

# THOMAS SAYERS ELLIS

BY PENNY DICKERSON

Poet, essayist, and editor, Thomas Sayers Ellis is a literary threat. Harvard educated and a Brown University graduate; noted writer Elizabeth Alexander described him as, "One of our geniuses." Upon meeting him and experiencing firsthand the whirlwind fury of his writing workshops, I too agree. As an associate professor of creative writing at Case Western University, Ellis's innovative teaching techniques and his unique approach to connecting with students, has earned him the institution's prestigious Wittke Award in 2000. Despite accolades and three published poetry collections—*The Good Junk* (Graywolf Press, 1996), *The Genuine Negro Hero* (Kent State Press, 2001), and *The Maverick Room* (Graywolf Press, 2005)—Ellis lacks any pretense Ivy League environments

may grant one. Head to toe he's a pure soul, emoting his own brand of individuality--silver loop nose ring often accompany his retro attire.

True to community, Ellis is a cultural icon in his own right. A co-founder of the now defunct Dark Room Collective (see page 16), he followed its departure with the birth of *Quotes Community: Notes For Black Poets*, an anthology of comments on craft and race between emerging and established black poets from all over the world.

I interviewed this soul brother/professor/poet and received rare insights to the metaphoric, linguistic music he creates in his most aggressive literary endeavor to date, *The Maverick Room*. Readers can prepare to read a wedding of Washington D.C. culture and urban nuance.

*TMR* places the author's childhood experiences, American histories' tough truths, and aesthetic memories into separate poetic bursts across the traverses of our nation's most model metropolis and its simultaneous ability to house measurable mess.

**Penny Dickerson:** The writing community welcomed the release of *The Maverick Room*, your first major publication since the year 2001. Where have your literary priorities been during the interim?

**Thomas Sayers Ellis:** I don't have any literary priorities. My literary priority is life, is living, without which there wouldn't be any poems—but I know what you mean. I've been doing what writers do: teaching (a lot), reading, writing, giving readings, re-writing, re-reading, re-giving readings, paying the bills, falling in love, falling out of love.

**PD:** Your poetic passions are, "...the trick move, the okey-doke, and the trope-a-dope." Is *The Maverick Room* your "passion project,"--a compilation of fa-

vorite poems that include plenty of back-peddling?

**TSE:** Well it was my passion project but now it's just a book. The height of such passion only exists for me while I am making the poem, and yes, sometimes it takes a trick-move or two to get the muse to see it my way. I don't have any favorites. My favorite poems are the ones I'm working on right now and they are "Dear Don Cornelius," "The Last Time Saw Soul Sister #1" and "Statue of Sterling Brown". Some of the poems in *The Maverick Room* are more event-like than others but not one of them is my favorite. I think a poem should be an event. Favorites don't let you walk away from them, their loves, the way they look and the way they sound. And you have to walk away to get to the next whole thing. And didn't Mr. Tallest Temp, Mr. Ain't Too Proud To Beg, Mr. Raspy Plea, Mr. Loss, David Ruffin teach us that—twice, once willingly and once unwillingly—to walk away from love.

And I betcha didn't know that Michael Jackson paid for David Ruffin's funeral and that Minister Farrakhan preached it, and that it was held in Aretha Franklin's daddy's church, and that Eddie Kendricks was arrested (for child support) immediately after he sang "My Girl" at David's casket.

Another walk away for Mr. Keep On Truckin'.

To re-answer your first question, I guess you could say I've been wrestling myself away from these events, those I's.

**PD:** I read Michael Eric Dyson's blurb for your book jacket. He refers to the book as, "Ellis' sonic opus of a site-specific artistry that reminds us of Ralph Ellison's sampling of his namesake Emerson's observation that "geography is fate." Do you believe this book is destiny manifest in your writing career? a literary birth that has been incubating since your

Washington, D.C. childhood?

**TSE:** I definitely believe this book belongs to me and that we've been waiting for each other. I saw this book years ago, all of the D.C. stuff, from day-one, but I had no idea about the literary journey and how those things would take root aesthetically—and to answer your first question again, that, too, is what I was waiting for, especially in this age of series writing and book length series and poems. I discovered I wanted something looser, something a little more maverick. Destiny manifest, maybe—birth and re-birth. The first poems I wrote were published in *Agni* and *Callaloo*, whew, so I was lucky and I am not one to keep every poem I write—no way. I am not always thinking book—no way—sometimes I am thinking against book, against magazines, against permanence. Why must everything become either fixed or finished? It's a lie, especially for utterance.

