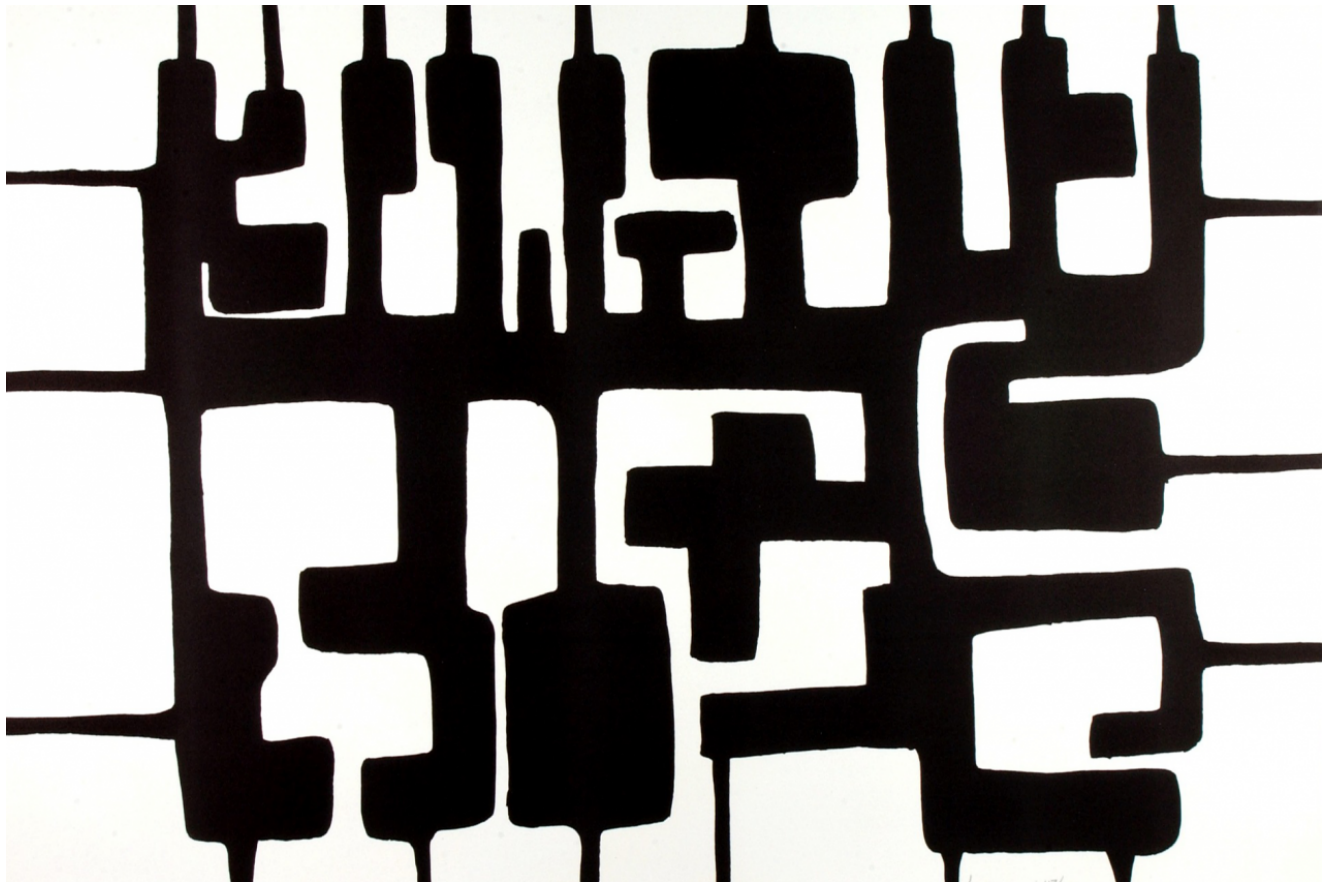


# Ones and Zeroes

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What is the matrix? Without resorting to pharmaceuticals in various chromatic registers—red, blue—and the versions of paranoid reality such pills might produce, it feels right to recall the ways this concept has been deployed in mediums neither cinematic nor far-right political. In the early 1990s, [Kevin Young](#) wrote in an essay about the poet [N.H. Pritchard](#), “The concept of the matrix is that the matrix is the concept, or rather, the paradigm from which the poem gets produced.” That is, the matrix is abstract structure that, as the French literary theorist Michael Riffaterre writes in *Semiotics of Poetry* (1978), “becomes visible only in its variants, the ungrammaticalities.” For James Edward Smethurst, the matrix is the Black Arts Matrix of the late 20th century, as tracked in “Foreground and Underground: the Left, Nationalism, and the Origins of the Black Arts Matrix,” the first chapter in his treatise *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (2005).

This Black Arts Matrix was a station in what is now commonly called the Black radical tradition, equal parts aesthetic experimentation and political commitment. Myriad and electrifying entanglements, both artistic and activist, charge the ambient atmosphere of N.H. Pritchard’s first book, *The Matrix: Poems, 1960–1970*, published by Doubleday in 1970 and out of print until Primary Information and Ugly Duckling Presse reissued it this year.

Various called sound poetry, concrete poetry, Black Arts poetry, material poems, and transreal poetics while subtly elucidating and eliding each of these descriptors, Pritchard's collection reflects the experimental semiotic poetics and conceptual art rigors of the sixties moment risen within and against that moment's manifold political movements: civil rights, Black Nationalism, labor, feminism, and third-world, anti-colonial struggles, all hounded by an overarching white supremacist US policy and regimes of deep paranoia and McCarthyism that were less epochal backdrop, as Smethurst suggests, than at the fore of every picture and every page.

