

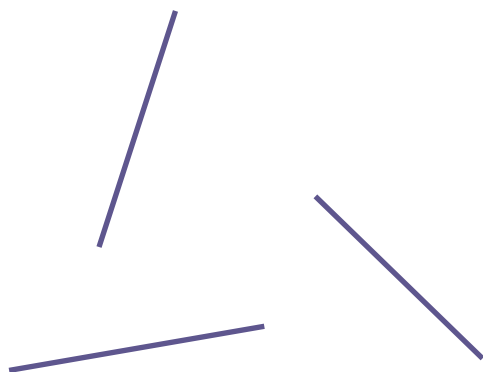
# Pieces of Sky



*an interview with*

J. Otis Powell?

*by Eric Lorberer*



This Spoken Word pioneer used to bill himself as J. Otis Powell!, that exclamation point denoting merely a hint of the passion and energy one would inevitably find when witnessing his work in performance. But recently I'd noted the poet had placed a question mark over the exclamation point in his moniker, creating an "interrobang" that richly complicated his aesthetic. The diacritical awakened a questioning fire in me, so I sought J. Otis? out, an impulse that led to a chapbook, titled *Pieces of Sky*, that Rain Taxi will publish this October. The chapbook presents excerpts from a novel-in-progress titled *Bottomless Sky*, along with a few poems written in the sharp, restrained form of quintets. This twinned volley of language offers the reader another side of this free-form poet, whose work blends literary, musical, and philosophical leanings into a coherent whole, no matter what shape it takes.

Proudly influenced by the Black Arts Movement, Powell? has worked in television production, theater, political

activism, and arts administration, and was a founding producer of Write On Radio! at KFAI-FM in Minneapolis. Some of his works are available as CD recordings and chapbooks, and his essays have enlightened dozens of publications from *Colors Magazine* and *Public Art Review* to the Minneapolis Star Tribune, but his performances, often in collaboration with musicians and dancers, are a body of work unto themselves. A true “citizen of the universe,” he and his work have had a strong influence on artists of all stripes in his adopted home of the Twin Cities.

In the following interview, we discuss the novel and its evolution, the poet and his evolution, and sundry other topics.

**Eric Lorberer:** You are an acclaimed Minnesota artist, but you are not originally from the Midwest; you're a transplant, like so many of us. I thought we might start our conversation today with a little history, such as where you were born and raised, and how you started your journey.

**J. Otis Powell?:** I've been researching Sun Ra, and I'm tempted to give you some kind of way-out answer, like he used to do; he used to tell people he was from Saturn. But like Sun Ra, I'm from Alabama. He was born in Birmingham, Alabama, and I was born in Huntsville, Alabama. We actually had the same alma mater, Alabama A & M.

I grew up in the space and rocket capital of the world. They used to, and they do still, send the rockets off from Houston, Texas, but they design them and make them in Huntsville. That idea of the space and rocket capital of the world has stayed with me. My first job when I was in high school—where they took out social security and taxes and all that—was a work study job at NASA. So I knew that, once I got my education, I had to leave there, because I didn't want to work in technology, I wanted to work as an artist.

**EL:** You knew that as early as high school?

**JOP?:** Oh, yeah. I started acting in kindergarten and I started writing in junior high—so I knew I was an artist.

**EL:** Who were your models back then?

**JOP?:** I went to segregated schools through ninth grade, so, fortunately, I had black teachers who would bring black writers into the room and black music into the room. And I had a fifth grade teacher named Mr. Elliot who was a fifth grade teacher by day and a jazz musician by night. Mr. Elliot used to bring his trumpet to class and put the mute on the horn and play for us. That was my introduction to jazz.

**EL:** And was Sun Ra known and admired in the local community?

**JOPP:** Well, like I say, he was from Birmingham and I was from Huntsville, so he wasn't local, but he was from Alabama. Nobody was talking about Sun Ra when I was a child. I didn't learn about Sun Ra until I became an adult, because the environment I grew up in didn't have a lot of jazz and certainly didn't have the kind of jazz that he played. I grew up primarily in the church and listening to rhythm and blues and soul, but once I started to hang out with the cats and develop my own taste, I found jazz.

