I have few vivid memories from the conference. One is of Polly and Al presenting on the then in-progress research that informed their exhibition *A Saint in the City*.

Nearly three years later, as I was starting a PhD program at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), I met separately with Polly and Al. I felt nervous at each meeting. I was eager to learn from people whose work had so inspired me, but I was also incredulous to find myself in their company. This initial awkwardness did not last long. I soon found myself spending many hours in Polly and Al's living room, talking about my studies and dissertation research. I frequently housesat for them and took care of their dog Scam. A few times I even watched their children, Seth and Sid.

Polly and Al supported me and guided my thinking in too many ways to recount in a short space. Here I would like to highlight two memories, because they remain central to the work I do now, more than a decade after I graduated from UCLA. Early in my graduate career, Al invited me to his Bunche Hall office to consult the book *Frans M. Olbrechts 1899-1958: In Search of Art in Africa* (Antwerp: Antwerp Ethnographic Museum, 2001). Al had excellent things to say about the book's editor Constantine (Costa) Petridis and thought the book would be important for

some of my emerging research interests. Nearly a decade later, Costa invited me to collaborate with him on an exhibition project.

The invitation from Costa led to the fulfillment of an idea that I had first discussed with Polly and Al in their living room: a hypothetical exhibition of Senufo arts. Around the time that I finished my dissertation, Polly and Al urged me to think about ways to make the exhibition happen. We had not addressed the possibility of an invitation from Costa, then curator of African art at the Cleveland Museum of Art (CMA), to work with him on the show. Yet, it's the thing that transformed living-room ideas into an actual project. Occasionally as Costa and I worked together, I sought advice from Polly and Al. I remember, for example, shortly after Costa sent me a draft of the book's cover for review, talking with Al about the design. An unfortunate scheduling conflict made it impossible for Polly and Al to attend the opening of *Senufo: Dynamics of Art and Identity in West Africa* at the CMA. Ironically, they were in Atlanta at the time to give a lecture at Emory's Michael C. Carlos Museum and meet with students. But Polly and Al later saw the show when they participated in a related colloquium that Costa and I co-convened at the CMA. Their presence meant a lot to me.

I could go on and on. I cherish the time I have spent with Polly and Al, and with Al, and I am grateful for their support. There are still-yet-to-be realized article ideas Al and I have discussed, and many other things. Lastly, I want to thank Al for being one of the few Africanist scholars I know who grasps the peculiarities of my hometown, or rather my parents' hometown, of Athol, Massachusetts, and he is always ready to remind me that my roots trace back to Athol. Thank you, Al, for the many ways in which you have helped me grow while remaining true to myself.

Susan Elizabeth Gagliardi

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A Tribute from Dr. A of the House of Roberts

Al, you regularly reminded us that Claude Lévi-Strauss said animals are ‘good to think with,’ so on this occasion of your retirement, allow me to sing your praises thusly:

Thank you for giving me wings. Al, each class I took with you was like a feather. One by one, little by little, my wingspan grew. Cycles of molting gave way to fresh plumage and I was brighter as a result. Thank you for teaching me to fly. Every resource you sent my way was like wind under my wings, giving me lift to explore and soar to new heights. Thank you for sharing your migration patterns with me. You showed me the best watering holes, safe havens for reflection and sustenance. You provided guidance so that I could course correct when I had flown astray, and helped me find a flock to keep me company and lend support on the long journeys ahead. Though the areas of my research may sometimes seem worlds apart from your expertise, my homing instinct time and again leads me back to the work you have shared with me over the years, and I am grateful to have those touchstones, not only return to, but to also spread to other areas of research, which may be less familiar with them. Finally, thank you for teaching me to be wary of anything that looked like a cage and for encouraging me to find my own voice and to sing the most beautiful song I could sing. While simultaneously teaching so many others, you always made sure I made it to my chartered destinations. I hope now you can rest your wings awhile in a tree with some nice shade and delicious fruit and seeds, but I will keep my eye on the skyline to watch where the next leg of your journey takes you. I am proud to be part of your flock and sincerely congratulate you on all you have accomplished.

