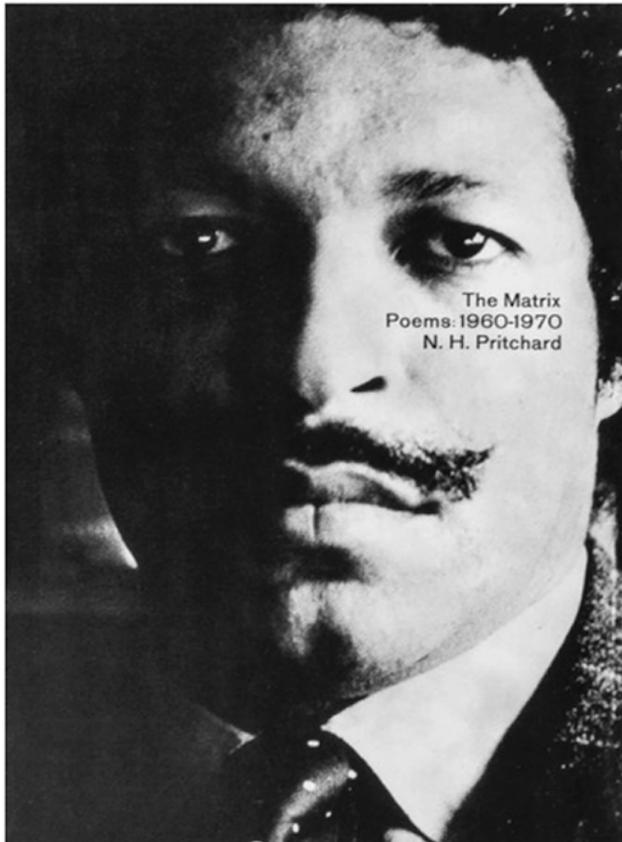


N.H. Pritchard's *The Matrix* and *EECCHHOOEESS*

These poetry collections exemplify the literary innovation of this era—a commitment to the pursuit and study of sound and a symbolic resistance to legibility.

JUNE 2021

By *Erica N. Cardwell*



The Matrix Poems: 1960–1970

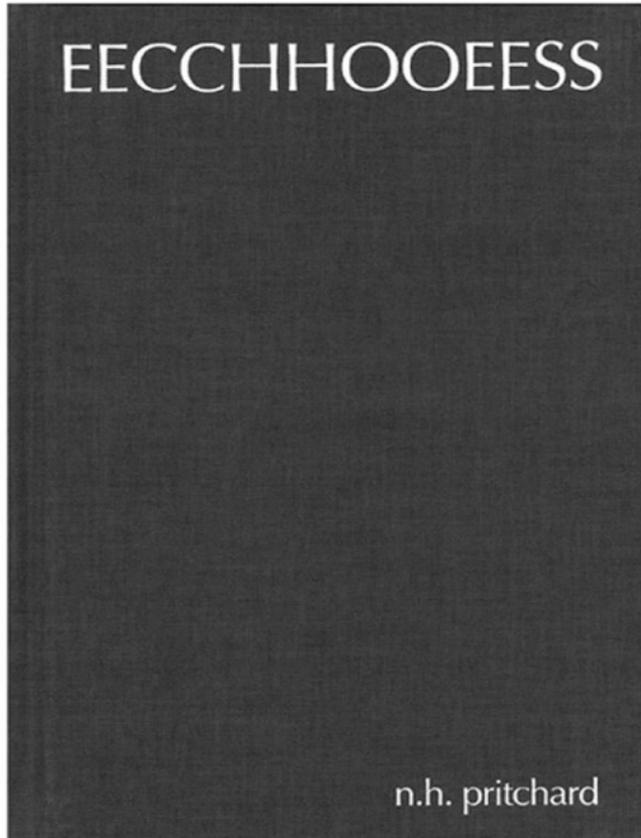
N.H. Pritchard

(Primary Information and Ugly Duckling Presse, 2021 / Doubleday, 1970)

