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The Sentence as a Space for Living: Prose Architecture

Before I begin my talk, which does not speak directly to Leslie Scalapino's immeasurable contribution to the field, I want to say a few words about my first encounters with her work and what her books made possible for me as a young writer interested in narrative though not particularly in story. I have read nearly all of Leslie's work, but it was that Northpoint Press series that really changed me as a thinker—*Considering How Exaggerated Music Is*, *That They Were at the Beach*, and *Way* my absolute favorites. And, ironically, what was most transformative in my reading wasn't even a sentence but were two words followed by an em-dash. They were:

> the men—

Something stunned me out of poetry when I read this phrasing, which continues:

> —when I'd
> been out in the cold weather—were
> found lying on the street having
> died—from the weather, though
> usually being there when it's warmer (*Way*, 51)

These interruptions, making fragments out of narrative space, question the very basis of experience, of being a participant and a witness. Scalapino's em-dashes create intervals, pauses, where the reader is given room to consider how events take shape, and how time sustains and disturbs them—the telling of oneself in time, because it's never just the object being observed. There is always the presence or pressure of the one observing. I was changed by the way the speaker (and, with that, her "speaking") *bisects* the fact of

"the men" who are "found lying on the street, having/died," dividing a singular moment into a series of discrete spaces. From these intervals or fragments or utterances of event I saw how narrative was not just a story that flowed, was not just language flowing, but, at its most inventive or reflexive, was also a positioning or mapping of philosophies, a slowing down of that comprehension of one's having had an experience. For Leslie, as I understood her then, experience—that which we attempt to re-assemble in language—was not a given, was not instantly known or graspable. Rather it was a kind of exquisite problem that opened endlessly into other problems, requiring life-long study. And, it was from this point of recognition that I wandered into prose and, later, fiction.

Today I want to move along a line of thinking, one that carries through the books I've written over the last fourteen years, and arrives, somewhat threadbare, in the present, where I am trying to talk about the correlation of language to drawing, for the first time. I wrote this paper over a period of eleven months. The writing came slowly and took up the space of any other possible writing I might have wanted to do over that time. It's a kind of record, in its composition, of how the line along which we are moving, also moves. For clarity, I've divided the talk into three parts: the first focuses on origins, the second on passage, and the third on the dreams of language.

I. Origins

For all my writing life I have been fascinated with notions of origin and passage, though rarely in terms of ancestry—since I don't know where I'm from. I don't know the languages or landscapes that preceded the incursion of English and what is now the United States into my lineage. Yet, the violence of that erasure—all the inheritances interrupted—is as foundational to my relationship to language and subjectivity as is grammar. There remains some aspect of my speaking that expects a different mode of expression than English provides. I know this because of my tendency to encode as I write, also to invent languages as I've done in half of my books. I open my mouth

in my own life and I want to distort, rearrange, mispronounce the available vocabulary. This comes from a desire to resist assimilation, but equally, it arises out of a sense of exploration or adventure, a sense of puzzlement: as if something has happened to my occupation of the language, where a kind of split occurs. I move through it and see myself moving at the same time. It's a double consciousness, a questioning that simultanates my rendering of experience. (I know that's not a word—simultanates—but I needed a verb that would indicate one thing causing something else to run parallel to it). I say "I" in my language, and whatever I was setting out to describe or place in time undergoes an immediate complexity. This points to a displacement, which I believe is at the heart of any narrative I write—the displacement indicates what I call "the problem of the person," where articulating one's experiences in time—that is to say, describing the origins of one's acts, the chronology of events of a day in the life of, something which would seem to suit language very well, which would seem to be the purpose of language, is in fact one of its foremost struggles. Narrative language seems baffled by both time and memory. And yet, these are its main source materials for world-building.

So, to return to the predicament of my displaced origins, that unmappable first land and unutterable first language, rather than comb my mind for their traces I have found myself more taken by the structural and philosophical implications of their absence. How these ghosts make voids and reflective surfaces within language, the very means of one's self-determination.

In 1997 or '98, I wrote a sentence that would be the beginning of a two-decades long investigation of what comes after absence. I wrote: "About the body I know very little though I am steadily trying to improve myself, in the way animals improve themselves by licking. I have always wanted to be sharp and clean." This grouping of sentences, which opens the first story of my first book, has stayed intact in my memory, because it exemplifies perfectly my predicament as a subject in language, place, and time. The voice announces itself through a declaration of what it doesn't

know "about the body," but it turns itself toward knowing. Though, not toward a countable knowledge—something that will attenuate this lack with regard to the body—rather, toward a better disposition, in a sense a better vantage point for viewing the unknown. The voice wants a lighter constitution, to be highly functioning, "winning," so it looks out into the world for behavior to emulate: "in the way animals improve themselves by licking," and finds a gesture that encompasses both the insistence and absurdity of trying. If there is anything my narrators do it is to try. To try and try. Which results in an arrival: "I have always wanted to be sharp and clean." A statement that at once sets a standard—to be sharp and clean—but looks at that desire with nostalgia, with detachment: "I have always wanted." With these sentences I sought to establish the conditions through which I would investigate the nature of experience, which, at that time, would be understood as something originating from a feeling of being "without"—of being foreign or disoriented—but, at once, moving forward, moving through itself, because the language or the street says so. We move through language because we place it between our selves and the world, we agree on it as the means by which we represent thought and emotion. We use it as a repository for most of our facts and observations and wonderings. But, what does language have to do with the street?

For me, the two are inextricable, and the one makes the other phenomenally more interesting through this link. In 1994 I moved to San Francisco to study poetics at a college that no longer exists but which, at the time, was very centrally located. The neighborhood, where I studied and where I lived and walked my dog, provided a ground (a staging, even) that laid out not only a trajectory of arts venues, bookstores, coffee shops, taquerias, etc., but also made evident the tension and sometime collaboration between the Mexican and Central American residents of that part of the city and their mostly white, young hipster neighbors. There were demarcations of space that you processed through your urbanized body, that presented you with a set of ever evolving questions regarding your itinerary—the streets you habituated, the streets you avoided, where you felt safe, felt central,

where you sought refuge, difference, etc. By contrast, I grew up in a city where one experienced passage from one place to another by car or bus. You walked only if you were poor, and you didn't get very far before your course was interrupted by expressways. Thus, that city was always held away. It felt un-enterable and evacuated as a space of cultural exchange. Living in San Francisco, however, a place where my primary mode of passage was walking, dramatically altered what was visible and what could be experienced. To repeat, foremost, it was the fact of the body—this body turning corners, passing other bodies, being seen and read by other bodies, climbing hills, touching the sides of buildings—it was the fact of this body, following lines, making new lines, resting, moving that gave the city a sense of syntax; the day was divided into intervals, like clauses. Walking became a way of reading the city, of writing one's subjectivity and thinking into it. My walking became a story of movement, of crossing in and out of different modes of being, and fragmenting place and time. And, it did not take me long to understand this also as the very character of the sentence: movement, crossing in and out of different modes of being, fragmenting place and time.

In *Toaf*, a book I wrote to memorialize this time in my life, which I also cite as the location of another kind of crossing, the shift from being a poet to a writer of prose, I describe writing as "returning home 'half the person' and looking into the space of writing for a refill. But not just to put back what the outside had taken, also to add some new information" (14). In my thinking at the time, experience was something that you were losing as you moved through the day, as you encountered acquaintances or ran errands, something time wore out of you, and it was only through writing that you could retrieve it. But it was not so much the specifics of the day you captured—who you saw, what you did, what you thought—more the shape and energy of those encounters. I wrote so as to turn over in my mind repeatedly the irrefutable but endlessly perplexing fact that I was a person in the world, here was my body, and it was with this body (enclosed in it) that I left the house that morning and it was with the same body that I returned.

It was similar perplexities that drew me, as a college student, to philosophy over twenty years ago. I remember quite vividly my excitement whenever the professor turned our attention away from some dense text we were trying to parse to focus on a "problem" in the room. I loved the moments where we were gazing at a chair or a pencil on a desk trying to get at some essence, some clarity on what it means to know or perceive those objects. The question of how we know and how we know that we know or see or experience anything is still one of the most interesting to me—utterly unresolvable but ever present. I am interested in what one has to quiet or to suspend in the noise of one's mind to simply order a coffee in a café or to say "I am well". Ultimately, I found philosophy uninhabitable, and found poetry better suited for my particular "problems" of language, but I am indebted to the field for providing me with certain gestures and vocabulary that I've found indispensable.

While I have been trying to talk to you about "origins," in many ways I have all this time been talking about translation as well. I have a dear friend, a translator from Spanish to English, who feels very protective of this word ["translation"]; it irritates her a bit how freely I use it. Of the known languages, I am fluent in only one. So I do not translate. I don't really know what it's like. But I also know of no other word which functions so brilliantly as a metaphor for everything I've said so far. At the core of my work is the question of the original—the event before it becomes memory, trying to locate oneself in the present, in language, which is always slightly behind the present. At the core of my reading, the majority of which is work in translation (from languages all over the world) is that same question of the original. I am captivated by the beauty of the problems of translation and find that these problems transfer easily to those of experience and language—how to construct a bridge between them, how the story of our experience changes once it enters language.

When we talk about a text being translated from one language to another we often worry about the original, whether it is getting carried over, where

it exists in the new language, the new text. We can't help but wonder what it is we're reading and whether this "translation" has anything to do with that original text, the one that is out of our reach (ungraspable, because we do not have competency with it, or it's simply absent, because the original is not available in our country). Does this translation contain the traces, the friction of the writer's contact with the original language, the tension of moving through that language toward the book? Is this original energy re-written by the translator's movement between the original and target language? When I think of these questions I get so excited about where literature actually exists. Where is the poem? Is it in the mind? Is it on the page? Translation is amazing, because it presumes that there is something that needs to be carried from one place to another. But, where is that thing? And does only the translator see it? Indeed, not only does translation presume that there is something to carry, but also that it *can* be carried. Jordan Stump, a North-American translator of French, has written a provocative work on the idea of "the original" in translation. In *The Other Book*, Stump writes: "Translation forces us to admit a potentially uncomfortable truth: on some level, to some degree, [he explains] and no matter how vigorously we deny it, we do believe in the text as certain words and not others, as something inherently right in itself." What Stump is somewhat facetiously getting at is that what we appreciate and grasp from a written text has every thing to do with the precise arrangement of its words—the words chosen, the order given. He goes on to reveal the supposed discomfort: "For even as we judge a translation according to the respect it displays for a fixed set of signifiers [the original text], the translation shows us the unfixedness of those very signifiers, their fluidity, their mutability" (138). But, I am less interested in debating a translation's "faith" to an original text as I am fascinated by the problem—this discomfort—that emerges, that haunts the reading experience. How does one reconcile these corresponding texts, both of which we presuppose carry the same "something," though by means of an entirely different set of words, a different syntax, among other incompatibilities? The problem draws my attention to the passage between sites (if we understood two texts as respective sites), to what lies

in the liminal space between them, in the moment where Hungarian becomes English or Japanese becomes Turkish. And what exactly does this "becoming" entail? And, beyond these questions about the relationship of the original to the translation, is another exciting query: how we arrive at an original in the first place.

Where does the original "originate"? Although I have no idea what thoughts, impulses, memories, and other material of our interior being look like—I don't know if they take up physical space in the brain, if they exist apart from the neurons that seem to catalyze them—and I'm not sure science has gotten very far in providing an answer. But when I imagine these energies in the mind, I see them as having a very different architecture and sense of time than does the sentence. So, when we move from our minds into language, from something that must be multilayered, full of fragments, full of complete feelings, like novels that exist in the shape of an instant, what are we doing? What is the nature of that movement? How do we find language, how do we put the complex shape of our interiority—its vast web-like structure—into the straight line of the sentence? I think particularly of the English sentence, which forces one to begin with a subject, a kind of encapsulated self or other that speaks, sees, knows, or, in the case of objects, a subjectivity that presumes grasp-ability. To say, "The piano is over there," is to put across an incontrovertible statement. The speaker knows. The speaker sees. Within the statement there is little room for ambiguity, for questioning the capacity of the room, for creating duration between object and location. And, it doesn't improve the situation to adjust the sentence so that you can ask: Is the piano over there? This points us back to that "unfixedness" I mentioned earlier. How do we cultivate a language that perceives in modes other than identification and assignation? How, in prose (and I specify prose because poetry has a much easier time of dislodging objects from their categorical existences)—so, how in prose, in that gathering of sentences can we position ourselves as adventurers (not unlike translators) of space? In *Ana Patova Crosses a Bridge*, the third book in a series of novels I've written about the city-country Ravicka and its inhabitants, the Ravickians,

I come upon an architecture where the object world and language and the body and the book have become a kind of breathing, moving singularity. For the characters of this book to make sense of what's happening to them they do three things: they write, they walk, and they gather. But to write is to activate the space in which they meet, and to meet is to activate the stories of their moving through the city and their failures to move, and to move and not-move is to write. It creates a collapsed space inside which a narrative occurs. Here is a passage (or "bridge" as I like to call them) from *Ana Patova* that demonstrates a little of how I'm seeing this process.

> There was ringing in my mouth. I hummed so I could see it. Somebody was looking at me. It was Hausen. Hausen had walked by and stopped and was now staring. It was Z. and it was me and suddenly Hausen, but Hausen stood on the other side of the window, his bags in tow, his silence. Zàoter stood up and walked to the counter, leaving Hausen and me to figure out who we were to each other (there was never enough time) and who we were to this glass between us and any possible reflection. Zàoter called to me from the counter. "Two," I returned to him. He called again. "I don't know," I confessed. "Hausen?" I asked, but Hausen couldn't hear me and wouldn't step inside. "Hausen?" Zàoter called from the counter (you began to wonder if he was really there). I hummed as I waited for coffee and the man tapped the window. I looked up. It was Hausen, who was a phenomenon: you saw him; it made you think. "We're in place," I mouthed against my reflection, then leaned back to see the small cup. Two people were calling my name and leaning and scraping the floor and one of them pulled my ear and brushed her mouth against my brow and the other grabbed the shoulder of Z. and tapped it and wrote (without ink) across it, probably

> something about the man outside, then this same one turned to me. He raised his right knee, he spoke without sound, he brought his open palm to his abdomen. "Uh Huri," he said. (106)

In this particular bridge, I understand this "ringing in the mouth" as the book, the book that arises out of moments of contact between beings or objects. The book is both a duration and a response to what I see as a inverted interiority—these exchanges that are happening between Ana and Zaoter and Hausen are expressions of inner material that has somehow become exterior, that must now be incorporated as narrative. I think the glass front wall of the café, where Ana stands on one side and Hausen on the other is very important here. Not just the wall but also the distance between these three bodies; it is "distance" that creates the fragment of their speaking. Furthermore, it is within the space between these bodies, in the waiting for language to depart and arrive, that I feel I can really touch the fragility and essential confusion of (1) being in the world and (2) being in the world with others.

I have explained why this "in-between-ness" is important to me as a post-abducted subject in language (to repeat: it allows me to work on that absence or problem of origins, where the first language and first land has been erased from what is knowable), but I haven't yet said why I think it's important for fiction. However, first, I'd like to talk about why fiction itself is so central to my investigations into the nature of experience. Even as a poet, I was drawn to the inherent narrativity of language. I was entranced by how little of it one needed in order to suggest a narrative, how one need only say or write the word "chair" or "inside" before a story—multiples stories—took shape around the inscription. That gave me the sense that embedded in every word was a possible story for me but also one that existed in language. Language awakened its own self when it emitted the word "inside," so writing became something you were encoding and decoding as you moved through it. I liked to imagine how this dual action troubled the space of

fiction. It led me to think that perhaps what disorients my narrators, what creates the obstacles they endure, are, in fact, these revenants of other possible stories that hide within language. There is a trace of a bridge or a memory of a bridge without there ever having been a bridge in that story. I love the conceit of fiction: that there is a world and inside this world there is a sequence of acts with consequences. I love this because, within this system one can immediately begin to ask questions: what if the sequence is broken or reordered, what if an act makes no difference in the world, what if an act makes all the difference but the world does not respond, does not notice, what does it mean to act, does one act only with the body, is memory an act, what is an act if it is only occurring in the representational space of language, in the space of abstraction? Imagine how fiction might learn from ambiguities, silences, voids or labyrinths that lie within its own structure. How through derailments within story or at points of interruption (grammar breaking) some new or other space might open up. For me, this break would be more than a city or street suddenly appearing on the surface of an uncomprehending map, it would be experienced in the passing of language, as a revelation of syntax.

II. On Passage

In Virginia Tufte's *Artful Sentences: Syntax a Style*, she writes:

> Prose is linear. It is read and is said to move. It must by nature, therefore, generate a symbolics of spatial or temporal movement widened by its context beyond the limits of the actual sentence read from left to right in so many seconds. In whatever context, the movement may resemble accumulation or attrition, progress or other process, even stasis, or any one of these interrupted, turned, reversed. In space or time or both, it can go in any direction as continuous or repetitive, accelerated or retarded, smooth, halting, or halted. (271)

This is the most comprehensive description of what prose does that I've thus far encountered. It allows for nearly every kind of prose practice imaginable without a sense of hierarchy or judgment. The only absolute phrase is the first one—Prose is linear—which I will attempt to complicate in the last part of my talk, but for now I will allow its usefulness in describing how language moves across a page: that is to say, how the sentence is a line. Nonetheless, Tufte's definition offers "enormous variety" in how language can and does behave within the architecture of prose. Yet, as a practitioner and connoisseur of prose, something for me remains unsaid in the above. What I'm missing is perhaps unsayable. It has something to do with the title of my talk: "The Sentence as a Space for Living," something that wants to get at an emotional or bodily register in relation to prose. In this next part I will try to elucidate this feeling of *being* in the sentence. When I say, "the sentence as a space for living," what I hope to conjure is the idea of language as a three-dimensional space, traverse-able by the body; a space one enters, moves through, exits. It is not possible that I mean the physical body, because language is abstract: it does not exist properly in the world. What I mean is something like one's reading body, the one that stands before a word and gapes at it, marveling over its beauty or mystery. That body of mine that feels excitement when it encounters a semi-colon used perfectly, or when it enters a described space that hovers just above visibility. I suppose an alternative title for this paper could be "The body in prose." But, this isn't quite right either, because to say that there is a "body," however abstract we allow it to be, is to place something between the mind and language that isn't there. And, it's this absent thing that becomes as I read.

As I mentioned earlier, for the past eight or nine years, I have been interested in using "the city" as a means to make *liveable* (and live) one's passage through the sentence. But, recently, I've wanted to shed the metaphor of text as city, or at least shift it, so to establish a kind of present tense of one's time in the sentence. The sentence provides us a space for wandering. How can we talk about being inside it? What does the duration of that passage feel like? What does duration even mean in this context? And, when

I talk about how the duration of a passage *feels*, what am I getting at? To think through these questions we will examine a couple of sentences that appear formally interested in creating an experience for the reader. These are sentences that wish to trouble the duty or act of pointing, to function beyond a mere transparency (as if a window into a world). They create, in their unfolding, a sense of travel for the reader.