In celebration of you and a flight well flown,

Francesca Albrezzi

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Office of Advanced Research Computing (OARC), UCLA**

It isn't easy to write a few words about Allen (Al) Roberts' various contributions. His teaching and scholarly writings span across many fields—African Studies, African Arts, Anthropology, Material Cultures, Urban Religiosities, and Indian Ocean Studies, to name a few. In this piece, I'll share my personal take on his mentorship. As a graduate student in the Department of World Arts and Cultures/Dance, I had taken a couple of seminar courses and several independent study classes with Al Roberts. The seminar course "Theories of Cultures" that he taught is one of my best experiences as a graduate student at UCLA. Al effectively paved a solid conceptual foundation for the newly admitted graduate students (i.e., incoming cohort of 2009) by effortlessly mixing theories with his incredible stories—some of which sounded stranger than fiction. His repartees and the regular assortment of donuts and other sugary savories that he fed us certainly added more flavor to our weekly rendezvous. For some reason, this unique curriculum format really helped us grapple with problems of representation and other cultural issues and enabled us to build lasting bonds with our peers. Working as a junior faculty, I am inspired by Al's commitment towards students and often wonder how he manages to carve time out of his schedule. Because Al makes it a point to keep in touch with his current advisees and those who have graduated and would send updates about conferences and emerging discourses and also a range of stories. That is Al Roberts, a phenomenal educator and mentor who continues to support and inspire his students through his sincere and boundless commitment to them. As he is turning a new page in his brilliant career, I wish him my very best. And as Al often puts it, "onwards and inwards."

Neelima Jeychandran

Visiting Assistant Professor

African Studies & Asian Studies, Pennsylvania State University

Al was surprised when I asked him to be my mentor for a Graduate Research Summer Mentorship (GRSM) to jumpstart a dissertation on US postmodern choreographers' experiences of pregnancy. With a chuckle, he gently reminded me of his areas of expertise and that his lived experiences included neither dance nor pregnancy. Nevertheless, he agreed to work with me. Thank goodness that he did, as it was a tremendously rewarding experience, and it marked the beginning of a beautiful friendship between my family and his. Although never pregnant, Al was an involved and enthusiastic co-parent to his three beloved children and had wonderful stories to share about supporting their births and also the births of children in communities where he lived and worked. Although not a dancer, he advocated for me and the importance of dance practice for my work. Al's family, research, and teaching lives are always fully, wonderfully enmeshed, and I was one of the many lucky students welcomed into his home and nurtured by him and Polly as I navigated doctoral studies. In my GRSM application, I wrote that I wanted to work with Al because of his "distinctive style of human-centered, rigorously compassionate, ethnographically-inclined research" through which "he has cultivated an array of innovative and interdisciplinary methodological approaches" which he "shares generously with his students." I admired the "vast network of friends, colleagues, resources, and perspectives" that his research affords him, and I concluded, "Having his guidance and insights early in my doctoral career will enrich my understanding of multi-modal approaches to investigation." His guidance certainly offered me this but also so much more than I could have ever foreseen. Thank you, Al, for encouraging me ever deeper into my questions and the fantastic relationships and adventures that "deep hanging out" and paying attention make possible.

Johanna Kirk

Ph.D. Candidate

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The Rigor of Care and Wonder

In the early weeks of my courses on academic writing, I often share with my students a sequence of my own drafts leading to publication in order to expose the lengthy process of review and revision expected of any scholarly work. The highlight of this self-deprecating presentation is always the draft—at that time a dissertation chapter—reviewed by Al Roberts—at that time my advisor. His commentary opens on a positive note, indicating the insights that could be further emphasized and offering additional resources. Yet his evident frustration mounts. As I scroll down the document, tracked changes and margin comments begin to proliferate. A note declaring “this sentence is a trainwreck” finally inaugurates ten pages of brutal scrutiny that rip into everything from my sloppy sentence construction to my facile generalizations to my inadequate citations: “sez who?”; “when was this ever true, anywhere?”; multiple invocations of “come on!” Eventually, Al concedes, “geez louise, I gotta stop such close reading and get on with this,” followed by some brief words of intellectual encouragement, although even the more sporadic notes that follow clearly indicate that he abandoned detail, not disapproval.

