

Dia Art Foundation  
Readings in Contemporary Poetry  
David Henderson and Andrei Codrescu

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Introduction by Vincent Katz

**David Henderson** was born in Harlem in 1942. In 1962, along with other black writers and artists, he founded the Society of Umbra, a literary collective and magazine. He became active in the Black Arts Movement through the Umbra Workshop, where he served as an editor of *Umbra* magazine and three Umbra anthologies. He was also involved in the anti-war movement. Henderson is the author of the following books of poetry: *Felix of the Silent Forest* (Poets Press, 1967); *De Mayor of Harlem* (Dutton, 1970); *The Low East* (North Atlantic Books, 1980); and *Neo-California* (North Atlantic Books, 1998). Author of the lyrics to Sun Ra's composition "Love in Outer Space," Henderson has also recorded with the saxophonists and composers Ornette Coleman and David Murray and the cornetist and composer Butch Morris. He is the author of the biography *'Scuse Me While I Kiss the Sky: Jimi Hendrix: Voodoo Child* (2009), and he wrote and produced an award-winning two-hour documentary on the African American beat poet Bob Kaufman for National Public Radio and the Pacifica Foundation. Recent publications include prose and poetry in the anthologies *Beats at Naropa* (2009), *Obama, Obama* (2012), *Angles of Ascent: A Norton Anthology of African American Poetry* (2013), and *Cross Worlds: Transcultural Poetics* (2014).

In his intro to his 1970 volume, *De Mayor of Harlem*, Henderson writes something evocative and true, that could also qualify as a perceptive comment on his own poetry: "The greatest thing was getting off the train uptown after the hassles of midtown and finding a beautiful place with laughing and joking and fish frying. A place so alien to the lesser New York area. Its beauty is in the blood, the genes; it defies time, defies money, air pollutions, institutions, and even outright genocidal murder."

Henderson's poems are amazing for the voice they have easy access to, always combining the life of the streets (New York City, New Orleans, Berkeley) with the military-industrial complex via the music that reflects and gives back the actual pulse of the same streets. His voice in "Elvin Jones Gretsch Freak," which you can find online, maintains a rhythm akin to Jones on brand name Gretsch "gretsch rocks and rolls / gretsch rattles / fuck gretsch // we know so well strident drums / children singing death songs / war / tenor and soprano / high..."

Henderson's takes are always unexpected, always bringing poetry to bear on difficulty and critique. Here he is manifesting the cataclysmic beauty of Jimi Hendrix: "Hendrix assaults the mind, sublimating horrible noises of the city... he turns the fascist sounds of energy exploitation into a beautiful music with a pyramid base of urban blues guitar... We hear spaceships landing in the heavy atmospheric gases of fantastic planets, we hear giant engines changing gears, we hear massive turbines that run cities, Frankenstein life-giving electric-shock blasts, jets taking off and exploding into melody." Please join me in welcoming David Henderson.

**Andrei Codrescu** was born in Sibiu, Romania. He has written poetry, novels, essays, and film. He won the Peabody Award and was a National Book Award finalist for poetry. From 1983 to 1996 he edited the multivolume publication *Exquisite Corpse: A Journal of Books and Ideas*, and in 1996 he started to edit the ongoing website *Exquisite Corpse: A Journal of Life and Letters*. Codrescu was a regular commentator on National Public Radio's *All Things Considered* from 1983 to 2016. His recent books include *Bibliodeath: My Archives (with Life in Footnotes)* (2012) and *The Art of Forgetting: New Poems* (Sheep Meadow Press, 2016). He is also the author of *Alien Candor: Selected Poems 1970-1995* (Black Sparrow Press, 1996) and *So Recently Rent a World: New and Selected Poems: 1968-2012* (Coffee House Press, 2012).

One of Andrei Codrescu's earliest books is in fact three books, each claiming an invented authorship — in poet-publisher Paul Carroll's words "a black Puerto Rican poet imprisoned for an unspecified crime, an ex-beatnik who's become a mystical Fascist in Vietnam, and a robust young woman who lives on the Lower East Side" — along with the dreams these figures, united only by their tangential relationship to the United States, possess. "I want to touch something sensational / like the mind of a shark" writes Codrescu in the guise of Alice Henderson-Codrescu.

He never gave up this fascination and desire for knowing America, whether from the underground up, or straight through middle America, as it grows, flourishes, and withers. A typically dense poem from a later period, titled "3/6/81, Amtrak," begins:

Bridges with empty niches waiting for rural madonnas.  
Subjects of somebody's nostalgia. Not mine.  
The backs of old Pennsylvania towns. Rusted boats...

Codrescu is always on the side of the Revolution, but he is also always a card-carrying Surrealist. Nobody gets off without Codrescu's taking the piss. A recent poem begins:

*the revolution: return to new york*  
*for Allen Ginsberg 92<sup>nd</sup> birthday: Allen, let's fix America*

Like everything by Codrescu, it's simultaneously serious and comic, witty, poignant, and unexpected. Let's see where he'll take it tonight. Please welcome Andrei Codrescu.