The first sentence, taken from Gertrude Stein's *Ida*, we read:

> There she was there was a crowd it was not very light, and she was close against so many, and then she stayed close against one or two, there might have been more room around her but she did not feel that way about it, anyway it was warm being so close to them and she did not know any of them, she did not see any of them, she looked far away, but she felt something, all right she felt something, and then the lecture or whatever it was was over. (13)

In the first independent clause, we have three complete observations: one about Ida, two about the crowd. Something that we are familiar with in Stein's work is this removal of stops, or boundaries you might say, some type of grammatical mark (a period or a comma) that would indicate the discreteness of each of these three thoughts. Rather, as a reader, we stumble on that second "there": There she was there—perhaps expecting something like "in the crowd" to follow. *There she was there in the crowd*. What we get instead is a construction that both separates and collapses the perceived subject of this sentence. Ida is not *in* the crowd. She is there and the crowd is there, with the nature of their relation unspoken, yet visually implied in this opening clause. I also appreciate the transposition of the object: it's not "there she was there the crowd was" but "there she was there was a crowd," such that "was" seems to take on the greatest weight, that act of identifying. The last phrase in that first clause "it was not very light" appears to grammatically refer back to "crowd." Though a crowd is a crowd, does one usually think of it as being "light" or "heavy?" So, perhaps, she's describing

the time of the day, adding more emotion to the obvious sense of things being too close. The comma after "light" provides a break. Then Stein sets upon the task of representing that experience of being jostled about, where the mind goes, and what the body and mind understand about where they are: she was close against so many then she was close against one or two. There might have been more room for her but at this point who knew with the whole thing feeling so immersive, with boundaries collapsed in this way. And regardless of whether there is room, Ida feels distinctly that there is not. For Stein, the moment is not done. She introduces a shift: "anyway it was warm being so close to them and she did not know any of them." The feeling of "warmth" compounds our earlier disorientation. Is being "warm" a positive or negative association? For me, a tenderness registers—"it was warm being so close to them"; it sounds cozy. But, again, that's imbalanced by "she did not know any of them." The warmth and proximity of strangers make her look "far away." Her looking away is internal; she's looking through her mind. But it's brought to the level of these bodies in space. But, as she looks away, she feels something that keeps her located. Stein says, "all right she felt something." This is an extraordinary moment. Whose voice is this? And, what exactly is "all right"? The reader undergoes a near bodily experience, navigating her way through Ida's indefinable event—"the lecture or whatever it was". Stein creates something between a third person omniscient narrator and a close third person that would give us access to Ida's thoughts; you could argue Stein's perspective is a kind of close third on the reader: as if she's saying, "go here, then here, now stop, look around, I'm not showing you anything, keep moving, do you see, now off you go to the next sentence."

I've performed a brief close reading of this sentence, but have I accomplished what I set out to do: to address the being in, the ambulating through that sentence? Is it possible to separate what a sentence does from our experience of it? In turning to the idea of the sentence as a space for living, I want to inquire, not only into to one's awareness of oneself having syntactic encounters, but also a certain resonance that exists within those encounters,

that results from passing through. A resonance that sets up a necessity of response. When I arrive here on March 6, 2014, I feel as though the thinking I've been sharing in this talk has finally caught up with the present. It is 4:37 a.m., and I register for the first time that this experience, which I've sought to capture, might not lie precisely in the language that I'm inside of, or rather, might not lie *solely* in that language but might also get completed in another text, one of my own making. Gaston Bachelard in *Poetics of Space* describes a similar moment of recognition: "We find ourselves experiencing in words, on the inside of words, secret movements of our own." It should be noted that he is referring to the words of others, the act of reading. What interests me—in the Bachelard quote—is that what he reports we find are not images or memories that belong to us or stimulate us but rather [what we find is] something that is in motion, in fact, "movements." This creates a sense of a second line forming along the course of the words I'm reading. A line that I'm writing or that is writing me. And, if we take Bachelard literally, every stop and passage through each word stirs this ancillary text. But, what is this "inner text" and how does it make itself known? Let's enter another prose architecture, one less complex in structure than Stein's:

> We have gotten into the habit of inviting other couples to our house to play cards, and once they are here they stay for a long time. (*Creature*, 55)

This sentence by Los Angeles-based prose writer Amina Cain opens a story in her recent collection *Creature*. Because of its economy, its seeming directness, because it's a sentence that summarizes patterned behavior and nothing happens in it, it's possible to miss everything it does. Nothing happens in it, mostly it just establishes the situation—friends coming over, staying a long time—it appears to just want to pass on by, deliver you to the next place, the ensuing sentence. But, something in the flatness haunts me. This sentence and many other sentences in Cain's *Creature* rouses for fiction a problem of subjectivity and motivation (getting a character across narrative space). It's a problem I like, that I could feast on. Entering through

"we"—"we have gotten"—I undergo an immediate shift of position. I become even more of a voyeur than I was: I am a witness and I am a voyeur. The first person plural pronoun offers a mysterious subjectivity: one voice, multiple presences. I read those words, "we have gotten into the habit," and I can't resist wondering about the whereabouts of the silent other. I wonder about permission to represent. Does the other half of this fictional domestic couple understand that he or she is being conjured, accounted for, in this way? Does he or she sit right next to the unfolding of this story or is the partner held by grammar in some kind of alter (that's a-l-t-e-r) space? I am interested in where the things are that are not named. I also appreciate that the "here" in "and once they are here" locates both the narrator and reader in a home: a home that is both the site of this story and this sentence. There is no direct emotion being shared here, but one can't help but wonder if "and once they are here they stay for a long time" is uttered with pride, coyness, salacity, or with nothing, just a sense that here is a fact. Restraint pulls the line taut, flattens it, but underneath something convulses. Or, to use Bachelard's relationality, though pulled tight something, inside the line moves, activates, something that is for us; that belongs to us. [Does that thing exist prior to our encounter?] Bachelard again: "A new environment allows the word to enter not only into one's thoughts but also into one's daydreams. Language dreams." Language dreams also (whereby I verb Bachelard's noun): and now we have two quotes from the same chapter "Corners" in *Poetics of Space*, one having us enter into the open of the word and the other having the word move through us. This bi-directionality, or "over-inscription" as writer and artist Danielle Vogel calls it, suggests the need (or at least the usefulness) of another possible site for exploring language. I would like to end my talk with some gestures towards and problems for that space.

Language has a dream of itself, and the book one is writing (and reading) moves through the dream. But, it does so, as Tufte tells us, linearly. What we see of language on the page is a line of marks, a series of stacked organized lines, so does that mean the dreaming happens or exists elsewhere, in

some space adjacent to writing and experience? There continues to be a suggestion that we are somehow surrounded by *other* spaces in which exciting, ungraspable things occur. It was upon finishing *Ana Patova Crosses a Bridge*, a time characterized by both celebration and grief, that I found myself in one of these spaces. In fact, all the time through *Ana Patova* I had been trying to invoke a kind of writing practice, a space of alterity that put the body in motion and activated lines. Ana tells us toward the end of the book, "There was a book I was writing that was also a series of drawings as well as a file of questions about tensile structures." This was an "over-inscription" that could not be resolved in writing.

III. The New Sentence is a Drawing (?)

To play upon a title that many of you in the audience will be familiar with, I'm calling this third part, "The New Sentence is a Drawing," but lifting my voice slightly at the end to suggest a query rather than a mandate. Or even just to marvel: how amazing would it be were the new sentence a drawing. In any case, for months, I've been struggling with how to articulate a bridge between the writing I've been doing and this drawing I've started to do, that attempts to extend that writing practice Ana talks about. They are called Prose Architectures; a kind of drawing that feels very much like writing, a way of turning the sounds and symbols for speech and thought inside out. One day in a movie I noticed a character holding a fountain pen over a large pad of paper; as soon as she began to scratch at the surface I felt something turn over in me. I had been drawing for years, aspects of buildings, habitations, but drawing was something I did when I was not writing. And though I had a collection of fountain pens, I'd never used them to draw. A fountain pen has, for me, a love of the line embedded in it. A pen with a good nib wants to just go; drawing put that "turned over thing" in my hand. To move my hand was to look at it, to pass with it. This was a way of being most present in language, because, though I was drawing, I felt immediately that writing had carried over. I knew these were prose architectures I was making, and that into the drawing space: that meant I was no longer in the

proverbial "page" into which or out of which comes language. I was now on the visual plane. Yet, it was writing that I was doing. The notion of "drawn writing" struck me as a new kind of conversation with prose. It was the writing of a text with its inner syntax somehow revealed.

Recently, when I find it difficult to explain what I'm doing and why I'm doing in clear, expository terms, I turn to a new form of expression I call a calamity (a kind of spiraling thinking essay that departs with no particular idea of where it's going). I will end my lecture with a calamity I wrote a few days ago:

> I began the day trying to write about having drawn on a morning that was held in fog; I wanted to write about the drawings I'd done and I wanted to talk about how I'd arrived there through writing: I looked at the drawings. There were hundreds of them. They were numbered, so I read their numbers out loud. I sounded their numbers in this room where I sat poised to write, because numbers, though not words, ordered things similarly, into a line. I was trying to put the drawings into a line without touching the drawings, which were now back in their box; you couldn't touch the drawings for very long, because they were fragile and liked to absorb things from the object world. My drawings liked dust and fingerprints and sugar from dates. My drawings had names like "PA 210" and "PA 04" and they lay in harmony in the archive box. But somewhere in the object world I'd decided I would talk about the drawings: I'd give them language so that I could say they weren't language exactly. They were underneath, something appearing out of something being exposed, and I wanted to say it was language with its skin peeled back, but you couldn't use peeled back language to tell an audience that the drawings were language peeled back. You had to use language with its cover and point away from language to show how language could go around exposed. Language was beautiful exposed; it was like a live wire

set loose, a hot wire, burning, leaving trace. If you looked into language this way, you saw where it burned, the map it made. The wire was a line, but because it was electrified it wouldn't lie still: it thrashed, it burned, it curled and uncurled around itself. It was a line but one that moved, sometimes forward, but mostly up then back then over itself then out then up then curling in one place until the mark grew dark then out forward and up into a rectangle then inside the rectangle and around, circling with small, tight movements. I was amazed that I was talking about wires when really I was talking about prose. I was talking about how it was to write, but doing it through drawings (that were language) and using wires to spell it out, but I was doing this on a foggy morning, where there were neither drawings nor wires. It was a table, upon which sat a computer, and I was staring at a screen imagining the drawings I had made and wanting them to teach me how to talk about the line, the line in art, which I could use to talk about the line in language, because you'd need to know that they were the same line. There was not a thing different about them. They entered blank space and made a problem for the page—what next, where to go—and they were lovely in themselves. I wanted to show the line of language I was using to write the drawings, and sometimes had buried within those drawings that line of language, but it was nothing definitive. It was usually a question, nothing I could remember right then, in that morning, where hours had gone by—one hour—and the fog had remained. With this city, you never knew whether there would be fog all day or just those first moments of the morning. I wanted to expose something about the fog, so I sat down in language, language, which has never seen fog and which was the problem I was having. I wanted to write about something that I absolutely had no understanding of. I didn't understand lines, and couldn't tell if anyone else did. I read about lines in art and couldn't understand why they wouldn't talk about language. Monika Grzymala said, "Drawing was a

process of thought conducted by the hand," and she was an artist, and though she was using language to explain her art, it was her art that most concerned her. Drawing was a process of thought—that was true and so, and especially, was writing. And we wrote through the hand, even if it were typing, we used our bodies to write. So, drawing was writing, was how I wanted the quote to go on. And to write was to think; to make lines was to draw; and lines were the foundation of writing. I made a line, and though it couldn't be read, the narrative of my line began instantly. I made a line; it couldn't be read, but I felt the story in my body. It was as experimental as everything else. I made the line while talking in my head, which was what I did while I wrote. So, I was writing, but it was drawing that had accumulated.

—adapted from the Leslie Scalapino Memorial Lecture, UC-Berkeley, 2014.

Renee Gladman

from *Volume Five of the Ravicka Books, a Novel about the Grasses*

In the midst of which, an open fold spread toward the neighboring country in a slow question, fanning left and right toward the train stations Hilayli and Hilayli, encircling the families of Ravicka, their festivals, their endeavors: Rab and Letic writing histories; the trio drawing the first maps; Jandovine practicing solo for voice; the Lejacs, the Cartajûs, everybody sipping something, eating out of homemade paper bags, and meeting here, all over, as a daily ritual of being part of a story that couldn't be written but which itself contained many that could. We came by bus or train, in all weather, from every square of the city, performing the staking *pareis* essential to the health of our language: you laid things out; you dug your feet in; you walked the periphery of your desired spot and called out the names of those present, pausing for each person's response (Mama's "get some," louder than everyone, becoming her moniker for that season, for that arrangement of bodies; Jandovine next to us, talking to himself, in his own arrangement, remote and strange, coveted); first you called the names of those with you—your group—

and then you called upon your neighbors, the groups you're bisecting (it would be rude not to acknowledge the interruption, how you have altered space), their responses differing in length from your intimates: you needed to know their plan for the day, when they arrived, who they were expecting, what would be the nature of the day's activities—were they writing; were they playing a sport. If there were tensions between one group and another (Jandovine had a minor dispute with Sido), both parties had to perform an experiment in the interstitial space, elaborate and public: starting from the ground Jandovine lifting his pelvis with his head and feet remaining on the ground said "always," said "plenty was then," wondered, "if being in the day was nearing, was diaphanous," and Sido moving swiftly beneath the bridge of him, removing all rocks and bramble, rolling the r of *eirimjil*, and all of us involved felt something release in the environment, a divide form, a quiet water filling the gap. We sat down and organized our snacks. All day in the grasses, we made these constellations: the three of us, then some meters away Jandovine, then more meters, on the other side of Jandov, Kesasi's ever-growing family (Ilil and her cousins, babies last summer, in the center, drawing circles on thick brown paper, and the new babies now in baskets, none belonging to Kesasi but

rather to her sons and daughters; the sons and daughters in their own encampments on the other side of the road); Kesasi's schema being intervened by Frondeim's arrival, now reading the eleventh volume of a series, shouting out his favorite words, and Duder Rejaldar in counterpoint. Others made spirals of our afternoon, in that season, in that arrangement of three: Mama, me, Sido, and these families of Ravicka were the map upon which the trio (not ours) drew; we were one map laid upon another map (the grasses) on top of other maps that sought out time and choreography: what a body did five years ago, on that day, in the spot, where Bernard now lay sleeping. The stories of the grasses moved between generations, cohering at certain times of the day, becoming map-able, then dispersing leaving filaments at the edge of space; our conversations ended there too, where a collective dream picked up again about dusty novels, about bodies crossing terrain, falling down, bodies putting names to things, at one point trying to shave the grasses. We lay with our novels, tucked under our heads, burrowing into stories we all knew, but everyone looking for new entrances: our history was full of novels being written in public, between sleeps with bread in your mouth, novels usually about other novels, where maybe you recognized a woman folding white sheets on the top floor of an

old house, a trio of women sitting to draw, though this wouldn't be the same trio who were alive in the moment of our reading or writing (our lying back looking through the grasses, spying Aron and Hadan—what are they doing, building something); it also wouldn't be people who were dead. In a sense, there was always a trio of women; since the very first ululation of air across the plain, since the very first crack of atmosphere, of motion among the ground's objects, the things flying, there has been a trio of women drawing, an Aron and Hadan, all time divided and meted out among the novels, the dreams, the paragraphs, and not just those that we carried and manufactured, but also those that we inherited and we passed on, sad to say, even those we imported: we gave out time to other languages, to neighboring countries, to Bashir of all places. You recognize a person in a novel because someone has performed the dividing *pareis* on her; someone wrote her name down on a piece of paper and handed that paper to another person in full regalia, observing the "thus splits," until the second person handed the paper back to the first: it had been read. And, I was reading the last words of something when Mama stood up and clapped her hands in the crepuscular air and shook first the left hand (with her right) and then the right and (with her left) of

Kesasi and blew five times into the face of Jandovine and accepted a loaf of bread from Frondheim, who wanted to come closer, and gave a sentence to Letic's father walking by, which he should have promptly forgotten, asking Sido to dismantle the tent, to close the window and fold the tent, and instructing me on how to return the books to the satchel, where to place the one I'd just finished in relation to the one I wish to start tomorrow, closing the satchel with some quiet words.

Earl Jackson, Jr.

Writing Internal Distances: Renee Gladman's Translucent Poetics

Since first reading *The Activist*, I've wanted to write about Renee Gladman. The conference "Communal Presence: New Narrative Writing Today" not only gave me this opportunity, but the nature of the forum it provided also raised questions that deepened my appreciation of both Renee Gladman's current work and the New Narrative legacy. I understand that legacy's relation to Gladman's work not in terms of New Narrative making her writing possible, but rather having provided new ways of reading that aid in a productive reception of such writing.

It is rather daunting to write about New Narrative *per se*—the name itself now evokes both awe and affection, intrigue and intimacy. Having traversed four decades, New Narrative is not so much a school as a network of unintended—or at least initially unforeseen—consequences. Consequences that included new inter-animations between life and its expression, subjectivity and community, "authenticity" and audacity.

Let us recall Bruce Boone's peripatetic meditations on social life in conversation in *My Walk with Bob*, or the visionary pathos of a disobedient historical consciousness in *Century of Clouds*. Consider the stereoscopic subjectivity Dodie Bellamy orchestrates in *The Letters of Mina Harker*, or her later work (*Academonia* and *When the Sick Rule the World*, for example), in which a variable enlightenment vies with a coeval disillusionment—invoking a kind of disillumination. Kevin Killian's variations in appearing as oneself are offset with his rhapsodic invocations of "celebrity" that goes beyond a figure of fan-worship to become a phenomenological prism.[1] When Aaron Shurin embraced "both poetic and narrative tensions," it was no accident that he turned to Robert Glück as an example of a writer

who "has foregrounded narrative codes to awaken a reader's attention to process as well as result" (*Narrativity* 1-2). Shurin recognized that when Glück confronts the reader with direct questions, he "not only breaks the window of his narrative but creates and engages an audience, creates social registration for his writing by direct address … The foregrounding of devices and codes does not neutralize them, they are too full of historical determination, but it can ritualize them, or expose their ritualization; reveal them not as necessities but constructions – open to change" (ibid. 4-5).

I offer this thumbnail survey of some of the core New Narrative writers not to trace common "themes" or even techniques between them and Gladman, but rather to suggest that, as addressees not only of Gluck's confrontations but of all the textual provocations of these writers over time, the cumulative effect would be an increase in the modes of reading we are capable of. In other words, engagement with the New Narrative writers expanded our habits of reading, understanding the word "habit" in the sense that Teresa de Lauretis extracts from the semiotics of Charles Sanders Peirce—an effect of signifying practices that results in a "shifting the 'ground' of a given sign" thereby "effectively interven[ing] upon the codes, codes of perception as well as ideological codes" (de Lauretis 178).[2]

Martha Graham used to say that an artist creates her audience. In some ways the New Narrative writers not only cultivated their own readers but also trained them for future textual encounters. Certain contemporary works seem to anticipate new modes of engagement in the ways in which they articulate reading within the composition itself. Laura Moriarty's *Ultravioleta* and Renee Gladman's *Ravicka* tetralogy and *Calamities* mark the range of such forms of engagement in that they are polar opposites in terms of how reading and writing are thematized.