What was and remains so valuable about that document is its visceral representation of the experience of reading through Al’s eyes and, by extension, those of any potential editor or critic. My students can clearly see the importance of precise language in any academic argumentation and understand my rationale for submitting them to the same degree of diligence. Moreover, I see those corrections as manifesting a broader pedagogical model I have since aimed to emulate. Many of us associate academic criticism with competition, gatekeeping, self-aggrandizement, and other forms of exclusion. Yet in all aspects of his teaching and mentorship, Al cultivates such radical and unconditional intellectual generosity, collegiality, and enthusiasm that they frame even his most devastating assessment as a gift. To that end, Al’s critiques targeted the elevation of my scholarship and the experience of my potential readers. Most crucially, he focused on the improvement of my ethnographic representation of frequently marginalized perspectives, experiences, and aspirations—an especially significant challenge when even quoting interlocutors in their own words (e.g. via fraught terms such as “tradition” and “witchcraft”)

can prove dangerous. The care we take with academic expression constitutes the care we take for each other.

I found it disorienting when the freewheeling exploratory spirit that Al brings to classes and fieldwork—the latter of which he fondly renders in the words of Clifford Geertz and Renato Rosaldo as “deep hanging out”—metamorphosed into the exacting judgment he brought to bear on writing up. What I understand now is that these attitudes were not at all opposed. As many of the saints and sages with whom Al has engaged over the years might tell us, without meticulous attention to detail, the joys and breakthroughs of exploration could evaporate into mere curiosities and clichés instead of crystalizing as the intellectual and more-than-intellectual provocations they could potentially inspire. Hence the valuable lesson that rigor comes not at the expense but in the service of care and wonder.

Samuel Mark Anderson
Lecturer
New York University Abu Dhabi

Al was like a father to me, paternal but not paternalistic. He pushed me when he needed, yet he was entirely patient—realistic without being rigid. Anytime I needed him, he was there, supportive with generous feedback; even as I dodged deadlines and should not have been worth his time, he always gave it.

He and Polly created for their students a home, intellectual and literal some summers, as my wife and I ‘house sat.’ But the place they made rather welcomed and took care of *us*. Somehow we became siblings with their other students, and with Scam the Wonder Dog.

I am still referencing their work, passing on insights from Al, some of the lessons learned nearly 20 years ago. From the *débrouille-toi* of System D, the virtues of tenacity and creativity, to the *baraka* of Bamba, whose spirit transformed the mistakes and missteps of colonial authorities and technologies, those lenses, into something else entirely, inspiring other visions and communities, other options and possibilities. We learned in our bones that representation matters, and can have profound effects on how people are perceived and treated—so it is important to do our very best.

Over a decade removed from grad school, there is of course a certain nostalgia for that time and place, but what Al generously gave us truly endures, still matters, and is still needed. I am so thankful for his life and his work, and that it continues in ‘retirement.’

Scott M. Edmondson

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To be a student of Al Roberts is to know the stories: encounters with hippos and warthogs, or why aardvarks are “good to think.” In celebration of his career, I propose a meditation on another of his favorite animals, the pangolin.

As most Roberts students know, pangolins are scaly anteaters, mammals covered in an armor of interlocking scales. Different species of pangolin can be found in Africa and Asia, and several types live in the Congo Basin. A few years ago, a video of a lion kicking a balled-up pangolin went viral, illustrating the effectiveness of the pangolin’s scales.¹ To cite the man himself, one is reminded that “Tabwa say that ‘the king of beasts is not the lion’ but the pangolin.”² As a graduate student, I frequently identified with the rolled-up pangolin, curled up for dear life as it was swatted around by the lion of graduate school. As I approached the end of my studies, I began to re-think the pangolin and its scales. To be a Roberts student is also to feel protected, to realize that Al and the broad network of Roberts students form the interlocking armor that carries us through trials and tribulations of our intellectual pursuits.

