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Distributed by:

Small Press Distribution
1341 Seventh Street
Berkeley, California 94710-1409
Tel. (800) 869-7553
www.spdbooks.org

Published by:

Cuneiform Press
University of Houston-Victoria
3007 North Ben Wilson
Victoria, Texas 77901
www.cuneiformpress.com

ON: CONTEMPORARY PRACTICE

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FROM CENTER TO MARGIN

MICHAEL CROSS, THOM DONOVAN,
& KYLE SCHLESINGER

It's intriguing to track how margins respond to centers, and that at the centers of poetry discourse one often finds the accelerated erosion of the United States as a viable model for democratic multitude. If this drastic erosion is an epicenter for our cultural dilemma, how can we measure repercussion adequately? The M.F.A. (from which many of us derive some sustenance, if only in the form of adjunct wages), the contest/residency/guest appointment, the academic proceduralism of the Ph.D., job/tenure search, etc., the bureaucratic function of state and national poetry laureates: the professionalization of poetry embodies a form of cynicism that has become, as Paolo Virno argues, a discernible expression of multitude in our contemporary geopolitical climate.

In lieu of this analogy between political-economic disaster and poetry as a force of culture, *ON: Contemporary Practice* serves as a space for dialogue, discourse, and the emergence of new cultural expressions, if not a space for the acknowledgement of unrecognized subjects. On the outskirts of culture, we believe poets offer one of the most vital and exciting discourses among a larger landscape of visual artists, academics, activists, and public intellectuals (those typically responsible for shedding light on current cultural phenomena and showing their stakes). How to extend poetry through our work as teachers, activists, culture workers, and responsible human beings? How, likewise, can poetry put multiple cultural realms in relation with works which may affect larger political, economic, and social spheres?

Transmissibility and critical conversation are of the utmost importance to grounding an activist function of poetry, a function not so much for a people (in the Hobbesian sense), but for a multitude which is always arriving but has yet to realize its various potential libratory manifestations. How can the magazine (and other cultural spaces) create a new "common sense?" How can what was otherwise submerged, suppressed, or invisible have the opportunity to emerge so that we might read and address it? How, what's more, can we observe a present while it is still occurring; that is, before it has ossified into events consigned to a representative past (so-called 'historical narration').

Critical writings about one's contemporaries should not be consigned to the back pages of magazines and journals of record; nor should we approach them without a sense of consequence (a cynicism which book reviews, blurbs, and other staid critical formats often inspire). As an apocalyptic despondency increasingly befalls our culture, it seems all the more important that poets act out of a sense of consequence, compassion, and conspiracy (breathing together). Why speak otherwise? Who are

your most cherished and important contemporaries? Why does their work matter to you and how may it touch others? How can the poem upset, transcend, or overcome the sequestering of poetry from larger cultural exchanges also consequential for the fate of multitude? How to bring the community dynamics and tools of poetry across cultural fields to other problematics, emergencies, sites of need (to “outsource” poetry as Robert Kocik says)? *ON*, as the inflection of an idea shared by other magazines, institutions, cultural locations, and singularities would like to create a *possible world*. This world starts, for many of us, by writing about one another’s work as if to find purchase for what we most believe and will therefore tend to do.

CLICK HERE IF YOU ARE LOOKING FOR MONICA DELATORRE

MÓNICA DE LA TORRE'S *PUBLIC DOMAIN*

ROSA ALCALÁ

"Sorry, but more than one, it is always necessary to be more than one in order to speak, several voices are necessary for that..." (Jacques Derrida, *Sauf le nom*)

Admit it. You Google yourself. What are you looking for? A mention on someone's blog? Some type of recognition that you exist beyond the confines of your office? What are you avoiding? Grading papers? Facing your fears? Whatever the mundane and existential reasons that lead us to search for our selves, our names are the vehicle. They are the extension of our bodies in the world, how others know us, our origins and on-going documentation. Yet, how many share our names? The young woman murdered by her husband in California? The track star? Their existence both disconcerts and intrigues us; they are nothing like us, yet we feel connected to them in some way.

The last poem in Mónica de la Torre's *Public Domain*, "Doubles," explores this very issue: the problem of expectations surrounding who we are; our connections and disconnections with others who might be like us. She achieves this by following the correspondence of an Argentine woman raised in Spain, Mercedes Correche, who searches on the internet for her mother, "Mónica de la Torre." Her mother, Correche explains, returned to Argentina from Spain when Mercedes was two and disappeared after being accused by the Argentine government of subversive activities. The series of email exchanges, all with the subject line "abandoned," are between Correche and various people named Mónica de la Torre, all who turn out not to be her mother — from a "transsexual top model" in Veracruz, México, whose English is, by her own estimation, "no good," to a high school cheerleader in the U.S. who gets bad grades in Spanish class. The email exchanges between Correche and these de la Torres become like split screens of miscommunication in an Almodóvar film.

While all the Mónica de la Torres have some relation to Spanish-speaking cultures, their overt demographic differences exemplify how a name might stand for certain false expectations of, or sense of unity amongst, those with the same designation. It reminds us of Gertrude Stein's *Everybody's Autobiography*, in which she writes,

We saw an electric sign moving around a building and it said Gertrude Stein has come and that was upsetting. Anybody saying how do you do to you and knowing your name may be upsetting but on the whole it is natural enough but to suddenly see your name is always upsetting. Of course it has happened to me pretty often and I like it to happen just as often but always it does give me a little shock

of recognition and non-recognition. It is one of the things most worrying in the subject of identity (qtd. in Spahr, 36).

What Stein comes to realize, Juliana Spahr explains, is that “naming, the thing that she once thought defined a person, [is] flexible and variable” (37).

Similarly, what worries “Doubles,” is how the presumed identity of “Mónica de la Torre” shifts from one person to the other, yet each person with that common Spanish-sounding name is trapped by what others expect of them. “I am sick,” writes one of the de la Torres, “of receiving sales calls and junk mail in Spanish! If your last name is Hungarian does that mean that AT&T will send you Hungarian promotional material?” Another stateside de la Torre, revealing her own limited notions of Argentine culture shaped by American marketing, says to Mercedes, “I love dulce de leche Hagen Daas ice cream, isn’t it from the same place as you?” We ask, too, what is expected of a poet with a Spanish-sounding name like Mónica de la Torre? What do we expect of someone from the U.S. with that name, or from Latin America, or Spain? What assumptions do we make? How does marketing (of frozen desserts, of literature, of cultures) shape those assumptions?

Also important to note is that some of the characters Correche corresponds with are “Mónicas,” while others are “Monicas.” This small, yet acute, accent doesn’t just indicate a different set of vowel sounds or the trilled “rr” of Torre, it designates a cleave, a crack, separating them. Still, their desire and ability to communicate in both languages via the internet, to find common ground, also suggests a relationship that persists despite the fact that none of these women are Mercedes Correche’s genetic kin, despite their dissimilarities.

And, of course, one must consider how this internet-aided correspondence upsets or complicates further any notion of identity or group affiliation: any of these Mónica de la Torres can be impostors, presenting an altered or completely invented persona, posting photos of someone else, creating a background foreign to their own. Does that make their connection to each other and to Correche any less real or productive?

In the sense that she examines the construction of identity, we can call de la Torre, the author of *Public Domain*, an identity poet. Her identity poetry may not be what has been narrowly understood as such, but it nonetheless engages in explorations of the self within society, employing performative and experimental techniques—such as Conceptual, Oulipian and Dadaist procedures and appropriations—to break down or question, rather than re-affirm, existing notions of a certain identity or group filiation. In doing so, she questions authenticity, while still allowing for those multiple affinities that occur between and amongst groups of various origins.

De la Torre’s employment of collaged texts and procedural poetic forms, as a means to explore identity and the multi-vocal, multi-situational self, continues the work of her first book, *Talk Shows*. Two poems from this collection, “Bite Its Heart Until It Learns,” and “Poem in Spanish,” are centos that bring together lines from several canonical Latin American poets, which she then translates into English. These poems remind one of Jack Spicer’s *After Lorca*, in the way the poet establishes a dialogue with literary masters, but at the same time displaces their origins by cobbling their work with her own and by migrating them into English. We find in both books this bilingual mediation, the translator and poet working through each poem as if some original existed in another language; one hears these traces and fragments of Spanish or English continually pushing through the surface of the other. As she writes in “On Translation,” another poem in *Talk Shows*, the point isn’t to “search for meaning, but

to reenact a gesture, an intent." And this reenactment called translation—or poetry, or language—is endless, as she reveals in the poem's final lines. Here, the translator is taking a picture of the poet she translates, after an afternoon of listening to him recall his dreams (despite his "disillusionment with Freud"). He "greet[s] posterity with a devilish grin," but the camera, as the translator is well aware, has no film, and he is forced to repeat the pose several times. There is delight in this seemingly unproductive exchange, and, one could say, in all the games de la Torre revels in when she aims her camera at language.

It is no surprise, then, that *Public Domain* continues to explore the complex economic and social system within which language functions. Like notions of Latino-ness sold as dulce de leche ice cream, we are made aware of the circularity of identity and economy, of language and identity *as* an economy. In the anaphoric poem "\$6.82," which begins each line with "My economy," the speaker moves through a dense network in which she chooses her currency and is at the same time dependent upon an existing rate of exchange. Take for example the line, "My economy is language." It is this negotiation of language—as both newly-minted and well-worn currency, as volatile market controlled by external forces and dependable product—that humbly leads us to realize how difficult it is to master, to feel at ease with our investments.

De la Torre expands on this point, with a good dose of sharp humor, by creating a series of poems, grouped as "Imperfect Utterances," that exemplify "the difficult art of public speaking," particularly in the realm of the poetry reading. The first poem in this series, "Plosive Letter (To read into a microphone making all p's pop)," is an open letter to "Estimado Sr. Presidente," written in Spanish. This public address, aimed, we assume, at the President of the United States, condemns unfair immigration policies and public attitudes directed at undocumented workers in the U.S. As a kind of intervention on behalf of those workers, the poem, with its explosive and persistent p's, is both performance and protest. We can imagine the reader popping and cracking her p's (represented in bold in the text) at the microphone, thus amplifying the political and personal discomfort such issues cause when raised publically. Similarly, the use of Spanish, directed at a mainly English-speaking audience, denotes the indispensable nature of Spanish speakers within the U.S. economy, even as it upsets the hegemony of English. In turn, the audience's inability to fully grasp the message—or its annoyance at a less than polished delivery—may, therefore, lead to inaction or disregard. As such, De la Torre's score makes physical the explosive nature inherent in articulating these national and linguistic tensions.

Referencing Shusaku Arakawa, de la Torre also maps out the relationship between the public and private by making evident the blanks, erasures, and refusals that allow these two realms to co-exist, or even replace or transform, each other. Such is the case, certainly, with lyric poetry, which insists on the willingness of the poet to make public the private, but with a good dose of "blank"—call it white space, dashes, elliptical evasions, fragments. The reader, then, determines what is not being said "completely," by drawing meaning from what is being said. De la Torre's playful employment of blanks in the first poem of this collection, "Is to Travel Getting to or Being in a Destination," places at least partial responsibility of the poem—not just its interpretation, but its existence—on the reader. For each section of the poem, she begins with an anecdote regarding a recent trip out West, but frames these not as parts of the poem, but as documents or experiences that might lead to a poem. For several, the poem that is to come of this travel is left to the reader. For example, in the poem's third section, she writes, "I overheard a guy at the Grand Canyon Lodge say, 'I figured out this trip is all about erosion.' Who likes to overhear things? This poem is about overhearing:" The colon is then followed by a white expanse, taking two inches of the page. In that

expanse is not a poem, but a silence (an erosion) we fill in with our own “overhearing,” our translation of the blank. In other words, the poem, like all territorial expansions, could not be completed by just one person. That de la Torre insists on the reader’s involvement reminds us of Édouard Glissant’s ethical reminder: “This is not a passive participation. Passivity plays no part in Relation” (137).

De la Torre also uses blanks or erasures to comment on her own worries of what poetry should or can say. She does this by removing the vowels in a piece that begins, “wrry tht ths prjct hs nthing t d wth wht’s gng n n my lf,” and builds with a list of events, both personal and political, that the speaker fears are not being addressed in her work. In its ever-enlarging font, the poem worries itself breathless, unable to sing beautifully its existential or worldly concerns. All it does is spit out hard consonants, tiring the reader with its impermeable, yet growing, presence. She ends with the perfectly decipherable and vowel-filled: “If ‘war does not sing,’ it makes noise.”

Underneath the crackle of consistent consonant anxiety the poem unloads, is a larger worry, present and clear, which connects us all. In *Public Domain*, we are always at war—in Iraq, yes, but also in other realms, and with ourselves. Alluding to Adorno’s famous question of whether lyric poetry is possible after Auschwitz, de la Torre’s book enters a larger conceptual field that continues to ask this question, falling thus into the tradition, as Dale Smith points out, of “poets who desire to engage with issues of public relevance [by abandoning] the lyric in favor of satire, social documentation, modernist assemblage, and other strategies of poetic engagement.” And de la Torre seems to fret a lot about lyric poetry’s failures—to capture the complexities of identity, to really sing the self, to engage and collaborate with others, to be political, to articulate both the personal and the public—by instead appropriating (and sometimes pretending to appropriate) material from newspapers, websites, and other sources. In doing so, de la Torre appropriates public voices that in poems become easily confused with her own voice, or takes on different characters that seem very unlike her. Or, she performs many voices at once, sometimes overlapping and thus overtaking the singular poetic speaker we have come to expect. In doing so, *Public Domain* reconfigures identity and authorship, constructing a new kind of lyric subject, one that acknowledges the myriad relations ordinarily hidden under the guise of “identity,” one that coincides with the noise of war and public unrest.

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A PILLOW FIGHT WITH HEGEMONY “THE MEMOIR” AND CORRECT BEHAVIOR IN STEPHANIE YOUNG

STAN APPS

Stephanie Young’s second book of poetry, *Picture Palace*, considers autobiography as a process rather than a product. Above all, it is an alternative to the official genre of “the memoir,” to the methods and mannerisms of that genre.

Young’s first collection, *Telling the Future Off*, featured anxiously autobiographical lyrics reminiscent of Frank O’Hara, poems concerned with “the high-gloss of boredom, / national pink well-being, preventative / presence of mind.” The best of these poems focused on social anxiety as a public, collective experience, as in the long poem “Age of the Mercenary” in which Young writes:

are you seeing the same chair I see
did you hear what I did
do you have it too
the real sickness of equating unlike things
the constant incremental comparisons
everybody sick to everybody else’s stomach.

Building on this work, it was natural for Young to engage with memoir, the genre in which individual experience is translated into a public form for collective consumption.

“The memoir” as a commercial genre demands that all lives, no matter how extraordinary or aberrant, no matter how different they are from the well-known life story of the affluent bourgeois subject, must nonetheless be represented by the same formal means and strategies. Such a memoir writes a life, any life, as a series of narrative incidents consisting of all the relevant formative details of the writer’s personality, displaying the formation of that personality through the progression of incidents, and supplementing the narrative with dialogue between the narrator and significant others and with the evocation of visual images that supply the narrative with a filmic quality, enabling the reader to visualize the story. In “the memoir” the reader is not mired down with language, but rather the language becomes a vehicle for the transmission of the essence of a particular life. It is a powerfully reductive form, and the reduction serves to enable judgment.

Interesting examples of “the memoir” genre are rarely about typical bourgeois childhoods, but rather tend to focus on the childhoods of people who are raised in poverty or other alternative social contexts. “The memoir” concerns itself with the transcendence of difficult childhoods; through this genre, the writer, although she or he comes

from a non-bourgeois context, is enabled to become an affluent bourgeois subject by comprehending the limitations placed on him or her by a difficult childhood and overcoming those limitations. Above all, the formalities of the official memoir genre assert that an affluent bourgeois childhood is both normative and best. "The memoir" represents any other form of childhood as a source of pain, suffering, confusion, and dysfunctional values, and shows the heroic process through which the writer learned to affirm bourgeois values above the false values of a damaging childhood.

In other words, "the memoir" as it exists in our culture acts as social class imperialism, asserting the fundamental superiority of the bourgeois lifestyle by representing all other forms of American living as fundamentally faulty and destructive of the opportunities and mental health of young people. Further, the writer of "the memoir" acts as a willing accomplice of the bourgeoisie, articulating in the most earnest way the failure of the value system and way of life of her or his own parents. Only because the writer has evolved into a bourgeois subject is he or she empowered to write "the memoir" and only because he or she has written the memoir is the writer affirmed as a bourgeois subject. In other words, "the memoir" chronicles the late identification of a troubled young person with bourgeois values and the realization that these values constitute a better and more natural view of life.

Alternative ways of living (including poverty itself) are framed by "the memoir" as carnivalesque—more exciting and more dangerous than bourgeois life. They portray interesting life as something better left to its victims, the children (who are the memoirists). The experience of reading these memoirs shows us that we are better off being bored by the routine and seemingly meaningless conventions of bourgeois life than going through hell or going insane trying to do something else. The memoirist's reliable identification with safe bourgeois normality in the present tense represents any alternative lifestyle as something which has been tried and failed. It is a genre that tells us we will hurt our children if we try to live differently.

The memoir Young did not write concerned a religious childhood, one in which "My Baptist finger picks my Baptist nose," in which "I just lie down when it gets too hot in the home school." But instead Young choose to do something else. On the first page she writes:

One thought she-child could eventually step outside. She found she could not.

Instead she found it everywhere. (Repetitive arrangements with more than one body. Her own, and other's. The house, its content and structure. Governing bodies.)

Rather than writing an official memoir about the escape from one (nonstandard) way of living into another (better) one, Young has written a book about the continuity of relations, about a life in which living with others in houses according to rules has been the inescapable given. Rather than writing about entrapment in a religious childhood and liberation into a bourgeois norm, Young has written about a life of entrapment. It is a life full of objects and thoughts, a life in which thoughts often have as much solidity as objects and in which objects, through their disposability, can be as transient as thoughts. It is a life of intellectual property (what is on the bookshelf, the I-Pod, the DVDs). I recognize this life. Contained within a house, with objects and by and with relations with cohabitants, it is a life of anxiety and pleasure, a life of anxiety about pleasure.

Whereas the official memoir presents bourgeois life as an empty space into which the

memoirist escapes from the crowded and damaging confusion of childhood, there is no culminating emptiness in *Picture Palace*. Instead the flow of sensations among objects is portrayed as a permanently transient condition . . . the mind a flow through which intellectual properties and human relations circulate anxiously and excessively. This flow can be overwhelming or enjoyed—it is both. The container is always full and complete, and it is the very completeness of this life, the lack of extra space within the container, that makes it so anxious. There is always room for new developments, but they must be squeezed in, and this squeezing in of new possibilities represents a constant increase of pressure.

Young writes:

Don't let me run
out of Woody Allen. Everybody said
don't run Stephanie
out of patience with me Stephanie
they said take cover.
Person-shaped cement
protective device other people
had and had to show me
how to use, but I wouldn't. A kind of
cathedral, it could. . . . not go off instead?

And this would be for everyone.
Like summer camp.
A friendly, non-bomb moment.

On the other side of this I am calmly
cleaning the red carpet. Surveying
the nice wall. Granted
that our little hotel is dull,
and the food indifferent,
and that day after day
dawns very much the same, yet
we would not have it otherwise.

Coming in the door is bad.
After a while everything
gets better. If you could just
calm down. Get in the snow.

There is no place to run out *to*, and there is no danger of running *out of* this life. The supply of life is constant, with no run-off. Such life is a completeness to be rationalized and navigated, challenged with variations on perspective. Rather than running out, a person might “go off,” an explosive switch of demeanor. But it would be better to “take cover” in a “Person-shaped cement / protective device,” and if everyone did the same it would be “Like summer camp. / A friendly, non-bomb moment.” Anxiety must be defused with the assertion (undermined by every formal element in this passage) that “we would not have it otherwise.” Above all, “After a while everything / gets better.” What can be relied on, confronting the surfeit of experience, is a circulation of perspectives that, after a while, invariably brings “better” back around.

Much of the book revolves around the hope that the author's perspective will change by itself, or, more accurately, will be found to have changed. In the midst of the book's

longest section, “Chapters First Through Third,” Young writes, “We shall see if a significant tonal shift has actually occurred” and then goes on to compile a list of evidence that could possibly denote such a shift, a list that is also a parody of the “to do” list. This list represents some of the possible changes that Young could make to shift her own perspective on the charged completeness of her life. She writes:

Many things must be made new for a tonal shift to stick. She draws up a list:

1. Recipes
2. The type of food we eat
3. The locations where we obtain our food
4. Pauses (duration, shape)
5. Incidence rate of Export A
6. Phone calls (duration, shape)
7. Social engagements, individual and shared
8. The falling asleep process
9. Sleep (duration, shape, mood)
10. The processes and order of waking
11. Saturdays
12. Workload
13. Movies
14. Bedding
15. Flatware
16. Physique

Any significant change to one item on this list should be enough to alter their course from one loop on another. “Is that all there is?” he whispers, “LOOPS?”

Young’s metaphor is of domestic space as a pressurized compartment, a container that is a complete system that assimilates everything outside of it into its own workings. Because it is a complete system, it can only be modified from within, and yet any adjustment might be sufficient to shift the narrator’s perspective on the entire system. And the list, these 16 items, is incomplete of course—so many other adjustments are possible. Young continues:

An arrangement of categories on a list? Not enough either! Especially a list that doesn’t include drugs, alcohol, or plainly sexual gestures. Like the houseguest who looks up and wonders aloud why she said what she just said, when it’s the opposite of what she thinks. That’s our list.

Alli Warren: “We are lonely insofar as (because) we are co-each-other.”

Young’s poetic colleague Alli Warren is made the Cassandra, announcing the bleak idea that loneliness is the signature emotion of human relations, that loneliness is in some sense synonymous with interdependence. But loneliness is not the primary emotion here; rather the passage revolves around crowdedness, a sense that the living space is so full of the activity of interaction that there is no place in which to retreat, no perspective from which to (as Williams put it) “witness and adjust.” Instead, Young faces a felt imperative to adjust first in order to enable the possibility of witnessing differently. Were this possible, there could be a “significant tonal shift” that would let the pressure off. Young imagines this possibility in catastrophic terms at the close of the passage, writing:

outside of all arrangements trying to remain in the house we can’t hear the duali-

ties go rushing

out the hole blown out the side of the passenger plane—

the change in pressure would be that intense—

Perhaps the biggest question about this book would be whether any significant tonal shift actually occurs in it. I'm not sure. I do not think such a shift needs to occur for the book to do its work of describing this life to us, and perhaps the "significant tonal shift" is more of a *deus ex machine* or unmet need than it is a formal element.

If the book has a tonal shift, I would look for it in my favorite of the poems, "Epistle Seven," which studies the contrast between law and freedom, and the association between law and sincerity. The poem interrogates how the feeling of sincerity or of wanting to be sincere stands between an individual and freedom. Young writes:

Don't you remember how it was,
among the thousand things reflected there?
I do, perfectly well,
the place where that rose heap was on display
sincerity seized its opportunity
when I approached
found a way to pervert the command
which many another better man has
wrought in me
to handle and to smell
every kind of covetous desire
within a hedge
without all the paraphernalia of law—

compared to it, the perfume
sincerity looked pretty dull.

For I was alive apart from the law once
the year that followed was the saddest
but when the commandment came,
sincerity sprang to life
and I was fooled.

Young reflects on how sincerity (an aspect of the ethos of her religious education, as well as of the bourgeois ethos) has prevented her from enjoying many physical pleasures—more, that sincerity has "fooled" her out of enjoying them. Working with a pseudo-liturgical diction that solemnizes these representations of ethos, Young creates a subtle comedy about her struggle with "the perfume sincerity," a struggle in which the ethos of sincerity wins out (as it tends to) over sexual desire. Sincerity offers transparency of action as a substitute for freedom of action, a substitution Young accepts. She continues:

Now if I do what I do not want to do,
it is a vision
it is no longer I who do it
broken up by the rhythmic sound of the voice.
It is sincerity living in me
which prevents images from crystallizing

and gets the better of me every time
causing them to break out into sensation.

Young articulates the pleasure of loss of agency here, how obedience to an ethos produces dissociation (“it is no longer I who do it”) and restricts the processing of experience (“sincerity. . . prevents images from crystallizing”). Young describes this abandoning of desire as “one of literature’s most abominable scenes” and it is awful in a sense—yet, at the same time, this loss of self (loss of a self identified with desire) is followed by identification with “the rhythmic sound of the voice” of moral authority, an identification which offers some promise of collective good and is foundational to a more nuanced, socialized sense of self. The self that lives the life is stranded between incomplete identifications with desire and sincerity, caught in a state of transparency to a non-existent higher authority. And perhaps the higher authority is not so much non-existent as highly distributed, present wherever any subject struggles to affirm or deny transparency as a virtue—no doubt this is so. Debunked ideology is moral life.

Of course it is a troublesome thing to live in a correct or moral way without any specific ideological stance to serve as the guarantor of that correctness. It becomes a matter of what is comfortable, what makes oneself and others comfortable, and whether people are comfortable or uncomfortable depends on what they are used to, especially on early ideological training. Young is very good at dramatizing a moral situation that revolves around the comfort level of adults who attempt to behave correctly with consideration for each other’s feelings, and the many forms of shame that can result (and perhaps such a concern is precisely what it means to be a “Bay Area poet” at this time). The only universal moral idea in this is the tried and true “Do No Harm.” But each person’s comfort level and sense of fairness relates to early ideological conditioning, which means that in this context moral ideas that are not viewed as having general validity continue to hold sway to the extent that they determine what is comfortable for certain persons. For Young, the Christian demand for moral transparency and sincerity, for motives that can be seen through, is necessary for comfort even while frustrating liberty.

So in general Young is dramatizing how a need for comfort frustrates desires for greater freedom of action. She dramatizes, on behalf of her poetic community, how the personal limits imposed by childhood training don’t go away, though the guarantor for those limits changes from “belief” to “comfort,” from rigid ideology to the soft pillow fight of hegemony, an angst-ridden internal negotiation with what feels right. The least shameful or unpleasant thing for all involved, of course, is to admit their limitations and talk them out. In this context, a person is a Foucauldian discourse machine, a black box “Insisting on the desire of its personhood.” Picture Palace repeatedly queries the limits of this arrangement:

how is shame different from embarrassment. The anxiety of each. The image of each. Around its idea. Institutionalized. “You will have to give me a wedgie,” I said to the text. Is there something which cannot be faked.

(O) SHE SHE -
SUSANA GARDNER

CARA BENSON

Victorian postmodern (post-Victor?) poet-ess Susana Gardner has created a poetics of fonts and textures, of a woman stitching words into breathtaking techno-spaces. Exaggerating the white between the words then smooshing the words together like this, or riffing on sights and sounds (“ASTER ASTIR TATS A NAME SIR,- A MANE STIR, A MEAN / STAR AS” (SCRAWL, 17)), Gardner loves language play, yet also allows or, rather, collects narrative.

Her syntax is re-ordered so that subject verb object appear near each other, interchange, stand apart, collide, and hover. I don't believe Gardner creates her syntactical structures to specifically or solely replicate how words crash together in a globalized televised mediated world. I do think it is, in part, because the “direct” communication prevalent in the public sphere—the manipulated tag line or ad line or marketer's politician's spokesperson's talking points—has usurped and compromised accountability in utterance. Language that makes specific claims is dubious. I do not state an original concept here, but it is absolutely a current one. [Aside from broader conundrums when considering symbolic representation vis à vis deconstruction.] We need to re-make in order to re-see in order to see at all in a never-ending crawl of contemporary language. Her work, however, is not solely salad for the sake of language play. There is authorial presence—a speaker—if often refracted through (a) third person. An I as she or about her “small her (o).”

From Gardner's SCRAWL:

is and is so spoken this (o) and what new language spoken or simply netted and
s o

suited toward her as is and better is so suited toward (her)
while (8)

The rushing stuttering of “is and is so...and so” and “toward her as is and...is...toward (her)” continues the tradition of making new with words in the way the poem rhythmically replicates the birthing process of which she writes. Rather than directed, this language is “netted,” accumulating its visceral impact and semantics as it builds upon each (re)iteration. (In fact, inter-netted, even. Gardner's online presence and digital capabilities have positioned her among those pushing the Pound dictate through new media).

More singular syntax—from [*lapsed insel weary*]:

yet,- she is just a girl and sing-ing
 strange,—she wants her very
 way of seeing is too
 uneasy yes, wavering she
 will only ever want (32)

A linear version of the sentence might read: “Yet, she is just a girl who sings strangely and wants her very way of seeing.” Well, it falls apart here, doesn’t it? Or is it that “her very way of seeing is too uneasy” is to be read as a separate sentence? That puts the first sentence as “yet,- she is just a girl and singing strange,—she wants.” Each line turns back on itself. Can be read ahead and/or with what comes before. Strange should be an adverb yet as modifier it also operates as, or becomes, noun. The “yes” seems a confirmation, but of what? Of uneasiness. Of wavering. Of not knowing what is wanted, but that a sea-like, undulating desire is present. The passage loses its “sense” when parsed. Of course, this is arguably the *modus operandi* of all poetry. Written another way the poem does not “mean” the same thing. In Gardner’s work particularly, like many “post” poets or “L”anguage sympathizers, landing the words around each other uses an associative sense-making not found in writing meant to be more directly representational.

However, unlike many avant writers, Gardner takes topics that aren’t typically subject to such language systems. Hence, some sense of the Victorian in her sensibility. Without question, the female figures prominently. To the room. (Woolf meets Woolf). Women & Mothers & Sisters & Childbirth & Writers & Ancestors. Emily Dickinson. Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Mina Loy. The infirm woman asserting her voice despite...

Gardner makes an embroidery of erasure, collage, and overwriting. Language is object yet there exists an urgency to communicate toward or through a fluttered utterance. The poem at play and at odds. The inherently lyric and elevated discourse in her work [bound] in blocks of text. Not so round as the bustles or curls of a traditional notion of the Victorian bodyscape. She exhibits a feminine feminism. Or is it a feminist femininity? Yet beyond third wave feminism, Gardner’s work employs, as well as challenges, semantics and rhetoric as much as it does aesthetics as evidenced in her concerns with the ways in which language does and does not make meaning.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Love Sonnets from the Portuguese* becomes Gardner’s EBB PORT rub outs. EBB PORT sounds like a computer plug. An information receptacle or conduit. EBB = a modernized through acronym Elizabeth Barrett Browning. PORT = erasure from the Portuguese. However, these do not feel like destructive cross-outs. Not strictly Derridian. There is something of the created (the feminine?)¹ here. I feel the making. The hatching. The art of her hand apparent in the tiny tears of paper of lines and words from the Browning.

In fact, the handmade often figures prominently in a Gardner project.² Cursive atop the typed. Colored crayon background words float in talking bubbles out of the beaks of birds. Yet always also the elements of the machine ever present. She uses grammatical symbols as full words / signifiers themselves. [[[&&&]]] As a result, attention is called to the tapping tips of fingers on the technology of the keyboard even as it is lusciously over-scored by image of ocean.

From “to stand to stand to sea” —

Constellation: misheard words
muttered from your throat, *Consolation.*

The most perfect night.

No,- *it is not clear*—

Decoration: the buoy tied itself to my
throat moved with the waves tatted
colored glass the shore was to the
right and to the left the sea
the sea unknown weed

tangled in brackish rope my arm
was numb from separation
along my legs oozed light brine of
a salty hue : Inviolable Candescence:

Yet,- no place for 'happily ever after'
no breadth for 'and so they lived'

Or so,- as stirring mates might kin so
kindred so cunning so kind so as ever is
so twain and coupled. Whereas
vigilant stars must mate,- and do. Such
verbiage only wretched waste at your
doorstep your yesteryear your only
ever after—before me. (I)

This is not Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, though one cannot help but think of it. Gardner's particular uttering reinvigorates and reformulates all the women's texts she has surely consumed: "your yesteryear your only / ever after—before me." The author's predecessors and her subjects become assimilated into a slippery time schema.

As mentioned, the brea(d)th of her spacing and repetition is often contained in left and right justified text. A strip block down the page that the words urge within. Again, the contradictions and tensions in Gardner's work. Straight-edged femininity. Words misheard. No. The act of speaking as a necessity and perhaps damaging. The voice is shredded through the machinations of technology, yet a voice, a body, is present ("...my throat...my arm...my legs..."). The lyricism of the rhyme of "constellation" to "consolation" to "decoration" moves within her non-standardized grammatical structures and spacing. Women and decoration? No. The decorated neck is a throttling weight, carrying away.

This is not quaint work, nor victimhood. "Feminine" ways of making are no less urgent or investigative than any other method. Her control over the material through design, through sound and language manipulation, ultimately displays power through voice. Even if that power is problematized by an awareness of linguistic limits. ("...[C]an we ever really know / no misinterpreted translation?" (to stand

to sea, XXVI)) To interrogate is to challenge; Gardner asks: posits: interpolates: the sea the sea is language [such verbiage] an unknown weed? For her, "as extant ontologic investigation", whether or not it achieves its communicative and performative aims (and her(e) it certainly does), poetry is a labor "of rigorous wanting and song." Perhaps beyond the effort, the impetus to utter, "even as", it is—*poetry is*—"a state of being." (*I lapsed insel weary*], 81)

Notes

¹ Eileen Myles to Jennifer Firestone, in *Letters to Poets: "I distrust my own jargon, my abandoning of the feminine for the female."* I, too, distrust (my) jargon. Yet, there is a certain type of making that is considered archetypally feminine. Creation and destruction. Yin and yang. Shakti and Shiva. I use the words as not solely representative of man and woman. As has been pointed out to me in response to this essay, many men hand-make stitched objects and many women don't. Agreed. Nary a man I know of has given birth.

² A major part of the Gardner domain is the successful Dusie project which consists of an international collective of poets connected through the internet. The purpose: to make hand-bound art books to be mailed among the list.

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1. LICENSE AND REGISTRATION TRANSLATION IN THE WORK OF BRANDON BROWN

DAVID BRAZIL

2. Brandon is a friend of mine, so the first difficulty in writing about his work is having to write sentences like, “In the writing of Brandon Brown,” etc., as though I don’t know the guy.
3. So, as a test, to see whether it helps, I’m going to refer to him as “the writer,” in this piece, with the hopes that you, the reader, will humor me & understand I’m not trying to be cute but just trying to figure out, tactically, how to write what is difficult to write.
4. In a way I’m illustrating, via this method & opening, a fundamental issue (*the fundamental issue*) in the work of the writer, and that’s *translation*.
5. I’m not really clever enough to talk about translation properly—maybe just clever enough to suspect it is one of the most important philosophical issues there is—and that it opens up on to the very basic question of adequation.
6. Implicit in a ‘common-sense’ idea of translation is:
7. Is the text in the origin-language (A) *properly, adequately, sufficiently* brought over into the target-language text (B)?
8. So, yeah, we’re always also talking about judgment here, as in, who makes the call?
9. *Quis judicabit?*
10. (Usually, *experts*.)
11. You all know all this already. The writer does too obviously. He’s just *interested in other practices*.
12. Why? Is he a pervert? Is he just perfidious? (Wearing the mantle of the traitor with pride?)
13. Or is there something particular we can learn about translation, about poetry, about writing, from these other sorts of practices?
14. *Adequation* is governed by the *copula*, in propositions (meaning the third-person singular of “to be,” namely, “is”). The “is,” is evacuated of any content other than bare

apology. It's an equal sign. It's invisible.

15. In customary notions of translation this "is" is the translator. The labor of the translator, and the body of the translator.

16. In several theoretical texts the writer has reiterated that the primary aim of his work is to reintroduce the body and its complex physical, intellectual & social overdeterminations into the practice of translation.

17. For example, there's this extract from *Remarks on Rogue Translation*:

18. "Whether the translator is understood...to be *invisible*, or whether on the other hand the translator is a *traitor*, as in the Italian adage *traddutore tradditore*, what is always overlooked as integral is the body of the translator itself."

19. I mean, do you guys know the writer's work, by the way?

20. There's a lot, but I can stick with what I know best.

21. There's *The Persians by Aeschylus*, a translation of *The Persians*, by Aeschylus, about which the writer has written that he "tried to include many collaborators to intervene in the translation, especially including Edward Said, Jane Austen, Walter Benjamin, my Arabic class, the Clash, e-mail correspondence with a translator recruiter from the U.S. Army, and Rumi; also all the things I ate and drank and wore and said and did are in the translation; and most especially I tried to pay attention to the terrific war and the terrific language that the war made that completely infiltrated all of my food and beverages and clothes and words and actions, and I let that get in the way of the translation too."

22. What does this look like in practice?

23. Beat your breasts, lament
 And tear out your beards
 Scream like an ox / duck
 Tear up your clothes
 Pull at your hair, pity your army
 Shed a lot of tears
 Shout out a response
 Wail out as we go to funerals
 Cry this cry throughout the city
 Wail out you soft ones Greeks killed
 E e e e e triple-banked...
 Take me into the economy
 Do it now

24. And at the bottom of the page, separated off from the main body of the text with a line like that Spicer book or Rodefer's *Villon*, in bold, "**He thinks it's not kosher.**"

25. (Best, perhaps, to remark now that this piece of writing was written in the deep dark heart of the Bush years, when a play written by an Athenian tragedian in which the abject misery of the just-defeated other side couldn't help but rhyme with various dramas of spectacular pomp, including (just because it happens to leap to mind) the capture and execution of Saddam Hussein.)

26. The account of translation, in other words, as repeatedly reformulated & refined in the writer's works, most recently in the text of his work *The Poems of Gaius Valerius Catullus 1-60*, goes something like this :

27. "Translation as I understand it involves a preceding writing, a proceeding writing—in between is the body that translates. The preceding writing is absorbed by the body of the translator in the act of reading. And when the translator writes something down which proceeds from the act of reading and the preceding writing, that is called 'translation.' However, far from idealizing a notion of repetition, this translation model wishes to privilege the *delay* between preceding and proceeding marks. To acknowledge the *fact of detour*. To suggest that things can go *haywire*." (TPOGVC XXIX & XXX)

28. Within, therefore, an **A** ---> **X** ---> **B** account of translation, the writer introduces X as the problem; the locus of overdetermination, the effects pedal, the Duchampian delay.

29. The skeptical are gonna say, as the skeptical tend to, "Well, *why*, for chrissake?"

30. First of all, I reckon, to foreground the fact that translation itself, which in its ad-equationist drag pretends to a mimesis whose whole backstory is a bunch of Platonist hooey, that translation, I repeat, *is always writing*.

31. But also, and more importantly, that the writing thus produced may know things that other writings (including other translations) *don't*.

32. Number fifty-one of the writer's translations of Catullus explores how a translation can know or learn by compiling "a short list of possible ways to translate the fifty first poem in the corpus of Catullus, itself a translation of a poem by Sappho."

33. Some instances:

34. "2. Translate the Sappho poem from the Greek and, like Catullus, add an extra stanza about my laziness."

35. "5. Given the scene described in the poem, put my body in a situation where I am likely to feel intense jealousy. Go home and write poem."

36. "6. Just sit in my cubicle and imagine that scene—speed process of translation."

37. "7. Create a scene in which someone else feels that intense jealousy, and then try to convince them to translate the poem of Sappho."

38. "8. And then add a stanza about the process, including apology."

39. "10. Write about specific imagery that caused me discomfort at the inauguration of Barack Obama in 16 lines, then alter the form so this poem looks like a prose poem."

40. "11. Skip the fifty first poem in the corpus of Catullus entirely. Get refreshment."

41. "12. Substitute discursive short list of possibilities as the translation, and include the four extra Catullan lines as a sort of consolation prize for the reader."

42. (This prize being) : Otium molests Catullus. Otium he exulted in and what does he

get? Otium beats up his Prius in the suburbs.

43. And ain't it the fucking truth?

44. The writer and I are still, in conversation, attempting to figure out what the name for otium is if you don't have otium.

45. But in his work, he is showing a way to incorporate that shrapnel of non-otium.

46. It's this inclusion of the material of the body (the physical body, & also the social body, or bodies) that helps illuminate the texts which are being translated—& *meaningfully translates evasive elements of them*, elements that vanish when the semantic or phonic elements alone are privileged (= drawn into relief at the expense of other elements).

47. May even translate gaps or absences in the text.

48. I'm aware this might sound like a lot of talk surrounding what ought, supposedly, to be at the center of this kind of piece of writing, namely, poetry-as-such, or talk about poetry.

49. My sense of the work of the writer is that his (tremendous) talents of structure and prosody, rather than being used to create autonomous art-objects to be appreciated for their own sake, are being put to use in a project of philosophical poetry—that is, a philosophical project *that can only be worked out in poetry*.

50. *which is why I'm telling you about it*

ON THE MULTIPLICITOUS POETRIES OF LEE ANN BROWN

LAYNIE BROWNE

Lee Ann Brown is a voracious art involver. By this I mean that her work has always been informed by her very active involvement in arts communities including film, theater, literature and just about anything else you can imagine. She has a wide curiosity, a generous ear and a unique and authentically singular interest in everything. The nature of my understanding of Lee Ann Brown's work is as a peer and collaborator and as witness to her terrific instigation and enthusiasm for art happenings in which I've often had the pleasure to take part. The last time I arrived in New York we went immediately to (here's a partial list): a trapeze extravaganza performed by an acrobat/poet, a psychedelic yogic projection dance party, a punk neon kid's violin performance topped off with a concert, and a high rise burrito as art feast simultaneous with Times Square filmic productions of the guests. There is never one project or one agenda. There is no day without twelve plans. This is the somewhat hypnotic universe in which Brown dwells, peopled with uncommon beauty and exquisite surprise.

Her work is informed by a variety of sources including the New York School, Beats, Language Poetry, (with a New York and San Francisco bi-coastal urban sensibility) and also her North Carolina roots. One reason that her work is unique is that she radiates from all of these possibilities and others. Her lineage isn't singular. It's Bernadette Mayer and Emily Dickinson, but also Whitman and Brainard and Elmslie, the filmmaker Nick Dorsky, and the playwright Richard Foreman. She is of hymns, of Allen Ginsberg and Japanese tea ceremonies (she was born in Japan), Appalachian ballads and garage punk, Frank O'Hara and of course Sappho.

I say "of course" because it is in her nature to be various, many places at once. She is both Steinian and traditional, irreverent and classic, proper and erotic, epic and minute.

A brief history of her so far illustrious career includes: a long history as an arts community organizer through the Poetry Project in New York City, where she curated the Monday night series, founder and editor of the press Tender Buttons (à la Gertrude Stein) which has published about one dozen titles including: Bernadette Mayer, Rosmarie Waldrop, Anne Waldman, Dodie Bellamy, Harryette Mullen, and myself among others. Her first book, *Polyverse*, won a New American Poetry Series Award, chosen by Charles Bernstein, published by Sun and Moon Books in 1999. And prior to that her work was greatly circulated by means of oral publication. She is terrifically known as a wonderful performer of her works which at times includes singing. She is also known for her work as a poet-in-the-schools through the Teachers and Writers

Collaborative in NYC, both as a teacher and a writer of articles on the curriculum she has developed for teaching imaginative writing to young children. Very recently she co-founded a new project for multidisciplinary poetry and performance, the French Broad Institute of Time and the River in Marshall, North Carolina. She is currently professor of English at St. John's University in NYC.