The poems in Pritchard's *Matrix* also prefer the surface. They appear to avoid depth, in the sense of the more clichéd registers and modalities of lyric poetry, with its woundlike punctums and lineated revelations. If Pritchard prefers the surface of the page for his work, the page, in some sense, *is* that work. His typeset lines cross it, skittering and syncopating, the paper itself like a setting, a ground that exudes resin and hums with structure. Staying at the surface reveals an instructive opacity; by using so much of the page, its spatial-acoustic effects, his poems seem to emit an even fluorescence, blinding and allover. But Pritchard equally emphasizes the surface of words, their smooth or rough materiality, repeating them until they lose linguistic sense and become abstract. Or, more virtuosically, he breaks those words apart like crystals, showing what they are made of—equally geological and etymological, all sonic and textual and spatial and material meaning.

I look at the metaphors I've reached for here—*fluorescence*, *resin*, *crystals*—to describe Pritchard's materiality of affects. Each metaphor evokes gradients of light, of transparency and opacity. Perhaps I am attempting to invoke the illumined, bright-dark image of the transreal, an idea that hovers around critical readings of Pritchard's work. It arose from the poet himself. In a 1969 letter to Ishmael Reed, Pritchard wrote, "Transreal is a word which visited me in the fall of 1967 while making initial probes into a book which I call *Origins: A Contribution to the Monophysiticity of Form*. My 'definition' is: Transrealism = O." A few years later, in 1972, Pritchard hosted a New York gathering called "The End of Intelligent Writing: A Transreal Awakening" with artists that included Vito Acconci and Richard Kostelanetz. As Aldon Lynn Nielsen later wrote in *Black Chant: Languages of African-American Postmodernism* (1997), "The transreal poetics of NH Pritchard are critical interdiction suspended between the very real letters in which we inscribe subjectivity." That said, the real and the very real and the transreal—and all the unreal movement of language and life in between—as well as the concrete and the "concrete," are signage *The Matrix* continually attracts, even as those terms do and do not describe it.