Among Tabwa, Luba, and other peoples in the Congo Basin, the word for pangolin is “nkaka.”³ This same word is also used to indicate a headdress worn by diviners in both Tabwa and Luba communities. As Polly has written, Luba royal bilumbu diviners wore their nkaka headdress to “take hold of the spirit as it mounts the diviner’s head and to contain, control, and protect it.”⁴ Further, the triangular beadwork of an nkaka headdress refers to esoteric knowledge, learned by the diviners through their initiation. I cannot help but think of a less sophisticated but personally important symbol, my six-sided doctoral cap, which I earned thanks to Al and Polly’s guidance. Going around the sides I could recite lessons of Luba and Tabwa cosmologies, or the significance of the number six in numerology. Learning from Al turns the world into a riddle, an approach he may have learned from this erstwhile Tabwa neighbors: “What is clear is that when Tabwa call a beaded headdress “pangolin,” they propose a rebus.”⁵ A lesson from Al is never definitive, but rather an explosion of knowledge reaching across time, place, and disciplines. His students are similarly dispersed, and I happily raise my glass alongside them to sign off, “Cheers.”

Elaine Ericksen Sullivan

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Notes

¹ “Lion ‘Plays Soccer’ with Pangolin In Rare Video,” National Geographic WILD, January 22, 2019 <<https://youtu.be/EFZL5DXJn0k>>.

² Allen F. Roberts, “Tabwa Masks: An Old Trick of the Human Race,” *African Arts* 23, no. 2 (1990): 43.

³ *Ibid.*, n17.

⁴ Mary Nooter Roberts, and Allen F. Roberts, *Memory: Luba Art and the Making of History* (New York: Prestel and The Museum for African Art, 1996), 192.

⁵ Roberts, “Tabwa Masks: An Old Trick of the Human Race,” 43.

The Art of “Showing and Telling:” Allen F. Roberts’s Seminars

Narrating stories is a form of art that Professor Roberts combined with his phenomenal idiosyncrasy of “showing and telling.” His seminars became “a cabinet of curiosities” for me where I looked forward to new stories he would recount and photographs and objects that he would display. His specific art of “showing and telling” was also an act of generosity and passion in sharing deeply personal lived experiences and anecdotes. He successfully transformed what appeared to be theory-laden scholarship into accessible, relatable, and more importantly, inspiring approaches to academic work. Professor Roberts’s art of “showing and telling” served as a concrete example and reminder of what is most crucial in the work we undertake as researchers, valuing the ontologies and epistemologies of the communities with whom we collaborate. Professor Roberts’s approach of “showing and telling” transcended time and space to travel in a non-linear way between the past, present, and future. Whether it was the “hippo story,” a poetic recollection of Sheikh Amadou Bamba’s *baraka* (blessings) that enveloped his travels to Senegal, or his wide-eyed, finger-shaking gesture accompanied by a smile (to infer that we must know what he is saying), his seminars were an “assemblage” of infectious laughter, at times tears, and at other times, moments of pure healing. When these seminars were held in person, “BC” (before Covid-19), Professor Roberts’s art of “showing and telling” also included the art of sharing cookies: shortbread and fig cookies (my favorites). His art of “showing and telling” was also an art of demonstrating empathy, solidarity, and wisdom. “Showing and telling” was an invitation to infinite possibilities of “what could be.” His seminars were embodiments of flash-backs and fast-forwards (analepses and prolepses), of in-betweenness, and of thresholds. The art of “showing and telling” is never completed, just as he and Professor Polly Nooter Roberts once noted that the “creation of the person is continuous, forever negotiated, never completed.” Thank you, Al.

Amira Hassnaoui

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One Is Not Born [a] Beautiful [Teacher/Enlightening Peacock]

