

A ROOM FOR OPAL, ROOM FOR TIME LISTENING WITH JULIE PATTON

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A Room for Opal emerged in collaboration with poet and artist Julie Patton and our work together around *ecopoetics*, a journal I edit devoted to creative-critical edges between making (with an emphasis on poetry) and ecology, what I call the praxis of deliberate earthlings. What does it mean to live deliberately, in relation to all the others (human as well as other-than-human)? And what can possibly the oldest form of making – going to the root sense of “poetry,” as essentially a species of making – bring to this conversation?

ecopoetics was founded with these questions in mind, and one of the first submissions I received was Julie’s piece, “Slug Art”: a leaf perforated by a slug’s digestive juices, and a poem singing through the various ramifications of the word “slug,” from invertebrate, to bullet, to typesetting element. The playfulness of Julie’s work crossed received categories between “nature” and “culture,” between “art” and “nature,” between “human” and “invertebrate,” raising the question: what would an art created in the spaces between species look like?

Why, in a time when we desperately need to recalibrate our relations to the rest of the planet, do so many of the contemporary artists and writers attending to the crisis (thankfully enough) continue to posit a human “subject” here, a “nature” over there, reinstating the very dualism structuring our inability to relate? If art is a form of knowledge, it equals scientific cognition not by emulating scientific method but by methods intrinsic to its own love of paradox and open-ended form. Art allows us to think the unthinkable, say what cannot be said, and move around, inside and outside of the “rational” box. Art teaches us what science cannot. If slugs make art, it is human artists, rather than scientists, who will be their collaborators and critics.

That said, we owe to scientists the diagnosis of crisis, a measuring of affairs that translates into the language of power, and attention to the things that really matter to slugs, and all other subjects of the taxonomic kingdoms – attention that, when ethically directed, can make scientists collaborators too. Art could do what science cannot by listening to science rather than ignoring it. Science could do what art cannot by listening to art, not ignoring it. Julie’s work has taught me a great deal about listening: a seeing-hearing that begins with the letters and syllables we make our words of, extending to the forms of seeds, leaves and plants, the shapes of human and animal vocalizations, the curves a musical note writes on our nerves. Art can provide more than raw data for scientific method, science more than “facts” for artistic interpretation. Both are human activities positioned in a world desperately in need of our hearing, of both one another, and of those other-than-humans we have yet to invent (or remember) a mode of listening to.

Patton's book works, "paper toys," concrete poetries, "composaytions," floor plays, "recycle pedias," and "vociflors," amongst other performance and publication modes, extend the modernist "revolution of the word" into collaborative civic and natural spaces. Her daily site-specific installations of book and plant assemblages at Casa Malaparte in Capri, Italy (1995) or her floor installation with books at Stadtbucherei Ludenscheid in Ludenscheid, Germany (1997) exemplify her use of the book as magical object and architectural medium, interacting with natural materials. Language takes place in letters and breath, inscribed on paper pulped from plant materials, scrolled, accordioned or bound into books whose shapes, page layout and spatial forms are governed as much by principles of architecture as by those of literary composition. (In the case of her collaborations with Euphrosyne Bloom, from 1991 to 2001, the medium is film.) At the same time, these constructions are susceptible to "contamination" by the wild forms of flowers, branches and other plant elements, a form of "spelling" that helps turn them into instruments of magic.

Patton's practice as a gardener and forager, whether for subsistence or pleasure, has been as much a part of her work as her constructions and performances. More recently, her efforts have taken a civic turn, with the 1387 Corporation artists' cooperative, in Cleveland, Ohio (of which Patton is President), with her leadership and collaboration with City Planning officials and neighborhood youth around a re-design of bicycle pathways in the Cleveland parks, and with her works engaging civic trauma, such as the "Common Ground" memorial tree planting project and performance with local artists and community activists in Winston-Salem, North Carolina (2005). As a performer, Patton tours Europe regularly with composer Uri Caine, writing and improvising librettos for his eclectic "operas." Her performances sometimes take the form of "improvoications," where improvisation and voice conspire to provoke reflection around the submerged presence of race in politics or avant-garde practice, as in her impersonation of Colin Powell as Othello for Caine's "Othello Syndrome," at La Biennale di Venezia della Musica (2003). In what she calls "Ju-Ju Pulp-its & Con Texts (where the body gets close to the hand turning the pages of the self as a paper doll)," Patton deploys the language of dance and mime alongside "paper toys" and "life-sized" letters, recalling the public modes of *commedia dell'arte* or marionette theater (see "play / sub mitted by/ "X," a "Soap Opera" documented in *Tripwire* #5, 2001).