It is important to note that no book by Lee Ann Brown is simply a single book. She tends to write big books which are equal to three or four books by most poets. This is true in terms of length, depth and arrangement. For instance, *Polyverse* is 186 pages, divided into three sections: "Her Hearsay Hymnbook," "Velocity City," and "A Little Resistance," each of which could be a stand-alone book. And yet what we are presented with in her sweeping generative texts is a careful orchestration of parts which demonstrate a great continuity and range. The poems are relational—speaking to each other on and off of the page—just one aspect of her highly collaborative sensibility. Poet Jordan Davis writes on the arrangement of her books: "So many recent books of poems are interrupted every twenty pages by a Roman numeral, the same styles and subjects picking up where they left off—intermissions disguised as changes... Brown, on the other hand organizes her uncommonly long books into sections that differ from each other the way rings in a circus do: present beau hymns to the muses go here next to the N+7 operations on familiar allegiance texts, precisely observed miniatures hover in this corner, Steinian meditations make frequent flagrant rendezvous with the recognizable vulnerable world here at the end. No Roman numerals."

A few qualities of this first book: Patrick Pritchett writes "Above all 'polyverse' suggests Oppen's 'being numerous' his 'shipwreck of the singular.' The destruction of the monolithic and ceaselessly self-aggrandizing subject, its narcissistic craving for experience and epiphany opens the possibility for a radically new poetics."

Poet Elaine Equi writes: "Pleasure is the subject of Lee Ann Brown's poetry. Pleasure in the craft and anti-craft of poem making. Pleasure in the vocalizing and harmonizing of voice and text—speech and writing. Giddy recombinings. Flirtatious collaborations. Irreverent anagrams. To paraphrase Lee Ann's version of her own poetic genealogy: enthusiasm is the mother ("We are the daughters of enthusiasm"), excitement the sister ("Where are my excitement sisters")."

Here is a section of "Crush" from which Equi quotes:

We are the daughters of enthusiasm.
With tenderness and dancing.
With late night storming.
Excitement sisters.
Where are my excitement sisters.
At work they are all at work.
We want to talk late into the night.
We want to play tenderly with boys also.
To sleep and work on our non-paying work,
We try to unite our rent power tryst.
It is seldom these days that we meet.

Assiduous angles in a latin position.
We hide in the woods to remember
the simultaneous noise of the city,
wearing the ring of the city.

Southern butter.
Did you expect southern butter.
Our rented reality is a problem.

Trillium.
Trillium and lady slipper.
Lady Slipper is married to Jack-in-the-Pulpit
Mayapple is a name to remember.

From my own review of *Polyverse*, “She does not deny the narrative, but creates the ‘extra-narrative,’ specific locations intimate interiors which insist upon their own dimensions.” Her poem “Crush” ends with the statement: “I say these things not because they happen, but because many things happen.” Thus she does not deny the present, nor the recording of events, but she does negate the notion that the poem is merely an accumulation of recollections. She writes:

I believe in the alteration
of the planetary structure
by means of language
at every level of its register
from the phonemical
to that of discourse

Her second full-length collection, *The Sleep That Changed Everything*, was published by Wesleyan University Press in 2003. This book is in part a re-visioning and re-versioning of hymns and ballads as source material for writing and performance. Her presentation of this work culminates in “13th Sunday In Ordinary Time” a song cycle performed by five women including Brown, and directed by her husband, the actor Tony Torn.

This 175 page book is divided into five sections: “Insufflation,” “Estivation,” “Vibratory Odes,” “Devastation,” and “Inflorescence.” The book begins with a list in memoriam, including family and poetic allegiances. As per usual she writes in many forms including acrostic, ode, hymn, ballad, sonnet, list, personal add, epistle, lament, elegy, homophonic translation, dictionary entry, etc. For any poet who ever wanted a magic spellbook of possible forms to consider hers is a must-read compendium—very openly offered with unobtrusive notes at the end providing further insights into possible poetic excursions.

On the ballad form, Brown writes:

Immensely flexible and with a very long history, the ballad has been one of the backbones (and the source forms) for innovative, hybrid American art since the time of the first European settlers.

The ballad is, quite simply, the link between the written and the sung: it is the vehicle for children’s songs, hymns, lullabies, political anthems, folk songs, heavy metal “power ballads,” sweeping love ballads, movie soundtrack themes, and nearly every type of popular song.

And I’d like to suggest that Brown leaves none of these forms untried.

She writes: “These collective human experiences, these stories, are what make ballads. I view the ballad as the ultimate field (or form) for truth-telling through appropriation.”

And as to her sources for appropriation, to name a few, Tuli Kupferberg of the Fugs, Helen Adam (a contemporary of Spicer, Jess and Duncan, a poet and artist, whose work was only recently just brought back into print by the poet Kristen Prevallet in the book: *A Helen Adam Reader* (National Poetry Foundation)), Emily Dickinson and Will Oldham.

She writes: “We can take cues from folk ballads as stitcher of tissues of quotes from the larger culture.”

This second book represents quite a range in terms of subject content—from erotic to violent. From epithalaleums to cruel mother ballads.

Brown writes: “There is an extensive process at work behind the creation of a folk ballad, which I liken to the organic way in which new words are added to the dictionary. But I believe in our power as wordsmiths, as poet folk to create new words that will ‘take’ new songs that will be sung and used and memorized and give up to be changed, the first whispers (or growls) in a cosmic game of Telephone.”

Certainly Brown has created new words and new meanings for familiar words (consider her poem “thang” a list poem of locations for coupling), new ways to recite the alphabet (as in her witch alphabet poem in *Polyverse*), new songs, as in the layered new versions of hymns and ballads which allow the light from original composition to radiate through her own pastiche of cultural references.

I wanted to say a word also about Brown as a collaborator. In her first book *Polyverse* is an entire section, “Colabs” written with poets such as Mayer, Moxley, Jarnot, Weiner and others. One project in which she has been involved is the 3:15 project—which began in 1993 by poets Dinsmore and Mayer and then opened more widely with a 1999 panel at the Naropa Institute in which Brown, along with Bernadette Mayer, Jen Hofer and Danika Dinsmore spoke about the project. For anyone unfamiliar with the project, participants, during the month of August, set their alarms for 3:15 am and wake up and write in a somewhat not quite awake state. According to Albert Flynn DeSilver, publisher of Owl Books first anthology from the 3:15 experiment, “The topics of their panel included time, consciousness (altered), collaboration, community, and ritual. I wanted to know, hear, read, more. As it turned out they were planning to open the experiment up to whoever wanted to participate, and were passing around a sign-up sheet. I excitedly signed my name away for the following August when the experiment would begin again.” (For anyone interested you can go to 3:15 exp. com). This project exudes the type of communal collaborative visioning in her work. Here’s an excerpt from one of her 3:15 poems, published in the more recent anthology, *between sleeps: the 3:15 experiment 1993-2005*:

vibration,
missing or skipping
something that’s supposed to
happen in a house just
_____ with my lamps and beds

“scared the living daylights
out of me”
I stood on the platform
feeling the slightest
turn-on as the

mechanical hum of
the subway & the way
people were moving
vibrated ever so
fascinatingly
in my being
all different kinds of people

One of her current works in progress is a book exploring the history lore and terrain (literary, geographical and otherwise) of North Carolina. Another is a book called *Philtre, Writing in the Dark, 1987-2007*, forthcoming from Atelos. This project has as a unifying concept the practice of "Writing During" meaning that each of the included texts was written during attendance at cultural events, including poetry readings, film, and a variety of other performances. Another form of collaboration. She begins with a quotation from Whitman: "You shall listen to all sides and filter them from yourself." Here is an excerpt from that work, written during a poetry reading by Philip Lamantia, at Beyond Baroque in Los Angeles, February 26th, 1999.

Grackle Digression

"I buy ectoplasmic peanutbutter"

Anecdotal surrealist tonic
inside psychedelic Luxor hot dog stand
Star burst—not many left
hand in pocket
"great big fairy head"
"this paper writes me"
when we scribe the big ode
a red-faced cormorant
will shift encyclopedariums
clear-cut avataristic to
"iridescent rot"

Where is Topsy?
In the bed of the Sphinxes?

I'd like to invite all of you to take Brown's concept of writing "during" while listening to a recording from "13th Sunday in Ordinary Time" — recorded at the Bowery Poetry Club. A recording of this performance can be found at:

<http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Brown.html>

While you are listening you might attempt some of Brown's Ballad experiments:

1. Make a list of misheard song lyrics and choose the best one for the title.
2. Experiment with appropriation and collage. Note down words and phrases from signs, overheard conversation, or the tabloids, and put them in a ballad form. Then sing it!

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AN INTERLUDE ON THE POETICS OF DIRT PART TWO

CACONRAD & BRENDA IIJIMA

BRENDA IIJIMA: CA—there is still so much to say concerning dirt! I thought we could revisit the discussion we had surrounding the interview you conducted with Alice Notley to start this second phase of our pursuit of smut, grime and dirt. I remember being surprised that Alice quickly dissed Hecate, seeming to favor the beautiful, that of Athena’s owl (you were having a conversation about owls as they appeared in Alice’s writings). Alice says, “Fuck Hecate. I’m not interested in crones! More to the point, there is a tangible, beautiful, known ancient image of Athena’s owl that one can avail oneself of...” To which you reply, “OOOOO! FUCK HECATE!?! I’ve never heard anyone say that before! Wow! A test for the soles of the feet! I like that! HEHEHE! Just for the record I have nothing against Athena, I was sharing what I had been thinking with my own interest in crones coming through with the thoughts. If I turn 60 I intend to live the rest of my life as a crone.” I was buoyed by your response, CA...very much so. I think we have to grow to embrace the fleshy, amorphous form we take as we grow old—basically as we return to dirt, we soil (ourselves, etc.), fusing back with matter in general. There are the cliques about beauty and plenty of cliques about ugliness both vying for attention and our confusion it seems. I’m interested to note the disgust that our culture has of aging, dirt, and the unsanitary—it quickly gets categorized as ugly. Obviously I’m parsing Alice’s comment out of context. She hit the ground running with *Alma*. Maybe that’s why her passionate comment struck me so. I love the notion of old women stirring up trouble. At a certain age there is no distinct disposition of gender any longer—it is awash—this is quite hopeful in fact. Hecate is a liberator of patriarchal bonds (boundaries)—that’s why she is demonized by the Christian church especially in the medieval era. I’m also interested in how she is associated with night. Night is compared negatively to day and light. Alice’s work never turns away from darkness. Perhaps we could begin our discussion by focusing on what gets sanitized out of culture.

CACONRAD: If Alice Notley murdered someone I would hide her in the basement. If she became a cannibal I’d shove someone down the steps for her. In other words Alice Notley always gets a pass from me, she’s one of the few people I would do just about anything for. That said, it’s clear in the interview that I was surprised by her response, but at the same time I wanted to make clear MY LOVE for old women. Crone was originally an insult, meaning “a disagreeable woman.” What I love is how women become more and more open as they age, I’ve seen this in the women in my family, TIRED of taking shit. These amazing working class women who juggle everyone’s everything, and with little thanks. I prefer disagreeable people in general, but yes, I agree, the reason it was surprising that Notley reacted the way she did was because of the STRENGTH in her work with *Alma*, and other women. FUCK HECATE is a

serious statement. As is “I’m not interested in crones!” Not interested in crones? Isn’t Alice Notley sixty, or close to it? THIS IS in a sense talking about “what gets sanitized out of culture” when talking about crones, especially crones NOW, especially crones denying other crones. But then again, she and I were discussing the owl in *The Descent of Alette*, so, Athena’s owl was the owl she had in mind when writing, but still, the answer seemed much bigger later when reacting to Hecate. Hecate gets portrayed as the hag we need to ignore or step around, but she was a virgin, already setting herself as someone disagreeable to the charted course for her sex. Let’s not forget her ministering Persephone, giving her comfort in the Underworld. Anyway, I LOVE Hecate, she who talks to ghosts and spirits.

The Baby Boomers, my continual plea! I’ve posted this plea online more than once, asking THIS amazing generation, THEY who gave us Civil Rights, gave us Women’s Rights, Queer Rights, and so much more including THE HEALTHIEST POSSIBLE feelings about and AGAINST WAR, THIS generation I ask to give us ONE MORE GIFT, the gift of “Aging As SEXY!” And SEXY without hair dye, surgery, all that nonsense that is very much part of “WHAT GETS SANITIZED OUT OF CULTURE” indeed! A TOTAL embrace is what I ask for. LOVE-INS in front of MACY’S Department store cosmetic counter, or some such fucking place whose engines are determined to intimidate ANY FRACTION OF DEATH’S APPEARANCE! But they do not of course intimidate the inevitable decline, these Macys, these brands, these creams!

There are of course MANY from their generation who ARE what I hope them to be! Freya Aswyn who in the middle of teaching her workshops on ancient runes and Norse Mythology will strip naked, her long, long gray hair cascading over her fierce, tattooed body! Freya is my favorite and PERFECT example, as she is named after the Goddess of LOVE, yet is a fierce crone! Freya is the strength I wish for every woman and man, TAKING the day’s moment by the gizzard and denying NOTHING!

BRENDA: Crone sounds like an earthy way to articulate crown without church and state crowding in. The holistic cycle of the three goddesses—the crone returns the living to the death state so that the rebirthing process can begin anew. We need messengers to arrange these terrestrial transformations. The sanitation of death is so palpable currently—the sheer expendability of bodies in war and how these bodies are erased from consciousness. War energies get into our flesh, colonize cellular structure—this must be a reason so much of the US population seems to be lacking serotonin. And why there is such an array (an arsenal!) of synthetic chemicals designed and administered to cloak the body’s innate warning signals—something that is exported with neo-liberalist capitalism. Aihwa Ong’s work on *The Production of Possession: Spirits and The Multinational Corporation* elaborates on the effects of sanitized environments among other issues, in a book of collected essays called *Beyond the Body Proper: Reading the Anthropology of Material Life*—really a great anthology. Here’s a brief excerpt:

The sanitized environments maintained by multinational corporations in Malaysian “free trade zones” are not immune to sudden spirit attacks on young female workers. Ordinarily quiescent, Malay factory women who are seized by vengeful spirits explode into demonic screaming and rage on the shop floor. Management responses to such unnerving episodes include isolating the possessed workers, pumping them with Valium, and sending them home.”

Speaking of crones—it is quite thrilling to take in the new Helen Adam reader. Her grotesqueries sensually present the liminal state between living matter and momentary death. Sator means sower or planter—again the profound connection to dirt though the recognition of turf is already an imbedded social factor. I’m very much

focused on locating and connecting with recuperative energies that surge up and cicatrize. Eleni Stecopoulous and Rob Halpern gave tremendous readings last night at Thom Donovan's series, *Peace on A*. Eleni, in particular is deeply engaged with the study of regional and site specific healing, the special healing qualities that the earth exudes in localized areas. Eleni's work, Rob's work and Robert Kocik's all are very connected to the active process of working through disaster, negating totalizing despair and inoperability with sensual gesture, emotional connectivity—how bodies bridge intelligences and form a benevolence of sharing. Your writing is also committed to these energies. Freya Aswynn—you and I had a terrific conversation about her when I visited Philadelphia a little over a year ago. We had a delicious lunch at your favorite vegetarian Chinese restaurant where your ex-boyfriend works. After that, we met kari edwards and Rachel Blau DuPlessis for the reading you arranged for all of us. That was a very impactful reading for me—to witness the intense force field that kari and Rachel created—going in to the reading with all of this vital information about Freya Aswynn—all generative.

CONRAD: You brought up the psychic pollution among the factory workers in Malaysia. It's horrifying, and psychic pollution is on my mind quite a bit, and how THAT pollution is informed by and engaged with all other forms of pollution. Michael Moore's film *BOWLING FOR COLUMBINE* was spent searching for the reasons Americans are so violent, and why we kill one another with guns. Our guns and dirt, or guns to send us back to dirt is how I want to look at us, is probably much more complicated than wondering why Canadians have more guns per household, yet have far fewer murders.

One of the subjects Moore did not breach was pollution and guns, unless you count his investigations into violent video games and music, but as he pointed out, the games and music are played and listened to all over the world with very different results. The pollution I focus on the MOST for our very American pollution is food. NO WHERE on this planet are animals abused to the extent as the animals unfortunate enough to be born in America. The nonstop horror factory WILL IN FACT factor onto the dinner plate, I have NO doubts about this. Animals who never see the sunlight, never walk on the grass, kept in aluminum buildings, AND THIS FOR THE SAKE OF production. Our good OLE Yankee prosperity has always been built on making something as efficient as possible, and if that means raising animals in metal structures instead of letting them have lives, MAKING THEM and ENSLAVING THEM as product instead of living creatures, then so be it. It is efficient to have animals raised this way, to blow air conditioning on chickens to make them produce MORE eggs, etc., the brutality, THE BRUTALITY is what THE EFFICIENCY ultimately provides.

My point on pollution though is that WE KNOW WITHOUT A DOUBT now that body tissue HOLDS memory and especially traumatic memory. Anyone who has had massage, reiki, or other forms of body work done on a regular basis KNOWS what it's like to finally have some of that RELEASED from the body. So, if we KNOW that tissue holds memory, THEN, please imagine with me the tissue of a chicken or cow or pig who has been BRUTALIZED and deprived of life's simplest pleasures, and kept depressed and sick with fear, IMAGINE that tissue winding up on your dinner plate soon after the slaughter has taken place. It's eaten, the nutrients of muscle soaked with terror, held in the cells. Some people would say that the pain and suffering ENDS on slaughter day. NO, I disagree. It continues in the mind, body, and spirit of the people who eat the flesh. NO OTHER COUNTRY abuses animals the way we do in America, and NO OTHER COUNTRY eats as much animal "product" as we do in America, and NO OTHER COUNTRY seems to have as much psychic meltdown, murder, freak out, serial killer, kind of fucked up behavior as we do in America.

You cannot escape the torture of the animals if you eat meat. If someone is eating meat in America and is too PRISSY and COWARDLY to see what the animals' lives are like before the slaughter, well, it's my opinion that they FEEL it whether they want to or not. Psychic pollution will NOT be resolved until we return to old ways of farming animals so that they can be comfortable and live their lives. Factory farming is destroying this world in so many ways. Psychic pollution is one thing with factory farming, then of course there's the immeasurable damage such farming is doing to the environment.

And frankly, when I became vegetarian twenty years ago, one of the first things I found out was that my mind became sharper and calmer and gave me the stamina and POWER to write and write better than ever. The world is much more beautiful to me now, I feel that this is true. My uncontrollable depression and suicidal days, and other wanton destructive feelings disappeared. When I argue with people now it's because I am passionate, not lost and over-stimulated with a complicated stew of frightened animal flesh and their excessive adrenaline and hormones.

BRENDA: What you have written reflects my life experience and perception also. I only wish I had become a vegetarian sooner! It is so distressing to understand what is being done to animals in the name of profit but more poignantly, to outfit lifestyles of persons living in the United States—to give the “we” a sense of satiation—prosperity. Despite all the compelling data, people are consuming more and more meat and meat that is downright cruelly procured and unhealthy for anyone in that food chain. Everyone is free to pursue their “lifestyle.” (Free should probably be in quotations too.) I'm so worried about the polis operating human-centrally always. But animals are clearly protesting.

The denial that surrounds production and expansion of this bloody economy enters flesh. It is embedded in fleshy emblems: The New World—as if this land could be anything but ancient, layered with culture (including animal and vegetative cultures). The total disregard for indigenous people and people of color and so oftentimes women is the same destructive energy that sets up factory farms and propagandizes the eating of meat, or more dully so, lulls the population into exorbitant unconsidered consumption models that create a false sense of well-being at a unconscionable expense for...*all*. There's this succinct quote from Alice Walker in *Am I Blue*, “As we talked of freedom and justice one day for all, we sat down to steaks. i am eating misery, i thought, as i took the first bite. and spit it out.” Plus, meat is often feminized.

I know many view this line of thinking as sanctimonious, “Just give me the meat!” No doubt, when SUVs are roaring through habitats as if it were a sensitive way to get in touch with nature and then some reckless trawling produces all you can eat at *Red Lobster*...I was in Boulder, Colorado last week (teaching at Naropa's Summer Writing Program). There is something quite hygienic about Boulder—a kind of hyper idealized environment...The city of Boulder bought itself a gigantic swath of land to surround itself in green and maintain a pristine environment (yet it seems everyone drives an SUV out there!). The population of Boulder proper is very conspicuously white—because it is so expensive evidently only rich white people are able to live there. People working the service industries drive down from the mountains to come and work in Boulder. (Why oh why is it that environmentally “healthy” places to live are usually exclusive—it is so insidious.) Anyway, Boulder seeks to be very ecologically oriented. There are PETA brochures in dispensers like the ones New Yorkers get their Village Voice from. I took one home with me: *Vegetarian Starter Kit, Everything you need to eat right for your health, animals, and the Earth*. Here are some quotes from the brochure.

“Of all agricultural land in the U.S., 80 percent is used to raise animals for food—that’s almost half the total land mass of the lower 48 states.” And, “Raising animals for food causes more water pollution in the U.S. than any other industry because animals raised for food produce 130 times the excrement of the entire human population—87,000 pounds per second! Much of the waste from factory farms and slaughterhouses flows into streams and rivers, contaminating water sources.” ...“Mad cow disease has been discovered in North America, yet the chicken, pork, and beef industries put profit ahead of public safety and feed diseased animals to pigs and chickens, who are fed back to cows and to one another. When people eat infected chickens, pigs, or cows, they could develop the human variant of the disease.”

The quotidian displacement of flesh to meat without direct contact with death is a prominent feature of 20th Century mass culture. “Like those birds that lay their eggs only in other species’ nests, memory produces in a place that does not belong to it” writes Michel de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life*. There is an odd correlation with de Certeau’s quote—something misaligned but considered normal—our lodged memories in the animal othered bodies, digested. Given the mostly wholesale acceptance of what is called food, it is quickly becoming a *Soylant Green* scenario where we feed ourselves to ourselves. Notice those bodies going into the grinder!

CONRAD: HOW TO GET AT THE EARTH in our poems!? Karen Weiser’s *To Light Out* (Ugly Duckling Presse, 2009) senses the atomic light of our cells. I had just watched a documentary about an active volcano the day before hearing her read from these new poems at The Poetry Project. I was transfixed, listening to her, thinking, KAREN is a volcano! Karen is TELLING US how a pregnant woman is a volcano. She is telling us how the surface hears and knows the core’s message. This is an excerpt from her introductory note to the collection:

When I became pregnant I felt like my brain and body were filled with static. This static was less a sound than a sense that the flickering of snow on a tv screen had been made into liquid and pumped into my veins. This made it hard to think, hard to do anything. After a while I realized that it was her signal. I couldn’t hear my own ways of thinking or feeling with this other person’s atoms multiplying inside of me. It was the sound of the big bang, and my own radio brain was tuned it.

BRENDA: The effect of Karen’s gorgeous reading saturated my consciousness—incidentally fluid and metaphysical (by this I mean beyond terrestrial—not transcendent) while not abandoning the physical—these are visceral poems. As Kim Lyons commented to me, “It’s like she’s molting the poems or they are the fruit of the pregnancy—as though intrauterine is a metaphor for writing.” We sat together at the Poetry Project, enthralled. I sent an email to Karen after the reading and this is a fragment of what I wrote: “The work makes a profound eco statement in its emphasis of body generativity and interspatial relations. You seem so attuned to the intensities and frequencies of the surround, liminal zones and also the transitional flux of space. A poetics that contends with the cellular level of being I think is holistic and has ethical possibility...The Zohar came to mind also because you acknowledge splendor. There is a benevolence of tone and modality that is so open...” In the meanwhile Karen shared her manuscript with us and it has been really thrilling to be enveloped by her work for extended durations. Her immense recognition and the experiential data she relates of the body acting as a conduit is so very poignant I think. The body is a discrete conduit while also morphing simultaneously into new forms beyond sovereign states. *To Light Out* presents such a limber philosophical position and feels

rehabilitating. “Protean is the thing saying/only on loan from one’s skepticism—each word changes us.” This work reimagines the complications of presence and possibility.

Everyone has to pay for the affect that greets us in every other,
little whirlpools of voice and hormone that reach the ear as one’s own
You should hear me play a song of mutable appearances;
I was the color of dusk hearing this song any day you want
Its muting is the heft of our senses
hanging in the air when air alone can dislocate
with its thin edge of unmistakable quality...

There’s also plenty of scrubbed raw sarcasm at play that addresses hurts and injustices relating, as in this example to gender.

Plausible blunders had unmanned me
but now I speak perfectly manned, an almanac
stone for a head, trapped thing sunning itself

in language: boatless rudder;
arrive and the land educates you
move around and your cells take shape

with plenum, the avalanche of plenum

Amber Di Pietra writes the following at the Nonsite Collective website:

I am thinking toward a kind of sensation fieldwork in which the grid of circumstances and subjectivities around sensation are documented. To truly write inside one’s own sensate bubble going away from abstraction and invention and toward distillation and intensification which does not mean that writing on sensation would be expository or representational or solipsistic in the normal sense. Such writing would require the formation of a new language, just as experimental writing always does, but it would also mean a pivoting off of and a touching back to old tropes, fragments of and instances of familiar language because those instances of language, when used in a certain context, are valuable for the kind of sensory charge that they have accrued over time.

This seems to me to be a way into writing about social work and activism and identity and gender and ability. To write about it through the body because one’s body is the site for all fieldwork. The body is not personal or owned. It is a sensate lens.” (<http://www.nonsitecollective.org/node/489#comment-140>)

Amber’s thoughts definitely correspond to the work Karen is doing:

While you wait to return your lace, your furniture
is copied, and by furniture I mean DNA,
spiraling into its own pulse
drinking the ancient transparent dream
emanating from the mattresses that are
our bodies. Put a finger on that run of notes
this is life and its laws are merely habits
bedding gravity with panorama in mind

&

Nothing shuffles off our present
but forms form around the flaws
plovers from which the apple strays
venting small movements that tremble with proximity
The channel steadies when I move closer
tempted into artistic sanitation that used to be
called clarity; the kind of Revolution of one body
around another, but inside, kingdom of mere dreaming
There is no outside yet to bleat with unlovely aspect
nor bounties for channels of thought

CONRAD: “the kind of Revolution of one body / around another, but inside,” reminds me of our talking about the consumption of animals once again. Living beings taken down, drained of blood, eaten, put inside our bodies, to become our bodies. The gravity of being alive takes a lot to swallow. In Frank Sherlock’s newest book *OVER HERE*, the section titled “Wounds in an Imaginary Nature Show” certainly grapples without disguise all the different implications of *LIVING*. Here’s a sample:

Part of
me wants to

refrain from
eating
the chocolate

rabbit
the butter
lamb

“Part of / me,” he says part of me. Wants to refrain. It’s clear the rabbit and lamb are not meat, but are vegetable, chocolates formed into animals. Part of him wants to refrain from eating. If you had just this fragment and no knowledge of what drove him to write it, it would stand on its own as someone thinking and *FEELING* quite seriously about the world he’s taking into his body. It’s clearly Easter candy, Easter the time of resurrection, new life, and he chooses pagan animal forms for this, the sweet, the new, forming life. “Part of / me” he says realizes these are chocolates. Chocolates shaped like something with fur and tendons, blood, sap of *LIFE!* I truly love this poem.

The fact is he wrote this while in the hospital after nearly dying from meningitis. Well, he *DID DIE*, I was there in the ambulance when his heart stopped, his kidneys shut down, he was dead. The EMT worker started his organs back up, and then in the hospital some amazing people killed the meningitis bacteria that *WAS EATING HIM*. He was being eaten alive, but survived. And as this poem shows, a man surviv-

ing being eaten by another considers his options. His body got to recover, he got to LIVE, and he sensed that victory with complete concentration into the poems of this sequence, taking, such, care, to, walk, gently from bed. "Wounds in an Imaginary Nature Show" is without a doubt THE BEST series of poems I have ever read about near death. It's asking us to not merely apt for agreeable movement, a poem charting how to finally live up to the questions we ask about the animal, human, living here. OVER HERE is a book I would buy for every single person I know if I had the money.

Another poet of dirt is David Buuck (he quite literally is a poet of dirt!)! His part of the Barge Project in San Francisco is called Buried Treasure Island, see this link: <http://davidbuuck.com/barge/bti/index.html> which includes PDFs and photos of the project. He writes:

Given Treasure Island's long and complex history as an artificial staging ground for world's fairs, military bases, television shoots, and real estate speculation, as well as being an enormous landfill of dangerous and toxic substances, Buried Treasure Island attempts to unearth the secret histories of the site, and explore how the landscape is transformed not only by its usage, but also by what is elided from public view. Home to some of the most stunning views in the bay (but only if you turn your back on the island itself), Treasure Island remains a site full of hidden histories, presents, and possible futures.

When reading for Thom Donovan's series in NYC, *Peace on A*, Buuck had with him a plastic bag with some of the toxic soil from the island which he ate in front of the astonished audience. The activism cannot be denied, a frightening display of a person taking responsibility for the soil's corruption, saying, "I'm going to MAKE this part of my body RIGHT IN FRONT OF YOU!" I wasn't there for this, but FELT it with each person's recounting of the event. It made me feel SICK, made me think about feeling sick, about what we're doing, how complicit we all are every single day. What do we do each day, how many things do we do each day which contribute to the infractions of a delicate order of all that is living, needs what we take, spoils, terminates, seep-ages seeping back to our bodies? Frank Sherlock grew up in a part of Philadelphia whose land is so toxic that when the neighborhood was considered for a new prison it was deemed unfit for the prisoners. But the poor who live there, well, this is America, the poor left to the most toxic land. SHIT!

THREAT IS DEEP

NEW WORDS FOR POETS THEATER

CORINA COPP

Talking around a tradition of Poets Theater would inevitably extend to an inclusion of contemporary practitioners, possibly making clear how Poets Theater operates today (and why). Yet, as is the case with many texts that seek both a cultural context and an aesthetic resonance in a space more peripheral to—if not utterly outside—history, it's worthwhile to look at the art just as it stands now, especially if the term "Poets Theater" is an eyesore, a headache, or otherwise tiring for no particular reason. But perhaps I am only delaying talk of this tradition because in fact I am interested in *poetry* as well as *theater*. I'm interested in poetic lineage and theatrical history. Separately. Enough about me! Conceptually, "Disorder, mental, strikes me; I /...though the observers appear clear"¹ fits well the task of bringing the two genres/disciplines together. The use of *genres* pointing to ideas, *disciplines* to practice. Typically, American Poets Theater is composed of volunteers, makeshift sets, and a hint of magical un-expertise (cultivated sloppiness?). And a survey of the active history and sophisticated *mise-en-scène* of such Poets Theater might emphasize the following moments: Bunny Lang and Frank O'Hara at Harvard in the 1950s, sets by Edward Gorey; the Fluxus movement, "happenings," and productions from The Living Theater in the 1960s; the year 1964 for LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), which saw the Obie award—winning "Dutchman," among his other drama; Pedro Pietri's amazing "The Masses Are Asses," which premiered in New York in 1974; plays mounted by the San Francisco Poets Theater from 1979-1985;² a continuum of this Bay Area tradition at Small Press Traffic, often coordinated by the likes of Kevin Killian and Dodie Bellamy; BAM audiences throwing tampons at the stage during "The Birth of the Poet," a Kathy Acker/Richard Foreman opera in 1985; and Fiona Templeton's *You the City*, a play attended by one person at a time (text published by Roof Books in 1990). This list leaves much out, notably the trajectories of Cocteau, Beckett, and Stein. For language is the most calculated understatement of the years. Everyone writing plays disrupts linearity through language, yeah? And utopic texts like the 1950s' radio dramas of Austrian poet Ingeborg Bachmann reflected society's corruptive desire for social order through the lyrical heights of language (and the actions of murderous squirrels, who act as harbingers of death for those couples doomed to love thoroughly³...a transgressive act!).

Bachmann's work in this media is sure apt for an undertaking of Poets Theater now. What radio drama seems to compel best is the imagination, as poetry does. According to radio theorist Andrew Crisell, all the signs in radio are auditory: they use time, and not space, as their primary structuring agent.⁴ "But there is an important difference between words which are written or printed on a page and words on the radio, and that is that words on the radio are always and unavoidably spoken." In Becket-

tian terms, speaking = uttering. Uttering relates personality, in theater? (“Personality is one of the scatter-effects of Character”⁵). Certainly in radio. If I hear a French accent, there’s a character. In theater, character is a fun default. It’s equally as easy in a poetic project to feel like *focusing on* language, and *making absentee* person. Rodrigo Toscano’s recent book, *Collapsible Poetics Theater*, demonstrates his “body movement poems,” “modular activities” and “poetics theater plays” on the page, a more central element to the CPT (not only a book title) than we realize: the physical page—in performance—is played with, relied upon, dropped, flown, and generally centralized. Toscano is energized for the *making*, *undoing*, and certainly *collapsing* of a theater treated for the social body. Terms are not thrown about loosely. In Phase I of CPT, Toscano indirectly re-terms: “character” and “actor” become “entity,” the “stage” becomes a “contact-zone” and the “cast” a “contact-group.” An equilibrium between players/entities is established, though “*the threat* of each entity completely re-routing or even scuttling a given reading—through intentionally fucked up intonations of a given text—remains constant.”⁶ What’s incredible is that Poets Theater is a threat to order, and that entities are threats to equilibrium. Threat is deep; even multiplicity is still threatening. Polyvocal pieces are more and more prevalent among poets and playwrights, hinting at our efforts to equalize (provoking discomfort with lack of distinction), create cacophonies of sound, resist traditional structural modes, etc. What follows from an effort to equalize is the dissolving of individual character traits. In much current writing, for instance, characters A, B, and C might variably have nervous legs, low IQs, or violet auras or not—but often they are *types* who witness strangeness in a place (the theater) meant to show something. As Toscano writes of his “Poetics Theater”: “As time and space are also not treated in a realist mode in PT (there being no ‘characters’ to grid onto it, no ‘psychological’ reactions to massage per say), how could ‘situations’ like ‘situation at the scaffold’ ‘touch us’?”

For Toscano, utterance is used as a rhythmic device which endows each utterer with a “tempo-power,” as he calls it. I want a tempo-power. Work that emphasizes pacing and language among entities can seem to disregard the humanity or flux of the individual (a Marxist tale). Toscano’s use of the page-in-hand is the link, however, from text to body. A drama-theory text I once encountered suggested that a director uninterested in character might pin a pink or red construction-paper heart on each performer’s chest—a corny reminder that you’re working with a physical being. But a shift occurs when internalized rhythm extends to physicality: we move from situational (or psychological) entertainment to rhythmic or perceptual spectatorship (new ways of viewing). This effect, in some cases, makes dance-theater and movement-based work all the more poetic than language-based work. My desire for a tempo-power is spectatorship lending itself to participation. See “Eco-Strato-Static” from CPT:

Is anybody coming?
 I see somebody.
Somebody coming?
 Somebody coming.
Say something.
 What?
 HELP.
 Okay.
What’s happening now?
 They’re talking to me about an innovative product.
What is it?
 Some kind of art-thing.
Can it be fashioned into a lever, or a ramp?

I'll ask'em.
What do they say?
"Depends on how you look at it."

Sure, this excerpt is a dry look at the Duchamp room, or at bottom, an atypical "dialoguing" that considers art, commerce, functionality, witlessness, media saturation, and so on. What it also does is incite performance. Look at the roll of pronouns: anybody, I, somebody, somebody, somebody, something, they, me, it, it, I, 'em, they, you, it. Not specters exactly, but inviting reminders of personage and objecthood. We've been here, said it, will say it again, or a line like it, let's ask for help, let's go to the sidewalk and look across the street, or let's do that and remember what we said and saw, and then find a stage and some people to watch us; let's invite them to look at this thing, not for destabilization necessarily, but to be the silent butler.

We are dealing with the actionable mind and heart then, I keep reminding myself. The physical stage unifies mind, time and space. Mac Wellman: "Drama takes place in phase space. The continuum of phase-space is to time as time is to space. Theatricality takes place, as it were, perpendicular to time, along the phase-space continuum. We do not know what we are doing."⁷ Easy (in this essay-writing, in making a stance) is a linguistic divestment—re-termining, as Wellman and Toscano have done. The words we have for theater get in our way; they become restrictive. Look at "scene" — "poetry scene" and "theater scene" tend to both envelop and smother work before it's started. A scene is where we go to be touched? Or as Toscano might write, we go to be served ("The CPT is vomit-sick of serving people"). If an audience expects to be served (emotionally or otherwise) and Toscano's Poetics Theater is an attempt to rewire and rein in, or group together the persons on- and offstage, then what's onstage must divorce entertainment and pursue new forms. "Character," "voice," "motivation," "situation," "setting" — even "world," "stage," "direction," "production," "dramaturgy," "vision," "relationship" — I'm like, pacing around them, OK, say I know that replacement is not solution, as new terms are also vulnerable...what I'd rather talk around is that "phase-space." Those practicing Poets Theater in new incarnations all over Chicago, New York, and still, San Francisco, might think constantly about duration and *threat* — be it formal economy or extension, "scene" phases and their relation to currents in political and domestic life, and timeliness, tiredness, and/or popularity of this hybridity itself. Interest in the two genres colliding is also appearing in reverse. Playwrights like Kristen Kosmas, Jenny Schwartz, and the experimental members of Joyce Cho;⁸ the resurgence of interest in British playwright Sarah Kane; poet Ariana Reines's turn as playwright in her Obie-award-winning "Telephone;" anthologies like *New Downtown Now*;⁹ and the productions of avant-garde-theater stalwart Richard Maxwell all point to what I suspect is a larger group of theater artists focusing on a fluctuating, textual deformation of the play.

Notes

¹ Edwin Denby, "Disorder, mental, strikes me; I," *Complete Poems*, Ed. Ron Padgett, New York, Random House, 1986.

² See *Hills 9: Plays and Other Writing*, Ed. Bob Perelman, Berkeley, CA, 1983, for plays by Alan Bernheimer, David Bromige, Jean Day, Rae Armantrout, Bob Perelman, and others.

³ Ingeborg Bachmann, "Good God of Manhattan," Trans. Lillian Friedburg. *Three Radio Plays*. Ariadne Press, Riverside, CA, 1999.

⁴ Andrew Crisell, *Understanding Radio*, London: Methuen, 1986.

⁵ Mac Wellman, "Speculations," *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field*, Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2008.

⁶ Rodrigo Toscano, "PT as seen through CPT," unpublished early essay draft, 2008.

⁷ Wellman.

⁸ www.joycecho.org

⁹ *New Downtown Now*, edited by Mac Wellman and Young Jean Lee, Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2006.

SOCIAL CHARACTER AND SOCIAL SCULPTURE IN JUDITH GOLDMAN & JENNIFER SCAPPETONE

MICHAEL CROSS

In “Notes against the Form of Appearance,” her contribution to *War and Peace: The Future*, Judith Goldman writes, “Truth is not enough: This / is just its Social Character.” The “Form of Appearance”—a “screen life” in which the transactions of the War Machine reify, sponsor, and sell both truths and selves “hidden in plain sight” (those of us safe in our nests *and* those vulnerably public)—draws our attention to both the screen itself and our willful collusion to, as Freud has it in her epigraph, “experience (the) present naïvely.” That we acknowledge the screen—that we pick it up and move it and put it back to protect ourselves from our experience of ourselves experiencing ourselves screened:

Let us now examine the residue
of my screen life:
From one of numerous starting Points
I am not applying myself,
I have not applied.
The innate structure needs your sponsorship
but how am I the one to see the thing transacted?
this is just its Social Character...

There’s a familiar desperation here—that we are always already culpably complacent, that the “guilt of subjectivity,” as Horkheimer and Adorno have it in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, is both telos and cause of our (non)participation. But how *not* to “participate” while trying desperately *to* participate?

...To do right, let’s declare
and undeclare war on tonight,
in hopes that under stringed lights of bombers
we don’t have to pay fare,
we don’t have to, *we*
don’t have to

In her response to these “balled-up Fists of Ragged individualism,” Jennifer Scappetone turns Goldman’s “screen life” into an onscreen “scream life”:

[E]very partition, every mirror, is rigged.
In one place, you can hear the sighs, in
another the echo of the moans,

public woman
against the mechanical sons
for lack of a box—
for lack of a violent banality of parts—

Both Goldman and Scappettone share an interest in “rigged partitions.” For Goldman, the poem sets partitions of affect in which tonal shifts of voice lift the corner of the curtain and peek below; live, Goldman paces her reading with repetitive pregnant pauses, shifting her facial expressions as she wears rhetorical registers from some shared public subjectivity, likely a disembodied internet personality [certainly male] addressing the female body with a barely concealed mixture of disdain and arousal—that is, disdainful arousal, or better, aroused disdain. Spending time with her current chapbook, *The Disposessions*, as its editor, I caught myself inventing voices for these personalities, acting as a kind of switchboard, a collective ventriloquist. Partitions shift as Goldman switches from character to narrator to critic—from disembodied to embodied to a body:

Get on w/ it

On w/it, yes

[That] fucked people over like [that] or [that] fucked me over like
[that] or [that] fucked me like [that]

Fits and starts, heart fits

or: Starts and backs away

Take a deep breath

The poem serves as a response to the *Lyrical Ballads* in that it promotes *and* challenges the use of the colloquial as poetic material: here, the poet struggles to charge and unravel a language that posits itself as alternative while deactivating and/or amplifying its compulsive desire to serve the primary goals of sovereign power. The poem too corroborates with the intersubjective field of voices subsumed by a wash of violence while striking out above the din in percussive moments of vivid clarity, as if somehow striking an incredibly clear frequency only to drown in a din of static. In her epigraph to the poem, Roger Callois writes, “I know where I am but I do not feel as though I am at the spot where I find myself”; in response, Goldman writes,

in this labyrinth I lost
my sense of sense, senescent
trackless errand
my errant reins slack, Here comes
the recruiter; offer hole to the discharge

Scappettone’s project similarly struggles with the rigged partitions of truth’s Social Character, and as a reader of her work, like Callois, I often feel as though I know where I am (or think I do) only to find myself somewhere else entirely. Using Shakespeare’s Dame Quickly as the organizing figure of her first collection, or at least using Shakespeare’s figure through the lens of Marx, the work attains a “plurality in the whole as well as an annihilating fusion of disparities” (as she has it in “Antigonal Complex”). She derives her organizing conceit from Henry IV, Part 1, as Hostess Quickly and Falstaff volley shifting signifiers back and forth in a quickly disintegrat-

ing sheen of apperception:

Fal. There's no more faith in thee than in a stewed prune; nor no more truth in thee than in a drawn fox; and for womanhood, Maid Marian may be the deputy's wife of the ward to thee. Go, you thing, go.

Host. Say, what thing? what thing?

Fal. What thing! why, a thing to thank God on.

Host. I am no thing to thank God on, I would thou shouldst know it; I am an honest man's wife; and, setting thy knighthood aside, thou art a knave to call me so.