**EL:** It sounds like it was primarily a live experience—were you exposed to music at all through radio or records?

**JOPP:** Yeah, that too. The primary source was my cousins in Michigan. I had a cousin named Oliver, a cousin named Kenn, and a cousin named Oluyemi. They were all into the music. In fact, two of those three are actually musicians. I would go to Michigan to visit in the summer, and they would come to Alabama to visit on alternate summers, and so I would spend a lot of time at their house. Oluyemi and Oliver were older—Kenn and I are the same age—and the boys lived in the basement of their parents' house. They owned the stereo, so most of the time we had to listen to whatever they wanted to listen to, unless they weren't home. And they were playing John Coltrane, and the Last Poets, and Sun Ra, and Albert Ayler, and Ornette Coleman, and all that kind of business.



This was when I was in junior high school; at the time, I thought it was noise. But, eventually, I acquired a taste for it. And once I got the taste in my mouth and had some appreciation for it, I was gone. I became addicted to that music, because it spoke volumes of things I had never heard of before. Especially the Last Poets—they were saying stuff that I didn't think you could say. When I was listening to their album I was looking for the police to be at the door, because they were so radical—I was afraid that somebody was going to come and get us!

**EL:** Were there other aspects of the Black Arts Movement that you were introduced to as a young person?

**JOP?:** Actually, this preceded the movement, because I was in junior high school in the late '60s—the Black Arts Movement came in the '70s. (Historical note: In a 1968 essay, "The Black Arts Movement," Larry Neal proclaimed Black Arts the "aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept.") But it was my introduction into a whole new aesthetic. When the movement really hit me was when I was in undergraduate school. I went to a historically black institution and my freshman English class was all African American writers, except for Hermann Hesse.

**EL:** (Laughs) How'd he get in there?

**JOP?:** Well, he was hip! And this was all revolutionary to me, as opposed to the education that I had previously gotten. My World History class started with the history of Mali, Songhai and Timbuktu. That's when I really got baptized into the Black Arts Movement.

**EL:** Did you have any exposure to African American arts prior to that—for example, to the Harlem Renaissance?

**JOP?:** Only on the periphery. At that time, we had Negro History Week, and the negroes that we used to celebrate in those history weeks were

mostly assimilated negroes—with the exception of Langston Hughes; he somehow broke through, even in that conservative environment. That prepared me for a lot of other stuff. But by the time I got to the university we were reading radical stuff—I mean, we read Claude McKay in my freshman English class! Of course, we read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, and actually, Alex Haley came to our campus and spoke. And because we were a historically black institution, those writers would come to campus-wide assemblies. As a journalist for a community newspaper, I got to interview Kwame Ture, also known as Stokely Carmichael. I had a lot of opportunity to raise my awareness about blackness and revolution and change.

**EL:** Did that exposure, especially the political ramifications, change your outlook on the art that you wanted to create?

**JOP:** It changed my in-look. I lived through the civil rights movement, and I had relatives who would go and protest. They would sit-in. I always wanted to go, but they wouldn't let me, because they were afraid I would get hurt or arrested or something like that. I would hear them tell stories . . . we would do stuff in the church, and, actually, Dr. King used to come to my home town and speak at a private black Seventh Day Adventist college, Oakwood College.

So we were actually in the forefront of the civil rights movement because, not only was it the space and rocket capital of the world, but there was—there is—an arsenal there, Redstone Arsenal, and in order for Huntsville to get government funding, they had to be progressive enough to integrate all of their systems. In a lot of ways, Huntsville was ahead of the curve in Alabama because they had so much government money coming in that they had to qualify for, and a part of the qualification was equal opportunity.

**EL:** So what was your eventual major in undergraduate school?

**JOP?:** Eventual! (Laughs) After five or six others, I graduated with a major in telecommunications (which, in the context of my education, meant television production), with a minor in philosophy and a cluster of English classes.

**EL:** Take us through your early adulthood and early jobs—especially in television, because obviously that relates to the novel you’re writing.

**JOP?:** Well, after I got out of school, I decided my first job was to get out of Huntsville. (Laughs) So I left right away. In fact, days after graduation, I took the money I got and hit the road. I went to New Orleans, and then I went to Kansas City, Missouri. The first arts job I got after leaving was in a play, because I was an actor at the time and I thought that was going to be my primary art form. I got cast in a play called “In Search of a Bird” that was at the Charlie Parker Center in KC, MO.