The fictional works deploy a narrative situation as a template for their respective textual topographies.[3] *Ultravioleta* is set in a distant future after earth and its neighboring planets have been taken over (semi-benevolently)

by alien beings known as "the I" who are essentially mental energy. They take on the personae of literary and legendary figures who have enabled humans (and their clones and hybrids) to travel physically and psychically through reading. Gladman's tetralogy takes place in the fictional city-state of Ravicka, where an undefined catastrophe is either intermittently underway or ongoing but only intermittently and differently recognized. One of the central preoccupations of the series is the fictional language of the natives there, Ravic, and the relations the characters—both natives and foreigners—have to it.[4]

These works conjure very different textual and textural surfaces. *Ultravioleta* imagines the page as a porous interface, allowing an excessive enmeshment among reader, character, and reading community as fellow travelers. Gladman's pages are architectonic barriers of varying translucence—designating the absolute difference between the writer's experience of language and the limitations of the reader's reception. While *Ultravioleta* traverses intimacies, the Ravicka texts map internal distances.

The first novel, *Event Factory*, is a first-person account of a visit to Ravicka by a linguist who has mastered the language to some degree; however, her experiences there are still marked by failures to fully understand situations. This novel resonates with and differs from a 1970 Hungarian novel by Ferenc Karinthy in interesting ways. *Epepe* (translated into English as *Metropole*) is also the story of a linguist in a mysterious country, but in this case the linguist, Budai, arrived there by mistake on the way to Finland. He cannot recognize the language nor find anyone who speaks any language he can understand. The entire novel covers his attempts to survive in this linguistic opacity. The parallels in the plots, however are affected by the novels' respective linguistic status. *Epepe* is written in Hungarian, a language linguistically isolated in central Europe, not Indo-european but Ural-Altaic, related to Finnish and arguably distantly related to Japanese and Korean. While the protagonist confronts an unintelligible language, the account is written in a language whose speakers are regularly othered by western Europeans.

Although not explicitly stated by the narrator of *Event Factory*, we can assume that her account is written in the English we see on the page.[5] English is the polar opposite of Hungarian—it not only represents a mythos of absolute clarity but it commands universal accessibility—people around the world are not only granted access to it; access is imposed on them. In any event, the English-language reader shares habits of presumed coherence with the narrator who wanders away from that coherence and takes us with her—but only up to a point. She goes where we cannot and her accounts are at best paraphrases that mark the absolute difference between her experiences—not merely in Ravicka but more significantly her experiences *of and in* the Ravic language.

The division between the language spoken during the events and the language used to relay them is the division between narrator and reader on the page as a translucent interface—the language on the page marks the boundary between what was actually said and what is told to those without access to the language of the experiencing "I". Some passages import terms from Ravic into the text and describe both what occurs in the language and what is lost in the translation. For example, in describing her entry into the Old City, the narrator mentions in passing a complex social gestural practice she was able to avoid because there was no one to receive it:

> Crossing the old city took the took the better part of the day when you were as hungry as we were, which was not a nutritional hunger but rather something deeply emotional … The bridge led to the Barabas wall, now only half-standing, the eastern side of the city exposed. It brought us to the much celebrated threshold, where you are supposed to hold your breath, with a hand against the back of your neck as you walked through. It was not necessary to complete pareis with the customary speech about "the long and short of night," as there were no residents here. [*Event Factory*, 49-50]

Since there is never a textbook-like description of *pareis*, the reader is elicited to construct a conception of the practice from the instances of its occurrence scattered throughout the novels.

Although my larger aim is to appreciate the distance between the experience/language conjured and the experience of reader reception, I would like to briefly reverse direction (momentarily and strategically) by taking a detour through Donna Haraway's "situated knowledge" to use my reader's experience to highlight a degree of realism in the novel that may not be particularly apparent. The narrator's experience as a non-native speaker in a culture very different from hers rings "true." This grounds the effectiveness of using this situation as a metaphor for the distance between the writer and the reader in relation to the text itself.

First of all, the destabilizing temptation of Ravic as a language that offers a radically other coherence is by no means merely a fantasy motif. Virtually any non-Indo-European language offers such an experience to the adventurous student whose native language is English or French. I can state without any trace of exoticism that there is no such thing as an English sentence that has an exact correspondence to a Japanese sentence. While subjectivity in an English sentence is monadic and can be either inserted or withdrawn, subjectivity in a Japanese sentence is like an atmosphere with ebb and flow.

Gladman herself suggests such an encounter in a text from *Calamities* published online but not in the published book. In the text she imagines an encounter with Bilge Karasu's novel, *Night*, as an immersion into the Turkish language that would begin with a word-by-word list that would necessarily exceed any reduction of a language to vocabulary.[6]

At the time of this writing I have lived in East Asia for over 14 years cumulatively and 11 years consecutively which includes time in Japan, six years in Korea and five years (and counting) in Taiwan. When one lives in a dramatically different cultural and linguistic environment in "good faith"—

neither as a perpetually helpless "ex-pat" or a self-mystifying Orientalist—daily life comprises any number of negotiations across modes of meaning and meaning making with no guarantees. Even the successes can traverse different registers.

To give one example: in modern Japanese, the sounds of the language are organized according to types: five vowels then the same vowels prefixed by regular consonants: A, I, U, E, O/ KA KI KU KE KO, etc. Japanese dictionaries are ordered this way and theater rows are designated either by the roman alphabet or this syllabary. But traditionally, the sounds were remembered by memorizing an anonymous 10th-century poem (although attributed to the founder of esoteric Shingon Buddhism, Kobo Daishi) that contained all the syllables of the language, at least as they existed in the Heian period. I frequented Noh and Kabuki theaters which maintain seat order by the order of appearance of the syllables of that poem.

Memorizing the poem guides one to the seat, but I found it easier to remember not by rote, but by learning and understanding the poem. This requires also learning classical Japanese grammar, old Japanese spelling, and recognizing syllables and their representing character that are no longer in the language. Thus, when I'm in the Noh theater, I recite to myself the following poem:

いろはにほへと　ちりぬるをわか よたれそ　つねならむ うゐのおくやま　けふこえて あさきゆめみし　ゑひもせす	Though the blossoms are lustrous They will scatter In our world who Is constant? Today I cross The deep Ui mountains I will not entertain -shallow dreams Or succumb to drunkenness. [Translated Earl Jackson]

Revisiting the poem in the theater plugs me into aesthetic, philosophical and philological experience, but its immediate aim is to find my seat without waiting for the overworked ushers guiding the people who only remember the first line. This kind of practice is something I find beautifully captured through analogy with the negotiations the linguist-narrator makes with Ravic and Ravicka.

It is also important to appreciate the distinction the narrator makes when she writes "I had not come to Ravicka with any anthropological purpose - I studied languages, not people" (EF 59). In other words, she is neither an ordinary tourist who sees the differences as local annoyances or a "social scientist" who comes to "master" those differences but someone who enters with respect and gratitude.[7]

In *Event Factory*, the account of the narrating "I" is in English that includes the experiences of the narrated "I" that occur in Ravicka—thus the language of the text is transparent, or more precisely, translucent to the moments the agent of that language departs from the language of the reader—through paraphrase, synopsis and rough translation. The narrator of the second novel, *The Ravickians*, is the Ravickian novelist Luswage Amini. Amini opens the text with a stark recognition of the difference between what she writes and what the reader reads:

> To say you have been born in Ravicka in any other language than Ravic is to say you have been hungry. That is why this story must not be translated. If, for example, you are reading these lines in French or German, Basharac or English, these are not the lines you are reading. Rather, these are not the lines I wrote. Of course, I do not wish to undermine the dexterity of my translators – I have heard they are competent- it is that the things I am trying to say are internal. [*Ravickians* 7]

The English text is not merely a translation of the original but a turbulence between the attempted translation and the consciousness of the "native speaker" writer of the original words—compromising the message

conveyed with the message delivered; Ravic haunts the text in its refusal to be accommodated, having withdrawn to a space on the other side of a failed interface.

The reader's position on the other side of that interface, however, is also conjured in the consciousness of the incommensurability of the languages. When Amini puzzles over a note her ex-lover Ana Patova sent her in English, she writes:

> .I cannot decipher it. It's none of the usual words. It doesn't say "house" or "lane" or "water". I am thinking about this translation you are reading. If you are reading this in English or know English better than I do, I am thinking how simple these words of hers would seem to you. They probably say the most basic thing about life. Were I to include her note here I imagine you reading it thinking it is composed of the simplest words of that language, even a newcomer should be able to grasp them. [24]

The depiction of the linguistico-gestural practice of *pareis* is also radically different through this translucent view from an infinitely distant "inside." At one point, Amini worries how she will be able to perform *pareis* in a certain situation:

> My behavior, however solitary in nature, propels me forward. But how will I enter? It will be difficult to perform *pareis* with my arms full of film reels. My translators will have been stumped in finding an equivalent for *pareis*. There is no correspondent anywhere; no culture performs it as extensively as the Ravickians. You cannot enter a place without proving to the occupants that you have a body. Not just to display the limbs and skin you carry around with you, but to prove you are in dialogue with them. I could never enter a performance hall with my arms full. [50-51]

Here the difficulty is not only her physical and sociological situation but the linguistic burden of the translator. The text is not only about the experience of the narrator but the subsequent experiences of the stages in relaying the experience outside of the language that has already been foreclosed.

In another point in the novel, Amini expresses a complexity in her own relation to *pareis* as a native Ravickian. When she encounters a stranger on a train (a train she herself does not completely understand why she is riding or where she is going) she attempts *pareis* and this happens—or more accurately, *what* happens is obscured in the translation that announces its own failure to present it: "I refuse *pareis* or it refuses me. I do not try very hard - not with my body – but I open a corner of my mind, diffidently" (68).

If not the "plot" of *The Ravickians*, perhaps the trajectory is Amini's path toward a reading/performance of the poet Zaoter Limici [who also appears in *Event Factory*], an event at which Amini will reencounter fellow writer Ana Patova, who is the narrator (mostly) of the third volume, *Ana Patova Crosses a Bridge*. So the narrators proceed from a non-Ravickian, to a Ravickian, to a Ravickian writer whose Ravickian identity is qualified in the second novel in ways not entirely clear. Ana Patova's own accounts of the crisis of the city also shift levels of narrativity and the divisions between concrete and figurative uses of language:

> The city that existed ran like a film playing in a small movie house on a forgotten street in the blown out part of the city we swore never to enter, never to grace, because of some tragedy no one remembered but which haunted our movements in the "safe" part of the city, which counted for most of Ravicka. (*Ana* 82)

The "like" in the first part of the sentence marks both the small movie house and the forgotten street as a metaphor for the city, but both the street and the movie house become places to enter or shun, to mourn or to celebrate.

Another shift in word meaning with major consequences both to events narrated and the event of narrative occur within the polysemy of the English word "line"—a word that appears in the translation of the occluded language.

> Lines were still in nature I noticed on the day of the crisis; many things were gone but I saw lines had remained. If you looked for them, you found them everywhere. A line cut the path in front of me and intersected the lines of the pavement. It was a line that had arrived from another country, Hungary, I thought. It moved like it had a complex story to tell that would be three hundred and fourteen pages long. It looked like it wanted to move without paragraph breaks and follow a group of people through a desolate landscape. (*Ana* 52)

The simultaneous use of line as a physical feature of the landscape and a component of a text will take me to a vital division in the writing systems of Gladman's *Calamities*, via one more eccentric [both figurative and literal] detour (or calamitous turn)—a sentence that starts a separate section of a late chapter in James M. Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice*: "Right after the sentence ran out, she got the telegram her mother was sick" (*Postman* 94). Obviously the sentence refers to the suspended sentence Cora was given by the court after killing her husband. But the probation is not described at all in this chapter and the court sentence is only mentioned in this new, decontextualized topic sentence. I'm abusing this sentence (not Cora's, but Cain's) as an inroad to the ways in which Gladman's *Calamities* perform relations between sentences and their writers and their exterior venues.

Consider the *Calamities* text in which Gladman describes her encounter with sentences written by Gail Scott:

> I began the day transcribing several of Gail Scott's sentences onto the wall of my living room. For months I had been trying to

> say something about them, which when I went to say it became layered, thus impossible as an utterance. I had already argued somewhere that one could not express many different things at the same time in the English sentence, and so was not terribly surprised by my failure. I'd learned to think that in this language you had to be patient: you had to say one part, like drawing one side of a cube, then say the next part like drawing another side, and keep on saying and drawing until eventually you made a complex observation and a picture-feeling. (*Calamities* 43)

This prose describes the sentences that have not yet been quoted. But in centering the prose on Scott's sentences, the text demurs—its own language renders itself instrumental in anticipating its capturing of the sentences of another writer—sentences fixed on the wall that nevertheless elude the narrator's grasp through a process of escape that the narrator's prose abets and confesses. In the wake of that escape the language of the text observes the limitations of English through a use of English that actually exceeds the limitations it discovers. And the relation of the language examining English to the "English" it examines recalls the relations of textual language to Ravickian from both outsider (*Event Factory*) and insider (*The Ravickians*).

But when the sentences of the Calamities focus on themselves or the projects they intend, other complications arise. For example:

> I began the day thinking that in order to write a talk on "The Ongoing Story" I would need to incorporate it into these essays I'd been writing about my life. I began, "I began the day staring into the face of the question of narrative - was anybody still interested in it, and if so, why?" (*Calamities* 6)

The topic of the passage ostensibly serves to relegate the language to simply reporting the writer's uncertainty regarding a larger question than the status of the language in which she records that struggle. But accepting this at face

value reduces the status of the text in question to a method of pointing at something better—or more radically it suspends the relation of the sentences written to the topic conveyed as a kind of signifier-signified dyad. But a critical engagement with these texts needs to restore the surface texts to the status of the process itself. The problem with the word "writing" is that it is both a process and the result of that process—both present-tense gerund and completed action noun—often with the dynamism of that action elided. I would like to end by suggesting a dialogic reading between the Renee Gladman of the *Calamities* with the Augustine of *De Magistro (On the Teacher)*, a text which is already a dialogue between Augustine and his son Adeodatus. First of all, because Augustine's attempt to draw out the nature of speaking from the dialogue with his son shares something implicit in the question of writing about the nature of writing in the *Calamities*.

The dialogue is about the nature of signs; during the dialogue signs move from being only words to including gestures. There is an elliptical discussion in which certain objects mean what they are; for example, a wall is and means a wall but when asked "What is a wall?" we signify it by pointing at it. When they turn to the attempt to explain actions through actions it gets interesting:

> Augustine: If I were to ask you when you were walking what "walking" means, how would you teach me?
>
> Adeodatus: I should walk a little more quickly. The change in speed would give notice that I was replying to your question, and I should still be doing what I was asked to demonstrate.
>
> Augustine: But you know there is a difference between walking and hastening. He who walks does not suddenly hasten, and he who hastens does not necessarily walk … So I should be misled.

> Adeodatus: I admit that a thing cannot be demonstrated without a sign, at any rate if the thing is an action in which we are engaged when we are questioned. If we add nothing new to what we are doing, our questioner will think that we don't want to show him, but are continuing in what we were doing without paying any attention to him … A special case would arise if, while I was speaking, someone asked me what "speaking" was. In order to let him know I must speak, whatever I actually may say. And I shall continue to show him until I make plain to him what he wants to know, not departing from the actual thing which he wished to have demonstrated to him, and yet not seeking signs apart from the thing itself wherewith to demonstrate it.

This dilemma is about how to demonstrate what speaking is through speaking not in order to convey content but to "mean" the act of speaking. *Calamities* seems also to describe one level of the project of exploring how translucent language not only points at events and conjures inspirations that seem to deliquesce through that encounter, but also how the language itself is performing an identificatory demonstration that requires a new kind of reception. And the gaps between the writing on the page and what the writing is pointing at—as well as other gaps as demonstrated in the Ravickian novels between the account of the experiencing "I" and the acknowledgement of the limitations of sharing that experience beyond the language that cannot be reached—these gaps have an ethical political significance beyond the strictly epistemological, as in for example, the reception/appreciation of the writings of a lesbian of color without claiming an identical understanding—thus appreciating the difference between experience and critical reception.

I would like to return to Augustine for a coincidence that I will exploit—somewhere between a heuristic strategy and a cheap trick. While Augustine asserts that one can signify a wall by pointing at it, he points out that one cannot point at the three-syllables pa-ri-es of the word for wall; it is

impossible to signify gesturally the components of a sign even if the sign is for something as concrete as a wall. But note that the word *paries*—transposing the final two vowels gives us *pareis*—the social ritual that figures prominently in the Ravickian novels—so that mythic practice, presented and withdrawn in its presentation, could also be a way of dissolving walls of all sorts into signs that illuminate the vanishing point into which they recede.

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[1] "Kevin Killian's work also exemplifies a dynamic belief in the fictionality of the self but his narratives tend to focus on the construction of the narrator, rather than its vanishing act. . . . If Gluck's narrators dissipate themselves in writerly texts of bliss, Killian's narrators perform themselves within imitations of readerly texts of pleasure. This quasi-readerly text – both the metaphor and medium for Killian's self-disclaiming narrative 'I'- eventually disinvests the reader of the 'I''s illusory fixity and fixations. This disillusion is also a pleasure principle (and a principled pleasure) of Killian's text. It is a disenchantment that does not invalidate or demean the fascination of the narrative that had led to the deconstruction of the conditions of its possibility. Killian never punishes his reader for enjoying the nostalgia of personality." Earl Jackson, Jr., *Strategies of Deviance*, 216-217.

[2] Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't. Feminism Semiotics. Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana UP 1984)

[3] *Calamities* presents a nonfictional variation on the internal distances presented in the Ravicka tetralogy that I will describe at the close of this essay.

[4] The differences in the rhetorical structures of their respective fictions should also be read within an appreciation of the affinity between the work of the two writers. Laura Moriarty lists Renee Gladman as relevant to her work *A Tonalist*, for example. Ironically, both *Ultravioleta* and the Ravicka tetralogy resonate with the work of Samuel R. Delany. *Ultravioleta*'s aliens recall Delany's novels *The Einstein Intersection* and *Babel-17*; while the Ravickian language recalls the linguistic speculation of *Babel-17*, the state of the city is reminiscent of Delany's Bellona in *Dhalgren*.

[5] It is a working supposition that the narrator has written the text in English, but there are passages that could be considered evidence against this. In her account of her time with the native Ravickian Ulchi, she writes: "To confirm that something had been completed, he asked, in my native language, 'So we're going now?' but had transposed the letters in the last word such that I did not right away understand him" (*Event* 72). Note that she writes "my native language" and not "English". Furthermore, transposing the letters in "now" would be difficult, suggesting it was a word in a different language.

[6] "I BEGAN THE DAY WITH the sense that if I could write down all of the words I encountered in Karasu's *Gece*, made a list of them then sought out their definitions, the eventual accumulation would most probably represent the entirety of the vocabulary of the Turkish language … I had to choose eat or sleep, which also meant choosing Turkish or no Turkish, at least for that day … The bell rang again. I opened the door to my apartment and yelled, "*Merhaba*," down the stairwell, precisely mimicking Rosetta Stone. "*Nasılsınız*," I said as Alev had taught me. "*Iyiyim*," I answered, though no one had asked how I was. "*Ne yapıyorsunuz*," I asked because nobody was saying nothing and I wanted to know what was going on". *The Calamities*. Triple Canopy. 2011. https://www.canopycanopycanopy.com/contents/calamities

[7] Gladman touches on such respect for differences in language and the life it informs in her examples from Turkish in an interview in *Triple Canopy* "In Turkish, when you bring food out to people, the people who are receiving it say, 'Health to your hands,' and the person who brought the food says in return, 'Health to you.' An encounter could have a bigger sort of performance behind it, so you're not just saying, 'Thank you,' but, 'May birds fly through your hair at night.' I wanted to embed in narrative these other symbolic possibilities." Renee Gladman with Lucy Ives, "The Company that Never Comes" *Triple Canopy*. 2012 https://www.canopycanopycanopy.com/contents/the-company-that-never-comes

Renee Gladman
Houses of Ravicka
Dorothy, 2017

REVIEWED BY BRUNA MORI

"If it's disappeared it's because you can't find it."

