**Akwete Weave**



***Peter Schmidt***

pixel press

Swarthmore, Pennsylvania

*Poems*

Bloomdido for the Improvisors

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cover image

*Akwete* cloth. [Igbo](https://africa.uima.uiowa.edu/media/photos/show/peoples/show/Igbo) artist, Nigeria. Photo by Lisa Aronson

<https://africa.uima.uiowa.edu/media/photos/show/920>

**Bloomdido for the Improvisors**

Honoring the first century or so of jazz

everyone’s *different* ways of knowing the tradition:

—for Albert Murray and Angela Davis;

and for Sonia Sanchez, neighbor and instigator

My parents playing Louis Armstrong 78s,

“West End” and “Tin Roof” blues,

Introducing the blue horizons of Sidney Bechet,

Jelly Roll Morgan’s Red Hot Peppers,

Aristocracy à la Edward Ellington, or Prez,

Mary Lou Williams’ zodiacal soul on soul,

Count Basie’s jump-up from the get-go,

Charlie Christian on guitar, the smo-o-o-oth one,

And one of the *other* blues God blessed Billie Holiday,

“Tell me more and more and then some,

...The waiting’s been so long,

It’s hard to be believin’ ”—

Better than this

There’s only silence,

And better than silence

Only Miles with a mute.

Bird’s clarion “Ko Ko” outsmokes even Duke’s,

Monk’s brilliant corners, crepescule in the face of fools,

Con alma the ebullient Mr. Gillespie,

Sinatra singing “What is this thing called love?”

Soaring sweet Brown and Roach, Inc.,

And Sonia Sanchez’s praise to the Max:

“You came warrior/clear your music/kissing our spines.”

In Havana and New York, para bailar

El montuno, Arsenio Rodríguez y su Orquestra,

Mario Bauzá, 944 Columbus Ave.,

Con Machito el corazón of the Palladium,

Billy Strayhorn, swee’ pea, fleurette américain,

Ah um! fight song aka Charles Mingus,

And cruising beyond the ages and Philadelphia’s

Germantown, Sun Ra and His Arkestra

“Through the darkness of the light years,

And the light years of the darkness”—

Better than this

There’s only silence,

And better than silence

Only Miles with an open horn.

Art Blakey’s pressroll: seedcrop for the next generation,

Ornette spilling the alphabet on beyond zebra,

Coltrane sound of the underground tranesonic,

Out to lunch and other aspects: Eric Dolphy,

Cecil Taylor, conquístador!

And Yusef Lateef, plum blossom,

Sassy Vaughn gone velvet, Newk questing on the bridge,

Nina Simone black gold beyond category,

Dorothy Ashby’s hip harp rascality,

Alice Coltrane astral meditations stirred in with

Cal Tjader’s and Willie Bobo’s soul sauce,

“Yo le canto a la luna” by Gato Barbieri,

“Azúcar! azúcar!” en Nuyorican plena

O Cachao putting the charge in la descarga—

Better than this

There’s only silence,

And better than silence

Only Miles, in a Spanish key.

Art Ensemble of Chicago, Southside ancients

To the future, Henry Threadgill’s bush rags

‘N’ pocket demons, “Peace in Essaouira, Morocco

(For Sonny Sharrock)” from Pharoah Sanders,

Rubén González, a Mandinga cosmos spanning

Eight full octaves, y La Voz de la Experiencia,

Celia Cruz, from Sonora Matancera

To La India forty-some years later: still time

For Cassandra Wilson’s smoky crescent alto,

Jon Jang & Vijay Iyer: Pan Asian directions,

Redress & rainbow, new names

Pronouncing themselves daily, though many

Not named here, many paid only with dues,

But still unstoppable after all this time

Ed Blackwell’s polypolyrhythm marches on,

His quizzical metaphysicals asking “what it be like?”

Better than this

There’s only silence,

Don Cherry’s “Voice of the Silence,”

And better than silence

Only electric Miles, *Pangaea*.



[Kenneth Victor Young,*Untitled (Abstract Composition),*](https://catalogue.swanngalleries.com/auction-lot/KENNETH-VICTOR-YOUNG-(1933---2017)-Untitled-(Abstract-Compos-2518++++++95+-++761190)acrylic, 1972.