I was going to auditions and interviews all the time, but, to pay my bills, I had to take a job as a desk clerk at the YMCA. I worked the night shift so I could have days open to do auditions and interviews. And I did that until the work ran out. When the work ran out, when the arts work ran out, I realized being a desk clerk at the YMCA wasn’t doing it for me. So, one year, when I went home for Christmas, I took everything and stayed. Then I taught school until I could find another exit.

The next exit I found, after teaching school for maybe a year, was to join VISTA, Volunteers In Service To America, which was considered a domestic Peace Corps. I got assigned to Florida—even though I asked to be placed in Harlem, they sent me to Florida—not only Florida, but rural Florida! (Laughs) But it was a way out. And I haven’t lived at home since.

**EL:** After Florida you came up North?

**JOP?:** Yeah. But I lived in Florida for seven, eight years. This was the early ’80s, and VISTA was still radical: Jimmy Carter was president, and



we were actually doing community organization and focusing on the empowerment of disenfranchised people. I was not only an organizer and a volunteer for VISTA, I also worked for the state office as a trainer for VISTA, but once Ronald Reagan got elected we all had to resign, because he changed the focus of the program. His administration actually had spies to make sure that we weren't doing that anymore. And so we all had to resign because our politics were consistent with the work that we were doing, and not the work that his administration wanted us to do. What they wanted us to do.

**EL:** What was your perception of the differences between Alabama and Florida?

**JOP:** Very little. (Laughs) The last place I lived, and the place I lived the longest, was Pensacola, Florida, which was very much like my hometown, except they had salt water and beaches. It's a military town, they have a Navy base there, like we have an army base at home—and right down the road they had an Air Force base, so it was a very military place. South Alabama and North Florida, Mobile to Pensacola, is, or was then, considered the redneck Riviera, which was a lot like my hometown. You get conservative military people and conservative religious people and people who grew up generations in the old South, and that's devastating to the kind of person I am, because I'm not the kind of person who knows how to stay in his place—in fact, I'm the kind of person who's always looking for another place to be somebody, you know? So I knew it was dangerous for me to stay there.

**EL:** Did you have a conception of yourself as a Southerner?

**JOP:** I still don't. I have a conception of myself as a citizen of the universe. I mean, don't fence me in, especially with geography or race or class, or any of that; I'm a citizen of the universe and I still don't know who I am or all that I am, and so other people's perceptions of me are always going to be limiting and misleading.

**EL:** I'm thinking less in terms of personal limitations, and more in how art movements and communities can sometimes identify as regional—hopefully there is some strength in gathering the tribes, so to speak, at a certain place and time. I only ask because you're a transplant to the Midwest, and I was curious how you felt about negotiating the differences between the South and this region.

**JOP!:** My wife and I moved here from Florida together—we met in VISTA and we served on the same project and lived in the same apartment. We got married and we moved here together because she was from Delano, MN, which is thirty-five miles west of here.

The hardest thing for me to adjust to was how in the South, people may not like you, but they are frank about it—you pretty much know what people feel about you by how they treat you and what they say. I got up here and I started going to interviews and meeting people, and I would be expecting some kind of follow-up from what I thought went very well, and I would not only not hear from the people, but they wouldn't even return my phone calls. I realized that they were playing one role in front of me, and then, when I left, they were ignoring me; it was my introduction to "Minnesota Nice," which is, "Yeah, we'll smile in your face, but when you're gone, next." They just didn't want to spend any time on me, and I had to adjust to that because I was believing what I saw on the surface. I hadn't learned yet how to interpret a different way of mannerisms. I eventually had to learn that in order to survive here because it still happens—"Minnesnowtans" are very different from the people I grew up around. Most of my close friends are also from somewhere else, and they sympathize with that adjustment.

**EL:** Getting back to your work in television and in VISTA—did those jobs and roles affect you as a writer?

**JOP!:** Of course. In fact, I got into that work because of my writing

and because of my acting. My first job in television was actually in undergraduate school. There was a studio on campus which produced programs for Alabama Educational Television. I got a job as an actor in a children's show. I played a frog, Herman the Frog—I had a theme song and everything. And a hot costume, it was a hand-made costume, like the costumes they make at In the Heart of the Beast Puppet Theater, and I had a big old papier-mâché head. It was very uncomfortable. But I had a job as an actor and that was my entry point.

