IN RELATION: A SEMI-CENTO WITH, FOR & ABOUT JOHN KEENE (ET AL.)

Evie Shockley

a boy is born. a "negro." an artist.
a boy is born a negro and becomes an artist.
a negro boy is born an artist.
a born artist becomes a negro boy.

he is born to "strivers" in the st. louis bullseye.
in the storm's eye, amidst riots and vietnam.

he is born to an akan-speaking woman in
the stables of his father. in colonial massachusetts,
in what would soon be "revolutionary" times.

he is born in abstraction, emerges from the point
of his own pen. in graphs, in "anti-kantian" maps,
"in a field," in "the transverse layer," "the tangential
layer," "the rupture layer," "the violet layer,"
and "the compressional layer," all at once.

he drew compositions, studies, "scenes."
he invested mental energy into seeing
what he saw, developing a skill, undertook
it as a form of education. and they said
"incapable." they said "traced." they
said "forged." he put a name to this. in
a word: "treemonisha," a word that means

erasure of black talent. a forgotten word of
salvation from scott joplin's magnificently
heterogeneous musical lexicon.

a relation.

he sang uncontrollably, gold coast lullabies,
christian hymns, irish melodies. he improvised,
and they said *imp*. he counted the beats,
and they said *beating*. he fiddle-dee-dee'd,
and they said "sullen nightingall." they said
"music from a tarpit." they said "to the delight
and horror." he put a name to this. in a word:
"attucks," a word that means freedom is
a condition for which the black body gives blood.

a relation.

he spent his days scribbling, penning, drawing
worlds he imagined more habitable than his
own. he devoted his time to this "intimate,"
"determinate act," "the search for an approach
to deconstruct his erasure." and they said
"identity." they said "boundaries." they said
"verisimilitude." he put a name to this. in a word:
"driskell." in a word: "gilliam." in a word: "white."
words that mean geometry following its own
lead, mining its own gaps. words that mean
"connection within disconnection."

a relation.

he situates himself, "sublime subject
of bodily subtraction," "reciting the 'negro'
poems at one of those gatherings."

he situates himself “in the surrounding woods,”
“at another safe house run by free blacks.”

he situates himself, “an object in field,”
“at the juncture of numerous conceptual planes.”

in memory’s halls of funhouse mirrors.
in fiction’s reroutings re-righting history.
in poetry’s a-lyrical a-linear lines.

being his multiple selves by being with multiplicity.
freeing his aesthetic self to track “ghost paths” he
creates as others have done and are doing.
seeing the self (“black self”?) in a company.
accompanied.

in relation.

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What I have tried to do in this poem is juxtapose moments of parallel concern from each of John Keene’s books, *Annotations*, *Counternarratives*, and the collaborative *Seismosis*—specifically, concerns about the development of Black men as artists and the fundamental relationship of (bodily, intellectual, and aesthetic) freedom to that developmental process. I wanted to spotlight how in each context—whether writing about himself, his fictional colonial-era character Zion, or his collaborator Christopher Stackhouse—John places the Black man artist in relation to community, collectivity, and conversation, *even* (*paradoxically*, we might say) when the self and/or art produced is of the sort that we might typically describe in terms of its individuality, idiosyncrasy, or

sui generis nature. His work thus calls upon us to move beyond a facile dichotomy between individual and collective and to think about how, for example, certain experiences of collectivity can encourage aesthetic or political nonconformity and how certain experiences of isolation can activate a politics of solidarity across difference or an aesthetics of generative intertextuality (what Henry Louis Gates might call "unmotivated signifyin'").

What I do *not* intend is for this poem to suggest, by its focus on the artist-as-Black-man/Black-man-as-artist, that John's work is exclusively masculinist. I could have written another poem that placed *Annotations*'s depictions of artistic development in conversation with the figure of Carmel in the riveting story "Gloss on a History of Roman Catholics in the Early American Republic, 1790–1825; Or the Strange History of Our Lady of the Sorrows" in *Counternarratives*, which is, like Zion's story in "An Outtake from the Ideological Origins of the American Revolution," a *künstlerroman*, and could have referred as well to the poem "Mo: Poeisis" in *Seismosis*, his ode to our dear mutual friend and brilliant artist Mendi Lewis Obadike. I could have also written about the critique of masculinist norms and related aesthetic issues that are bound up in his treatment of gay sexuality and gender nonconformity. Here, I'm thinking particularly of several sections of *Annotations* and two stories in *Counternarratives*, "Blues," his fictional backstory for the Langston Hughes poem "[I loved my friend]," and another of John's breathtaking colonial-era historical fictions, "A Letter on the Trials of the Counterreformation in New Lisbon," given the appearance of the Quimbanda figure therein. But to cover all this territory would be to place before you an epic, when I would rather have you read John's work itself.

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