

An interview with Evie Shockley, as conducted by Sarah Giragosian for Barzakh.

SG: “Formalism” continues to be a problematic term in contemporary poetics, particularly in its relationship to literary history. For female writers and people of color, formal verse is a vexed, yet potentially critical zone. In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Toni Morrison writes, “Those of us who come from traditions of oppression find ourselves estranged from canonical texts, and must fight—against them and our arguments with them—to own them.” What is your own relationship to a formal poetics? How might form denaturalize oppressive structures?

ES: I confronted this question of “formalism” fairly early in what I think of as my “serious” writing years. Prior to that, as an undergraduate creative writing student, I’d been required to engage intensely with form; the instructor, in one particular instance, subscribed to a deeply traditional poetics and felt a mandate to pass that on to us. When I returned to poetry a few years later, I was as clear as I ever had been that there were other equally “legitimate” and effective ways of writing poems, but I still found myself appreciative of and drawn to certain kinds of given forms, especially the sonnet. At the same time, I was learning more and more about the ways that African American poets and women poets had felt excluded from traditional form, for its Eurocentric origins and masculinist baggage. The complicated nature of their concerns—and the concerns of poets from other similarly marginalized and disempowered populations, as I began to learn—caused me to question the values that ascribe “beauty” to the sonnet, for example, and not to the blues poem, or the loose, irregular lines of confessional poetry, or the anti-racist, anti-establishment poem that tears all over the page and ignores not only meter and rhyme, but even punctuation. This was an important intellectual process for me, the way paved for me by the theories and practices of poets and scholars of both the New Negro Renaissance and Black Arts Movement periods, and by the work done by and on the women’s poetry movement. But, at the same time, I was lucky to have writers like Robert Hayden, Marilyn Hacker, Rita Dove, and Rafael Campo to argue and demonstrate that writing in traditional forms did not necessarily equate with acceptance of a cultural straitjacket. They took the traditional structures, as other similar poets had done prior to the 20th century, and wrote in them about the subjects that these forms were not supposed to be able to accommodate: resistance to racism, sexism, heterosexism, and so forth. My way of dealing with what I learned from poets working on both sides of this equation has been to embrace traditional forms, but without feeling bound by their “rules” to the detriment of my poems’ ideas and concerns, and to embrace free verse, prose poetry, and all manner of other approaches to writing as well. I let the poem dictate what it needs in terms of structure. And, to speak specifically to the second part of your question, one of the things that has helped me reconcile these competing values has been my interest in and work with procedural forms—Oulipian-type constraints, for example—as well as with newly invented forms and forms that have migrated more recently to poetry in English from other linguistic traditions (such as the ghazal and the pantoum). Reading widely in these kinds of poetics—work by Harryette Mullen, Lyn Hejinian, Ed Roberson,

Erica Hunt, Nathaniel Mackey, Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge and more—has, indeed, not so much reconciled the “formalist” and “anti-formalist” positions as it has exploded the terms form and formalism altogether. I embrace all that these terms can mean and exploit and enjoy all kinds of writing in form. What I particularly enjoy is playing with the rules of form in order to highlight their arbitrariness or model resistance to the constraints, even as I engage them. It’s a way of making agency visible.

SG: I enjoy your experimental poem, “Clare’s Song.” The poem, as I read it, tropes on form, while seeming to develop a poetics of liminality, as it invites readers to negotiate the relationships between words that connote various discourses and to derive meaning from their proximity to one another. Do you see the poem as engaged in the territory of the threshold?

ES: I like this question because it relates to and reinforces the title of this journal, *Barzakh*, which I read (in a blog post for Harriet by the amazing Barbara Jane Reyes) signifies a kind of interval that is liminal and, as such, a space of possibility. But had I been thinking of liminality and the threshold in writing it? I would say, if I had to find a metaphor for my conceptualization of “Clare’s Song,” that it would focus more on instability, shiftiness, and multiplicity. The idea that one can at least gesture towards a story—that of Nella Larsen’s novel *Passing*—with a cycle of six words and the synonyms for their varying significations strikes me as revealing something about both the malleability and the limitations of language in relation to experience.

SG: In what ways do you think that traditional and experimental forms provide an efflorescent zone for marginalized communities?

ES: Well, as I noted in my answer to question #1, writing in form creates a kind of background that can, by way of contrast, make one’s agency as a writer—and thus as a subject—visible, even when writing in forms that largely eschew intent (i.e., chance-based procedures). But maybe even more to the point, when the poetic “mainstream” is made up predominantly of types of free verse and open field poetics, writers in marginalized communities may discover it to be easier to find one another and carve out a space for their work that leaves them room to grow, when writing in ways that privilege either sort of formal practice. A final, not-unrelated way of thinking about this idea of an “efflorescent zone” (a phrase I just want to keep saying over and over! so delightful its music!) would be to take account of the range of possibilities that are opened up for one’s poetry when one writes in form, and the fertile ground this provides for poets seeking to represent complicated pasts in complicated relationships with totally unruly present circumstances—and to imagine futures that are not “simply” utopic, but liveable. It may seem counter-intuitive to think of formal constraints as opening up possibilities, but that is precisely how I see it. Despite the literal meaning of the word, poetic constraints are not handcuffs, but tools. Or, constraints : poets :: handcuffs : Houdini.

SG: You cite Gwendolyn Brooks as an important influence (I love Gwendolyn Brooks too!). Can you speak to how Brooks has provided a model for your poetics?

ES: Brooks fans unite! Gwendolyn Brooks's work teaches me (again and again) that there are sonic and intellectual pleasures to be had in "excessive" language use that are worth the risk of being written off by some readers as too difficult or convoluted. When I say "excessive" language, I mean her irrepressible employment of alliteration and consonance, her ability to jimmy a rhyme out of almost any set of words she needed (most seen in her earlier work), and her wonderfully idiosyncratic syntax. Hers is a poetics of precise musics, or musical precision. And it was an ambitious poetics that, rather than backing down from a challenge, ran headlong towards the difficulty.

SG: Do you have any advice for the young student of poetry?

ES: Lately, I've been advising students to think more consciously and carefully about audience—not to arrive at any predetermined position on matters of reception, but in order to make questions of audience a more deliberate and generative part of the writing process. When you read, I say, think about whether you feel addressed, or even imagined, as a part of the audience for a poem. Does the language, subject matter, set of references, point of view, or structure of the poem invite you in? Deliberately exclude you? Something in between? How much work are you willing to do to find your way into a poem? Will you Google things? Ask around? Read a book? Watch a movie? Does it matter what the "payoff" is for that work? Does it matter whether you trust the poet? How does a poet gain your trust? Asking questions like this about poems one is reading then helps you think about what kinds of cues you're giving your own readers—or the various kinds of readers you might have or want to have. And, again, the point of this thinking is not to have all poets come down in favor of "accessibility" or, on the other hand, in favor of "difficulty." What's important, from my perspective, is that the poet is aware of how her poem might be read (or not read!) by different potential audiences and is thinking about ways to do what she needs to do aesthetically without unintentionally limiting the possible readership. An important essay for my thinking on this question is Harryette Mullen's "Imagining the Unimagined Reader."

Thanks very much for this opportunity to imagine the readers of *Barzakh*!