And then, as I was working at the television station, they developed a major in telecommunications, and I became the first graduate in that major. I was also the first graduate with a philosophy minor, so I was right on the cutting edge of what they were developing in their curriculum. In fact, I go back home now, and I have cousins who are much younger than me who went to that same school and they think I'm a hero because I was the first one to graduate in that program; it's like historic lore at the university.

**EL:** Television is a medium that has changed a lot. What do you think of the arc of that medium?

**JOP!:** Well, I'm glad I was in it when I was in it, because I don't think I could be in it now. I could get an opportunity tomorrow to change my mind, but I don't even watch television now except for sport events. I don't trust the programming. Even public television has become so much like corporate television that it's hard to tell the difference. So it would be hard for me to assimilate into the kind of behavior that would be required of me as a producer.

My biggest dilemma as a television producer was that most of the TV crew were college students who were just learning; I could do anything I wanted to do, but I had the limitation of a staff without a lot of experience. After I moved up here I did corporate television for a while, and it was reversed—I had people who had a lot of skill and a lot of experience in



know if you ever spent much time in a black church, but the religion there won't let you sit down; you have to get up and clap your hands and make some noise. So that spirited kind of expression was something that came very natural to me.

**EL:** The chapbook we're publishing is primarily prose, so let me shift gears and ask some questions that circle around that, as well. First of all, I know that you've written essays and various other prose pieces throughout your career as well as poetry, but was writing prose fiction something that had interested you for a long time? Or is it a more recent development?

**JOPP:** This wasn't the first novel I attempted, and often when I write poems they are in story form, with characters. It's not a new form for me. Which is not to say that I have published a lot of fiction, but I have published quite a bit of prose. In fact, the first book I published in the Twin Cities, *Theology: Love and Revolution*, was prose. It was prose-poetry, but it was prose.

I've written for magazines and anthologies and other places because, for a lot of people, poetry is not a practical art form, so if you want to write, you have to write a lot of different things. I've written book reviews and reviews of concerts and plays and recordings. Writing prose is not foreign for me.

**EL:** And what about how you conceive of the novel? You have a lovely phrase in the chapbook: one of your characters describes the past as "hemophilia of memories." I thought that was a really evocative possibility for what a novel is, too. Is that how you see it?

**JOPP:** If you can't go on tangents then nothing happens as a writer, or as any kind of creative artist—you have to open a vein so that you can't control the bleeding. Bleeding is what it's about for me. It's about putting myself in a position to have the time and the space to bleed, because

there is so much letting that needs to be done.

It started out way back when I was a novice as catharsis, but it's grown into so much more than that now. I used "hemophilia" because I don't know how to stop it; once it gets going, it just goes how it goes, it takes on its own life. Sometimes I wish I could put a tourniquet on it and go someplace else, but I'm not in control of that.

**EL:** As these memories have surfaced in that bleeding process, how have you organized them?

**JOP!:** I would reverse the phrase and ask how they have organized me. As a community organizer and as a trainer of community organizers, we used to tell young organizers who came with degrees and arrogance, thinking they were going to save everybody with their bourgeois, middle-class, well-educated ideas, that the first thing you got to organize is your knowledge of that community. You don't know those people. You don't know what they need from you. And you don't even know if you have anything they want. So you go into a community of people and you make yourself available to learn who they are.

As a writer, as an artist, my first job is to be organized by the material that I'm working on; to be open to what the flow is of what I'm trying to do. Toni Morrison has a prompt for writers that says, "Write about something you know nothing about, and then rewrite it until you don't know who wrote it." That takes you out of the ego part of it and puts you in the craft and responsibility part of it. Of course, it's impossible to write about anything that you don't know; it's also impossible to write about it until you don't know who wrote it. But as an aspiration, it's something that is worthy. I use it with other writers because it opens up their idea of what they're trying to do.

A lot of writers are just trying to tell their story and to get something out of their system, as opposed to being a witness to the universe that we live

in, a witness to the community that they live in, a witness to what their family is, a witness to their social, cultural, and biological DNA. That's what we do. It's not just to complain about how many times your heart has been broken, or why the world doesn't treat you right: our job as artists is to represent the environment that has made us who we are.

**EL:** As you've been open to this process over the course of creating enough material for a novel, has that changed or reframed what you're doing?

