

MY KARI EDWARDS

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kari edwards was a truly difficult person, and by difficult I mean persistently radical. One of the things I remember most fondly about hir is that when anyone asked questions about hir work, hir way of answering was to interrogate and dissect the question itself.

If one was to examine on a deep psychoanalytic mode, one would find continual displacements and disjunctions.

Sie refused to be anyone else's oracle of authority, and sie refused to "make nice" for the sake of being polite. When we first met online and started corresponding in 2003, I found these qualities to be extremely irritating. To be honest, we fought about quite a few things, because at first I found a lot of hir positions on politics to be unrealistic . . . in retrospect I should have seen they were utopian.

no body no borders . . . art making is a revolutionary process . . . it takes one out of the act of commodification . . . but only the act . . . then it is a product

Once sie made a statement that gender didn't matter, that everything was about power. My response was that if you're a hammer, then everything may look like a nail, and I felt the emphasis on power to be concerned with the ways people are disappointing rather than the ways in which they can be strong. What I didn't realize at the time was that we shared a similar viewpoint, that kari was concerned with power in the productive sense of the word, of empowerment, redistributing and sharing power, critiquing the oppressive misuse of it.

All gender is state enforced territory . . . controlled by the war machine.

Never operating from a top-down conception of things, kari's work and hir behavior in life was always a grassroots vision of literature. Sie often published hir poetry in new journals, young journals, places that were just getting started. Sie often failed to recognize existing hierarchies of power in poetry, frequently encouraging young writers who had no "cultural capital." kari's model was a kind of cantankerous generosity and inclusion, and the rhizomatic relationship between all hir acts cumulatively accounts for the tremendous outpouring of sympathy from the poetry community when sie died in December of 2006. Hir work in all its forms drew attention to the contemporary contradiction between solidarity-in-diversity grassroots activism and the Orwellian language of the Bush administration.

Strategic essentialism . . . sounds scary . . . really scary . . .

The increased speed of networking created by an explosion in poetry blogs and other public online interaction in the aughts celebrated the individual while showing young writers that they can do it themselves and can make a difference. But a situation of mutual surveillance was created which has since affected our way of being social and defining intimacy in relation to other writers. It seems to me now that kari in hir poetry was involved in multiple, often contradictory acts of describing that space and how we function within it as bodies, how we relate to the social psychology of it. Transgenderism in hir work is among many other things an allegory for the possibilities of this virtual space and the fractured body politic of language that it was composed of (and vice versa).

there is no answer, there is revolution on a one-to-one level . . . with the intention of transformation which may lead to the insight of the multiple forms of oppression.

kari negotiated these contradictions by acknowledging that literary formalism was not enough, that we need to step outside of poetry and spread the word about all the injustices happening in the world. Hir “transdada” blog was a stream of intense, painful, constant reminders of the injustices committed against people of marginalized gender every day. kari made struggles of gender visible in contemporary poetry at a time when the subject had largely been ignored by the poetry community, except perhaps when transgender bodies are fetishized as merely the site of freaky operations. kari edwards represented all of these different things to many people. However, the distinction needs to be made: sie is not a symbol for anything, not a synecdoche. It remains to be seen whether sie is a hero, a term with which sie did not appear to identify.

it can never be about the mirror, the mirror is deceptive, a liar . . . what you think you should see is a seed planted with spectacle bits as a form of social control . . . there is no true self-reflection

Sie was certainly an incredible writer. kari’s poetry is original in the way it destabilizes language in the process of thinking-through. Hir poetry is at once maximal and decentered. But whereas Whitman’s poetry includes the Brazilian vaquero, the Brooklyn Bridge, and a ton of other miscellaneous stuff, the philosophically exigent poetry of kari edwards cycles through all the permutations, includes all the possibilities involved in the engendering of a thought. It’s about the process before it reaches completion, before the juridical, but also anticipating and projecting potentialities into the future. It is a utopian poetry, and the figure of the writer is placed so precariously within it, as a simultaneous coalescing and dispersal of energies. I have learned a great deal from these ethereal, expansive poems which seem to also contain a world of suffering.

I can not embody your turmoil you not mine

I was changed, continually turned inside-out, by my relationship with kari, who was an important mentor to many. Sie was a supportive friend when it came to advising me about issues of gender identity on a personal level. I felt a deep solidarity with hir in this regard, and a deep compassion for the contradictions sie lived through, of wanting to see and write without gender but wanting also to pass as a woman, of wanting to coalesce into a new identity without that identity actually being stated and thereby commodified. I feel changed by kari’s sincere engagement with thinking out loud in public, including the struggles and mistakes of thought in the poem, by hir ability to reach outside the literary tradition for subject matter and inspiration, and by hir refusal to recognize existing hierarchies (thereby avoiding the exhausting matter of choreographing literary positionality). For many of us, kari represents the person who accurately named how the space of the virtual is transforming what activism and embodiment can mean in our era. For me personally, sie represents the persistent possibility of meeting someone in the mall of online performance

who can become a true friend, like a person gradually emerging out of a background of language, coalescing, cumulative, radically decentered.

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