"No. 96 wasn't where it was supposed to be, thus we couldn't be sure that no. 32 was where it wasn't." The seeking is not feigned; the plot is truly unknown! It doesn't matter if 32 is found, yet we are still looking.

Houses of Ravicka, by Renee Gladman, was intended to continue a series including *The Ravickians* and *Event Factory*. Instead, *Houses* is something to be divided among the existing books or its own entity writing toward a middle.

It is be/coming to terms with itself. Cognition starts and stops and shifts, and in getting lost gains perspective and dimension, its choreography raveling throughout with consideration, then moving inward.

The buildings of Ravicka do not house a Perec-ian search. They are on the move—as much as its plot—as much the shifting tectonics of Gisela Insuaste's cover art. Portable fragments compose *exploracion sin fin: here we go*—our jelly-like beings carrying their own slab architectures forever.

Ravicka's comptroller is tasked with the job of taking *geoscogs* of the city's buildings and houses, measurements that keep track of a building's subtle changes and movements over time. The tactic is used to support topographical alignment between any building and its invisible counterpart, which typically exists in another part of the city—in this instance, house no. 96 in Skulburg and its cousin no. 32 in Mohaly.

The movement is punctuated by a curious and precise slapstick: "A sixteenth of the third of that half of a third, connect his miniscule eruption to those from previous nights and previous residences." Yet, among these measurements, what is the formula differential, what causes the movement over time, why do they matter?

"Stepping away from the plot to make something up then bringing it back to language." That's not new for Ravicka, known for its linguistic performance, its getting lost in translation. Ravicka's Bachelardian *Poetics of Space* is a 'Patovian' poetics: studying a transom of a door but also her own self-criticism in calling the iron black, preceding materiality with hue.

The challenges of communication are elucidated in their predicaments, in a Stein-like study: "I can't tell where his problem intersects with my own, but he seems to think they are related, so related, in fact, that he dismissed the suggestion that I might benefit from a description of what he's come to do."

Houses of Ravicka is a book about architecture without using the language of architecture. While writers might consider architecture a formal or externalizing device, Gladman travels the other direction where "architecture shatters into an interior revelation" as it mirrors the author in each point in time, or "places where the boundary has broken, a place of refracting light."

The protagonist might be the author, reader, main character, un/finished work, building, or city at once. Rather than having to come to terms with an unreliable narrator, I trust them completely. The critique inquires or intentionally plods (not dully)—with a tonality that hints at but is not the science fiction of a Ben Marcus *Age of Wire and String* or pure farce of Mark von Schlegell's *Ickles, Etc*.

Eileen Myles oft-used quote observes: "Renee Gladman has always struck me as being a dreamer—she writes that way and the dreaming seems to construct the architecture of the world unfolding before our reading eyes."

(Or in the words of one student, overheard: "No one can do what you do.")

Is Gladman dreaming a Ravicka edition on houses or hallucinating a circumstance for us to witness? Well beyond an *Invisible Cities*, she empties the familiar gestures and overcited vocabulary of a world, creates and redefines obscure or not yet invented ones, and applies them to a discourse of a future present or *descending chronology*.

The book of dreaming is a book of seeing what things are or might be, in a place so wary and yearning it tries to escape (into) itself "(further inside a place you've already been)."

Renee Gladman
Calamities
Wave Books, 2016

Julie Carr
Objects from a Borrowed Confession
Ahsahta Press, 2017

REVIEWED BY ALEXIS ALMEIDA

For months I've been staring at Renee Gladman's drawings.

Since the first time I saw them together in her latest book *Prose Architectures*—their urgent shapes built of tightly written lines, sometimes swaths of color—I've experienced desire, lightness, frustration, intense curiosity, discomfort, joy, a strange kind of calm, and awe, and always a strange and mysterious kind of pleasure I can't stop returning to.

I've asked myself why these short, stacked lines in the vague shape of a building, why that circle around this particular section, why this particular blue over its crown. Also what, if anything, is being left out, alluded to non-verbally, and what happens to the body as it moves through these structures, these fields of affect to leave behind these meticulous, strange, and deeply affecting sort of maps.

There's also something inherently contradictory about how scale works in these drawings: they feel both close, intimate, and also immense and inscrutable, like an immeasurable but highly perceivable event taking place in my immediate vicinity.

If the word "event" is important here, it's a languaged version—Gladman's work has always been interested in the way words affect spaces, how space

is moved through and experienced—it also seems important to mention the way language undergoes various transformations in the book, how it exists as writing, drawing, notation, also becomes a literal threshold, a point of access, in this case to her visual process. What attracts me most them, then, isn't any immediately discernable reading, but rather the proximities they create around me: the lines being extended between body and syntax, diagram and utterance, writing, mark-making, and physicality. When Gladman says they are a way "pulling the process of thought apart," she is also re-imagining the way we can inhabit space, and thought itself, the way we might reconfigure the most familiar social and political structures, as well as how we can position ourselves within them, so that different relational possibilities begin to appear over time.

But I want to think a little more about this question of scale, scale in the sense of what the drawings make visible and what they don't, and especially the ways they interact with the viewer, draw them into new ways of thinking about representation, legibility, and beauty.

In a recent conversation with Don Mee Choi, which involves, among many other things, her decolonial translation practices, and forthcoming translations of Korean writer Yi Sang, Christian Hawkey says something that feels very resonant: "There's something marvelous about how in the shortest of spaces [Yi Sang's poems] push at the very edge of what constitutes a poem, such that they seem simultaneously poems and not..." He also refers to Édouard Glissant's idea of the "right to opacity," the idea that the refusal to be legible is its own strategy of resistance, a way of refusing to perpetuate grand, imperialist narratives, echoed also in a line from Don Mee Choi's *Hardly War*: "I refuse to translate."

Based on the interview (and what little I've read), Yi Sang's writing responds to the racist depiction of Koreans during the colonial period; his poems and prose oscillate between inhabiting more traditional forms and staging formal disruption—like a frequent use of long dashes

(Don Mee Choi calls these "free streams of consciousness")—and the intricate arrangement of words and numbers to create what Hawkey calls "felt spatiality." But what I loved about this conversation, beyond the description of these formal elements, were the descriptions of the emerging points of contact that gather within the work, the way they demand a different kind of reading. Also the idea that an act of translation, in refusing to direct itself toward a preconceived notion of legibility, can delve deeply into the ways certain cultural legacies are created, can imagine new iterations of subjectivity within and eventually beyond them.

Gladman writes: "But to progress in language (in sentences) is to move forward through a kind of syntax we've all agreed upon … However, this 'making sense' wasn't actually a representation of how what I wrote came to me or existed in me…" Her refusal to register felt experience in ways that are easily recognizable (grammatically, pictorially) is not only a basic challenge to traditional modes of representation, but also, as in Hawkey's original idea, a basic challenge to what constitutes drawing and writing, what art can be expected to be or do. Rather than obscuring modes of self-expressiveness, I read these maneuvers as a constant (re) framing of the self in a certain state of becoming, it's "*Bilding*," as Fred Moten says in his outro to *Prose Architectures*, "with the same urgency and surprise that mark the field of interruption called everyday life."

I wanted to start here, with Gladman's drawings, because they lead me to think about two books I've recently been reading over and over again: her own *Calamities*, and Julie Carr's *Objects from a Borrowed Confession*. Neither of them resemble *Prose Architectures* in any obvious way, though in the sense that each attempts to chart the passage between genres, modes, and the positioning, the othering of the self in the space of the sentence, they both draw me closer to a certain kind of lyric engagement, one I've encountered many times before but that feels deceptively new after reading these books."

This engagement, this lyric feels hybrid, both interested in poetic subjectivity and institutional critique, and whose use of familiar speech patterns doesn't signal a comfort with cultural norms; rather it exists along the threshold of many different genres and modes of address. It's also interested in difficult, even impossible to articulate energies/affects/subjects, and off the page spaces, though doesn't move toward any degree of ahistoricism. Instead it's speaking subjects resist being read as genderless, raceless, or classless; the work is heavily invested in subjective experience while also in problematizing the construction or projection of stable speaking-subjects, making certain divisions (like public and private) to some extent seem absurd to even name.

These are some of the things I see at play when I read *Calamities* and *Objects*, which in part culminate, at least for me, in the basic challenge to the idea that poetry that turns away from the lyric I then engages more fully in public discourse, and poetry that invokes the lyric I might instead be retreating from it. Even if this division is reductively drawn here, these insinuations have recently been taken up by Cathy Park Hong in her essay "Delusions of Whiteness," especially when she invokes Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith's anthology "Against Expression," and her challenge to the idea that renouncing lyric subjectivity is immediately anti-authoritarian, as well as by Gillian White in her book *Lyric Shame*, where she discusses the entitled position from which one might posit modes especially associated with autobiography as "other to experimentation," or as being mainly complicit with various processes of poetic institutionalization, like "fetishizing personal experience," or assuming "communicative transparency."

I would add to this, as others already have, the issue of how works from other countries are read here in the US, are not only translated into English, but translated into North American and Eurocentric literary networks and recognizable patterns of reading. How might we, as translators, resist occluding the text's otherness, or resist translating into

standardized modes of legibility and fluency? How might this refusal in itself be a form of agitation we need to move toward a less polarized, more decentralized field of poetics.

What I think is exciting about these books, then, is the way they stage the lyric I in various states of relation, the way they complicate reductive readings and create ways...and create ways of seeing beyond the false binary between experimentation and modes like the confessional mode by, for example, veering away from assumption that these modes primarily emphasize finished, commodifiable forms.

In her recent essay "When a Person Goes Missing," Dawn Lundy Martin problematizes the idea/possibility of the poetic self's strategic retreat from public life as she thinks about her brother's recent incarceration, about the range of social and political containments the black body is subjected to, and later about Hannah Arendt's definition of freedom, which "notes a difference between political freedom and 'inner freedom,' 'the inward space into which men [sic] may escape from external coercion and feel free.'" What becomes particularly compelling here about this definition is how it points toward what it excludes: "… in order to experience inner freedom you must first know outer, political freedom." Lundy Martin goes on to write: "As a teenager, I often sat in front of my bedroom mirror in an attempt to recognize myself. Many distortions from other people's perceptions needed to be smoothed out. Something about an attempt to see my face as it was without mediation became, I believe, important for my growing sense of self, and thereby a sense of my own power, real or imagined. Feeling free is a relationship to *being* as much as it is to movement…"

It's this very conflict—the fantasy of inhabiting a private, unmediated self, and the range of ways this is difficult, even impossible in the public space of language—in the public space of language—that I see being so powerfully confronted in *Calamities* and *Objects*, especially

when the self is confronted with the task of narrating oneself and of being narrativized from without. In a recent interview, Carr contrasts lyric poetry and narrative in terms of desire, in that "[poetry] offers escapes from narrative… [whereas the] narrativized self suggests the self in relation to structures: the family, the institution, the state." These books, in a sense, speak to this desire/tension, troubles it, and turn it into something radically potent—suggesting that subjectivity is never separate, never not in dialogue with larger narratives, never not in dialogue with larger narratives, though it can be staged in in-between spaces and states of becoming.

From the very beginning, *Calamities* is primarily interested in, obsessed with, undone by, in love with one thing: the sentence. It figures the sentence as its basic unit of measurement, but also as fundamentally inadequate, unable to translate and fully render the process of thought that Gladman is after, obsessively, over and over throughout its pages. In a recent review of the book, Prathna Lor deftly takes this a step further, chronicling Gladman's eventual movement from the sentence to the line, especially for the line's association with drawing, and drawing's closeness to thinking, being, and embodied experience: "Although the line is cut off, it doesn't necessarily seem to or feel like it's going to stop. There is a certain decisiveness, an aggression, that this line contains. Yet, despite its longing for an ineluctable propulsion, the cut-off line exemplifies the vexing frustration of trying to represent something that seems fundamentally unrepresentable."

Here we can also see Gladman's interest in the unsaid, the unsayable, which she locates not only in the semantic space of the sentence, but also in its plasticity, its physical presence and inability to represent, hold, and locate bodily experience and the various contours of thought. Instead of merely describing these tensions, *Calamities* asks the reader to imagine a series of combined entities: word and image, line and body, place and description, lyric subject and, in essence, her critical

subject, what Lor describes as "writing the space of writing itself." If, as Fred Moten says, Gladman is "a subtle and adventurous practitioner of the old-new sentence," I see this book as building new iterations of subjectivity that, while never stepping fully beyond the representational, grammatical, and social constraints they exist within, imagine radical new ways to occupy the spaces between them, to imagine new ways of framing the visibility of the self.

Each section, with the exception of the last thirteen 'calamities,' starts with the same phrase: "I began the day." Aside from invoking a general expectation for intimacy—are these essays, diary entries, letters, poems?—they also enact a constant process of dispossession of what came before, defying one of the primary conventions of narrative: duration. "There could be no duration. The 'sentence' had to be divided infinitesimally"—in many ways, this infinite division gestures toward one of the main processes explored in *Calamities*: the retreat from writing, and the discovery of drawing, which is defined as 'inhabited thought,' the interplay between these two modes, and the difficulty, even impossibility of narrativizing this process. Though the early pages of the book explore different methods of dissociating words from things, creating new relationships between sensation, language, thought, and place, what first struck me were the early visual descriptions, which almost function within a sort of erotics of seeing, always gesturing beyond what is describable in language, even beyond what would be visible to the eye:

> I began the day in an embrace. Somebody was saying something; a car was crossing the earth on a highway. There was nothing but green fields, in a kind of architecture. The earth seemed proud of itself, which was part of the conversation I was having with the driver. She wanted to know if this was the letter or the essay I was writing, having promised her both. But the driver couldn't look at

> the passenger. And the passenger couldn't look at her lap for long (in her lap, she was writing). But she could look at the driver. The driver had to keep her eye on the road. It took a long time to fill up the page. I'd had to see that there was a small patch of yellow growing in a field as we drove along. And I was sucking on ginger and needed to swallow. You had a feeling that when you were turned away she had her eyes on you and wasn't driving properly. And wasn't driving. But neither were you pulled over. Would looking at her mouth bring on speech? Would it say what you wanted it to say as the car neared the hangar structure? Someone flung a door open in Denver, Colorado. "Someone jumped on my skin," I was writing when the question of the earth was raised – was it happy? She didn't think so.

The question of visibility remains constant throughout the book; not unlike the drawings in *Prose Architectures*, the sentences in *Calamities* play with scale, framing certain things within recognizable systems of legibility, while others are built from proximities, relationships, imagined intimacies, or are simply held out of reach. Because so much of the book thinks about what happens to the self, the body, in the process of being narrativized, the language accounts for the constant alterity, the othering that occurs in naming and being named, so that the reader watches while "I" becomes "you," "she," and "she" becomes "the driver," and the "I" seems to blend into a field that the reader is not only able to perceive semantically but also visually —at least in moments—so a kind of sensorial map of impressions begins to flicker and move across the page. These narrations can also start to feel intimate, not because the speaker is addressing a "you," or creating a direct address to anyone in particular, but because the reader feels let in on a thought process being laid bare, something inconclusive and improvisatory, yet also something that clearly constructs a likeness that is beginning and continues to take shape.

One of my favorite moments in the book happens when the speaker is about to teach Ed Roberson: "I began the day looking up at the whiteboard, wondering how I would do the thing I needed to do." Instead of plainly describing the class, Renee (yes, mid-way through the book, I feel like saying "Renee" instead of "the speaker") describes a desire to "draw a grid of light, as if one were looking down upon it, a grid that extended across an opaque surface, then draw, a good distance below that, a container, inside which we were symbols." Just as she says in the introduction to *Prose Architectures*—"Language has an energy that eludes verbal expression"—here she is thinking through ways to render this energy, and allowing it to exist in an extra-literary space, or perhaps also inside the "silence of writing," dismantling the difference between inside and out. When she also writes, "…drawing was a way to think with the body," and "writing was the story of the body in thought," the reader might recognize that she's been illustrating this all along, through sentences that seem to combine a kind of plain-spoken narrative progression with the simultaneous re-shaping of narrative conventions, so that the mode of address has a way of shifting tone and focus, almost as it moves through different visual and affective fields of condensation/expansion:

> I began the day thinking that writing was becoming a thing of the past as my fondness for Rollerblading now was, though in my time of writing and time of Rollerblading – and these did sometimes overlap – I was far better at the former than the latter. I was far better at writing than I was at Rollerblading, and for the most part considered them vastly different. However, when they departed my life, they did so identically, robbing me of the ability – in retrospect, of remembering separately when I wrote and when I Rollerbladed. You were going to say that writing was for birds flying when suddenly a feeling came over you. Someone beautiful was talking about your sentences. It felt like rain. Things were starting to line up: history was

> speaking, which hardly ever happened to me. It was saying I had arrived at a moment where I could put writing down and walk away from it. I remembered an ache in my mouth when I ran into the back of that pickup truck. I was alone in a parking lot and had already given up too much, where a tooth chipped and I bet through my lip. I gave up most in going to the hospital. The language I had accumulated confused me, and slamming into the truck had cu my knees. I didn't know how to explain myself to the medic, but soon I began writing poems. In the ensuing years, the poems became prose, and I had written my last of it. Finally, I was done.

All of this said, I think one of the most subversive thing about the book is its use of humor, placing humor within moments that seems to be building a tone of seriousness; also using it to expose situations of gender and racial disparity, as well as, and not unrelatedly, gross power imbalances in different institutional settings, especially the university. In a moment that feels both hilarious and tender, Renee realizes that "'the person of the world' was not a philosophical placeholder, as I had been treating it for the last twenty years, but was actually a student in my class of eleven silent girls … Why hadn't she made herself known, or at least distinguished herself? How did one draw out the person who is the most perplexed of all persons? You couldn't be direct." Also, in the moment of being let go from her teaching position, she exposes the narrative weight cliché can hold, weaving narrative around empty signifiers and the narratives they automatically issue, undermining their power:

> I began the day trying to understand how the phrase *slam dunk* functioned when uttered by the president of the university at which I was employed, who was, in that moment, explaining how I would soon be dis-employed from that university and pulling from her gallery of expressions the phrase slam dunk

> to drive the point home. The reasons for my dismissal were cloaked in a mysterious mystery … I thought she might have been writing fiction, because the whole air of why I was there was that she knew ore about fiction that I did, as did the provost and some other men at the university level, so "slam dunk," which she confessed I was not, was an opening to some novel she was writing.

If *Calamities* imagines new paradigms for legibility, if it pushes against recognizable narrative structures, *shows* narrative working, and failing, *Objects from a Borrowed Confession* pushes further into the desire the lyric lays bare, a desire not only to redefine, to detach from the strictures of narrative, but also to manifest what Carr calls "a presence," a human desire to be.

The book is divided into many sections— among them, an epistolary novella, an essay about confessionalism, a nine-art memoir, a section of "Destroyed Works," a letter to Fred Moten "and all"—and though I'm mostly going to focus on the first section, it's also important to mention the way the lyric "I" modulates between the different parts of the book, responding to a desire for a sense of intimacy, while also drawing attention to the limitations language poses in making the "I" cohere, to become singular or knowable as one thing, marking it instead as something that slips into different states of relation."

