

**The First Books of  
David Henderson  
and Mary Korte:  
A Research**

Iris Cushing

Sometime in the spring of 1968, Sister Mary Norbert Korte walked out of the St. Rose Convent, on the corner of Pierce and Pine Streets in San Francisco, with a basket of food from the convent kitchen. The basket might have contained canned pears, powdered milk, and whole-wheat bread; it might have held coffee, or tomato sauce, or ham. The cool morning air carried the damp smells of eucalyptus and new clover. The fog over the bay was just beginning to dissipate, vapor rising out of its opaque mass and burning up into the clear sky. Korte brisked along in her boots down the city's formidable hills and back up again. She did not have permission to leave the convent.

After morning prayers and breakfast, the poet-nun packed a basket of food while helping to clean the kitchen, then slipped out the kitchen door while the other sisters went off to attend to their own daily errands. She walked in her Dominican black-and-white habit to the Haight-Ashbury district, passing long-haired men in colorful clothes smoking hash in the early light. She was going to meet a fellow poet, Diane di Prima. Di Prima was working on behalf of the Diggers, an anarchist community-action group fashioned after the seventeenth-century English Protestant radicals by the same name. The San Francisco Diggers offered free meals, transportation, and medical care to anyone who wished to receive them, and distributed parcels of food to families throughout the Bay Area. Di Prima, one of the food coordinators, had agreed to meet Mary that morning at the Diggers' headquarters on Haight Street to collect her foodstuffs. The two had never met, but had heard about each other from other poets on the scene, maybe Michael or Joanna McClure, or their mutual friend Robert Duncan.

Korte pushed the buzzer for an apartment the Diggers shared with the *San Francisco Oracle*, an underground newspaper that specialized in psychedelic, spiritual, and politically subversive content. Di Prima, hearing the buzz, hurried down a few flights of stairs to answer the door. The two women clasped hands and smiled at each other. Di Prima transferred the items from Korte's basket into a paper sack, making note of what was there, fitting it into a mental inventory of the other provisions upstairs. The voices of two of di Prima's children, Alex and Mini, echoed down the stairwell. The meeting was quick, even clandestine.

Both women were 33 years old. Di Prima had recently moved into a communal house on Page Street with her four kids; Korte had been in the convent since she was 17. Although their worlds differed wildly, the two women lived less than a mile from each other. Having transferred the food from basket to bag, di Prima and Korte exchanged glances of solidarity, and Korte turned back toward the convent. If she hurried, she could get back before anyone noticed she was missing. The ham or pears Korte carried went on to fill the stomachs of single mothers in Oakland, or homeless men in the Tenderloin, or perhaps the bohemians and poets of North Beach and the Haight.

At the time that Korte and di Prima met in 1968, both were involved in the making and publishing of poetry in unlikely ways. Korte's first book, *Hymn to the Gentle Sun*, was published in Berkeley by Robert Hawley's Oyez Press, with hand-set letterpress printing by renowned printer Graham Macintosh, in the fall of 1967. Hawley (1929–2017) had come to San Francisco ten years earlier, in 1957, after

studying with Charles Olson, John Weiners, and Robert Duncan at Black Mountain College, and had started Oyez Press in 1964 with Stevens van Strum of Cody's Books in Berkeley. Di Prima—in addition to being a widely-published poet in her own right—had been publishing books under the imprint of Poets Press since 1963. Di Prima put out early books by Robert Duncan, John Ashbery, Michael McClure, Herbert Hunke, and Timothy Leary, in addition to the first book of her longtime friend Audre Lorde, *First Cities*; indeed, Poets Press was ahead of its time for its unusually large number of first books by black poets, including the first books of A.B. Spellman (*The Beautiful Days*, 1965, introduced by Frank O'Hara), Jay Wright (*Death as History*, 1967), and Julia Fields (*Poems*, 1968).<sup>1</sup> In the summer of 1967, as she was busy raising her three children and expecting a fourth, moving away from New York City, and living in Leary's experimental LSD community in Millbrook, New York, di Prima had found time to print and distribute David Henderson's first book, *Felix of the Silent Forest*.

