

The Spirit of Yes

On Collaborating

YUSEF KOMUNYAKAA

I'VE OFTEN SAID that the ideal collaboration is a dialogue and negotiation, but one must also underscore this: a fruitful working together embodies cooperation and freedom. In fact, the single most important tool in process is freedom; but it resides outside the realm of a happening. For me, and I hope I'm also speaking on behalf of all my main collaborators—T.J. Anderson, Susie Ibarra, Anthony Davis, Chad Gracia, Tomas Doncker, Rhoda Levine, Vince DiMura, Hermine Pinson, Bill Banfield, etc.—when I say the philosophy of process is based on a belief that creative freedom is exacted through shape and control. Each collaborator leans against the other, in an act of embracing, to establish trust. A sense of trust arises not out of a preexisting understanding or schema, but more out of dissimilarity and tension; not for the sake of industry or production, or even as a dare against fate, but more out of the will to achieve a moment of illumination; nothing abstractly complex or elaborate, fashionable or overly stylized, but something almost accidentally singular.

Yusef Komunyakaa's numerous books of poems include Taboo: The Wishbone Trilogy, Part 1 (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004); Pleasure Dome: New & Collected Poems, 1975-1999 (2001); Talking Dirty to the Gods (2000); Thieves of Paradise (1998), which was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award; Neon Vernacular: New & Selected Poems 1977-1989 (1994), for which he received the Pulitzer Prize and the Kingsley Tufts Poetry Award; Magic City (1992); and Copacetic (1984). Komunyakaa's prose is collected in Blues Notes: Essays, Interviews & Commentaries. In 1999, he was elected a Chancellor of The Academy of American Poets. Yusef Komunyakaa is the Senior Distinguished Poet in the Graduate Writing Program at NYU.

Each artist possesses a knowledge of the other's obsessions—weaknesses and strengths. Process is the path to surprises. In many ways, yes, dance is a natural metaphor here. A collaboration is a tango of sorts, a system of anticipation, but it is never a tussle. Even if there are moments of push and pull, or when one can almost read or foretell the other's moves, elements of surprise and passion still drive any successful collaboration. A simple turn is often the gem. This moment is what collaborators live for, when reflection and beauty coalesce naturally out of trust.

Such a moment is a gift. We hurt to find the shape inside the elemental material. A recent collaboration called *Nine Bridges Back* is a perfect example. This project began when George Lewis, the director of Jazz Studies at Columbia University, called me and asked if I'd be interested in working on a piece with the violinist Billy Bangs about African-American soldiers in Vietnam. Since I was aware of this musician's visionary scope, I immediately said yes. And then the wheels were turning. I said to myself: Maybe we could call the piece *Sacrifice*; maybe it could embrace the unspoken, unacknowledged contributions of black troops in the Nam.

Finally, after numerous phone calls and e-mails, and hectic schedules, Billy and I met at 5 o'clock one afternoon at the Bowery Poetry Club for coffee and tea. We sat there sizing each other up, and I said, "Well, Billy, I have this idea. I think this could be absolutely wonderful." He said, "Uh huh." I said, "There were fourteen or fifteen young black soldiers in Nam who threw them-

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selves on grenades to save their platoons or squads, and maybe *Sacrifice* could be a tribute to them.” He said, “Man, have you listened to my music?” I said, “Yeah.” He said, “I’ve been doing my thing for years. All my pieces are tributes.”

When I left that meeting, I knew our performance at the Harlem Gatehouse would be in two parts. Also, I now knew that this piece wouldn’t be entirely composed of new works: I’d have to embrace collaborators with whom I’d worked before. I began writing two new short pieces: “A Translation of Silk” and “Looking for Black

Lang.” At first, I decided to call my half of the evening *Twelve Bridges Back*. George Lewis, however, informed me that my collaborators would have only 45 minutes on stage. I cut three pieces. In that moment of cooperation, as I returned to the drawing board, *Nine Bridge Back* found its shape, its heart. It became an assemblage of music and language based primarily on experiences of the war in Southeast Asia. I had to remember that a collaboration is a synthesis, a negotiated personality that lives within and outside each contributing artist. A third thing or being, a feeling, exists because of cooperation. We see interactive glimpses of ourselves in a work. ☺