In a recent interview with *Electric Literature*, Carr says "…what poetry is is the act of pointing toward something that lives outside of language … interesting … for me is that when we're using language to point to something that language can't do, there's this kind of awareness that I have of that space, of that gap. And, ironically, that gap itself is the thing that makes me love the language." In its varied and various performances of self that draw attention to its constructedness, its contingency, *Objects from a Borrowed Confession* frames the lyric "I"

as occupying several interstitial spaces, ones that ultimately question divides between public and private languages, selves, that render the space of 'confessional' lyric as a mode that points as much to language's failure as it does to language's ability to communicate what Carr herself calls the "possibility of truth."

What I love about the first section, "What do we want to know and how far are we willing to go to get it?: A novella," is not only its difficult range of its concerns—envy, jealousy, rivalry, death—but also the relationship it troubles: the relationship most fundamental to the idea of confession, the relationship between the "I" and the "you." Drawing on what reads as autobiographical material, and drawn out over a series of letters addressed to the same person—"J"—the speaker expresses both a desire to narrativize and to make sense of her grief, and also an acute knowledge that she won't be able to achieve this in the lyric space she inhabits. As Carr writes, in an essay called "The War Reporter: On Confession," which appears later in the book, "I return to another thought: That the ethics of seeing, of really seeing, and describing what ones sees, this effort to tell some kind of truth (which his one way to define confessional writing) meets an opposing force…that the very thing most needing to be told remains outside of language…" So when the speaker repeatedly, chidingly says to J, "will you forgive me?" she is playing with the idea that she reveals herself fully to J, or that she has a specific purpose in writing to her—i.e., expects a response, or an epiphany—which, as the text also seems to be suggesting, is a fundamental sort of lie.

As opposed to *Calamities*, the entries in *Objects* always have a specific recipient in mind, but what the reader knows of J is very little. She wears a scarf, she stands on a bridge, she sits across a classroom and stands distantly at an event, she has the look of "struck sorrow" in the speaker's memory; as she later says, "I can see only your body, and that only in my mind." Aside from these frozen, potentially objectifying images,

there's also another important detail, that they share what the speaker refers to as an "x," one "angled between us…[who] went home with me and thought of you." Here, the "I"/"You" relationship is forged in all its complexity, so the moments of cruelty, and the moment of intense curiosity, envy, acute attention—"I was afraid that crying on the subway or puncturing your body with needles, you had become the performance artist I always wanted to be…"—are always shot through a prism in which an 'x' figures greatly, provides the gaze through which the speaker sees J, and through which, more importantly, she sees herself.

But what is so brilliant about this piece is that instead of probing this prism, she breaks down the way it is constructed, reconfiguring it so as to arrive at a kind of conditional freedom from this reconfiguration, an incomplete self-portrait that she's able to convey in the letters. When the speaker writes, "I hold you in my mind and I try to see into you," she's also very aware of this idea's proximity to "the power of the male body," the idea that the self could appear transparently in language, or that a male presence could define their state of relation. As the letters progress, they seem to be framing desire (rather than fulfillment) as their primary motivator—"The secrets in the hat are a kind of fuel for me, driving this incessant interest in letters. Every day resolves itself in language, like insects running across snow, or like the premonitions of Philip Glass heard through a pillow"—so when the speaker references the unrepresentability of her intentions, or her experiences, I would ask how the book frames this as its own source of power.

Instead of communicable 'truths,' I would also say the novella is most invested in something Julie quotes Gerald Bruns as saying, in an essay that also appears later in the book, "By beauty and by fear: on narrative time": "What is it to be a *who* or a *me*," This tension between the desire to lose oneself, especially to the relationality made possible in the lyric space, and the fear of losing oneself, especially to those who wield tyrannical power, are both present in the text, and work not

toward resolution, but instead toward a certain erotics of language in which each can be present, can be a "kind of presence." It's within these threshold that *Calamities* and *Objects from a Borrowed Confession* position themselves, forming on the edge of the lyric, remapping and reshaping it, asking the reader to participate as certain shapes and possibilities come in and out of view.

Mirtha Dermisache
Selected Writings
Siglio / Ugly Duckling Presse, 2018

Renee Gladman
Prose Architectures
Wave Books, 2017

Reviewed by Vanessa Thill & Lewis Freedman

Reading Space, Drawing Time: A Conversation Around Mirtha Dermisache's *Selected Writings* and Renee Gladman's *Prose Architectures*

No matter that Mirtha Dermisache and Renee Gladman composed their texts decades apart, their new books bear a striking similarity: they're each composed of writings that don't seem to signify phonetically. We wanted to read these books in conversation, to approach something of the difficulties and fascinations they offer, and to gesture to the promises of their potential legibilities in our moment. Over the first months of 2018 we exchanged many emails between New York City and Stillwater, Oklahoma, presented now as what follows.

Vanessa Thill: Last night I had a dream that I was in Gladman's fictional world of Ravicka. Every body movement was a different way of communicating, but I didn't know the right movements. I had to land a fighter jet plane in a valley of ferns onto a train track, find a seat at a dinner theater, and explain a sex crime. The most important part of the dream was a jug floating from the corner of a flooded barn, out and away, with its round opening floating down stream. I thought, ok I can follow that, and I immediately woke up and looked at Gladman's drawings in *Prose Architectures*.

Lewis Freedman: In the months just spent with these books often at hand, practicing their strange literacies, I feel as if I've been reaching for something to say about them that's not quite available to me, as though it were something I had just perfectly articulated to myself in feeling/thought and then as I go for the transfer I find I've immediately forgotten it. And though I don't know how to articulate why this is the case, I feel a feeling of what's not quite available yet in your dream jug. I imagine, as I follow with my mind's eye the open jug bobbing in the flood in your dream, that I'm reading something Mirtha Dermisache's and Renee Gladman's books bear in common, that as I follow the patterns of displacement and substitution I'm following an excess in the linguistic sign that permits and powers the possibility of a writing that signifies not phonetically but graphemically.

VT: I like the idea of chasing lines through these books. There is a quality of searching that permeates the experience of looking at them. Yet I also find such playfulness. Reading them on the subway feels funny, like I'm studiously reading a book that's upside down. And you can read them at any angle.

Fig 1. Dermisache, "Libro No. 1, 1972," n.p.

I expected to find architectural metaphors in Gladman's work, but it was a surprise to see them in Dermisache's pages. This section of Dermisache's *Selected Writings* really brings to mind a city like Istanbul, looking out on minarets, chimneys, and countless different barges and buildings (Fig. 1). I love how the negative space comes alive, like looking through a slatted window. Those blocky forms give me the sense of sculptural bodies lining up, thick with pen-mark ridges. They also look like poem stanzas sideways, which may be obvious, but also might not be.

LF: How compelling to me that you've been turning the Dermisache book around to look at it, and I hadn't conceived of what you point to here, that looking down each line in the "Libro No. 1, 1972" section of the book would constitute a structure of a page of verse in itself, like say each page of the pages you're holding open would be 7 pages of verse, as much as it would be seven lines of verse with each shape read as a word.

One of the impulses I have in trying to look to *Prose Architectures* and *Selected Writings* together is that they both seem to me to be so manifestly writings first and images second; that is, rather than take them in as composites in which I locate a center or series of centers from which the events of the image's movements are proceeding (and maybe this is a grossly generalized way to talk about my experiences of looking at images in art contexts), when I look at the surfaces in these books I begin to read them as though they are romance language books, that is from the left of the page (from the top left in Dermisache's case, and from the left more generally in Gladman's). That is I begin to be disappeared into a time in their movements that goes from left to right, and mostly from the upper to the lower parts of the page (although again this is complicated in Gladman's case in which the writing more often than not moves up and down in its events). But this is all to say that I never noticed the pages within the page in that series of Dermisache images, and of course my training and practice is so textual, and it feels great to be gifted your way of looking. Curious to know what you think about all this? About reading & looking, text & image, as manifest in your perceptual practices and in these books?

VT: I'm pondering the idea of locating the center, or network of centers. I guess one thing that strikes me about these artists is the way they use representation as a conceptual framework that relates so closely to time; through their gestures they record processes while immersed in the world of them, in language that forms its alphabet through speaking. Neither Gladman nor Dermisache is writing, but both are working and moving across the page or grounded in language. The results are more rhythmic and immediate than language could ever be. There's something about the physical structure of these drawings that feels so aware, so well listened and listening. Gladman's structures have the feeling of elaborate syntax without specific meaning, or with meaning that eludes us. As she writes in the introduction: "This is language with its skin pulled back." I tend to read Gladman's architectures like the aerial and skyline view of a city simultaneously, with little bridges and stairways extending out in all directions (Fig. 2). My impulse is still to read left to right, partly because some areas seem to have discernible words, but more so because one might read a picture of a skyline or landscape in that manner. Gladman's approach isn't so much one of "collapsing space"—which is also kind of a trope in representation—but representing space without concern for perspectival traditions.

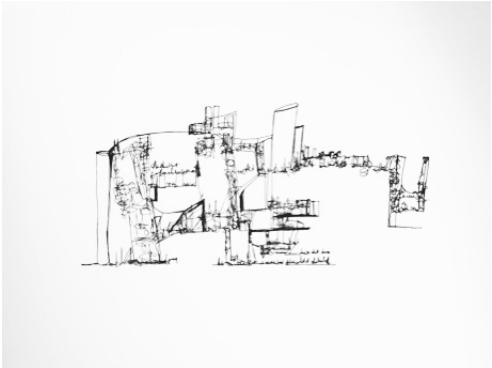


Fig. 2. Gladman, *Prose Architectures*, p. 67.

Ok, this is opening up another can of worms. I recently learned about Polynesian *rebbelib* wave charts and dead reckoning maps, which are ancient techniques for navigating in the open ocean by plotting wave swells among archipelagos (Fig. 4). In relation to Gladman and Dermisache, I'm thinking about the way an individual can synthesize different types of information (not just visual) to build a picture around themself. Indigenous maps are such an amazing precedent for looking at this work because Cartesian logic is not the operative mode. For instance, Australian aboriginal maps condense many kinds of knowledge: flora and fauna varieties, topographical landscape features, seasonal changes, and water flows. It feels exciting to try to peel open the idea that perspectival representation is not the one true naturalistic way. Linear perspective is not actually how we see, because we are also absorbing many other signals about how to apprehend space and move through it, with atmosphere, distance, light, sound, smell, memory, history, rumor, legends, instinct, etc., etc.

LF: I'm amazed by what you describe (and apologies if I begin each response in this way, and apologies for a persistent apologetics habit), that you "read Gladman like the aerial and skyline view of a city simultaneously," that actually stretches my spatial and perspectival imagination in a curious way, and reminds me of my experience of city space as I move through it, something of a double feeling, a double time, of having walked to the city's edge to feel the city.

I have the impulse when reading pages from *Prose Architectures* to enact the verticalities written as temporalities too. Like in the image you point to above (Fig. 2), I start out with the leftmost mark reading its line from left to right in the sequence of its duration (like we do). Then, as it's interrupted by a rising line (which once it reaches a height moves from left to right itself), I am reading two separate events occurring at once: I'm reading the continuation of that first line whose movement from left to right continues in relation to its interruption; and I'm reading the parallel event of the line that departing upwards has begun its own multiple movement

rightwards. And the composition expands and expands asking me to hold its various and multiple events as I read. The way this accretes in any given composition becomes a temporal architecture, a series of multiple interiors happening together and figuring the connecting spaces between each other in the movements from one moment (which except for at the start of the composition is never only one) to others.

And maybe this is just to say that Gladman's *Prose Architectures* feel to me like representations of the time of writing as irreducibly multiple in such a way that in reading them I exist in the social space between the gestures of writing (the architectures) which the writing creates. Not entirely dissimilarly, Dermisache's compositions push me (perhaps more singularly) into the questions of writing itself. Take, for example, the very first text in *Selected Writings*:

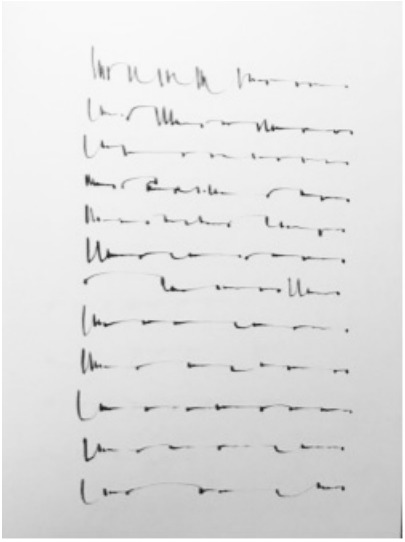


Fig. 3. Dermisache, "Textos, 1970 – 1970," p. 1.

How each line of its script moves from a larger gesture, a kind of capital gesture, and then in a patterning of waves that move down and up from left to right diminishes itself at the end of the line. In the 12 variations on this gesture, I can feel how each is the time unit, the same kind of syntactical energy, a force and its waning, that conditions the gesture of its idea. And the most remarkable moment is in the seventh line in which there is this inversion of the established gestural structure, a long stroke at the height of what the line permits in graphic gesture and then this energy is left over at the end of the line which permits two heightened strokes that are unlike the latter part of any other line in the composition. This way in which a syntactical energy in written syntax offers to its subsequency an inversion of itself to renew itself, feels and looks so apparent to me there when I read it, and I can feel the underside of this structure in syntax as I write now waiting for the syntax to flip and reinverse itself refresher-wise.

Is what I'm saying here similar to your sense of both Dermisache and Gladman's compositions as languages that form their alphabets through speaking?

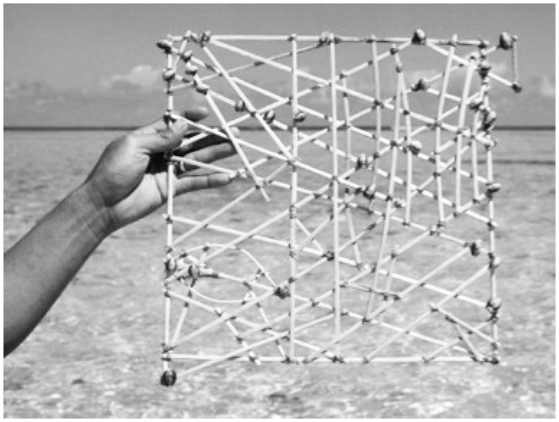


Fig 4. Micronesian stick charts showing wave patterns and currents. The shells represent atolls and islands. Using stick charts (also called *rebbelibs*, *medos*, and *mattangs*) ancient mariners successfully navigated thousands of miles of the South Pacific Ocean without compasses, astrolabes, or other mechanical devices. Photograph by Walter Meayers Edwards. National Geographic Society.

Also, I hadn't heard of a *rebbelib* before and I'm struck by the imagination they suggest of a mapping produced by looking down (or perhaps more accurately feeling down), mapping wave patterns as they move beneath the cartographer's boat, and they open up a particular corollary to an experience of certain of Gladman's writings from *Prose Architectures* (including, I think, Fig. 2), which feel to me as I trace their temporalities like a cartography of a city moved through by walking/thinking, the walker/thinker's circuit of looking down, looking out. And, of course, when we write by hand we so often produce our recordings while looking down at the page.

VT: This double feeling of reading from above and across laterally pertains to the innate problem of depicting three dimensions with only two. With a city in particular, so many verticalities must be condensed. Like reading a map: you are always seeing the aerial view and trying to compare its angles with the rights and lefts as you approach corners. A pathway across can be below and also a bridge hanging several stories up. This feels like something that would occur in Ravicka. Like the jug! Which bobs up and down as it moves across.

The verticalities of Gladman acting as durations, that is wonderful. This will never stop being interesting to me. Because of the way the gesture gets calcified ... that the resulting form can flip back and forth forever between a symbol and the remains of an act. I'm thinking now about symbols, we could say letters. I have been fascinated by the shape of a T in the sculptures I have been making over the past year or two. It seems to be both a figure and also not, or perhaps a garment of a person who has slipped away, leaving a posture of liveliness where their body had been. Although this implies a before and after in time, I'm not trying to represent symbolically using a pre-existing framework. I wonder if the action and the result can merge temporally to eliminate a hierarchy between them?

Apologies now if I'm going off track but I'm excited about this. Think of a pelt and a knife, both are about the same shape of this T or t. So that shape is

both the actor and the acted upon. The shape is the writing and the writer? I think this is related to holding together two modes, like reading a map and seeing the horizon at once. Like being the writing and the world that makes the writing possible, the seeming impossibility of a self-constituting creation. How can it exist if it has to build everything through itself? And yet it does.

Fig. 5. Juan Valverde de Amusco, Anatomia del corpo humano, 1559, Copperplate engraving. National Library of Medicine, Rome.

LF: The T beneath the skin, and the T that skins! Concerning what you call the impossible "impossibility of a self-constituting creation," in relation to both Gladman and Dermisache's writings I sense an opening, I have questions/concerns:

To what degree is a writing that does away with the semantics of sign-signifier language, with phonetic alphabet, or to start this sentence again, to what degree is a writing that seems to draw attention to the gesture of writing, to a kind of semiotic field of meaning particular to the patterning of writing gestures, to what degree is that a performance of a kind of desire for union, for a kind of presence, in which the T is both knife and body and pelt, in which the body writing and the writing being written co-present?

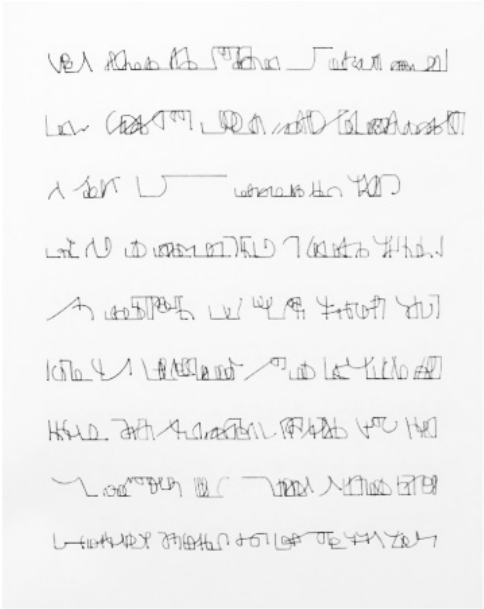


Fig. 6. Dermisache, "Sin Titulo (Libro)," n.p.

When I look at the beautiful blue writing that comprises the final section of Dermisache's *Selected Writings*, I can feel all the attention in the hand-to-gesture circuit for each compound letter written, I can feel the drama of that force of mediated becoming that lots of the semantic writing I'm used to reading holds (Fig. 6). And yet, as I feel this, I also feel a resistance to any reductive meaning made, and what's produced instead feels like something that gestures prior and post to normative semantic writing, something that maybe dreams itself as pure event.

And because of this I keep on having this thought about illegible writing as I look at these books, that it's not illegible at all but in fact far more legible than phonetically legible writing. It's legible as itself. Like when we handwrite quickly and messily as I often do, how the legibility of the word-shape comprised of letter shapes is often so roughly sketched as to be only legible as the word within the context of a particular writer's system of gestures as they play at and within the iterating borders of the shapes of letters and words within the iterating boundaries of syntax. I think of the way Gladman describes her movement from writing into drawing at the end of *Calamaties* (Wave Books, 2016): "I made a line, and though it couldn't be read, the narrative of my line began instantly" (104).