**JOP!:** Yeah, because it's educated me about my own process, my own existence, who I am. I know who this is looking out at the world because of the self-discovery, the journey of learning what that means. Because the thing about writing the stories down is that I have to do some analysis in that process that I would not do otherwise.

Some of us just live our lives ignorant of what anything means because we don't believe in meaning anymore. We believe in other things—I mean, we believe in automobiles, we believe in houses, we believe in a lot of things that have nothing to do with us except that we were able to acquire them. But to actually learn about ourselves, there has to be a process of isolation and separation from everything else so that you can hear a voice that is only audible if you are close enough to it.

**EL:** That dovetails with your novel's characters and how important their self-creation is—their identity, even down to their names. There's a really interesting passage in which you point out that Aquanetta names herself, but not after an African woman, because she had problems with that idea, even though it was popular at the time. I wondered if you could talk about that process of choosing one's own name.

**JOP!:** Aquanetta is the closest character in the novel to myself, so I understand her psychology more than any other character. The thing about her is that she is alternate to whatever environment she's in: if

she's in an environment where African Americans are converting to African names, then she's going to do something else, because she doesn't want to parrot what other people are doing. So when she got to that place where she wanted to make a decision about changing her name, she decided, Well, I don't want to be limited to Africanism either. So to become Aquanetta was to become water, which in some creation myths was the elemental origin of life on Earth. We are able to live on Earth because of water. At some point, we must have all come out of water. Most of the planet is water. She wanted to be that elemental, and to do that, she had to be pre-African, even. She was trying to go as far back as she could, and her imagination led her to water. It was as far back as she could remember. Sekou Sundiata has a poem like that, because he says that he remembers coming from the tide, as DNA being washed to the shore, mixing with other things and becoming that way.

**EL:** Reminds me also of that beautiful Morton Marcus poem, "Learn to be Water." There's another chapter or excerpt in the collection that is in Aquanetta's voice, and it's really charming, because when we see her and hear her writing, we see that, for example, she spells "mythology" as "My-theology" and she spells "Improvisations" with an X. We really get a sense of how she reclaims language. This reminded me of you, as well, so I want to talk about the interrobang. Your public has seen your name fashioned in various ways by you over the years; tell us about what you're trying to do now with that glyph.

**JOP?:** It gives me an opportunity to talk about my influences. I showed you an article that I wrote about Sun-Ra years ago—he went through several name changes and several personality changes—and you know that I'm an aficionado of Amiri Baraka, and he went through a lot of different changes. I want my work and my name and my life to reflect that I'm not doing anything by rote. I'm open to growth and progress, and I'm always trying to learn, because I don't know who I am, yet. I am still searching for who I am in a creative way, like a jazz musician—if I just play what's on the page, then I'm not playing jazz. In order for me to



play jazz, I have to go off the page and find something I've never played before.

Branford Marsalis tells a story about being on tour where they often play a lot of the same songs night after night in concert. He's in the middle of a solo, and he says to himself—and this happens in milliseconds—he says to himself, “Okay, you played this last night, what are you going to play tonight?” And by the time he says that to himself, he's playing something he didn't play last night. It's like Miles Davis used to say to cats who would get up on stage and play the same solos every night, he'd say, “That ain't jazz, you played that shit last night.”

The aesthetic that I learned my whole life was about creativity and being a human being is to continue to grow, to evolve through improvisation, because there is something between what you think you know and what you can't remember and can't imagine. That is Duende, and it has to come through you, you can't be open to it unless you are striving for it. You have to practice freedom. You have to practice being inventive. You have to practice improvisation, because if you don't practice it, you'll do like most people—fall into a rut and parody yourself your whole life.

**EL:** Do you feel the J. Otis Powell! that published with the sign of the exclamation point is a different artist than the one that now has the interrobang? Do you see a difference?

**JOP!:** Oh, yeah. To quote Sekou again, he has a line in a poem, “I used to sign my name with a flare—no more of that.” The exclamation point was too didactic. I'm at a point in my life now where even if I'm passionate and committed to something, there's still that question, because I learn how much I don't know every time I learn anything. I'm at a point now where I don't have to be right, and I don't have to be an authority—I just have to keep moving forward, and in order to keep moving forward, I need to back off from being so didactic and allow the question to remain in everything.