FIRST OFF, I need to get one thing
 Clear off my chest, my conscience:
 I'm not quite sure if this poem
 Is a synecdoche or a
 Pickle, metonym or
 Pimple-skinned fruit,
 Preposterous aardvark¹
 Or some whole other animal/trope. (*Trope?*:
 "Synecdoche and metonymy are in kinetic
 tension, moving back and forth from
 part to whole to part; binding...")²
 O I wish I could compose an ode
 Inscribed deep into pangolin scales,
 To embrace entire worlds of thanks
 Within the wick-glimmer of a fingernail:
 Star-shine and meteors dust the sky.
 How is something so big so small (from here),
 And how so small so dang immense?
 Life-changing—whole-world (trans)
 forming. How do you share so much
 Of what you've seen in what's felt
 Too much like fleeting moments?
 (Should I have brought *more* cans
 Of beer to sit against that stove
 In your narrow kitchen, like Vic
 And Edie's?) How can what seems
 Slight be so downright encompassing, so
 Meaningful? So full of meaning/s
 And might, 'magic' and mystery/
 Misery and mighty, mighty joy: potent,
 potent potencies powerful as that sanguine
 potentate³ (Who lost their head? *Who* was it?
 Me.) positioned with all the might
 Of the nation—empire, colony, state?
 Corporation? Church? UC?—O! A strength so
 Fraught (fully loaded?) that it cuts
 All-ways: can kill and cure (and
 Rekill and recure, again and again) as
 'Proper' toxin/tonix (*bulozi*) 'ought,' right?
 As an infant so small makes waves so big...
 "When iron is tempered..., all the powers
 of the cosmos are bestowed upon it...
 The smith...needs powers that lie in

*Don't mock the croc or
 be a hater to the gator
 till you've crossed that river.*
 —Cameroonian proverb

*...old as life, old as a fingernail.
 The saw was the teeth of bone.*
 —Wilson Harris

places far away, powers more sweet than these,"⁴ like that *Abrus precatoria* branch/pod
 Full of "eyes of the dog" I brought, *you*,
 Unknowingly offering a gift of thanks rich in
 Ricin-laced potent-ially fatal brown-nosery, a
 Poison meant to heal—and heal it does, I swear
 It does, and it did, and it has. *I swear. Right?*

Boilerplate

Q: How to say 'thank you' to *you*,⁵ AL?

A: I, with all 'common sense,' cannot.

Or can never enough, so can't *try*.
 Do not say 'thank you' to lovers (!)
 Or family—reciprocal gratitude is
 Unsaid, performed "in the 'theatre'
 of life itself"⁶ as a politics of care/mind,
 rememory, as in 'minding' power relations,
 "jockeying" for love/(recognition?) through
 These dramas of lived lives. I am me,
 AL, and you are certainly *you*—
 But there's something *intersubjective*
 Going on here...*What the heck's* going on here
 There, nowhere, and no-here, too, right?
 Aw, something's going on though, some
Thing 'obdurate' to revelation (read
Revelations?, I know AL! He's *Our Dear*
Friend John, of Patmos, The Revelator,
The Regulator?) Humm, I return to...stars,
 We all return to where we're from, in
 This-here little world and bigger
 universe of potentialities, potencies:

*The potencies of the universe are thus enveloped in
 the space of a small gourd, which is why Luba-related
 Tabwa peoples literally refer to such gourds and other
 magical bundles as "little worlds."*—Polly Roberts⁷

Mirror(dog) Masks/Mask Mirror(dogs): Cosmographic Shrines/Tom Thumb Weddings

*Its miniature form allowed it to reach perfection in detail...a kind
 of mirror...like magic...it guarantees the presence of an absent
 other through either contagion or representation.*—Susan Stewart⁸

I remember one day walking
 In Westwood, where we both
 Lived when I was just a couple
 Blocks from you, from Polly,
 From Son Seth and Son Sid...(and, Aka-toumbi?)...
 You were watering your roses (?)