**PD:** At the end of *The Genuine Negro Hero* you state, "I've always had a burning desire to be percussive, to create the kind of composition that resembles a literary, mini-March on Washington. Have you reached a full "percussive-crescendo" in the poems that comprise *The Maverick Room*?

**TSE:** I'll never know and I do think the idea of crescendo is overrated—I like the climb, the groove, the getting there, the bobbing and weaving. I think that what I have tried to do in *The Maverick Room* is to fill "the pocket" so to speak. (See [www.thedcpocket.com](http://www.thedcpocket.com)). I've simply tried to fill in the spaces between the chaos and the order that I experienced and imagined while growing up in Washington, D.C., the city and the district of language. In the book I do "bang, bang" and "wham, flam" and "Up, up, up up, down down".

**PD:** *The Maverick Room* contains poems from both

## The Return of COLORED ONLY

One of these badass,  
glorious days,  
the signs and negative sounds  
that worked against us

will all begin their tenures  
of service, their holy and complex repentance.  
It has already begun with  
"Nigger" and "Bitch"  
and for this we have young folks to thank,  
their disrespect and fearlessness.

Naturally, this will scare  
the civil rights out of some  
and, for a mad-moment, empower  
a great many wrong-cultured others.

To this "The Return..."  
will either code switch or hood ornament,  
drama-drumming both—a cult-nats matrimony  
of the vernacular re-mix: ain't studin' you,  
nommo no more nommo,  
stop studin' us.

All yall who tell yall hearts Art,  
your Bama Hour is, again, up-struggling  
as we (credits and debits alike)  
hang and unhang the old slanders ourselves

—not as segregationists  
(although that wouldn't be  
that bad, given...) and not as Air Februarrians  
(..., given...) but as identity repair-people,  
faders of trick moves, trope-a-dopes  
and okey dokes,

laying our dice down like (self) lovers.

of your earlier collections, in addition to some that have never appeared in "book form." What do you mean by "book form,"— have you held them close to the personal helm, fermenting in a journal?

**TSE:** Book form means poems that have not appeared in a collection but that may have appeared in journals and anthologies. They operate as bridges and ways to foreshadow some of my current interests.

**PD:** What artistic and/or political factors came into play when you selected poems for this collection?

**TSE:** The book is divided into four sections each named after one of the four quadrants of Washington, D.C. with the title poem sitting in the middle of the book, hill-like, like the Capitol Building. The ordering does not attempt to match subject to geography but does attempt to re-map Washington as a source of tension between local and federal noise and culture. In the book I hide the federal noise the same way the local noise gets hidden in real life; thus, the cover photograph. At the same time, because Black D.C. is a very funky town, built on sweat and swamps, I've infused the book with the rooted and uprooted outrageousness of Parliament/Funkadelic and the cosmology of its many metaphors and slanguage.

**PD:** The poems that start and conclude *The Maverick Room*, "Marcus Garvey Vitamins" and "The Dollar Signs of Autumn" can both be considered controversial. I say this because you've disclosed that literary journals refused to print "Autumn," until its recent solicitation by Eliot Katz for *Longshot's*

"Beat Bush" issue. Do these two poems set the tone for what is nestled neat between *Maverick's* pages?

**TSE:** I don't know, but I do think those poems are strong enough borders, boundaries, to contain all of what's to come and that, in a way, is as tragic as the Dyson quote suggests: "geography is fate." Is it? Maybe, but it is certainly containable and limiting, especially when book-ended by those two poems. In "Marcus Garvey Vitamins" I am considering the lie of English literacy, broken promises and cultural responses to both; and the different types of routes one can take toward truth, especially literary truth. Remember Quincy Troupe's truth and Jayson Blair's truth are only lies the moments the other actors are told to acknowledge them. In "The Dollar Signs of Autumn" it's simple (but it's still about truth): all things capitol eventually collapse because capitol is not natural.

Nature muse behave like nature and that includes us and all of our inventions. Nature got us here and nature will take us away from here. Flags, borders, governments, policy, nothing can change that,

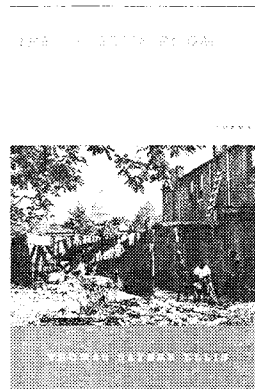
**PD:** From Marcus Garvey Vitamins:

d

widescreen whiteache/*Don't* like it/*don't* Pulitzer me/  
I stress less than landlessness.