EECCHHOOEESS

N.H. Pritchard

(DABA Press, 2021 / New York University Press, 1971)



Jazz poetics, the formative tradition rooted in the Black Arts Movement, has contributed a sense of energetic permission towards experimental transcendence, specifically for Black voices from within the diaspora. In N.H. Pritchard's two works, *The Matrix Poems: 1960–1970* and *EECCHHOOEESS*, readers encounter poems that exemplify the literary innovation of this era—a commitment to the pursuit and study of sound and a symbolic resistance to legibility. Pritchard's poetry illustrates a specific tenet of jazz poetics: words are more malleable when deconstructed.

Pritchard's background in art history—with degrees from New York University and Columbia University, born and raised in New York—is evident when one flips through the pages of his books. The poems contain sparse stanzas or hunks of verse, with individual letters often spaced apart, sometimes singled out onto one page with zero punctuation. For some seeking traditional, narrative driven work, this notion might appear antithetical to audience connection. But there is much more to be gathered from the sense of refusal found in these poems. As the poet describes in his opening page of *The Matrix*, "Words are ancillary to content." Despite this, words remain, their sound released from contrived sequences. *The Matrix* introduces this break.

though a storm returned the borrowed sky
tomorrow did not reply

Many of the venerated writers of the Beat Generation embody the emotional white everyman-ness that, at times, distracts from the meticulous craft of jazz poetics. Students of jazz poets recognize the enduring legacy of the Black radical tradition and what Fred Moten describes as “fugitivity” or the way in which “blackness operates as the modality of life’s constant escape and takes the form, the held and errant pattern, of flight.” This unnerving context or “constant escape” need not derogate the discursive, frenetic nature of jazz poetics. More than rejection of canonical white literary traditions, Black jazz poets understand the nature of liberation, right down to the utterance of sound.

In thinking of Pritchard’s lineage, audiences bear witness to poetry created from spacious, unrestrained perspectives. In the collection, *Black Chant: Languages of African-American Postmodernism* (1997), Aldon Lynn Nielsen suggests that “Jazz poetry had long been interracial as well as an intertextual phenomenon.” This remark brings to mind the jazz composer Cecil Taylor, whose chaotic abstractions deliver a sense of agitated enthusiasm, a tone resonant within Pritchard’s poems. One could argue that Pritchard makes visible the clanging chaos of a Cecil Taylor composition—robust, jagged, and still, a peculiarly satisfying listening experience.

Pritchard’s second book, *EECCHHOOEESS* (originally published in 1971), demonstrates a more effusive commitment to the economy of language. Repeated words, concentric circles, and stacks of symbols or numbers remain consistent. The first poem in the book is “FR / OG,” which primarily consists of 10 pages printed with “as a” in a single vertical line with occasional additions such as, “as a moonless ooh boon” and “as a hoo hooz.” Initially the “as a” reads as a prompt. But with steady repetition, it recedes into the “s” sound, hissing into a whisper. This is echoed by the final two pages that turn the number 2 into a visual pattern blanketing the pages.

After spending time reading Pritchard’s poems out loud to myself, I listened to a recording of him reciting his poem “Gyre’s Galax,” which is included in *The Matrix*, for the New Jazz Poets album. The opening line, “Sound variegated through beneath lit,” is announced and repeated until he organically inverts the phrase into a chorus of hard repetition. The poem commences into softer consonant sounds like “b” and “th” pressed into a mouthful, until compounded, illuminating a rhythmic phonic language. As Pritchard performs, the audio recording crackles in the background, like fuses sparkling and decorating the imagined environment. As art object, and as music composition, Pritchard’s poems teach as they inspire.

Contributor

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Erica N. Cardwell is a writer, critic, and educator based in New York. Her essays and criticism have appeared or are forthcoming for *The Believer*, *Hyperallergic*, *Frieze*, *Passages North*, *Bomb*, *Green Mountains Review*, and others. In 2015, she was awarded a Nonfiction fellowship from the LAMBDA Literary Foundation.