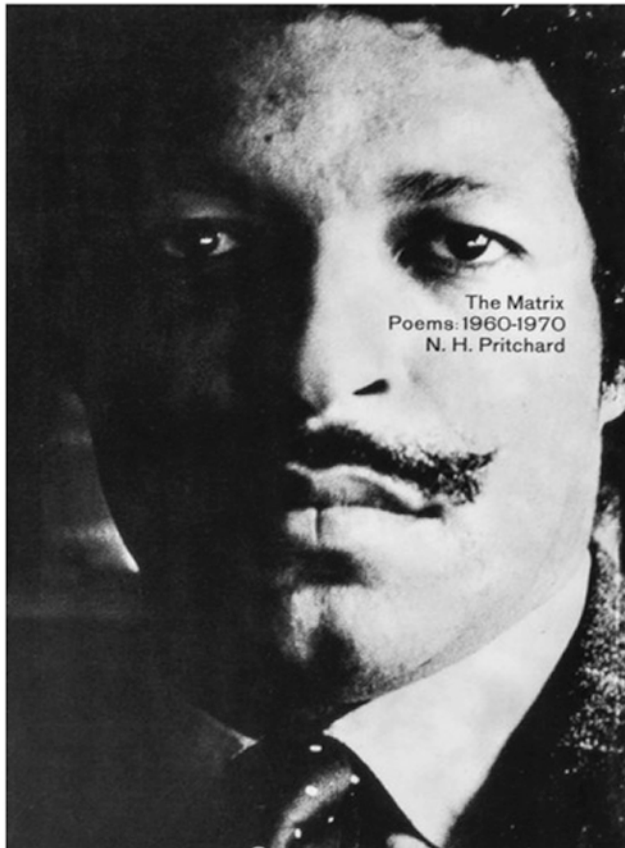


## N.H. Pritchard's *The Matrix* and *EECCHHOOEESS*

**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

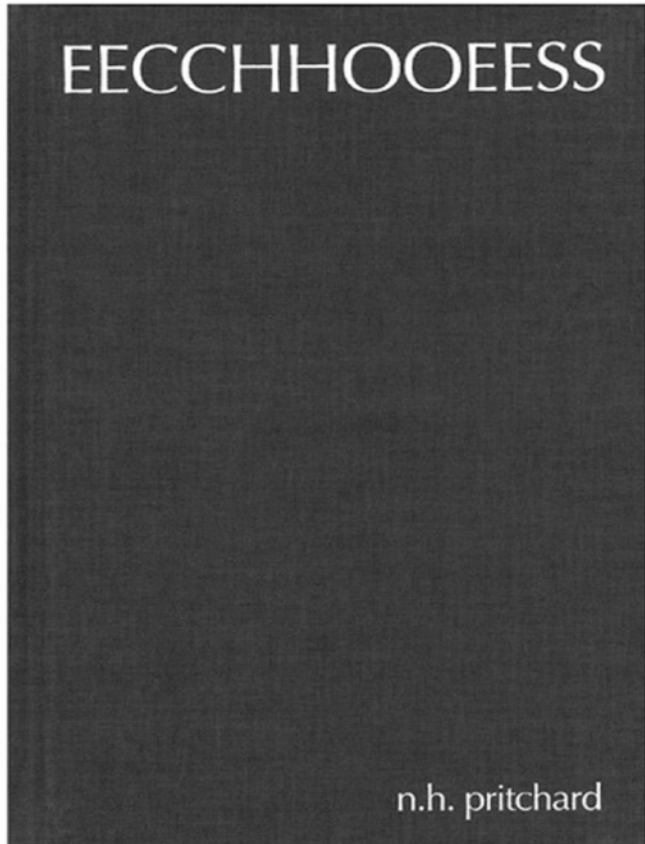
By *Erica N. Cardwell*



*The Matrix Poems: 1960–1970*

N.H. Pritchard

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



*EECCHHOOEESS*

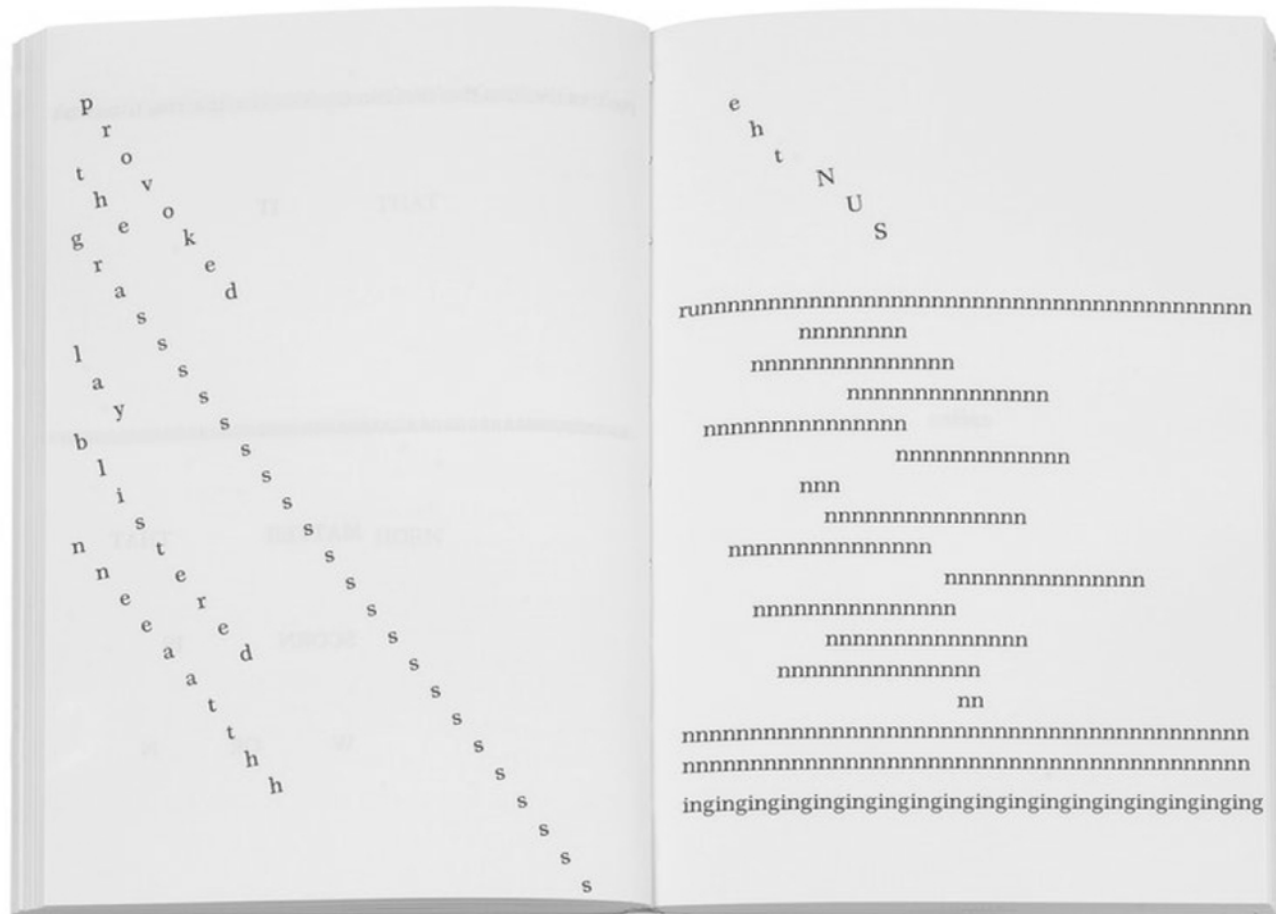
N.H. Pritchard

(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.

The poem "BURNT SIENNA" is an investigation of color and its associations. Readers are introduced to one of Pritchard's consistent craft techniques of displaying formal traits before revealing intent. We begin with the descriptor, "ample and plain" in the first few lines. As the poem continues to take shape, the aesthetic conceits switch to phonetic wordplay, "still gleaming meekly weaned" and "beyond be gone" allowing for a subtle shift in tone before landing on absence, "the nameless coloured yarn."



Courtesy of Primary Information and Ugly Duckling Presse

Syllables, consonants, and vowels become porous explorations meant to alliterate as they collapse into new visual and acoustic configurations, as in the poem, "THE VOICE," which opens with the lines printed without margins at the left of the page:

*s talk s t oo in t rude  
up on t his d une  
s till ness b rush e s the sea  
c alm t oo s oo n g r e w  
c alm ab out the s and*

Each poetic line confounds with sonic riddles guiding the mouth to pause, enunciate, and ponder aloud. Under this direction, words become sacred and erotic, a clever arrangement and melodic conjure spooling out as one moves through the text. Reading, therefore, is performing. We are meant to *encounter* the poem by participating in it, contributing to the sound, confronting context down to the syllable. This also present in, "DOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOM," while it retains the original shape of the word, Pritchard's syntax conveys a sense of departure:

Possibly and perhaps set out  
to watch the clouding willows droop

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

### Erica N. Cardwell

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.