Swann Gallery, New York

**The Neo Colossus**

(aka Emma Lazarus’ Statue of Liberty Poem, Revised 2017- )

“Give me your privileged, not poor,

Your neoliberals yearning to invest,

Entrepreneurs stuffed with d’or galore:

For us, elite and Christian now are best,

I lift my lamp beside our gold-plate door!”

**Security Directive**

“See something? Say something!”

says the security directive —

Graffiti chockablock letters explode in 3-D off a wall

signed “Rat King :: So It Goes” —

Sparrows in a sun-warmed garden

minutely inspect every inch of wall

for seeds in crannies or nooks of brick

then fly in a burst to a chain-link fence

at ease on corners of the wire diamonds —

“Live Rare Nude Show” truck on cinderblocks

painted pasties and garters fading

as it rusts in a junkyard by the tracks —

Penn Relays track-and-field teams

rustling in their warm-up suits

do rollover stretches &

leg kicks and sprints.

They share the same workout space

but keep respectful distance from each other —

Bumblebee checking me out

legs dangling down

like miniature landing gear.

When he swoops close to the pavement

his wings ablur suddenly make

fallen cherry-blossom petals skitter —

Dusk comes on.

Phonelight cupped in many hands

makes the faces of their owners

glow like candlelight —

In South Korea as a ferry sinks

“Don’t move” the intercom says.

“If you move, it’s dangerous. Don’t move.”

Potential ID marks for the dead

(clothes, moles, scars, tattoos)

are handwritten on whiteboards

in numbered spreadsheet cells.

Crowds press forward.

Two teenagers, a boy and a girl,

later become famous on TV:

Their bodies were found floating

on a ceiling inside the boat

lifejackets carefully

knotted together —

Plastic bags balloon in the wind

caught on razor wire —

“Mr. Speaker, witch-hunts happen

because there’s a witch somewhere.

Everything

we do in this body

should be about messaging” —

In my city yesterday, in Grays Ferry,

3 people were shot dead.

After the bodies were taken away chalk outlines

on the street make them look as if they’re running.

Tiny yellow plastic triangles

dot the crime scene & number

each brass bullet casing

destined for evidence bags.

So careful we are, so forgetful

Charon lugs new bodies into his boat

then poles them languidly across Lethe

his face a blank, his touch strangely tender

At Woodlands Cemetery near

University City the stone statues

stand with straight spines & sport

their best nineteenth-century finery:

As I sway and click by on my train

a granite gentleman with

cane and wide-brimmed hat

his face in shadow

takes a long quizzical look toward

our unrecognizable future —

# Produce

To water South Jersey beans, tomatoes, peppers, and whatnot

a large hose with a cannon-sized nozzle

is sometimes wheeled out between the rows and opened up.

At the base of the nozzle is a long metal arm

attached at its middle, with a weight

on one end and the other end spatulate and spoon-like.

As the water jets, this thing-a-ma-jig floats like a see-saw

until the spoon-y end swings from the side

and suddenly thwacks the water as it shoots from the hose.

The spoon-end is then thrown backwards until the weight

at the other end makes it swing slowly

towards the jet to crash into it again. What’s it there for?

To nudge the water’s angle steadily to one side?

For the hose spurts water out

at regular intervals, moving just a little to one side each time,

until it meets the limit set for its motion, when it quickly

swoops back to its starting position and

begins again. But there may be something at the hose’s base

preset to handle this, to wet solely the right segment of field.

Maybe the thwacker gizmo

is there just to change the way the water spreads and falls,

so the jets don’t uproot the crops. It strikes the spurts just

at their base, making the spray spritz.

But the spouts would soften anyway, never pummeling

the plants, for they lose motion swooping to the end of their flight

and fall gently in silvery sheets and veils.

Maybe instead it's there to spray plants near the rainmaker’s base,

while the nozzle douses those at the far end of the arch,

rain for one and rain all around,

neither too little nor too much, no hail or lightning,

no stalk-twisting gusts, just a shower on wheels,

though not for free,

a port-a-storm complete with a watch-a-ma-call-it mister,

a clanking cumulo-nimbus cloud towable by tractor.

The produce takes it all in.

Soon there will be containers stacked at the end of each long row,

long hours and sweat from nose and chin watering the sandy soil,

quick wrists and español

rising and falling, row on row, dolores para dólares,

while it all becomes someone else’s store-bought bounty

sprayed in front of mirrors

and bushel baskets as if it just spilled over.

