

“A GENEROSITY OF RESPONSE”: NEW NARRATIVE AS CONTEMPORARY PRACTICE

ROB HALPERN & ROBIN TREMBLAY-MCGAW

Something about autobiography = injection of element of risk in your writing,
and risk is a generosity of response to what's beyond you as a writer and person.
—Bruce Boone, “Negativity”¹

What is “New Narrative”? Our book aims to explore this literary movement as an open set of related works, as well as an array of cultural practices and persistent questions concerning writing and risk, ethics and politics, self and story. One of the several propositions informing this collection engages New Narrative’s contemporariness and historicity: not only is it a literary phenomenon located in the past, but an ongoing construction with a capacious reach. As for its origin story, New Narrative emerged during the late 1970s and 1980s with a group of San Francisco Bay Area writers—Steve Abbott, Robert Glück, and Bruce Boone—who asserted the critical and imaginative values of identity and storytelling for a formally innovative and activist writing. This was at a time when “self” and “story” were arguably considered retrograde by the avant-garde of the US writing scene within which New Narrative located itself. According to Abbott, who first identified New Narrative in the second issue of the low-fi literary zine called *Soup* (1981), “New Narrative is language conscious but arises out of specific social and political concerns of specific communities.”² Together, Abbott, Glück, and Boone theorized their practice as they elaborated a range of tactics negotiating writerly pleasure, self-fashioning, social engagement, and reflexive accountability. Put another way, New Narrative aimed to

straddle the distance between Language poetry (with its emphasis on the materiality of signification) and Movement Writing (with its emphasis on the centrality of identity), while maintaining close ties to both in its emphasis on construction *and* expression, artifice *and* selfhood. At the same time, New Narrative was close to Queer performance art as it mobilized an impure aesthetic, incorporating high and low culture, probing the collective fictions of the person and personality, while also foregrounding popular culture as a scene of social practice and politics.

While recognizing the importance of this historical framing, we wanted to organize an engagement with New Narrative as a project still under construction—an engagement that honors its history while remaining faithful to the proliferation of contemporary interest in New Narrative in the Bay Area and beyond—without being overdetermined by our preconceptions. With this in mind, we circulated a query in November 2012 seeking essays that would allow writers and readers to make their own meaningful contact with New Narrative as a movement still unfolding in the present. As part of our effort to frame this work we wrote:

We are not interested in offering an “authoritative” canon of New Narrative work, nor are we interested in consolidating an official version of New Narrative’s history. Rather, we want to use this as an opportunity to foreground New Narrative as a movement that is still coming into focus, a more or less unstable object that doesn’t want to be “fixed,” codified, or hardened into a limited & limiting list of names and works. One of our motivating questions is *Why New Narrative now?* Or, *What are the stakes of New Narrative for our contemporary moment?* In other words, while we remain committed to a set of past works that have been identified as “New Narrative,” we are equally committed to maintaining New Narrative as a dynamic and ongoing project, one with consequences for our present writing.

For those of you who may be new to this story, the set of past works to which we remain committed as cornerstone New Narrative texts *might* include Bruce Boone’s *Century of Clouds* and *My Walk With Bob*; Robert Glück’s *Elements* and *Jack the Modernist*; Dodie Bellamy’s *The Letters of Mina Harker* and *Feminine Hijinx*; Kevin Killian’s *Shy* and *Bedrooms Have Windows*; and Camille Roy’s *Rosy Medallions* and *Swarm*. We want to stress the subjunctive mood of our proposition here by underscoring “might” because this list

might have been composed otherwise. For example, Rob immediately thinks of Aaron Shurin's chapbook entitled "Narrativity," as well as Carla Harryman's collection *There Never Was a Rose Without a Thorn* and Kathy Acker's novel *My Life My Death by Pier Paolo Pasolini*; while Robin thinks of Eileen Myles' *Chelsea Girls*, Pamela Lu's *Pamela*, and Mike Amnasan's *Liar*. Given our commitment to the expansive hospitality of this orbit, we've tried to maintain the porousness and elasticity of every list so that as wide a range of writers and readers as possible can enter as they wish. And so, rather than a protocol of canonical texts and frozen assumptions, we want to present New Narrative as a dynamic, commodious and open project, one that is accessible as a contemporary practice for anyone who might feel some kinship with it. At the same time, our own orientation as writers who were similarly seeking affinities and kinships within the Bay Area's writing ecology in the late 1980s and early 90s no doubt delimits our frame of reference.