Pritchard's poems are not always shaped as such; instead, they carry the look of conceptual art, its coolness of profiles, its studied removes, even as Pritchard's poetic language pulls equally from the pastoral lyric tradition, its frisson of "natural" representations of—what?—nature and from concrete climes of word-as-image. But what is natural about nature and what is concrete about concrete poetry? "The seductive discourse of Aphrodite," Anne Carson once wrote, "is so concrete an aspect of her power that she can wear it on her belt as a

physical object.” I love this line, but it does not help us much. Except, maybe, in the line’s whiteness via the projected paleness of its subjects and of classical Greek sculpture generally—so taken up by the Germans and the West’s whiteness industry and supremacist ideology—though ancient Greek figurative sculpture was originally brightly painted. Too, those of the Eastern Mediterranean and its seafaring matrix, opening like a mouth to Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Europe, were never really white at all. Nor was concrete poetry and conceptual poetics, though you’d never know this from the anthologies, critical studies, and exhibitions that continue to circulate and historicize it. It remains the case, though, that “Pritchard seems positioned outside whichever definition of ‘concrete’ is chosen, whether Black reality or reader-oriented physicality,” as Young notes.

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Born in New York City in 1939, Norman Henry Pritchard studied art history at New York University and Columbia University and published two collections of poetry: *The Matrix* and, in 1971, *Eecchhooeess* (which is also newly reissued by DABA Press). He performed his poems on record compilations of jazz poetry, and his work was widely anthologized, appearing in *In a Time of Revolution: Poems from Our Third World* and *The New Black Poetry* (both 1969), but not in the crucial 1964 anthology *New Negro Poets U.S.A.*, edited by Langston Hughes. (Hughes noted that Pritchard’s manuscripts were “so beautifully typed I hated to send them back.”) Hughes was familiar with Pritchard from Umbra, of which Pritchard was a member and Hughes a mentor. The brief, seismic, early sixties New York workshop and eponymous literary magazine for Black radical poetics, Umbra combined formal aesthetic experimentation with political engagement, Black Nationalism with international decolonial movements, and poetry as published text with poetry as live and/or recorded sound.

The weekly Umbra workshop sessions were held on the Lower East Side; they included poets, activists, and jazz musicians such as Archie Shepp and Cecil Taylor. Through Umbra, its writers—Pritchard, Steve Cannon, Tom Dent, David Henderson, Calvin Hernton, and Lorenzo Thomas among them—sought, as Thomas later wrote in *Extraordinary Measures: Afrocentric Modernism and Twentieth-Century American Poetry* (2000), “a better understanding of the shadow world that is black life in the United States.” Indeed, the foreword to *Umbra*’s first issue in 1963 read “UMBRA has a definite orientation: 1) the experience of being Negro, especially in America: and 2) that quality of human awareness often termed ‘social consciousness.’”

If the Umbra writers were writing against the lingering holdovers of McCarthyism (were theirs proto-surveillance poetics? perhaps), they were also making art against a mainstream literary establishment that, as David Grundy writes, “sought to limit the political effectiveness of avant-garde writing, both by at once claiming it as a depoliticized aesthetic space and criticizing it for political hypocrisy or naivety.” Though the poetry Umbra produced was wildly diverse, the formally inventive avant-garde poetics did not align with the “protest poetry” expected from Black poets of the period, with its presumption of “vernacular-

inflected” narratives of struggle, wherein what was thought to compose a Black vernacular, as well as constitute realism itself, was emphatically reductive. Pritchard was maybe the most exemplary in this regard. His exclusion from so many historicizing narratives of that multifarious moment—from critical histories of Umbra and the Black Arts Movement as well as concrete poetry and New York’s conceptual art and poetry scenes—tells on itself (like a mouth).