In writing, Patton extends her work outside the identity politics that have configured and constrained so much postmodern African American art and poetry, with, amongst other projects, *Alphabet Soup*, an extended series on the alphabet, exploring and exploding a wild range of resonances, letter by letter: as in the existential, ontological riff on the "middle passage" of B, in *Teething on Type: 2*. (One of my favorite pieces is "Oxford Re-Verse," where Patton locates "black American" speech in lines from early English literature.) See chapbooks such as *Teething on Type*, "Car Tune" & *Not So Bella Donna*, *Notes for Some (Nominally) Awake*, or anthologies such as *The Portable Boog Reader*, or *Moving Borders: Three Decades of Innovative Work by Women*. Patton's work brings much to the site of ecopoetics, in its fearless embrace of the indeterminate spaces between disciplines, its cultivation of an edge practice rather than exploitation of a professional niche, its commitment to diversity, and its willingness to inhabit parallel, even juxtaposed, dimensions – without demanding they drive into and reinforce one another on the same plane. Patton lets art, as a form of knowledge cultivated through the investigation of materials, make a difference, by placing art's investigations in social fields where the response is indeterminate, not random. Her work is responsive, and radically responsible to the contexts in which it takes place: while she draws on a particular repertory of forms, vocabularies, gestures and vocalizations honed through years of practice, these are not marshaled to reproduce a portable concept. Rather, each work is time, place and community-specific, in a configuration determined through what the available materials make (unpredictably) available.

When Bates Museum Director Mark Bessire and Curator Anthony Shostak suggested I

apply for a Synergy Grant, for potential participation in the Green Horizons Exhibit, and told me the grant would be for collaboration between a faculty member, a visiting artist and a community organization, I thus immediately thought of Julie's work. I also thought of the Thorncrag Bird Sanctuary (which the Stanton Bird Club administers), and the Morse Mountain Conservation Area (managed jointly by Bates College and the St. John family): sites miraculously dedicated to the well-being of other-than-human species, and to the widest possible sense of conversation. Julie and I had often traded tales of encounters with owls and other wild spirits, and I wanted to see what the Maine woods could bring to the conversation, what we could offer. An additional notion was that Julie, as part of her residency at Bates, would help me teach a week of the May 2007 Short Term course in Ecopoetics: we would work onsite, with students, in collaboration with volunteers from the Lewiston-Auburn community, in an effort that would contribute to the Green Horizons installation. When we were fortunate enough to receive the grant, Julie immediately told me she'd like the students to read the "Mystical Nature Diary" of Opal Whiteley, *The Singing Creek Where the Willows Grow*. Thus was planted the seed that would become *A Room for Opal*.

Opal Whiteley was a young, very small but very precocious nature writer who published a best-selling diary in 1920. It soon went out of print, however, and Whiteley into obscurity, due to growing skepticism that she had actually written the diary. She claimed to have written it from 1904 to 1905, living with her family and attending school in Walden, a logging community in Oregon's Willamette Valley. As her editor Benjamin Hoff narrates, "There, in the latter half of her sixth year, Opal began to write a diary, which she kept in a hollow log in the nearby forest. In it she described her home, her animal friends, her cathedral area among the trees, and 'the singing creek where the willows grow.' Using her own phonetic form of spelling, she printed with crayons on pieces of scrap paper a neighbor woman brought her. The crayons were left for her in a secret place in the woods, where she would leave notes asking the fairies for more 'color pencils' to write with" (*The Singing Creek Where the Willows Grow: The Mystical Nature Diary of Opal Whiteley*, ed. Benjamin Hoff, Penguin: NY, 1994). Opal's ambition was to write books for children about the inhabitants of the field and forest; indeed, she soon gained a reputation as a "teacher of the forest and its ways," and would take logging-camp children on "explores" to her cathedral in the forest to listen to the singing of the birds. She would later finance her university education and the printing of her first book, *The Fairyland Around Us* (1919), by giving widely attended talks.

