

ON THE MULTIPLICITOUS POETRIES OF LEE ANN BROWN

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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 epithalameums 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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