Fal. Setting thy womanhood aside, thou art a beast to say otherwise.

Host. Say, what beast, what knave, thou?

Fal. What beast! why, an otter.

P. Hen. An otter, Sit John! why an otter?

Fal. Why, she's neither fish nor flesh; a man knows not where to have her.

Host. Thou art an unjust man in saying so: thou or any man knows where to have me, thou knave, thou!

What thing? What value? According to Marx, in the unifying quotation of the project, "The objectivity of commodities as values differs from Dame Quickly in the sense that 'A man knows not where to have it,'" and for Scappettone, our Host, there is a kind of dialectic in the thing in which the abstraction of value serves as both curse and freedom. Heidegger sees the moment of "enframing" — in which humanity serves itself as standing-reserve, a thing like other commodities ready at hand — as an *opportunity* to capitalize on the nature of the process, a moment Heidegger calls (in his vaguely Romantic terminology) "unconcealment." Scappettone laments the Social Character of value, its enframed scream life, as an opportunity to emphasize that *Falstaff's right*, that Dame Quickly is a privileged site of schizophrenic subjectivity, a slippery Janus-face (squared), multiplying face value as it turns to face security, terror, protection, policing, all similarly base without base.

While Goldman incorporates a plethora of voices, Scappettone bends hers through a multitude of registers, so that as the poem unfolds, the thing is turned and turned and turned before us, and it is no longer as it was moments before with each revolution. Often Scappettone writes a long unwieldy prose line that, like Henry James before her, refracts into any number of clauses spinning out and shifting under our feet: "She was inert, that is, until, in the bloom of her sixth phrase, in withering rains and ending airs, with her glossy pants seeming singularity, like the desperate boots of others, at their hungriest, the empty paramour rolled out the carpet and admitted Mr. Pace." She writes in the first of her "Derrida is Dead" poems, "My way into it was barbous, forks," that is, "culture forked her." And culture forks us as we spin through the quickly shifting signifiers of the poem: "My proper / chessmistress would serf me about the board black for perpetuities with a stick. Over June / retreats, guest, the gang pissed / that I wouldn't scream with it. I wouldn't snitch upon the John unshopping his crotch ahead of Ross lingerie..." — or in "Delection Even," as she puns through choppy collective memory so that "I dredge allegedly" becomes "I edge a legibly" becomes "I pledge alien" becomes "I pluck allegiance" — "one ration under planes." The tonal shifts from longer syntactical units to short percussive vowel sounds is dizzying; in an open spread we find "After Amnesty" on the verso:

Oil, illth-oil, rebuttal recast—lust,
sickle-bloom, trusted trash—two
geists as a clam crease, and your
mess—their loath—is a wind

and on the recto, this line from “Fodderialism”:

Outskirt weeps, disclosed, would make the phallus go but ain't ergoic, mouth I miss

The pace of the lines enacts and rehearses the incommensurate fosse between the Social Character of the “thing” and our intimate experience of it, whether the thing materialized is product or person or poem. But it is mostly the *person* fixing Scappettone’s attention: weaving Hegel into the fabric of “Antigonal Complex” she quotes, “Womankind—the everlasting irony of the community—changes by intrigue the universal end of the government into a private end, transforms its universal activity into a work of some particular individual, and perverts the universal property of the state into a possession and ornament for the Family.” Womankind, perverter of public ends, stands here as “thing” *par excellence* in that she serves the particular by transforming the public into private use. In Scappettone, the “guilt of subjectivity” manifests itself as no-thing, or no-mere-thing, in that the Social Character of experience, the naïve experience of the present as presented, is faced with its untruth in the face of the subject’s fragmentation, in this case, “womankind,” the most “complicated” of human subjects, of whom “a *man* knows not where to have her.” Alternately, in Goldman, “woman” is a sieve of subjects—her public performance of an intimate self appears as it *really* does in public: as a transcript of *other* voices speaking *about* and *through* her, as if the woman as subject serves only as a palette for the abstract expression of male subjectivities.

Further, there’s a curious relationship to the panoptic in both projects that strikes me as a shared concern. Scappettone writes, “Inlaws and neural smarts will thrive under lock and heed: We will do the police.” And Goldman:

Words do not harm each other

Looking for words [that] don’t harm each other

Grammar as window,
Words as voyeurs

A word [that] does not give
Onto anything else

Voyeurism of one word giving onto another

Unlike, say, the work of Rob Halpern, in which the confluence of eros, violence, and power serve to fuck the subject into a kind of exhaustive stupor, where political submission *is* erotic submission and erotic stimulation is political activism, Goldman and Scappettone seem less concerned with a policing of the body’s intimate extensions than they do with an extension of the body into the intimacy of a shared public. My initial impulse is to call this a response to, or even a critique of, second wave feminism, mostly because the abjection here seems so public and diffuse and *disembodied*. There are cunts and cocks in *The Dispossessions*, but it’s mostly due to an abstraction from private to public that the poem attains its creepy level of critique. When Goldman writes, “My vagina as ass / Simile cracks” or “My cock rises out of the picture, the words / My cock rises out of the words,” it is precisely due to the glitchy Google search tone (I repeat *tone*) that the poem arrives at a collective critique that keeps the body of the poet at a distance. And in *Dame Quickly*, it is because “man knows not

where to have it" that the female body is unfixable, that the poem attains a level of collective legibility. Both poems capitalize on the voyeuristic as tool and critique, and in the distance suss out how *we too* replicate, rehash, and reinforce modes of power when left to police ourselves.

In this sense I like to think of both projects as an extension of Joseph Beuys' notion of social sculpture, of "A SOCIAL ORGANISM AS A WORK OF ART," as he has it in a short statement entitled "I am searching for field character" in *Energy Plan for Western Man: Joseph Beuys in America*. He writes,

EVERY HUMAN BEING IS AN ARTIST who—from his state of freedom—the position of freedom that he experiences at firsthand—learns to determine the other positions in the TOTAL ARTWORK OF THE FUTURE SOCIAL ORDER. Self-determination and participation in the cultural sphere (freedom); in the structuring of laws (democracy); and in the sphere of economics (socialism). Self-administration and decentralization (threefold structure) occurs: FREE DEMOCRATIC SOCIALISM.

Self-administration and decentralization as a public performance of the energy of social order; orchestrating the schizophrenic energies of the public by creating an intimacy of [dis]order on the level of participation—further, both writers use materials that, like Beuys, conduct energy and/or insulate. In his description of "Rubberized Box" (Gummierte Kiste, 1957) he writes,

The nature of the materials used means this insulation has an elastic quality, softening the rigid form of the box which has nothing to do with minimalism. In addition it is significant that the box is open, which suggests that while everything else in the environment works as a distraction, energy directed towards or flowing from a higher level increases concentration. The mixture of asphalt and rubber on wood functions as a sound insulator, too. Asphalt insulates electric power, while rubber resists blows. With time its elasticity has gone and the surface has hardened, although originally you could knead it.

Both poets make use of similarly elastic material, language that either conducts or insulates or both. In fact, Goldman's project reads like a script for public performance, taking the materials of intimate compartment and reading them through the lens of enframement as public fact (read: Social Character). And for Scappettone, the language of the immediate "happening" is decentralized and recommitted to an elasticity that serves both content and sound:

I dredge allegedly
to repair and upgrade the Port of Umm Qasr
I edge a legibly duty free
transrational contract drag
well I pledge alien
lesions will be doled
expensively (not on the cheap)
and not to um miss explosives
who shell
Bechtel by the—that is Shell it by the
shore Bechtel sells

The work here is social sculpture at its most intense: ciphering the din of public immediacy through the person of the disjointed subject only to feed out the stream of

information as a critique of participation, colored by the guilt of subjectivity. Rather than, like Beuys, taking the energy of social critique to the people, Goldman and Scapettone make a social critique *of the people*, insulating them *by* conducting. This work is by all, the product of many subjectivities imbued with shades of public guilt rivaling the varieties of color in second nature "herself." According to the authors, guilt, abjection, and fear are the very tools by which the human becomes an artist and/or a subject and/or a thing, or else, the tools by which a woman becomes "a woman."

DOROTHEA LASKY, IT'S UNBELIEVABLE

ROBERT DEWHURST

I couldn't sleep tonight so I started a new diary. On the first page I wrote the following quotation about Iceland, by Eileen Myles:

Most likely we travel to exist in an analogue to our life's dilemmas. It's like a spaceship. The work for the traveler is making the effort to understand that the place you are moving through is real and the solution to your increasingly absent problems is forgetting. To see them in a burst as you are vanishing into the world. Travel is not transcendence. It's immanence. It's trying to be here.

I love how Eileen always compares poets to astronauts. In August I moved to Buffalo, New York, where for five months of the year the sky turns an opaque, sour-milky gray. Dear diary, I've been trying hard to be here.

In one poem Dorothea Lasky imagines herself "soaring in the black night as just a thing," and somewhere else calls herself "star-filled." Both lines appear in her recent manuscript *Black Life* (in which "star" and various forms of "sad" are probably the two most used words), but her writing has cast the radiance of real human presence against the immense loneliness of deep space for a long time. Like a Jeff Mangum song, her second chapbook *Art* for instance imagined "the tiny babies of the universe" who would "explode" from out of her womb. My friend Myung Mi Kim has written that "the practice of the poem is the practice of a radical materiality." I completely identify with that. But because Lasky's work carries forward an underrecognized, immanentist literary materialism of extreme presence, negative affect, and wild lyric impersonation (rather than a more myopic "materiality of the signifier"), I'm always disappointed with the way people talk about it.

One week this bitter winter I spent almost thirty hours transcribing an interview between Chris Kraus and Penny Arcade, recorded last June. It's weird how transcription can blur into you, focus your attention on someone else's voice so closely you absorb and internalize it. I wandered lost around an empty antique mall in Western New York sometime after New Year's, thinking like Penny. In one place on the tape, she says this:

But I want to say, for younger artists . . . you know, because one of the things is that . . . you know, this has gone on for 20 years . . . people see me perform, they work with me, and I talk directly to the audience. Which was one of the things that I created, which now has like, you know, an actual academic name, which is "direct address," right? And I started speaking directly to the audience because

I was so ignored by the press and the art scene. And so I would talk directly to the audience. I understood that my relationship was with the audience. And so I developed that, and just got braver and braver and braver . . . because I'm a very frightened person emotionally . . . And so at any rate . . . a lot of younger people who'd work with me, they'd see me talk directly to the audience, and they'd go, "oh, I can do that," you know? And they didn't understand the level of integrity that you have to bring to talking directly to the audience. Because . . . it doesn't work unless you're really at risk.

I copied Penny's quote into my diary too. As a literary form, the diary is a kind of modality of direct address, except it's not very risky because we usually hide them. Lyric poems can approach direct address, too, but the apostrophe itself usually proceeds from a secure and formal absence of audience.

Because her poems so dramatically reinhabit emotion, one of the most perfect lines Lasky's ever written (from *AWE*) is "Conceptual art, you are dead / Language poetry, you know how I feel." In a slow-learning poetry culture where awfully predictable writing based on deconstructive theories of language from the 1960s is still considered avant-garde, I think it's taken an unbelievable amount of integrity for Lasky to make unironic and very public announcements like this one, or to say "I hate irony // I am only being real." Although I'm friends with people who've misread her affective and unembarrassed realism as a kind of nostalgia, or "naïve" (if put-on) reaction to things like Language writing and its attendant "critique of authenticity," Lasky's lines like these read so flatly because she's not being defensive: her poems aren't troubled by such poetics, but simply identify with an entirely different, more minor poetry/performance-art tradition (and one that's never cared to promote itself with its own technical vocabulary). While she is thus endlessly confused by reviewers surprised at her "earnest sincerity" with the allegedly self-absorbed "confessional" poets of mid-century, for me Lasky has most in common with a stylistically diverse line of usually forgotten and mostly soulsick writers who've inhabited language literally, and risked using the poem as a kind of depersonalizing, radically signifying material. Reading *Tourmaline* and *Black Life* this morning, I think immediately of Arcade, Kraus, and Myles, Catullus, John Wieners, Ariana Reines, Tao Lin, Tracey Emin.

Here is an entire poem from *Black Life*:

JAKOB

I am sick of feeling
I never eat or sleep
I just sit here and let the words burn into me
I know you love her
And don't love me
No, I don't think you love her
I know there are clouds that are very pretty
I know there are clouds that trundle round the globe
I take anything I can to get to love
Live things are what the world is made of
Live things are black
Black in that they forgot where they came from
I have not forgotten, however I choose not to feel
Those places that have burned into me
There is too much burning here, I'm afraid
Readers, you read flat words

Inside here are many moments
In which I have screamed in pain
As the flames ate me

Opposite the confessional, one signal ethic of Lasky's writing is a spectacular disabling of lyric personality. What I mean by "depersonalizing" above is written here in the emotionally flat, anaphorically insistent way that Dorothea has lined up so many deadpan 'I's along the left side of her poem. She begins declaratively *sick of feeling*, and then lets her own abject and disaffected persona unravel and self-immolate in line after line of negative emotion, until her sick-day poem finally burns bodily into and through herself. In other words, Lasky disables the affective singularity of first-person lyric enunciation by overinhabiting the form to a kind of self-destructive, nearly ontologic limit-point. As the poet is visibly consumed in flames, her body becomes a wild object, and her emotions a kind of impersonal energy passing through her. It's an incredible *twist* Lasky is constantly pulling off, surely learned from her idol Sylvia Plath (who in a poem titled "Fever 103°" once wrote, "Darling, all night / I have been flickering off, on, off, on"). "Like love," Lasky writes, "I so did contain many voices that weren't mine."

My favorite two poems of Dorothea's are titled "I Just Feel So Bad" and "I Hate You." "I Hate You" begins:

I have thought and thought about it
And I hate you
And what I hate about you most is that
You have no real understanding of the sublime
I hope the white light crushes in on you
And crushes everything about you

Although I suspect some people might read *Black Life* as a depressed departure from the perceived levity of *AWE* (which one reviewer characterized as "kind of like . . . getting chapped lips at a slumber party, after an intense round of Cyndi Lauper lip-synching/dance performance moves"), even Lasky's more plainly wonderstruck poems have always been directly involved with the problem of writing presentationally about blocked and unglamorous emotions. In an interview shortly after *AWE*'s publication, Lasky tried to explain this dark underside to the book's more clearly life-affirmative poems like "Poem for My Best Friend": "I totally meant for the idea of awe to invoke a complex and terrible emotion," she said.

In her recent volume *Ugly Feelings*, literary critic Sianne Ngai notes that the Kantian sublime (with which memorable sections of *AWE* as well as Lasky's later and uncollected hatred series seem fascinated) is "perhaps the first 'ugly' or explicitly nonbeautiful feeling appearing in theories of aesthetic judgment." Ngai also recites one of the philosopher's own more lyric definitions of the affect: an "*Astonishment* that borders upon terror," and a "dread" and a "holy awe" which terrifically "seize" the feeling person. Although Lasky's hilariously deadpan and radically literal verse has absolutely nothing to do with the modified "stuplimity" that Ngai later suggests using to consider the recalcitrant texts of poets like Gertrude Stein, Samuel Beckett, and Bruce Andrews, I think *Ugly Feelings* still has a tight, revisionary affinity with Lasky's work for the way both exclaim the literary legitimacy of feeling badly. "All poetry that matters today has feelings in it," the poet writes in one place in *Black Life*; and in another, "Whatever you do don't feel anything at all."

Have you ever heard Dorothea read? She shouts the poems. It's stunning. To remind

myself that I was still alive on cold morning drives to TA freshmen comp. courses on a campus with very ugly architecture this winter, I listened to *Ready to Die* by the Notorious B.I.G. almost every single day. Usually, I would play the sixteenth track over and over. *It's un-be-liev-able / Biggie Smalls is the illest!* It's great because this posturing send-up of the emcee's own fantastic lyrical prowess is the next to last song on the record, and then the last one is all about self-loathing and suicide. In another interview, Lasky once said, "I'm very concerned with how power occurs in a poem." Besides Biggie, I'm unaware of any writer who has inhabited Charles Olson's performative kinetics of "projective verse" to such an embodied extreme as she has. In high school Lasky competed in the 3200 m. long-distance run for her outdoor track team, and when she read in Buffalo last February she had to pause between verses of shouting *AWE, AWE AND LOVE* to ask a girl in the audience for a Gatorade. Maggie Nelson has recently written that Eileen Myles' naked incorporation of private and metabolically-charged lyric disclosures into scenes of live performance has worked to "transform the boundaries of what kinds of claims on public space a female poet can make." When Lasky deadpans loud lines like *Identity politics are bullshit*, or *I have to be protected / because I am so afraid*, she further extends this same stage into what Thom Donovan has called a form of "biopolitical theater." Within it, the poet's startling voice creates an affective, material immediacy between herself and the audience that riskily opens the room up to an unprecedented sort of antiidentitarian, emotional access to her writing.

One sad thing about being in graduate school is that all your friends are basically adults, and successfully settled in normal, monogamous couples. Do you know the way that being surrounded by couples can make you feel excluded from all love? On nights this year when my married friends weren't going out, I would usually stay in and read Dorothea or write her e-mails, dote on my cat, Winston. I discovered Lasky's work about two years ago, after reading one of CAConrad's inspired, inimitable rants on the UB Poetics List. A graduate student somewhere had blogged about Dorothea's "infantile" and supposedly unfeminist answers to the Proust Questionnaire in a YouTube video (really), and Conrad fumed back that "Dorothea Lasky needs no one's permission to act one way or the other. Those who actually read her poems understand exactly how and where she stands in the world. In 100 years when the rest of us are forgotten there will be Lasky." The moment I read *AWE* I felt he was right, and when I opened the manuscript for *Black Life* this spring I smiled to see that one of the personas she's invented to flicker through these days wears the tough-poet posture as well as Conrad does. One of the best poems in the book ends like this: "I give up / But it is a sweet giving up / Knowing instead I will be the best poet that has ever lived / While all those people in love / Will simply die in one another's arms / While I will die in the world's arms."

Her poems are so good they make me gasp.

July 2009
Moon in Cancer

“IN THE DIRT OF THE LINE” ON BHANU KAPIL’S INTENSE AUTOBIOGRAPHY

THOM DONOVAN

To become animal is to participate in movement, to stake out the path of escape in all its positivity, to cross a threshold, to reach a continuum of intensities that are valuable only in themselves.¹

—Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari

As the event unfolds both after and before. As the text of a present moves so rapidly it cannot be written. This is why immigrants don’t write many novels; only emigrants do. I write to you at night, for example, when even my body is hidden from view.²

—Bhanu Kapil

Epigraphs can speak volumes about the works they precede and to which they belong. In the case of Bhanu Kapil’s writing, it was one particular epigraph that initially piqued my interest in her work. This epigraph is from philosopher Elizabeth Grosz’s *Architecture From the Outside*, and can be found on the first pages of Kapil’s *WATER-DAMAGE_ _ _ _*: *a map of three black days* (Corollary Press, 2006). It goes as follows:

The psychotic is unable to locate himself or herself where he or she should be: such subjects may look at themselves from the outside, as others would; they may hear the voices of others inside their own heads. They are captivated and replaced, not by another subject (the horror of the double I mentioned) but by space itself.

Grosz’s writing is nearly as poetic as the text it paraphrases: Surrealist fellow-travel and College of Sociology participant Roger Caillois’ writings on “legendary psychasthenia” and mimetic behavior among insect species.³ In *WATER-DAMAGE*, Kapil takes-up psychasthenia (a condition ‘discovered’ by Caillois) towards the problem of immigrants who, as a study quoted in Kapil’s chapbook observes, may suffer from forms of schizophrenia and psychosis more frequently than their non-migrating counterparts in regions of the world more ‘stable’ and ‘developed’ (which is to say, richer, more powerful, hegemonic).

Box 1. Six hypotheses for the higher incidence of schizophrenia in migrant groups: 1. Sending countries have high rates of schizophrenia; 2. People with schizophrenia are predisposed to migration; 3. Migration produces stress, which can initiate schizophrenia; 5. Different symptom patterns are presented by

migrants; 6. Increased population density of ethnic migrant groups can show elevated rates of schizophrenia.

Kapil's collaborator in composing her text is her mother, Asha Kapil, who she interviews and whose transcribed speech she mines for the text of *WATER-DAMAGE*. That much of Asha Kapil's language reads schizophrenic⁴ adds an important dimension to the book, for it would seem that the book is being written to recall her mother's immigration from the border of India/Pakistan to the UK, an event to which the "black days" of the book's subtitle likely refers.

In a way very much like her first book, *The Vertical Interrogation of Strangers* (Kelsey Street, 2001), in which Kapil incorporates the responses to a questionnaire she provides to various native Indian women and women of the Indian diaspora, Kapil poses to her mother a series of questions which her mother answers throughout the work. These questions are both provocative and wide open to play: "1. Who Imagined You? 2. Describe a hillside, whether real or imagined, from your childhood. 3. How do you see into the heart of a flower? Do flowers have centers?" (10). Throughout Kapil's books she proceeds through questions, as she also does through numbers (as though a book of logic) and letters. In Kapil's latest book, *Humanimal* (Kelsey St., 2009), one of the ways the book is organized is by the lowercase letters "a" through "o." Kapil's alphabetic ordering of *Humanimal*'s sections seems a significant design feature of the book given that its protagonist "eat's language" (47) and the feral girls upon which *Humanimal* reflects, Amala and Kamala, lick "the dictionary off each other's faces" (13). Interestingly, Kapil describes "An alphabet to o, a kind of mouth" (8) as if to identify her book as an allegory of articulation: articulation as the primary means of acculturating what is feral and wild, thus at the purlieus of civilization.⁵ The violence of linguistic acculturation is doubled by a doctor's resetting of the girls' feral skeletons whereby the "fascia hardend[ed] over a lifetime" is "split in order to reset it, educate the nerves." The ironic fact that Kapil performs a related violence through her practice as a Roling therapist⁶—a deep tissue message therapy in which the muscle tissue is practically 'reset'—is reflected in *Humanimal*'s epigraph quoting Ida Roling, whom Roling is named after: "I was changing a unique but very poorly operating girl to a normal pattern of a woman who could no longer look in the mirror and know that she was unique. I was afraid to say to her, 'You are beginning to look like other people.'"

On first reading *WATER-DAMAGE*, I was struck by how rich Kapil's text is, yet also how unfinished it seems—a feeling I don't have reading her other books. As Kapil says herself on one of the first pages of *WATER-DAMAGE*, "I don't know how to continue this work in writing." Perhaps, for this reason, Kapil currently travels in India making films and installations in order to find ways to continue. I suspect she may also turn towards film, installation and performance since her project would like to enact a work of healing, and these time-based art formats can materialize aesthetic experiences that writing alone cannot: experiences of movement, of heterogeneous durations, and of inter-subjective embodiment. As Kapil also writes at the beginning of *WATER-DAMAGE* in regards to her mother's experiences of loss, violence, and suffering as a person displaced during the 1947 conflict at the border of India and Pakistan (an event which displaced approximately half a million people, as Kapil tells us): "I wanted to mark a space for healing; this text marks the space, opens the space, only" (4).

To mark such a space Kapil "put[s] [her] knib on the page" (*Humanimal*, 38) to "let motion wreck the line" (38) producing written "arrhythmias" as "record[s] of travel" (38). Through an arrhythmic writing—a writing paced by quickened heart rates—Kapil's own body leaves the traces of its lines of flight. The form of the writing—the

sentences which stutter with commas, hyphens, and periods; the syllogistic/constellative movements of the sentences and paragraphs—chart intensities rather than represent where Kapil has ‘been.’ Here, form becomes an extension of physical travel in space intermittent with writing as a form of travel—the “crossing of thresholds,” a “flight of intensities” —without moving. Making the body in-transit a site of autobiography (a la Thoreau’s “Walking” or Kerouac’s *On the Road*), Kapil’s body also extends writing as a means of mourning, where mourning is successfully negotiated through itinerancy. “In the quick, black take of a body’s flight, a body’s eviction or sudden loss of place, the memory of descent functions as a subliminal flash” (*Humanimal*, 26). Although travel and motion result in perpetual loss, in Kapil’s work they also accomplish an unforeclosed work of healing.

To read all five of Kapil’s books so far, plus her prolific blog, “Was Jack Kerouac a Punjabi?,” is to recognize the ongoing working-through of a series of traumas which have touched Kapil’s life deeply, shaping many of the facts of her biography. In *The Vertical Interrogation of Strangers* the questionnaire Kapil offers her collaborator-participants, while they act heuristically to generate raw materials for Kapil’s lyrically intense prose poem series, may also allow the women who answer them an opportunity to exteriorize/exorcize experiences otherwise consigned to their inner life by the repressive domestic situations and social environments in which they find themselves. Similarly, in *Autobiography of a Cyborg* (Leroy, 2000) and *Incubation: a Space for Monsters* (Leon Works, 2006), Kapil mines her own autobiography in order to work through her experience of being a second generation Punjabi immigrant to England, as well as a first generation emigrant to the United States.⁸ Through *Incubation: a Space for Monsters*, Kapil writes about many of her formative experiences. Though trauma lies at the heart of the book (the traumas of immigration/emigration/travel, of being a woman and a single mother, of being, in other words, multiply displaced), so is a genuine desire to give birth to herself as a singular being beyond both assimilation and multiculturalism. To be a monster or a cyborg is to take on, by necessity, a subjectivity radically resistant to normativity and to the various social processes which construct ‘abnormality’ as a category of the subaltern.

As in the work of the self-described Lebanese visual artist, thinker, and writer Jalal Toufic, who locates his own figures of both loss and cultural survival in the vampires of American and European vampire films, transposing the qualities of the Sufi, Yogi and Zen master through the figure of the vampire, Kapil locates herself and others through the non-human subjectivities of the monster, cyborg, humanimal, and schizophrenic. While Toufic and Kapil are obviously not the first ‘others’ to identify with the animal, monstrous, psychotic, and non-human,⁹ Kapil and Toufic are perhaps most unique in the ways they link so explicitly figures of the non- and post-human with their own autobiographies. Whereas through Toufic’s work he imagines encounters with others where Jalal Toufic¹⁰ is undead, schizo, or vampire, in Kapil’s *Incubation* she is alternately cyborg and monster: the cyborg trying to ‘pass’ for human; the monster wearing its inassimilability on its sleeve.

Significantly, Toufic and Kapil both emigrated to the United States as students around the same time (mid 80s to early 90s),¹¹ and have since lived both in the United States and their countries of origin, and so can be said to be multicultural or international persons in the most literal senses of these terms. While we can (and perhaps should) take these non-human identities as mere metaphors, they do a very specific work. And this is to make legible the dilemmas of actual, historic entities who have “tunneled” through what Kapil calls the “concave warp in the dirt of the line” (*Incubation*, 3).¹² The figures of this cartoonish, topographical line, a line I take to be a line of flight, unlike many of the figures whom Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari hold

up as resistant intensities in their collaborative *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* volumes, have not elected their deterritorializations as a force of 'outside,' so much as they are surviving it. Or, we might rather say that they are electing it retrospectively in order to overcome.

What the monster, the cyborg, the vampire, the schizo, and the humanimal risk, is the affirmation of subjectivities unwelcome by official cultures, national narratives, and hegemonic ideational structures. Arguably, what survives through these affirmations is not just the singular—the account Toufic or Kapil would like to give of their own bodies, or the bodies of those torn by the Lebanese Civil War or the crises of the stateless and displaced everywhere. What Kapil and Toufic are documenting through their work, thus making legible, are entire histories of non-experience—experiences largely submerged by cultural disaster. Likewise, what may survive their work are concepts endemic or appropriate to their cultures direly in need of transmission, if only through objects *inappropriate* to the concepts themselves. Which is to say, it is very unlikely the figure of the vampire in Western vampire films was intended to embody the imagination of Sufi literature or mystical Islam, and yet through Toufic's work one finds those images everywhere across the genre, from F.W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* to Francis Ford Coppola's *Bram Stoker's Dracula (Love Never Dies)*. As Jawad Ali has written of Toufic's contemporary, the video artist Jayce Salloum, "ideas too have their biography."¹³ If ideas have a life of their own and are nothing without the vessel of culture to carry them, how should they survive through writing across the culturally incommensurable, ruinous, catastrophic?

A major question for me, returning specifically to Kapil's work, is how autobiography can create conditions of possibility independent of chronological affiliation. Kapil challenges procreative essentialisms by evoking the power of desire and cultural contact as a means by which one selects the future (rather than procreation selecting us 'naturally'). So Kapil writes, "I want to have sex with what I want to become" (*Incubation*, 4), and "I am not sure if mating is something that happens before someone is born or after, in the space of the future" (40). Kapil also subtitles *Humanimal* "a project for future children," by which she of course refers to children who have yet to be born, but also to children like Amala and Kamala whose potentialities have yet to be acknowledged by the dominant culture. As in Kapil's *WATER-DAMAGE*, *Humanimal* attempts to invent spaces where the real and imaginary, future and past are co-native (they give birth to each other). To do so is not only risky, but frightening because it admits one to the freak-show of the submerged, non-existent, and occluded:

There are two spaces in which I took notes for feral childhood. I am not sure if childhood is the correct word. The first space was a blue sky fiction, imagining a future for a child who died. The second space was real in different ways: a double envelope, fluid digits, scary. I was frightened so I stopped. There were two kiosks like hard bubbles selling tickets to the show. A feral child is freakish. With all my strength, I pushed the glass doors shut, ignoring the screams of the vendors inside, with a click. I clicked the spaces closed and then, because I had to, because the glass broke, I wrote this. (5)

As the anthropological project of Modernity coughs its last gasps on account of the shrinking, if not already exhausted, resources of our planet and the incomprehensible greed of the rich and powerful, the human must embrace the non-human as that by which it may transform its current condition. This transformation would not be regressive, but ideally an evolution, which is to say an act of transcendence within phylogenetic immanence; a movement that will produce a new means of being beyond our challenged human condition. Can a poetics help to accomplish this? If Kapil demonstrates nothing else it is precisely this.

When I was a graduate student at SUNY-Buffalo in the fall of 2001, Elizabeth Grosz posed a radical proposition through her “Becomings” seminar: what if what we considered most noble about the human was that which was most animal about the human, which therefore was not human at all? In the animal, in the discursion of natural facts, in the non-organic and limit-organic, in the non-normative ‘human’ lies not human salvation, but the fact that if traces of the human will remain at all they will be born across (i.e. metaphorized) through non-human materials. Our present is burdened by the mistakes of history. It is burdened by despicable colonial histories—histories intertwined with the submission of women, the exploitation of labor power based on skin color and class status, the devastation of whole ecologies. To return to these mistakes, to reset them as one would the deep muscle tissue in Roling therapy, would be to reshape them into the futures we most desire.

How to affirm the monstrous, the humanimal, the schizo as that which is trying to find a way out of this mess we’re in—a mess created by anthropocentrism aligned with human malice and short-sightedness? How to heal ‘monstrous’ bodies while preserving their uniqueness—thus affirming their difference as a creative phenomenon? This irresolvable play—between a desire to heal bodies made monstrous by disparate social traumas and to prioritize non-normative bodies which may, through their submerged experience, found new subjects if not wholly different beings—Kapil offers up as a problem for whatever will remain of the human in a future in which the continuation of human being as we know it seems increasingly doubtful all the time.

Notes

¹ Quoted from *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Réda Bensmaïa, University of Minnesota Press, 1986, pg. 13.

² Quoted from a work-in-progress called *Schizophrene*.

³ Caillois’ writings about “legendary psychasthenia” can be found in his books *The Necessity of the Mind* and *Mask of the Medusa*, as well as in his article “Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia” originally published in *Minatoure* 7 in 1935, and republished in *October* 31, Winter 1983.

⁴ Such as in the following passage: “UK means United Kingdom but since I was married into the KAPIL dynasty, I think it means something like this to me. That is U means You are untied [sic] with a K and go to a country called UK in your adulthood. USA, it means the United States of America. But I have a different version of my third and last habitat. U stands for You have been stupid, Asha. S stands for A Stupid Old...A stands for Aroo, a peach. You Stupid Asha. That’s how I was imagined” (11; my brackets).

⁵ Also interesting is the recurrence in Kapil’s books *Incubation: a Space for Monsters* and *Humanimal* of a “perimeter” at the edge of forests: “The question of home dissolves into the question of trees” (*Incubation*, 93); “Fused forever with the trees of the perimeter, she can’t. The branches fill her mouth with leaves” (*Humanimal*, 49); “Perimeter space transfuses moonlight” (30). The recurrence of perimeters in Kapil’s work makes me think of Giorgio Agamben’s etymological treatment of the term ban in his book *Homo Sacer*. Here, Agamben’s central figure of ban is the mythical werewolf, rumored to live where town ends and forest begins. Hence the terms abandoned and bandit: “What had to remain in the collective unconscious as a monstrous hybrid of human and animal, divided between the forest and the city—the werewolf—is, therefore, in

its origin the figure of the man who has been banned from the city. That such a man is defined as a wolf-man and not simply as a wolf (the expression *caput lapinum* has the form of a juridical statement) is decisive here. The life of the bandit, like that of the sacred man, is not a piece of animal nature without any relation to the law and the city. It is, rather, a threshold of indistinction and of passage between animal and man, *physis* and *nomos*, exclusion and inclusion: the life of the bandit is the life of the *loup garou*, the werewolf, who is precisely neither man nor beast, and who dwells paradoxically within both while belonging to neither" (Agamben, 105).

⁶ Kapil qualifies her bodywork as follows: "The bodywork is not rolfing proper—I would describe it as integrative bodywork focusing on soft tissue dysfunction and injury [this is basically a form of structural integration which shares elements of the rolfing process, but cannot be said to be the same thing]—but I also include Ayurvedic/energy work too" (from personal correspondence with Kapil, August 2009).

⁷ Quoted from Gilles Deleuze's and Felix Guattari's *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*.

⁸ Kapil emigrated to the United States as a student, and has since divided her time between India, England, and Colorado.

⁹ One recalls Franz Kafka's Red Peter, Gregor Samsa, and the countless other liminal beings which amplify and articulate the writer's own situation as a Prague Jew in the early 20th century. One may also think of Donna Haraway's famous work on cyborgs and monsters which Kapil quotes as an epigraph to *Incubation*.

¹⁰ Throughout Toufic's texts Toufic eschews use of first person pronouns preferring to refer to himself through his full name, a curious choice given the recurrence of Nietzsche's proposition "every name in history is I" throughout his oeuvre.

¹¹ According to Kapil: "I came as a grad student in 1990, then went back to the UK in 1991—I was a grad student again for a year in 1994, but dropped out, and after that lived in New Mexico, then London, then Chile, then London, then India. I returned in earnest in 1998, and earned my living through a private bodywork practice, though started teaching in a minor capacity too, at Naropa, from the Summer Writing Program of 2000 onwards—though recently became an Assistant Professor" (from private correspondence with Kapil, August 2009).

¹² In Toufic's work he uses the notion of "quantum tunneling" from Quantum Physics to describe one of the essential movements of the vampire in vampire films. In doing so he accounts for the vampire's ability to cover large distances in a short time. As Toufic explains: "The dissolve or cut between two shots of the vampire, in the first of which he or she is far away, for instance at the end of a long corridor (according to the mirror, he or she is not at that location), and in the second of which he or she is next to the victim (according to the mirror, he or she is not at that location either), may either indicate that the future victim of the vampire has just undergone a lapse or that the vampire has tunneled through the intervening space" (Toufic, 20). That both Toufic and Kapil imagine the surpassing of various thresholds (both geographical, biological, and ontological) in terms of a being "in transit" may offer compelling ways to think about their work in relation to the displacement of people within and without national boundaries as well as the relative porousness of international borders. Toufic makes this connection explicit in *Vampires* where, in the section of the book titled "Transit Visa in the Labyrinth," Toufic asks: "Does the ghost, who does not stay in place but haunts it and who is thus the in-transit being par excellence, need a transit visa?" (Toufic, 101)

¹³Quoted from "Sans Titre/Untitled: The Video Installation as an Active Archive//2006," in *The Archive*, ed. Charles Merewether, Cambridge/London: The MIT Press/Whitechapel, 2006 pg. 187.

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MESSY IAMB ORANGUTAN

SOME TEXTURAL RIFFS

PATRICK JAMES DUNAGAN

“bent in think mittens useless as news”
—David Meltzer

I’m not aware of other poets practicing language as language in quite similar fashion to Edmund Berrigan, Jeff Karl Butler, and John Coletti. With quacky determinism each turns increasingly away from writing line by line, in some syntactical sense, towards a rather word-by-word sonic jumpiness (think of the beans); image, let alone meaning, is at points directly challenged. As Berrigan attests in an on-line interview with *Here Comes Everybody*, “I work on a word-to-word basis, and prefer collage to philosophy.” A sort of musical affinity which defies common conversational currency becomes immediately apparent. Don Byrd’s remarks on Clark Coolidge in *Stations #5: A Symposium On Clark Coolidge* approach the matter:

Our words come together too readily in patterns which have found their authority in simple power: the power which public figures have by their access to the language-forming media; by the power of the advertising dollar to transform habits of the most basic kinds of language use; and, I suspect most insidiously, the power from which other poets have shaped the language to a fierce rightness.

However, the poets under discussion don’t fully align with Coolidge’s inclinations. Each has come of age in the three decades since Byrd’s writing and Coolidge has moved into the role of being a fore-figure to their work. At the very least, his own work has been “in the air” if not at hand for each to advance upon as they will and certainly there’s little interest in repeating what’s come before.

The bop prosody pointing towards near-complete abstraction in much of Coolidge has a somewhat hesitating presence in the work of these poets, musical inclinations being a shared endeavor. Coolidge is well known as an avid drummer and jazz enthusiast. His interest in drumming transfers itself into the writing, hitting resonant beats where language, as such, has no grounds and exists in and of its own occurrence, propelling itself as if forever. Berrigan and Butler have shown interest in the guitar and composition of lyrics, for Berrigan in the strain of folk song funk, and for Butler a murgence of ballad meeting free jazz out in the land of far out. Berrigan, as *I Feel Tractor*, has released a cd and plays live shows while Butler has explored forming a band, *The Clinks*, going as far as to recruit members, amplifying toy instruments, writing several sets of lyrics, and setting down some initial track recordings in his basement. Coolidge oftener than not drums for his own benefit, while Berrigan and Butler pursue music as performance, relying heavily upon the writing of lyrics—each of their

practical abilities on an instrument, the guitar, is proficient at best (I hope neither of them hears this as disparagement.) Coletti for his part, to the best of my knowledge, has parried any musical practice. However, the sounds words make beyond meaning or connotation run through his poems and he joins Berrigan and Butler in rollicking snap and sense extraction word by word, dazzling up the page with chunks of new lore embedding “story” throughout, albeit if at first unrecognizably, anew.

Language is musical at its roots. Poetry born entirely out, or at the primary beckoning, of “meaning” —look no farther than the product of standard MFA production mills of the 1980s—misses the joy of this fact. Word is thing. Things clunk. As Basil Bunting writes in a letter to Alan Neame in 1951, “I do not see why people should want to ‘understand’ everything in a poem” and Bunting as much as Coolidge is a ready-mate to these poets. Words sing and song is for the birds. That is all any poet may hope to match up to: the unintelligibility that is quite intelligible as one walks down the street and hears song rising out from the branches & eaves above. Or, to put it conversationally, as in Jean-Luc Goddard’s *La Chinoise*: “to talk to each other as if words were sounds and matter.” To be reminded of what is at peril in every moment of being.

There is architecture behind it all. By way of a withholding bit of intensity, resistant wit undergirds the poems with abiding patience. Surprisingly, there is no hurry. These poems indulge within completely separate space of their own making. As if saying, “go on out and do your own bit, we’ll stay here doing our own thing.” Cool as that sounds is as cool as the page gets. These poets have taken a well measured look about, soaked up the social along with the aesthetic, gained some ground and taken it from there. This is contemporary territory of singular creation. Not myth-making and without grand self-embellishment, each follows his own sense of the matter arriving at a dialogue of consensus. To my own ear, it’s as if hearing similar conversations in different parts of a large room during a party and eager to hear more of what each is saying I pursue them, wishing to bring them together. The possibilities of engagement entice.

Basil Bunting notes in his lecture, “The Codex,” speaking of work by early scribes, “... the letters are rarely alike; you’ll find C made in one line in half-a-dozen ways. And so on. And every letter was drawn with much preliminary cogitation, much considering how its shape would affect the shapes of the letters on the page.” Bunting’s emphasis upon the physicality of the letters as “drawn” is especially relevant to preoccupations of these poets. Such is the grounding sought by the poems. The title of one of Coletti’s latest collections, *Physical Kind*, states it plainly. Bunting goes on to say, “That is the way you’ve got to write poetry, you know: every word has got to be thought of with all that care.” Whatever words won’t do words do in these poems. Both pressure and depth, come again. Action of thought language turns against. Chalk it up to over-spirited will or possible excess, but not lassitude. Each of these poets bears down upon their poems with Bunting’s clarity of focus and a willingness to resist Byrd’s “habits of the most basic kind of language use” while simultaneously spinning such “habits” to further challenge any “authority.” These poets write above all for pleasure and freedom opposed to the mechanizing cultural doom which engulfs daily life with ever threatening gloom. The ear seeks change as rapidly as the eye adjusts and thought thuds right along. Ring in the poems of tomorrow.

THE GROUNDS OF TRUST IN WILLIAM FULLER'S *WATCHWORD*

JOEL FELIX

William Fuller delights in poetry's utility in fracturing the knowledge claim from experience, and yet envisions a horizon to oppose the roles offered to subjectivities forged under capital. The grounds for this protest take place in the soporific bedazzlement of instructional, legal and financial language, and its abstract and concrete labors which are rich with etymologies of trust, faith, and service. Fuller's primary historical inspirations include the Levellers, Diggers, and other pamphleteers who invented the argument for individual autonomy, philosophers of the English and Italian Renaissance, and a wide collection of hermetic and neo-Platonic writings. No contemporary body of work better shows the critical vitality of mysticism, or better shows the sympathy between aesthetic fragmentation, negative capability, and negative theology. To the point of this essay, a handful of poems in *Watchword* reveal Fuller's drive to re-imagine the 17th Century English revolutionary argument for self-rule (rights) by re-activating etymologies of trust in the landscape of contemporary American experience.

I would define "wit" for contemporary poetry as the ability to uncover the role of language in fitting together concepts and forms of subjectivity that are profoundly "silo-ed" by discrete spatial, economic, and cultural relations. It is my belief that the significant political form of the time is how capitalism and consumer culture robs words of their histories, and flattens the language into concepts that have only one dimension. By hiding the history of languages, capitalism hides its procedures, thereby bulldozing the grounds for protest. Poets sensitive to this procedure may richly mine the field of apprehended language to redress that loss. In *Watchword*, we find a field of experience wildly conjectured from the collapsed distinctions between the financial and the ontological, the mystical and the surreal, and the banal and the beautiful. Fuller's protest is launched against the coherence of the contemporary *episteme*—in other words, his poems rewire the nexus of assumptions, practices, ideological underpinnings, and desires upon which the social imagination emerges under capitalism.