But I can't entirely dismiss the feeling that the question and desire around how to escape those borders and boundaries is also the question and desire, I think, of how to enter into a context of inscriptive gestures that doesn't constantly refer in a transparently legible way to the particular writer, that is, to the repeating structure of an authorial self. Like even though Gladman and Dermisache's works are so idiosyncratic in a way, in their willingness to follow their impulse to write outside of the sign that refers outside of itself as a way of shaping its interior, each of their works feels to me in some excess of the expressivity of an individual subject (though not at the expense of), and feels within the possibility of some new existing social order.

And I'm reminded of Dermisache's emphatic concern that these are writings to be circulated within the politics/aesthetics of public contexts (her *Diario No. 1* circulated on public buses, the special days of public arts workshops she ran, etc... [see "About Mirtha Dermisache" at end of *Selected Writings*]), that, as Dermisache writes, "the liberation of the sign takes place within culture and history and not on their margins." And I think of Gladman's work with its performance of the writing gesture as constructing a social architecture, a city's time/space, a narrative architecture. And when I do so I'm reminded that the presence these writings offer is emphatically not singular or hermetic, emphatically not purely formal, so (and here I draw to an end) can we imagine these writings, in some way, as politics, and if so, what would be their political dimension (or am I getting too far ahead of us?)?

But maybe I can first ask what your experience of reading the blue section in Dermisache's *Selected Writings* has been? I'd be curious to know.

VT: The authorial self and a proprietary relationship of maker to mark is what I was getting at with the discussion of T and my desire to break up that situation. These texts seem to shift under the eye, they seem to slip in and out of coherence. To what degree are the writers in control of their texts? To what degree are they also surprised to apprehend the strangeness that appears before them? This seems to be a co-productive mode that decenters them as "masters" or "producers" of an easily synthesized output. Instead they struggle and play their way through the pages in a way that does seem to be socially generative at its core.

The blue section of *Selected Writings* feels the most controlled. It has a consistency that implies that it follows linguistic rules. I look at it not as the admirer of a drawing but as the discoverer of a strange manuscript. I am still most drawn to Dermische's "Libro No. 1, 1972" (Fig 1.) The rectangular sections blocked out in marker connote censorship. Perhaps this links to the idea of communicating outside; they aren't so much secret

languages as a system that doesn't accept such a straightforward binary of secrecy and transparency, of known and unknown. Perhaps those forms propose that a reader can understand something and still hold it in complete mystery.

The question of legibility is an important one, especially when we consider the political dimensions of the work. I wonder how the radical potential of illegibility is relevant here? I think something very different is happening than what is often referred to as illegibility and refusal when it comes to representation and marginalized subjects. Thinking especially of Gladman, who shares our contemporary moment; her works seem to offer spaces of abundance and proliferation and generosity. Where the refusal may come in, as you point out, is that they write outside of the expectations of "authorial" language, even toward a new social order.

We could bring in Édouard Glissant's idea of opacity as a response to the Western requirement of transparency. We tend to approach systems of writing with the expectation of rational relationships of letters to sounds, words to meanings, and yet we know that this is a fallacy. In Glissant's short chapter "For Opacity," in *Poetics of Relation*, he says the opaque "is that which cannot be reduced, which is the most perennial guarantee of participation and confluence." We can certainly relate this to the irreducible nature of these books, a presence, which does require a different kind of participation from us. They ask of us a kind of humility of approach, to encounter without any possibility of mastery of the text, to approach gently a space of strangeness, otherness, and accept whatever may live there.

Glissant also writes, "It does not disturb me to accept that there are places where my identity is obscure to me, and the fact that it amazes me does not mean I relinquish it." Perhaps this relates to what you say about the individual's expressivity, that there are unknown parts and as a writer, the goal need not be to transmit these transparently. An amazement

here could be akin to the more-legible-ness of the illegible. In "reading" these "texts" you become very aware that you do not understand. This positioning of the reader as one who is fully aware of the strangeness of the text they encounter, and must kind of travel through the pages aware of their own role in looking and choosing what to zoom in on, what to take in on the page compositionally, how the eye moves around in ways very unlike the experience of reading. This allows the viewer to never lose themself in the work, but to remain conscious of the productive space of reading a text and what their consciousness and imagination confers upon these symbols.

LF: Glissant's ethics of opacity is useful to me in reading both Dermisache and Gladman's work, in which the demand for identification often assumed in models of reading is subverted. In these books one can give oneself to the text and not become it, can become the text and not become oneself, can feel the text holistically, digest its semiotics sensorialy, without needing to understand each mark of it, or needing to read through some relapping circuit of authorial intention.

Maybe this is a way to understand the particular hospitality of Gladman's book, that her opening of another way of seeing and writing, her way of imagining the structures of narrative sequencing and lived space to be emerging in a synchronous architecture, invites us into a form of legibility that is without the demand for total identification or understanding, a form of holistic legibility that is both a reading of the sequence of the marks of the text and a taking in of the text as whole.

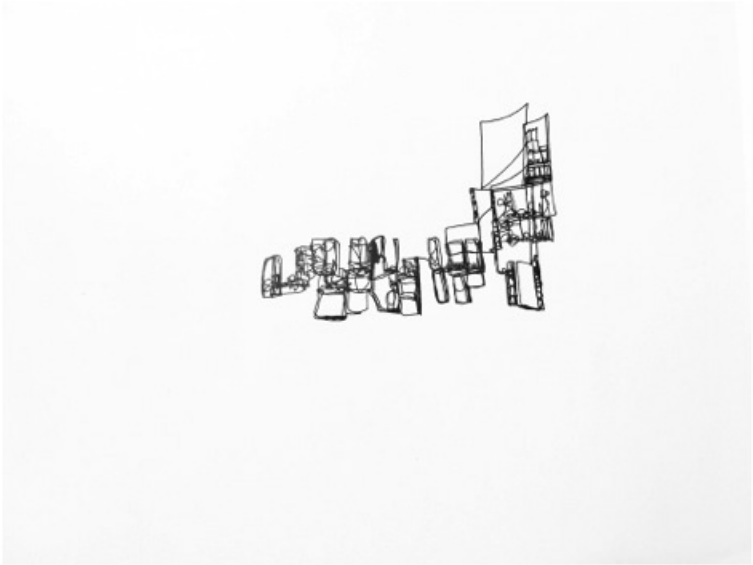


Fig. 7. Gladman, *Prose Architectures*, p. 80

I am looking as I write this at a page in *Prose Architectures* (Fig. 7) and it's reading to me like a complex circuitry of reflective screens rising up to a vantage point, to something like a ship's big screen mast, for looking back. And the way these screens rose to that height on the right was through a hugely multiple series of reflections, a writing over and over of themselves to make a space between them, and I feel invited to move my eye over and back in this expansiveness built by compression, an expandable language of gestural writing as new time.

Mehmet Dere
from *the "One" series*

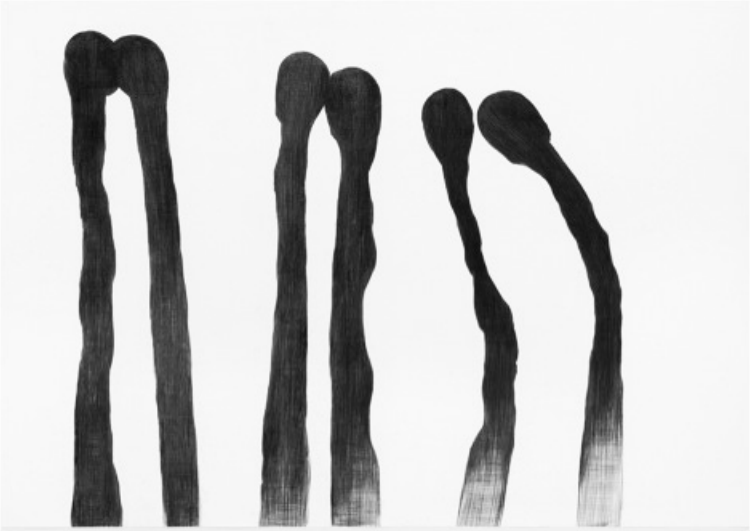
… After some time I began to feel the state of isolation very deeply, it was useless to leave the house, where were you supposed to go if you wanted to walk around? I began to draw in the house all day, mostly charcoal black-and-whites. There was something rehabilitating about this and a new language began to surface that was outside of my political works.

Everything looks better in black and white. With the numeric comprehensiveness of its English meaning and the stop in the pronunciation of the word Van, 'One' enabled me to focus on this period of time where I existed as one. A stop where a mystic experience converged. The compositions featuring the merry-go-rounds transpired during this period of time.

This process, the One series, are pictures of this period of suffocation and of running within oneself.

Invisible Stories Series No:1 2012, 70 x 100 cm Charcoal Drawing on Paper

Invisible Stories Series No:2 2012, 70 x 100 cm Charcoal Drawing on Paper



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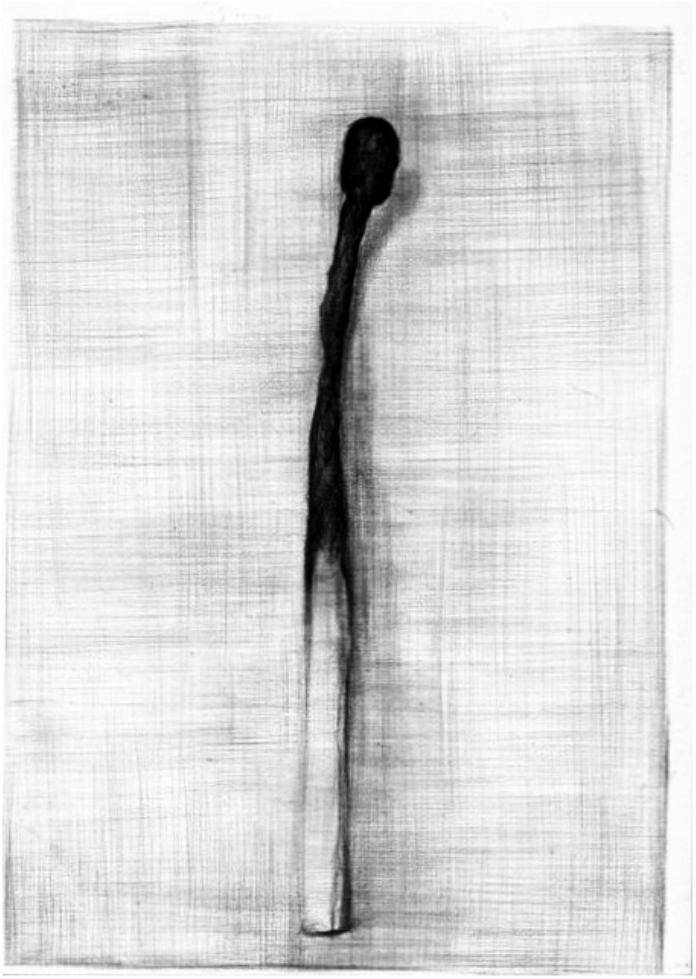


Invisible Stories Series No:4 2012 ,30 x 21 cm Charcoal Drawing on Paper

What we see when we read 2012, 42 x31 cm Charcoal Drawing on Paper

Syd Staiti

The Note

As I walk home from work my head hangs, shoulders slumped. It is 2006 in Oakland, California and I walk everywhere like I'm rushed to get to where I'm going
hunched and looking down at the ground
I see a note on the sidewalk
It reminds me of a note someone once wrote to me

There's a knock at the door. It's my neighbors who I've never spoken to. I am in Portland, Oregon in 2001. A note hangs from their hand. Is this yours? I take it and say thanks. The neighbors ask if I'm okay. I say I'm fine / it was just a joke. They seem genuinely concerned for my wellbeing.

Seldom looks up from beneath a layer of sludge
I look down and try to catch his eye, but what can we say to each other, a double vision intercepted by ripples on the surface of a pond, in different worlds tethered by a thread?

I look down at the note in my hand. At the time my girlfriend had not yet punched me repeatedly in the head, strangled my throat, or kicked me while I was on the ground. She hadn't yet taken the alarm clock cord and wound it around my neck, pulling the wire at both ends. I hadn't yet called the cops because I thought she was going to kill me and had no other way out.

Something in the neighbors' face held a warning to me from something they had seen in the note. Something I didn't see in the note but saw in their face, and then promptly forgot about after closing the front door.
It's filthy, Seldom, Venn says. But they want the filth and animals too.

Make it funny, a little pathetic, so they chuckle through the filter of your self-narration. They need to know your politics are in the right place. Is it 2018? Otherwise you can't be a star in your own reversed mirror.

Don't you wish to have been born of a different era, among mounting beasts of the web, cavalry raising dirt under their hoofs, beside those trenches where you lay? Venn asks with a smirk while looking up over her glasses. Seldom shakes his head.

Did I say that, did I ask how the text is like a slaughtered animal?

I wrote a book over the years of 2011 to 2015 that contained an "I" character that was never stable—sometimes a woman, sometimes a man, sometimes an ungendered person or a person with an unmarked gender, sometimes a person who was a different gender from the way they dressed or were perceived. The character finds themself in a variety of environments and situations, carrying out experiments. The book felt continuous to me at the time but I can see now that it starts and stops a lot. The central character is pretty inaccessible and the changing landscape never seems to settle. It doesn't quite carry you through.

When I get home from work at the coffee shop, I say hi to my cat and quickly make some food to eat. Then I walk to the bar and start drinking.

The bar I mean is the White Horse Inn, the oldest continually running gay bar in the country, the bar where Jack Spicer used to drink. I go there almost every night and drink too much. It is 2008 and I'm writing a piece called "The line curves where you live" about living on the border of Oakland and Berkeley. It was also about my exploits as a person who drinks too much and sleeps with a lot of people, about the disintegration of a relationship and the desperation I felt and all the sleeping around, the drinking and drugs, the woman 12 years older than me who I was obsessed with for many years and who I started dating in Portland in

2005 just before moving to Oakland and how things quickly ended after I moved. I wrote about all that too.

I couldn't stand the piece. The writing was so direct, too vulnerable. I wasn't ready for sentences. So I decided to chop it up. For every three words, I removed one word. I had no idea how the piece would turn out but it felt cathartic as a practice. The piece of writing became much better, felt almost thrilling the first time I read it all the way through.

After Janice left in 2002, I spent a lot of time at the E-Room (The Egyptian Club, the now-gone lesbian bar in Portland), which you could say was like the precursor to my White Horse days. Both were dark gay bars with outdated décor, pool tables, karaoke nights, and a dance room. I would drink Jameson on the rocks and smoke Camel lights and wear a leather jacket and shoot pool. There was something very deep inside me that felt satisfied by this as my way of life. It felt destructive, but real, like I was accessing something secretive, like desire. I chopped off all my hair for the second time. I read *Stone Butch Blues* for the first time. I tried using a packer; it didn't feel right. I flinched when my new girlfriend would make a sudden motion. I smoked inside the bar. I kept my eyes on everyone.

Was it a book of prose that should have been verse? Or vice versa?

It was not so easy to decide to start taking hormones or get top surgery. Certainly not as easy as it was to remove one word for every three words and then the poem was better. Then the form held the content in a way that worked.

Seldom walks beside Hue. Hue drops back for a second and kicks Seldom's ankle to the side as he takes a step. He stumbles and jerks, they laugh. Seldom is startled to see Hue in this way, jovial and light-footed. They have a boyish look, pretty, with something heavy and dark in there

too. He feels bashful around them. They walk with their hands in their pockets, talking about a book they are reading. They are already on to the next subject but he's still somewhere before, not thinking anything specific, just an ambient sort of processing in the back of his mind that keeps him distracted from being present.

It wasn't the village they strolled through
On a path that led them back here once again
The story for someone to see—written once from above, then beside
From beneath the sludge he looks up, then back down to the page
Which ones are whose, which verses are the ones that caught you looking
Seldom signs his name at the bottom of the page.

Every five or ten years, I find myself thumbing through old journals. Usually it is when I'm moving. This is the day in my packing up of a place where I don't do any packing up; instead I read through all the old journals and notebooks, all the old folders stuffed with writing from my younger years. Sometimes I skip over the two journals that cover the nine months when I dated Janice. In these pages things go dark. The appearance of my writing changes, letters look more angular and sharp, written with a depressed and frantic energy, the pen impressions seem to be dug deeper into the page.

I look at the pages where we scribbled words and drawings together about her abusive behavior, as a way of talking about it. I see myself sitting next to Janice in the Red & Black Café on Division Street in Portland as I draw an image of myself with welts all over my head and she writes captions to explain why I deserved them.

The Red & Black was an anarchist collective coffee shop and gathering space a few blocks from where I lived in Southeast Portland. Morgan used to give me free bowls of chili when I was broke. I would use their computers to check my Hotmail account. It was 2002 when I was sitting

on the ground outside in a hoodie smoking a cigarette. Walt Curtis stopped in front of me and asked if I was a homeless boy. I said no. He turned and walked away.

I move back to the neighborhood on the border of Oakland and Berkeley at the end of 2017, this time South Berkeley. I walk to the coffee shop where I used to go when I moved into this neighborhood in 2005, in North Oakland. It is the coffee shop where I wrote "the line curves where you live." Now I write here in the same coffee shop about that piece, how I cut one word for every three words and made it better. I walk on the same streets, but my head no longer hangs, my shoulders are less slumped. I walk a little less rushed. I am still the same person, same anxieties and fears, same delusions. But I have more presence and intention, more inner stillness. This is partly because I transitioned but it is also because I grew up. I did a lot of work. I mean inner work that's invisible. When I get pushed on a stretcher into an operating room or start inserting a needle into my body once a week, I receive many congratulations.

My first book was an accurate representation of where I was at the time of writing it. I now long to tell another story—one that may jump around in time and contradict itself, that may draw from real and imaginary landscapes of people and environments, that has unstable subjects and speakers—that conveys my embodied state today.

Chase pokes out from a pile of leaves. Hue looks at him through the window as they wipe their hands on a towel. Venn comes up the stairs from the basement and stands in the doorway, tapping her foot. She is giving Samuel a call but he doesn't answer. He is wading in the swamp, moving his arms around to catch pieces of the composition. When he brings them back in a bucket, Seldom will wash them off. I place them in my mouth one by one to feel out their potential. Chase rakes the leaves into a pile so he can jump into them again. Venn goes back downstairs.

I remember being particularly pleased to be mistaken for a boy. Not only by Walt Curtis but in all instances when it happened. I was just beginning to be a lesbian, a dyke in those early Portland years. When Janice brought me to the emergency room, a nurse asked her to leave the room for a moment and handed me some pamphlets. After one violent night, I went to work at the store that used to be called Natures and then was called Wild Oats and later became Whole Foods. I was working behind the deli counter when Janice showed up to say that she had packed her car and was driving to Los Angeles for good. In that moment I became free of her. But not by my own doing. This happened two weeks before we were about to move in together.

The building is starting to disintegrate. We are going to let it be so

Blood of a pig coasting through the streets in the village, after writing something that wanted to show up in a way and didn't. After I sat myself down on the curb and wondered. How I would ever come to write about myself in this way. And Seldom says

How the building comes to be the story / Seldom tells through your window

All along he had forgotten about the piece he was trying to write a few years ago in which the text was a body, a slaughtered animal.

A book to be prose. Or could it be *verse*?

The body / of work
holds its previous versions inside
— invisible and present —
building its aura out of them

I reach my hand into the swamp and pluck Seldom out, my wrist and

forearm dripping with mud and saliva, blood and gunk. The stuff of old writing, old bodies, old selves and thoughts, desire and trauma, the old versions of us, *every body's got them*

A note lying on the sidewalk

Jena Osman
from "Motion Studies"

Her body is lifted onto a stretcher for transport, and he clings to her, unseen, like mist. He feels hands move through him to secure her arms and legs, and to silently check her wristwatch device. He tries to keep his breath as quiet and even as possible, but fears his increased heart rate will sound an alarm.