As for us, Rob and Robin, we happened to meet one Saturday afternoon in 1997 in Bob Glück's living room where we would gather regularly for Bob's writing workshop, which began in the backroom of Small Press Traffic on 22nd and Guerrero in 1977, and whose history is coextensive with that of New Narrative itself.³ We arrived at a time when several "in-house" workshops in San Francisco—not only Bob's, but also Dodie Bellamy's and Camille Roy's—straddled the space between the university and various local scenes, fostering a sense of community across multiple divides. Rob came to Bob's workshop after having also participated in Dodie Bellamy's—to which Arron Shurin had pointed him as though he were throwing Rob a lifeline!—and both workshops were formative for shaping his sense of what writing could be. Robin came to Bob's workshop via Gina Hyams, who performed in poet's theater productions by Carla Harryman and Camille Roy, and also by way of Bob's and Kathleen Fraser's classes at San Francisco State University in the mid-1980s. While these workshops were the very marsh associated with New Narrative writers, New Narrative itself was rarely spoken of and seemed to persist quietly as a vague bit of hearsay even at the scene of its own cultivation. One of us even remembers having to whisper in another workshopper's ear, "Do you know what New Narrative is?" when the phrase was casually invoked one afternoon in Bob's living room, only to be met with, "Not exactly." It strikes us today as significant that New Narrative never

aimed to define itself as a coherent project, even to the point of resisting its own transmission, thereby risking obscurity. At the same time, New Narrative writers still promoted their own and other writing by facilitating workshops, organizing events, curating series, teaching classes, editing and publishing their own small presses (*Soup*, *Hoddypoll*, *Black Star Series*), at once local and communal in their aims. Despite what appeared at the time to be its disinterest in drawing attention to itself as a “movement”—or perhaps precisely for that reason—New Narrative aroused intense curiosity among those of us in the mid-1990s desperately seeking to better understand the complexities of Bay Area literary histories and communities and our place within them. What we discovered then was an open sense of community that we—together with many others—had not anticipated but found ourselves immersed in simply because we showed up with our work, our questions, and our desires.⁴ It is this horizon of possibility that we wish to nourish here.

As the emergence of New Narrative in the late 1970s itself attests, every project is both enabled and limited by its social histories and geographic locations, and this book is no doubt similarly enabled and constrained. That said, the essays included here, rather than tread familiar ground, consistently disabuse and complicate our assumptions about what New Narrative is or might be while expanding and ramifying that horizon. Roomy in the collective vision that they manifest, these twenty-four contributions variously address—both directly and indirectly—the AIDS crisis, the politics of race, the structural impacts of neo-liberalism on urban space, and the movement across queer, straight and transgender subject positions. Other topics of investigation include the category of queer art, the importance of “feeling,” the fiction of personality, the necessity of risk, the function of pedagogy, the strategy of appropriation, as well as scandal and gossip as these topics have been important to New Narrative and its expanded sphere of influence.

As for formal approaches, you will find critical inquiries and polemical arguments, close readings and animated performances, probing inquiries and inspired homages. In addition to those New Narrative authors mentioned above, many others are discussed or referenced in the essays that follow, including John Wieners, David Wojnarowicz, Renee Gladman, Matias Viegner, Pamela Lu, Tisa Bryant, Gail Scott, Chris Kraus, Eileen

Myles, Kathy Acker, Joey Yearous-Algozin, and Roberto Bedoya. While acknowledging the impressive range of writers and topics addressed here, we want to underscore that what we have assembled amounts to but one of many possible records of how New Narrative continues to arouse a cadre of fellow-travelers as it migrates away from the scene of its origin story. As Dodie Bellamy and Kevin Killian's recently edited anthology—*Writers Who Love Too Much: New Narrative Writing 1977-1997*—suggests, New Narrative may very well have been a centrifugal movement, always traveling idiosyncratically away from its more familiar point of departure in late-1970s San Francisco along very diverse trajectories, acting, as Gertrude Stein so aptly put it, “so that there is no use in a centre.”⁵