Over the course of several of his books, Fuller has demonstrated an interest in the 17th Century English revolts against unjust government, a period in English history that saw inconceivable volatility in the contract of government. The writings of Digger pamphleteer Gerrard Winstanley emerge as particularly important for Fuller. At a 2006 public reading in Chicago, Fuller described this theme in *Watchword* as an "interest in 17th Century Agriculture"¹—a reference to the future of the Digger project that challenged no less than the law of property itself. Fuller draws from these writers to historicize the belief that individual autonomy is the license for all registers of truth: this autonomy is both the authority that licenses the consent of the governed and the

reader's agency to conjecture meaning and judge. In this Fuller follows from Milton, if his practice is uniquely served by an often radically paratactical form. Syntax is often freed from the sentence, and if quotation is marked by italic fonts, and citation is omitted, the reader cannot rely on historical markers to frame the meaning of the language act. Whatever other debates we have about fractured lyric subjectivity, we must not lose site of the dimension that Fuller discovers. In the most fundamental sense, the fracturing of the coherent subject resists the collaboration between authorial intent and an extrinsic directive power that complies with our sense of order. Resisting this allows readers to freely reinterpret the products² of a broken time.

The Renaissance habit of "relating everything to everything else" roves through Fuller's poetry, framing the discovery of truths that are infinitely small portions of a political real.³ In *Watchword's* "The Chapter of the Sheep," reason is deployed to the field of experience in order to dig a new ground for truth. Yet this is a project that starts with great thrust and confidence that becomes successively more attenuated. "The Chapter of the Sheep" begins:

The application of a particular religious view together with benefits conferred by terrene wisdom appear to be responsible for the repealing of certain ordinary kinds of human behavior; this unavoidable inconvenience follows: force (which we call equity) runs back among adjoining shadows to issue a certificate, according to the pattern we observe when ice retires and the truth is resheathed in a variety of interests. (Fuller, *Watchword* 21)

Religious / earthly "wisdom," (or "doctrine") constrains "ordinary" behavior, and allows political force to license behavior ("issue a certificate"), a process we can watch in clear moments brought about by change ("when the ice retires") that reveal the contests for the name of "truth." Fuller's use of the term "equity" for "force" contains its historic use as "justice" and "fairness," but strikes also the more widely deployed contemporary tone of "value" or "stockholder interest." The dominance of the monetary use of the term "equity" is unquestioned. But the poem sets us up to recognize how one interest has sheathed the term. There is but one flow of force as we deliver all tropes to the terms of capital. "Benefits conferred" signals the contractual nature of this arrangement.

"The Chapter of the Sheep" makes a broader claim—namely, that reason may transcend the condition that reason has produced. As the poem proceeds, we sense the certainty of the original position begin to slip:

Neither can we rest secure after having renounced everything except what intrudes on first principles, reshaping them at the base of the baobab tree...No compulsion can be valid against daylight ominously shuffling darkness into acute self-consciousness—some forty persons have petitioned so far and I myself have made my voice heard in ideas close to theirs, uncongealed at the center; then they took out a cord and tied my hands... (Fuller, *Watchword* 21)

"The Chapter of the Sheep" disrupts the flow of the terms of capital, which motives typically trigger an arrest.

Fuller's work engages a prophetic history contingent with critique, yet is determinedly anti-vatic. This creates some room for slapstick, or, at least, an enactment of Sir Thomas Browne's plaintive cry of "*O Altitudo*."⁴ The cry *O Altitudo* is a restorative appeal to the unknown, an admission that the limits of knowledge have been reached. For purposes of this argument, I cite Browne's plaint as an example of an anti-epis-

temological knowledge claim, an “anti-episteme” that challenges the positive role of reason and opens the creative potential of uncertainty, a move that rests at the basis of Fuller’s argument around trust and authority.

This anti-episteme turns reason against itself while generating hope for the reappraisal of the cosmos through vision. This final turn is, at times, given a freer license in Fuller’s work than is found in “The Chapter of the Sheep,” but those seeking in Fuller a “straight” version of the theophanic visionary would find conflict between the ecstasy of the vision and the bathos of the materials in the poems. If we try to determine this work as *either* prophetic or nihilistic, we would be forced to conclude that Fuller’s intention is to satirize the vatic impulse, the poet a picture of a distracted mystagogue found at work with his tie caught in the drawer.⁵ But such a view of Fuller’s work promotes an existing poverty in discussions on the “political” (read, *critical*) component of irony. Irony is a tool not only for deriding truth, but also for engaging a horizon for truth. The dazzling complexity of the way that language governs experience is brought into sense by the poems, and subsequently, the possibility of ascension from such governance has been opened. Fuller’s vision reveals the implied collusion between culture, language and experience, and we come to realize that conventional coherence is folly, a blind trust in governance. Free from the logic of coherence, we are freed from its *telos* just as we are free to re-imagine, and perhaps, to alter the relations of the present.

Fundamental to Fuller’s poetics, and to my argument about the collaboration between coherence and governance, is how he understands the term “elliptical.”⁶ In Fuller’s 1998 collection *Aether* he shows how ellipsis became a symptom of a larger condition. In “Harmonious Verification,” Fuller starts with a description of the meaning of ellipsis by George Puttenham (d.1590):

In rhetoric the ellipsis designates the omission of an element that, as Puttenham says, ‘may be supplied by ordinary understanding’; it is the figure of defect. In traditional poetry this figure represents the compression of syntax for the sake of meter. To extend this narrow technical sense to a more general principal of artistic design comprising ‘defect’ as a thematic structuring element (wherein what is insufficient or flawed is conscious of its insufficiency, articulating its exemption from the compensations ‘supplied by ordinary understanding’), we view ellipsis in conjunction with related figures, such as enigma and noema. Of the latter Puttenham observes, ‘The obscurity of sense lieth not in a single word, but in an entire speech, whereof we do not so easily conceive the meaning, but as it were by conjecture’...Whereas Puttenham’s ellipsis readily presupposes a remedy for its defect, and its meaning already contains a reflection on that fundamentally implied remedy, the defects in *noematic* texts are remediless...*they signify an irreversible dissolution whose depiction and decipherment have now become the task of artistic understanding.* [Fuller, *Aether*, 25-26. Emphasis added.]

The ellipsis omits from the poem what is presumably supplied by vernacular understanding. The reader fills in the missing meaning by interpreting the text based on their experiences, unaided by editorial commentary from the poet, dilating the lasso by which the reader’s imagination stretches to constrain the poem into unity. Arguing for Fuller now, it seems that the *means by which things are commonly understood* must be resisted if we are to re-imagine governance; it is the knowledge that is supplied by common understanding that reifies control.

Fuller’s only published essay on poetics is “Restatement of Trysts.” There, Fuller quotes another 17th Century English pamphlet, *A Remonstrance of Many Thousand*

Citizens (William Walwyn and Richard Overton). This is a central essay of the Leveller movement. Walwyn and Overton sought to undermine Cromwell by reminding him that government rests on "...a Power of Trust, which is ever revokable, and cannot be otherwise, and is to be employed to no other end, than our owne well-being" (Fuller, "Restatement" 243). Fuller elaborates:

A trust exists when one has authorized someone else to act on one's best interest...One of the most fundamental duties, if not the most fundamental, is the duty of loyalty owed to the beneficiary of the trust. By this duty, a trustee must place the interest of the beneficiary first and foremost, and must put aside the trustee's own self-interest: to ignore this duty is to be in breach of trust. In the context of [Walwyn's work] those pursuing their own self-interest at the expense of the nation's best interest have committed a profound breach, falling prey to the conflicts of interest of the most devastating kind. (Fuller, "Restatement," 242-243)

The paper continues to establish that a *breach of the trust* exposes a necessary insight: trusts, from that of government to that of reason, are an unlikely business, indeed. All trusts are "blind," according to the condition of history, and it is unlikely that someone or something really stands as our surety. For Fuller, the usefulness of the breach is "to expose as false the presumption that confidence has been well-placed. When the break occurs the conventions hitherto governing the relationship start to fail, the entire apparatus becomes subject to question, and liable to collapse" (243). Although Fuller wrote this passage in the immediate aftermath of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, he does not name this event as inspiration for his excursus through the legal role of fiduciary in property law (above), or in his general support of Walwyn's protest. Nevertheless, it is hard to not see the connection.

Is this protest seen in Walwyn, Overton, and Winstanley, a secularization of the autonomous basis of the soul translated to material conditions, that suddenly redrew subjectivity in ways not since altered? As these questions imply, Fuller forges a relationship between the production of art and the production of truth. Poetic texts that begin at the breach of trust, where meaning lies "all in pieces," offer a break of coherence as a kind of relief from dogma. With coherence fragmented, the broken text provides a restorative place of interpretation. In "Restatement of Trysts," Fuller writes:

In such a time [as the contemporary] it may be difficult to restate and reaffirm a trust, particularly through works of art that see themselves as products of a loss of trust, and appear to take great pains to embody the resulting alienation...These difficult texts appear to be left on their own to form new networks, and new relationships; they rise from the broken landscapes they inhabit to seek out trusts with those who will take them up and respond to them, assess their truth... Through the breach the broken world is brokenly visible, the mirror scattered in pieces and yet capable of fragmentary, noncontiguous forms and images which challenge the intellect to construe in fulfillment of the trust implicitly imposed. If the ordering impulse can never fully counteract the multitude of breaches the text records or bears, yet it drives one's immersion into its networks, to conjecture thereby a space where intelligence can recover itself. (Fuller, "Restatement" 243-244)

In "Harmonious Verification," Fuller writes that "decipherment has become the primary task of artistic understanding" of the elliptical text. "Restatement of Trysts," shows how that decipherment operates. The texts "seek out trusts with those who will take them up and respond to them, assess their truth" (243). So, the texts that are "products of the loss of trust" may be a mildly painful read, as we must build our

own structure to take from them; nevertheless, they afford the opportunity to think beyond what we already know.

James Noggle argues that 17th Century England is the period of the “skeptical sublime,” in which the loss of cultural certainty, which was witnessed in the regicide and ensuing parliamentary struggles, was turned into an aesthetic asset. I find this view broadly useful to recognize the creative principle of doubt: it promotes a view of the autonomy of individuals to freely judge reason from unreason. Therefore, the individual subject has sovereignty over truth. I turn to a narrative related by Milton to illustrate this. As with Walwyn and Overton, we can witness the moment where the argument for individual sovereignty, which began as an issue of divine justice, bleeds into the secular.

Dionysius Alexandrinus was about the year 240, a person of great name in the Church for piety and learning, who had went to avail himself much against hereticks by being conversant in their Books; untill a certain Presbyter laid it scrupulously to his conscience, how he durst venture himselfe among those defiling volumes. The worthy man, loath to give offence, fell into a new debate with himself what was to be thought; when suddenly a vision sent from God (it is his own epistle that so avers it) confirmed him in these words: READ ANY BOOKS WHATEVER COME TO THY HANDS, FOR THOU ART SUFFICIENT BOTH TO JUDGE ARIGHT AND TO EXAMINE EACH MATTER. To this revelation he assented the sooner, as he confesses, because it was answerable to that of the Apostle to the Thessalonians, PROVE ALL THINGS, HOLD FAST THAT WHICH IS GOOD. (Milton)

Milton’s narrative serves the thesis in the *Aeropagitica* that censorship fails to recognize in each individual the best judge of truth, as god will provide. For Fuller, the act of interpretation may be the sole ontological agency of the self.

But all that I have written doesn’t account for the elegiac notes in *Watchword*, which recognize the loss and the degree of difference between the volatile period of the English Civil Wars and this moment in the Western capitalist empire. When Fuller redeploys the work of the Levellers, Agitators, Ranters, True Levellers (Diggers), he is also measuring the distance whereby the current social tense has *lost* instability to certainty, as the episteme grows more inarguable.

“Parson Platt” shows some of this distance from the hope of a vulgar revolutionary capacity. The “real” Parson Platt of 17th Century England has become Fuller’s figure for the violence by which governance will restore itself to disputes of its authority. In 1650, Winstanley and the Diggers had begun a commune of some “six or seven houses” and crops at Cobham Manor on lands owned by John Platt (Parson). To a certain extent the Digger movement was enabled by the indulgence of Lord Fairfax (a General of Cromwell’s army) who had decided not to demolish an earlier settlement at St George Hill, and did not persecute the Cobham settlement. Parson Platt lobbied Fairfax to demolish the commune, and when that did not happen, Platt took it upon himself (and with hired goons) to attack the Diggers. Perhaps the most tragic moment in the brief history of the Diggers experiment is found in this story. According to Winstanley, he directly petitioned Platt to leave off the attacks, and the Parson responded by saying that if Winstanley could “prove his case for the commune by the scriptures,” he would trouble them no more, but, in fact, join their commune. Sadly, it is clear that Winstanley believed Platt’s offer sincere. Winstanley wrote up the proofs and presented them to Platt, who promised to read them. Henchmen showed up within the week to pull down the Diggers’ houses, effectively ending their movement (Winstanley 433).⁷

Looking back from the many finer knits of the laws and language of contemporary capital, we recognize that the disruption of governance in the Digger movement was to breach the laws of property, which “Neo-Conservative” icon Richard Pipes⁸ has argued is the foundational pillar of capitalism, and indeed, political freedoms as such. After the trial and execution of King Charles I and the subsequent civil wars, Winstanley proposed that all class inequality was a form of the Kingly, a synonym for corruption. For Winstanley, *all governance is Kingly power*, as illegitimate as King Charles I himself had been. From that premise, Winstanley argued for equal relations not just in terms of political subjectivity, but of property. Claiming the “public wastes” as land for his communitarian movement, the Diggers broke from the rule of law, and lived apart before their hopes were broken. In “Parson Platt,” Fuller modulates the arc:

Parson Platt
 theft, cheat, wrong or iniquity
 dance with joy displacing
 emphasis viewed fully in these
 shapes that find their broadest
 dreams roaming throughout
 leafy mazes or pressing on
 from the arbor in spasms
 toward three starved cows—
 at the beginning it was not so
 handmade goods for all
 during times of roasted meats
 clustered in the woods like a navel
 in trance and out of trance
 a former friend of mine
 was afraid to approach
 without distinctions
 imprinted on my face
 we sat together limpid and cool

The “three starved cows” echo the years of famine in the Pharaoh’s dream,⁹ as well as the summation of the material failure of the Digger project of communitarian agriculture. When Platt’s brawlers broke into their camps, they found the equivalent of three starved cows: failed crops, no stores, and an emaciated populace. Fuller’s poem, “Parson Platt,” modulates this narrative. While “history” tells us that the utopian projects which implode governance will collapse as power intrudes to restore governance, Fuller’s poem ends by restoring the early, tenuous ease of the first moments of the project (“we sat together limpid and cool”). We remain in that moment of the uncertain, before it collapses and governance reinstates itself.

I would like to provide a final example of the way that the coherence presented by governance is challenged in Fuller’s work. “Ode at Work,” from *Watchword*, is a *tour de force* that busts the definition of tropes as merely financial, corporate, poetic, secular, or religious. The voice of the address to a “*Pamphilus*” hints at a conceptual environs so broad it cannot be grasped. As gaps open in our ability to interpret what is expressly ironic and what is prophetic, “Ode at Work” elaborates a field of experience painfully stuffed with the abuse of logic to hide violence within “trust.”

This experience is restorative in the sense that it feels good to listen to the blues. “For covetousness is all,” the final sentence in “Ode at Work,” suggests Winstanley’s complaint that humanity will only know how to abuse itself if it is not acting on the basis

of equality. For Fuller, this is the last word to the environs. He combines the language that inhabits the office/ corporate sphere (“Consult my small plastic head—she’s about to explode. *Pamphilus*, you work in *this big office?*”); offers bursts of renaissance archaism (“Tell me whether seeing consists of opening and turning the eyes”); and includes dramatic appearances of the surreal and the banal (“Hotter and hotter, the door began to melt, revealing a small causeway over the investments in continuity and tenure”). All these rhetorics train through an impossibly small portal called the “Ode at Work.” Fuller provides the castigatory summa to condemn the inability of people to overcome self-interest.¹⁰ We feel that there is no sphere of relating that remains untouched by this failure.¹¹

I have argued that Fuller’s vision for contemporary poetry is that the breaking of “coherence” is the first step by which we may recover our agency as interpreters of experience, and that the description of truth in *Watchword* reveals that the ordering sense to experience is not only a fiction, but a damaging fiction, created in order to convince us of its inescapability.

Some trusts keep us blind. Fuller indicates this in his use of the Christian Dives and Lazarus parable. It is a parable about the reversal of material injustice through divine justice. Beggar Lazarus, who was all his life denied alms by rich Dives, sups at God’s table after death, while rich Dives, in Hell, is made to see Lazarus in Heaven. Even after death, Dives is blind to the injustice he serves, and asks Abraham to send Lazarus down with a cup of water for his thirst, as if, even in death, Lazarus was his servant. Abraham denies him. Fuller’s poem is not so straightforward.

Dives and Lazarus

There are two articles called Article Ninth
in them would still
be
holding and effective all the
provisions not negated by them
and these giving rise
to vexations
I could not have guessed at
but not even a hint of this falls to earth
deaf as ever
I made my way through the transformation unit
past thinning crowds raised in ditches
and I felt his presence
carefully cut to fit the frame
and out of this flies a kind of bat
on a perfectly level flight path
towards all kinds of people, apparently silent,
what is their common characteristic
with some exceptions many of them
have considerable accumulations
or bear witness to pure mysterious gold
in an effort to sustain themselves

The Christian parable about role reversals seems like a rich warning against over interpreting the world on the basis of human justice. The obfuscating language of the binding contract is not “what falls to earth” where the subject is seen laboring through the “transformation unit” (what we might take as “life”) “deaf as ever,” insensible to some other order, like Dives persisting in his blindness. The “I” feels

around for another presence: “and I felt his presence / carefully cut to fit the frame,” hint at the awareness of the immaterial concept or code most familiar for god (“*I felt his presence*”). But the situation is distracted by an ejected bat, an image we can only guess at, but to this reader a kind of comic sign for abandonment or emptiness (think attics). The bat is a trajectory out of the earlier situations that pulls social conditions into view—a people perhaps truly or perhaps falsely consumed with sustaining themselves. For Fuller, the vision of self-interested accumulation would not be served by commentary. It speaks volumes.

In “Restatement of Trysts,” we hear Fuller closely modeling an idea for the responsibility of art in his summation of Browne: “For Browne the book of Nature is a trust; he has maintained and held that trust by observing and making connections. This is both vigilance and commitment to the ever-growing object. For Browne, the alert, resourceful reader of the continuous text of nature and art, completes the circuit by ‘recreating’ it in his own text” (251).

In “Restatement of Trysts,” we hear Fuller closely modeling an idea for the responsibility of art in his summation of Browne: “For Browne the book of Nature is a trust; he has maintained and held that trust by observing and making connections. This is both vigilance and commitment to the ever-growing object. For Browne, the alert, resourceful reader of the continuous text of nature and art, completes the circuit by ‘recreating’ it in his own text” (251). Thus the duty to nature (Being) is to conjecture its meaning, testing for the holes within our theories that enable governance to replicate particularly dubious licenses of power. The immediate violence toward conventional expectation from the embrace of “fragmentary, noncontiguous forms and images” (Fuller’s terms from “The Restatement of Trysts”) releases the reader to “a space where intelligence can recover itself”; that is, where one might step through the door into St. Paul’s sanctuary, both relieved to have hit the limits of coherence and relieved that the troubling need for coherence can and should be relinquished. Embracing the defect in the model, we look at the field of experience not braced by the longing for a vanished unity but as an array of complexity itself infinite yet incomplete, within which we may claim empathy for each other. While we can’t begin to understand the horror of the condition to which humanity delivers itself throughout history, we may nevertheless recognize the obligation to serve that recognition with our human capital.

Notes

¹ After reading “Plat” and “Ode at Work,” Fuller said, “And that is the portion of this reading devoted to my interest in 17th Century Agriculture.”

² Here I am echoing Fuller’s essay, “Restatement of Trysts.”

³ If the *O Altitudo* is this, it is also a generative moment wherein *mercy* is felt. Humility produces the love/awe of the god and empathy between his creations for their shared condition.

⁴ Browne is quoting Paul’s *Romans*. Paul is essentially thanking god that he (Paul) doesn’t need to know all that God knows. Browne later refers to this phrase as “St. Paul’s sanctuary.” This phrase handed itself down then to history as an invocation of relief as the intelligence is released from the search of Truth.

⁵ The image here is Fuller’s own, from correspondence with the author.

⁶The meaning of this term has become increasingly difficult to pin down in recent years. Stephen Burt and Steve Evans, for example, take the term to different ends. Burt tried to establish the term as a tactic for elliptically capturing the self as a multiplicity of voices (which may have overstated the contemporaneity of this phenomenon), while Evans sought to peg the term to a poetry that takes for granted the fractured nature of experience and mindless replication of this state. As I continue, I hope to show that this term is being examined in both philosophical and formal dimensions by Fuller.

⁷This account draws from “*An Humble Request to the Ministers of Both Universities and to all the Lawyers in Every Inns-a-Court,*” Gerrard Winstanley.

⁸C.f. Richard Pipes, *Freedom and Property*. Harvard Professor Pipes is primarily remembered for his devoted hatred of communism, which as a matter of political philosophy was highly influential to the young Donald Rumsfeld and others behind the “New American Century” policy statement of 1998, that clarion call of the “Neo-Conservative” movement in America.

⁹C.f., Genesis 41.

¹⁰From the Pauline Letters: “For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows” (1 Timothy 6:10). Covetousness, Aquinas wrote, as the root of all evil, is also the root of all sin. Therefore it may be said to be “all” for the condition of us born in the material of Original Sin for Winstanley.

¹¹I might note that the text produced in the breach of truth is also potentially less fixed in its receivership under the general social dispensation of culture. At the 2006 public reading I mentioned above there were many co-workers from Fuller’s bank in the crowd. The audience had physically separated itself almost perfectly between this audience and the PhD crowds. I notice that for several poems from *Watchword*, Fuller seemed to address the work crowd as the “inside” audience, and, from their reactions, it seemed like they recognized the intention of the work in a more direct way than the academic crowd I sat with, nodding, straining forward, showing that the impact of “Ode at Work” was speaking to an experience they could recognize.

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STACY SZYMASZEK'S *HYPERGLOSSIA*

ROBERT KOCIK

If we assume that food found in an Egyptian tomb is proof that the dead don't eat food, we only magnify the fact that we have no idea what aspect of funerary food actually gets consumed. A painting on the wall can be an endless feast. Stacy Szymaszek's *Hyperglossia* is the efficacy of such ceremony—her words are the receiving of extraordinary sustenance as they, in turn, feed their readers.

As the book opens, her initial persona ('she,' 'her') has died from a head injury. Her soul splits in two. Half remains in the tomb, awake while dead. The other half starts a new life—as a 'delog' (one who has returned from the dead) marked by former brain injury. Her particular lesion results in irrepressible speech capable of producing anatomy.

The content, sonics, compression and concision of the first poem are comprehensive of all that is to come. At first glance the poem may appear to be a fragment made of fragments. Here is the poem in its entirety:

ka ker flutt clutter head injry sincere corps

compendia ah guardiam

sachets of natron pork crackle armor

bid

ity

'Ka' is the Egyptian word for life-force (some say 'prana,' while others say 'chi' or 'elan'). 'Ker' is the singular of Keres and as such indissociable from doom and violent death. 'Flutt' is too near to 'clutter' to be read as truncated. Under compression, the 'u' of 'injry' is superfluous. 'Compendia' is the poem's knowledge of its generative force as hyper/hypo/extra-syntactic. 'Sachets of natron' were once stuffed into the thoracic cavity to desiccate mummies. 'Pork crackle' is a difficult-to-achieve crispness of roasted skin...in contrast to the 'armor' that partially lends itself to the apparent fragments 'bid' and 'ity' as even more morbid.

This is how it goes. To read her particular word usages I must hear all possible meanings of each word. An uncanny double register of the actual and potential is created. This is lexical hyperarousal. To accord with the poems I can only read each word as though I've never heard it before.

As the title suggests, *Hyperglossia* is involved in excess. It deals with pathologies. It balances. It at once writes a hypoglossia—a below normal word count. Its altered psychological, social or physical states have corresponding grammars, morphologies and prosodies. Anomaly becomes accuracy. For example, to my eye, generosity had never been generous until seeing Szymaszek’s hyperglossal “ggenerosity.” It’s not a misspelling but an over-spelling that augments aptness.

The poems are, as she says, the making of anatomies by means of words. This happens quite literally. Even when I silently read *Hyperglossia* I have an exaggerated experience of the physical act of articulation (as well as the acoustics!). Words straddle material and immaterial conditions: “invisible doorsill grimed.” There are, arguably, 4 known states of experience: waking, dreaming, dreamless sleep, and none of the above. *Hyperglossia* of course extends the list of states to include phantasm, mel-lifluousness, physiogenesis, present hereafter (perhaps a new grammatical tense!), personogony, syllabocoagulation, and so on)—but more importantly the text intermingles the list. Intermingling of states—the pouring of one state into another—is the actual art of enlightenment (like Dante passing out during his hallucination known as *Divine Comedy*). *Hyperglossia* simply turns such art into a poetics...which implies the author has placed her person in peril (it would be impossible for actual poetry to somehow not be real—whether or not it uses fiction to address us, it defines itself as poetry by addressing what most pertains to us). This ordeal taken on in order to bring life to light determines the pathology these poems deal with. Sun City is existence in the sun or bust.

A scene or self or selection agglutinates as the syllables and semantics aggregate in situ. “indeterminate lexicon / seasonal concussion / defect of fixative / fact of hyperbole / THIS IS AN AILMENT WHICH I WILL HANDLE / work into a mass / and bind.” One page per poem. The book is not a representational walk down the street. Nor is it a presentational world unto itself. Her exteroceptive field is mostly made of other texts. A passage as sweet and simple as

my head leaks honey

on an alabaster

pillow

is steeped in surgical papyri, embalming manuals, nineteenth century enlightenment, and love songs recovered from vase fragments...all Egyptian. Analogs also hold the poems in place. They are recitals that give virtue to the ingredients they use. Constant use of container-words such as cask, vase, sachet, satchel, canoptic jar, amphora, sack full, bagfuls—all seem suggestive of form. Perhaps a poem is a scroll unrolled, an area of scent, vignette, “dream surgery,” pharmacopoeia, or an anagrammatic exhaustion. It’s the necessary turgor that keeps its form full and engorged. It exists to demarcate a permeable membrane. In this context it’s fair to say (as the infamous W.J.M. Lovelt so aptly put it) “syntax is the poor man’s semantics.” In such unbounded semantics, the mummification art known as The Opening Of The Mouth Ritual is as real in its integration in *Hyperglossia* as it was when practiced on the deceased in the third millennium BCE.

There are name changes and character vestiges. Someone is “outfitted in plumes.” A panther comes and goes. “verbal hippopotamus” makes a lone showing. By far the most prominent persona is someone (is a persona a someone?) called Eustace. Per-

haps the book would have gone on forever without Eustace (and in doing so, would not have ever been a book). “nom de plume / nom de guerre / perfect pseudo-cleft / what I want is want is // a storage locker / of schema / Eustace / superimposed / Eustace / chosen / for / closure.” Eustace is another delog...dead and back—well, the name has a long past complicating matters as phenomena in *Hyperglossia* is first and foremost a word appearing on a page. Eustace is a mnemonic device. The name ‘Stacy’ traces to the feminine Anastasia (meaning ‘resurrection’). As a boy’s name Stacy is a shortened form of Eustace. Eustace is Greek for ‘fruitful.’ The name itself is ambisexual. As we eventually discover in the poems, Eustace was first seen by the poet as a 2nd Century encaustic painting of a North African boy named Eutyches. From then on he had the power to ‘place’ the poet. To diffuse her. To become her, and to eventually turn into a glaring liability.

physique

Still

a disjoined
festoon

In one poem she makes a megaphone, then announces “MUTATO NOMINEE.” The full expression is: *Mutato nomine, de te fibula narratur*. A name change that makes the story apply to you.

Many historical personages are met along the way, but they do not necessarily constitute personae. Abde-el-latif, Imhotep, Rifaud or Champollion are details, brief animations, markers of place and time along journeys taken. They are scribal material...but not personae through which the person behind the scribe contrives identity.

So who is she? Who? Which ‘her’? Is the author in the book or just her surrogates? Can we add up all the personae and deduce or reverse-engineer a person? Are these questions the author herself asks herself? She’s the scribe of her poems. So who authorizes the scribe? From within the poems it is occasionally possible to surmise a social self functioning (and malfunctioning) outside the poems. The third and final section of the book (called Agora) behaves most like an integrated recognizable lyric somebody named Stacy Szymaszek.

ID of performer of demise disinterment the wrong

direction the answer constellation clay pigeon quickens

to sedentary phobic bird only way to repossess

amatory chest careen through deaths

In relation to her art her lesion produces an aprosodia. “She tries to grasp protocols of public speech, body language and garment, and wanders in and out of commerce and solitude with a set of difficult motives, such as: to elude detection and to find company.” Or, more accurately, the lesion in *Hyperglossia* can be said to produce a *hyperprosodia*—a heightened ability to comprehend and generate emotion through speech and body language: “my hand went / anarchic and / everyone applauded.”

Hyperglossia is a rare and empowering insight into the makings of what and who we are. We readers can take as prescription the words Stacy may well have written with regard to her own process:

take an item
from the collection
that will help you

(The food from the tomb that gets consumed.) As the saying goes: *When 'ka' acts, conscience has a guide, there is creativity and kindness, and all is well on all levels.*

I dilate to stave
my whip kicking reproductive system
sleep with a loot of musical instruments
donate catgut
from my eerie
hereafter

STATE CHANGES IN THE WORK OF JOHN COLETTI

CHRIS MARTIN

John Coletti writes rocks. Or bricks rather. John Coletti writes bricks that sometimes turn out to be made of foam. He is a stunt man. No, wait. He makes of the reader a stunt man, who jumps off the line into a pile of bricks that turn out to be foam. What is important is texture. More than any poet writing today, John Coletti writes past text to texture. And the best part is when the texture you expect collides with another texture wholly unexpected. In this way, Coletti could be said to be a Surrealist of texture. That is, one could say that if it weren't totally wrong. The thing about texture is that it's always specific. There is no conceptual texture. If Coletti says "daytime snow chunk" he means it.¹ He means there is something chunky like a brick that is simultaneously melting and just so happens to be hurting your eyes with the way it reflects the sun: bright, hard, soft, wet, white and probably dingy. John Coletti writes snowballs. But not movie snowballs. He writes the kind of snowball you only understand once it's creamed you in the ear. It might have a crab apple inside, or an eyeball, or a 20-sided die. Instead of the note in the bottle, it's "Neat little bottles / I send out in notes." He lives in a town where the yoga is angry. He lives in a body where his "elbows are little brains." And this is what it means to read a poem by John Coletti. You find yourself in a crowded room and every time you muscle forward your elbows click into someone else's syllables. And that's the fucked up thing about elbows: they're sharp and virtually nerveless and yet—wham—there's your funny bone. Jokes have everything to do with texture and Coletti's poems live their Joseph Cornell lives with a stand-up comic trapped inside. But unlike the cold, self-absorbed distance of comedy, his poems preach the soft collision: "no fear, no envy, no meanness." And this is why his poems are experimental. His collisions create new entities. He catches electrons as they move from one orbital to the next. He explores the state change of solid to liquid and from liquid to air. Or vice-versa. He sees "mist rusting autumn sky." One minute, full of nostalgia, he dives for the "Dwight Clark sandwich" and the "next morning / blow moth away / he knows I'm just air."

Notes

¹ All quotations are taken from *Same Enemy Rainbow* (Fewer & Further 2008).

OPEN LETTER TO A COSMETIC(S) RE-/MEMBERING ME/-MBRANES IN THE WORK OF ROB HALPERN

C.J. MARTIN

Split the Lark - and
you'll find the music -

Emily Dickinson

...these
Accidents produce me
-mbranes peeling off in-

Ternal selves skins...

(Disaster Suites 31)

Dear Rob,

Besides lyric poems, I wonder what other kinds of membranes are "me/-mbranes"?

I've been thinking about the cosmetic, reading Oppen's "The Mind's Own Place" — the weirdly cosmetic poem of Levertov's he cites in that essay as exemplary ("Matins") even after deriding "the art of the masseur and the perfumist" (SP 30). His working through Levertov's formulation in that poem of "the real": "the new-laid / egg whose speckled shell / the poet fondles and must break / if he will be nourished" — & earlier in the poem (him pointing out the fact of) "breaking the handle of my hairbrush" (SP 32).

All of which is returning me to "This one wants to be the one to break / the story" (DS 27). Am reminded, too, of Duncan's "A Song from the Structures of Rime Ringing as the Poet Paul Celan Sings," where the "wreckt" world "is totally untranslatable" (though he still tries) (GW1 8). Your cosmetic Monica Viti poem: line breaks &/as "me/-mbranes" (DS 31) — "as if all this were really breaking" (DS 27).

If the tropes of 'brokenness' and 'witness' have been central to a mythology of the lyric, your work is a kind of visitation on that mythology, disfiguring it in the interest of rereading the history of lyric poems as a history of "me/-mbranes," of fallout that doesn't exactly document a world or a disaster, but that is in some way shaped on it — *a cosmetics*.

“soot’s / What remains when I can’t re- / Member the words for what re- / Mains”
(DS 28).

Re-/membering me/-mbranes: the momentum is not in fact towards “break[ing] the story.” As a cosmetics, lyric material is a residue of ‘voice.’ It comes to resemble ‘me’ / ‘I’/person only inasmuch as it takes its shape & features from the person-al experience of disaster on which it is modeled. It’s constructed of soot, rubble—“which informs the intimacy of the I’s relation to the world *as if beyond all this fallout, no personal life*” (DS 81). As if the lark’s already split—& cosmetic ‘music’ re-/members that disaster. “Whenever I try to com- / Muncate love dis- / Appears” (DS 31)—debris of that split.

The heavy enjambment & hyphenation of the Monica Viti poem turns reading, too, into a re-/membering, so that the last line, “—*don’t do it for my experience*” (DS 32), prohibits the tendency to read in a lyric poem the document of a personal history. Not that ‘witness’ is worthless here, but precisely the opposite: that it can so easily be turned into *coin*, poems “whose measures can be // —*traded*” (DS 21). The directive, it seems, directs us elsewhere if we’re looking for the why and the *what* of reading disaster. Echoing Oppen, the answers aren’t to be found in “the poet’s self among things” (SP 32).

“this one // —*can’t be tested*” (DS 69).

In developing his claim for poetry as a “test of truth,” Oppen sizes up Levertov’s “Matins” thus: “These are, as poetry intends, clear pictures of the world in verse, which means only to be clear, to be honest, to produce the realization of reality and to construct a form out of no desire for the trick of gracefulness, but in order to make it possible to grasp, to hold the insight which is the content of the poem” (SP 32). Your work frequently problematizes this formulation:

With no
Arms I
Can’t be

Yr model
Of reach
To reach

For things
Not here
To break

The grid
The real
Event like

Love this
One can’t

—be tested.

(DS 69)

In the suite prior to this one, such an effort to *grasp* is ominously figured as a “dreamy mix of arms and aid” (DS 65). And still earlier, Oppen is (it would seem) directly refuted: “It’s nothing but doctrine poetry distorts / The things we live among” (DS 60). However, that these lines permit multiple interpretations of what they declare—that “doctrine” doubles as both the object of the verb “distorts” and as a dismissal of Oppen’s call for clarity—suggests that the working out of an argument isn’t central to the work being done here. Poetry is capable of both erecting and critiquing doctrine; the claims are stacked one on top of the other. To see in these poems nothing more than a politics of critique would be to ‘split the lark,’ even though the media’s “invidiously racialized” reports “pitting black ‘looters’ against white ‘finders’” in Katrina coverage (DS 79)—an extreme example of profanely mediated ‘reality’—serve as catalyst for this book. Neither do I find here a poetics dismissive of Oppen’s desire for “transparence,” but one deeply and critically engaged with it.

Passages like these where the language is stacked or thickened often serve to further entangle your concerns with his. I want to see this as a cosmetic fact—a layering, a covering over—& a distortion, but as much of the idea of unmediated ‘Truth’ as of the “realer subjects” of critique (DS 60). Here I would argue, the lyric puts on a cosmetics as it attempts to overburden mattering-as-exchange. That in your poems, cosmetic thickening is offered as one among a handful of lyric strategies for approaching the problem of touch “With no / Arms,” as it were.

My discussion of “thick language” is indebted of course to Sianne Ngai’s development of the concept of “stuplimity” in her book, *Ugly Feelings*. It might be a stretch to call “stuplimity” a product or effect of the lyric—even, necessarily, of the cosmetic. However, I do think that a “doubling over of language that actively interferes with the temporal organization dictated by conventional syntax” (UF 261) is deployed in your work as a strategy for confronting “disaster’s own conditions of visibility” (DS 81)—particularly where punctuation and line breaks are concerned in *Disaster Suites*, and in the augmented signage of *Weak Link*. Often in DS, the sentence and the line seem directly at odds with one another. The bracketed dash (“[—]”) that shows up throughout WL operates, further, as an active interference in lineation, sentencing, and voice—all part of the “conventional syntax” of the lyric.

Interestingly, this last also performs a kind of exegetical intervention (brackets being how one signifies, within a quotation, that text has been added or changed). Here and elsewhere, the poems read themselves, in the process disrupting, distracting, & diverting the line(s) of thought. This is where Ngai’s work is particularly applicable—these poems argue for a new *ear* for lyricism: as against the “ears whose hearing’s hulking mass / Can’t hear the excess of our industry” (DS 49). To cannibalize the old guard of the senses, of ‘lyric sensibility,’ what makes sense as lyric: “we can / Eat these grids of recognition mangle / Things count what counting can’t have // Been inducted into” (DS 49).

The priapic, the repulsive, the interruptive, the self-exegetical—each “Missing in the count now counts as one” (DS 49) among the many faces of the lyric. I love that this includes embracing & exploring distraction as an inroad to lyric work (DS 79-80)—which it increasingly seems to me is as valuable as attention & contemplation in the production & reception of that work—and that cosmetic thickening is here as generative as transparence.

So disaster is at the heart of legibility, as a condition of the lyric that piles up countenances for the lyric, most of which legibility then distorts by a rigorous exclusion. Your poems attempt to sing “what the world can’t say” (DS 48) because unsanctioned as permissible speech. “Their homes being thick descriptions solid waste” (DS 43), they read disaster by “becoming unmoored” (DS 83) from reading.

Re: thick language & inter-textuality: your work at times stages readings of the lyric (unmoorings from the lyric) through Robert Duncan’s formulations of it. So that a line like “Ruins more than ever the realm I am” (DS 59) overlays his “Something has wreckt the world I am in” (GW1 8), or somehow puts it on in order to trouble the question of what “I am.” Duncan’s “A Song from the Structures of Rime Ringing as the Poet Paul Celan Sings” seems to me to be at the back of much of your own working through of this question. It may be that it is precisely the “song” in Duncan—the notion that song is the best of what ‘I’ do, an ideal of lyric ‘voice’—that is problematized in your poems:

I’m a zero-degree in global production
Whose real event’s what no one hears
A structure of value as it decays in time
(DS 19)

...singing
Of old salt seas & the boutique water
In our private language means nothing

Public like *use* I mean what matters
Goes on exchanging

—wasting organs work unsold.
(DS 59)

That “I mean what matters” is one problem of song being so persistently tied to the lyric as a quality of voice, music having been deemed (by Zukofsky & before him a whole tradition of lyric workers) an “upper limit” in the measurement of a poem’s import: the danger of ‘I sing, I *am* what matters.’ (Not, certainly, that this is Duncan’s presumption, or Zukofsky’s.) In your work, the ‘I’ is not above acting as a force of value, but is also figured as material (not necessarily personal, but linguistic) & thus subject to decay: “A structure of value as it decays in time.” Your work doesn’t dismiss song, but disfigures it, severs its ties to ‘person’: in the first poem of *Disaster Suites*, the poem is an “accumulation of waste” (DS 9). In *Weak Link*, “what you hear is erosion / [—] of sound, this decay of tone” (WL 10).

So that the line thickens: “I mean what matters” can also read as a definition of the cosmetic ‘I.’ As against matter-as-exchange, the cosmetic ‘I’ is ‘what does the mattering’—what *shapes* the materials of the poem—what *organizes* the “accumulation of waste.” All the while, “what matters / Goes on exchanging.” I think the primary question of cosmetics is how to matter, how to approach mattering what matters, how to proceed. This must be where “there must be some bad faith” (DS 82).

Here are the last stanzas of Duncan’s poem:

It is nothing that has
wreckt the world I am in so that it is
beautiful, Nothing in me

being
beyond the world I am in
something
in the world longs for

nothing there.

(GW1 8)

What I think your work most shares with this poem of Duncan's is the concern for complicity, the sense that the lyric 'I' is a me/-mbrane, a cover-up and not a revelation. The first lines of *Snow Sensitive Skin* (in an echo of the music of Duncan's "Veil, Turbine, Cord, and Bird") seem to confess as much:

having voiced this under cover
veiling turbines overhead
by hundreds humming wave-
fronts punch beats measure
time sounds as no sound sounds

(SSS, "Canopy")

In the fourth (& most priapic, even Whitmanesque) suite of *Disaster Suites*, the personism of a song-centered lyric tradition is neatly summed up as a "slum hum / -Anity" (DS 40). This priapic 'I' repulses: "A strong man erect I could hug them all // —their ungrievable bodies caked with my shit" (DS 43). And *Weak Link* points up "So many erroneous self-images [-] skins" (WL 7).

Unlike a plaster cast in forensics, a cosmetic address shaped on a world/disaster crumbles into so much rubble when abstracted from it, so can't really be examined as evidence of 'person.' I'm reminded here of Cindy Sherman's photos, particularly the striking similarity between pictures of trash or even biological waste—like *Untitled #s 168, 170, 236, and 244*—and images that would otherwise appear to be portraits. Both types of images come to mind in reading her note brainstorming how to proceed "when I want to stop using myself and don't want 'other people' in the photos":

Dummys
Photos of other people ^in the photo
parts of the body (no face)
shadows
empty (no people at all) scenes
wear masks
blur the face

(CSR 163)

Sherman's list could easily double as a list of strategies for confronting problems of person & persona in the lyric. Her work offers a useful model for cosmetics as a kind of drag focused not on persona but on residue, on fallout, on the materials. Thus what I want to call cosmetics is I think what you mean when you refer to "lyric [...] as a spell to break this spell of resemblance" (DS 81). Like Sherman's waste photos, your work isn't openly forensic in its approach, though the materials are close enough to trick the eye.

At the end of Duncan's poem, "something / in the world longs for // nothing there" (GW1 8). Is this the "something in the world" that breaks our things? That permits threats to approach unnoticed, that takes our skins (the threat of "white phosphorus" in DS 70)? This seems right to me, at least in part. But in Duncan's poem "Nothing in me // [is] / beyond the world I am in" (GW1 8). *This is the nothing-in-me of the cosmetic 'I'*—so that "something / in the world long[ing] for // nothing there" is a twin desire to "want[ing] to be the one to break / the story." "Something in the world longs" to tear open the me/-mbrane. And yet it is "in me."