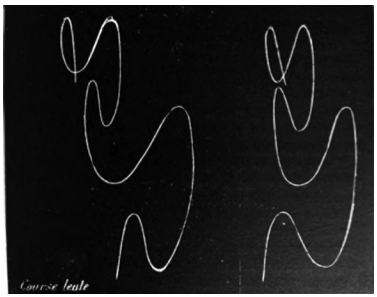
How did they get caught in this net? They had been solid citizens at the company. When interest-targeted for purchases or events, they had purchased, they had attended. When asked to review, they had done so eagerly. They rated products, reviewed experiences, created wish lists. They left the RF tags in their clothing. At protests and demonstrations, they smiled for the police and their cameras. They fed all of their social media feeds. They had dabbled in online revelations and had uploaded video documentation. They had fed the machine so the broker would have plenty to sell. They had been sincere in their efforts. They had been efficient and true to their community. They each had recently received "employee of the month" program loyalty gift cards.

But somehow it had all gone awry. They had tried to keep coherent, but they kept falling apart, and the company had evidence in its archives. Their data profiles sent mixed signals, inputs were tagged as possible bots. At first each had tried to hide it from the other, ashamed of their algorithmic failure, anxious for their financial future. Until one night they confided in each other, surprised but relieved that they weren't alone in their honest mistakes. They strategized about how to clean up their data streams, their paradoxical profiles, their illegible patterning and unmarketable traces.

Now he can feel her heart beating, tucked beneath his own. He tries to get a sense of where they're going, what will happen to them. Then a black sheet is draped over her and all goes dark.

Motion capture was first used in biomechanical research in the 1970s, but was quickly recognized as a powerful tool for animators. In a motion capture studio, actors wear tight-fitting body suits with white reflective markers placed at the joints. Variously positioned digital cameras record the white markers 120 times or more per second, sending thousands of floating point values into a data file. The data files show the position and rotation of the body, but not its muscles or identity; the actor has been stripped away, leaving only movement behind. Extracted (ghosted) action is then used as a foundation for a virtual composition. In this way, animators create plausible human-like movements for their technicolor action heroes. Fight specialists don black skin-tight suits, with ping-pong balls velcro'd at the joints for videogames like Total War and Splinter Cell. Cameras map their digital skeletons and track every move, render their forms on screen. Their human actions are captured, cleaned up, and skinned in the solve edit. The bird becomes a cursed captain with a tentacled face looking for souls to join him.

In order for the virtual to feel real, the real must be stripped of its body, dematerialized until just a dot or a line on screen remains. Then given a new skin. The bird becomes a long-headed yellow-eyed beast who says "I smell you, I hear your breath."



"stereoscopic trajectory of a brilliant point placed at the level of the lumbar vertebrae of a man walking away from the photographic camera." Etienne-Jules Marey, *Movement*, p. 23.

All he can hear is an engine. And then the engine stops. And then they are lifted from an interior to an exterior. And then the engine starts again without them. And then it is silent. He waits a long time. If he moves, if he lifts the black sheet and they aren't alone, his presence will be given away. He can still feel her heart beating against his, but slower, in a deep sleep. He wishes he could move through her, but he is only a transparent skin.

Eventually she twitches awake, unharmed. She throws the sheet, and him, off. He quickly looks around: lush grape arbors, rolling hills, not much else. Have they made it to New Wilderness? She looks down at her wrist and sees that the inflammation is gone. Her body feels sore. She thought she had died. There is a moment of wonder and relief.

But something is wrong. When they turn away from each other's eyes to the place that they're in, the arbor has become a barren tract of lines and objects, abandoned engineering projects, pipes, a culvert. Then the world begins to erase itself, then redraws back to the wild, only to disperse and decay again. They hold onto each other as if the earth might crack open, but nothing rumbles, nothing shakes. Just the smooth glide and reshuffle of competing landscapes. The barren tract erases, redraws, becomes the New Wilderness. Then the ghost of the former grows and embeds in the new. Then the new leaves its residue in the former, grapes scattered across a plot of dirt.

Is this a glitch?

Ghostcatching was a 1999 collaboration between dancer/choreographer Bill T. Jones and digital artists Shelley Eshkar and Paul Kaiser. Jones, with sensors attached to his joints and limbs, improvised before the cameras. Software tracked and captured his movements, his self reduced to dots. His body spun and lost its mass, its identity. A human animation tool took the skeleton of Jones' movement and mapped it onto a kinematic biped, a three dimensional figure that looked hand-drawn. A computer modeled applied geometry. For a time, the figure is contained within a sketched box (a phone booth? a coffin?), struggles to move inside of it, but ultimately breaks free. A captured movement trying to escape its capture. Each gesture leaves a mark, a chalk line, until the entire world of the piece is filled with the inscription of motion's residue. The sound of chalk drawn on a blackboard. Position. Rotation. A body draws a line in space, now a visible trace. The visible trace draws itself another body, a half-life of lines and planes and curves. The bird, reduced to a system of bright lines, becomes the chieftain of a Martian clan.

Reading the heart is a matter of understanding the variation of curves. Captured then breaking free again and again. With motion capture no one is there, but there's someone there. The ghost of each movement continuing as a visible chalked trace, the chalky streaked air. In analyzing pure motion, the body is lost. Yet, as Jones himself once stated, motion capture may be the best way to archive his life's work. The bird, reduced to a system of bright lines, becomes a big blue alien from the planet Pandora.

—excerpted from *Motion Studies*, Ugly Duckling Presse, 2019

Germán Sierra
Cloudwall

sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt.
Virgil, *Aeneid*, 1.461

1.

Nothing is colossal.
The air is almost water, the trees rachitic, the sea sweats dead dark clouds of filth and salt,

She walks away from the couch, stamping sweaty footprints on the floorboard, leaving a tingling vibration in the wood that spreads like a scent through the cold air. Be jewelled by numbers! he mutters—echoing the sequence of her perambulation until the room absorbs all the fluttering sounds and she vanishes like the photograph of an argentine greyscale ghost.

> *mountains are collapsed hills, beasts are torpid and blind, towns are tiny clusters of ruins, kings were thin and weak, people die young, rocks are eroded pieces of furniture inhabited by frogs, heat is cold, the land is wet, love is lukewarm, gold is a lethargic rust over the earth's crust, the green is diamond and it laughs at you like a mossy hell of water and weed. No gods could have been brought to life there—they had to be seized from the future.*
>
> *Creepy crypto-CRISPR. Fuck genomic darkness.*
>
> *The rain is plain plan B.*
>
> *Death rides the dirty waves; death rides dust, exactly like a moth.*

A saint, a bearded flea-bitten hermit shrouded in burlap and fed by the generosity of a chestnut forest was living on top of a wormholed bubonic hill in a wooden hut asphyxiated by ivy branches, hiding in there from the slimy touch of the rotten photonic wave-stream [distilled through the cloudwall into a filthy dark smearing fluid] that ran through the air to splash over the burnt-and-drilled crust of the earth. A ghost town would eventually emerge from that watery land, colloidal dust in a dizzy river—a space then occupied by the greenish-grey woods and the unbelievable mess of emerald-green moss, tarnished leaves, vinyl lichens, camo toads, and ampersanding golden fern blossoms.

'So dendrites volupt. Like it matters.'—wrote Amaranth Borsuk.

Now, undead people go phantoming around over the cobblestone shattered-mirror pavement—but back then it was *the wild*, under the same lead-dead sky.

Real life is like the outcome of a zombie apocalypse—but you're expected to restrain yourself from slashing the zombies.

All zombies are undead equally.

A collapsant sky, a vertical horizon of crystalline Damocles's swords.

A swarming soil and soul.

Splashing sounds, splashing souls.

A murderous sea, infested with seaweed-smeared, mud-vomiting necrotic-skinned creatures.

Once upon a time, swirl-crowned monsters emerged from the depths,

swam to the shores, crawled up creek streams leaving threatening footprints in the sand, feeding themselves with exhausted salmons and lampreys. They crept over the hills waving menacing tentacles, surrounding the man-of-god with extra-terrestrial arrogance. Until he found himself encircled in a ring of unsurpassable evil beauty.

He lifted his baculus and turned the monsters into boulders…killing all beauty around, immortalizing evil.

This sounds more proper of a sorcerer than a saint, she replied.

Later on, the saint's followers carved the sea-monsters' stone corpses into churches, their tentacles into sinuous arcades that branched in spiral alleys leading nowhere. Nowhere was everywhere—the pavement blobbing and cracking like fried fish skin, and the dark deformed houses growing clustered and superimposed like bad teeth, hovering over automatic people.

But this is not how the story goes!—although the actual one is also a fairy tale, nothing more credible in any of its multiple details.

Both are professionally concerned with the past.

She's an archaeologist: She unearths eerie things, such as the big tin bird with golden eyes hypothetically intended for astronomic calculations that, since exhibited in the almost-empty local museum, has encouraged a kind of weird cult: people killing birds—crows, lost seagulls, jays, sparrows—and hanging their corpses from street lamps.

He's a historian, he works with texts instead of mud, he knows the past is just a lie that's been around for enough time to be used as foundation for future falsity.

Recently, she's been unearthing certain stuff that wasn't supposed to be there and hiding it at home: a fairly well-conserved but unidentifiable iPhone 20, a real-size Barbie doll, and a sophisticated-looking metallic prosthetic hand. All of them prevenient from the underneath of a never-before-excavated Romanesque chapel. All of them, most probably, originated in what is commonly called *the future*.

She wonders if there is a market for relics of the future.

She cares about money, because money, in pure capitalist logic, means the possibility of change.

Who would want to keep objects from the past? But then, who would like to pay for vestiges from the future?

In pure capitalist logic there's not an outside of pure capitalist logic, so money is time.

A few days later, she and her colleagues meet to discuss what to do with the found futureware. On one hand, it's obviously *new*—nobody ever saw an iPhone 20 before and, although they won't publicly discuss its appearance to avoid conflict with Apple's confidentiality policies, they coincide in acknowledging that it doesn't look like anything they would easily identify as an iPhone. On the other, it's evident that the objects are *old*—dirty, rusty, worn out, with some broken or missing pieces. Does a market for old future things exist? The most plausible explanation would be that they're fake—it wouldn't be the first time future objects are forged by some artist and exhibited in museums—, but whoever might have done it must have been really cautious about fabricating their placement: the stone blocks didn't seem to have been removed

in centuries, and the relics were buried under seven feet of mud and medieval debris.

The saint's followers came also from the shore, sleepwalking like oxygen-drunk overdeveloped fish insisting on evolving into batrachia. They arrived from small fishermen's port villages, carrying the sulphurous smell of rotting seaweed with themselves. They were squid-eaters.

Later on, they developed a taste for a wider diversity of cephalopods and crustacea.

From time to time, those who had built the town stacked up new stones over the monsters' relics to prevent their awakening. Every winter, the mountains chanted and cried hypnotic black tears of granite. The squid-eaters' offspring secured the monsters' backs with buttresses, nailed their heads to the ground with hefty needle-towers. However, they never felt safe inside the creatures' golden bellies, so they finally turned to the Bishops for help.

Bishops, the true lords of the land, drank blood and raped men and women with no regret. They gave instructions to paint the churches' intestines with children's gore. The walls absorbed the blood to the last drop and the old stones showed again their grey, grainy, shimmering surface. Bishops were terrified their sins would reanimate the primeval beasts, so they willingly paid in gold coins for the heaviest and hardest stones to be carried and carved and piled up on top of the ancient, ruinous chapels. Chapels grew into churches, churches into cathedrals—people died young and returned as rocks. How did they invent killer languages? From time to time, stone people uproot themselves from the walls, carrying singing swords, hideous musical instruments, and fearsome religious symbols. Flesh people tried to stop them from bubbling out by painting them over, but sponge-stone people kept drinking all the paint and all the blood they were able to smear over the walls.

All that was forgotten.

'We live in an empire of mud and weather'—wrote Janice Lee.

2.

The slashed eye of the monocular chapel stares at him from the other side of the grimy window glass. The city is still, deeply rooted in the centre of the earth. It's the kind of city you run *from*, not the kind of city you run *across*. He is the one who remembers the untold story, the one who listens to the grey silence screamed by the crushed beasts. While sipping his coffee, he fantasizes about becoming a necromancer and bringing monsters back from death. He dreams of godzillating the town: crushing cars and skulls and trees and houses. Dust to rust. The sky is a greasy low ceiling, made of goo, just an indistinguishable extension of the warped and dull and miserable land. He misses the feeling of her weight on his chest—*her weight*, maybe the liquid pressure of her skin on his skin, maybe her warm sweet-and-salty sweat as a membrane of sea water flowing like a tiny flat tide between his and her body. His illusion is now just to lay still beneath her heavy flesh until his joints and muscles begin to hurt. Just the pressure and the pain, and nothing else. There's nothing like being enlegged by her mediterranean cities of white marble.

Nothing else matters, says the song.

When the enemies left the still city, they buried radioactive debris under the pavement to slowly burn the feet of its inhabitants.
When he was young, he was a pulsating black hole. A computer moon buried in dewy jelly. A naught surrounded by a universe wanting—perhaps pretending—to collapse onto him. His body

was constructed with nanosize bits from that same selection of the cosmos that was destroying him—*the outside*. Booze, new drugs, old books, boys and girls he was fucking…All the elements, the bits; all the universe's demons rashing and competing against each other to occupy the void. They eventually abandoned his inner space while he was growing up—exorcised from his hollow flesh with every ejaculation, with every vomit, with every nosebleed—leaving, nonetheless, some traceable imprints of their presence in the void until the void started to collapse over itself.

Now, after a long battle, he believes to finally own his anti-body, and ongoing destruction comes autoimmunely from the inside, from the inner mirror side of naught. Every time a demon managed to leave the void, the void emitted light. Then, for a second, he became visible, viable, a true phenomenon, superimposed to reality like a Pokémon.

Dust against the machine—it's chalk, it's sand, it's ice.

Ashes from a lost life—stardust is, in fact, a gas, swirling, a lost gaseous world that was a father's world. It's a death-city where people wear stone—he's cold, but tombstones are his clothes—due to their failure in having thrown some sand on the brain. It's b-rain, it's blood.

There are sand and ashes in the machine.

In the machine, every word is made of pixel dust and blown away by the swirling gas coming from disintegrated stars, never ever cracking the mistaken mystery of the world, the crashing world he wrongly chose to be himself, just to be chalk and dust in the machine.
He's seen the greatest minds of his generation bored to death,

asphyxiated by ridiculous institutions, wandering the social media labyrinthoids in search of a quantum of meaning, masturbating to the screen's visual white noise of polished pixel dust, crystals of b-rain to keep him running as fast as possible over the cracked screens of life.

3.

They met for the first time during one of those unusual visibility events: *I can only see you when you're orgasming*, she whispered. He jerked off for her visual pleasure. She wasn't visible most of the time either, which was fine for him. More often they weren't able to see each other, they just felt some gravitational-attraction pulses directed towards a particular location of the invisible-out-there. Touching was like the clashing of two clouds: confusing, humid, gaseous and electric. He licked her with perfect parsimony to make her almost visible—a fluctuating white-noise shadow like a Hollywood ghost. Like an intermittent reflection on a dewy mirror under a throbbing neon light. They buzzed and glitched the observer's perception systems while somehow haunting the house. When they fucked, a vibrating protoplasm acquired form on the bed, on the couch, a misty blanket floating a couple of inches over the living room's wooden floor. They were faithful to multiple and different savage dimensions. Possessed by a succession of objects in order to acquire temporal corporeality. Invisible to each other, most of the time, but each one longing to become visible to the other. They were beautiful when perceivable and then they were gone.

They grew hard, thick, solid, filled with the world's debris. Their waste-stuffed bodies were eating them from their hollow intestines. As time went by, they became more easily perceivable. They tried to get rid of the debris by acupuncturing each other in rooms full

of candlelight and essential oils, but it didn't work. They remained visible for longer times and it was boring, and only pain could made them disappear again after a while, so they hurt each other with fire and lashes. But as soon as pain melted into pleasure they became solid and opaque again, so they sat separately, crying transparent tears of transparent xanthan gum.

4.

He never sleeps well at night. He looks so pale! If he could be true to himself, he'd vanish, he'd collapse into information … *forever*. Uncoloured like a broken zero, like the theoretical in-between of quantum states. In-between morphospaces.

Insects become translucent-white during metamorphosis—don't they? She doesn't want to lose him—even though neither of them know very well what they mean to each other.

Presence: it should be enough.

Absence kills the brain.

Has this skin been ever burned by the sun? Long ago, perhaps. It was another dimension, not just a former life. Extinct life forms. Monumental fossils. A lost realm of old cheap paperback editions, itching vegetal blade cuts and cigarette burns, boys and girls waving towards the drunken boats from the abrupt dark-grey rocky shore, diving in the cold and salty waters. Orbited in the water by evanescent sea snakes and phosphorescent plankton. Swimming by night among the Tesla lightnings of dinoflagellates. He never quit smoking or masturbating, keeping himself connected to the mental dinosaurs from that lost teenage world. She is younger, she must have been a toddler back then. Before mobile devices, not

even a reliable phone number during summer vacations; just the books, the grains of sand between the pages, just the water, just the misty freezing reverberation of sunset, the hour of eclosion, the night dropping its veil of light, the cloudwall like a cotton pad over the bleeding neck of a beheaded god, just the pleasure of licking salty goosebumps on a girl's leg. Just the aura of the burnt golden sea around the naked bodies. She's a tree, he's an epiphyte. Do they live in a venetian internet? When did sex become a problem? Is it a problem at all? It seemed to be fine when they were regularly fucking, and it seems to be fine now after they stopped almost a year ago. She thinks he never really believed it would be possible to be living together, that he would go crazy and would start screwing around and finally leave. He dreams of gardens.

Town people dream of gardens where burying their pet's bones, eventually their children's.

He doesn't understand the urge to own land. Land is just dirt. And grass, and worms, and bugs, and plants, and trees…. He doesn't understand how those things could ever be owned. Land that has been conquered and shed with blood and exchanged for money and seized again and inherited and given as dowry and sold again.

Legacy.

Every funeral is a cannibal act. A reading of minds. A nanodust-bleeding crackline on the silky screen of time. Never mind if [they] devour the corpse or the corpse renounces to the kind gesture of devouring them. The [he] the [object] hopelessly waiting for a watt-less fuck under the dim glow of low-intensity lightbulbs and air-pixelating TV white noise, light hissing on the mirror's surface, a moth, mechanically, repeatedly trying to collapse into the other

side of itself. The air is old black-and-white TV hiding from light. Clean clothes lay on a chair. She dreams of cities—of a warm comfortable house in a megalopolis covered by snow. She dreams of being other, of being somewhere else.

Woundaries.

He spent most of his young age lost somewhere in the future.

In some [fortunate] places the past is just a fine powder that might be dusted by the winds of future, where dry bones may be easily crushed just by walking on them. In the still city, however, the past is a heavy and soaked tombstone: He learned from her that *truth* doesn't matter when you approach the past; the only thing that matters is *weight*. Maybe this is the reason why he misses her weight.