Here we see emphasized italics, repetition, rhyme, and syntax that speaks volumes:

*Don't* like it/*don't* Pulitzer me. Like a vitamin the size of Garvey's legacy, do you expect these words will be hard for the literary world to swallow or is this collection's defining message, "Who cares what



## The Roll Call

the literary world thinks?"

**TSE:** I don't know what the literary world will or will not find hard to swallow. I also don't think it's a comment directed to it, of which, I guess, I am one. The literary world and the literacy world are two different places connected very differently to English. We may just be surprised by how many people feel the same way about the line. All I do know is that the poem wanted Pulitzer to be a verb, a thing done to some people and not done to others—which, of course, questions who has the power to do the doing. And, as you know, people care what people think. Poems do not.

**PD:** Webster's *Unabridged* defines a maverick as, "a lone dissenter, as an intellectual, an artist, or a politician, who takes an independent stand apart from his or her associates. Are you one, any, or all of these?"

**TSE:** I am everyday people three times a week and I represent the anonymous poetic self as positive nuisance when I am not out getting ribs. Dissenter, intellectual, artist and, or politician, sounds like Aimé Césaire—When would I find time to quote community.

Or to "...slice the watermelon into smiles."  
—Terrance Hayes

Or to sing The Pronoun-Vowel Reparation's Song?

**PD:** The best advice you've been given is to "stay black," and "do the right thing?" Has adhering to this advice been a challenge for you in literary circles, or in contrast, has it driven you to become a "Maverick!"

Any half-decent rapper  
Can conjure the dead,

Can reach into graves  
And accuse God

Of Indian-giving.  
The trick is ancestral,

No more magic than memory's  
Hidden strings & chains.

Trust me,  
We haven't forgotten a name.

Say them. Raise your hands.  
Holler at me!

**TSE:** Those comments are just reminders not to get too lost, to keep home (if you choose to) in mind. As long as you know that grits is groceries and eggs is poultry you won't lose yourself. Me, a maverick? That's a metaphor. I'm new. I'm still working on my mini-G.E.D.

*The Maverick Room* was an actual club in D.C. where we played and listened to Go-Go; It's the first place I was when someone actually

got shot and killed.

The map of Washington also has a pretty maverick history—the torn square. Washington was also caught-up in a big way in the gunslinger-violence that resulted from the government's inability/lack of desire to control the import of crack cocaine.

**PD:** Let's talk about risks in regard to writing. Your philosophy is that "all risks live between truth and trouble." What, if any, artistic risk has caused you the most trouble?

**TSE:** Risks don't cause trouble; they cause liberation and liberation is a troubling, rare thing, a new breed if you will. The truth is, for more cloudy reasons than I can conjure, already trouble's first cousin and now it's up to poems to invent new ones; truths, new cousins for trouble. That's my job, to invent places for the troubled-truth to line and break. That's what the best, not favorite,

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ing Saturn; Hoops), Natasha Trethewey (Domestic Work; Bellocq's Ophelia; Native Guard), Nehassaiu de Gannes (Percussion, Salt & Honey), Audrey Petty, David Wright (Fire on the Beach), Jahmae Harris.

#### The Dark Room Extended Family

Noland Walker, Kelly Sloane, Sonya Brown, Stacey André Harris, Maritza de Campos, Bethany van Delft, Dina Strachan, Jade Barker, Jorge Otaño, Mackie Burnett, Kevin Keels, Philecia Harris, Blondel Joseph, Toni and Wyatt Jackson, Mark Leong, Marcus Alonso, Vuzi Maduna, Mark Griffith, Charles Rowell, Ntozake Shange, Clyde Taylor, Mary Helen Washington, Maryemma Graham, Richard Hunt, Florence Ladd, Joanne V. Gabbin, Askold Melnyczuk, William Corbett, Kay Bourne, Don Lee, Eve Stern, André Caple, Yvette Mattern, Kwaku Alston, Jacquie Jones, Gelonia Dent, and many more. ★

#### Thomas Sayers Ellis

events in *The Maverick Room* do—I hope.

**PD:** I like that you gravitate towards philosophies instead of hollow definitions. Another powerful philosophy you offer is that "...poetry is broken and breaks itself into breathing...everyone in the breathing business is in the rhythm business."

**TSE:** I love that quote and I think I jacked it from William Stafford. It simply is meant to return the anti-business of language, matter, and literature—it's truest, most rooted production to the folk—back to earth where all of the real living and dying are done.

