

# 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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!