**EL:** How did you discover the mark?

**JOP!:** I was reading something, and I saw it. And it just drew me in; almost from the first day I saw it, I started using it. The place that I saw it wasn't the single, combined thing, it was the question mark followed by the exclamation point. I think I found the word before I found the symbol, and then I looked up the word; on the search engine, they will give you a hundred different sources, and so I started copying and pasting the ones I liked and started using them.

**EL:** We talked about water, but the title of this chapbook we have published is *Pieces of Sky*. It's largely taken from your novel-in-progress called *Bottomless Sky*. Why is that sky image so important for you?

**JOP!:** That's another Sun-Ra reference. I had an associate in Kansas City named Greg who was a Sun-Ra groupie. He had albums, albums, drawers in his dresser full of albums, all Sun-Ra. And most of them had original covers, designed by Sun-Ra. And he called him Ra—they were friends, they used to hang out. Greg had a painting on his wall, and the title of the painting was "Bottomless Sky," and he said he learned from Ra that we look up at the sky and we don't realize that we're actually looking down into a pit—and his painting, even though it was on flat canvas, had that dimensional feel to it that allowed you to feel like you were looking into a black hole. And so that stuck with me all these years. I loved the concept of the sky as a pit because, you know, the ground is a limitation; there is something to be said for going deep beneath the center of the Earth and all of that, but it's limiting. You know how much earth there is, and you will run out of that, but the sky you never run out of, that's real infinite, and even if you do run out of it, then there are black holes that are even more infinite than the sky. Infinite has always been attractive to me in that way.

**EL:** There's the philosophy student in you! The sequence of the chapbook

is punctuated by a couple of poems. How do those poems relate to the world of the novel?

**JOP!:** Well, actually, I used them to kind of introduce the main characters. We've talked about Aquanetta, but we haven't talked about Adamas. His name represents the opposite of water. Adamas is taken from the root word of diamond. Diamond is the hardest substance on earth, the opposite of water, which is fluid and soft and penetrable. Adamas is impenetrable and he can cut glass. I wanted the characters to have that kind of juxtaposition.

The quintets actually introduce the characters. I used the poems strategically before the character was introduced to give even a more imagistic idea of who these characters are. Those characters live in me, now; every day of my life, now, I talk to those people—they are real to me, as real as you.

**EL:** The quintet is such a pressurized form, and not one that a lot of people would associate with spoken word, but it's a favorite form for you. What makes you return to it?

**JOP!:** I actually mostly avoid form these days, because I prefer free-form, free verse, but an associate of mine, George Roberts, was publishing a book of five-line poems, and he invited me to be a part of it. And so, in order to accommodate George and to be in the book, I had to write five-line poems and, once I started writing them, I couldn't stop—the thing about form, too, is it's addicting: once you get comfortable in it, you just go.

And that's what happened when I started writing these quintets. He only wanted one, and by the time I submitted to him I had written forty-five or so quintets, and I told him that, and he said, "Send me ten of them." And from the ten, he chose one. And since then, I keep rewriting the ones I have, because I was hoping to get fifty and publish them as a book.

I'm sure I can get up to fifty, because his book had fifty quintets from different people; to have fifty of my own would be something that I think would be interesting.

**EL:** There's another excerpt here that focuses on music; it's important to your characters, and it's important to you as an artist. You've collaborated with musicians, as well. Let's talk about that—especially in how it differs from the form of a novel.



**JOP?:** Well, it differs from the form of some novels. A part of the influence for me to write like that is Nathaniel Mackey, who has a series of novels about a band that goes through different incarnations. I love reading that stuff. His relationship with music, and Amiri Baraka's relationship with music, and even Sun-Ra, who was also a poet—all of those influences and growing up around music affected me. Baraka says, "Poetry ain't nothing but music—it's just using language

instead of notes."

I can't write anything until I hear it in my head, and when I hear it in my head it's music—so when I write it, it has to maintain not only the words and the context, but the rhythm, because the rhythm is the form it finds as opposed to dictating that form, and the form is free—which is why I don't often like to write in a particular form. Form comes from somewhere else. I want the form, like the content, to come from me; to be a creative artist is to be original, and I struggle against established mechanisms. I'm not trying to do what I know. I'm trying to discover where I'm going. And to discover where I'm going, I need to go in such a way that I don't already know where I'm headed when I leave home.