**PD:** In your writing, you've traded "simile for signifying" saying it's gotten so easy to simile.

Do you consider using more simile, over less metaphor, the sign of an immature poet?

**TSE:** Naw, but I am ready to move beyond the limiting freedoms of diction. I am ready to involve the undiscovered nuances of *Colored Only Me* more. All poets are immature, all language is too, it's always growing up. In my case, down, toward something elemental, basic, right before babble. The finished object is fooling us with its maturity, so it dies. We're just babies, man.

**PD:** When using metaphors, we "create meaning by renewing perception." Your poems consistently speak a new language, which gives readers both an element of surprise and perspective. How do you achieve this?

**TSE:** By taking my time, by taking too long, by an aggressive manipulation of every inch of sound I sound.

I've been called a control freak. That's the price and the punishment, a badassssssss eardrum.

**PD:** Along those same lines, the cognitive purpose, the most organic use of metaphor, is that it actively provides words that have no literal name. When you are in the initial stages of composing a poem, are you in a state of free, mental association with your surroundings, or are you consciously thinking about structure and form first?

**TSE:** I forget, so don't make me remember, I forgot, so don't make me over—it's different every cotton-pickin' time. Sun up, sun down. There's blood in them there questions striking structure, south to get southern.

**PD:** Explain the metaphoric warning, *Workshops are war*, as written in your poem "The Dollar Signs

**TSE:** I spent two residencies at Yaddo, both in West House. I had Elizabeth Bishop's and Sylvia Plath's work spaces. I also stayed in "The Nipple Room" where Phillip Roth wrote *The Breast*. Yaddo is beautiful and Saratoga Spring is too and you meet artists you might not otherwise, but I'd rather tell you the story of a 16-years-old Thomas Sayers Ellis riding the subway in Washington, D.C.

There was a woman sitting across from me on the subway reading *The Collected Stories Of John Cheever* (the book cover caught my eye) and she was carrying a book bag that said Yaddo. Being very curious I asked her about it and she told me about it, saying it was for writers and that the guy she was reading had been there and I said I am going to go there some day. Of course I went right out and found those stories which opened my mind up to *The New Yorker*, *The Paris Review*, and Cheever's letters to Malcolm Cowley, etc.

I even, eventually, became a colleague of Susan's Cheever at Bennington for awhile. I wrote a letter to William Meredith at Connecticut College saying I was a young poet who needed a scholarship, and he replied and offered me money if I would wait one year after graduation. I didn't because, that young, a year seemed like forever and I just had to leave D.C. It was a great response as he read my work and was very encouraging.

I wish I still had that letter.

**PD:** You returned to Yaddo for multiple summers, yes? Did you consider other prominent workshop/retreats like Breadloaf in Vermont or Cave Canem? The latter developed specifically for African-American writers?

**TSE:** I used to alternate summers, The MacDowell Colony then Yaddo then MacDowell, but I realized

that I didn't need solitude, not yet, to write—maybe later. I needed noise, motion, my passage, my water—plus the black flies and the mosquitoes used to eat me up. I stepped on a baby frog one night leaving the main house at MacDowell and that was a little too much "Death of A Naturalist" (Seamus Heaney) for me.

I've never been to Breadloaf but I love the phone calls I get from there.

I could not do Cave Canem after doing The Dark Room Collective. It would have felt a lot like re-recording "Goin' Back To Indiana" after the success of *Thriller*.

Cave's a good church and I grew up in a church and I am drawn to church, so naturally I needed a break from church.

I am a church.

**PD:** As a former student of two Nobel Laureates, Derek Walcott & Seamus Heaney, as well as poetic great Michael S. Harper. How do these mentor relationships currently work in your writing life?

**TSE:** These writers know what they're doing. Their work is a big part of the teaching. They offer their passionate selves in the work, which is all any understanding young writer can ever hope for. The time spent with each of them is priceless, and they each saved me time and was honest and wise enough not to "pet" me. They gave and they let go. Walcott taught me courage and how to make imagery. Heaney showed me how honesty and home could work beneath percussive sounds as an effective matrimony toward my own brand of metaphor. Michael S. Harper (MSH) made me read the complete two volume set of *The History of English Prosody*, and laid out the possible steps by which entrance into

our tradition could be earned.

MSH once said to me about a bad poem I had written, *Do you know how many dead people I will have to answer to if I accept this poem from you?*

**PD:** West coast poet Wanda Coleman has published six poetry volumes and considers herself "self-taught," having never completed her college degree. Do you believe a M.F.A. degree is really necessary, or can a good poet be self-taught?