The documentary impulse is an inheritance of American lyric work from Whitman, which in your poems materializes (somewhat threateningly) as an "Intercepted message" (DS 58). (If there's a war here, one wonders on what side we'd find the "lower limit" eavesdropping of Zukofsky or W.C. Williams.) But what to do with an intercepted message when "what you hear is erosion / [—] of sound" (WL 10)? One answer might be to locate the plea in the intercept: "ple [...] a [...] us [...] out" (DS 58). Somehow, though, this seems like too easy an answer, one that trusts too greatly in the intentions of whatever force does the locating.

I'm compelled to circle back to the question: working from the linguistic detritus of a "wreckt" world, how organize the debris in a way that makes any kind of sense? Or if not sense, if we are to abandon sense (if we have that option), how else to make it matter?

In a kind of many-mirrored nod to Whitman's Civil War poem "Vigil Strange," one section from the fifth suite in DS (a voice, I think, from out of the "Chorus" that's "dying to sing" "what the world can't say") performs just such an interception. Whitman's is an 'account' of nursing a dying soldier to his death. Your poem seems to question Whitman's propensity to make sense of the death, as well as his inclination to write about it in a poem:

Ejaculating in terror, he wears my uniform and talks
Real big about our transcendental subject
A corpse in Gaza, another Suprematist painting

My aeroplan of purity and shame where I find myself
Wanting realer things, sewage sweet to help our dead
Boys realize better options, peace and aid

— *the mind to languish fully in its shadow.*

(DS 54)

It's as if in the first two lines, the poem wants to embody a persona—to give voice to Whitman's "boy of responding kisses" (WPP 439)—but is then drawn back out of that gesture (because too presumptuous?) & into the present by "A corpse in Gaza." As if performing an intercepted message is a kind of false start, or that, further, writing a poem to the disaster (of a death, of Whitman's poem, etc) is a shameful urge to begin with, coming as it does *too late*: "There's shame in simply being here" (IP, "The Pathos of Distance, Being a Thing Inside You Once I Felt").

It strikes me too that, as abandoned persona, the first two lines also gloss the traumatic turn in Whitman's poem from a second person address to a third person report, where "My comrade I wrapt in his blanket, envelop'd well his form" (WPP 439). If Whitman's lines can be construed as a paradigm of poetic image-making as the enveloping of forms / the laying of corpses to rest (a truly *strange* vigil for Whitman), then your poem seems to call out the performative and appropriative sides of this undertaking: "he wears my uniform." But even here the line doubles over, reading as both a call to Whitman (to take it off, to give it back) and as an immensely productive queering of the lyric (as always already a performance). Whatever the nature of the trauma, neither poem operates to 'reveal' it.

As in Duncan, "It is totally untranslatable" (GW1 8), whatever it is. To attempt to locate the *translatable* would be to 'split the lark,' which reminds me too that Dickinson's never far off here. Both in DS's attention to *ecological* disaster and in offering the competing interpretations of images of Katrina survivors as a kind of explanation-as-profanation, your poems question whether readers should in the first place trust (much less desire) an 'I' who claims to have truly broken a story. Your poems urge us after something otherwise than explanation.

While your work finds company with a tradition of investigations into the lyric, it stages its own intervention in startlingly contemporary terms:

Wetlands and marshes slow.
But my poems, like *phynance*
—this accumulation of waste—

I mean *this*, you and 'the cranes
Like ships,' they're relentless
—targeting flows, pipelines—

Thru which the silence, too,
Has slowed, tho it's still refining
—me, I'm down to prewar levels.

(DS 9)

If the cosmetic 'I' is "A structure of value as it decays in time," then it shares this important physical characteristic with both the eroding "wetlands and marshes" & with "Democracy's myth about itself" (DS 79). Here, in the very first poem of DS, "silence, too, / Has slowed" through the pipelines—what a fucking perplexing motion. It makes sense that silence would be drowned out by the sound of "the excess of our industry," but the fact that silence is *embodied* as a substance (even a commodity, to be

transported through pipelines) suggests that there's more at stake here.

It seems to me that these lines indict a tradition that so faithfully upholds the marriage of person and lyric. This tradition is consubstantial with big oil & gas in its attempts to successfully commodify 'self' by offering such a narrow view as to what makes sense in lyric work: "it's still refining / —me." This similarity is much more than incidental, more than simply a metaphor: the oil and gas industries have exerted a tremendous force on the official calculation of the dollar value of a human life in cost-benefit analyses. In 2008, this figure (then \$6.8 million) had already dropped by \$1 million from just a few years prior, facilitating (among other things) a relaxed standard for the construction of pipelines in populated areas.¹ The fallout from Hurricane Katrina would no doubt have been lessened were it not for the value of human life having become so profanely calculable in the terms of late capitalism.

That it would be *silence* that's "still refining / —me" (still shaping the traditional lyric 'I' —and with the force of an industrial lobby) is an appropriate critique of how impossibly tangled person and lyric have become. As an ideal quality of lyric 'voice,' silence remains extremely problematic—and when the purported goal of such a voice is epiphany, 'silence' is nothing short of fallacy. But then again, the alternative to epiphanic lyric has been posited as another kind of silence in Oppen's "Clarity in the sense of silence" (NCP 175)—& how else to understand a resistance to explanation? As much as its disappearance might be mourned amid the din of industry's excess, silence seems always to carry with it a potential threat.

Near the end of *Disaster Suites*, a figure appears that names this threat, that puts a face on it:

This morning feels what lingers falls
—whose bodies clot the white remove
Lying wedged embedded pools
Lustrum hides our naked stark—

We're touting sky's all-purpose pack
—stiffing up the friction lubes
And opens nothing's pink patois—
Mouthing punks the war with want

To touch my longing eons come and
Goes touch want in longing songs
—our organs dreaming products sink

Guns our silent blocks for broke—
Failing under inquiry stress
Thru which the words

—*white phosphorus*.

(DS 70)

This is perhaps the most sustained engagement with the work of Emily Dickinson in your recent books. If "it's still refining / —me" was a Dickinsonian turn (the dash that doesn't behave, that misleads a reading), the metrics and final slant rhyme in

“This morning feels what lingers falls” are nothing short of your best Dickinson drag, a cosmetics shaped on her concerns. Your “white phosphorus” reads like a torqued, contemporary rendering of her “White Exploit,” “the *White Heat*,” “that White Sustenance,” and, finally, most directly, the “Vesuvian Face.”

“White phosphorus” is a cosmetics on the “Vesuvian Face” of our current disasters. The idea of ‘bodies’ in the lyric being so contested, “white phosphorus” attempts a redirection of lyric work so that it can be seen as a question of grave concern for our daily bodies, “as if these bodies counted, as if they really mattered” (DS 82). If cosmetics thicken (in) a contested space, if “all contested spaces sort / The rules of place enclosing units” (DS 62), then here is lyric as a matter not of person, but of organs, meats, and skins.

The figure of “white phosphorus” sounds the depth of the danger posed when silence is offered as among the best alternatives to what Oppen referred to as “political generalization” (SP 32). In its military use, white phosphorus is a smoke-screen munition used to mask movement—but it also functions as an incendiary device. So it’s both a mask & a weapon that produces fatally deep chemical burns on the bodies of those exposed—both a cover and a means of eating down through a cover. The threat of the refining force of the pipeline is clearly replicated in this figure—it conceals an ominous movement, imperils us (by “refining / –me”) without our knowing in the first place to be on the lookout.

“–bombs come to mind as selves // Sleeves clusters” (DS 53).

A split lark is what happens when one “opens nothing’s pink patois” (DS 70). The nightmare “I / Dreamt a conquistador & his top ground meat cruising aisle / Eight singing I want this one skinless” (DS 62). Cosmetic me/-mbranes re-/member a wreck of literal skins & meats. The lyric, then, is figured as a non-site where inter-textuality can operate as a form of interception, eavesdropping, even informing (there is a war here), as against Oppen’s transparent or silent “clarity.” The cosmetic as where ‘I meet this trouble of “disaster [having] already made the world all repellent surface, allowing for no traction” (DS 79-80).

If *Weak Link* is any indication, neither the poems of *Disaster Suites*, nor “the conditions that make them readable” (DS 79) have disappeared, though new strategies for confronting those conditions have taken shape. In *Weak Link* the cosmetic me/-mbrane seems finally to threaten to unleash its own disaster, allowing itself a kind of monstrous birth: “[...] residual subject // [–] ≠ an unstoppable irruption, my tailbone, poking thru environment, a skin // [–] ≠ undoing what the war forces /// –weakening the links” (WL 5).

Could this be the crowning of the cosmetic ‘I’? A hopeful, if terrifying, birth—“to which one might be permitted an unreliable witnessing” (SSS, “Time of Command,” 16)...

What better way to name the permission I’ve sought (& taken) here.

–C.J. Martin, Lockhart, TX, 07/01/09

Notes

¹ Seth Borenstein. “AP IMPACT: An American life worth less today.” *San Francisco*

Chronicle: Thursday, July 10, 2008. <<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/n/a/2008/07/10/national/a110546D37.DTL>>

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CONCEPTUALISMS DIARY

LAURA MORIARTY

March 13, 2009

Dear Diary,

At AWP in Chicago. Poets everywhere. Haven't been outside the building once since I arrived. They say it's cold.

The SPD bad poem contest is going pretty well, though having "the worst Flarf poem" as a contest category has caused me to have to explain Flarf over and over again. Yes, Diary, it is ironic.

People are wearing shirts with "Subject" on them. Nice.

Christian Bök and Alana Wilcox stop by the booth a few times. Egged on by Alana, Christian submits a highly competitive piece in the "poem intended to lead to sex" category. "Hello, my name is Christian Bök."

I think we should have a joke contest. Jokes were my first poems. My father could tell jokes all night without stopping.

April 1, 2009

A guy walks into a bar. It's a conceptualist bar but he's a conceptualist guy. He knows he can't get what he wants here with his good looks. He knows not to mention Mineola Prep, though he went there. He appropriates the drink of the guy next to him who knows better than to complain, but then spits it out. It's not a joke but a trick. A schtick. He is aware that the bar is an allegory of his art practice but he is really thirsty. That's when he sees the giraffe.

May 8 2009

An email solicitation arrives from Vanessa Place and Laynie Brown to submit to an anthology of conceptual writing by women. I am surprised because I wouldn't have thought of my writing as conceptual. I mention the email to Brent, somewhat perplexed, and he tells me about the new conceptualism. Laynie and Vanessa encourage a response and submission even if one does not consider oneself a conceptual writer.

The openness of this invitation recommends the project. I decide that I actually do know what conceptualist writing is but then I wonder if I really do. I wonder also if I am one and if not what I am but, of course, I already know what I am.

This brings me to *A Tonalist*. At this point, it is a while since I have thought of *A Tonalist* but now the book will be published by Nightboat and Kazim Ali has asked me to write an afterword. When I first started writing the poem *A Tonalist*, there was a lot of explaining and I always seemed to explain it differently each time.

A Tonalist refers to work that has existed for a few decades such as my own and that of Norma Cole, along with newer work by Jocelyn Saldenberg, Taylor Brady, Brent Cunningham, Standard Schaefer and others I read and see. I began to write a long essay poem called *A Tonalist* in 2002 and started an eponymous group blog in 2005. There were somewhat heated exchanges between Flarfists and *A Tonalists* on the blog. At the time I don't think Kasey Mohammad, Gary Sullivan, Nada Gordon or others who think of their work as Flarf exactly identified as conceptualist but I might be wrong.

In writing about *A Tonalist* I have used the word "lyric" but then fellow *A Tonalist* Brent Cunningham warned me that the word has implications that don't really relate to the sort of anti-lyric-lyric that I am interested in. Eventually I realize he is right. I start using the phrase "highly prosodized syntactic unit" but then I forget to use it, though these units are what I continue to write and to find in work by other *A Tonalists*.

May 26, 2009

Notes on Conceptualisms mysteriously appears on my desk. It is a nicely designed bright blue book and I am not surprised to find that it was published by Ugly Duckling. As I glance through it I begin to get the first traces of the headache one might get when encountering a new poetry movement that one isn't in. I tell myself not to jump to conclusions. The sense that the kind of writing I do might not be allowed within a context that claims to be post-creative or post-lyric is familiar to me from the publication of my third first book in 1980. I chide myself not to succumb to a kind of poetic PTSD by assuming a belief on the part of others that what I do is "so over." I come to the index in the back, not to look for my name, but to wonder through who is there. I find a few people I have written about or consider *A Tonalists* like Renee Gladman and Yedda Morrison.

It occurs to me that *Notes on Conceptualisms* might be, in part, doing something similar to what I've done in *A Tonalist*—defining a kind of writing and then extending it out to include other kinds of writing. Place and Fitterman define conceptualism as loosely as I do *A Tonalist* or more accurately they don't define but contextualize it. Conceptualism seems more real or at least to involve writers who are happy to identify as Conceptualists, whereas I have found few *A Tonalists* willing to so identify. Of course *A Tonalists* don't have conferences, but maybe we should.

In retrospect I remember the various conceptualist writing conferences and realize that there are quite a few poets—I can think of some younger ones around here—who I think are conceptualists. I was vaguely aware of all of this but don't usually go to conferences or pay them much mind. I also notice that I know many of the people involved and their work. Looking back I realize that I didn't connect Rob Fitterman's *War, The Musical* with Kenny Goldsmith's books or later to those of Vanessa Place or

to her press Les Figues when they started at SPD in 2006. My head was certainly in the clouds.

June 1, 2009

Suzanne Stein and I begin a discussion of a manuscript of hers of talk performances that partly revolves around what I think I can accurately identify as a conceptualist sense that appropriating an essay is a useful and in fact essential part of the project. The talks themselves, or they are more like poems, seem entirely conceptualist and it occurs to me that performance isn't really discussed in the *Notes*. Rather, a level of performance seems to be assumed. I am crazy about Suzanne's manuscript but resist the use of the essay. We go round and round about it. I think about what might constitute an effective conceptualist gesture. Reading the manuscript and aware of her other work, I realize that Suzanne is A Tonalist and conceptualist at the same time. I wonder if this is allowed or even possible. I suspect it is, though I perceive that it will sow discontent in the breast of the person so burdened—if that is not a mixed allegory.

June 4, 2009

Brandon Brown writes about *Notes on Conceptualisms* on his blog, "HI." He focuses on the idea in the book of "failure." He resists "failure" in relation to translation, seeing it as evoking the betrayal that occurs with bad translations. As per the song, "Sometimes bad is bad." But he does appreciate "the assassination of mastery" which is another phrase in and idea from the *Notes*.

I connect "failure" with my sense of "doubt" in A Tonalist. I remember everything about A Tonalist now because I have written the afterword to the manuscript called "A Tonalist Coda."

June 6, 2009 D-Day

Am I in the last generation that will remember this as D-Day and recall uncles being injured or losing their lives on the beach?

June 18, 2009

Friday Harbor, San Juan Island, WA

Felled by a vacation cold in, however, a lovely hotel, I finally have time to read and take notes on the *Notes*.

I am interested in how the use of definitions, quotations, examples, directives, aphorisms and, well, notes allows the *Notes* to propose multiple narratives for the making of the literary object. Sometimes I think I see everything as a novel.

Notes on Conceptualisms could also be the commonplace book of the conceptualist writer, as she is writing or, it is a case, the notes for a case, a legal brief with aspects, details, precedents all laid out, prioritized and numbered. Like a brief, the *Notes* have a side.

Visual art is the precedent or, at least, a precedent. Identifying with the protagonists, we appropriate, reproduce and copy—not only phrases but whole categories of intellection. We philosophize. We identify and prove, quoting experts. There are many of those. We eliminate the subject replacing it with a multivalent “subjectivity.” But, wait, haven’t we been down this road before?

At this point, thinking through my reading of the *Notes*, I literally become dizzy with déjà vu and a kind of dread. Didn’t we already get rid of subjectivity? All around me in the 80s subjectivity was being ditched by Language poets and experimentalists who weren’t exactly Language poets and Jackson Mac Low and, really, so many people. I agreed to everything back then only to argue that the subjectivity was not removed when certain surfaces of writing were obviously characteristic of certain people and reflected their ideas, personality and agenda—so who were we kidding? And to this day it really is both ways for me.

I also have déjà vu—admittedly A Tonalists are prone to this—about the allegory conceptualist connection. It is a long story but I can’t quite remember it now. Much in the book seems a restatement of thinking about the word and the sign and the image that feels like part of one’s experimental patrimony.

July 1, 2009

Today was the deadline to submit something to the conceptualist anthology being edited by Vanessa Place and Laynie Brown and published by Les Figues. Realizing that I had already written an essay I decide to send them “A Tonalist Coda.” I do and suggest that I could write a conceptualist introduction. Vanessa replies saying yes send it.

July 6, 2009

I have been very busy this week, thinking about writing movements, not to mention working at SPD every minute, trying to catch up after being on vacation. I sent “A Tonalist Coda with a Conceptualist Prelude” to Laynie and Vanessa. I don’t think I fully explored the allegory aspect of the *Notes*, to which I am much drawn.

Okay—as a basic definition—allegory can mean “moral tale” as in Aesop or simply “image that stands for a concept,” as in, well, let’s say Reubens, though we could say Goya, Delacroix, Duchamp or many other artists. For a long time, allegory becomes “disreputable,” as it is called by Marcia Tucker, Director of The New Museum of Contemporary Art, when she wrote the preface for a 1987 book called *Blasted Allegories*. In the introduction to this book, editor Brian Wallis explains that he has assembled the narratives in it to find the stories of artists silenced by the modernist idea that the work of art is enough. He cites Deleuze and Guattari’s assertion of Kafka’s sense of “minor literature.” Wallis notes that “the role of the ‘minor,’ is one in which a specialized, local language serves to challenge or disrupt the structures and confidences of a dominant language... Thus, one important question for the artists included here is not how to gain access to accepted forms of literature, but how to recognize language which is relevant to the issues of their particular community.” I wonder if this 80s use of allegory to include narrative of communities is related to the *Notes On Conceptualisms*? To some degree the emphasis on community makes it seem similar but the search for stories and the presentation of specific stories of the communities as opposed to any other kind of reference to their issues makes it seem different.

A decade or so ago—after *Blasted Allegories* came out and with the book in my head—I wrote an essay called “The Last Allegory” for a symposium on allegory at Cranbrook Academy in Detroit with Mary Lucier and Richard Tuttle. The plan was to focus on my own work and that of Carla Harryman, Norma Cole and Jerry Estrin. After pouring through endless texts about allegory, I had wised myself up to the symbol/allegory thing, investigated the metaphor/allegory connection and had discovered a few interesting and artful discussions and examples, as in *Blasted Allegories*. Many were negative because folks seemed to love to hate allegory. There were also a few allegory nuts, like chaos theory obsessives, who tended to see allegory everywhere, surely leaving them with a tough row to hoe in their universities. Of course it was everywhere and I began to see it too.

“The Last Allegory” became rather tangled and was never published. Possibly, it was a glorious failure. At the time, I was unused to writing discursively and made the rookie mistake of trying to include too much, but it wasn’t completely my fault. Maybe it wasn’t even a mistake. The nature of allegory—how it is like language in that the distances between allegorical levels evoke language’s function of referring—was the problem. It was both a problem and an opportunity, as they say. I didn’t comprehend allegory so much in writing the essay as I was seduced by its ubiquity. Things could be something and something else at the same time. It was exactly how I saw the world.

I began to look in contemporary writing and elsewhere for what I thought of as central allegories. My new allegorical perspective chimed nicely with my longtime interest in art history. As a young woman, I had been in several “happenings” where the participants had brought allegorical painting to life—all day, naked, under the influence of various substances, in an idyllic setting in the Sierra foothills. The impact on my young self of being one of the Seven Deadly Sins or a fierce representative of West Coast Art in these events was great. Because of that experience, I tended and continue to tend to see writing practice, art movements, literary groups and other phenomena as allegorical. John FitzGibbon, my teacher at Sac State and the artist who put on these events, had worked with Joseph Kosuth in, I think, the sixties—note conceptual artist allegory connection.

I return to *Blasted Allegories* and find another joke. This one by Richard Prince:

I went to see a psychiatrist. He said, “Tell me everything.” I did, and now he’s doing my act.

July 17, 2009

Alli Warren and David Buuck read at Books and Bookshelves. I enjoy Alli’s new speechiness. I like David’s reading which consists of jokes in an initial performance and then a long piece about war. Later I find it online in *Narrativity* but then, checking with David find that the piece which was called “Despite,” is now called “Bearings For Grid Work.” This is the last paragraph of the new version:

One narrative theory is that one never dies in writing. The writing cannot in actuality provide safety. It is a machine desiring its own apocalypse. In actuality it is its own social being, desiring its own narrative theory. Here it is now, stretching out into the distance, held up by its social bearings. Agent A disappears into the rabbit hole, bottoming-out into dream-work. Agent B transcribes the grid-work into underground histories. Agent C is writing itself onto the imaginary plane. The script has yet to be finished. It’s already happening. Action.

July 19, 2009

Vanessa Place and Peter Culley read at The New Series at 21 Grand. All day I have been looking at the *Notes*, a book of Vanessa's called *Lies*, and online at multiple items, thinking through and making notes on the *Notes*. I write a page or so of what I think will be the essay I have promised Michael Cross for *ON*.

At the reading, I chat with Vanessa about the reception of challenging work. ("Conceptual writing is annoying." *Notes*) She mentions a recent conceptualism conference in Europe where it was refreshing that the issue of conceptual writing not being writing at all didn't come up. This connects with my belief that one reason to use the word "conceptual" is to ask for the same attention and patience that is given to conceptual artists. I agree that the writing world tends to be very conservative.

I realize Vanessa makes her living as a lawyer. This doesn't surprise me. She reads from (I think) testimony from a case. She says later that what she has read is a matter of public record. It is about child molestation or, alternatively it could be about being falsely accused of child molestation. She reads numbers referring to other pages with the text. It is effective.

Peter Culley and I talk about growing up in the military. His experience seems to have been more exalted than mine as his father was an elite submariner. His work seems like highly prosodized syntactic units and I think it is probably A Tonalist, but don't bring it up.

I don't go to the bar afterwards but hear there was some ranting about the *Notes*. I feel a strong sense of compassion for writers who react very strongly to the book. It seems to be a reaction you would expect more to a straight out manifesto than I think the *Notes* is. I really value the passion of such a response and would bet that Vanessa and Rob share my value for it—though of course it is not fun to be ranted at.

As I am friends with Erika Staiti, who seems to have been the chief interlocutor in this exchange, I ask her about the *Notes* in an email. I think of her as a conceptualist and figure that her closeness to the issues is the reason she has such strong feelings about the whole thing. Erika replies in a generously long email, objecting to what she identifies as "hype" around conceptualism but with some surprisingly positive observations about the *Notes* themselves:

the book i think is fine in some ways and in other ways i think it's dangerous. i liked the aphoristic quality. i liked that it was called "notes." that it came out of a conversation. there are nice little gems in here that have got me thinking in new directions. i like that. it's fine. . . . it's hard for me also because i like it for the same reasons that i don't like it. i like the notes, aphorisms, the fact that it's a starting point. but i am a little disappointed because it feels lazy. it doesn't feel rigorous enough. so i know that's a contradiction because you can't be all "note-y" and also be rigorous. i feel like they assume that their readers already have some idea what they're talking about. i don't understand that because the list in the back gives me the impression that this is a book that might introduce someone to the term but the whole rest of it gives me the impression that they presume you already know.

I love her use of the word "danger," because it makes the stakes seem as high as they are—let's say "the future of poetry" or, to go back to that old gesture of combining the genres and eliminating that prissy word "poetry," we could say "the future of writ-

ing.” Erika’s point about the lack of history and explanation of conceptualism which, being so jaded and all, I hadn’t caught, is interesting. Rereading the *Notes* to look for this lack of explanation, I find I like it because it gives you a field to work in rather than a set of instructions. It doesn’t define but suggests. I know from writing *A Tonalist*, that leaving things out is a strategic way of not going over all that old territory with all those same people in it yet again. You choose some influences and celebrate them, failing to mention others, and it creates a particular frame for the work and ideas you are presenting. It’s not scholarship, it’s persuasion.

July 23, 2009

Andrew Joron, active participant in both the Surrealist and A Tonalist communities, drops by SPD. I ask him if he has heard of the *Notes On Conceptualisms* and he hasn’t. Frowning, Andrew seems to picture conceptualist writing in his mind and asks why it would be of interest to me. I say that it is of interest because it is an act of group formation and that the book casts a wide net, attempting to implicate many who might not have thought of themselves as conceptualist writers. He looks doubtful.

July 24, 2009

Suzanne asks Brandon for his opinion on the appropriation issue in her manuscript and Brandon comes back with a very strong yes on including the appropriated material. I have been completely vanquished by these conceptualist ways. The obvious fact that writers, people, don’t easily fall into these categories occurs to me. I have made A Tonalist somewhat inexplicable as a category and, aware of the madness it can cause, I did not make a list of A Tonalists, though I am curating a group for a magazine.

July 25, 2009

I watch a doc on TV called “The Spartans” and muse that, by its nature, conceptualism seems like a new Spartanism, just as Language Writing did in its day. No more indulgent sentimentalism, forget the now, forget craft—of course one does hate craft—and get with the program. Here are the techniques. But I know I don’t quite believe that. I sense that Fitterman and Place aim to include a lot of variation and contradiction in these *Notes*. I use many of the techniques myself, though I suspect I fall into the use-the-techniques-but-isn’t-conceptualist category in which they place John Ashbery though I don’t exactly write like him.

Is the creation of an imaginary lyric “I” really the deal breaker here?

July 26, 2009

Nick and I run into Rob Halpern and Lee Azus walking on the Albany Bulb near our house. We discuss the *Notes*. Rob and I rant for a moment about emotion, lyric, allegory, narrative, theory and self—all of which we are yes/no about. Rob is passionate with a scholar’s take on the use of allegory. He has an A Tonalist and post New Narrativist’s take on the need for emotion and for what he calls “affect” with loving emphasis. He mentions *Blasted Allegories* and I feel happy that I have used the book in developing a take on the *Notes*. I think of it as a somewhat obscure volume which I have only because Jerry Estrin worked at the Berkeley Museum in the 80s when it

came out. I agree with Rob that there is in *Blasted Allegories* a possibly opposite use of the term or phenomenon or whatever allegory is though I secretly know I could be convinced otherwise.

July 27, 2009

I have lunch with Jasper Bernes. He seems pretty much in tune with much of what is in the *Notes* and is very positive about many of the books in the index. He doesn't really find what Fitterman and Place are saying new but we agree it doesn't claim to be new. He is not crazy about the whole allegory thing. It occurs to me that the *Notes* are written more for the common reader or maybe the uncommon reader than for the doctoral candidate who might long for the argument actually to be made. But then I wonder what I mean by this. I think I mean that the *Notes* are directed to the young unaffiliated writer, to the conceptualist herself. However, and perhaps this is a contradiction, I think they are also directed to the academy to provide the raw materials for a critique of a critique of a critique.

August 2, 2009

Brent and Melissa's wedding yesterday. Poets everywhere.

There is live music by Lindsey Boldt and David Buuck at the wedding, romantic oldies and then music for dancing which seems to become more contemporary as the night goes on. It occurs to me that we are surrounded by music. There are many kinds of music. It would be difficult for me to want to play this conceptualist music because my alacrity is elsewhere, though I have played a conceptualist tune or two in my time. I too like to be annoying but in a different way. But who gets it when I do this in my work? (Okay, I can picture the ones who get it completely and occasionally am surprised by savvy new readers. Thank god for being my age.) Still, I like the way conceptualists are doing the work of framing themselves, of creating arguments, threats, assertions and challenges to other writers and writing. I like that *Notes on Conceptualisms* is upsetting.

August 2, 2009

Recovering from my post wedding migraine, I find I must think rather than write, so I think of John Cage. Place and Fitterman seem to be a bit tired of him. His books are foundational for me but I can see being tired of what could be thought of as a sort of chance triumphalism. I use chance in my work a lot in the form of incessant self-interruption and by proceeding with the sound or letters in words rather than with the meaning. I wonder if this counts? Maybe chance is passé. I appropriate, but these days I often write the "appropriated" material myself rather than finding it. This clearly won't count. I remember being at a dinner near the end of Jackson Mac Low's life where he seemed to reject his many chance manipulations in favor of just writing. It was a wonderful moment. There is no better way to have it than both ways.

Then there is the question of readers. Is it not the duty of the writer to find her readership? Traditionally we say no to that question, valuing stories of the obliviousness of poets to their potential audience, but these legends are disingenuous. It is entirely appropriate and a fuck of a lot of work to focus attention on your own writing and that of writers you read. Objecting to a successful attempt to seek an engaged readership

is not useful. The success of exacting that attention doesn't produce value in the work, other than economic value—as I know as a bookseller—but it also doesn't negate its worth. But what is this value anyway and how can it be measured? How to establish value is one of the issues of the literary world and not likely to be solved. It's more like a practice than an issue, involving daily decisions. Personally I appreciate compromise and I really like contradiction. So if you claim to be against capitalism and then clamor for sales or other capitalist fruits, I won't mind.

A positive review of *Notes on Conceptualisms* comes out on-line in *Octopus Magazine* #11 and I sense it is written by a young writer who hasn't been endlessly down this road before. The reviewer is Karla Kelsey and a little googling reveals that she is in fact this imagined youthful enthusiast. She provides the history of conceptualist writing that the *Notes* don't and then worries that:

in pluralizing conceptual writing to include elements such as interest in subjectivity and investment in improving the resulting written object, Place and Fitterman water down the ultimate value of conceptual writing practices. Rather than shrinking away from this worry, Place and Fitterman ask themselves: "Do these broken promises point to a failure in a conceptual writing text?" The answer that they give is: "Failure is the goal of conceptual writing." So, in virtue of the fact that they fail to achieve the goals of "pure" conceptualism, "impure" conceptualisms gain a place within the movement.

Kelsey's concern might be another way of stating my feeling that when Place and Fitterman focus on the particular conceptualist writing that is like their own work, I am most interested in and impressed by the *Notes*. Conceptual writing in that narrow sense seems to be happening in a way that makes a lot possible right now. It even has the power to annoy people who are pretty used to Language writing. And yet, I continue to appreciate the impulse to be inclusive, not always present in every "movement."

Ron Silliman reviews the book very positively in his blog, saying it is an "imposing" project whose "impact will be profound and lasting." He also says it's not new—I think this is about "reference" in Place's essay—and points out connections to the Language School. It makes sense to me that he would respond in a positive way, respecting the assertion and the work of putting it out there. There is a part of his post about the book being small, fitting in his pocket and taking on the shape of his butt. Allegory or symbolism?

August 4, 2009

I have to admit that Fitterman and Place's use of visual art terms such as allegory, baroque and conceptual to refer to aspects of writing resonates for me. In a book of mine from the 80s, *Rondeaux*, there is a set of what I call "Baroque Poems." I did a lot of reading in relation to that idea back in the day. Tonalism, of course, was an old kind of misty landscape painting from the turn of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, though my use of this forgotten and discredited term seems almost opposite to the application of conceptual to writing. Atonalism in music has its own history though I think it is not well known among writers. Still, it seems completely appropriate for conceptualists to appropriate the term "conceptual" as it seems entirely to apply to the techniques used and frames the work nicely, possibly even making it more legible to a fickle public. I am less enthusiastic about the extension of conceptualism to apply to writing that uses few of the conceptualist moves described in the book, having

spent some time counting the angels on the head of that particular pin, but what the hell.

I am caught up on the very end of the "Notes" part of the *Notes* and what they call "a crisis in interiority." I notice there the brief ascendancy of Joseph Kosuth as a sort of straw man or king for a day who is deposed and then rises again. Kosuth's role as an early figure in my own artistic cosmology causes this both climactic and anti-climactic end to work well for me. When I studied with John FitzGibbon at Sac State he taught that life was art in the sense that I, naked on the deck of his houseboat, was as much a nude as I was a lover, student or poet.

We, in what used to be called the avant-garde, are not all conceptualists, or are we?

This brings us back to meaning, and the possibility of possibility.

This is allegorical.

In Vanessa Place's essay, "Ventouses," we are brought back to allegory and to the possibility that we are all conceptualists, if only on an allegorical level. An affinity for allegory is just one of many enthusiasms I find I share with Place in this engaging essay. As I read it and enthuse, I experience a last attack of déjà vu. I can't believe she is mentioning Lessing's *The Laocöon* which, along with Blake's *Laocöon*, has been of particular interest to me forever. I am also surprised but delighted to find W.G. Sebald here. Place thinks through the nexes of narrative, visual art and poetry in a way that feels revelatory but familiar. I feel excessively implicated by the points. I am so close to it I find I can't quite make out the argument. Actually, full disclosure, I rarely make out the arguments, treating philosophy and criticism either like poems, for the language, or like novels, for the suspense of the big point at the end. Like Sebald's discursive fiction, Place's essay has a circuitous quality of thought as she relates visual and written art.

Place concludes "The art in language is formed content and contented form. For the fact remains that a thing is nothing imagined of itself, and a word is worth a thousand pictures. Use them all."

Okay, good. I can do that.

August 5, 2009

Diary,

Finally finished with the "Conceptualisms Diary" and found the time to read David Buuck's *The Shunt*. It includes jokes! He calls them "jhokes." Perhaps the "h" is for "hesitation." They are part of a series of performances David has been doing lately. The book uses a lot of the puns and self-similarity, close to puns, that many contemporary writers, including me, use to go forward in a poem. He does it really well. The book is mostly about war and the challenge of writing about it. I wonder how to think of Buuck in relation to conceptualism and other isms, deciding to bring up the subject the next time we are at a reading or, perhaps, in a bar.

A...man...walks into...a bar...says I'm...a...writer as...you can see...I have a...writing table...tablet...and...I...am...able to...provide...my own...support net...work...by...self dash...punish...publishing...I come to...the bar...in

order...to...think myself...under...the table...the bar...tender...pours a...gin
and...tonic...and...says...

August 6, 2009

Hiroshima Day

The anniversary of the dropping of the first atomic bomb on people makes me remember that Place and Fitterman mention the Final Solution in one of the last notes in the *Notes*. At first I wondered at this brief allusion to a mind-numbingly vast evil, but another way to look at it is that it is there in the background of any contemporary poetic speech act framed quoting Adorno, Benjamin and others in the book. Certainly it is not enough, but I am not sure what would be enough. Does their sense of failure mean that language, allegorically, is guilty? Does mine?

12a. transcript is a work of failure: the prosody used refers to a failed system (politics) of a failed humanity. A failure on all fronts; one that cannot exist save in its constant manifestation of constant absence—the citation without content, with partial content, with mutilated content. Language was the first strike of the Final Solution. Language was its eyewitness, and will be its shadow substitute, as supplementary texts/narratives (the play and work of words) begin to memorialize and supplant memory. This is the postcard-placard effective of history.

We are caught at the end with history and real life. It is no joke, Diary.

MISC. NOTES ON FLARF, CONCEPTUAL WRITING & C. (NOTHING IS NOW CLEAN SLAYNE BUT ROTTETH)

RICH OWENS

Q: What happens when a gaggle of middle-aged financially-secure nobodaddys tell an old boring joke as if it were new and not boring?

A: Their ponzi schemes are backed by cultural and economic muscle and richly rewarded. The Whitney. The latest issue of *Poetry*. Viz. whoever's got the cash can make it sing. Nothing tough or edgy in making cultural capital that challenges nothing sing like a nightingale. It always has the blessing of power.

Or:

GRANDMA'S EXPLODING DIARRHEA
=
GRANDMA GOT RUN OVER BY A REINDEER

The joke is safe—like a knock-knock joke. As such boring and old. We share these side-splitting, hilarious jokes with our grandparents over Thanksgiving dinner. These jokes are a species of gratitude that never go unrewarded. We give thanks by reproducing them.

And if we ironize the boring jokes our grandparents so admire?

Perhaps then we can share them with our grandparents *and* our friends and cop cheap laughs from both. We can stay out late, impress our pals with something resembling avant-garde “edginess” and at the same time climb into the good graces of the old folks at home. We can have our cake and eat it too. And we can say let them eat cake and boldly call it a shit sandwich because it really is a shit sandwich and our grandmother looking back on her own care-free days as a sprite middle-aged fleamarket giveaway will say, “Those zany kids. They’re a wild bunch. But at least they pay their bills on time.”

The joke is. Is why we pay our bills on time. Is what guarantees the interminable flow of bills. In other words, the same virtues we admire in the succesful sale of the joke are those we admire in Bernie Madoff. Ponzi schemes are nothing new. Like any appeal to avant-garde practice they promise futures based on forward-looking projections engineered to fool and fail and reproduce themselves like rabbits. They gleefully enter into an already entrenched feedback loop and are in fact produced within it. Like capital. A feedback loop. They profit by it—are constitutive of it—are grist for the mist-producing mill.

The avant-garde is a risk taken at another fool's expense. Like financial markets, avant-gardes anticipate future outcomes. They anticipate anticipations of future outcomes. They make poorly informed investments based on the probability of these outcomes and when their far-sighted investments give way to catastrophic but highly profitable short-term results they're handsomely rewarded by the market and protected from their failure by the state. Their failures are regarded as forms of success achieved by way of a certain daring-do.

Put differently, what publicly announces itself as avant-garde through market and state funded megaphones scarcely ever is. Their daring lies in doing what others have done with the blessing of the market.

(NOTE: The spectacular failure of GM should not be considered apart from its decision to manufacture military vehicles—the Hummer—for civilian consumption. Responding in part to Arnold Schwarzenegger's desire for a street-legal version of the HMMWV, the American Motors Corporation began churning out a civilian version of the Hummer in 1992 and then sold the brand name to GM in 1998. Defending the manufacture of these super-sized, hyper-aggressive, utterly inefficient, economically insensible, rolling disavowals of community, Schwarzenegger exclaimed, "Look at those deltoids!"

It wasn't until GM was muscled into filing for bankruptcy and the Obama admin. insisted Rick Wagoner step aside as CEO that GM began brokering deals to unload the Hummer on China. Yet Wagner's disastrous reign at the helm of GM from 2000 to 2009 was rewarded rather than punished, allowing him to saunter into the sunset with millions. After GM lost \$30.9 billion in 2008 and accepted however many billions in federal bailout loans, Wagoner's salary increased by 35 percent. In 2007, after announcing the closing of four GM plants, Wagoner's combined pay rose 64 percent to a total of \$15.7 million for the year.

Here we find a cowardly form of failure which is in fact a smashing financial success for the engineers of this failure. To laugh all the way to the bank on the back of a destructive joke generated by market forces. The joke is called avant-garde. And like the civilian version of the Hummer, any notion of an avant-garde cannot be disentangled from its martial character. The avantgaird—the coward called hero—can never be considered beyond its relation to notions of leadership, aggression, power and, in the end, military conquest and domination. Shock and awe. This preceded the ground invasion of Baghdad. And this is what the cultural "avant-garde" call for? To be shaken, grabbed by the shirt collar, enraged, unsettled, disgruntled, disturbed and eventually awakened into new forms of consciousness by way of cultural hijinx? This is the joke. From Stein to Tzara to Fluxus to Warhol these challenges to dominant forms of consciousness and the sway of an unconscious grounded in the logic of capitalist accumulation have been for more than a century financially lucrative and economically sound. Warhol behaved like a ruthless investment broker and we worship him for it. There's a marked difference between a rhetoric of struggle and the rhetoric of military aggression. And any identification with an avant-garde or commitment to innovation paves the way for a promising career in the culture industry.

Introducing flarf and conceptual writing for the second or third or thirtieth time in the current number of *Poetry*, Kenny Goldsmith situates what he claims are two "movements" as "two sides of the same coin." Are these social or cultural "movements" as

such? Where does Eurocentric economically-privileged coterie end and the expansive popular appeal of a “movement” begin? Are these “movements” global in scale (and do they cut across internally differentiated communities) or is this simply another artificially-constructed self-appointed center presenting itself as representative of the whole (viz. the bulk of contributors to the feature are grounded in the US)? Is disjunction really “dead” or is it a strategy that continues to offer different but nonetheless productive ways of grappling with similar or shared concerns? Must one practice be disavowed, smeared and disarmed in order to valorize or identify the usefulness of another? This either/or logic is oddly reminiscent of Bush admin rhetoric (i.e. you’re either with us or you’re with the terrorists) and curiously in alignment with the ill-tempered, bourgeois rhetoric of avant-garde manifestos from the nineteenth century on.

For Goldsmith “digital environments” set flarf and conceptual po apart from other approaches, allowing this “new writing” to “continually morph from printed page to web page, from gallery space to science lab, from social spaces of poetry readings to social spaces of blogs.” Fuck. This just seems like a negligibly small part taking credit for the work of the whole. If we can bracket out the digital divide and issues of economic privilege, who in the whole of the western world is not producing work that “continually morphs” in this way? Kamau Brathwaite’s *x/self* provides a powerful and well-known early example of the overdetermined relation between digital and print technologies Goldsmith insists characterize *this* (viz. his) “new writing.” If we consider contemporary letterpress production, much of it wouldn’t be possible without digital technologies (i.e. the electronic transfer of photoshopped image files for the production of photopolymer plates used on otherwise obsolete proof presses). Who isn’t aware of the interplay and confluence of conventional, obsolete and emergent technologies that make the present multiplicity of poetics and poetry communities possible?

The insistence that this writing is fundamentally “new” is itself nothing new and in fact disguises in an especially pernicious way commitments to unnamed traditions and tendencies (i.e. the fetishization of newness and innovation that emerges with the rise of industrial production and consumer culture; the slavish privileging of a temporality that destructively pits a hastily discarded past against a recklessly misread present and ill-conceived future).

Nihil Novi. WCW remarks somewhere or other that the avant-garde is nothing more than a set of stubborn peasant loyalties. An uninterrogated fidelity to innovation is undoubtedly one of these loyalties.

But if this writing is “new” in some fundamental way (recall the necessity of newness as an indispensable category for Adorno in *Aesthetic Theory*; his careful theorization of the new that insists on the separation of surface charm from deep structural differences), then how is it new? Plagiarism, poaching and citationality are practices old as the hills and were certainly coeval with the rise of Enlightenment commitments to authorship, copyright debates and notions of intellectual properties. Goldsmith tells us no practitioner of flarf or conceptual writing has written even a word in the conventional sense: “It’s been grabbed, cut, pasted, processed, machined, honed, flattened, repurposed, regurgitated, and reframed from the great mass of free-floating language out there just begging to be turned into poetry.” Based on this description, what appears to separate the “new writing” from, say, Eliot’s *Wasteland*, Pound’s *Cantos*, Benjamin’s *Arcades Project* or any number of Alan Halsey texts is that this work is not disjunctive or “shattered” but crammed “into towers of words and castles of language with a stroke of the keyboard.” In other words the practices Goldsmith regards

as fundamentally new are heaps of (presumably unedited, uncurated and potentially unread) signs. Heaps of them.

