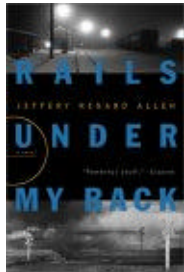


**[Rails Under My Back](#)**by *Jeffery Renard Allen*

Harvest, 2001.

Paperback, 576 pages, \$14.00.

**[Françoise Palleau-Papin](#)**

In Jeff Allen's epic novel *Rails Under My Back*, the narrators tell an extended family saga about the two crossed branches of a family tree created by two brothers who have married two sisters. Friends, brothers, cousins, parents, aunts and uncles, Second-World-War veterans, housing-project inhabitants, models, and drug dealers people this teeming novel—an African-American Odyssey. In it, two characters search separately for two others in a fictive city, a composite of New York and Chicago, as Leopold Bloom and Stephen Dedalus did in their Dublin tribulations.

Allen is not a system novelist, but several themes resonate in his novel, such as its allusion to Malcolm X in terms of the color red. The character Jesus is a young rebel as destructive and terrifying as Faulkner's Jesus in the story "That Evening Sun." Just like Malcolm X in the days of his underworld life, Jesus is nicknamed *Red* because of his red crest, which he daily shaves. He is the betrayer, the angry and unreliable character who carries in him as an eternal grudge his grandmother's "betrayal." "He moved with a sort of amazement in the world, anger fueling the furnace of his heart. With ceremonial rigidity, each day he wore red, symbol of his unflagging fury." He drives a red Jaguar and ultimately murders his uncle, Lucifer, who is also redheaded, and a father figure to him. Jesus is a new Brutus ("We gon do this like Brutus" says his friend). The blood he spills exhilarates him and gives him a triumphant sense of his own power. "Blood singing in his body, this day marking the beginning of his seeing the world." In the Red Hook housing project where Jesus the fallen angel prowls, warring gangs block an intricate path like geological obstacles: "the red valley, the jets above reflecting menacing shadows. A rival crew rolled forward, six or seven big boulders, and blocked the path. Red-tied bandanas, threatening, gallows rope."

The red motif recurs in various forms, in various tones, building up a pattern. It is a composition in melodic disruptions with echoes, and it recalls the structure of jazz. John Coltrane (often written as *Trane*, punning on *train*, another recurrent motif) is often mentioned. So is Jimi Hendrix, whose importance Jeff Allen has stressed in an unpublished interview with me, saying: "Jimi Hendrix has a thematic, stylistic, and structural influence on the novel." Both musicians use ecstatic repetition and the break of improvisation or syncopation—somewhere between the fascination for endless repetition and the abruptness of disjunction.

In *Rails Under My Back*, there is a clear disjunction in the structure of the chapters, which juxtapose different viewpoints; there is also a clear syntactic disjunction in the broken-up sentences (often elliptic, many composed solely of nominal clauses) and the peculiar phrasing some characters use. You can feel the rhythmic influence of Jimi Hendrix's eclectic guitar in the juxtaposition of nominal sentences and in the sounds teeming around the melodic line, with echoes and variations carrying the narrative flow along like a sound wave. The narrative voices, in the background yet omnipresent, paradoxically allow the reader to dive into a discontinuous vision with a musical, jazzy form of coherence. What a character says about Jimi Hendrix corresponds to the narrative structure of the novel, in which a narrative voice mainly alternates between six major characters' viewpoints (Lucifer's, Sheila's, Gracie's, Porsha's, Hatch's

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and Jesus's) and their respective streams of consciousness: "You hear a guitarist who is also an orchestra. One man who is six. Oak, cherry, redwood, pine, rosewood, mahogany—six limbs bunched in a single trunk of sound." Allen's narration echoes Jimi Hendrix's capacity to speak in voices, with such evocative titles as "Voodoo Child (Slight Reprise)." Allen gives a voice to each character in tone, rhythm, and style. When Hatch tries to persuade his girlfriend Elsa to respond to his sexual overtures, Allen humorously shows that a single character can readily speak the language of all the others to advance his cause:

He could Spokesman her. *Baby, a circle is a circle, an angle an angle.* He could Uncle John her. *Bitch, why don't you just relax. You know you want it.* He could run Jimi's voodoo down. *Well, I march right up to a mountain. Crumble it to dust in the palm of my hand.*

Virtuoso, ear tuned to the sound of each instrument, Hatch mixes sounds and voices as well as intertextual references and the rhythms of other texts.