**Speck**

An ant crawls up my leg to my knee, tickling me.

I flick him (?) off with my finger, sending the black

speck

tumbling through air into long-bladed grass

over a yard away. How can he survive such a blow?

(Ants

mostly do.) Is flying just another event for him, nothing a

compound eye can’t handle? How does he figure out where he

is

when he lands, and what to do? I’ve disrupted his scent trail. The grass

must seem a jungle, so different from the patio desert we were in when

he

decided to ascend, threading through hair forests and over strange knobs

in quest of I have no idea what. Does he just adjust bravely to each new

world

and set off on his journey as if it’s still all of a piece?

I can’t know for certain, but as I sit here dreaming

I

somehow know he knows precisely where his ant-hole is.

His task remains fixed too. He searches anywhere he is.

Six

legs planted on whatever surface comes his way, he raises those delicate

ant mandibles, calipers for the infinite, and gets on with job

one.

**Elegy Written in a Natchez Country Churchyard**

—for Robert Hayden

Old cemeteries where the headstones

always face the church and the edifice

itself resolutely draws its axis

east/west: solstice sunlight enters eastern

windows to grace the altar and shadow

forth a judgment and the end of time.

Recent churches often face the road

instead, like the headstones that surround them.

This shift means something else has shifted too,

though what we don’t know and it seems so normal

no one notices. Along the Natchez

Trace one road erases all but traces

of another. There’s also a turnoff

for a burial mound. It faces west

and rises to a sunset overlook.

No telling how the bodies inside were

placed. The park plaques instead retell tales

of Indian atrocities—killing

family “retainers” (what a word) so

they were forced to serve in the next life. All

allegoric innuendo for why

they lost their right to live on Natchez land

while history makes them prehistorical

(or parenthetical). Was it a new

sun-god or a right-of-way that made them just

a line to be erased before rewriting?

(Yet those who follow are retraced themselves

to wait and watch the roadway as they go.)



[Norman Lewis, *Untitled (Abstract Composition)*,](https://catalogue.swanngalleries.com/auction-lot/NORMAN-LEWIS-(1909---1979)-Untitled-(Abstract-Composition).-2518++++++34+-++761932)oil and ink on paper, 1951.

Swann Gallery, New York

**Octavius V. Catto**

Philadelphia 1871, 2017

Does Branley Cadet’s statue

capture the moment when Catto

was shot pointblank in the back

at Ninth & South for

having the audacity to

talk back & push for jobs, voting rights,

and being a Pythians base ball

star on a diamond in the city

or the instant when, almost

like an angel wearing sturdy boots,

Catto spreads his arms, rises

on one toe, & ascends

welcoming us into the new

history of the would-be nation

he fought for and brought

(tried his damnedest to bring)

into being?

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[Norman Lewis,*Untitled,*](https://catalogue.swanngalleries.com/auction-lot/NORMAN-LEWIS-(1909---1979)-Untitled.-2518++++++36+-++761606)oil and ink on paper, 1960.

Swann Gallery, New York

**Starling Shout-Out**

Several hundred common starlings were released in 1890 into New York’s Central Park by Eugene Schieffelin. He was president of the American Acclimatization Society, which tried to introduce every bird species mentioned in the works of William Shakespeare into North America. See Steve Mirsky, “Call of the Reviled,” *Scientific American*, 1 June 2008. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/call-of-the-reviled/>

“The common starling is a noisy bird.” —Wikipedia.

Drilling the mulch with its yellow

prod of a beak, gimme that, gotcha

punk with short-tailed swagger and swank

an iridescent sheen on basic black

unctuous oils spilling the spectrum

in the right light more, ever more, over

the whole continent from first clawhold

just another New York City migrant—

a murmuration as American as you are,

chump, & don’t you forget it,

anything can make a nest, even trash, omni-

vore and scavenger, take that! $@#%~!?$

POW! plus a knack for bone-grinding sounds,

such pops & scrunches from its

masticating noise-maw you’d think

you’d got a glimpse into the raw where

speech come from, as buzz-sounds

break it down to pips and quawks

the tags & undulineaments of

all that’s new

**Shadows on the Highway**

*—This story is set approximately during the years 2010-2017.*

*Since then things have gotten worse.*

**A** teenage girl from Benin City, Nigeria—

Adaora, “Daughter of Us All”—heads north

to look for work. Her family can’t support her,

they need her wages but there are no jobs.