Opal populated her "explores" with other-than-human friends named after literary and mythological figures, such as Thomas Chatterton Jupiter Zeus, a wood-rat; Lars Porsena of Clusium, a crow; Plato and Apliny, two bats; Michael Angelo Sanzio Raphael, a fir tree; and Lucian Horace Ovid Virgil, a toad. The prose, incredible for a six year-old, is written in an approximation of French syntax, and seasoned with French words and names: "I did sing to the rivièrè a song. I sang it *le chant de Seine, de Havre et Essonne et Nonette et Roullon et Iton et Darnetal et Ourcq et Rille et Loing et Eure et Audelle et Nonette et Sarc.*" In it, she goes on explores: "I like to go in among the rushes where the black birds with red upon their wings do go. I like to touch fingertips with the rushes. I like to listen to the voices that whisper in the swamp." Opal sings to plants, puts her ear close to the rock and listens to the "lichen folk" who "talk in gray tones," imagines stretching out long and getting short again like an earth worm, and observes her toad friend Lucian Horace Ovid Virgil "use his hands to stuff [a worm] down his throat."

A further biographical complication (and marvel) is that Opal Whiteley did not consider herself to be Opal Whiteley but, rather, Françoise, daughter to the Princess Marie and naturalist Henri d'Orléans, a prince of the French royal family of Bourbon. (Henri had died when Opal was four, at the end of an expedition through India and Indochina.) These were her Angel Mother and Father, who used to take her on walks and teach her to

observe what was around her. Such beliefs earned her the increasing skepticism of her fellow humans, and a perilously marginal place in society. After ten months in India, where Opal lived in the maharana of Udaipur's guest house, and time in an imperial convent in Vienna, she lived in London as a ward of the city. "During the second world war," Hoff notes, "she was often seen scavenging for books in the rubble of bombed buildings." Opal was committed in 1948 to Napsbury Hospital, outside London, where she would die in 1992 at the age of 95. Thus she takes her place beside writers like John Clare or Antonin Artaud (amongst others), "schizophrenic" poets who were punished by society for making public their visions and hearings.

In our dialogue, Julie and I discussed sustainability, or, rather, our reluctance to use the word, a term meant to designate (according to the World Commission on Environment and Development) "meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." If sustainability is about generational self-reliance, it is largely about time, about how the energy crisis entails a crisis in our relationship to time. "Email bankruptcy" is a collective call for TIME OUT. How can we stop speeding and make time, to listen beyond the needs of our own generation, to "have feels" for the times of others? How can we make the time it takes to know a landscape, for instance, not just across seasons, but across years and decades – by listening at the overlap between generational horizons, at the stone walls of successional New England plots. Instead of sustainability, Julie and I discussed walking, we have always discussed walking, while walking, or in Paul Klee's words, while "taking a line for a walk."

We decided that with intergenerational walks through Thorncrag we would draw a timeline, by ear and by foot, across multiple horizons, including that of the retreat of the Laurentian Ice Sheet and that of the Great Flood, right down to the current shrinking of the polar ice caps and the inundation of coastal cities. The timeline would also focus on extinctions and recoveries, as in the recent, uncertain appearances of the Lord God Bird. Susan Hayward helped us locate elders and children who were generous enough to walk with us at Thorncrag. (Rain cancelled the walk outdoors with Susan's Junior Naturalists, which led instead to an enchanted game of "Simon Says," exploring Thorncrag indoors at the Montello School.) Key collaborators in all of this were my "students" – a designation put in quotation marks, since they had so much to teach. And a key context was our meeting outside to read, discuss and write, amidst the singing birds and sprouting leaves, nearly every day for three weeks before Julie arrived. As a culmination of these meetings (but only one of several projects), each student wrote, printed, designed and constructed a book that found its way into the installation. There also was a performance at Bates College, Julie conducting music professor Dale Chapman, myself and the students, in a live "composaytion."