Umbra dissolved in 1964 after only two years. The Black Arts Movement, led by Amiri Baraka, was canonized, but Umbra’s members have remained largely obscure, perhaps none so much as Pritchard, whose work is barely mentioned in Smethurst’s *The Black Arts Movement* or in Grundy’s *A Black Arts Poetry Machine: Amiri Baraka and the Umbra Poets* (2019), though it is beautifully surveyed in Nielsen’s earlier *Black Chant*. Pritchard continued to work over the succeeding decades, if not publish, though it is hard to know: he taught poetry at the New School for Social Research and was a poet-in-residence at Friends Seminary in New York. He died in Pennsylvania in 1996. That his oeuvre went out of print is perhaps another study in the violently narrow ways in which people read and receive bodies of work via the bodies that make them.

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What about the poems, though? I lingered over *The Matrix*’s table of contents, the columns of words and numbers taking on the air of the indexical. Split into three chronological, phenomenological sections that trace the production of its poems over a decade, *The Matrix* invokes a space-time continuum at once conceptual, semiotic, temporal, and natural. From “Inscriptions (1960–1964)” the book moves to “Signs (1965–1967),” before ending with “Objects (1968–1970).” If Pritchard’s title resounds with certain referents, matrices nevertheless carry other meanings. A matrix might be an inscribed die or an electroformed impression of a record or connote some fossilized rock or crystal. Record, rock, fossil, crystal; the phonographic original and the natural material; the poetics of recording and material records of geological time: all echo though Pritchard’s book as voices marking time lived in a natural world (whatever nature is), making of it some sound, leaving of it some inscribed record. Inseparable from the textuality of his poems, their status as printed language, is their clarion, syncopated orality. Lucid and ludic both, Pritchard’s voice is at once intimate and borrowed, studied and improvisational, strobed with the scattershot movements of personal consciousness, lyric pastoral traditions, and conceptual art materiality.

See the poems Pritchard stretches and stutters like lines of music, via techniques of kerning, in which spaces between letters are added. These lacunae that open up Pritchard’s poems become ghost notes that keep his words open, his lines open, his sightlines open, his meaning, yes, open and unencumbered by closure. Doubling and tripling back, reading and rereading such lines is both labor and pleasure. As meanings accumulate, some sense of oneself as a machine of meaning becomes deeply felt. The doubling of meaning is one of poetry’s most spectral and stunning techniques, usually produced via line breaks, but Pritchard achieves it within the line itself by splitting open his words.

Consider “HARBOUR,” a quiet lyric snapshot of a seaside scene. That quiet is broken by the gaps that emerge throughout the first line and then all through the poem, so that taken together, the text appears like dark spores on a pale page—all fertile, scattered ground—or perhaps what loops and constellates above it, stars figuring some sky. See, that is, *read*, the opening lines:

W here quiet ly on ly go e s  
k now in g the s h or e  
w it h its sun dried hues  
s ever a l b oats

The first letter of each line, situated on its own, forms a kind of pole from which the rest of the poem waves wildly, then quietly, in the wind of the page. I begin to try to make sense (of that movement): “W here quiet ly on ly” I initially read as, “We here quiet, lie on lie.” “Ly on ly” might also be “ly(ric) on ly(ric)” I decide. But I correct course: “Where quietly only goes” goes the first line (not quite quietly into some night). Four lines down, my mind plays more tricks: “s ever a l b oats” becomes “severed alba oats,” some Napoleonic exile verse crossed with field or feed, even as the simple line, “several boats,” emerges newly myriad. Another line startles me with its hunger: “c l ever f eat her limbs.” I read “If I ever (f) eat her limbs.” That lonely *f* is like a note, hanging there in the middle of the line, waiting to be played. “Clever feat her limbs” might be more beautifully compressed, but I prefer the line broken out into some psychogeography of sexual need. So it goes, though: I move letter by letter, from (imagined) image to (constructed) image to (literal) meaning but without my accumulation of readings ever truly dissolving.