First challenge is to get to Agadez in Niger

without getting robbed of the USD$650

she’ll need for smugglers (“tchagga”) to take her

across the Sahara into Libya, where

rumor has it there is work.

But Adaora gets robbed.

By police. At a checkpoint outside Agadez.

They guess her money’s secret hiding spots

then make a great show of filling out a receipt.

But when they hand it to her it’s blank

and they think the expression on her face

is hilarious. Now Adaora

must get new money any way she can,

but there are not any ways to do that other than

to sell herself. All the women shrug and tell her so,

it’s the way of the world. Adaora learns quickly that

government officials promise to pay but then usually

don’t: get the money ahead of time.

Blowjob by blowjob (and other acts) she gradually

grows a pile of money to hide in dirty laundry

when no one is looking, praying she’ll not be robbed again.

**A**daora’s ride north is in the back of the first of many

Toyota pickups, little padding, a dozen others, a tarpaulin

to keep out only some of the blowing dust and sand, 1600K

and what feels like 16000K of ruts in a trans-Sahara road

following the same routes of the ancient slave

and salt trade. Soon after leaving Agadez the road

passes near a new U.S. military base, its North African

center for drone counterterrorism—but no passenger in the truck

is aware it’s there, and what Adaora is experiencing

doesn’t count as terrorism. At each transfer point

Adaora is in danger of being raped and robbed

again. But she arrives, bruised yet intact.

Adaora works for a year in Tripoli, Libya,

in houses and offices and refusing sex work.

The country’s in chaos but there is always

cleaning work. A woman she meets promises to help

her cross the Mediterranean. Adaora is uneasy,

for the woman won’t keep eye contact,

looking at her once and then away

as if she’s seen enough. Madame, for that is

what she wants to be called, wears

blue eye shadow, its color sprinkled with gold.

Who else can Adaora trust to find the men

with boats? But once inside Madame’s van

Adaora is kidnapped and taken to a Libyan man

who proudly announces he’s a buyer for a sex

syndicate of Italians and Nigerians in Naples.

They specialize in putting West African girls

on the streets of Italy and anywhere else in Europe.

That will be the price of passage, plus his fee.

The man wears sunglasses indoors and

too much cologne. Adaora screams “No, never!”

so loudly he turns down the sale in disgust.

Madame then whips out her cell and calls

Adaora’s home number (she’s forced it out

of her) and demands a ransom: USD$1200,

or 1200 more than her family can spare.

**I**n Benin City

Adaora’s mother has a stand in the marketplace,

goes to her sister stall-owners

pleading for help. They dip into their

savings and raise the money. They all

know families who have sold a daughter

to pay back loan-shark loans

but this is almost as bad. Ransomed,

Adaora works another year in Tripoli, earning

passage on a leaky dinghy heading

north to Sicily. She sits packed tightly against

the others, listening to the outboard engine,

praying it won’t cough and stop, wrapping her brightly

colored *ipele* shawl more tightly round her shoulders.

Inside is sewn her mother’s phone number

so that someone kind might call her

if Adaora’s body washes up on shore.

**U**nlike many, maybe most, Adaora makes it,

cold water rising to her ankles

by the end of the voyage. She gets help from a refugee

center, papers and foster homes hosted by both

Italian and African families, and eventually

a job cleaning apartments and offices, low wages

but better than sex-slave riches. Over a year or so

she works her way up the peninsula,

always in a new city’s underground,

saving a little to send home, aware she’s now

the exception, not the norm. She hears of girls and

women from Africa and Eastern Europe imprisoned

in buildings, drugs sold on one floor, women

on another, and guards with Uzis all around.

She hears of women who have *juju* thrown from a distance

and laid on them—not *juju* music but a contract-curse

made of their own hair and blood, activated

if they leave the trade. Adaora also hears of women

who have a chance to leave but refuse, their families need

large sums sent each month, whole neighborhoods

in Nigeria with houses brightly renovated

from slave wages. There are whispers too, told half in disgust

and half in awe, about women who fought to rise in the system

and are now a “Maman” or “Madame” empowered to work

with gangs such as Black Axe, buying girls

like they were once, girls who arrive in Italy

tens of thousands of Euros in debt, a lifetime

to pay off even if they live a long time,

which many do not. And whispers of what’s

happening now to migrants out of Libya—

men and women “rescued” in mid-voyage by Libyan militias,

robbed and returned to detention camps and sold

to the highest bidder. Bullwhips slash through the air

from Libyan Coast Guard boats, falling on bare backs.