Passing from one character to another involves a syncopation in the act of reading, sometimes a violent one. Only a typographic blankness—a white space—marks the separation between Gracie's madness (she sees cannibal babies everywhere) and Daddy Larry's good-humored and mythical countryside world. Gracie, sitting on the toilet, imagines a scene from a horror movie: "She felt something clamp on to her behind. A baby held her buttocks in its gripped teeth." Then immediately after the typographic blankness, Daddy Larry's tall-tale spirit brings relief: "A Houston wonder, Daddy Larry's three-legged cat ran faster than a dog wit six legs." In this sentence, the black teller from a mythical South makes himself heard through Allen's direct transcription of his accent—the word "wit"—and through the comparison to a fabulous six-legged dog, the ludicrousness of which mitigates whatever evaluation the simile was supposed to provide. The scary world of a paranoid mind gives room to comedy, the two juxtaposed without canceling each other, in vivid contrast.

The use of nominal sentences and the fast shuffle between various narrators allow for short circuits and create an economy of discourse, at once omnipresent and discreet, compensating the restraint of the narratorial voices with the variety of their viewpoints. The novel's density derives from narrators showing their memories at work through hesitations about what they remember. Allen leaves open questions that show memory's limitations and the difficulty of commemoration. In his poem "Saws and Sayings" (from his collection *Harbors and Spirits*, 1999), Allen writes about his quest for an authentic narrative voice to give form and substance to the mute voices of the past, the "mouths of drowned men":

..... to draw the lines tight
..... gather all the stories/ lead them
through terrible country
..... and weave them into a single voice.

Allen gives a voice to the anonymous dead, to the forgotten, and to the victims of the cities' grinding forces. Brief apparitions, anonymous dead, express themselves in wrenching utterances in a unique chorus of voices, inhabiting spasmodically the characters' lives. The sirens who lure the sailors with their songs are present in the seduction of the city that kills people. In the brief suicide scene, a woman is drawn to the singing voices of the rails, yelling as she dives under the approaching train:

as if the wind-loud train itself had lunged out the tunnel of her mouth, then the Oriental Asian woman moving with ease, flowing, and disappearing, not as Sheila might have imagined it, a slippery log rolling out from under her, no, not like this, but sinking, the anchor of her purse drawing her down, or the platform itself collapsing beneath her, a ringing chorus of rails.

With such moments of violent and vivid recognition of how difficult it is simply to exist, Allen's characters learn to face life. If Hatch is, as Allen explains, a "Portrait of the Artist," this novel warns us to avoid epiphanies. It only acknowledges memory's transfiguration as a particular subjectivity's expression: "All rails glowed with the memory of those speeding colorful objects his eyes had witnessed years before.... So his nostalgia had formed." The young musician Hatch learns to divest himself of his narcissistic nostalgia ("His tears were private, selfish, for him only. He would never cry again.") and comes to a more mature worldview characterized by compassion and distance.

The variety of voices does not threaten the novel's coherence, but contributes to the creation of a teeming universe. *Rails Under My Back* recalls a war novel, a social testimony, a *Bildungsroman*, or even the parody of a "Southern novel" in the end. The syncopations and rich sound effects along the melodic line of Allen's prose not only imitate Jimi Hendrix's but also signal Allen's complete renewal of the extended family saga as a literary genre. Allen puts into richly poetic effect the majestic lines of Sterling Plumpp's poem:

I/the poor, silence recording
ledgers of my generations.
I give you windows
in darkness, ears
in silence. I ritualize:

Jeffrey Renard Allen was born in Chicago in 1962 and received his Ph.D. in English from the University of Illinois in Chicago. He has taught at Queens College since 1992.

DRAWN ON FOR THIS ESSAY

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