

LITERARY Meditations

By Dr. Brenda M. Greene

QUINCY TROUPE, POET, BIOGRAPHER, EDITOR

Greetings Friends and Colleagues,

Welcome to the fifth edition of Literary Meditations, a newsletter reflecting my thoughts on writers and their work. Literary Meditations provides a preview of my book project which contextualizes the interviews that I have conducted with Black writers throughout the African diaspora on the radio show and podcast Writers on Writing. In this issue, I feature Quincy Troupe, the award-winning poet, memoirist, and editor whose literary work presents readers with a cultural history of America through stirring and powerful poems and stories celebrating Black writers, musicians, and artists.

About Quincy Troupe

Poet, writer, and editor Quincy Troupe is the award-winning author of 21 books, including 12 volumes of poetry and three children's books. *Duende* (2022) a collection of poetry from over fifty years includes many new poems, as well as selection chosen from across his eleven previously published volumes. Troupe's poetry captures lyrical and metaphorical reflections on jazz, sports, love, art, literature, and remembrances of slavery and racism in American life and culture. He has written two best-selling books on the jazz legend Miles Davis: *Miles: The Autobiography* (1989) and *Miles and Me* (2000). His awards include three American Book Awards, a Lifetime Achievement Award from Furious Flower, and the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History Award.

One day while I was listening to Jimi Hendrix and John Coltrane. I had always listened to Miles. He was a favorite of mine. And so I was listening to Coltrane and I started trying to imitate the line of his music. I started trying to transpose that rhythm into a line of poetry. I did the same thing with Jimi Hendrix and I did the same thing with Miles Davis.

Writers on Writing Interview with Quincy Troupe

I met Quincy Troupe when I began directing the National Black Writers Conferences at Medgar Evers College. Quincy was a frequent panelist at the Conference and received the Gwendolyn Brooks National Black Writers Award at the 12th National Black Writers Conference: *Black Writers Reconstructing the Master Narrative*. Over the years, I often attended readings for the *Black Renaissance Noire* journal, published by the Institute of African American Affairs at NYU, and launched and edited by Quincy. Quincy and his wife's Margaret's literary salons in their home overflowing with books and art were memorable experiences for many writers throughout New York City. This excerpt from my interview with Quincy focuses on his evolution as a writer who infuses his poetry with jazz.

Brenda Greene

Your poetry is nuanced with music and specifically with the rhythms of jazz and hip hop. Can you talk about when you decided that you wanted to be a poet and about the influence of music on your poetry?

Quincy Troupe

I started writing when I was in my 20s, so I always felt I had a lot of catching up to do. I decided to teach myself. I used to be a basketball player. The way you play basketball is you learn that if you are going to be a great basketball player, and I consider myself a great basketball player, you pick up all the fundamentals, so you can dribble with your left hand, and your right hand.

I used to go to the playground and I would shoot 500 jump shots from there, 500 from here, 500 from there, 500 all the way around and come back, and I would dribble 500 with this hand, 500 with this hand. And so that kind of disciplined me.

Quincy Troupe

When I decided I wanted to be a writer and a poet, I did the same thing. I went and got Babette Deutsche's Poetry Handbook: A Dictionary of Terms because I didn't know what I was supposed to do. I taught myself to write in a very formalistic way through that book. What that means is that I taught myself to write in iambic lines and to write sonnets, sestinas, villanelles, haiku, and tankas.

I would do these writing exercises: sonnets, 14 lines, the rhymes and all of that, the iambics, and 10 syllables with five accents a line. And then I would do villanelles. Then I would do sestinas. Then I would do haikus and tankas and all of that stuff. They were all terrible.

When I moved to Los Angeles I joined the Watts Writer's Workshop and met writers like Jane Cortez, Old Jinky (Alvin Saxton), Stanley Crouch "Grouch," ouch [laughter, Louise Meriwether, and all of these writers and artists. I realized all of a sudden that what I was doing was something that I should not be doing when I heard Old Jinky read and I heard Jane Cortez. I mean it was alright, but I felt that since I grew up in the church that I had to return to that kind of thing.

Brenda Greene

Right, you had to get that rhythm and feel that heartbeat of gospel music in your poetry.

Quincy Troupe

Yes, I wanted that heart and soul in it. So I threw away all of my old poems and I started doing the other thing. It goes into your body and goes into your spirit, into your heart, and then it goes to your brain. That is what happened when I heard Miles. It is hard for me to explain, and then I went out and became a Miles Davis fanatic. And because the sound on that instrument is so recognizable, so haunting and penetrating, it's like a grapevine of poetry. And he was for me, like a poet.

One day while I was listening to Coltrane, I started trying to imitate the line of his music. I started trying to transpose that rhythm into a line of poetry. I did the same thing with Jimi Hendrix and I did the same thing with Miles Davis. What I would do is learn all of their solos and try to transfer all of those rhythms to my poetry and transpose them. It started to work and there is a poem in this book Transcircularities (2002) that I thought was successful. It was "Ode to John Coltrane."

Brenda Greene: Yes, that is the first poem in the book.

Quincy Troupe: Yes, it started to use that antiphonal calling response, and the church, and jazz and all of that. That was the first poem that I thought was successful for me, even though I had written maybe 30 or 40 poems.

J.C. J.C. John Coltrane. J.C. J.C. John Coltrane

You blew your fingers to smoking cinders

preparing for the "Ascension,"

blew beautiful and death songs

on "Kind of Blue" mornings
blew love on "A Love Supreme,"
now the ages await you,
beyond the infinite darkness,
where the "Bird" of bebop slumbers.

From Ode to John Coltrane

Brenda Greene

Your passion for Miles 'music began when you were young. What was that experience like?

Quincy Troupe

I had always listened to Miles. He was a favorite of mine. I first heard him when I was 14 or 15 years-old and just by accident. I wanted to be hip, and I went to this place in St. Louis. I am from , and I went into this fish joint. I was just out wandering. I walked in and saw these four Black men sitting in these booths with ascots on, and berets with dark glasses on.

Brenda Greene

They were cool.

Quincy Troupe

Yes, they were cool. So I said well let me go sit behind them because I had just integrated to this high school where there were seven Black kids with 33,000 White kids. I went and sat behind them and they started talking about Miles Davis. They were playing this tune "Donna" on the box, and from the time I heard it, it just kind of entered into my spirit like a grapevine of poetry.

About Writers on Writing

Writers on Writers is a radio show that I created and produced at Medgar Evers College in 2003. The show airs every Sunday over the airwaves of WNYE, 91.5 FM. As the host of the show, I have interviewed writers about their lives, their craft, and their work. During COVID, I expanded the format of the show and began to host podcasts and post the interviews of the writers on the Center for Black Literature YouTube page. (122) Center for Black Literature Medgar Evers College - YouTube.

Contact Me

These literary meditations represent a window into the world of my book project. I would love to hear from you. Please visit my website at www.drbrendamgreene.com.

Sincerely,

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