Bellamy and Killian's vision in *Writers Who Love Too Much* is generous in its expansive embrace of the communities and fields it documents.⁶ From within the diverse and fiercely innovative work of gay writing in the 1980s, these editors locate the first OutWrite Conference as one of New Narrative's historical horizons and watersheds. Billed as “The First National Lesbian and Gay Writers Conference,” OutWrite took place in San Francisco in March 1990. After a decade decimated by the AIDS crisis and intense censorship, queer writers convened to address urgent questions and concerns such as “What is the Future of Sexually Explicit Writing?” and “AIDS and the Responsibility of the Writer.” The conference included a rich cross section of writers across race, gender and sexualities. By a complementary contrast, our editorial vision in this volume is shaped by our formative efforts, circa 1997, to understand our own seemingly obscured community histories and kinship structures at a moment of generational disorientation—at least what we experienced as such—following the most devastating wreckage of AIDS, on the one hand, and the quieting of debates that developed in the Bay Area after the so-called “Poetry Wars,” on the other.⁷ This moment overlapped with the unharnessed neoliberalism of the Clinton era, between the two Gulf Wars, and we longed to understand for ourselves the relationship of poetry to politics—both historically and presently—while locating that relationship within the folds of embodied life. George Oppen seemed omnipresent in our various conversations—at workshops, readings, and study groups—but so was Kathy Acker, as we struggled to proffer provisional responses to exigent questions: What is the relation between formal innovation and socio-political urgency? How does a writer realize the body in one's work

in light of this urgency? So whereas *Writers Who Love Too Much* situates New Narrative's adventure across the eighties while looking toward the first celebratory OutWrite Conference—an event that showcased many of the innovative queer literary tendencies one can associate with New Narrative—we often found ourselves looking back toward another event, the Left/Write Conference held in San Francisco in 1981 before the ravages of the 1980s altered the social landscape irreparably. In its effort to enhance a set of common aims across multiple communities of left-oriented writers, Left/Write addressed structural injustice by bridging divides across race, gender, sexuality, labor, and class in the interest of a more unified leftist front among writers. Abbott, Boone, and Glück all participated on the steering committee (together with Denise Kastan and John Mueller). The conference goals were consonant with those of the Gay Liberation Front, which integrated sexual, gender, and class politics. It seems to us now that these two analogously named conferences—Left/Write and OutWrite—bookend New Narrative's first decade of intense productivity, with the AIDS crisis as one of its primary pivot points. Not coincidentally, Steve Abbott was involved in convening both conferences.

Our rediscovery of the Left/Write Conference at a moment of our own uncertainty and longing regarding community, writing, and politics, provided us with another historical model for social engagement among writers building solidarities across communities. Today, we continue to look to Left/Write as a way of understanding the promises and failures of the sort of community building that has always been central to New Narrative. About the Left/Write conference, Bob has written:

We felt urgent about it, perhaps because we each belonged to such disparate groups. To our astonishment, three hundred people attended Left/Write, so we accomplished on a civic stage what we were attempting in our writing, editing and curating: to mix groups and modes of discourse.⁸

As the proceedings of the conference evidence, Left/Write pursued a politics that has since come to be understood as intersectional.⁹ Writers—including Diane di Prima, Judy Grahn, Clyde Taylor and Ron Silliman—were engaged in impassioned debates about how best to organize a leftist writers' union, an effort that ultimately faltered. Decades later, contemporary writing communities continue to struggle with similar questions and contradictions

around unity and difference, privilege and oppression, solidarity and marginalization. In this light, the Left/Write Conference remains significant as an example of an organized response, with all its successes and failures. While the transcript of the conference proceedings has been available in various archives and libraries for some time, we are making this text accessible as one of several online appendices to *From Our Hearts to Yours: New Narrative as Contemporary Practice*, together with a rich reservoir of documents related to this event. (Additional online appendices include recent interviews with Kevin Killian, Dodie Bellamy and Bruce Boone.¹⁰) The conference transcript and its various planning documents detail an unfolding of the many socio-political concerns that accompanied the emergence of New Narrative. At the same time, this archive also demonstrates the challenging but crucial value of coalition building and the stakes of writerly accountability in complex social and political situations.

Thirty-five years after Left/Write, the Poetics (The Next) 25 Years conference convened in April 2016 to celebrate 25 years of the Poetics Program at the University at Buffalo. As part of this event, nine of the participating writers in this volume met around a seminar table to discuss the values, commitments and challenges many of us have come to associate with New Narrative.¹¹ We read one another's contributions to this volume in advance in order to synthesize and elaborate, differentiate and focus the many threads moving through our variegated approaches, questions, and research. The seminar succeeded beyond our wildest dreams—and our giddiness simply to be together around the same table was palpable—as we managed, among other things, to clarify for ourselves some of the stakes of New Narrative in contemporary contexts. We hope this introduction bears the imprint of that occasion as a series of new questions and topics emerged there that have helped us to frame the project beyond our initial query. For example:

- what are the implications of New Narrative's emphasis on “self” over “subject”?
- how do selfhood, personhood, and subjectivity construct themselves in the process of the writing (rather than preceding the writing)?
- how do our writing practices make accountability visible in ways that might allow writers to “account” for the complexities of social location?