Referring to his *Historia Brittonum*, Nennius remarked in the eighth century, “I have made a heap of all that I could find.” In this heap are any number of indeterminacies, ambiguities and contradictions that Nennius was arguably aware of. David Jones, a disciple of Eliot’s, begins his *Anathemata* with this quote from Nennius and then, after an unusually long preface not unlike those found in works of conceptual poetry, invites us to enter into his impressively complex and contradictory heap of information. But in the case of conceptual writing and flarf it’s unclear what is particularly new beyond the use of digital technologies (for instance, how can we not see the continuity that cuts across procedural conceptual works like Jackson Mac Low’s *Words and Ends from Ez* and Caroline Bergvall’s *Shorter Chaucer Tales* or Steve McCaffery’s “The Property: Comma” and Christian Bök’s “Great Order of the Universe”?)

To beg the question again and again: what makes any of this new? Unrelenting critiques of subjectivity (a deep skepticism of identity, expressibility and sincerity)? These have been with us for — wot — more than half a fucking century, as have investigations of flux, fluidity, indeterminacy and undecidability.

Beyond insisting on the newness of the new writing, Goldsmith also leans on “materiality” as a concept. But he seems to confuse it with perhaps mass or excess. In the production of digitally produced excess (viz. the “repurposing” or “regurgitation” of excess information in works like *Day*, *Traffic* and *The Weather*) Goldsmith believes “Materiality, too, comes to the fore: the quantity of words seem to have more bearing on a poem than what they mean.” In other words, not representation or signification — no exterior scene or self mediated through a seemingly transparent system of signs and corresponding referents — but a sort of truth to materials as old as Mondrian and Stein. Appeals to notions of materialism and materiality get a lot of play these days, but when a figure like Žižek refers to himself as a materialist philosopher he means this in the post-Hegelian sense (arguably the Marxist sense precisely *in spite of* his early critiques of Marx by way of a Hegel filtered through Lacan). But what Goldsmith seems to mean by materiality is grounded in the quantity/quality split, matter over mind, body over spirit, etc. Investigations of materialism and materiality in the present moment typically refuse or trouble this split and seek rather to consider the overdetermined relation between the material and ideological conditions of existence (that is, the *relations* of production are recognized as *material* relations. Materiality as a concept usually addresses much more than simply the product manufactured by way of these relations. In any case — given Warhol & c — attention to “materiality,” citationality and reproducibility is in itself nothing particularly new.

Google: what flarf folk do with search engines, wiki technologies and other web-based applications Ashbery, Bruce Andrews, Bern Porter, Charles Ives, Carl Ruggles and innumerable others have done with print objects and sound texts.

At bottom there’s nothing at all fundamentally new about the “new writing.” The new boss bears a striking resemblance to the old boss. Perhaps defetishizing innovation and directing attention away from newness and toward shared concerns or sources of pleasure might be the most innovative thing any contemporary writing could hope to achieve.

If we think about Lang Po as an Anglophone “movement” or (richly heterogeneous)

tendency we don't have to look too hard to find calls for innovation and newness (Ron Silliman's *New Sentence* being the obvious example). But for my money the most useful catalog of Lang Po concerns and achievements appears in a 2007 academic book review by Steve McCaffery and mentions neither innovation nor newness but instead the practices that emerged out of a culturally specific historical conjuncture. Reviewing Jennifer Ashton's *From Modernism to Postmodernism* for the summer number of *Twentieth-Century Literature*, McCaffery critiques Ashton's narrowly defined view of Lang Po and writes:

A contrived textual indeterminacy was but a single facet of Language poetry, a facet alongside a critique of voice and authenticity, an embrace of artifice, a laying bare of the method of production, a preference for heteroglossia over monoglossia while at the same time rejecting narrative modalities, and a general critique of instrumental language under capitalism, mass mediation, and the consciousness industry—all key elements in its early theorizing. Moreover, fragmentation, disjunction, grammatical transgression, and catachresis are...modernist tactics reincorporated in a different historical moment...

Beyond associating with Lang Po *all* of the characteristics (except use of digital technologies) that Goldsmith suggests separate flarf and conceptual po from earlier tendencies, McCaffery avoids the rhetoric of innovation in this description of Lang Po's concerns and achievements.

Recall Goldsmith's January 13, 2009 posting to the Poetry Foundation's *Harriet* blog—a post saturated with nostalgia for an early twentieth-century avant-garde he identifies himself with, unabashedly referring to himself as an “avantist.” Comparing the economic and political contours of the present moment to those that characterized the shift from roaring twenties to depression era thirties in the last century, Goldsmith buys into the utterly untenable split between high art and low art, good art and bad art, illegible or difficult work and intelligible or popular work. He predicts *this* historical conjuncture (marked by Obama's tenure as president) will yield a base and terribly unsophisticated populist order of cultural production. For him this moment recalls “the exile of adventurous art during the Depression when intelligibility wiped innovation off the map...”

The crucial terms in the statement are of course “intelligibility” and “innovation”—terms Goldsmith sets up as mutually exclusive categories. Here intelligibility is equated with the low, the popular, the seemingly readable—in other words, forms of culture so dummed-down that a slobbering rabble untrained in the arts can apprehend and delight in cultural objects produced by formally trained intellectuals and artists. But Goldsmith would be the first to point out that such intelligibility, such accessibility, is itself only an illusion grounded in the notion of a mythic popular audience, a mythic popular reader, a mythic masses. What Goldsmith seems to fear most is that artists and writers, scholars and critics, will buy into this myth. By buying into the myth of a popular intelligibility Goldsmith believes we foreclose on the possibility of popularizing—or exposing the rabble to—*authentic* forms of cultural and artistic innovation (i.e. formal techniques that can somehow be authenticated by an advance party, a messianic few, and then set apart from those forms that aspire to reach a seething mass of idiots through intelligibility). Goldsmith situates innovation and newness in a privileged position, one that attempts to conceal the relation between the culture industry's lust for innovation on one hand and the market forces that rely on appeals to innovation and newness on the other. Goldsmith also fails to point out

that what Peter Bürger long ago referred to as an historic avant-garde—an avant-garde historically located and responding to specific situations—stood in aggressive opposition to the institutions and institutionalization of art. In other words, the very same avant-garde of the nineteen teens and twenties that Goldsmith nostalgically looks back to worked in fact to destroy the cultural institutions Goldsmith presently supports and depends on.

These notes necessarily incomplete. And at the Niagara International Airport a few days back I saw an adolescent dragging a set of clubs after what must've been a lovely stint on the golf course in Myrtle Beach. He wore a shirt with a smiley face, smile turned upside down into a frown and a tear rolling down the cheek. The text above the face read "CHEER UP EMO KID!"

Aside from wondering what's especially innovative about Gary Sullivan's Brain-ardesque comic in the *Poetry* mag flarf feature, I also wonder how dated, banal and completely inoffensive the emo joke is. For a community that fetishizes contemporaneity and innovation, it's surprising to find such an old boring joke still in circulation. Emo = bowdlerized pejorative for emotionally needy bourgeois kids that first emerged as a subgenre of music with DC's Rites of Spring in the mid 80s. Later what? K Records? The mid-90s Olympia scene? In any case, a handful of the records sit here within arm's reach but in the end a genre I was never particularly fond of. In its present usage, a community of kids (adolescents? or for Sullivan confessional poets committed to bankrupt notions of creativity and self-expression?) that make a delightfully easy target.

yawn

Like spitting on a scrub at the front of the cheese wagon, who of *any* consequence will come to their defense? Isn't this what the culture industry wants, produces, demands — that ridiculing, hyper-competitive cultural mirror of market forces that privileges muscle at the expense of those without? Where's the courage, the risk, the avant-garde bravado, in ridiculing a defenseless and (evidently for Sullivan) vaguely defined community of poets, artists or knuckleheads otherwise shoved around by hyper-masculine frat boys, high school football heroes or former cowards with a narrow slice of cultural and economic clout? This is precisely the sort of Malthusian survival-of-the-fittest approach to cultural production and criticism that greases the gears of the market. These approaches are always rewarded. Big fucking surprise.

posted by damn the caesars at 11:47 AM

Addendum

An earlier draft of this essay was posted July 2, 2009 at <http://damnthecaesars.blogspot.com> and was foremost—as it appears here—a response to Kenny Goldsmith's introduction framing the flarf and conceptual writing feature in the July/August 2009 number of *Poetry*. But this response is also built on careful consideration of several other comments produced by Goldsmith, with special attention to the following: the talk given at the Conceptual Poetry and Its Others conference hosted by the University of Arizona's Poetry Center in May, 2008; a January 13, 2009 posting to the Poetry Foundation's *Harriet* blog; the introduction to the "Flarf vs. Conceptual Writ-

ing” event held at the Whitney April 17, 2009. To clarify some of the points made here *without* covering my tracks I have decided against revision and in favor of notes.

There’s no such thing as a single shooter. What concerns me here *is not* the work of Goldsmith or flarf or conceptual writing specifically—some of which I’ve long been grateful for (i.e. Caroline Bergvall’s philologically-oriented work) and some of which I find, as Goldsmith might say, “boring boring” (i.e. most flarf). Instead what primarily concerns me is a tendency in the arts encapsulated in the *tactics* poets, artists and writers often appeal to in order to legislate and guarantee the terms of their own critical reception. These tactics are strikingly similar to those appealed to in marketing campaigns. The logic of these tactics insists that when operating within the limits of a market economy the valorizing rhetoric that packages a product must render competing commodities obsolete. So I take issue—at least for the moment—not with the product as such but the active construction of the frame wrapped around it. The most pernicious but seemingly harmless of these framing tactics is a destructive pretense to newness—the claim that a given figure or movement has produced work or developed a practice that signals a fundamental rupture separating new from old, past from present, craft (i.e. labor; the work of bodies) from art (genius; the work of minds, managers and leaders).

I make no claim to authority in *thinking* this problem further. But I do insist on the destructive character ensconced in claims to newness and innovation—and also in identifications with *the* avant-garde, a singularizing concept that places the burden of cultural research and development on a vanguard community assigned (often retroactively) to carry us as all further as an internally undifferentiated civilization. While the work produced by artists recognized as avant-garde may deal in conceptual poetics, procedural or constraint strategies and investigations of indeterminacy articulated with critiques of Enlightenment reason and postmodern theories of subjectivity, the concept of the avant-garde as such tends to be deployed in the singular, as though there were only ever one internally coherent forward-looking avant-garde raging toward the future in a single-minded and linear fashion like an unstoppable juggernaut. Further, theorizations of the avant-garde—sometimes packaged in Marxist terms or aligned with critiques of global capital—often refuse to responsibly account for economic, cultural and geographical difference, allowing non-western *and also* class-specific “popular” (or “legible”) practices within the west to be contained and effectively ghettoized under the mantle of an ethnopoetics, ethnomusicology or cultural studies. “Legibility”—the bogey man aligned with notions of the “popular” and the “mainstream”—is central to theorizations of the avant-garde for *popular* writers like Charles Bernstein and Goldsmith and demands consideration.

But the concept of an avant-garde itself is deployed in a number of contradictory and troubling ways it may be useful to address. In one sense the avant-garde stands as a self-conscious fundamentally western social formation grounded in specific forms of cultural production—that is, since the early twentieth century there has never been a shortage of artists in Europe and the US that identify themselves and their work as avant-garde. Many a lucrative career has been built on identifications with an avant-garde. In another sense the avant-garde is an organizing category into which artists and works are absorbed and situated in opposition to mainstream culture, official verse culture, school of quietude poetry and other strategically positioned straw men that mask the mainstream status of the avant-garde itself. Consider the “Recantorium” Bernstein read at the conceptual poetry conference in Tucson and then again in Buffalo at the symposium organized around Raymond Federman’s 80th birthday. The poem—a mockingly ironic apologia renouncing the “obscurantist” critical work of Language poets and praising authenticity, sincerity and accessibility—shores the fury

of what Bernstein himself might regard as an expression of white male rage against a largely imagined mainstream fighting tooth and nail against innovative, experimental and inaccessible poetry. If we concern ourselves *only* with National Poetry Month or the poets US presidents select as poets-laureate then perhaps Bernstein has a point. But if we redirect our attention to the Library of America catalog (which includes titles by Stein, Pound, Crane, Zukofsky, Stevens, Koch, Fearing and Ashbery) or the fact that Ashbery was selected poet laureate for MTV—or the amount of federal, state and private funding invested in “innovative” poetries—or simply the fact that poems by Bernstein himself have appeared in *Poetry*, *Harper’s* and *The New York Times*—then the “mainstream” Bernstein situates so much of his more vitriolic work against seems suddenly complex and even deeply invested in particular forms of illegibility and obscurantism. But most important is how the role of the mainstream as a sort of beating post for Bernstein masks his totalizing vision of poetry as a homogeneous forward-moving genre with shared concerns. When he rails against the mainstream he advances an idea of poetry with a capital P and leaves little if any space for the work of contradictory but mutually productive poetries. This notion of a curiously vague and undertheorized mainstream plays a similar role in Goldsmith’s sense of an avant-garde. Take the introduction to flarf and conceptual writing for the Whitney event in April:

Poetry is an extraordinarily conservative world. In fact, there still is an avant-garde in poetry. Unlike in the art world where, since the dawn of modernism, the mainstream has been the avant-garde, there are still two separate flows in poetry: the mainstream and the avant-garde. And the dividing wall is very big. The mainstream in poetry is very visible: every time you pick up the *New Yorker* and see poetry snuggled next to the cartoons, it’s mainstream poetry; ever Sunday when you peruse the *New York Times* Book Review and see what books of poetry are reviewed, it’s mainstream poetry. If you picked up a book of that poetry at its most adventurous, you’d get pretty much the equivalent of early modernist painting: a bit disjunctive, slightly dissonant, but with representation and sincere emotion fully intact. It’s usually competent and fairly academic stuff that neither challenges nor offends anyone.

For Goldsmith both poetry and its avant-garde wing are singular—each presumably identifiable through its relation to legibility. In this vision of a mainstream and its antagonistic avant-garde there is no room for difference and no space for internal differentiation. The statement assumes all artists that recognize themselves as such willingly participate in a linear forward-moving race toward some sort of undefined finish line and—as the Brion Gysin comment Goldsmith’s fond of quoting suggests—poetry must *catch up* to the plastic, performance and visual arts. Where the arts are concerned there is only a single temporality within which all work is measured by the hands of one clock. The implications of this rigidly linear sense of time (i.e. climb on board with the new or get tossed out with the old) are especially destructive when spatialized and mapped onto disparate cultural communities with different and often deeply antagonistic interests.

At the present moment—and arguably since the turn of the twentieth century—the museum and university industries, profit-driven and fundamentally bourgeois in character, do not refuse avant-garde work in any of the arts. They welcome, embrace and promote it. They sustain this work financially—have mobilized a complex system of production, distribution and consumption around it. In fact, the insistence within the avant-garde on its own illegibility—which stands in relation to its exclusivity and the *illusion* of its inability to be popularized—has deeply economic underpinnings grounded in class difference. Illegibility is the avant-garde’s stock-in-trade and commitments to this illegibility are to the avant-garde what grape scissors and bread forks

were to privileged Victorians: instruments of distinction.

Consider for a moment how avant-garde artists are lampooned and effectively interpellated through caricaturish representations of the avant-garde in network television and Hollywood film: from Roger Corman's 1959 *A Bucket of Blood* to the more recent Schoener family skits on *Saturday Night Live* a commitment to unintelligibility in the production of contemporary avant-garde art is always already assumed. In this way we find Bernstein, Goldsmith, mainstream culture and the market economy that drives it in curious agreement: avant-garde work *is* opaque, impenetrable, illegible. For decades now the avant-garde has *never not* been a perfectly hailed caricature of itself—so much so that one could reasonably insist television and film police the boundary between mainstream and avant-garde cultural production as enthusiastically as Bernstein and Goldsmith.

I focus here on the issue of illegibility because valorizations of illegibility—especially among avant-garde artists—tend to identify investigations of the unreadable with cosmopolitanism, newness, innovation and exclusivity while accessibility (or the illusion of accessibility) is aligned with the primitive, the provincial, pastness and the popular. We could add to this string of oppositional concepts *writing* (on the side of illegibility or avant-garde practice) and *speech* (on the side of mainstream or popular practice). In the US and the UK these distinctions tend to identify speech-based work with the primitive, the popular and the legible and text-based work with cultural sophistication and technological advancement. A discourse of race runs through these oppositions that intersects in an elusively overdetermined way with the economic. In fact, it is perhaps this same racialized discourse that would segregate the speech-based and largely class-specific poetics emerging out of the Nuyorican Café in the 1970s from writing-based Language and post-Language poetics in the US. The situation is similar in the UK where dub and other forms of performance-based work are entirely cordoned off from critical assessments of Linguistically Innovative Poetics.

There are of course slam and dub poetics that are entirely scripted or text-based (Tracie Morris in the US and Patience Agbabi in the UK come to mind) and there are examples of Language-based and “innovative” poetics that are speech or performance oriented (Hannah Weiner and Bruce Andrews in the US or Maggie O’Sullivan and Caroline Bergvall in the UK). There is also a tremendous body of important work by poets like Nathaniel Mackey, Steve McCaffery, Harriet Mullen and others—much of it decades old—that specifically targets and troubles the speech / writing split. We could even draw the lens back centuries earlier and articulate the present fetishization of avant-garde illegibility with the modern *textual* invention of popular and ancient orality during the antiquarian turn and rise of philology, looking at anthologies “edited” by figures like Evan Evans, Thomas Percy, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, FJ Furnival or John and James MacPherson. Whether romanticizing popular “readable” work or dismissing it as ideologically constructed drivel, those who command economic and cultural capital tend to identify the *ochlos*—both “the people” for whom one has affection *and also* “the rabble” one disdains—with orality, readability, pastness and simplicity while identifying themselves with writing (technology), illegibility, innovation and sophistication. A good deal of critical theory has called attention to the constructedness of this split, marking its limitations and identifying how this opposition between “singing and signing,” as Aldon Nielsen calls it in *Black Chant*, serves to construct and reproduce economically and racially encoded subjectivities that effectively determine the movement of real bodies in the world. But despite these investigations the avant-garde willfully continues to trip over its own work, falling back on deeply entrenched concepts that are neither challenging nor offensive but safe and profitable, offering the promise of a largely warm critical reception only a fool would dare refuse.

When Robert Grenier bluntly bellowed “I HATE SPEECH” in the first number of *This* in 1971—now nearly forty years ago—the declaration resonated among a small community of US poets as an axiomatic rejection of the authenticity of voice at a moment when the production of “mainstream” or workshop poetry was predicated on the assumption that the speaking subject was fixed and coherent and the medium of poetry—language itself—was a transparent veil through which one could accurately name, point, express, share, confess. But this aphoristic statement—one that distilled an immense and complex body of then-recent critical theory—responded to a *specific* historical situation, a particular conjuncture of social forces, that has since shifted and revealed a different set of contradictions that Grenier’s declaration is no longer capable of adequately addressing. Read outside the specific set of conditions that would give rise to such a statement, the declaration “I HATE SPEECH” performs differently, again inscribing and reinscribing the opposition that aligns speech with the primitive and pits it against writing as a technology central to innovative or avant-garde work. But the status of “speech” as we read it today is markedly different from the way such a word might have been read in 1971 and what is at stake in the difference cannot be overstated.

In the end what the contemporary avant-garde so masterfully conceals—even from itself *as* it builds work around theories of the constructed, unconscious or fragmented character of subjectivity—is its reliance on a highly essentialized and class-specific notion of genius. Genius is the elephant in the room no one wants to name for fear of ending the party. A notion of genius and the messianic (*reframed* as the ability to identify, read or produce illegible work) is what lurks behind these claims to newness and innovation.

Rather than consider the extent to which popular forms of cultural production might themselves be illegible, self-reflexive and delightfully difficult to the communities that produce them (i.e. Eskimo “throat poetry,” Shaker “visual poetry” or the typographically complex and semantically indeterminate work produced by everyone from anonymous graffiti artists to children manipulating information with wiki technologies and html editors), the avant-garde insists only on its own ability to identify and produce *productively* illegible work. But what most separates avant-garde work from popular *and* mainstream work (the avant-garde is always careful to hedge its bets by conflating the two) is not a thoroughgoing investigation of the aesthetic or its relation to capital but capital itself. Recognition (precisely *in spite* of careers built on the refusal of fixed identities), canonization (precisely *in spite* of critiques of canonization) and the flow of capital are what is at stake in claims to innovation. Instead of recognizing historically, geographically and technologically specific forms of cultural production as a collaborative or collectively constructed response to a particular conjuncture of social forces, the avant-garde insists on retroactively assigning credit to itself for leading the way within the frame of a single temporality. Work which is not properly illegible is dismissed as unproductive or irrelevant. Such work is usually considered craft (labor) and not art (genius). And even art that foregrounds labor—as many of Goldsmith’s projects do—privileges the concept, the vision, the form or frame of a work over the labor invested in it. In this way labor is subordinated to the concept, stripped of its intellectual capacity and utterly devalued. When Warhol aspires to be a machine and Goldsmith aspires to be a word processor both make a gesture toward privileging instruments that manage and administrate information in almost precisely the same way a manager might legislate the productivity of a workforce or an administrator the function and flow of a department. The scale and scope of Goldsmith’s projects—the insistence on administrative frames through which content is subordinated, contained and carefully reprocessed to perform in particular ways—mirror global economic developments specific to the rise of neoliberalism. I find this

reflectivity in one way very useful but in conjunction with Goldsmith's critical statements I also find it deeply troubling. From Ubuweb to *Day* to the series of introductions and blog postings that actively struggle to determine the reception of flarf and conceptual writing Goldsmith is careful to position himself as a managing or executive liaison—the frame (or more accurately the gate) through which forms of cultural production must pass or be turned away. Here I find myself—for a host of markedly different *and* congruent reasons—in agreement with Barrett Watten when he claims in “The Expanded Object of the Poetic Field” that “class relations are a ‘cultural logic’ in ways that filter down to a baseline of the aesthetic.” At a moment in the US when the industrial base has long since fled, labor has been devalued and executives continue to be richly rewarded for creatively mismanaging information in ways that ruthlessly consolidates the flow of capital it is not surprising to find that the virtues of management and administration are those most privileged by the avant-garde.

All of the concerns raised here need to be considered much further but my sense of the destructive ideological underpinnings of claims to innovation and identifications with the avant-garde is what it is. If the avant-garde as an operative category can somehow be recuperated—and I don't believe it can—I remain convinced contemporary practices that might fall under the rubric of a carefully theorized avant-garde would never disclose themselves as such.

DISLOCATION ORCHESTRATION IN THE WORK OF ROSMARIE WALDROP

EVELYN REILLY

i. an un-natural history

No ideas but in numbers.
Jacques Roubaud¹

I am surprised that Rosmarie Waldrop consents to the term “prose poems” for her many books of what might be better described as “investigations in paragraph-based forms,” or “experiments in pronoun-initiated meditations,” or taking “the temperature of a body of philosophy,” as she calls it in “As Were,” a set of extraordinary improvisations on the language and preoccupations of writers ranging from Leonardo to Louis Zukofsky.

Generally, I am resistant to prose poems. I miss the rush of radical compression; don’t much like the quasi-narrative pace. In poetry I prefer work that exploits the visual opportunities of the page-space. And I particularly like the poetics of the blank—from the minute synaptic space hovering at the end of even the most heavily-enjambed line to the phantom footprints of the “un-written” that haunt the interstices of Susan Howe’s “exploded” texts.

So when it comes to the work of Rosmarie Waldrop, I find I first want to remove it from the genre and assert that it has less to do with the history of the prose poem than with the quantitative formalism of many Language Poets. Emerging from a primarily constructivist, rather than expressionist sensibility, her writing participates in the renaissance of the former and the reform of the latter—both being major activities of poetry today. In fact, Waldrop’s essays contain some of the best articulations of this movement away from neo-romantic notions of “organic form.”² “It is the form that generates the content,” she writes, overturning the Olson/Creeley dictum “Form is never more than an extension of content,”³ but she does so without overstating the case, adding that the poems “were still about my mother.”

A typical Waldrop work is a serial poem in sections, each constructed of a set number of paragraphs, and each paragraph containing approximately the same “amount” of text, if not exactly the same number of sentences. In addition, each series has a distinctive rhythmic pulse, as well as more or less of an atmosphere of digression, analysis, or riding the waves of language. As an exploration of “writing in sentences” that ignores the category distinctions of poetry and prose, the work is nonetheless

marked by an unresolved longing for the more explicit spaces, gaps, and suspensions that line breaks and other visual techniques of page-composition make possible. In many ways, Waldrop's work is about finding alternative means for bringing such discontinuities into play.

In order to trace the development of some of these alternatives, I tried to assemble a kind of evolutionary typology of the Rosmarie Waldrop sentence sequence, starting with this early example:

If I were a mother I would naturally possess the pure crystalline logic which is the prerequisite and found in most well-appointed duals. Only, it is hard not to slip on the ice because there is no friction.

In this passage from *Reproduction of Profiles*, the first book of Waldrop's well-known trilogy (which was recently published in a single volume by New Directions), relatively normal grammar and syntax combine with an unexpected proximity of frames of reference once considered decidedly unproximate: "motherhood" and "logic" (or, more broadly, philosophy). This is an example of what Waldrop calls "semantic sliding" and also of her characteristic feminist gesture. The movement from "crystalline" in the sense of "purity" to "ice" points to the slipperiness inherent in preconceived notions of both motherhood and logic, as well as the risks of both, if deemed, or when desired to be, "pure." Finally, Waldrop conflates the biological (reproduction) with the intellectual (logic), by emphasizing the dual meaning of "dual" as 1) "duality" and 2) the dual/duel/duo of a relationship that may lead to parenthood—even as she rejects the "duel of duality," stating that there is, in actuality, "no friction" if the "body" is re-attached to mind, soul, cultural tradition.

The next passage is from *Lawn of Excluded Middle*, published nine years later, in 1993:

My love was deep and therefore lasted only the space of one second, unable to expand in more than one dimension at a time. The same way deeper meaning may constrict a sentence right out of the language into an uneasiness with lakes and ponds.

Here, apparently logical sentences turn out to inhabit several logics or "dis-logics," with time/space dimensions allowed to overlap with and call into question figurative language such as "my love was deep." The equation of physical depth and emotional profundity is cast aside in favor of an alternative "dimension" that might have, if not "depth," at least other means of expansion. Her concern seems to be that language such as "deeper meaning" may actually "constrict" rather than enlarge language/thought, and lead to an uneasiness in proximity to those features of the world that actually do have "profundity," such as lakes and streams (features that might, in fact, benefit by a more literal and less metaphorical attentiveness on the part of the language-bearing species).

In the next example, from the 1998 *Split Infinites*, shorter sentence-units lend speed and acceleration, something increasingly evident in Waldrop's later works:

To understand the full clearing as the young animal turns human. Coupling curiosity with upright for speed. Hands become intelligent, economics, incorporated into body temperature. Not necessarily for the best.

As the sentences become more phrase-like, the paragraphs (none of which are quoted in their entirety here) acquire more urgency and power. In their capacity to contain

and conflate language from many arenas, even within very brief passages, they manage to be both authoritative and deft, avoiding the occasional longueurs of the earlier trilogy.

In a final example, from the more recent *Love, Like Pronouns*, punctuation, especially the period, reinforces rhythmic and syntactic units, and adds to the impression of speed, even while introducing new species of gaps and discontinuities:

Forlorn visceral stucco. Begin frozen. Had I not skated under water? Serious other knee. Poor. Transparency already less sweat. Descends upon great junk onrush.

It is through this ability to assemble ever more disparate sentence-like fragments into paragraphs with a compelling forward propulsion, while also creating larger formal structures by extensive use of repetition-with-variation (which will be discussed in more detail below), that Waldrop begins to achieve some of the “orchestral” qualities that she describes in her essay “The Ground is the Only Figure”:

When eye and mind are interrupted in their travel, a vertical dimension opens out from the horizontal lines. Suddenly we’re reading an orchestral score as it were. No longer one single voice. A multiple meaning.

ii. gap-gardening and dislocation-orchestration

By Waldrop’s own account, what appealed to her in giving up the line break and other spatial strategies of discontinuity in favor of a paragraph-based poetics was a desire “for complex sentences, for the possibility of digression.”⁴ In practice, she explains, the breaks moved from the right margin to inside and between sentences:

I must try to move the vacancy and the mismatch from the margin inward...
I must cultivate the cuts, discontinuities, cracks, fissures...*inside* the semantic dimension. *Inside* the sentence.⁵

Note the verb “cultivate.” In the same essay, she calls this “gap-gardening,” a term that successfully evokes the “fruitfulness” of such strategies, not only for Waldrop, but for many poets experimenting with radical means of language-innovation in recent decades.

Why this exuberance emerging from a strategy of disruption, if not, at times, destruction? We write, Waldrop says, echoing Mallarmé, with “a whiff of the destruction that is the Beatrice of creation.”⁶ And maybe it is after all the “Throw of the Dice,” with its embrace of the contingent and famously elusive referents, that has continued to lead the way, standing as it does as the ur-text of a kind of writing that defies collapse into interpretation (the destruction of closure), that acknowledges that language writes itself as much as being written (the destruction of the notion of originality), and that embraces the page as a field for textual composition (the destruction of the left-margin-aligned stanza).

Waldrop’s language of cultivation, fullness, and gardening amid the gaps reflects this “constructive deconstructive” trend and its larger project of a liberating “dis-enchantment” of poetry:

For a fraction of a moment, this void stops everything. It suspends the assurance of statement to reintroduce uncertainty . . . According to Friedrich Hölderlin, the gap of the caesura, metrical poetry's additional locus of disjunction, blocks the hypnotic enchantment of rhythm and images.⁷

This is the rejection of the enchantment by which poetry participates in a fundamentally conservative role of consolation and repetition, of re-enactment and ceremonial enforcement. For many contemporary poets, this means a skeptical employment of metaphor, with its tendencies toward escapist transcendence, and a preference for metonymy, which serves as an anchor, through proximity, to the world and the "depths" of its lakes and streams.

But what does Waldrop mean by this "void," this "emptiness," to which she so continuously and strenuously alludes?

Some possibilities:

1. An emptiness that is nonetheless a place of writing, related to the Italian *stanza*—an abode, a place to stand. ("Four walls, like four lines, transform pure potential extension into a space, an empty space. The walls to lean on . . . as you face the emptiness within."⁸)
2. The space between languages. That which cannot be entirely filled or even bridged by translation. (Waldrop is a translator of the work of Edmond Jabès and Friederike Mayröcker, among others.)
3. The Freudian "oceanic." ("It is not true that I have no oceanic feeling. I have this kind of feeling about language."⁹) Or maybe just *the* ocean, the successfully-crossed "space" of the Atlantic. (Waldrop is German by birth, American by marriage to poet Keith Waldrop and by contribution to the cultural landscape.)
4. Not a "contained" space. Not a space with a core. A space of surfaces. (Waldrop quotes Merleau-Ponty: Not "the space *in which*, but the *means through which*."¹⁰)
5. The space "between voices," the gap that marks all communication, even if love is present. (Much of Waldrop's work is written as implied or explicit dialog between a "she" and "he," or is addressed to a "you.")
6. The relational space of Olson's "no longer things, but what happens BETWEEN things."¹¹
7. The void, the emptiness, that is a pointing toward God (which Waldrop entertains, but rejects: "[W]e must close our eyes to conceive of heaven."¹²).
8. The slightly different negative space with a pleasant Buddhist chime that makes an appearance in a certain line of mid-20th century American poetry. (Not especially pertinent in this instance, except as it connects to John Cage.)
9. The "nothing to say" of Cage's "Poetry is having nothing to say and saying it" —which, abbreviated, becomes the title of one of Waldrop's essays. (To which I would add his "Activity, not communication," "No split between spirit and matter," "Giving up ownership, substituting use," and also, "America has a climate for experimentation."¹³)

10. The womb, the empty womb, the womb as emptiness. (Yet even the “empty womb” can be figured as plenitude and possibility, as freedom—from norms, from a life devoted to sustaining others, from financial hardship—a loosening up of female space and time.)

11. The synaptic gap between nerve and nerve, across which occurs the “leap” of signal, switch, pulse. (“Thought is thought a way of capturing particulars the way nerves ferry impulses to the brain.”¹⁴)

I would argue that Waldrop’s work takes place in the space, gap, fruitful tension *between* all of these, in the coexistence of both “empty” and “full” gaps. Another way to say it might be that Waldrop’s work takes place in the “space” of the hypothetical, of the subjunctive—inside the “mood” of a verb that is perpetually “full” of movement, so that even in its references to emptiness the work multiplies the facets of that emptiness.

This is a fertility that is also a kind of negative capability, a being in uncertainty that logic might not “allow,” but where much of life and language happens—in her own words, this is the “lawn of excluded middle,” the space between supposed opposites where growth occurs.

Note, however, that there is no true abyss in this list. Waldrop’s void is a fairly decorous one. It lacks what Calvin Bedient calls the “*terra abjecta* of the negative. Nothingness, variously called negation, lack, absence, abjection, zero, inessence, and why not add Yeats’ terrible phrase ‘the desolation of reality.’”^{15,16}

In fact, for all her insistence on “tangible emptiness,”¹⁷ I find Waldrop’s statement that “the blank page is not blank”¹⁸ in many ways more pertinent to the actual writing, which is collagist in its genesis—her sources often being fragments from the work of other writers and philosophers—and which exults in a kind of happy plenitude of interaction. “No text has one single author. . . We always write on top of a palimpsest,” she says.¹⁹ Or, “Poets work on the language, and language thinks for us.”²⁰

Or, as I once heard David Antin say in one of his “talk pieces” — “Every word has hands all over it.”²¹

iii. the ripe apples of emptiness

*Between obedience and knowledge any child will choose the apple.
“Blackwards”*

“Sad, so sad, apples in Autumn,” begins one of the sections of “Blackwards,” a serial poem in *Love, Like Pronouns*, published by Omnidawn in 2003. In this case, the layers of the palimpsest are pulled back to reveal fruit previously handled by Keats, Milton, Newton, and, of course, Eve.

The epigraph reads “she speaks blackwards/no image will remain,”²² the strange word “blackwards” bringing to mind “backwards” or “black words.” Are these words that absorb instead of reflect light? Words that speak in the direction of the void? Words that lead to a final section called “And Sometimes I Stare Blindly” in which “At

the point of innervation, where the image reflected on the retina becomes sight, the eye is necessarily blind”?

Soon enough Eve, the original “backwards and barefoot” female,²³ given the choice between the apple-polishing of obedience and the nutritional value of knowledge, disobeys, and chooses both knowledge *and* the body, the great returning theme of Waldrop’s work:

Thought is so little incompatible with organized matter that it seems rather one of its properties, on a par with geometry. The apple she ate was satin green, sharp, sweet...Her soul sat in her brain, substituting inner for space.

Yet, “Sight is organized so as to prevent us from seeing its blindness,” just as language organizes its apparent “lucidities” in such a way that we are often prevented from recognizing its opacities. So, as O’Hara would have it, we just go on our nerves (or synapses). This is the trouble with, or challenge of, both language and brains.

And the socket of the eye surrounds the ball in so close a manner it derails the train of thought.

But what if the Pragmatists and the biologists are right, and both brain and language evolved to perceive what helps us better adapt to our environment, specifically the three dimensions of space and one of time that make it possible for us to live on this particular speck of dust? What then if the string theorists are also correct, and the universe turns out to actually have eleven dimensions? To face such drastic inabilities of perception will require a temperament and language of acknowledged unknowing. Perhaps this will be a new place for poets, in Waldrop’s case, one in which “Language is not a tool...but a medium infinitely larger than my intention.”²⁴

It is difficult to give a full sense of the orchestration of recent works such as “Blackwards,” with their fugue-like composition, in which phrasal units and thematic strands are interwoven in a pattern of repetition and variation within and across sections, and engage subjects and language from other poems. But as an example, the first section of “Blackwards,” titled “No Apples Here,” includes the following: “She had a telescope with which she viewed the heavens from her roof. Women are well positioned to focus on unstable subjects.” The apples (present even in their negation), the problematic issue of “sight” and of “the subject,” immediately chime with parallel passages in *Reluctant Gravities* and *Blindsight*. At the same time, new motifs are also introduced, such as the apparently autobiographical “I dropped my letter into the mailbox and walked toward St. Paul’s,” a statement that will be repeated, with alteration, in the very next paragraph:

What constitutes a body? What you keep, what you throw. Death fell savagely on the unstable subjects. She positioned me by the telescope for a squint at the stars. Hardly a recipe for begetting children. Our lives being now language, the emphasis has moved. More and more often I don’t arrive at the mailbox I set out for.

This paragraph in turn introduces repeating themes from previous works, such as the begetting (or not) of children, while putting forth new ones that will reappear in altered form in subsequent paragraphs. Cumulatively, the experience of reading these elaborately interwoven multi-part works, with their almost, but not quite, diagrammable structure of cross-cutting fragments, is of semantic sliding on a “macro” scale, coupled to what might be described as an “intellectual musicality.”

In "Blackwards," this expansive formal structure makes possible an "orchestral" work with multiple altering and recurring thematic strands: mortality, Africa as the site both of Eden and of some of the sourer fruits of current globalization, the situation of woman ("A Stinking Eden, a forlorn Eve.") and of man ("In both the infinitely great and small circles boys set out to rob the orchard."), science (especially understandings of our physical nature gleaned from molecular biology and genetics), the chemistry of love, and the "temperature of philosophy," which is, as always in Waldrop's work, exactly 98.6 degrees.

If these be the fruits of knowledge, long chosen over obedience, how much more abundant can the orchard be?

iv. Reluctant Coda

My intention was to end this essay here, but I feel I must acknowledge a surprising turn at the very end of "Blackwards":

The contract stipulates drowning. If we were truly able to see the blind spot in our eyes we would see nothing. Which some call God.

I want to ignore this seeming flirtation, after all, with the notion of "filling the gap." But how, given its emphatic position, the coy "some" contradicting in some, but not all ways, this "last word"?

It makes me wonder if perhaps I've been mis-reading Waldrop, and in fact, it is emptiness number 7 that's going to win out in this long career, a swerve, after all, in the direction of the transcendent.

I, for one, hope not.

Notes

¹ Quoted by Waldrop in her essay "Form and Discontent," reprinted in *Dissonance (if you are interested)*, University of Alabama Press, 2005.

² Especially interesting in this context are the essays "Helmut Heissenbüttel, Poet of Contexts," "A Basis of Concrete Poetry," and "Form and Discontent," all reprinted in *Dissonance (if you are interested)*.

³ Waldrop, however, like others, points out that the actual practice of Creeley and Olson in many ways contradicts such a proclamation.

⁴⁻⁷ "Why Do I Write Prose Poems," *Dissonance (if you are interested)*.

⁸ "The Ground is the Only Figure," *Dissonance (if you are interested)*.

⁹ "Split Infinite," *Dissonance (if you are interested)*.

¹⁰ "The Ground is the Only Figure," *Dissonance (if you are interested)*.

¹¹ Waldrop notes that this phrase from Olson's "Projective Verse" is actually a para-

phrase of Alfred North Whitehead.

¹² "Lawn of Excluded Middle," section 7, pdf available at www.durationpress.com.

¹³ John Cage, from the introduction to *Themes & Variations*, 1982, reprinted in *Post-Modern American Poetry: A Norton Anthology*, 1994.

¹⁴ From "Admiration of Animals," a section of "Blackwards," in *Love, Like Pronouns*, Omnidawn, 2003.

¹⁵ Calvin Bedient, "The Predicament of Modern Poetry (The Lyric at the Pinch-Gate)," *Chicago Review*, Spring 2006.

¹⁶ This is especially interesting given the fact of Waldrop's birth in 1935 in Germany to parents sympathetic to Hitler, a fact of which she has written on numerous occasions. I tend to think that in this case the fact of birth turns out not to be the determining factor in her writing, even though certain works such as "Split Infinites" and her novel, *The Hanky of Pippin's Daughter*, address her childhood. By all accounts, it appears instead that the young Rosmarie Sebald was someone truly "liberated by the Americans," in her case, by meeting the GI Keith Waldrop and getting the hell out.

¹⁷ "The Ground in the Only Figure," *Dissonance (if you are interested)*.

¹⁸⁻¹⁹ "Form and Discontent," *Dissonance (if you are interested)*.

²⁰ "Alarms and Excursions," *Dissonance (if you are interested)*.

²¹ This is my memory of part of a David Antin work presented at Poets House in Fall 2003.

²² Claude Royet-Journaud, translated by Keith Waldrop.

²³ Also of note are the lines in *Reproduction of Profiles*: "You said it might be different if we were able to stand outside logic. I knew by this you meant: barefoot." These were brought to my attention by Linda Russo in her talk "Spaces too wide to reach the next word: Gesture and Gender in Rosmarie Waldrop's Poetry," given at the CUNY Conference on Contemporary Poetry, November 2005.

²⁴ "Thinking of Follows," *Dissonance (if you are interested)*.

“THE PROCESS OF WRITING THEM IS WHAT CHANGED ME”¹

ON STACY SZYMASZEK’S WORK(S) SO FAR

MICHELLE TARANSKY

Stacy Szymaszek may mourn the loss of the singular. Cry out that the self collides (and colludes) with multiple personas, pronouns and bodies. Like Oppen before her, Szymaszek is looking for “the meaning of being numerous,” for a self that is not a myself, but an ourself that chooses to, and then finds, connections.

In Szymaszek’s work, the poet is not an I, but both the I and the persona (James in *Emptied Of All Ships*, Eustace in *Hyperglossia*); the poet and the other “filter[ing] myself though the Roman poems of Pier Paolo Pasolini”² (in *The Pasolini Poems*); the I that can only “find a lyric after 100 hours of staring”; the I where “one known through anecdote vanishes.”

Szymaszek brings in the outside, emptying the authority from the personal and replacing it with a relocated conversation both in and of the crowds. The individual and individuality are cast aside here as the perspective performed in the poems is not positioned as *the* perspective but as many perspectives that are layered and unstable:

“to be both more than I what I am or less than what I am”³

As Szymaszek expands the field of what may be available for inclusion in poems, she challenges the splitting of the world into the known and the unknown, the private and the public, event and aftermath, the body and the state. Pulling in the outside of the self, Szymaszek’s work makes a place “where intercourse can occur, while another part of her soul begins a new adventure in form and in name” — a present commons where the act of writing, being a “twiner of speech” and a “sayerer” is what may change you.

In an interview on Ray Bianchi’s “Chicago Postmodern Poetry” (chicagopostmodernpoetry.com), Szymaszek discusses the relationship “internal and external” source material in her writing process: “I need to relate to the book—nouns, adjectives, images, object, ideas—while I’m making a community of words in this other field.” So too do the ways Szymaszek scores her work call attention to the drawing from different places/times/mouths/tongues into one object/locale/breath—what constitutes the particular poem as site of disclosure and encounter. “[I]n my version,” Szymaszek writes, “I see from a variety/of angles.”