By composing and decomposing language, loosing letters from their corralling word, Pritchard invokes the idea of asemic writing without ever quite committing to it. (W. Francis Lucas on Pritchard in 1967: “These poems decompose the reader by sight and sound.”) Playing the performative materiality of the page as though it is a score, the poet reconfigures printed language to resemble flights of thought and migrations of tradition, its constant projections and epochal swings. If this situates Pritchard in avant-garde traditions of art, language, and publishing from Mallarmé on, as well as in the specific sixties New York moment in which he lived, it also shows him obliterating essentialist ideas of linguistic racial difference while simultaneously resituating “modernist forms within the continuum of African art forms,” as Nielsen put it, which had so inspired Modernism itself.

Thinking about Pritchard’s loose and long-limbed poems, their stretched and shattered lines and rhythms at once singular and polyphonic, evokes, suddenly, the operating idea of Eugene Redmond’s 1976 survey of Black poetics, *Drumvoices: The Mission of Afro-American Poetry*. As Redmond explains, “the longest connection of course, and oldest connection, and most circuitous connection, is that the drum was the first means of speaking over distances, drum voice.” There is the feeling in Pritchard’s poems, in the percussive beats of words and syllabics broken apart by his orchestrated distances, that the poet is indeed speaking across

expanses, both the distance of the page and the distance of the book and wider, vaster fields as well. As he writes in the stair-like lines of “VOLITIVE,” dropping melodically into the void,

|                    |  |
|--------------------|--|
| Drawn              |  |
| across the absence |  |
| Borne              |  |
| by silence         |  |
| All                |  |
| surrounding        |  |

Still, despite his virtuosic performances of poem and page, the feeling that Pritchard is (at heart) a pastoral poet doesn't quit. “Pritchard buries more traditional images of nature (dusk, dawn, tides) in the psychovisual text,” Lillian-Yvonne Bertram has written of “HARBOUR.” In anatomy, lacunae refer to the small cavities in the substance of a bone containing osteocytes. What is an osteocyte? “Osteocyte is itself an entrapped osteoblast in the matrix,” according to online dictionaries. Matrix or not, Pritchard appears in moments such as this a nature poet to the bone, one who voices the pastoral lyric as an oral tradition at once ancient and very, very new.

Another sea view: Pritchard's “VISITARY,” as wing'd as a messenger on some brilliant-beached shore. The poem has shades of June Jordan's “It's About You: on the Beach,” with those visionary repeated lines, in all caps, that close her poem: “YOUR BODY IS A LONG BLACK WING / YOUR BODY IS A LONG BLACK WING.” As in preamble or retort, Pritchard writes,

|                          |
|--------------------------|
| Where winged wings walk  |
| Where winged wings       |
| Where winged wings       |
| Dewinged wings           |
| ...                      |
| Springing to their feet  |
| The things with their... |
| all over the place       |
| spinning haste           |
| like a flying ocean      |

Around that ocean, flung in the air (that is, the page), are repeated columns and conjugations of Pritchard's repeated lines, droning and ecstatic. Here are wings as lyric, suggesting the sign and shape of flight, following an early example of concrete poetry: George Herbert's 17th-century “Easter Wings,” its two stanzas each in the shape of wings weighed on their side. Herbert's last lines go “For, if I imp my wing on thine, / Affliction shall advance the flight in me.” *Affliction shall advance the flight in me* or *YOUR BODY IS A LONG BLACK WING* or Pritchard's last lines, addressed to his wings, both winged and de-winged, and those who

might wear them: “Now / all is still / will they return / in something other than an urn.” Pritchard’s urn summoned for me another, Keats’s, with its “Sylvan historian, who canst thus express / A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme.”

I have to admit: I am drawn to Pritchard’s neat rhymes, his allusions to poetic ancestors, and the couplets that sometimes bring the stuttering machines of his poems to a close. See the lovely couplet “though a storm returned the borrowed sky / tomorrow did not reply” that ends a poem titled “DOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOM.” Twenty-seven O’s, an entire audience of gaping, gasping, unblinking, yawning, laughing, lyrical, doomed, and desirous open eyes or mouths, all oral, all code, all doom. Are these O’s, so sequential and serial, doomed because they are repeated, spoken, written, occluded? What is O for Pritchard? We know that he equated it with the transreal, but what does that inscribe or signify, what sign? For him, it appears (as sign and sound both), O is variously eye and wreath, all mouth, with its instrumental outrush of air:

DOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOM.