- how might New Narrative help us to understand the place of risk in writing at a moment when vulnerability is so unevenly distributed across our social worlds?
- what happens to New Narrative tactics like scandal, gossip, and naming names under conditions dominated by social media?
- what are the benefits of considering New Narrative as a practice, or set of practices, rather than a form, a movement, or a genre?

This last question left us with a profound impression. While we had initially framed New Narrative as a literary “movement,” we came away from our seminar thinking about New Narrative as a set of practices—reading practices, writing practices, and critical practices that new generations of writers are taking up and remixing in an array of poetics. The word “practice,” of course, circulates as both a noun and a verb through multiple fields: *Practice*: 1. (n) an action, an undertaking; 2. (v trans): to live or act according to a principle or set of principles one advocates; to observe, to perform, to carry out; 3. (v intr): to exercise oneself in a skill or art. Practices are *ek-static*; they evolve with their social conditions; they can be taken-up, resituated, transmitted, and deployed differently. And so, we find ourselves addressing New Narrative as an evolving set of practices, practices we hope this collection of essays enables further, allowing for their ongoing elaboration in as yet unexpected ways that depend on you, dear readers.

By now we hope it is obvious that this book remains committed to the kind of social, sexual, and literary promiscuity that New Narrative has always stood for—and perhaps we need that promiscuity now more than ever—together with New Narrative’s permission to maintain the body and self as vulnerable and porous, resistant to newly re-sanctioned forms of fortification and borderization. In a utopian gesture consonant with the clarion call for enhanced community life that marks New Narrative’s inception, our hope is that *From Our Hearts to Yours: New Narrative as Contemporary Practice* will spur as-of-yet unimagined conversations and texts, new readers and writers, unanticipated solidarities and camaraderie. And so we conclude this introduction with a line from Bruce Boone’s *Century of Clouds* that continues to mark one horizon of this project: “You want what you write to actually cause these things to come to exist.”¹²

NOTES

1. This fragment appears as a handwritten note at the top of a draft text entitled “Negativity,” which Bruce Boone delivered as part of the New Langton Arts Talks by Writers Series on Public & Private Language (March 1, 1984). Bruce Boone Collection, The Poetry Collection of the University Libraries, The State University of New York at Buffalo. For research assistance around Bruce Boone’s as yet unprocessed papers, we extend our thanks to Michael Basinski, Curator Emeritus and James Maynard, Curator.

2. Steve Abbott, “Introduction,” *Soup 2* (1982): 1. See online component of this project at *ON Contemporary Practice* for a PDF of this issue: <<http://on-contemporarypractice.squarespace.com/pdf-archive/>>.

3. As Bob mentions in a personal email: “It started with just the drop-in workshop, and soon there were two more, an older writers’ workshop and a queer workshop.”

4. Many others participated in these workshops, including several among the contributors to this collection: Kathy Lou Schultz, David Buuck, Amanda Davidson.

5. Gertrude Stein, *Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein*, ed. Carl Van Vechten (New York: Vintage Books, 1962), 498.

6. See *Writers Who Love Too Much: New Narrative Writing 1977-1997*, eds. Dodie Bellamy and Kevin Killian (New York: Nightboat Books, 2017).

7. See Small Press Traffic’s conference *Aggression: A Conference on Contemporary Poetics and Political Antagonism* from May 2008, which explicitly probed intra-community tensions. <www.sptaggression.blogspot.com>.

8. Robert Glück, “Long Note on New Narrative,” *Communal Nude* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2016), 23.

9. Robert Dewhurst interviews Dodie Bellamy; Jocelyn Saidenberg interviews Bruce Boone; Miranda Mellis interviews Kevin Killian. <<http://on-contemporarypractice.squarespace.com/pdf-archive/>>.

10. *Left Write! Edited Transcripts of 1981 Left Write Conference*, ed. Steve Abbott (1982), np.

11. The following contributors to this volume were present around the seminar table at the University at Buffalo on Saturday morning, April 9, 2016: Cathy Wagner, Robert Dewhurst, Kathy Lou Schultz, Kaplan Harris, Eric Sneathen, Thom Donovan, Joel Fares, Rob Halpern, and Robin Tremblay-McGaw. In addition to this list, two other writers contributed seminar papers and participated in the discussion: Magdalena Zurawski and Jane Malcolm.

12. Bruce Boone, *Century of Clouds* (New York: Nightboat Books, 2009), 47.