**EL:** Yet the novel at this point is a very standard genre—how do you fight against that, and still end up with what someone else would recognize as a novel?

**JOP!:** By telling genuine stories about the characters that I'm writing about and paying attention to what they tell me. I have dialogues with those characters and I write what they say. I'm not in control of what's going on. We are—we being the characters, the story I'm telling, and me—we are trying to get the stories out there, and if we get the stories out there, that's what I'm really interested in. I don't care what people call it.

In fact, part of my frustration with this material is how many people who are educated would read it and tell me it wasn't a novel. And I would say, "It is for me. It's my novel." You know? The word novel means it's different from anything else! I mean, c'mon, we're wordsmiths. I'd say, "Do you know what the word novel means? It's a novel because it's new!"

**EL:** Poetry, and especially spoken word, often uses performance as a compositional tool. Do you find yourself doing that with your prose writing?

**JOP!:** Yeah. A lot of the evolution of the chapters happened when I was rewriting them for a particular performance situation. Most of the chapters were 3,000 words, and there's hardly a performance situation when I was collaborating with other people where I could use 3,000 words—who wants to listen to 3,000 words in a performance? So I often had to spend time paring the stuff down and still maintaining the essence; I would edit it for a particular context. And then I would realize that paring it down that way sometimes made it better, and I found new avenues and events in the story that I couldn't see when it was longer.

Actually, the material that I ultimately submitted to you reflected that practice because all of that material was pared way down from the original,

and in the paring down, the details of the story would change. I'm not doing a journalistic recording of something that actually happened; I'm writing stories that make themselves up as I write them. The characters tell me how the stories go and what they want to do and what they want to say, and I try to do that with some accuracy, but that has little to do with fact: it has to do with what the story is. Stories are much bigger than facts because there are so many dimension to our experience that we can never tell it all in one breath, one draft. The story has to be layered in subtle ways that you can't articulate, but it has to be in there, and figuring out how to do that requires me to go beyond factual reality to some kind of reality that I don't know yet.

**EL:** We talked earlier about you relating to Aquanetta and understanding her psychology; is it a chance to reach across the gender divide, too, and understand something of the feminine? Is that important to you as you tell the story of these characters?

**JOP:** My journey as a human being is to learn as much about humanity as I can, and to stretch gender is just a small part of that. I identify as a whole human being, not just one sex or one gender. Aquanetta's name actually came from my best friend in undergraduate school, and so I have a real human being to inspire me, though I haven't seen her since undergraduate school—so it's also a way of having a relationship with somebody who I was very close to a long time ago. The fact that we haven't corresponded in all those years makes me have to imagine what her life became. I inform that with my own experience, because I don't know beyond our relationship what her experience actually was, so I have to make those parts up. That keeps me from writing memoir, because I don't want to write memoir.

**EL:** You're able to be true to your experience without being restricted by facts.

**JJOP:** And without whining. The thing about telling my own story in the

first person is, after a while—and this is why, sometimes, memoir can be hard for me to read—a lot of people take it as an opportunity to get stuff off their chest and to have a cathartic experience because, you know, they have said who’s good, who’s evil, and who treated them badly. I’m not that interested in that kind of art. I’m interested in art that is a story of overcoming something; I’m interested in art that, even though it was beneath the ground at one point, at some point in the story the artist learns to fly, and had no idea they could even come from underground. It’s magic. I’m interested in magic.

**EL:** Both of your main characters are very powerful, almost totemic, but that doesn’t mean they don’t have conflict or entanglements. There’s a really interesting line spoken by Adamas about Aquanetta—he says, “Seeing the world through her eyes and voice was starting to take up so much space in my mind that some days I had to strain to hear my own voice.” That’s quite an experience, and I think a lot of us can relate to that: how do we hear our own voice amidst the strong voices sometimes in our way?

**JOP:** Especially when you’re in love. It’s one thing to talk about the voices as propaganda, as noise around us, as societal indoctrination and all of that, but when you’re in love with somebody, they take over. That’s what being in love means. Somebody moves in, they’re sleeping in your bed, they’re eating your food, they’re using your chair, they’re using your computer, they’re on your phone—they’re occupying you in a way that you volunteered for, but sometimes you start to chafe at that occupation, and you want some space—which is why the best relationships I know about have space as well as closeness. People learn how to give each other space, because it’s too intense all the time to be occupied, and sometimes you have to quiet that other voice, even though you’re in love with it, just to hear your own voice in its original form. No two voices are the same, and if you allow the voices to synthesize into one, then you lose something; true love is about how people are able to grow, not only together, but apart, as well.