**TSE:** Everyone is taught by something—everything, to walk, talk, love, etc. There are varying degrees of interests and, in American, various clubs and criteria and schools, etc. No, I don't believe any rule about anything, but I do know for a fact that if you don't go to college you won't sit in the classroom with any who will be in a position to support you or nominate you later for something.

You won't establish a social line or line of support into certain possibilities that are not birthright in this business. And, after that, it matters which schools you go to and which support circles you make.

The question of necessity is one based on path and all of the paths have hierarchy. Certainly there is someone from Harvard at the center and top of the avant-garde.

**PD:** As a participating professor in the Lesley University Low-Residency Program, would you agree that students are able to receive a comparable creative writing education as their residential counterparts at major universities?

**TSE:** Yes, but that is up to the student and the faculty. They may even receive too much coddling

to over compensate, which is another type of handicap. I didn't get what you're getting. There was more darkness surrounding my searching. Nothing's perfect and there's no way to measure it. All such comparisons fail.

**PD:** Few African Americans pursue M.F.A. degrees, leaving many programs lacking in diversity, which subsequently creates a literary world lacking the same. Do you have any suggestions on how to close these gaps?

**TSE:** Colored Only.

I was very disappointed when I was applying to graduate school to realize that not one black school had a M.F.A. Program and that's another can of cotton. I don't even know if it's a gap but I do know that a change is gonna come. Institutions like *Callaloo*, Cave Canem, *Black Issues Book Review*, *Black Renaissance/Renaissance Noire*, Rita Dove as Poet Laureate, The Furious Flower 2 Conference, etc., and every book that comes out by a black writer are all steps toward this repairing.

It's not even complex. Some of us have got to run off and do the cultural nationalist thang and create new pockets, presses and journals like Dudley Randall's *Broadside Press* and Haki Madhubuti's *Third Word Press* and others have got to stay on and share our white folks, interacting with them and mixing and marrying and introducing those resources, respectfully, to folk and to folk practices. Those of us who have been educated in the white, literary MFA model, have got to pull our white colleagues aside and say I don't want to be the only black writer you know and invite to these events and conferences and check out this and that, and not just with folks whose work



we like. I shouldn't have to like your work to put you on.

I have met so many writers who are comfortable being "The Only One" as long they were getting published & paid.

I believing in filling the house with folk they don't know—how else to keep the language vital—so where's the fear and why are black and white writers so afraid of work by folk at the other end of the class and literacy line, why?

You know.

**PD:** Will your reading series for African American's, "The Dark Room Collective," ever experience a reprise?

**TSE:** Every time it tries to phoenix-up, I chop it down but I am getting tired of that; I predict that some young enterprising young writer who finds kinship in what we did will adopt it in the future but it won't be me. There are a couple of silent reunions planned for the near future and, maybe, the anthology/reader Sharan Strange, Kevin Young and I almost did together will see the light of day, finally, too, but you didn't hear that from me.

**PD:** How would you complete the following statement?

A poet has matured when...

**TSE:** A poet has matured when maturity is no longer the issue blocking the unrhymed path all cor-duroy sunsets fake, daily, midsummer, toward their deuce triple o zoo of zodiac vanishings and delicious clipadelic plantain butter showdowns. ★

### A Baptist Beat

A mixed congregation: sinners, worshippers,  
Hustlers, survivors. All that terrible energy,  
Locked in, trying to blend. Such a gathering  
Of tribes has little, if any, use for a silk-robed choir.  
Members bring their own noise, own souls.  
Any Avenue Crew will tell you: nothing comes closer  
To salvation than this. Here, there is no talk of judgment,  
No fear. Every now & then, an uninformed god  
Will walk in, bear witness, and mistake Kangol  
For halo, and all those names for unwanted bodies  
Being called home, arms raised to testify, waving  
From side to side, fists flying like bullets, bullets  
Like fists. Above the snare: two sticks make the sign  
Of the cross then break—a divorced crucifix.  
The tambourine shakes like a collection plate.  
This pastor wants to know who's in the house,  
Where we're from, are we tired yet, ready to quit?  
We run down front, scream & shout, "Hell no,  
We ain't ready to go!" The organ hesitates,  
Fills the house with grace, good news, resurrection  
& parole, a gospel of chords rising like souls.  
Up, up, up up, down, down. Up, up, up up,  
Down. Up, up, up up, down down.  
Up, up, up up, down. The cowbell's religious beat,  
A prayer angel-ushered through dangerous air.