It sounds like a jazz singer, her moan, or a horn—its moan. It *looks* like a horn, its moan of a body. Nielson would write of Pritchard that he was constantly “worrying that line between text and tongue, between writing and intention, singing and speaking, all saturated in the signifiers of black song traditions.” O is also a familiar lick in English-language lyric poetry. Consider “O Rose, thou art sick!” (Blake); “To what green altar, O mysterious priest” (Keats); “O Captain!” (Whitman); “O daemon of grasses” (H.D.); “Oh open, apostolic height!” (Brooks); “Oh! If you would only walk / into this room” (Jordan); “O Superman” (Anderson); “oh, you live” (Smith); “o, hear the low humn of the ho of the sullen” (Moten). For both the ancients and the more recents, O might be code—I and O, all those ones and zeroes, being the I that speaks and the O that receives (or variously shrieks or remains mute—same thing). In ancient Greek, there was the *OLOLYGA*, an onomatopoeic shriek that did not signify anything except its own sound. In Shakespeare, there is Othello. And, as Anne Boyer recently wrote, “The little girl in Rousseau needed only to write down her name now: she had written, already, her revolutionary letters in the codes of O’s.”

The codes of Pritchard’s O’s are likewise revolutionary, revolving and signaling across the pages of *The Matrix* not like matrices of the expected grid but like circles: ouroboros, eye, mouth, lick; assent, exclamation, image, object, orality. In *The Matrix*, they might take an entire page; they might consume it. Indeed, for Pritchard, O can be the full text of the poem, roundly and totally constituted, as in “WREATH,” which opens his collection (like a door on which a wreath might be hung). O is a wreath, roundly and traditionally constituted. In the ancient Mediterranean, wreaths were diadems woven of laurel; they symbolized status and stemmed from some typically violent Apollonian myth. The O of wreaths continues to carry import in the Grecian world. I, for example, wear one as I write this now from Athens, engraved on a gold pendant on a chain. A recent present, the pendant celebrates 200 years since the Greek war of independence. I blanched at the nationalism (1821 is the cellphone passcode of every cop on every Athenian corner) but was taken by the design. O is the eye for

ornament too. I picture my mouth, its *O*, as I write this. I picture the wreath, its *O* around my neck. I sound out these sentences as I write them: oral, open, ornament, *O*. The mouth's sounds are another meaning, ancillary to words, which are themselves ancillary to content, as Pritchard's epigraph to his own book goes. And g o es.

Pritchard plumbs Apollonian myth, in a sidelong way, in his poem "CASSANDRA AND FRIEND," which he closes, with a click: "Because it was a fact / it never left a track." Cassandra, of course, was given the gift of prophecy by Apollo in exchange for her body. When she refused him anyway, he cursed her, making sure her prophecies went unbelieved. Still her mouth continued to offer a series of revolutionary *O*'s and turns, all unheard. In this and other Pritchard poems, I hear echoes of one of his elders, Gwendolyn Brooks. In her poem "The Children of the Poor," though she places no *O* on its own, still those round vowels of moan and ah, of revelation—as all that is real, transreal, and conditioning—are woven through Brooks's lines so that the *O*'s work like Pritchard's lacunae, pebbling and tracking her poem with absence, its wreath and mouth:

Lost softness softly makes a trap for us.  
And makes a curse. And makes a sugar of  
The malocclusions, the inconditions of love.

Malocclusions are gaps in the mouth, incorrect alignment of the jaw and teeth. "Inconditions of love"—well, every reader knows that. Even so I track Brooks's lines, her many redoubtable *O*'s, with my eyes while I voice them with my mouth, as Pritchard's *Matrix* of sight and sound—unreal or transreal and not to be believed—has taught me.