...and the river seemed to stretch endlessly

And I was walking. I stopped,
 Introduced myself (or did
 Margaux do that?) and said
 We had met before at the
 Top of Bunche (waffle?) one
 Time, at a talk about *asen*.
 You didn't remember, you
 Said. But were so glad to hear
 I was interested in WAC. O!
 And it hit me hard—to learn
 Of were-hippos, scent-trails,
 And the like I never knew,
 And still don't. Hyena genitalia
 Is a fine topic, ~~of course~~, and one
 To which you bring unrivaled
 Insight⁹: chalk on the face of
 An ancestor made flesh and bone
 And blood and kaolin. To *see*
 New-moon rising over quartz
 Crystal and (Kibawa's) caves¹⁰
 In crepuscular So-Cal sky, over *Khatam*
 Secret/sacred squares and Seals
 Of Suleiman/Solomon/Shlomo
 Right beneath my feet/before
 My eyes like mystical graf.¹¹ O! I
 Am *just* a roughdraft, maybe even
 Without articulated limbs to walk
 And write and cook and work
 Earth with an iron hoe,¹² (call me
Disabled?) a crook on the shoulder
 Of guava wood or a thief of the heart,
 The hearth, the grain-ark of inter-
 Galactic proportions and provenances,¹³
 Providences like fates to be divined
 Or known already, ~~of course~~, by *someone*,
 Some divine thing, being(s) about. O!
 Now I'm just clutching at straws, on
 A snipe hunt, of sorts?¹⁴ Just makin'-do,
 Recycling, I guess,¹⁵ these reused rusted
 Sentiments (*Mushima*, "the seat of sentiments")?¹⁶
 It's an observational science(art), duh,
 AL, you got to *look*, like in the lens ---->
 Of a camera, or a stereoscope, or something...
 A stanhope, stanho-scope? I don't know,
 I don't even know anymore! ANYthing!
 It's like it's all gone dark. Darker than a

*and forever onward. The water was as smooth
 as a child's mirror and newborn countenance.*

—Wilson Harris

...the mystery of the mirror.

...that hard water that is the mirror...

...one must surprise it when it's alone...

A tiny piece of mirror is always the whole mirror.

—Clarice Lispector

*Listen: The unknown is at the heart
 of the ordinary. To be and become,
 to live and to die are but two faces
 of the same reality. —Father Theuws¹⁷*

Continent of White Smoke. AL, you made a
 Darkroom on the shores of Lake Tanganyika?
 And a medical clinic, right? A garden and
 Chicken pen. And that outboard longboard,
 O wow, to “participate in webs of relations
 [Bead-chains?] and suffer reverberations
 of rulings made in distant capitals,”¹⁸ now
That is intersubjective! (Take notes?) I want
 To go inward, want to go *onward*, to feel how
 “Coast and hinterland are joined in a dialectic”¹⁹
 From Pomeroon with PV-celled zinc-roofed
 Palm-frond *Dreams*...to East African-Indian
 Ocean *Worlds*. There is a border (‘wall’?) of
 Skin that encloses (‘walls’?), but must connect
 Also both interior *worlds* and other...ones...:
 Horizons of soul/imagination/relation...:
 Again, a grassblade going all-ways, inward
 And out. For that timeless scalpel heals
 Just as the cutlass does cut. Heal *our* world!
 But...can there be an ‘*our*,’ or I got a frog in
 My pocket, huh? Hu-*man* could never be (a
 Geertzian?) *universal*, globe-hug of a ‘*we*’
 When want/need persists pummeling people
 With hunger: in Yemen, in the Congo, in LA.
 With apartheid of the COVID prick to bore a
 Hole in the skein of judgements the world-
 Over and over and over and over, again: an
*Infinite Rehearsal*²⁰ of frames inside frames ~~~~~
 Inside proscenium frames²¹: all under that limen—[^]
 But, most importantly, rising, rising, from below.[^]
 O! To heal worlds—Bamba! Baba! And *dance* [^]
 Along those railway lines as you did. To don [^]
 This material/conceptual “threshold between self
 and other,” and bore the eyeholes/skin of being
 with depth *darshan* sight of innereye visionaries
In reverse, downcast, “for who or what one becomes
 when ‘not oneself’ may be due to otherworldly agency”:
 Ancestors, Spirit(s), Gods and Goddesses and friends,
 Who might “appear in human guise,” for, after all, friends,
 Often our donnings are presentations “by and for the divine
 more than the hum[!]ns also attending a performance.”²³ Hu-
 M!n, Hu-m!n. Let ‘*us*’ ALL be hu-m!n. O! How I wish to
 Follow in your mighty (potent) footsteps. Draw us a glimpse
 Of Court on High, toward beauty, a *lukasa* of sorts(?),
 Of hu-m!nities and arts! A (non-Camillian?) ‘theatre’ of
 Rememory. “The court exists as a mental geography