**EL:** Your book also explores how to negotiate that challenge with one's labor and one's work. Adamas works at a TV station; Aquanetta works at an organization called Literatti. You suggest they both need to get away from those work environments—even though they feel they are contributing something of benefit to those institutions, they also feel limited by them as individuals. Talk about that dichotomy.

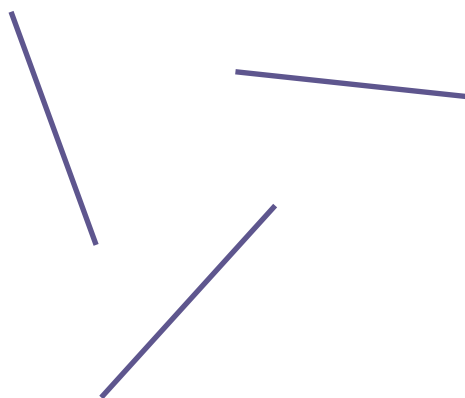
**JOP:** One of the residuals of slavery is the idea in our culture that one has to be functional, one has to be useful, one has to serve others in ways that others want to be served. As recently as today, I heard someone say, "They got too much time on their hands." We have clichés in our society like "an idle mind is the devil's workshop" and all that kind of stuff. We don't trust people who actually have a mind of their own and want to spend time alone, doing nothing. We're afraid of what they might come up with, that it might challenge us.

I've spent my adult life trying to be that person who spends all that time alone doing whatever I want to do and see where it gets me, and it's made me me. I wouldn't trade that for anything. Well, actually, I've traded that for everything, to tell the truth! I've made a lot of sacrifices in order to be able to be self-determined in my life. But, for me, that is the critical part of being an artist: you are actually able to be original, without having to assimilate into what other people are saying you need to be. Having a job is definitely being assimilated for forty, fifty, sixty hours a week, and for somebody else's agenda; even though you may be doing work that is true to your soul, and you believe in the cause, it's still somebody else's work because they are paying you and giving you health insurance, as opposed to you getting up in the morning and doing what you actually want to do and think is important for you to do because it's what you decided to do. That is freedom. I have been working toward freedom my entire life.

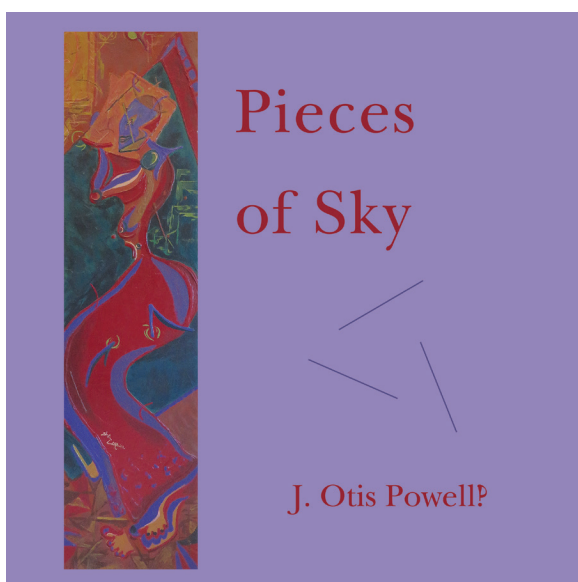
I call myself a drapetomaniac. Around 1865, a physician created that word to describe slaves who had a propensity for escaping; it was considered



a disease. We did a show about it eight years ago called “a Disease called Freedom.” Well, I’m a drapetomaniac. I’m always escaping slavery. I’m always escaping limitations. Every time I get trapped somewhere, I will always run away. If you cut off my legs, I will sing. If you take my voice, I will give you the finger. I will use whatever I still have left to protest and resist assimilation, because that’s what I do, that’s who I am. And I don’t have to be violent to do that; I don’t even have to be rude to do that. But I will definitely do that, because that’s how I know who I am. I know who I am by who I am not.



Launch event for *Pieces of Sky* at  
Patrick's Cabaret, Friday, November 7, 2014  
Ticket information at [www.raintaxi.com](http://www.raintaxi.com)



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