

# NOTES ON: HOLES & INTERTEXTUAL ALIMENTARY WRITING

## JOCELYN SAIDENBERG'S NEGATIVITY

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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."<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup> 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.

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*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.

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*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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.

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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.

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

<sup>2</sup> 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.

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

<sup>4</sup> 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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