*If a baboon can't eat there,
 the slope must be very steep*
 —Tabwa proverb

*...the greatest possible existence,
 existence as tension—pulled
 forward and forward again
 to something beyond, to
 something above. Peace
 and tranquillity...*
 —Gaston Bachelard²²

that maps and orders the universe, the kingdom,
 hum[!]n relations, and the mind.”²⁴ O! The body-
 mind-soulcase. Enclose, (and or) connect. Cut inward
 And Onward. Step out, and in. Stand *sub-lime*. And give
 Thanks. Thanks for this map, AL. Thanks for this picture
 Of the cosmos. Of a path ^ through this “bamboo thicket.”²⁵

Happy “Winter” BREAK
 Peace on Earth and Good Will to ALL

*I imagine one of the reasons people cling to their hates
 so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone,
 they will be forced to deal with pain.*

—James Baldwin, cited in *Teaching Tolerance*,
 a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center, 2017.

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Notes

¹ On aardvarks as “flat-out preposterous,” see AL quoted in Hope B. Werness, *Continuum Encyclopedia of Animal Symbolism in World Art* (Continuum, 2006), 1; as well as Allen F. Roberts, *Animals in African Art: From the Familiar to the Marvelous* (Prestel, 1995), 81; Allen F. Roberts, “‘Perfect’ Lions, ‘Perfect’ Leaders: A Metaphor for Tabwa Chiefship,” *Journal des Africanistes* 53, no. 1-2 (1983): 93-105; Allen F. Roberts, “Monotony and Surprise in Tabwa Cosmology,” *Archaeoastronomy* 12 (1996): 281-292; and Allen F. Roberts, “Aardvarks and Covered Baskets: Social Change as Reflected in Tabwa Origin Myths” [slide lecture from 1983 ? and manuscript book chapter referenced in Allen F. Roberts, “History, Ethnicity and Change in the ‘Christian Kingdom’ of Southeastern Zaire,” in *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa*, ed. Leroy Vail (University of California Press, 1991), 193-214, 209n17].

² Roberts, *Animals in African Art*, 19.

³ See Allen F. Roberts, *A Dance of Assassins: Performing Early Colonial Hegemony in the Congo* (Indiana University Press, 2013).

⁴ Gaston Bachelard, *La Terre et les rêveries de la volonté: essai sur l’imagination des forces*, as quoted and translated in Mary McAllester Jones, *Gaston Bachelard, Subversive Humanist: Texts and Readings* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 129.

⁵ One can consider AL's use of *empowered* fonts (mystical calligraphy?, such as in his monumentally memorable syllabi) in relation to Kamau Brathwaite's poetic "Sycorax video style," which Brathwaite—or "Eddie," as AL's told me his Chicago teacher RT Smith insisted—described as "a use of computer fontage to visualise [a] sense of dream & morph & riddim drama—videolectic enactment." See Kamau Brathwaite, *Middle Passages* (New Directions, 1993); Kamau Brathwaite, *DS (2): dreamstories* (New Directions, 2007); and *passim*. Quote from Nicholas Laughlin, "Notes on Videolectics," *Caribbean Review of Books* (12 May 2007).

⁶ Allen F. Roberts, "'Authenticity' and Ritual Gone Awry in Mobutu's Zaire: Looking Beyond Turnerian Models," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 24, no. 1-4 (1994): 134-159, 134.

⁷ Mary Nooter Roberts, "Proofs and Promises: Setting Meaning Before the Eyes," in *Insight and Artistry in African Divination*, ed. John Pemberton, III (Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000), 63-82, 75.

⁸ Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Duke University Press, 1993), 122, 126.

⁹ Allen F. Roberts, "Insight, or, NOT Seeing is Believing," in *SECRECY: African Art that Conceals and Reveals*, ed. Mary Nooter (Museum for African Art, 1993), 64-79.

¹⁰ See Allen F. Roberts, "'Fishers of Men': Religion and Political Economy among Colonized Tabwa," *Africa* 54, no. 2 (1984): 49-70; and Allen F. Roberts and Evan M. Maurer, *The Rising of a New Moon: A Century of Tabwa Art* (University of Michigan Museum of Art, National Museum of African Art, and Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale, 1985).