Szymaszek’s poems draw from and stitch together disparate bodies of source materials into an other field that pushes forms of lyric and elegy up against facts, testimonies, and record. “I was once a private person before this,” she confesses, where

“this” is the need to identify, explain and repair a present “value in no ledge/I mean knowledge.” Recognizing that the “same noise” may be heard “under/ different conditions” is also recognizing “my figure / within / it’s landscape” — that one’s practices are able to configure a circumstance.

Not unlike a source book of potential procedures for figuring out how we have been figured, Szymaszek models re-formations of community via re-imaginings of language:

“to grasp protocols of public speech, body language, and garment and wanders in and out of commerce and solitude with a set of difficult motives, such as: to elude detection and to find company”

For Szymaszek, finding one’s company entails finding what “is common” and yet asking “who can say they.” This is what Charles Bernstein would call a poetics that imagines “the public square, the town green, a Central Park of our poetries, where, leaving the solitude of sustenance of our rooms or communes, we might jostle against one another, unexpectedly mingle, confuse our borders: reconfigure ourselves, reconstitute our affiliations, regroup.”

As the title of Szymaszek’s newest collection, “Hyperglossia,” suggests about the attention of the personal—the condition of “glossia” refers to speaking in tongues, and “hyper” to bridging points within an entity non-sequentially—being in the company of Szymaszek’s work where “accretion leads to household” is to find company in a many-tongued house “where residence” is held.

Hyperglossia introduces a form that is able to acknowledge and perform the choral, jettison the actual from the possible, jump from ship to other sinking vessels, and make a “model of a city within a city” to configure “entry into another ledger” of the aftermath as a particular tonguing. By enacting instead of representing, Szymaszek speaks to, from, and against the bruised states by evoking said and unheard, glossed over, omitted, and erased speeches. This is a writing that diagnoses and instructs how the body and its parts may be constituted by discourse: by that urgent “speech-producing anatomy” as a practice that configures a circumstance.

Notes

¹ from <http://www.kickingwind.com/5406.html>

² from <http://www.kickingwind.com/5406.html>

³ from <http://xpoetics.blogspot.com/2009/03/cynthia-sailers-introduction-to-stacy.html>

CODE\$WITCHING

PRICELESS POETRY IN THE BAY

DAN THOMAS-GLASS

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Jasper Bernes's *Desequencer*, out this spring from Suzanne Stein's TAXT press, presents the unknowable as the already-known, exploring the dialectic between the sublime and the mundane. The impossibility of the human genome, both the organizing and disorganizing principle of the poem, is in the chapbook's concise introduction the mid-20th-century's dream of an absolutely administered subjectivity, the final gambit of internalized oppression: class codified as "*species*," class in the genes.

The poem's distrust for these codes is evident in its treatment of the nucleotide letter sequences. The first page takes the letters—themselves already abstractions of molecules, as Bernes points out in the introduction—as an absolute series, with the first accepting the code even down to the syllable:

1. [TGCCGGGGTG] / Target circles. Gone grey, gone "good," that's game

But quickly this paradigm, the words as directly expressive of the genes, decays. By the end of the first page, a letter (gene) goes unexpressed, and "life" opens and closes in the space left by an em dash:

21. [GTGCCACCG—] / Gastrins, glycines crowd a code calqued ~~life~~

From here the poem heaves into less coded terrain. We find a log of days sometimes in the manner of scientific notes, at times tied to the letter sequences (with the As, Ts, Gs and Cs bolded) and other times not, days themselves unsequenced (first 24, then 17, then 59, then 34), days in a lab with paranoia and patients. Beckett's *Endgame* meets Barthelme's *Game*:

Day 89: Lab meat airdropped into the courtyard: Memorial Day for the fifth time this week. "If I have to sit through another aromatherapy session," says Neil, "I swear I might start reading again." They lock him down. Which doesn't stop any of us from having his dreams. Because of the magnets, yep, for the shooting blindness and the red headaches. When I get out of here, I'm a kill the first lepidopterist I can find.

Day 1: No markings on the elevator buttons, smooth and unadorned as flattened pennies. This should serve as sufficient warning, but I'm too busy trying to figure out if we're moving or not, moving as I think we should deep into the safe center of the earth.

If the mark of a successful poem in this post-language era is the ability to set the terms of its own legibility, *Desequencer* is certainly a success. But it refuses to accept even this rubric: the mantra of *Desequencer*, as it were, is the decay of coding itself. Each new code—from the nucleotides to the logs, even to the use of white space and the page as a boundary—gets switched. The moment an analytical movement becomes familiar it is irrelevant, supplanted by some mutation of text (and so, of reading). This mimics as it resists the circulation of capital; apertures of new markets (on the globe, in peoples' brains) dependent both on infinite expansion and planned obsolescence. And the poem crows in this brief aporia:

Dear System: Your carbons, bugging, five carats per gigabyte—no rule in the code's rule, only a die, a tool looted of use, a stalled knot of command without dimension.

The code, a "tool looted of use," becomes the symbol of its own emptiness—impassable, inexpressible, "a stalled knot." There is "no rule in the code's rule"—the ambiguity between rule as noun and rule as verb pointing up the poem's corrosive affect, its reflexive attack on its own process, rules and rulers a pair equally worthy of distrust.

By the end of the poem, a quote from Alan Badiou's *The Century*, embedded and nearly lost in a mass of Gs Ts As and Cs, wonders about epistemology and ontology in a world in which "science knows how to make a new man." The genome project is of course a large part of that blueprint, and though the Badiou quote ends "profit will tell us what to do," the poem's labor, the crumbling of the coding that precedes the quote, suggests at least the possibility of a different epistemology for the 21st c.: one in which the programming of life by capital is desequenced, leaving a subjectivity "rifted with if, with not," potentiality achieved through the work of the negative.

00000000000000000000000000000000

Of course, there is another meaning to "looted of use," one which points toward Bernes's familiarity with Karl Marx's *Capital*.

Marx explains what he calls the "Fetishism which attaches itself to products of labour," or what has come to be more commonly known as the commodity fetish, as a process whereby the use-value of an object is lost:

...the labour of the individual asserts itself as a part of the labour of society, only by means of the relations which the act of exchange establishes between the products, and indirectly, through them, between the producers. To the latter, therefore, the relations connecting the labour of one individual with that of the rest appear, not as direct social relations between individuals at work, but as what they really are, material relations between persons and social relations between things. It is only by being exchanged that the products of labour acquire, as values, one uniform social status, distinct from their various forms of existence as objects of utility.

The transformation from the concrete object and its function to the abstract value through exchange is what creates the commodity-as-fetish—a thing that seems to have a social relationship to other things (it is easy enough after all to compute the relative values of iPods and lattes, for example—or in Marx's terms, boots and linen).

Marx's essential point is that we relate as people through these objects—our interactions become material (or monetary), while the commodities appear to exist in society with one another, all reducible to the same “uniform social status” through value.

So Bernes's code “looted of use” could be understood to be any commodity out there, or just the form of the commodity itself, all things related to one another on the scales of dollars or yuan rather than function. In *Desequencer's* introduction, Bernes reads the desire for the codification of class as symptomatic of capitalist society's “knowledge that the difference between those who do and those who do not own things is nothing but the history of theft, violence, lies.” Put another way, capitalist society is aware that there is a uniform social status for *people*, not just for things—this connection of everything with genes. To make class into species is equally to code the commodity into the molecules of the human bloodstream: in either case, the desired product is the suppression of this “bad conscience,” the erasure of human connection in favor of relations between things.

Desequencer, as previously stated, is a product of Suzanne Stein's TAXT press. TAXT is one of several Bay Area presses and publications (including David Brazil and Sara Larsen's *Try!*, the Nonsite Collective, and *WITH + STAND*, among many others) currently sketching the outlines of a local DIY aesthetic, one with an emphasis on free exchange. As Stein put it in a recent email:

TAXT was [...] born to publish the underpublished, the local, and I gave them away free (as I'd been already doing with other, less formalized iterations of my work and others), as a way of pointing up the fact of the gift economy that poetry is.

This gift economy (which, as Stein points out, is the actual state of most poetry, since poetry books and journals rarely make back their production costs) resists commodification by disrupting presumptions about value. Marx explains that “the character of having value, when once impressed upon products, obtains fixity only by reason of their acting and re-acting upon each other as quantities of value.” For Marx, acting as a quantity of value is “a necessary preliminary to the circulation of commodities,” in order that “they acquire[...] the stability of natural, self-understood forms of social life.” To paraphrase: commodities must consistently be exchanged as values for value (and the commodity) to become a basic patterning of social life. The move away from value in the exchange of objects calls into question the role of value in exchange, a questioning that can be unsettling to capitalist subjectivity. Again, Stein's email:

Something that's been infinitely interesting about TAXT being free has been watching the way people negotiate that fact. Some feel deeply uncomfortable about accepting them for free. Money is a way of finalizing relation in this exchange of course, and what the press resists.¹

This disruption of assumptions around value is echoed in the insistence by many of these presses and publications on the visibility of the labor process—often using production practices (home printers, staples, duct tape, etc.) that highlight the physical work of creating the objects. Unlike what Marx calls the “money-form” of value, which “conceals, instead of disclosing, the social character of private labor,” these poetry objects assert over and over again the centrality of the labor of their production and the social nature of that labor.²

At this moment in the Bay Area there are a myriad of poetry and art objects (and the labor that went into these objects) being distributed to the community for free. In

this, perhaps, the DIY scene enacts what Marx envisioned for communist exchange, in which “the labour-power of all the different individuals is consciously applied as the combined labour-power of the community.” Both for Jasper Bernes’s *Desequencer* and for the press and community that produced it, this communal approach enacts a refusal of value (or profit, or capital) as the only code through which to pattern existence.

Notes

¹My own experience in giving *WITH +STAND* away for free parallels this account. Both Suzanne and I have noted a particular desire to “at least pay for postage,” as though production can be free but circulation cannot possibly be.

²As Stan Apps wrote of *Try!* on his blog last year, “I don’t know how you get this zine other than being there when it’s being handed out.” Social to the last: *Try!*’s only web presence is an email address.

NOTES ON: HOLES & INTERTEXTUAL ALIMENTARY WRITING

JOCELYN SAIDENBERG'S NEGATIVITY

ROBIN TREMBLAY-McGAW

There is a hole in Jean Genet's *Our Lady of the Flowers* "an evil smelling hole, beneath the coarse wool of the covers" (3). Jocelyn Saidenberg takes one of *Negativity's* three epigraphs from *Our Lady*:

I wanted to swallow myself by opening my mouth very wide and turning it over my head so that it would take in my whole body, then the universe, until all that would remain of me would be a ball of eaten thing which little by little would be annihilated: that is how I see the end of the world.

There is a hole in Jocelyn Saidenberg's writing. It might be called negativity, or perhaps, being. The writing circles, digs up, collapses, digests, gathers, falls or is pushed into and out of the hole. As the Genet quote suggests, negativity might be about annihilation in and through negation of self, the universe, being. This version of negativity lacks the zen-like comfort of, say, Wallace Steven's "Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is" from his poem "The Snow Man." In Jocelyn's work negativity is dirty rather than pristine; it is voracious and also powerful and enabling, perhaps even particularly so, when via *détourné*, it takes language once an epithet and repurposes it as in this quote from "In this Country," a collaboration between Jocelyn and Robert Glück: "Suddenly I spring together. For the stain, in this country, the powers of the negative shape the limits" (51). This is one way some writers and bodies digest history, culture, self.

Another related version of negativity might be found in the work of Rob Halpern in his *Disaster Suites* and in Halpern's collaboration with Taylor Brady in *Snow Sensitive Skin*. These writers, while using evocative and resonant language, often mobilize their negativity in critiques with specific contemporary and political references as in:

highways for the troop transports and refugees, burnt rubber, cocaine and consequence slip beneath the tepid water, pound the organs out of shape. Along the rippled bottom we go fucking up each other's little patch of grassy lea. Hand to hand is holy, horror, stretched across a gated nation in a human chain.
(from "Theater of Moral Terror" in *Snow Sensitive Skin*).

Jocelyn's analysis of human catastrophes proceeds more obliquely. Her theater is a smaller one and less tethered to the overtly political. By this I do not mean a diminution of her project, but rather a description of its staging grounds. Camille Roy put it best in a review of *Negativity* that appeared in the *Poetry Project Newsletter*: "the brutality of American self-regard is located in the relation of self to self and that is exactly the relation that Negativity disrupts."¹

As I re-read Jocelyn's *Negativity* in the midst of a foray into thinking about what an ethos of being in poetry or writing might be, I find that the very acts of reading and intertextual relation and the digestive and alimentary figures found there are suggestive.² There have been a number of explorations into thinking poetry's relation to politics and ethos by various writers including Rosmarie Waldrop, and New Narrative writers Robert Glück and Bruce Boone, to suggest just a very few of the many. More recent explorations include Jonathan Skinner's *Ecopoetics* and Anne Boyer's "On a Provisional Avant-Garde." In the blogosphere of late, discussion about poetry and the latest "New Thing" has been lively and contentious. I want to explore how *Negativity* might propose another direction (because there are always many) that some current writing is moving toward: an intertextual relational writing that is intimately tied to the body and its physiological processes, including and perhaps particularly the processes of digestion and alimentation. Can I call this an intertextual ethos? Diet for an intertextual body? Corps ethics? An intertextual alimentary writing?

In Jocelyn's writing, as in much of the work I most enjoy, the writing advocates re-readings. Reading is itself part of the writing's alimentary processes. Maybe this emphasis on reading and intertextuality is not new in poetry, since writing that foregrounds intertextuality and figures of reading is ages old (Augustine, Dante, Shakespeare, etc.), but it does describe a body of writing that has as its foundation a highly self-conscious intertextuality, one that is also invested in not losing sight of the material body and its location in the social. But, then, maybe I'm just describing New Narrative writing. Robert Glück describes New Narrative as a "hybrid aesthetic, something impure" and about his own work, he writes "I wanted to write with a total continuity and total disjunction since I experienced the world (and myself) as continuous and infinity divided" (29). Jocelyn's writing certainly partakes of the hybrid and the impure, charting the continuous and infinitely divided self in an intertextual and physical corps. Possibly, what's distinct here is the inscription of the alimentary—the swallowing, the eating, the masticating, the nourishing, the shitting and its composting. For "corps" read the body, for Jacques Lacan's *le corps morcelé*, or the body in fragments, for corps as in a group, a corps of dancers or a body politic. The corps is also military in its associations, a contradiction with a ballet corps (though doesn't classical ballet sometimes glorify military spectacle?). I don't want to elide these troubling difficulties. I don't want to suggest eating or being without shitting, or even, violence: "There is the well inside the well to number the dead of yesterday and tomorrow, killed and eaten by another, the dead of yesterday and tomorrow" ("Bird of Prey"). The social and the physical are mutually constitutive sites of complex dilemmas.

For a number of contemporary writers (Tisa Bryant, Maggie Zurowski, Harryette Mullen, Dodie Bellamy, Yedda Morrison, Kathy Lou Schultz, Rob Halpern, etc.) at the forefront of their work are the strategic and highly articulate and conscious acts of intertextuality and reading—in all of its forms and targets or objects: the daily news, novels, songs, visual art, etc. Jocelyn's epigraphs for her book serve as markers in a labyrinth of other texts for readers to turn to while we dwell in negativity, however capably or incapably. A text that is founded on the intertextual—in this case, *Negativity*—advocates that entering the texts it has included in its textual body and out of which it is partially constituted, is productive and generative, a form of nourishing if also sometimes violent social participation, as even a meal may be. This corps or intertextual world is predicated on relation and proposes in its composition, the selection of its companions at table and sources, each of which carry with it highly specific and yet socially located histories, cultural milieus, and temporalities. At the same time, this corps or intertextual world is conscious of its relation to a writing machine, an alimentary canal, the person at the keyboard or with a notebook, someone who has a body and relationships to disparate categories of delimited identities with respect

to specific cultures, languages, diets. These coordinates are always already in relation to and with a cacophony of other cultures, ideological systems, empires of signs and worlds of discourse.

Negativity begins in dusk “Dusky, or Destruction as a Cause of Becoming,” and like Dante’s *Inferno*, the text and we as readers and the “I” that sometimes speaks but always undoes itself, are on the move, in a dark wood or shadowy forest, breaking apart, driving and driven, but with textual and writerly guides. Yet, it is out of this destruction that “becoming” emerges, as in eating we simultaneously destroy and enable life. “Destruction as a cause of becoming” produces a split subject, consumed with its own appetite: “So that I turn and turned again to earliest flush. I might prevail against me step by step perceiving that my eyes were floods only makes me hungrier, for the appetite moved on and I follow in step” (17). Later this destruction seems to annihilate human subjectivity itself, “its own inventions, dazzle and fascinate it. to the extent it itself does not even realize it, it is destroying itself again” (20). “It” is impersonal. If the theater of this writing sometimes dismantles the person, rearticulates the subject as impersonal, it is capable also of granting affect and the senses the status of characters in their own right: “in this country we feel the same sensations which is paradise, because when we feel pleasure, pleasure is feeling itself, not us, when we taste sugar, sweetness is happening, not ourselves...In this country I’m in two places at once, with you and with you” (51).

Negativity in Jocelyn’s writing is the force that keeps all asunder as it also digests, disarticulates, and blends one into the other. Disparate ends of the same canal. In *Negativity*, there’s friction and frisson, invisible but present forces that attract and repel. Like the alimentary canal itself, attraction and repulsion are connected, part of the same structure. On one end, what attracts us we put in our mouths, what repels us comes out of our asses. Yet, we also put what attracts us into our asses, and sometimes, what repels us, into our mouths. Sometimes the differences between the two—attraction and repulsion, mouth and ass—are infinitesimal.

I approach you, devouring you, your physical defect—corporeal indent—blemish. Never clean, never courteous, almost symbolic of nothing, almost. Fully. The gash, not separating but unifying the abrasion to all the impure, non-separated. Still cleaving, still suckling I am unmending, secreting and discharging, leaking out in glops and gummy puss. Blending into the boundaries, coterminous sore on the visible, not presentable superannuated surface of self. Persecuting, threatening traces of expulsion, a clot, from the inside matter incorporated. (“II: The Bible” from the long piece “Not Enough Poison” (38)).

Interestingly, in Jocelyn’s work gender is untethered from any singular pole—“I attract and gender myself in accordance with my habit” (39)—and floats across the text, viscous and oozing, suggesting malleable opportunities for various positionalities “Turning back kingly what unwilling covered with vapors between your thighs.” “Kingly” is a position anyone might inhabit in this text. Jocelyn’s grammar and syntax, disruptive and coalescing, finds a way to negotiate a queer telling that dissevers any uncontested ground of being—in any form, human, animal or linguistic. As such, her writing establishes an oscillation between the human commune (associated, as Jean Luc Nancy reminds us, with the Christian notion of communion, taking place “at the heart of the mystical body of Christ,” and entailing the ingestion of Christ’s body) and isolation—between the acts of reading and writing, text and text, reader and writer, self and self, lover and other, human and animal, eater and eaten:

reading spoke to me its deficit. sufficient forces to follow as if within us whose object was now sudden and gone from us. as in lackluster archives who wakened gradually dwelt along circuitous paths jostling toe to toe to make a version that is eating away at us, our uncorrosive alloys. intoning, locked into each other, enthralled, it holds and remakes in parts, noting it for you along your way. (27)

Reading ‘speaks’ its “deficit” and yet perhaps provides the fodder from which to “re-make[] in parts.” A self-conscious and self-digesting text is enthralling and notes “it,” marks its complicities, thralldom and failures along the way.

Intertextual Alimentation: Rereading Sartre’s introductions to *Our Lady of the Flowers* provides useful and delicious rubrics for approaching *Negativity*. Doing so, the reader discovers that Jocelyn, of course, has read Sartre’s introduction to *Our Lady*. Like Genet’s thief, she steals and reworks lines from it, and we readers are the voyeurs who watch her do it while we participate in its elaborate staging, eat what our host has gotten from elsewhere. A portion of the text from Sartre’s “the reader will open *Our Lady of the Flowers*, as one might open the cabinet of a fetishist, and find there, laid out on the shelves, like shoes that have been sniffed at and kissed and bitten hundreds of times, the damp and evil words that glean with excitement” (3) turns up in “Not enough Poison” in the final lines from “Bird of Prey”: “No wonder the horror. No wonder the panting excitement. No wonder. No wonder. So I as shoes that have been sniffed and bitten and kissed hundreds of times” (44). Isolated, undigested bits of charged diction from Sartre turn up, including pestiferous, “pestiferous doesn’t expiate the ghastly or contrite” (44). Sartre’s, “it is the abstract instant that congeals it into an exploding but static beauty” seems to mutate into Jocelyn’s stunning and contradictory image “the sparrow congeals into disintegration in release” (44). We read Jocelyn reading Sartre reading Genet. And elsewhere in the text we might find Henry James, Barbara Guest, or even Stendhal as Chris Nagler discusses in his evocative introduction to Jocelyn’s work written for her reading at Small Press Traffic in November of 2008.³ The writer thus becomes Genet’s or James’ texts and writing. If we are what we eat, we are also what we read, write, copy, ingest and digest. *Negativity* is, self-consciously, a corps, many and collective.

Some of the pieces in the book are collaborations—the play “Beckon” with Wendy Kramer and the piece entitled “In This Country,” written with Bob Glück. As such, the pieces inscribe a community of fellow queer writers, proposing an intertextuality of bodies and subjects. Many of the poems are also dedicated to others, often with the designation of initials only. Thus the book itself, in its inclusion of collaborations and dedications, sets up a thematic and formal corps while the individual pieces of writing themselves often inscribe a breaking apart, whether formally through the breach of dashes as in “The Residue” part of the series entitled “The Beginner,” or in the stage directions at the close of “Beckon” in which two actors who play “sailors” and “sirens” (note the plural) “move away from each other in opposite directions off the stage” (95). The sirens call to a sailor (she), falling into and out of speech and babble, lullaby and argument, trapped in between the human and the avian—“our wings our feet hold us here, but you, you could come near.” Thematically, within many of the pieces, there are repeated failures of connection between individuals, often a “she” and an “I,” or relation, as already noted, becomes impersonal as in the book’s closing poem from “Carnal”:

indeed. i can’t declare them for what they are. the approach goes like this. the dogs bark across the street. when and how and where. despairing answers. here

it is finally. the days passing as an argument indeed indeed terrestrial. carnal excavating relentlessly. inaudible slow. howling recalcitrance behind the music. beneath the ground. (117)

Carnal, aptly, leaves us with the appetites and passions of the body, some of which include the animal, the fleshly, the sensual, among which is “a sensual delight in eating.” The poem closes “beneath the ground,” where all carnality, in death, finally rests.

The writing in *Negativity* (with the exception of a few pieces) takes the form of prose rather than lineated poetry. In places, Jocelyn’s writing appropriates the intricate syntactic architecture of the prose of Henry James (the source of another of *Negativity*’s epigraphs), including its delays, suspensions, recursive and dependent grammar and casts it into the contaminated and dark atomized abyss. Not out there somewhere. But *here*. In here. Where an “I” is constituted—“rescued by prohibition alone” (40). The limit and prohibition are necessities that make legible the hybrid, the contaminated, and the murky boundaries between.

Language, a system of differences as Saussure describes it, is lovingly and aggressively taken into the body, broken apart, made runny so that reference slides into the gap and everything comes apart and merges. Language is digested and dispersed, taken apart. It becomes in its destruction a variety of generative and waste products, or even, gifts as when a young child offers its waste as a gift and accomplishment to its parents. Maybe the coming apart of language has something to do with the queer subject. In their collaboration Jocelyn and Bob write: “In that country, in order to lose the self, disintegration is being possessed by another. In this country, in the movie, they tear me limb from limb” (52). In “that country” romance is possession by another; in “this country” there is the violent tearing asunder of queer subjects such as happens to Sebastian in the film version of Tennessee Williams one-act play *Suddenly, Last Summer*. Each results in an ecstatic loss or standing outside of the self, an erotic and wasteful, Bataillean expenditure. In the film, like the poet Orpheus who is ravaged by a mob of women, Sebastian is torn limb from limb by a crowd of lower class boys, in Sebastian’s case, young boys whose sexual favors he sought. Catherine, played by a young Elizabeth Taylor, wails “it looked as if they had devoured him.” In their violent frenzy, those same boys become cannibals, dismembering and eating Sebastian’s body.⁴ In this piece, Jocelyn’s and Bob’s use of the deictic demonstratives “that” and “this” with “country” underscores the contextual nature of the references. “This” and “that” highlight the disparate nature of “country” and the subject(s) making such distinctions, while also blurring and troubling such differences. “This” and “that” overlap. Ultimately, what we put into either end of the alimentary canal is con/fusing. The alimentary in an ethos of being is not without its ambiguities. As is the case with nearly anything, the social or antisocial ends to which it might be put, are never simply one thing or another.

In “Not Enough Poison,” the “I” describes these fragile and mobile tensions between division and unity, assertion and accommodation, incorporation and purgation, the hierarchical and the contiguous:

I can’t assume with sufficient strength this imperative act, the one that excludes you from me, the one that feeds on us, that one. I can’t dam that up or that potential, where it’s filth whether it’s defiling, from the line I traverse or the line we walk the inbetween, mounted between jettisoned and aggregate, vacillating,

threatening in silhouette, permeably engulfed, hand in hand.

In *Suddenly, Last Summer* Sebastian's mother, Mrs. Violet Venable, played by Katharine Hepburn puts it this way: "all of us trapped by this devouring creation." Maybe Jocelyn's proposal includes also *all of us creating in this trapped devouring; all of us — we — creatively devouring this trap.*

Notes

Thank you to Wendy Kramer, Bob Glück and Jocelyn Saidenberg for providing feedback on an earlier draft of this essay.

¹ See *Newsletter* #213 Dec 2007/Jan 2008 available online at <http://poetryproject.org/wp-content/uploads/n213.pdf>.

² Perhaps a better term here might be Gerard Genette's *transtextuality* because it accounts for a text's: 1) quotation, plagiarism, allusion; 2) paratextuality—the text's relation to all its frames and devices—footnotes, dedications, epigraphs, acknowledgments, etc.; 3) generic relations; 4) its metatextuality (commentary on other texts); and 5) its relation or elaboration/extension/contestation of a particular genre or tradition.

³ See <http://xpoetics.blogspot.com/2008/11/chris-naglers-introduction-to-jocelyn.html>.

⁴ I can't go into it here, but Mankiewicz's film is full of other things to discuss—class, ethnicity—to name two topics that have resonance in Jocelyn's book (class, gestured at, perhaps, in the epigraphs' interest in various discrepant aristocracies—Genet's *Lady*, Guest's *Countess of Minneapolis*, and Henry James's *Princess Casamassima*), but following these here would lead me somewhere else and into a much longer essay.

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“THIS IS A WAR CITY”

SUBJECT, PAIN, AND REPETITION IN DOLORES DORANTES

BRIAN WHITENER

Dolores Dorantes is a young poet from Ciudad Juarez, Mexico who has, to date, published three books, *Poems para niños (Poems for Children)*, *SexoPuroSexoVeloz (PureSexFastSex)*, and *Septiembre (September)*, the last two of which have been recently published in a joint edition by Kenning and Counterpath, translated by Jen Hofer. All three books form part of Dorantes’ life-long writing project which she has entitled *Dolores Dorantes*. While there have been many serial books written over the last two centuries, none (to my knowledge) has taken their author’s name as their title. Thus, this title, *Dolores Dorantes*, pulls us directly into the autobiographical, the site where social experience is narrativized into something we might call the “literary,” but in what way is Dorantes’ work autobiographical and how does it affect and think this movement from the social to the literary? The way that Dorantes’ title knots together the social, the literary, and the autobiographical resonates with a series of current state-side literary debates, including explorations of performance and interventions in public space (I’m thinking of projects like David Buuck’s performance work, Rodrigo Toscano’s *Collapsible Poetics Theatre* or Jules Boykoff and Kaia Sand’s recent *Landscapes of Dissent: Guerrilla Poetry & Public Space*) and the status of the I and the use of narrative in experimental writing practice.

One approach to the work of Dorantes is via her long-standing critique of the involvement of the Mexican state in literary affairs and her, what we might call, extra-literary projects to create the conditions for a counter public within the Mexican literary sphere (these projects include the border arts collective *Compania Frugal* and the monthly poetry “newsletter” *Plan B*). Her critique is two-fold: the first is against state involvement via the *sistema becarío*, an elaborate prize and grant system set up under the guidance of Octavio Paz in the 1980s, which functions through a series of prizes for books (generally awarded by committees of senior, established writers, i.e., writers who have already been vetted by this very institutional apparatus) and grants (rewarded by government functionaries based upon the submission of a lengthy resume of prior publications and work). Dorantes’ first critique rests upon her observation that the system is a manner for the State to co-opt the integrity and work of writers and artists. A second critique is that this system comes to enforce, prescribe, and necessitate a certain stylistic and formal conservatism. As Dorantes writes in the introduction to *SexoPuroSexoVeloz*, “*Poemas para niños* came into being as a critique of the confessional poetry that prevails in Mexican literature, a mode imposed on writers through government-sponsored workshops in my country as a ‘style’ designed to win prizes.” So at the first level we have to describe Dorantes’ project as something involving a stance, perhaps a political one, but political in the sense of delinking the literary from the state and constructing a literary counter public. The second level is aesthetic,

but flows from the first:

The adventure of *Dolores Dorantes* as a project began when I was nineteen and refused to write like Jose Carlos Becerra. In order to achieve that goal, I needed to draw language taut in such a way that meaning alone might be the dominant force. Or, in other words, any writer who finds it necessary to exorcise Neruda in order to feel liberated must go to extremes.

I include this quote in order to foreground that at the very base of Dorantes' work is a signaling that the relationship between something we might recognize as the "social" and something we might recognize as the "literary" (thinking this relationship, modifying it, exploring its limitations and fissures and potentialities), is a key part of her poetic practice ("poetic" conceived here in broad terms to include all of Dorantes' activities as a poet, organizer, cultural critic, and not just her writing). If we assume, for example, that the literary generally somehow reflects the social, we can already see that Dorantes is working with an expanded notion of the literary, one in which the lines between the literary and the social are not so clear, and one which sees the conditioning of the "literary" by the "social" as critical to what then becomes possible in the literary field (refusing "to write like Jose Carlos Becerra"). However, what I think is most interesting about Dorantes' extra-literary projects is that they are not just "outlets" (like a small journal that serves as a site of production for a certain aesthetic tendency) but rather attempts to intervene in the realm of the possible, to shift the structural conditions which in turn condition literary production, and, finally, to construct a counterpublic around this project of "structural re-adjustment."

Since 1993, Dorantes' hometown of Ciudad Juarez has endured an epidemic of killings, abductions, and torture of women. Estimates of the number killed range from 400 to 1,200. This "story" broke in the national Mexican media in 1999; to date a number of different theories as to the cause of the killings have been advanced: serial killers, drug cartels, wealthy local "untouchables," the police, men emasculated by women who have become the primary breadwinners as a result of working in the *maquilla*. However, what makes this situation specifically a traumatic experience is that none of these explanations has been able to fill the painful explanatory gap between event and aftermath: journalists, victims, the authorities, continue to search for an "author" of the killings, but there is none. Despite repeated attempts to hang the crimes on a group or a particular sector of society, there is no one to step in and perform the role of protagonist, to make possible the conditions of narration. The failure to discover a cause for these killings has meant that the trauma remains open. Between 1997-2000, Dorantes herself wrote a series of articles for a local Ciudad Juarez paper about the killings. She stopped when she felt her safety was endangered. For the English-language publication of *SexoPuroSexoVeloz* and *Septiembre*, Dorantes wrote a special introduction, in which, in the very last line, she writes, "What clearly emerges from all this, for me, is war." The reference to "war" can be read as a reference to the book *Septiembre*, which takes up in a very oblique manner the events surrounding 9/11 (although to already name the subject as such does itself a great violence to Dorantes' work: she is concerned with 9/11 for similar reasons, unsutured trauma, wounds, and the failure of narrativization and aesthetization). However, if we try to apply this statement ("What clearly emerges from all this, for me, is war") to *SexoPuroSexoVeloz* the fit is more difficult. This line sends us back to the text of *SexoPuroSexoVeloz* searching for mentions of war, of which there is only one, but a very curious one:

*You navigate on foot in a departing
vessel, tell me:
this is a war city*

I want to see you
this city has a port
tell it to me

"This is a war city." And at the time of the writing of *SexoPuroSexoVeloz* Ciudad Juarez was indeed a war city, a line we might have glossed over and a fact that perhaps we might have missed without Dolores' introduction. But as we've already mentioned this is not a book that takes "head-on" the feminicides in Juarez; there are no direct mentions of the place, nor direct mentions of killings, and a great deal of the book discusses the conditions of possibility for love. However, there is indeed some engagement there, but it takes place within a linguistic and psychic field that is not Juarez (a kind of realism or poetry of witness) but one that has been conditioned by the trauma of the feminicides. It is not a book *about* the feminicides but one written into the conditions of their creation. How can we describe this engagement? And what does it mean to not write a book about the feminicides? What does it mean to refuse their aestheticization (of which there are many, from songs by Tori Amos to Lourdes Portillo's celebrated documentary *Senorita Extraviada*) as a poetic practice?

So, it's a book not about something but conditioned by it, or written into its wake, into its withdrawal. I want to focus on two moments that occur right at the beginning of the book. The first page reads:

The red whinnying
of heat
of saltpeter the night...

The red returns only once, five pages in, in a "red wood table," but the whinnying never. And other sounds are curiously absent from *SexoPuroSexoVeloz*; in some ways it is an airless universe, there is no shattering, creaking, rumbling, nor sighing. I want to place *whinnying* then in an analogous relationship with war: it is something that cuts across the text, something that withdraws itself from it and which in its withdrawal does not structure the text, but rather points to the poem's "conditioning" or transversal by something we might call an absent external event. But to say "external," already conjures up a split between something we might recognize as the "literary" and something we might recognize as the "social." So instead, whinnying: not being itself, but rather only a quality, a condition, something in the air, something precarious, something that traverses, that is of the night, not the day, something that is not human, but rather animal, something that points to the not-us that undergirds us. Whinnying: either trauma or exertion, either nervousness or a sign of a calm return, of repose. Whinnying: something which even against the blackness of night can take on a color, be colored, malleable, able to be conditioned and something that is neither co-extensive with, nor separate from the night, neither one, nor just two, and thus, perhaps, pointing us towards a different relation between the "literary" and the "social," neither one, nor two, neither a priori separation, nor a reduction to a common textual structure. The way whinnying cuts across this opening page of the text points us towards what I think is one of Dorantes' key concerns: an attempt to structure, much as her extra-literary work in publishing and criticism has, a different relationship between the social and the literary.

The second withdrawal, or perhaps in this case, non-presence, is pointed to by the title: *SexoPuroSexoVeloz*. In Ciudad Juarez, one of the most common forms of employment for women after the maquila is prostitution. For a book that is so much about love *SexoPuroSexoVeloz* is a curious title; and for a book that is titled *SexoPuroSexoVeloz* (*PureSexFastSex*) there is an astounding absence of sex, either pure or fast. Again, it

would seem that the way in which this title, this conditioning, withdraws itself from the text is again at the very limit of what we can say, that the withdrawal belongs, like whinnying, to a different, non-linguistic order, which forms a line “that circumscribes not only what is speakable, but what is livable” (to quote Judith Butler from *Precarious Life*). So, proceeding more by hesitation than by argument, I would advance that *SexoPuroSexoVeloz*, in the same way as “war,” points us towards a withdrawal, and withdrawal which I am reading as a conditioning by an absent external event. Absent as in something that is not fully external, neither two nor one, and conditioning because the relation between the social and the literary is neither one of relation via an a priori separation, nor autonomy, nor *écriture*, but rather some difficult, perhaps almost anti-representational, other. *SexoPuroSexoVeloz* is then not a book about the feminicides, but rather a book written into the world conditioned by that series of events, and that looks at the complicated ways that the literary and social, if not collapse into each other, at least share or can be conditioned into a type of similarity or shared structure by an event, especially a traumatic one.

I want to turn now to the question of autobiography in Dorantes’ work. *Dolores Dorantes* announces itself as autobiography, but the relation between the work and the genre known as autobiography is never clear cut. Perhaps in part because the project is open ended, a series of ongoing books titled *Dolores Dorantes*, thus its valence as a project has neither the documentation of Bernadette Mayer’s *Hunger Journals* or engagement with autobiography as Lyn Hejinian’s *My Life*. There is a sense of openness to the future in Dorantes’ project, the possibility for recalibration, that the horizon of the work is not that of the (dead, closed) past but rather that the project (in a way that is radically different than any other autobiography) is projective, prospective, directed in part to a horizon of the future. But this directionality is not significant just on the level of genre. It cleaves directly into the heart of Dorantes’ engagement with autobiography as a site where both the potentialities and actualities of the subject, both individual and collective, are measured and mapped.

Unlike works such as *My Life*, the point of Dorantes’ series of books collected under the name *Dolores Dorantes* is not so clearly an extension of the possibilities of autobiography via an expansion of the I; rather in Dorantes there is both less of a fidelity to autobiography as a genre and more of a fidelity, though oblique, to the subject. Part of this shift, has to do with the fact that Dorantes is interested in how the subject is formed by repetition, by the repetitive affective investment in particular objects or, in the case of *SexoPuroSexoVeloz*, the subject’s continual suspension and interruption by pain. In Spanish, the word for pain is *dolor* and its plural is *dolores*, thus in the name Dolores or in a title such as *Dolores Dorantes*, pain and autobiography are already placed into a fraught and intimate relationship. In the following, I want to briefly examine the links between pain and autobiography in *SexoPuroSexoVeloz* and then turn to how the I in Dorantes is never individual but always suspended between the individual and the collective.

In *SexoPuroSexoVeloz*, the subject is not identical with the I, rather the subject is defined by a repetitive positioning in relations (to a you, he, or she) or continual undoing by trauma (pain). The following is the second poem in *SexoPuroSexoVeloz* and lays out the deep knotting between the subject, relation, repetition, and pain:

Darkness where new
lights being

and grow:
fast swarms

buzzings
slice and trace the colors of the city

(*May be*

I had to forget how)

Pain inserts its hardest expression

The impact, extend it
toward clarity

(*Afterwards*

our separated forests
will be places—hot—
abutting memories

replete)

Pain and repetition. “May be / I had to forget how” is a phrase that repeats both as the title of Dorantes’ blog and as the final line of *SexoPuroSexoVeloz*, where it stands opening out into the horizon of the work’s futurity. The repetition of “May be / I had to forget how” here is linked both to a curious temporal structure and to pain and subjectivization. As we noted above, for a work of autobiography there is very little “past,” and many destabilizing openings to a horizon of futurity. However, there is something about this present which the poem is charting. In the need to forget there is a past, and then after the “impact” of pain’s hardest expression there will be an “afterwards,” but these temporal pasts and futures are not themselves present in the poem, they can only be indicated. What lies in between them, at the center of the present, is pain, a subject structured by repetition, and the inability to forget and an inability to arrive to this afterwards wherein the fusion of an *our* separates out into a *you* and an *I*, and where a process of becoming-place, a movement from non-site to site, from forest to not home, but place, would reach a terminal point. “May be / I had to forget how” leaves off into the blank unqualified present, the space of pure repetition: How? How it was done? Or how to do something? Something that I do, or something that was done to me? Does the speaker need to forget something about herself or something that was done to her? Or: the suspension of the ability to assign agency in the aftermath of trauma?

These questions force us to turn to pain, pain as an actor and what it would mean for pain to “insert its hardest expression.” Does its expression have a form? And is the subject the site of its insertion? Pain (*dolor*) has a long and important tradition as a rhetorical trope in Latin American poetry. In the modern period, a certain liberal humanist (and dominant) reception of Cesar Vallejo’s later work, especially *Black Heralds*, has constructed a set of linkages between Vallejo’s concern for the pain of the other and a limited form of political engagement. We don’t have time here to extricate the subtlety of Vallejo’s conceptualization of pain from these overcodings of interpretation, but I do want to play something of his understanding (or better one instantiation of it) off Dorantes’ poem. In his famous essay “I Am Going to Speak of Hope,” Vallejo writes:

I do not feel this suffering as Cesar Vallejo. I am not suffering now as a creative person, or as a man, nor even as a simple living being. I don't feel this pain as a Catholic, or as a Mohammedan, or as an atheist. Today I am simply in pain. If my name weren't Cesar Vallejo, I'd still feel it. If I weren't an artist, I'd still feel it. If I weren't a man, or even a living being, I'd still feel it. If I weren't a Catholic, or an atheist, or a Mohammedan, I'd still feel it. Today I am in pain from further down. Today I am simply in pain. The pain I have has no explanations. My pain is so deep that it never had a cause, and has no need of a cause. What could have its cause been? Where is that thing so important that it stopped being its cause? Its cause is nothing, and nothing could have stopped being its cause.

Pain in this Vallejo text is that which both overcomes the subject ("I do not feel this suffering as Cesar Vallejo") and which successfully sutures individuals to a collective by overcoming difference (neither Catholic, Mohammedan, nor atheist). Moreover, it is a pain without a cause, without an explanation, other than "nothing," the void, nada. We can see how radically different Dorantes' approach is. Pain in Dorantes' text is not tied to the "human," rather it is *constitutive* of the subject by interrupting or placing it into suspension. In Dorantes, pain both structures and becomes a structure. Dorantes' pain is always in the present tense, always perpetual, always still happening. The future, the point where the pain will have ceased to be pain can only be imagined as a hypothetical, as an "Afterwards..." In Dorantes, pain effects a brutal subjectivization. But notice the not-quite "passive" construction in the previous sentence ("pain effects"): it's impossible to write in the active tense that pain subjectifies. There's pain, there's the subject, but exactly how pain structures by interruption that subject is not clear; we only know that "pain inserts its hardest expression." There's something ambiguous about how it does this, if it's the "actor" or agent or author or not, an ambiguity that Dorantes' work doesn't resolve. Pain has an ambiguity in Dorantes: its unclear if its an object, a scene, a mood, or merely a psychological state. The key is not that pain can't be fixed, but rather that it is *only* known by its effects: the structuring of the subject by suspension, the creation of the non-site of the not place (the forest), and its the blank eternal present (whose horizon is conditioned by the need to forget and an inaccessible "afterwards"). In Dorantes, pain cannot be resolved by one person alone, it can never be made object, and thus pain is never something that was done to us, rather it is something that structures the subject. Pain and a repetitive return to its wound has replaced futurity as the horizon.

On the one hand, this is autobiography interrupted. The subject in suspension. But there is another vector to Dorantes' engagement with autobiography and that is how her text seems suspended between an autobiography of a subject and one of a collective. As we noted in the poem above, pain makes everything hazy, blurs the boundaries, expands: the subject, the city, the poem, they all expand into this blank present speckled by flashes of futurity. *SexoPuroSexoVeloz* is not the autobiography of a person. It's too generalized for that, but its not a collective either; as we have seen the our breaks down into a you and an I. In this way, Dorantes resists the rhetorical (political, poetic) tradition of epic gestures to a Latin American national-popular subject, *the people*, while at the same time refusing as we noted earlier "to write like Jose Carlos Becerra." Critical autobiography then: very conscious of the role literature has played in the construction of a national popular subject in the 20th and 21st centuries, but also suspicious of the "individual," voice, the pleasant music of light lyric in the service of culture masquerading as the state. If we can call *SexoPuroSexoVeloz* autobiography, it is the autobiography of a subject that tends towards two, or a group that moves away from one. It is the autobiography of a subject who is not an individual, who is incompletely becoming-collective, and a group, a collective, a we and our that is fragmentary, not closed, and not realized as a national subject.