As I assisted Julie with the technical component of *A Room for Opal's* sound installation, I collected recordings of the "composaytions" and conversations conducted during her residency at Bates, then edited and wired them for listening stations Julie located in four classic, wooden bird houses (where to listen visitors must kneel): at one you hear the collaborative performance, at one the conversation with elders at Thorncrag, at one the conversation with children at the Montello School, and at one (the eponymous "Bird House"), a mix of Charlie Parker and Peterson's Guide to Eastern/ Central Bird Song. The bird houses are located atop tottering towers of books scavenged from Lewiston thrift stores, some "roofed" by the books of poetry the students composed at Thorncrag and at various other sites (some urban) along the Androscoggin and Kennebec watersheds. (An upside-down bird house makes a kind of "Noah's ark" at the site of "The Flood" on Julie's timeline, also roofed by a poetry book.) For those who cannot kneel, a listening station shuffling segments of the various recordings is located at Opal's desk.

Opal's desk, amongst other things, indicates the Enlightenment classroom, with its alphabet blocks and birds' nests, an enchanted place in its own right, where natural history and childhood wonder are mutually illuminated. It is also, surely, a site of discipline and constraint: the hold of a society that has made us such poor listeners. (Opal often depicts herself being abused by non-comprehending adults.) The implication is that such deafness threatens the very life of the thing that is not being heard: an indictment the timeline of extinctions on the wall makes vivid, in place of the usual alphabet train. In a kind of parody of Opal's punishment for the truancy of her explores, an open book invites visitors to write out ecological resolutions, of their own devising, such as "I will not leave the water running while I brush my teeth."

To get things started, Julie's mother, Virgie Patton, wrote out several of these resolutions. Virgie, a painter herself, was also a key participant in the installation, making the collaboration very personal as well as intergenerational. In fact, the entire "hanging" atmosphere, with many of the artists (and friends and family) present at the same time working on their installations, was a vital aspect of this exhibit, a continuation of dialogue initiated during an artist's gathering the curators had organized earlier in the year. Such collaboration, like the listenings that led up to *A Room for Opal*, is provisional, and can only model the conversations that must make up the very fabric of our days, before we can even begin to talk meaningfully about sustainability. We have a choice, to sustain our professional differences: "work," "art," "science," "poetry," "literature" (not to speak of "church," "government"), or to listen across the differences, to begin to find out what it is we want to sustain. We find ourselves at a crossroads, where Opal's timeline spills into the chaotic and indefinite future.

In this uncomfortable place, books kept Opal company: Hoff tells us that when she was committed she was found living in a flat "filled from floor to ceiling with wooden boxes holding an estimated total of ten to fifteen thousand books, many of which were said to contain underlined passages and notes in Opal's handwriting." Perhaps because they have long been powerful models for conversations that write lines across time, books are the medium in which Patton has chosen to sculpt her Room for Opal. They serve as pedestals for bird houses and various found objects, taking flight, casting their profiles on the time line. Their colors and textures make the piece as tactile as it is visual. Some are treasures from Patton's own library, most, many ex-library copies, were found amidst the "rubble" at the local Salvation Army. The eerily pointed "talk" of the various titles and cover matter lends voice to the precarious, architectural forms.

One need not labor the visual puns between book and wing, book and house, book and mill – so many responses to the rich history, environment and town of Lewiston, Maine. Nor could one begin to enumerate, to describe the various historical and political vectors embedded in the imagery of Patton's wondrous, often sharp, often humorous assemblage. It is like a wild, overgrown Joseph Cornell box, still showing the vocabulary of its minimalist sensibility. Through Julie Patton, Opal invites us into her room for "explores," to stay for more than a few minutes, to "look looks down upon the mill town," and then to get small, on one's knees, and begin to listen. As if to say, that it is only by making ourselves small that we can begin.

NOTE: This essay was previously printed as part of the 2007 Bates Museum Green Horizons exhibit pdf catalog, available online at <http://www.bates.edu/prebuilt/greenhorizons.pdf>.