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At the time *Felix of the Silent Forest* was published, David Henderson was living between two worlds within New York City. His apartment was on the Bowery, but he was teaching in the SEEK program<sup>2</sup> at City College of New York in Harlem, and often collaborating with the black poets and activists who'd relocated to Harlem in the mid-1960s. Downtown, he was actively involved with the Society of Umbra, which he had helped initiate in 1962.<sup>3</sup> When the *Felix* book came together, 25-year-old Henderson

had been circulating in various West Village and Lower East Side poetry communities for years, and had been a formative presence in the development of the little magazines and poetry reading scenes that had emerged in lower Manhattan, including The Poetry Project at St. Marks Church. A couple of years before, in 1965, Malcolm X's assassination (the subject of the last and longest poem in *Felix*, "They are Killing All the Young Men") provoked a crisis for Henderson, as it did for many black writers and activists.<sup>4</sup> In conversation, David told me that he needed a change after Malcolm's death and left New York to travel and write in Mexico. In Acapulco, he ran into some fellow travelers who had seen him read his poems in New York, and gave him a ride to San Francisco. There, he spent a year living and writing in an apartment on Fell and Divisadero streets, only a few blocks from the San Francisco Zen Center where di Prima would settle in 1968, and about a mile from St. Rose's Convent, where Korte had lived as a Dominican sister since 1951. The two poets had in common their connection with di Prima, as both fellow-poet and publisher.<sup>5</sup> The work done by Robert Hawley with Oyez Press and di Prima with Poets Press established a lifeline for each of these poets, giving them a home in small press culture that they hadn't had previously. These communities formed at a time when small-press publishing was a primary form of countercultural resistance; these publishers' work constituted a significant node of 1960s anti-institutional cultural production. Both Henderson and Korte entered the poetry scene by way of these handmade books, both of which were published in a single print run, with Henderson's book printed in an edition of 2000 and Korte's in an edition of 900 copies.

As a writer, Henderson is perhaps best known for his biography of Jimi Hendrix, and as a poet, he has long been associated with Umbra and with the Black Arts Movement more generally. His poetic reputation among revolutionary black activists, however, goes back decades—his book *De Mayor of Harlem* was book number 50 of the 99 books found in Black Guerilla Family leader George Jackson’s prison cell upon Jackson’s death in 1971.<sup>6</sup> Critical considerations of Korte have mostly classed her as a “beatnik nun,” a figure straddling the unlikely worlds of Catholic mendicancy and subversive poetry.<sup>7</sup> But before each poet became boxed-in by these somewhat narrow categorizations, they made the work that appears in these two books—work that functioned as a hinge, a point of transformation between one life and another, greatly expanded life.

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In the winter of 2018, after visiting Diane di Prima in the assisted-living home where she resides, I stopped by her house to look for a picture. In the course of my work with Diane, I’d been helping gather material for the publication of her book *Spring and Autumn Annals*, and the hunt was now on to find an image for the cover. There was a box beside the brick fireplace in her living room containing pictures from the years that Diane was writing *Annals*, and that seemed like a likely place to find a good cover image. Sitting in a folding chair while Sheppard, Diane’s husband, chatted with me from the other room, I opened the box and began to sift through images. There were publicity pictures from the Poets Theatre, snapshots of

Diane's children on her rooftop dancing with Fred Herko, an image of her small figure tucked under Charles Olson's tree-limb-sized arm.

Then this picture appeared in the stack. It leapt out at me, even though it had nothing to do with what I was looking for. I recognized David Henderson instantly, but with that uncanny jolt of recognition that occurs when you see a person as they were decades before you knew them.



I had known David since 2012, when I met him at a poetry reading in Brooklyn and we'd struck up a conversation. Since then, I'd seen him around town, at the Poetry Project and at the Bowery Poetry Club in Manhattan. At the Graduate Center at CUNY, where I'm a student, I'd seen him speak about Sun Ra on the occasion of the

visionary musician's centennial. Our paths had crossed on 14th Street one night as I was on my way home from a date, and, stopping at Gray's Papaya for a hot dog, I picked David, in his Spiderman baseball cap, out of the crowd. But until that moment in Diane's living room holding this photo in my hand, I didn't know that he and Diane knew each other. "Diane knew everyone back then, I guess," I remarked to Shep as I positioned the photo on the table and captured it with my smartphone. Shep told me that, in fact, Diane had published David's first book. I made a mental note of this as I kept making my way through the box.