¹¹ Allen F. Roberts and Mary Nooter Roberts, "Mystical Graffiti and the Refabulation of Dakar," *Africa Today* 54, no. 2 (2007): 51-77; Allen F. Roberts and Mary Nooter Roberts, with Gassia Armenian and Ousmane Gueye, and preface by Mamadou Diouf, *A Saint in the City: Sufi Arts of Urban Senegal* (Fowler Museum at UCLA, 2003).

¹² Allen F. Roberts, Tom Joyce, and Marla C. Berns, eds., *Striking Iron: The Art of African Blacksmiths* (Fowler Museum at UCLA, 2019).

¹³ Allen F. Roberts, "Of Dogon Crooks and Thieves," *African Arts* 21, no. 4 (1988): 70-75+91-92; and Allen F. Roberts, "The Serious Business of Dogon Cosmology, A Review of: *The Pale Fox* by Marcel Griaule and Germaine Dieterlen (Review Essay)," *Archaeoastronomy* 10 (1987): 148-153. Also see Nathaniel Mackey's many Song[s] of the Andoumboulou, which AL seems to (unknowingly?) sing, for example in *Whatsaid Serif* (City Lights Books, 1998); *Splay Anthem* (New Directions, 2002); and *Double Trio: Tej Bet, So's Notice, Nerve Church* (New Directions, 2021).

¹⁴ Allen F. Roberts, "Of Snipe Hunts and Errant Bats, or, Will an Anthropologist EVER Learn?" *Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies* 40, no. 1 (2018).

¹⁵ See Allen F. Roberts, "The Ironies of System D," in *Recycled, Re-seen: Folk Art from the Global Scrap Heap*, eds. Charlene Cerny and Suzanne Seriff (New York and Santa Fe: Harry N. Abrams and Museum of International Folk Art), 82-101.

¹⁶ Mary Nooter Roberts and Allen F. Roberts, “Memory: Luba Art and the Making of History,” *African Arts* 29, no. 1 (1996): 23-35, 29.

¹⁷ T. Theuws, “Le Styx ambigu,” *Bulletin du Centre d’Etude des Problemes sociaux indigenes* 81 (1968): 5-33, 11, as quoted in Allen F. Roberts, “Precolonial Tabwa Textiles,” *Museum Anthropology* 20, no. 1 (1996): 47-59, 56.

¹⁸ Roberts, “‘Authenticity’ and Ritual Gone Awry,” 155.

¹⁹ Allen F. Roberts, “Beyond the Betweens: The Swahili Coast as Sensed from a Hinterland,” in *World on the Horizon: Swahili Arts Across the Indian Ocean*, eds. A. Purpura and S. P. Meier (Urbana-Champaign: Krannert Museum of Art and University of Illinois), 2018.

²⁰ Wilson Harris, *The Infinite Rehearsal* (Faber and Faber, 1987). Also see Corey D. B. Walker, “The Infinite Rehearsals of the Critique of Religion: Theological Thinking After Humanism,” *boundary 2* 35, no. 3 (2008): 189-212.

²¹ Please see Hans Breder’s palimpsestic series of paintings titled “Liminal Icons,” postcard (?) examples of which AL has been known to share with his students. Breder was also co-founder, along with Polly and AL, of the Isis Conceptual Laboratory/Gallery in West Branch, Iowa. See Scott Alan Siegling, *Intermedia at Iowa 1967-2000: The Cultural Politics of Intermedia in Performing and Event-Based Arts* (PhD diss., University of Iowa, 2015). Thanks to Degenhart Brown for furnishing details/refreshing memory/lost notes (lost due to fire. Of all my “lost” belongings, notes and course readers from Polly and AL’s classes may well have been the hardest felt).

²² From *La Flamme d’une chandelle*, as quoted and translated in Mary McAllester Jones, *Gaston Bachelard, Subversive Humanist*, 176.

²³ Allen F. Roberts, “African Masks and Masquerades: A Batch from *African Arts*, Parts 1 and 2,” *African Arts* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017).

²⁴ Roberts and Roberts, “Memory: Luba Art and the Making of History,” 33.

²⁵ Allen F. Roberts, “Through the Bamboo Thicket: The Social Process of Tabwa Ritual Performance,” *TDR* 32, no. 2 (1988): 123-38; and Howard Thurman, *The Inward Journey: Meditations on the Spiritual Quest* (Harper, 1961).