“We have to punish them to calm them down,”

says Ramzi Ali, shrugging, as he boasts of the phone

video he’s made to share. “We need to keep control.

They can take our life.”

For those like Adaora,

getting a residency permit is another deadly crossing

turned dead-end road for most. Forged documents

from a “facilitator” take years of savings,

though a few bribes from traffickers make it easy

to obtain certificates stating a girl is 18 or older,

her sex work legal, both police and pimps

happy to collaborate. It’s not just sex workers and migrants

who are on the streets and in the buildings

yet always underground, dark and officially in the dark.

These days the trade in migrants pays even better

than drugs or oil. Millions of workers permanently a part

of a low-wage economy that takes takes takes

from migrant labor then scapegoats those same workers

for stealing jobs, even jobs “natives” refuse to do,

jobs they say are too hard and too “demeaning.”

Meaning what, exactly? “We are ghosts,”

says a friend of Adaora’s, “shadows on the highway,”

yet shadows who eat and work and eat and work

and, sleeping, dream

of a different welcome in a different world.

**W**hy do some think of themselves

as free and others as merely prey

—or shadows? Shadows cast but shadows

we don’t want or need to see?

Especially when “North” and “South”

all subsist in the long shadow of colonialism,

were *constituted* by colonialism? What we have now

seems like old trouble in new guises.

*Sankofa*, the Ghanaians say: “go back

and get it,” to go forward you must go back,

not to a fake past but to a painful one.

Dear reader, *Agbonserema*,

Welcome to the World you and I

and our ancestors have made. Like Adaora,

Daughter of Us All, you too must migrate,

place yourself in danger, work to be free. *Ase!*

**Notes**

*Ase* (pronounced asháy) is “the power to make things happen,” or an exclamation equivalent to “so let it be!” Yoruba.

*Agbonserema* and *Adaora* are two of many popular baby names used in Nigeria, with Agbonserema for a boy and Adaora for a girl. Their meanings in English are given above. These two names have links to Benin and the Igbo, respectively, but may be used throughout Nigeria.

*Juju* in Yoruba means “throwing” or “something being thrown.” It applies both to curses or spells and, in very different contexts, to the powers of music, including both Afro-Beat and Juju styles popular in the 1970s through the early 2000s, particularly with musician-composers such as Fela Kuti and King Sunny Adé. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jùjú_music>

*Some details for this narrative poem are indebted to these and other articles online and in print:*

Anonymous. “Migrants Risk All to Cross Desert.” Irin News Service. Agadez, 9 October 2008.

<http://www.irinnews.org/report/80835/west-africa-migrants-risk-all-cross-desert>

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Philip Obaji, Jr., “The Juju Curse on Italy’s Sex Workers.” October 3, 2015. *The Daily Beast*. <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/10/03/the-juju-curse-on-italy-s-sex-workers.html>

Annie Kelly, “Trafficked to Turin: the Nigerian Women Forced to Work as Prostitutes in Italy.” *The Guardian*, August 7, 2016.

<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2016/aug/07/nigeria-trafficking-women-prostitutes-italy>

Ben Taub, “We Have No Choice: The Desperate Journey of Blessing, One of the Nigerian Girls Who Try to Reach Europe.” *The New Yorker*, April 10, 2017, pp. 36-49.

Sudarsan Raghavan, “Libya’s Coast Guard abuses migrants despite E.U. funding and training.” *The Washington Post*, July 12, 2017. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\_east/libyas-coast-guard-abuses-desperate-migrants-despite-eu-funding-and-training/2017/07/10/f9bfe952-7362-4e57-8b42-40ae5ede1e26\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/libyas-coast-guard-abuses-desperate-migrants-despite-eu-funding-and-training/2017/07/10/f9bfe952-7362-4e57-8b42-40ae5ede1e26_story.html?utm_term=.9bba93fd2314)

One example of refugee and migrant resettlement work in Italy, including foster family networks involving Italians and Africans: <http://www.piamonlus.org>

