# *"A SERIES OF READINGS AND PERFORMANCES TOWARDS A PHILOSOPHY OF JET LAG"* AT AUTO ITALIA, LONDON

WORDS BY HARRY BURKE

**The jet plane first flew commercially in 1951, at a time when dozens of Asian and African states were fighting for decolonization.**

For non-aligned nations celebrating independence, the jet, according to the art historian Tobias Wofford, was a symbol *"of a modern, forward-looking sovereignty."* Its impact was political and cultural. The First World Festival of Black Arts, convened in 1966 by Sengal's poet-president Léopold Sédar Senghor, a contributor to the Négritude literary movement, brought Aimé Césaire, Amiri Baraka and Langston Hughes to the city of Dakar, alongside Duke Ellington, Bella Bellow, and thousands of visitors from Africa and further afield. It could not have happened without the plane. William Greaves' evocative festival documentary affirms this. Eight minutes in, a jet, which roars like a steam train halting, interrupts a dance performance. The necks of onlookers crane skywards, and the camera skips to the silver bullet as it touches down at Dakar's modernist airfield. This startling jump cut, Wofford suggests, heralds *"a global Blackness for the jet age."*

That year, the Los Angeles Times first wrote about jet lag, suggesting that the syndrome *"derives from the simple fact that jets travel so fast they leave your body rhythms behind."* Jet lag is the popular name for desynchronosis, a physiological condition that is triggered by rapid movement across time zones. For the Swiss artists Mohamed Almusibli, Deborah Joyce Holman, Marilyn Umurungi, and Jan Vorisek, it also describes the disjunctive experience of being positioned within a global modernity, while being outpaced—(bored by the vending machine; expensive water; skin dehumidified; recycled oxygen)—by the relentless and dizzying temporality of this universalizing system.

Curated by Almusibli at the East London nonprofit Auto Italia in March of this year, A Series of Readings and Performances Towards a Philosophy of Jet Lag was a line-up of interventions and performances by the four artists that explored the implications of this latter meaning of jet lag.

Almusibli stood at one end of Auto Italia's emptied, whitewashed storefront gallery. He shared a poem based on famous Arabic love songs. *"I always found it funny that in Arabic the word for 'love' is the same as the word for 'wind',"* he later said to me. *"So I changed the meaning of some lyrics from love to wind."* The audience arranged itself in an arc ten feet from the performer—no one wants to feel the voice falter, though it does. After Almusibli's poem, Umurungi sang, and passed the microphone to Holman, who waited at a desk on the other side of the room. The reflections of a projector, cycling images of teeth and eyes, glowed upon the sleek enamel tabletop, while Holman shared *"fragments of notes, fragments of thoughts, attempts at language." "I need them to know that we are physically here without ever having been allowed to move beyond the moment of our arrival,"* she read, in one of the evening's many paralysing moments.

At the beginning of her unplaceable, cross-genre collection Schizophrene (Nightboat Books, 2011), the British-Indian poet Bhanu Kapil recounts how, believing that her book had failed, she threw the handwritten manuscript into her garden in Colorado. There disjected, it was blanketed by snow. Some months later, she retrieved the notes and *"began to write again, from the fragments, the phrases and lines still legible on the warped, decayed but curiously rigid pages"*.

Schizophrene uses the generational experiences of schizophrenia in diasporic Indian and Pakistani communities to address migration and displacement. It is *"psychotic not to know where you are in a nation space,"* writes Kapil. Conceptually activated by the gesture of the poet revisiting the decayed draft, the book resonates with the haptic, healing tenderness of *"light touch, regularly and impersonally repeated, in the exchange of devotional objects,"* for this is *"as healing for the non-white subjects (schizophrenics) as anti-psychotic medication."* Reading it is world-shattering, like flying.

In Auto Italia's streetside front room, Vorisek, in a yellow windbreaker, kneaded a symphony of rumbles and growls from the software music sequencer Ableton Live. Two work lights, mounted on the sidewalk beyond the window, peered into Auto Italia, like cats perched on hind legs. These provided the room's sole light source. *"It is psychotic not to know where you are in a national space,"* whispered Umurungi over Vorisek's soundscape, the line from Schizophrene. *"It is psychotic to draw a line between two places . . . Everyone's psychotic in their reliance on arrival."*

In her book European Others: Queering Ethnicity in Postnational Europe (University of Minnesota Press, 2011), Fatima El-Tayeb has addressed queer diasporic memory within European communities of colour. For her, this is *"a memory discourse that is not built on linear notions of roots and authentic origins, but on the grounding of a community embracing its 'inauthentic,' fractured nature."* A Series of Readings and Performances… was likewise grounded, like planes in exceptional weather, in the inauthentic and the fractured.

The poetic fragment, in place of the jet, is a vehicle of nonmodern, nonteleological, dissociative sovereignty.



**DESYNCHRONOSIS, A PHYSIOLOGICAL CONDITION THAT IS TRIGGERED BY RAPID MOVEMENT ACROSS TIME ZONES.**

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