Later on, I looked at the photo closely, taking in the scene it conveys: piles of books on the table, titles I can't quite make out. Between the books, an ashtray with the butt of a cigarette or joint. A psychedelic-looking print tacked to the wall over the streamlined 1950s refrigerator. A large black medallion on a cord around Henderson's neck. I showed the picture to Diane and to David, and neither of them could identify the person on the left, who David appears to be listening to, nor could either of them say who'd taken the picture. The date on the right means it was developed in January 1968, but it could have been taken earlier, in 1967, perhaps right around the time that *Felix of the Silent Forest* was published.

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In his preface to *Felix of the Silent Forest*, "The World You're Talking About," Amiri Baraka (then LeRoi Jones) writes,

David Henderson's poetry is the world echo, with the strength and if you are conscious, beauty of the place tone. Out of the "privacy" of experience, any experience, rendered to the living, evolving organism. In this case the black man longing for the god who is him self, as are the other selves, who reach from and through the spiritual principle, shedding those "selves" to become the spirit of everything.

The twelve poems that follow Baraka's introduction weave the "local epics" that Baraka names, using elements of musical improvisation and ventriloquizing overheard elements of black vernacular. The language Henderson was hearing, feeling, and making was that of both the Lower East Side and Harlem of the 1960s. In spite of his youth, Henderson's poetry drew upon a rich life of experience, responding keenly to the complexities of the world he inhabited. "Beauty of the place tone": this phrase, more than any other, stands out to me as an accurate characterization of the poems in this slim, green-bound book, stapled at its spine—poems which, more than anything, use sound to capture the emotional tenor of a particular here and now. The roving subjectivity of the urban *flâneur* moves through the book, which collects and interprets slang, slurs, declarations, declamations, gestures.<sup>8</sup> These accumulate into vivid impressions of a world, rather than a message about anything in particular. One could say that the impressions offered—their urgency and clarity—are themselves the message.

Having already spent time as a performer, teacher, and union organizer, the intersection of action and reflection in Henderson's life is evident in his early poems. The language moves between modes of storytelling and rehearsing of

utterances; writing of his time singing with a group called the Starsteppers, he intones,

The Starstepper organization carried four singers  
three managers and a lopsided Cadillac  
Let's take a cocktail sip  
and talk of the crippled '55 Caddy in 1960<sup>9</sup>

In the title poem of the book, the mythical cartoon-creature Felix the Cat lives out his own urban roaming:

Often  
Felix walks the City hungry in every sense  
of every gastric salivating phenomenon  
thighs to eyes to mouth  
He is wooed by Tad's \$1.19 steaks  
as well as 2 for 25¢ hamburgers on forty-second street<sup>10</sup>

Henderson, like Felix, moves hungrily through his varied and various worlds. Amid his lyrical recording of his place and time, he pauses occasionally to reflect on the meaning of gesture itself, as in the poem "Bopping":

I remember the arm pumping cap crowned blades  
of my boyhood  
their elemental gait talking  
deep beneath my eyes...  
the list at waist and trunk  
whip of an arm  
& abrupt then long wing-tipped stride  
of days when we had to show ourselves love  
in difficult pretensions

as if speaking words of self-love  
was too remote    a performance  
when    before the fact  
we understood all too well  
the action of the thrust.

It's in these reflections that we see what Baraka calls "the black man longing for the god who is him self"—gesturing to himself, registering glimpses of self-recognition amidst shifting urban spheres of violence and affinity. The "spiritual principle" of the poems in *Felix* emerges clearly in these moments, a principle that holds up as its highest value a sense of presence with the totality of aliveness.

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Among the canon of Beat and New American poets, Mary Norbert Korte is more obscure than most. This may have something to do with where she's spent her time; much of her life has been spent in some form of semi-hermitage. For the last 45 years, she has lived in a two-room cabin in a defunct logging camp at the end of a very long, unmaintained rural road in the redwood forest between Willits and Fort Bragg, California. Between the ages of 17 and 34, Korte was a nun in the Dominican Catholic order at the St. Rose convent in San Francisco. There was a brief window of time in her life after she left the convent, between 1968 and 1973, when she was living "out and about" in and around the Bay Area, working jobs, getting into environmental activism, participating fully in the poetry scene. Her first book, *Hymn to the Gentle Sun* (1967), was in many