There is an almost dialectical movement, a maintenance of an ambiguity in *Sexo-PuroSexoVeloz*. One of the most impressive achievements of Dorantes' text is how it suspends the subject between individual and collective, the way the 'our' and 'we' throughout the text fragment and particularizes into relations of I and you, and the way these relations are kept in constant motion, spinning pronouns into a skin of neither you nor I.

From the other side
(in the part of you
that doesn't show) I construct
what I think

we imagine

I conjure the red wood table
the chair where I wait for you on snowy days

love, we imagine

From the other side
(in the part of me
that doesn't show) throbs the fog
of your kiss: is that you? You open. You enter

questions from my mouth (9)

In *SexoPuroSexoVeloz*, I never occurs by itself. Literally. It is always linked, followed or preceded by another pronoun, a you, a she, a he, a we. The only place in the text that it occurs by itself is in the penultimate poem and even here it only occurs as negation:

Love
we are strange

but that borrowed form is already gone
I don't speak (41)

In "From the Other Side," Dorantes establishes a shifting array of relationships among the pronouns I, you, and we. The mirror structure has a dialectical push to it, highlighting the small differences in the repetition, especially the shift from "*we imagine*" to "*love, we imagine*." So once again repetition enters, but here it's repetition with difference, where the difference creates a kind of oscillating relationship between reading love as a form of direct address and/or as what is being imagined. The repetition of "red" sets up a complicated relationship with "the red whinnying," wherein withdrawal would appear to meet its instantiated form, but it occurs here under the sign of memory and as conditioned by love. The lines of "I conjure..." are also positioned as the pivot, the mirror itself, and in addition to being memory, they are mirror, suspended somewhere between a real and a reflection.

However, the greatest difference occurs between the stanzas that begin "From the other side..." It is here that we can examine in a fine grained way how the I and we in *SexoPuroSexoVeloz* plunge into each other, structuring and undoing and recalibrating each other, how they are not fixed, how they are suspended and purposively structured into one another. In the first stanza, the you is presented as cleaved by a complicated series of divisions: in a part that is non-visible, there is another "side." But a

side is not quite a place, like the difference between the real object and its reflection, a side is defined only by a line and is suspended between the actual and virtual. "On the other side of x" doesn't give us a concrete place, but rather a region, and regions are always both real and imaginary, both able to be mapped and unspecific, vague, waiting to be filled with content and memory. Moreover, Dorantes' choice of a preposition ("From the other side," instead of "in" for example) underscores the virtualness of the region. Thus, we have a you that is divided into parts (some visible, some non-visible) where there exists an additional division or marking of a region, "the other side."

The same holds for the second stanza and for the me or the I of the poem. From this opening divide, a series of complicated differences and repetitions are set up that resonant, fray, and decay against one another. The most significant for our purposes is the division between the mind ("I construct/ what I think" and "we imagine") in the first stanza and the body ("your kiss" and "my mouth") in the second. The movement from the mind to the body mimics the actual/virtual split that we discussed above with reference to the mirror and the nature of regions or an "other side." But the poem complicates this by, in the first stanza, putting the I in relation with a we, and in the second stanza effecting a bleeding between the you and the I, wherein the you and I physically become part of one another ("You open. You enter/ questions from my mouth").

In the first stanza, the relation between the pronouns (the I and we) is almost one of competition, the I thinks and constructs, while the we imagines. The we traffics in the hypothetical, ideal, virtual, but even the act of a thinking I is enmeshed in an "other," as all thinking in the poem proceeds from that "other side." So there's a tensile, differential relationship from an I who's thinking moves out of a region both actual and virtual to an undefined you and then to a we that unlike the I traffics in the ideal, the promissory, the future. The result is the blurring of each pronoun (I, you, we) into the other without erasing completely their specificity. In the second stanza, the you becomes diffuse ("From the other side... throbs the fog/ of your kiss"), becomes diffuse like a fog. But then the constituent identity of both the I and you is suspended further as the you both opens and then (provisionally) enters the I ("You open. You enter / questions from my mouth"). The I and you, become a fog together, they mingle, hover, and structure. The I and you are suspended into a tertiary zone, where they become constitutive of each other, where they become something that falls short of being a collective, something that is neither one, nor two. In this poem, then, Dorantes spins pronouns into a kind of skin, something stretchable, elastic, an I stretches into and is differentially specified against a you and a we, and this skin, this thin film that the poem generates through differential repetition suspends identity and it turns pronouns, not into deictic markers of identity, but rather into "regions," into sites both specific, concrete, and relationally realized and unspecific, vague, and waiting to be filled with content.

To return to our earlier discussion of the "literary" and the "social," pain is another site where we can see a productive working through of a related set of concerns in Dorantes' poetry. In *SexoPuroSexoVeloz*, pain is something that interrupts subjectivization (forcing the subject into an eternal present, into a holding pattern) and places the I into suspension), but in such a way that a past and a future ("may be / I had to forget how" and "afterwards") still vaguely condition the horizontality of the present. In Dorantes' work, between pain and the subject, between the literary and the social, between the I and we, there is a refusal of aestheticization, a decision to try to "stay in the room" with something difficult, something impossible, something neither one, nor not quite two. Dorantes' work attempts to map the difficult terrain between these

sets of binaries while engaging critically their specific histories within Mexican literary culture to chart new sets of relations between them. In the end, this is what I think is important about *Sexo Puro Sexo Veloz*; namely, that it is an attempt to engage with a serious, traumatic event that doesn't collapse into a poetry of witness and that also asks important questions about the effects of that trauma on a subject who is neither just individual nor wholly collective. It looks at the ways that an event which has already happened and withdrawn itself conditions the environment into which any writing of the event would take place. And it attempts to create a place where these binaries (in particular literary vs. social, and the I versus the we), which are so often either collapsed into each other or held apart at arms length, are looked at for how they come to be structured together, how, like whinnying and the night, they are not just the same nor different, one nor two, but rather both separate and co-extensive.

A=B=L=A=C=K=W=O=M=A=N POETICS

ERICA HUNT'S PROSE POETRY

TYRONE WILLIAMS

In her engagement with the Language School of Poetry and the legacy of Black and African-American poetry, Erica Hunt has attempted to recast the linguistic structures of cultural politics by eschewing normative literary procedures in order to “postmodernize” “black” themes and “blacken” neo- and post-modernist literary procedures. In particular, Hunt is concerned with the construction of a social fabric that overdetermines the normative in black literary production, whether the norm in question is methodological or thematic. Hunt’s strategies cannot, however, be reduced to a rethinking of mere racial politics since they also involve a rethinking of the overdetermination of gender politics. In this regard, Hunt’s deployment of “experimental” poetic procedures in order to reshape the overlapping but distinct social, cultural and political categories that constitute what we may nonetheless name in the singular—a black woman—is specific to the history of her generation which includes, among a few others, Harryette Mullen. I thus distinguish their postmodern black poetic strategies from that of a more recent generation of experimental African-American women that includes Deborah Richards, Duriel E. Harris and Dawn Lundy Martin, to say nothing of Claudia Rankine. Altogether these women writers of (to greater and lesser degrees) African descent, represent a tangent within Pan-African poetic production quite distinct from that of other black and African-American women poets like Sonia Sanchez, Lucille Clifton, Rita Dove, Elizabeth Alexander, Natasha Trethewey, and Tracey K. Smith.

The differences between experimental and mainstream tendencies within a generation of poets (e.g., Harris and Smith) has its analogue between generations, between those women poets who developed under the rubric of “black” and those who developed under the rubric of “African American,” even if both generations acknowledge and articulate a necessary symbiosis between the two terms and the two generations. Insofar as a great deal of current mainstream poetry by African-American women poets like Alexander, Trethewey and Smith tends to situate itself within the norms of a putative “black” cultural tradition, Erica Hunt’s engagement with the experimental can be read as pre-African-American¹ in relation to a relatively young generation of women poets (e.g., Smith and Trethewey) and non-black in relation to an older generation of poets (Clifton and Dove) since the work of these poets from two different generations deploy similar, normative poetic procedures. As is clear from the above, I am using the terms “black” and “African American” to differentiate both generations and modes of poetic production. I will attempt to spell out the reasons for doing so below. For now I want to re-emphasize the multiple lineages of Hunt’s work. Insofar as it recalls and engages the “experimental” wing of the Black Arts Movement (e.g., the early work of Sanchez), Hunt’s writing cannot be severed from a black literary tra-

dition. And inasmuch as it engages, as well, the Symbolist and Surrealist predecessors of and tendencies within the Language School, it cannot be severed from an important sector of international post-romantic poetics. Hunt's work deserves an extensive analysis that would treat all of its overlapping and intersecting vectors, but such a project is well beyond the scope of this essay. In this general, yet narrow, overview of some of Hunt's published literary work—*Piece Logic*, *Arcade*, and *Local History*—I delineate its relation to the work of both “younger” African-American poets and “older” Black Arts poets in terms of historical and aesthetic differences. This relation will also reveal certain connections between generational and political self-naming (colored, Negro, black, Afro-American, African-American) and aesthetic decisions. Finally, I claim that Hunt undermines the notion of a homogenous “black tradition” and “black poetics” in historically and aesthetically specific ways that are quite distinct from more mainstream projects out to achieve similar results. First, however, I want to address this question: What does it mean to call oneself colored, Negro, black, and/or African-American?

Each generation of African-European and African descendants in the United States has named itself according to a number of protocols: cultural renewal (e.g., The New Negro), social aggregate (e.g., colored people), political ideology (e.g., black power), cross-cultural history (e.g., Afro-American) and hip-hop revisionism (e.g., African-American). Though deployed according to successive epochs in the history of African descendants in the United States, these names are not solely generational. Because of what they signify in a given historical and political context, the terms are adopted or rejected according to both communal and individual needs and desires. And since African descendants are no more homogenous than any other group (racial or ethnic) living in the United States for more than two generations, all these names still survive, still are used, today. Stanley Crouch famously, or infamously, refers to himself and all African-European descendants in the United States as Negroes though he was once self-defined as a black militant. On the other hand, Albert Murray has always referred to himself as Negro, colored and, more generally, omni-American. What complicates the processes of self-naming even more is that the alleged political and cultural denotations of each term function as variables within the currency of racial and ethnic identification. For example, many hip-hop rappers and aficionados, who may identify themselves as African-American, will deploy the term black precisely because it still retains political and cultural power as an index of militancy and pride. And the term Negro, which took heavy fire in the context of the Black Arts Movement, is still, today, used as a term of insult, a putdown since it, along with colored, gets used chronologically (pre-Civil Rights and pre-Black Power) and politically (social, if not economic, conservatism).

All the above notwithstanding, if we think of a black generation as a reference to those young men and women who came of age in the 1960's and African-Americans as a reference to those young men and women who came of age in the 1980's, if black refers, still, to the blunt assertion of power and pride, if African-American refers to hip-hop-inspired boosterism under globalization and alternative modes of valuation, then Erica Hunt's work is situated amidst the clarion failures of social and cultural revolution and the encroachment of the public realm into the private, largely by way of a consumerist ethos.² In terms of contemporary literary production, for example, black and African-American refer to the “publicizing” and literal publication of artists under certain houses or presses (e.g., the history of Third World Press vs. that of Graywolf Press) whose aesthetic valences reflect certain segments of the larger social, cultural and political landscapes. Thus Black and African American do not refer solely to the specific political or aesthetic allegiances of a given author; rather, these names refer, in this context, to the political and aesthetic effects of a given body of work. I am

interested in how these works work—or play—in and with their various intersecting and overlapping publics.

Consider, for example, the work of a Rita Dove which, like that of a Paul Laurence Dunbar and a Robert Hayden, is predicated on the premise that the transcendental qualities of poetry stabilize channels of exchange between fluctuating, developing cultures, be they Negro, colored or black, pre-modern, modern or postmodern. Like Dunbar and Hayden, Dove has written poems inflected and uninflected by what Stephen Henderson called black mascons.³ The commercial success and critical acclaim that attended Dunbar's Negro-inflected "dialect" poems, first collected as *Lyrics of Lowly Life*, is analogous to Hayden's black-inflected *American Journal*, published a century after *Lyrics* and nominated for a National Book Award. Five years after Hayden's nomination, Dove would publish her "colored people"-inflected, Pulitzer Prize-winning collection, *Thomas and Beulah*. The fate of these poets' "standard English" or uninflected poetry, however, is instructive. Dunbar's most anthologized poems today, "We Wear The Mask" and "Sympathy," both written in "standard English," self-reflexively lament their eclipse by his then more commercially successful dialect poems. Hayden's poetry is as obsessed with the touchstones—both subjects and events—of black history as any Black Arts poet, but it is a poetry written in standard English and fairly traditional verse forms (free or metrical). Hayden's muted and short-lived acclaim within a largely conservative literary establishment clinched the case for two antagonists: those who had long felt his thematic concerns were too "black" to deserve the mantle of a major American poet and those who felt his poetic strategies were too "white" for an emerging cultural nationalism.⁴ Dove's poetry, almost exclusively written in standard English, has had a better fate than that of Dunbar or Hayden, due in no small part to the homeostasis achieved by normative poetic procedures and methods which tend to countervail the complement of feminist and racial inflections. Unlike Dunbar, torn by anxiety between an established European literary tradition, a nascent Anglo-American literary tradition and an emerging Negro literary tradition, unlike Hayden, at pains to answer the call of European modernism in the figure of his mentor, W.H. Auden, to answer the call of black history severed from black power, and to answer the call of his Baha'i faith, Dove seems relatively secure, perhaps even placid, to the extent her work intersects and overlaps with black and non-black sectors of the literary establishments. Moreover, Dove has acknowledged the debt she owes to the Black Arts Movement, claiming that those writers' successful affirmation of black power in all its forms granted her the thematic and procedural "space" to treat both black and non-black subject matter under normative poetic procedures now "cleansed" of any taint of racial superiority.⁵ Free, perhaps, of the insecurity and doubt about "Negro culture" and "Negro dialect" that plagued Dunbar, Dove can shuttle back and forth between black and non-black subject matter as befits her international stature as a poet. Unlike Hayden's confrontation with, and refutation of, what he viewed as a self-delimited poetics in the Black Arts Movement, Dove can acknowledge her debt to a poetics which is nonetheless refuted at every level of articulation and structure by her own, more normative, poetics.

Erica Hunt's poetic procedures also open out onto "non-black" territory, but unlike Dunbar, Hayden or Dove, Hunt's work is motivated less by the presumption of aesthetic transcendentalism than by a progressive politics that deploys avant-garde forms and methods to uproot politically retrogressive values within and without black communities (literary and otherwise). Hunt's apparent preferred term of self-reference in terms of race and ethnicity is black. Ditto for Rita Dove. Clearly, however, black means something quite different for each of these poets whose explicit subject matter is only occasionally gendered and racialized. For Dove, black, shorn of its cultural nationalist implications, refers primarily to a diachronic, generational category;

for Hunt, black, invested with Pan-African and cross-cultural implications, constitutes a synchronic political category. Both definitions differ significantly from that articulated by the progenitors of the cultural nationalist and Black Arts Movements.

As Aldon L. Nielsen has demonstrated in his important recovery of lost black voices,⁶ the canonization of certain poets from the Black Arts Movement reflects a certain “lag” in terms of innovative criticism and archival research as well as a certain amnesia among groups of avant-garde poets (e.g., some of the Language Poets) and critics (e.g., mainstream black criticism). More important, a great number of painters, sculptors and poets—Kara Walker, Romare Bearden, Norman H. Pritchard or Julie Fields, for example—drew on innovative musics (jazz and blues) derived from both native and diasporic European, African and Asian traditions. Given, then, the widespread experimentation with form that characterized Afro-, Anglo- and Jewish-American literary productions at the inception of, and beyond, the 20th century, given the foundation (in part) of that experimentation in African, Asian and diasporic aesthetics, the valorization and canonization of black musics and musicians as innovative contributors, the erasure or marginalization of equally innovative black writers and plastic artists, points to the way both white and black critics of black culture tend to hypostatize the oral and musical traditions of Pan-African and Asian cultures at the expense of their plastic and written arts. Yet many of the poets and artists affiliated with, or influenced by, the Black Arts Movement—Nathaniel Mackey, Ed Roberson, Lorenzo Thomas, Julia Fields, Norman Pritchard, etc.—self-consciously traced their influences back to Asian and African writing traditions. Writing during a period marked by a renewed interest in Africology in general and Egyptology in particular, these writers meld form with content as they deploy hieroglyphics, jazz and blues motifs and forms (musical and verbal) and grammatical/syntactical forms derived from Black English to reformulate the limits of poetic utterance within Western literary history.

In Hunt’s work we read a poetics crisscrossing a number of poetic traditions, movements and camps. If we ask the question that Toni Morrison reportedly asked—can you tell by the writing that the author is black, that an “ancestral” presence grounds and orients the work—it would be difficult for Hunt to always answer in the affirmative.⁷ Certainly there are “markers” of race if by this we assume that if a writer deploys “key” terms, mascons, that “flag” race—black, the word race itself, especially in conjunction with the first-person pronoun (singular or plural)—then that writer “is” black (or Hispanic, Latina, etc.). Nonetheless, it is also clear that these markers are insufficient to mark Hunt as a recognizable “black” poet (her given name, presumably, the only real assurance that the author is female, this despite the markers of gender that certainly outnumber the markers of race, especially in her first two books). Yet, without denying the humanity of her subjects and narrators—in one revision, of Wordsworth, we read that a person is someone to whom another person speaks—Hunt confronts the problem of the interpellation of the body as subject in matrices—social, political, economic, etc.—that include both gender and race. What is interesting is the extent to which—as noted above—Hunt is willing to concede some ground, or more ground, to the pigeon-holes of gender than to race. I believe this is due to the different grammatical scales involved here. Gender is reproducible in grammar by both “proper” names, common nouns and pronouns while race is reproducible less by proper names, more by common names and not at all by pronouns. Simply put, it is more difficult to avoid invoking gender, much easier to avoid invoking race, in the English language. Thus, from the other side of the mirror, as it were, it may be easier to understand how the various critiques of race mounted by both integrationists and cultural nationalists within (and without) the Black Arts Movement could still succumb to heterosexist and misogynistic assumptions.⁸ The “invisibility” of race at the level of the pronoun suggests, and an overview of Indo-European languages

supports, that gender differentiation is an essential component of their structures and developments. Indeed, it may be that only number surpasses gender as an essential element. The privilege accorded number and gender might help explain the specific channels through which Erica Hunt's work has been received.⁹

Nonetheless, in *Local History*, Hunt engages the problem of gender and number in language by deploying the first person singular and plural in indeterminate linguistic contexts. The photograph on the back cover, right beneath blurbs from Language writing experimenters Harryette Mullen, Charles Bernstein, and Ann Lauterbach, identifies Erica Hunt as a black woman. Still, given the multiple lineages of this work, it is difficult to find or surmise a referent for the "we" in the opening "Preface." In fact, each permutation of the "we" appears to refer to different constituencies: a couple, friends, women, experimental writers, black people in general, etc. One might respond that while such indeterminacy might hold for the multiple "we's" in "Preface," such is not the case for the "I" which opens the poem and book: "I was thinking that if the ceiling were mirrored we would have to watch what we say about what we feel." Regardless of how one interprets this playful but serious commentary on the indicative and the subjunctive, on the relations between standard and colloquial expressions, the "I" appears normative in its self-referential function. And so it is, a function reinforced in the other syntactical contexts in which it appears in "Preface." However, since this same grammatical function appears in the next two poems entitled "Voice I" and "Second Voice," it may be that this "I" has merely a narrative or generic function which cannot be "reduced" to a human referent. And that, I believe, is the point. Sometimes the "I" may indeed refer to the human being named Erica Hunt; sometimes it may not. And so it is for all the other single-number pronouns in this book, she, you and he, which may and may not refer to an "Erica Hunt." This indeterminate or flexible function of singular pronouns is not, as we know, unique to Hunt. Many people associate it with the Language Writing movement's usage of similar procedures to critique the integrity of a self, specifically its conflation with the first-person singular pronoun. However, a similar strategy can also be found in a writer like Zora Neale Hurston; her particular mode of stream of consciousness, often called indirect discourse, operates to meld what is often the delimited knowledge of third-person (singular or plural) narratees with the unlimited knowledge of a narrator posited, in terms of number, as infinite and, thus, omniscient. Hurston makes explicit what is already implicit in the general ideology of the omniscient, objective narrator function; no such function operates without implicitly, if not explicitly, taking a position, taking sides.

Thus structure and form themselves take on political and cultural functions for Hunt, and in this, of course, she is right in line with Language Writing procedures, though again, Nielsen rightly reminds us that for the Beats as well as the black art poets, form was always inextricable from politics. For example, it is not unreasonable or without merit to see that the division of the book *Local History* into three sections entitled "Local History," "Correspondence" and "Surplus" is analogous to the function of pronouns in Hunt's work: sometimes they correspond to the author or known "others," sometimes they correspond to an unknown other or others. The structure of the book might indicate that we are to read the pronouns as simultaneously corresponding to the author Erica Hunt and to unnamed others, except that simultaneity, a fixture of New Criticism, tends to occlude the temporality of reading. Better, perhaps, to say that "I" corresponds first to the author and then to others, first to the local and then to what exceeds the local, or, were one to begin reading, in medias res, the "we" or "she" might first correspond to unnamed others before the "I" that might or might not correspond to the author. Indeed, one might say that Hunt's three book publications, *Local History*, *Arcade* and *Piece Logic*, operate according to the same logic in terms of

poetic procedures. A certain clarity and accessibility characterize each succeeding book, yet everything hinges, literally, on the correspondence between Allison Saar and Erica Hunt which constitutes *Arcade*. It is fortuitous and significant that the link between what is posited and what exceeds it, between the restricted and the general, is a book that puts into play the visual and verbal ambiguity of the “black” (fe-)male body, an androgyny and racial indeterminacy reflective, perhaps, of both a hoped-for future (e.g., the reconciliation of black/non-black men and women into a neo-Black/Post-Black Arts Movement dedicated to both racial and gender egalitarianism) and too-present past (the violence that attends the black body, the pecking order of certain white bodies on certain black bodies, certain black bodies on certain black bodies and so forth). At the same time the visual/verbal play of *Arcade* alludes back to Hunt’s picture on the back of *Local History*, a picture that effectively translates an avant-garde writing exploding normative black literary poetics into a black avant-garde writer exploding normative literary poetics. The photograph of Erica Hunt turns a general text into a specific book, writing into a writer, a b=l=a=c=k=w=o=m=a=n into a black woman. Like deconstruction, an interminable project due to the incessant re-entrenchment of metaphysics at every level of being, *Arcade* is an attempt to redress the most immediate (from Saar’s and Hunt’s perspectives) and on-going hypostatization of a black woman.

As the cover by Allison Saar suggests, *Arcade* alludes, perhaps first and foremost, to the Venus Hottentot, the subject of poems and books by black women poets as different as Deborah Richards and Elizabeth Alexander.¹⁰ She is the black female analogue to Emmitt Till, by which I mean to recall not only victimization but also collaboration.¹¹ And in naming her black, I intend less a Pan-African gesture than a reference to the appropriation of an African woman by black and African-American poets, just as the Negro teenager Emmitt Till has been appropriated as the ur-symbol of black male emasculation.

Created by way of correspondence between Hunt and Saar over a two-year period, *Arcade* explores the terrain of the black body engendered in general as woman, or at least this is how critic Linda Kinnahan reads the second woodcut in the book. It shows a nude female figure with African facial and head and hair features (à la Grace Jones), hanging-upside down by her rope-bound feet. For Kinnahan the rope around the feet alludes to the lynching of black males as well as the violence perpetrated against black females. Thus the black female is figured literally under the mark of violence and metaphorically as an image of violence against black males.¹² While a number of Saar’s woodcuts mount sexual and racial ambiguity as undecidable androgyny, Kinnahan’s reading may be another form of violence against the black female body, forced to “represent” not only black females in general but also black males in general. If we read Saar’s woodcut, however, as a singular instance of a black female hung by her feet because there is never a reason to hang her by her head (which, after all, has no function within American history), ambiguity may shift from the mode of death itself (lynching) to the autoeroticism on display. The right hand cupping the left breast, the left hand cupping the genitalia, may be read as affirmative (sexuality, perhaps even nursing, in spite of all else) and negative (this body is only sexual, only good for nursing).

Facing the woodcut on the recto page is Hunt’s poem, “Coronary Artist (1),” first published in *Local History* as “Coronary Artist.” In *Arcade* it is the first of three “Coronary Artist” poems and has been slightly altered in format. Since this poem contains several instances of Hunt’s shifting between pronouns—specifically “I” and “we”—I want to look at the effect of Saar’s woodcut on our reading of the poem. Entrenched in custom we tend to read texts—poetry or prose—as captions when they are self-

consciously juxtaposed with images. Like the cupped breast, the fondled genitalia, texts “nurse” images, bring forth an image’s “meaning.” At the same time, texts, like cupped breasts, fondled (or shielded?) genitalia, pleasure themselves, give themselves meaning. Since the particular poem facing Saar’s woodcut was published in *Local History* three years before its appearance in *Arcade* we may be tempted to believe that the poem was written prior to the two-year period of exchange between Saar and Hunt that constitutes *Arcade*. In that case, then, we may be emboldened to read the poem as more than mere commentary or caption. Both verso and recto pages may be read as a kind of collage of pre-existing, self-sustaining elements. However, since we do not know when the Saar-Hunt correspondence occurred, to say nothing of the vagaries of the publishing industry which cannot assure a correspondence between composition and publication dates, we cannot know, in fact, when “Coronary Artist” was written. I raise this issue because of the first phrase of “Coronary Artist (1)” — “I dream excess” (13). The suggestion of autoeroticism in Saar’s woodcut, along with the invocation of the exorbitant in Hunt’s first sentence, might indicate that the woodcut means to be self-sufficient, that the surplus of self-gratification in relationship to the economy of hetero- or homo-sexuality, spins inwardly, toward, not away from, the selfsame body. At the very least Saar’s female figure problematizes our desire to conflate Hunt’s “I” with Hunt. On the other hand, the woodcut also makes it easier to conflate Hunt’s “I” with Hunt when the “you” near the end of the text seems more self-reflexive in light of the woodcut and the first two sentences of the last paragraph: “You can smell the smoke answering the alarm. And then you can’t smell anything over the family soundtrack, putting everything on hold” (14). Aside from the addition of the parenthetical “1” to its title, a “1” which resembles an “I,” the above sentences are the site of the only difference in format between the two books. In *Local History*, the first sentence is set off by itself; in *Arcade* it is the opening sentence of the last paragraph. The respite of a space — during which perhaps to dream of excess — has been deleted in *Arcade*. And perhaps it is precisely the absence of even a momentary rest before the return of the family as accompaniment to a visual script (sitcom and drama no doubt) that point back to the necessity of autoeroticism, though such a reading turns an act by choice into a last resort. Just as important, the absence of black mascons in Hunt’s text is less problematic in a book full of visual images replete with black mascons. And in case we had not read “family” as normative at the level of social organization, literary form and cultural/racial imperative, “Coronary Artist (2)” makes clear the ambivalence of belonging: “Who wouldn’t aspire to become an alien in their own language for a moment to lose the feeling of being both separated and crowded by their experience?” (15). This desire to “stray from my lines” can refer back to a struggle toward articulation patrolled by the apparatus of the state and it can refer forward to a future which, by definition, cannot be delimited by any mode of the family — for example, the black community or the avant-garde community — and its competing claims: “I am sentenced to think in lines running away and toward radical/detachment, where “I’s” lock” (39).

The figure of the family, of the female body, gets radically enlarged to the figure of the house in Hunt’s 2003 chapbook, *Piece Logic*. For it is in the house that the family dwells, but here the family, like the house, is explicitly national in scope. It is not mere rhetoric that the family in the big house, appropriately named The White House, is the original family, the First Family. Here, Adam and Eve are reproduced every four years as the President and the First Lady. But in this house where there are no men or women named as such, only a male that presides and a female who is “first” (a formula that echoes, however unwittingly, the stations of Adam and Eve in Eden: he has dominion over the earth and everything that “dwelleth within,” including the only woman begotten of man and the first sinner of human history), is other houses: “In a country that is not one but several” (1). Several, here, severs “house” and “family”

from one another as well as both from “first.” Recalling in part the logic of George Oppen’s 1934 excavation of capitalist atomization, *Discrete Series*, Hunt examines the “pieces” of “broken things” that both constitute and are contained within “The House.” The poems of *Piece Logic* critique the logic of consumerism from without and from within. “She,” “he,” “we” and “they,” certainly are figured from an “objective” and “scientific” position at the margins of the house but “I” remains here as an ethical denial of narrative omniscience and moral accession to self-incrimination. She, too, dwells in one of the many houses undergoing demolition.

Published in the wake of the events of September 11, 2001, *Piece Logic* ratchets up the interdependency of consumerism, misogyny and state terrorism. Race as a mascon, as “black” or “African American,” has been almost completely eradicated from the text and the cover (no photograph appears). In one of the few instances of a mascon’s appearance—near the end of “Invisible Hands”—the phrase “give me some skin” (15) functions ambivalently in a poem concerned, in part, with the veils of ideology that disguise warmongers behind peacemakers, arms behind arms. Urgent, politically motivated and linguistically propulsive, *Piece Logic* even calls into question the presumptions of gender identity—“I don’t even understand lactation” (5) says one narrator—as Hunt’s work enters a poetic landscape in which the languages of capitalism and the critiques they engender can function unhampered by anything more local and specific than “I” and “we,” “she” and “he.” Of course, as the history of the 20th century demonstrated, the logic of consumerism threatens to overwhelm the “state,” hypostatized as the “nuclear family.” It is this tension that unleashes xenophobia, misogyny and state terrorism under the guise of a “return” to “family values.” And this is true even if—especially when—the family in question is the putative “black” nation of Pan-Africanism.

Thus, as Hunt reminds us in the last line of the poem “A House of Broken Things,” “the figure x” is always “practical” because it can function even when “turned on its head.” This “x” is not capitalized, it may not be a mascon of the Nation of Islam, for example, much less the man named Malcolm Little, Malcolm X and El Hajj Malik El Shabbazz. In the lifespan of this one man we read not only a dialectical movement analogous to the publication history of one Erica Hunt, we read also the history of renaming, a phenomenon almost unique to the immigrant, however “voluntary” or “forced” his or hers immigration.

Is this line, then, is this poem, this book, *Piece Logic*, a critique of the nostalgia for what was lost, for what was broken (apart), an original family sundered from its history, its land, its Eden? Or is this lower-case x irreducibly undecidable, Hunt’s erasure, at last, of the pronoun, of all those gender referents that organize the structures of reverence in the house of the Reverend, a house populated by all that is alphabetical melting into x? And what would it mean if x—and not z—were the end of an alphabet?¹³

Notes

¹ Evie Shockley sees Hunt’s poetics defined more by her Caribbean heritage than the American culture in which she was born. See her paper, “Loss of Identity, Identity of Erica Hunt’s and William Braithwaite’s ‘House’ Poems,” presented at Furious Flower: Regenerating the Black Poetic Tradition, James Madison University, September 22-25, 2004.

² In this context, Hunt’s work is strictly post-black and pre-African American and

thus, in terms of its public and publication (with presses associated with Language Writing, women's writing and black writing, respectively, Roof Books, Kelsey St. Press and Carolina Wren) crisscrosses at least three "different" demographics and markets.

³ Stephen E. Henderson, *Understanding The New Black Poetry*.

⁴ Hayden's historical and all-too-literal dilemma replicates that most immediately of Melvin B. Tolson, a poet whose work, though strikingly different from Hayden's, was also viewed as both too "black" by the literary mainstream (because of its "content") and too "white" (because of its formal pyrotechnics) by black cultural nationalists.

⁵ Dove made these comments at the Margaret Cook Poetry Festival on "diversity in African-American Poetry" at Miami University (Ohio) in the fall of 2003 and the Furious Flower conference on "regenerating the black poetic tradition" at James Madison University in the fall of 2004.

⁶ Aldon Nielsen, *Black Chant: African-American Postmodernism*.

⁷ Toni Morrison, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," *Black Women Writers*.

⁸ See, for example, Michelle Wallace's infamous critique of the black arts movement in her *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*.

⁹ See footnote 2.

¹⁰ See, for example, Alexander's *The Venus Hottentot* and Deborah Richards' *Last One Out*.

¹¹ See Wanda Coleman's "Emmitt Till" in *African Sleeping Sickness*.

¹² Linda Kinnahan, "'Bodies Written Off': Economies of Race and Gender in the Visual/Verbal Collaborative Clash of Erica Hunt's and Alison Saar's *Arcade*," in *We Who Love To Be Astonished: Experimental Women's Writing*, 165-178.

¹³ I allude here, of course, to Claudia Rankine's *The End Of The Alphabet*, a book whose use of the definite article signals its polarized, and thus conventional, oppositional discourse. My deployment of the indefinite article attempts to pay homage to Hunt's open-ended sense of alternative languages or, at the least, different lexicons not reducible to mere "opposition." Hunt's languages shuttle back and forth between an "us" and a "them," between a "he" and a "she," between an "I" and a "you."

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CONTRIBUTORS

ROSA ALCALÁ is a poet and translator originally from Paterson, NJ. Her latest translation is *Guardians of the Secret* by Lila Zemborain (Noemi Press, 2009). Her translations also appear in *The Oxford Book of Latin American Poetry* (2009). *Undocumentaries*, a collection of poems, is forthcoming from Shearsman Books. She teaches in the Department of Creative Writing and Bilingual MFA Program at the University of Texas at El Paso.

STAN APPS is a poet and essayist living in Tampa, Florida. His books include *Info Ration* from Make Now and *God's Livestock Policy* from Les Fignes. A chapbook of Sonnets is forthcoming in the g.e. series from Books and Bookshelves, and a big brick of essays is soon to come from Combo Books. Stan's blog is at nonprovocativeurl.blogspot.com.

CARA BENSON has two poem books, *(made)* and *Protean Parade*, forthcoming from BookThug and Black Radish respectively and edits the online journal *Sous Rature* (www.necessetics.com/sousrature.html). "Quantum Chaos and Poems: A Manifest(o)ation" (BookThug) co-won the bpNichol Prize. Other work includes: Belladonna Elders Series #7 with Anne Waldman and Jayne Cortez (Belladonna), "UP" (Dusie), and "Spell/ing () Bound" with Kai Fierle-Hedrick and Kathrin Schaeppi (ellectrique press). Benson edited the interdisciplinary book *Predictions* now out with Chain. She is an active committee member of the PEN Prison Writing Program and teaches poetry in a NY State Correctional Facility for males.

DAVID BRAZIL was born in New York and lives in California. With Sara Larsen he edits *TRY!*, a biweekly xerox publication. His books include *The Book Called Spring* (Portable Press at Yo-Yo Labs) and *Spy Wednesday* (forthcoming from TAXT Press). Send mail to 3107 Ellis St., Berkeley, CA 94703.

LAYNIE BROWNE is the author of seven collections of poetry and one novel. Her most recent books are *The Scented Fox* (Wave 2007) and *Daily Sonnets* (Counterpath 2007). She has two collections forthcoming: *Roseate, Points of Gold* (Dusie) and *The Desires of Letters* (Counterpath).

CACONRAD is the recipient of THE GIL OTT BOOK AWARD for *The Book of Frank* (Chax Press, 2009). He is also the author of *Advanced Elvis Course* (Soft Skull Press, 2009), *(Soma)tic Midge* (Faux Press, 2008), *Deviant Propulsion* (Soft Skull Press, 2006), and a forthcoming collaboration with poet Frank Sherlock titled *THE CITY REAL & IMAGINED: Philadelphia Poems* (Factory School Books, 2010). CAConrad is the son

of white trash asphyxiation whose childhood included selling cut flowers along the highway for his mother and helping her shoplift. He invites you to visit him online at <http://CAConrad.blogspot.com> and also with his friends at <http://PhillySound.blogspot.com>

MICHAEL CROSS edits Atticus/Finch Chapbooks and co-edits *ON: Contemporary Practice*. His chapbooks include *Throne* (Dos Books) and *Cede* (Vigilance Society), and his most recent book-length project, *In Felt Treeling*, was published by Chax. *Haec-cities* is forthcoming in 2010 from Cuneiform Press. He is finishing a dissertation on the work of Louis Zukofsky, and he edited a collection of talks on the work of George Oppen which may or may not see the world soon.

ROBERT DEWHURST edits the small poetry magazine *Satellite Telephone*, and co-edits, with Sean Reynolds, *WILD ORCHIDS*, a journal of affective literary criticism. He currently lives in Buffalo, NY, where he is studying literature and feelings.

THOM DONOVAN coedits *ON: Contemporary Practice*, edits *Wild Horses of Fire* blog, and curates for the SEGUE reading series in NYC. His critical writings and poetry have appeared variously online and in print. "In the dirt of the line" is part of a book-length project about cultural translation and geopolitical disruption across recent poetics and visual art.

PATRICK JAMES DUNAGAN lives and works in San Francisco. An essay on Creeley and Stevens is expected in *Fulcrum* 7. Recent books include: *From Chansonniers* (Blue Press, 2008) and *Easy Eden* w/ Micah Ballard (PUSH, 2009).

JOEL FELIX edits *LVNG Magazine* with Michael O'Leary and Peter O'Leary. His work has appeared in chapbooks from Answer Tag Home Press, Bronze Skull, and Chicago Poetry Project, and in the journals *Chain*, *Ecopoetics*, and *Cultural Society*.

BRENDA IJIMA is the author of *Around Sea* (O Books) and *Animate, Inanimate Aims* (Litmus Press). Two forthcoming titles include *revv. you'll—ution* (Displaced Press) and *If Not Metamorphic* (Ahsahta Press). Presently she is working on a project that loosely resembles an encyclopedia chronicling animals used as surrogates by humans. She's also researching all the women that were murdered in her hometown of North Adams, Massachusetts. Ijima runs Portable Press at Yo-Yo Labs in Brooklyn, NY.

CHRIS MARTIN is the author of *American Music*, recipient of the Hayden Carruth Award. His most recent chapbook is *The Small Dance*, published online by Scantly Clad Press. An unpublished collaboration with the late poet kari edwards will be surfacing soon and the web journal he edited, *Puppy Flowers*, just finished its eleven issue run this summer. More of his critical work can be found in *Yeti*, *Slash*, *The Poetry Project Newsletter*, and *Poiesis: Canadian Journal of Philosophy*.

C.J. MARTIN lives in Lockhart, TX, where he co-edits Dos Press with Julia Drescher. He's also a contributing editor for *Little Red Leaves* (www.littleredleaves.com) & LRL e-editions. His chapbooks include *WIW?3: Hold me tight. Make me happy* (Delete Press, 2009), *Lo, Bittern* (Atticus/Finch, 2008) and *CITY* (Vigilance Society, 2007). Work is recent and forthcoming in *Antennae*, *Broke* (w/Julia Drescher), *Try!* (w/Julia Drescher), *P-Queue*, *Damn the Caesars*, & elsewhere.

LAURA MORIARTY's *A Semblance: Selected & New Poetry 1975-2007* came out from Omnidawn Publishing in 2007, as did *An Air Force*, a chapbook from Hooke Press. Her long essay poem *A Tonalist* is forthcoming from Nightboat Books next spring. Other recent books are *Ultravioleta*, a novel, from Atelos and *Self-Destruction*, a book of poetry, from Post-Apollo Press. She has taught at Mills College and Naropa University among other places & is currently Deputy Director of Small Press Distribution. She is findable on-line at A Tonalist Notes and related blogs.

RICH OWENS edits Punch Press and *Damn the Caesars*, a journal of contemporary poetry and poetics. *Delaware Memoranda*, a book-length poem, was published by BlazeVOX. *Embankments* is forthcoming from Interbirth Books.

EVELYN REILLY's most recent book, *Styrofoam*, was published by Roof Books in 2009. She is currently working on *Material Science*, an exploration of the language of siteless architectural forms. Other works also include *Fervent Remnants of Reflective Surfaces* from Portable Press at Yo Yo Labs and *Hiatus* from Barrow Street Books.

MICHELLE TARANSKY's first book, *Barn Burned, Then*, was selected by Marjorie Welish for the 2008 Omnidawn Poetry Prize. Taransky lives in Philadelphia where she works at Kelly Writers House and teaches poetry at Temple University.

DAN THOMAS-GLASS recently published *880*, a poetry and photography inter-media project on the freeway, with Deep Oakland Editions. He is the editor and lead spraypainter for *With + Stand*. Poems and essays have appeared in *Tarpaulin Sky* and

Jacket and elsewhere. He lives with his wife Kate and daughter Sonia one block from the 580/80 split, in Albany.

ROBIN TREMBLAY-McGAW lives in San Francisco where she edits www.xpoetics.blogspot.com. Her work has appeared in *HOW2*, *Crayon*, *Mirage*, *Digital Artifact Magazine*, *POM2*, *Narrativity*, *Biting the Error: Writers Explore Narrative* (Coach House Books, 2004) and elsewhere. She has two chapbooks—*after a grand collage* (Dyad Press) and *making mARKs* (a+bend press)—and is currently at work on a full length manuscript.

BRIAN WHITENER is a writer, researcher, translator, and member of the collective project La Lleca, an artistic-social intervention into the prison system of Mexico City. His most recent books include a translation of Colectivo Situaciones' *Genocide in the Barrio* forthcoming from ChainLinks, *Como hacemos lo que hacemos* with the artistic collective La Lleca, a translation of Maurizio Lazzarato's *Politics of the Event* and *Haciendo tiempo: Artelpolitica desde 1999* from la Universidad Autónoma de la Ciudad de México. He is an editor at Displaced Press (<http://displacedpress.blogspot.com>), and since 2005 he has been investigating new political and artistic movements in Latin America and autonomist political theory. His writings and translations have appeared in many U.S. journals, and he has edited a special issue of the online magazine *Moria* and is involved in an on-going collaborative translation project of contemporary Latin American poetry that is currently appearing in *Aufgabe*.

TYRONE WILLIAMS teaches literature and theory at Xavier University in Cincinnati, Ohio. He is the author of two books of poetry, *c.c.* (Krupskaya Books, 2002) and *On Spec* (Omnidawn Publishing, 2008). He also has several chapbooks out, including *AAB* (Slack Buddha Press, 2004), *Futures, Elections* (Dos Madres Press, 2004) and *Musique Noir* (Overhere Press, 2006). A new book of poems, *the Hero Project of the Century*, is forthcoming in 2009 from The Backwaters Press. He recently completed a manuscript of poetry commissioned by Atelos Books. His website is located at the following link: <http://home.earthlink.net/~suspend/>.

