

Vacations On The Black Star Line
By Michael Cirelli
(Hanging Loose Press, 2010)

Reviewed by Manson Solomon

Michael Cirelli's work is Good Stuff. With an agenda.

His seriousness of purpose is made clear in the epigraph: "Why hasn't racial anxiety, shame and hatred . . . been more a theme in poetry by Caucasian-Americans? . . . To speak in a voice equal to reality . . . will mean admitting that one is not on the sidelines of our racial realities, but actually in the tangled middle of them, in very personal ways."

(Hoagland, Tony, "Negative Capability" *The American Poetry Review* Mar/Apr 2003: Vol 32, No.2.)

Cirelli dives right into the "tangled middle" of hip-hop culture, complete with his own personal Brown Skin Lady (well, ladies actually, since there are no less than five poems with that title, some of whom are, not insignificantly, Middle-Eastern and South Asian rather than African-American), and proceeds to

. . . surround myself with black
people, black people that
had space jive, had cosmic
language wrapped
around their fingers,
and I homaged those words
and deconstructed that swagger . . .
as I boarded
every new rocket ship

and from that vantage point he comes at us with his authentic poetry.

So far so cool. But why is this white boy speaking poetry on behalf of blacks? Can't they speak for themselves? Well, he isn't – he is actually speaking for himself. The hip-hoppers and rappers are speaking for themselves in the rap and hip-hop itself – it's their authentic voice, but it ain't poetry. Cirelli has been called a "hip-hop" poet, and if by that it is meant that hip-hop is often the subject of his poetry, fair enough. On the other hand, if it is meant to suggest that his poems are actually hip-hop themselves, then nuh-uh: he is no more a mere hip-hopper or rapper than Wordsworth was a daffodil or a waterfall. Though he often immerses himself in the rhythms of hip-hop, and many of his poems allude directly to specific hip-hop songs, his work is way too good, too sophisticated, to be mere hip-hop lyrics.



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What Cirelli does is to personally enter into the hip-hop scene and write about it from within – or as within as a white boy can get -- giving us real poetry about it rather than merely mimicking it. So, for example, imbedded amongst all the hip-hoppy, rappy, yo's in "Yo Yeah" -- including ribald footnotes containing scores of them, and even some deleted yo's and yeah's -- are real gems, such as: "Yo multiple literacies / Come wrap / Your mouth around / My ear so I can listen / to the ocean in there."

Or, as in "Tawk":

When T-Pain . . .
. . . named his album
Rappa Ternt Sanga, he wasn't being
Ignorant, or ignant at that, wasn't bad
at spelling . . .
. . . but he was
accounting for the texture of the dirt
in his teef . . .

. . . This makes sense to me.

Cirelli is an interpreter, a translator, a poet with hip-hop as subject who, the better to convey his message, often employs its rhythms and language. In "I Am Hip-Hop", he says:

I claim nothing but hip-hop
I'm the white Eminem . . .
That makes me part gangsta. You know what time is it ---
When I win the Pulitzer prize, for Realness, the Nobel
for my translation of Hip-Hop.

In the first Brown Skin Lady he becomes an "extra black white boy" who "surrounded myself with all this darkness, packed my mouth / full of Shea butter & AAVE [African-American Vernacular English] until I felt black in sheep's clothing, / which isn't black at all, but it comforted me to be so god damn down, / so schooled in hip-hop like hip-hop was a hall pass to blackness" only to learn "that I wasn't nearly as black as I thought."

And in "Birthplace":

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wanting to be their "dawg" ---
but feeling like a mailman
another Elvis

So why has he taken this path? Is it only to respond to Hoagland's injunction, or is it also something more personal?

In "Definition" he speaks eloquently of his childhood, of eating breakfast with his sister in his family's American dream diner, staring out/ the window/ at the orange leaves / dancing on the hard edges / of the wind, before going off to Catholic school.

And in "Ars Poetica":

I am herringbone gold chain
hanging from the neck of a Tony Soprano
devotee with dried marinara
flaking from the hairs of his perfected goatee.
Italy laughs at this version of Italian, of us,
but I embrace it because it is something
I can call my own.

On the other hand, as he tells us in RE:DEFinition, he is ambivalent about contemporary Italian-American identity, absorbed as it has become into the general culture: "My People: noun No longer Italiano not even / Wop no longer Irish / Polack". Or again, in the My People section of "Twice Inna Lifetime":

. . . My cousins live in Providence
where every wanna-be-thug-gangsta
goomba hangs a lynched Jesus from his neck,
and the wardrobe of African-America
off his ass. I don't know who's worse off.
In Brooklyn, my friends with privilege
have the privilege of understanding
privilege. We pay off student loans
from our Adventures in Ethnography.
We read culturally relevant books
from other cultures and swathe our tongues
in hip logic . . .

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(In his use of 'logic', Cirelli, with his Catholic school education, is surely alluding to 'logos', the Word, a concept with a long philosophical history embodying the idea of Truth being made manifest through language.)

In RE: RE:DEFinition we get the college-age kid rolling around the world trying on different scenes. "I could surround myself / with poems in San Francisco / where the Beats have pacemakers . . .", ending up in "Brooklyn where hip-hop is jacked electricity and beats broken and samples stolen so hip-hop (in a way) is white like me."

Thanks to MTV et al, and booming bass technology, hip-hop is now a persistent presence in the lives of young people; as Cirelli puts it in "Anecdote of 16 Bars":

It was the sound of black troubadors.
The projects rose up around it and were
no longer wilderness to those who hadn't
lived there. Teenagers across the heartland
romanticized the bravado of Bronx, wanted
a lick of the red tongue, to fit into its baggy jeans.
this is the age when the word became fresh
and it took dominion everywhere.

(Perhaps, one might add, not unlike the absorption, after huge initial resistance, of jazz and swing into the mainstream, played as it is today without a second thought by totally white bands.)

And, significantly, interwoven into all this is another powerful strand, the impact of the election of Obama.:

In 2008, the poster on my wall
has a 4-letter word and a black face,
who is not an athlete, not a rapper.
I put black on a pedestal. Pray to black
five times a day. I make black the new

white . . . ("Black President")

-- and--

I'm afraid this new intergalactic
President of ours absolves my people
. . . like it offered us stripes, like it made us
The Voyeurs of Inequity, like it added
to our bios. (Twice Inna Lifetime")

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But what about the word “Vacation” in the title? That suggests not mere “Voyeurs of Inequity” or privileged “Adventures in Ethnography”, but a sojourn: “When I vacation / on the moon, I don’t want to look like / a tourist . . . When I look into the eyes / of the aliens, I know the pain they’ve seen.”

So are AAVE and hip-hop the inside now and are Caucasian-Americans on the outside, merely vacationing on the Black Star Line (a reference to a hip-hop album which is itself a reference to African nationalist Marcus Garvey’s shipping line)? To a young man questioning the vitality of his own domesticated culture, such a vacation offers an opportunity to engage with a vibrant new energy. Cirelli injects himself into that world, and, being a poet, sings of it – to his great credit in a voice more melodic and harmonious, and of exponentially greater sensitivity, than the music it alludes to, a voice that invites us to enter into a world.

There simply isn’t room in this review to do justice to all the many excellent poems in this collection, the delightful turns of phrase, allusions and insights, or to engage with the accompanying downloadable MP3 or the non-hip-hop-related pieces . Though eminently accessible on the first reading, like all good poetry, carefully crafted and real, it warrants reading and re-reading, as new meanings arise with each sojourn.