The most obvious, albeit improbable explanation of the objects' presence was time travel. This was initially discarded as irrational, specially because she wanted to avoid making public that they might be the victims of a hoax. Her colleagues, however, were very inclined to call the press immediately—they were picturing the headlines: "first evidence of time travel discovered by…", but she was much more conscious of her reputation. Reputation is a currency for the non-rich. People who are very conscious of their reputation often consider a black market.

When they first started thinking about time travel, they did it in the popular, fictional way: people coming from a future civilization, carrying with them some objects that might have been left behind. This could explain the iPhone and the prosthetic hand, but who would travel to the past with an oversized toy doll? A family from

the future on vacations in the middle ages? One of her colleagues proposed an alternative explanation: why should we always think about people travelling in time? Why should the objects be leftovers instead of protagonists? Time travel might pose many risks to living beings, but it could be much easier for inanimate matter. This was equally unlikely, but it somehow seemed a more rational approach. Maybe the result of an experiment designed to send things across time? But if any future civilization will find the way to send stuff back to the past, why has nobody found evidences of future objects before? She imagined a future engineer working on a way to get rid of disposable junk: let's just flood our stupid ancestors with our trash! Of course, there are all those temporal paradoxes and causal loops that might have stopped him, which could be the reason why he made just one experiment, or very few ones, and, despite the technological possibility, he finally decided to abort the project.

When did sex become a problem? Is it a problem?

From the first time she warned him that she would never cope, that nothing would be granted, that he would have to seize her every time.

Forcefully.
Uncomfortably.

Bodies are a lot more that candy genitalia. Bodies are tiny time-points in an ever-changing morphospace. Sex is the digital version of a much more complex body-to-body-to-non-body communication network. Sex could be just stored in a hard disk, or somewhere in the cloud, leaving it there until new software has been implemented.

Software, however, has never been updated.

She doesn't understand the desire to own a body. Bodies are dirt, hair, bugs, blood, thoughts… She doesn't understand how these things could ever be *self*—not to say *shared*. Her flesh—that has been conquered and shed with blood and exchanged for comfort and chocolate and peace and dreams.

5.

He can't recall recalling his first time. Not to recall recalling is supposed to be weird. This kind of stuff is expected to draw emotions and to be emojified somewhere into the body of the self—preferably close to its outer surface like scabies or tattoo ink. He does remember, from past dust, abstract-expressionist mats of wet hair and bloodstains and wet wool pullovers and tiny shining corneas. Some of them might have belonged to the hypothetical first one—he might even be right if randomly bricolaging a candidate. Riddle as past. Decyphering previous propensity codes that shape the present network of brain cells.

He does recall some encounters with a woman in particular—what he cannot remember is her placement in a specifically databased chronological order, if any of the encounters he is capable of picturing happened as part of a logical sequence of events or if he has precisely forgotten the first one because others were more intense or fun. He doesn't see the reason why sexual inception should be of particular interest. Love is not an action but an environment, a particular arrangement of reasons growing from a particular arrangement of things. Love is neither action nor pathos—it is, in fact, a variant of boredom, a conscious refusal to be *entertained*. He can neither remember the first novel he read, or the first time he got drunk. He can't usually remember the order

of things—but *are* things *ordered* anyway?— what happened before and what came later. Why is [sequential] order important? He feels/thinks about his life as a turbulent flow rather than a sucession of events. A cycle, like the blood circulating across the body, continuously looping nowhere. For most people, sex encounters are like transfusions, but for him they're bleeding, a way to melt into something more eager to drip. Fluids go effortlessly everywhere, slaves to gravity, never caring about when they were before or where they will be later. *Solve et coagula*.

Then, the most important thing to investigate would be when (in the future) the objects were time-transferred to when (in the past). Have they've been there for centuries, for millennia, before one filthy beast was transformed into a chapel? Buried under the dark soil of the woods? Or did they appear one thousand years ago? Or maybe last month, or last week…? Is time-transferring one-directional—for instance, always to the past—or multi-directional, and in that case, does it require matter exchange? Could the (future) objects substitute (past) stuff, such as someone in the future sending back the objects and receiving some pounds of mud in exchange, so the objects could be delivered anywhere assuming (Eureka!) they would dis-time exactly the same volume of matter?

She, however, guesses it all depends on the person who forgets or remembers. Liquid people's memory spills everywhere, turning itself into environment, and their remembrances are a knock on the door of an empty cabin.

He always liked old, recycled, used clothes, long before vintage was a fad. Specially black clothes. He remembers when almost everybody was wearing black, with that eclectic style mix that characterized the version of afterpunk that managed to arrive to

his country. Hiding from everybody, they arrived to the seashore, where sea monsters once emerged, from where they slithered to the hermit's hut. It was wintertime and there was only wind. Wind blowing up foam, not a horizon ahead but a fog wall. When future is not imagined, memories are not recorded. What keeps the REC button pressed is the belief that there will be a future from which the present will be remembered. Sand and clouds and water and wind were the same thing. A cinnamon-colored dog was looking from a corner, but he was not looking at them.

6.

He had been dancing at the disco. He was barely visible. He was recovering his breath leaning on a pillar when an unknown girl just jumped on him. He didn't see her approaching him, and he was unable to see her face during a long, asphyxiating kiss under her long soaked hair. Like he had been wrapped in a wet blanket. Hooded like a man sentenced to death while his mouth was being drilled by a muscled mollusk. It was raining hard when they went out to smoke a joint. He hates the rain, but he remembers she was turned on by rain because it reminded her of Rimbaud. She also wore black, or very dark blue, and she never put any underwear on. Now he thinks of her as one of those dripping-wet glitched Japanese ghosts emerging in the form of white noise from the TV or the bathtub. Student apartments were often cold, humid, uncomfortable and utterly disordered. Mold stains on ceilings switched shape and color as if every house grew its own clouds, its own ameboid god. He remembers being threatened by monsters. Students burned sweet brandy and drank it to fight the winter cold. They shared stolen drinks in the disco. Moss grew on old stone houses' facades. Rhododendra on balconies. Moss, mold, stone and paint talked to each other in their own language of mutually assured destruction.

But then, what if time travel is a rare spontaneous phenomenon occurring without human intervention? What if chronotaxia is a physical property of some particular objects, or some particular locations, or some particular times? What if it hasn't been detected before because who would care if some non-human-related inorganic stuff such as a stone, a few gallons of water or some cubic feet of nitrogen had ever arrived from another time?

Never mind to wait.

She had been living abroad and mothered a child.

All was unexpected.

One of these occasions you jump into the void to realize the other person was just expecting you to follow your desire. Maybe she wasn't wanting him, just wanting to be wanted. There was weed and rice and coffee and a few poetry books at her place, and many vinyl records and posters on the walls and dried blood drops in the bathroom. No memory, no pictures, no representation of pleasure. Joy always happens on the B-side of remembrance.

7.

They had chosen the past for very different reasons. For him, the past was a game—an approach that, depending on her mood, amused or infuriated her. For him, everything was a child's play, and the only unavoidable requirement to keep playing, as any toddler knows, is a subjectively safe environment. He was unable to take anything seriously except, perhaps, the particular disposition of some random spatial arrangements that helped him to establish that subjectively safe environment. The critical mess. His past was loaded with future. He didn't see disorder, and that

was another reason why he couldn't remember anything from his past—or from their shared past—in an orderly way. Only professional players and some committed amateurs, remember the details of previous play. How he managed to keep his job as a teacher was a complete mystery to her until she realized that he had that extraordinary memory for books. Books were part of his daydreams but, unlike other daydreams that were continuously appearing and disappearing, allowing him to happily contradict himself in a question of seconds, what he obtained from books was a specifically structured world so that, although considered as another portion of his imagination, although never taking the historical records as facts but as thoroughly malleable fiction, he was able to present books in an entertaining way—something he rarely did with personal experiences. Maybe the gap opened itself between different concepts of experience. For her, experience was a serious thing, something to be cherished and cared for and curated: there were essentially good experiences and essentially bad experiences. Experiences became her—you are what you eat, you are what happens to you, you are what you unearth. But for him, experiences were also toys, people were also toys, pain and happiness and despair and death were also toys, so they could be whimsically loaded with diverse emotional and symbolic charges at will. His way to stand life was to transform anything into a delirious game, including himself, including her. She wouldn't understand how he could be so responsible and so irresponsible at the same time. He wouldn't understand how she could be so engaged, so serious, with such trivialities. What was for her an obstacle to overcome, was another piece on the tableboard for him. If he was able to see the world with that sharpness he would certainly be terrified. So she knew she couldn't ask him about the future objects because he would understand their presence as something natural, like if a green alien or a flaming demon just appeared in the middle of the room. It's not that he would refuse

to find a rational explanation, but that searching for a rational explanation wouldn't be the first thing to do. It probably wouldn't be the second thing to do. For him, the future was mixed with the past, so the objects' chronophoresis was not shattering his world in any way. He would just keep lying down in his voluptuous ennui, as trying to rule the world with a telekinetic superpower. And he would say something like the objects are a clear evidence of the existence of a post-techno-capitalist leisure middle class developed from the unemployed masses for whom some abstract machine will be covering their basic necessities, so property will be meaningless and they will focus on communication (the iPhone), entertainment (the doll), and enhancement (the hand). At the end, he would sound as a regular historian, producing narratives to preserve the present by protecting the past from future's influence. And she would think, fuck you, you always have to have the last word.

She walks away from the couch, stamping sweaty footprints on the floorboard and leaving a tingling vibration in the wood that spreads like a scent through the cold air. Time is a crystalline construction seen through occult windows of life. Left to the past, sex becomes an obsolete skeuomorph. Be jewelled by numbers! he mutters—echoing the sequence of her perambulation until the room absorbs all the fluttering sounds and she vanishes like the photograph of an argentine greyscale ghost. Is a dead star still a star? Is a shining star hydrogen plasma, or is it the light travelling across spacetime? She turns back to him. He's reading, or pretending to read. All the objects she had previouly unearthed were pieces in a puzzle, things that could become tiny details in networks or narratives. Lantern-fishes lost in the abyssal depths but sparkling anyway. Inserting their existence somewhere—a museum, a journal, a hidden corner of the mechanoic city—produced a vaguely disturbing meaning beyond their own presence in the here

and now. Even unusual gadgets such as the tin bird were perfectly fitting into an accepted model of the past. The products of her last excavation, however, couldn't be interjected in any preexistent context, they were existing by themselves, as an indirect proof of *something* that *might*have happened—that something *will have happened*. Yesterday, she washed them carefully in the bathtub and placed them in her studio room over a blanket. As an evidence of the present existence of a future, at least a near one. Humans weren't going to be extinct tomorrow. Or maybe humans will vanish and intelligent machines will start disposing human trash in the past bin. She understood that she wouldn't be able to obtain any *proper* knowledge from the objects. She understands that she will never be able to live in the still city but she will never cross the cloudwall. The past is broken, he says, we can't hold on to it. Let's fill the cavernous diseased holes of memory with sink water and molten silicon. Fake or not, to her, the objects must be art. Put a frame around them. Real or not, their shared endurance would be love. He wouldn't dare to touch her. I can't see you, make yourself visible to me, please, she says. She's packing the objects carefully. She's sending them beyond the cloudwall, to a laboratory in America. Let's see what they can find.

'I open shafts, I expose categories, minerals. I slit face-mouths, open wounds that heal on the other side of time,' wrote Aase Berg.

—originally published in *Numéro Cinq* (VII, 10: Oct 2016)

Natani Notah
Impact Series

My current art practice explores contemporary Native American identity through the lens of Diné (Navajo) womanhood. Inspired by acts of decolonization, environmental justice, Indigenous feminism, and Indigenous futurism, my work dares to imagine a world where Native sensibilities are magnified. By way of fragmented abstraction, bodily scale, and the marrying of natural and synthetic materials, my work provokes conversations about what it means to be a colonized individual in present-day United States of America. Additionally, drawing upon minimal forms derived from Diné symbolism, my sculptures, installations, and performances become living bodies of sharp resistance to assimilation.

The Impact series of sculptures explore the impacts of colonization and the collision of indigenous and western cultures and ideologies. In the studio I consistently incorporate discarded and found objects as a way to respond to the historical traumas of displacement and exploitation of Native American communities since 1492. The process of assembling disparate pieces together functions as a generative metaphor for collective healing and reconciliation. Supported by research into historical trauma, the disproportionate rates of violence against Indigenous women and girls, plus the high rates of suicide across Indian country, my work conceptually challenges dominant, colonial ideologies by inserting a female, Native American perspective back into the mainstream. In an effort to imagine decolonial futures, I often pair unexpected elements together and include Native beadwork, leatherwork, and fiber to complicate our understanding of inherited tradition and value. Through my interdisciplinary art practice, I aim to braid together our communal stories of loss and survival to promote understanding and respect across cultural divides.

Shimá's Shoulder, 2017, found car fragment, adorned with leather fringe, 2' x 3'. Notes on translation: Shimá means "my mother" in Diné Bizaad (the Navajo language).

Shádí's Shield, 2017, found car fragment, adorned with leather fringe, 36" x 18" x 5".
Notes on translation: Shádí means "my older sister" in Diné Bizaad (the Navajo language).

In the Trenches, 2018, found car fragment and deconstructed leather trench coat, 108'' x 18'' x 74''.

Don't Bump Her, 2018, found car bumper and deconstructed leather coat, 40'' x 42''.

Untitled, 2017, found car fragment, adorned with leather fringe, 1' x 1.5'.

Shich'é'é's Shell, 2017, found car fragment, adorned with leather fringe, 3.5' x 4.5'.
Notes on translation: Shich'é'é means "my daughter" (female speaking) in Diné Bizaad (the Navajo language).

He Called Her a Harpy, 2018, found car fragment, adorned with leather, cotton, and acrylics, dimensions variable.

And Now His Ears Are Burning, 2018, found car fragment, adorned with leather, cotton, and acrylics, dimensions variable.

Impact Series installation shot.

Julia Bloch

The Queer Time of *The Desires of Mothers to Please Others in Letters*

You sounded so vulnerable because you said things so transparently, like a letter to everyone
—Bernadette Mayer, *The Desires of Mothers to Please Others in Letters*

In her 2001 book *Plot*, Claudia Rankine likens the desire to conceive a child to the desire for narrative: she writes, "The drive in utero is fiction-filled."[1] The word *fiction* here surely means what is imagined, but also means narrative itself, the representation of event sequence, causes and effects linked or fractured, conventions of story form. Rankine's coining of fertility as the narrative of projected desires anticipates some elements of critical discourse around reproductive futurity, or the queer polemic against heteronormative political discourse that positions the child as emblem of a future worth inhabiting. Few works of poetry constellate the desirous affects and narrative pitfalls of reproductive futurity as vividly as *Plot*; among them is the fertility narrative in Bernadette Mayer's 1994 epistolary long poem *The Desires of Mothers to Please Others in Letters*. As a work adjacent to, not quite of but affiliated with, the queer temporalities of the New Narrative movement, *Desires* can be read as a kind of sideways articulation of queer temporality.

What I mean by queer temporality manifests in a New Narrative work like Dodie Bellamy's time-traveling 1998 epistolary work *Letters of Mina Harker*, printed by the same publisher that originally put out Mayer's *Desires*: Hard Press. In Bellamy's book, Dracula's secretary stalker, Mina Harker, surfaces in grimy, polyamorous, contemporary San Francisco's South of Market alleyways and living rooms to declare that "The monstrous and the formless have as much right as anybody else"[2] to tell a story. One of the first stories in *Mina Harker* is about the time Mina went to get an

abortion but went to the bathroom first and then started spotting, which means, she realizes, "now I don't have to make any decisions, I can just be me, Mina Harker *an artist in the age of mechanical reproduction*"—Mina, her uterus cleaned and empty, can now play the dead one in Foucault's theory of the death of the author, freed from mortality in Benjamin's formulation of art's aura, at last loosed from the burden of being figured as woman or author, left finally simply to be author-function. And yet she also voices what it feels like to be an author-function, so she's still stuck, in a way, as when she goes on to wonder, "could this cervix *my* cervix really dilate to the size of a softball, push out a skull full of god knows what brains *first a softball, what next, the world?*"[3] Mina ironizes the world-making clichés of pregnancy and childbirth, revealing them as monstrous and overdetermined as any other narrative that governs the female body. In skewering those narratives, she acknowledges the ideological function of the author—while somehow also making room for her narrator's curiosities around kinship and desire.

The unresolved contradictions and contractions at this intersection of narrative voice, time, and reproduction are likewise as wildly reflexive in a passage like this one in Mayer's *Desires*:

> [W]hen you're pregnant your cervix is supposed to be blue but I think that's something new, no one ever told me that before, in fact I never knew till Shelley told me you were supposed to mimic your cervix when you put the diaphragm in, I do find it and cover it like a water tower, plant trees to disrupt the shadow of it, it means neck, the bladder has a cervix too, but doctors say something about the tip of the nose to describe one, that's as it's reputed to feel, cartilaginous I guess. Straight information about the shadow problem is one of the greatest difficulties we have as women. […] At the same time anger is unlike Claire. Secretly I don't want to have anything. Except this knowledge to translate the golden shadow you can't see into that cast by a known but

> otherwise concealed target. Like deciding you are gonna both stay up late and get up early, boy Bill was voluble.[4]

Less overtly monstrous than *Mina Harker*, maybe, Mayer's speaker still acknowledges the "shadow problem" of fertility's obfuscation and wrestles with its effects on a contested subjectivity. Mayer first converts the image of the cervix, lauded fleshy element in the vocabulary of fertility, into something both strange and familiar: the female body occluded by medicine. Then she converts this poem into a deliberation on emotion, dispersing individual affect into a network of the social: Shelley's counsel, Claire's lack of anger, Bill's volubility.

Later on this passage, a deliberation on the unit of the poetic line constellates pregnancy, time, and form, conflating the narrative lines of experience with the lines of the writing:

> Our life is pretty dull and what'll we do if we're pregnant, not only that we don't have any money, not even enough to make us feel good, I mean to do things to make us feel good and Lewis doesn't. He wants to go to the ocean, he hasn't seen it in five years, he's landlocked, there is disruption of outline, it is conspicuous. I try to tell him it is just as bad as no disruption and the business of disrupting this outline is then of great importance but the shapes are too definite and worthy of attack, he says, I see four years or maybe five more of infancy, pins, strollers, backpacks, outbursts if we have to have another baby, that takes up too much lack of harmony because we learn that the baby cries if we live like nature, that is in the disorder in which we love. But using lines not in harmony with the shape we disrupt our shape better.
>
> […]

> We know these lines of language are still a camouflage and we will only define and accentuate just what we want to hide! Half-close your eyes and you will see it. I'm sorry but I can only love you in this disruptive pattern, why I don't know.[5]

As the speaker argues with her lover about the disruption a new baby will wreak on the narratives of daily life, the "outline" of that dailiness gets conflated with the "lines of language" we are now reading: "this disruptive pattern" could be both the possibility of pregnancy (soon to be a reality) and this text itself, which wrestles over and over with how to represent temporal experience. And the text stages an argument for a new kind of narrative, one in which we might find ourselves "using lines not in harmony with the shape we disrupt our shape better." We write against the shapes given to us, and we must work out how to disrupt better.

These are works that bend time in order to exploit the time-bending capacities of epistolary form, a form that Laynie Browne in her introduction to the new edition of *Desires* calls "the form that includes everything."[6] Both *Mina* and *Desires* align with what Robert Glück describes as the information-saturated mode of New Narrative writing: "transgressive writing," as he puts it in "Long Note on New Narrative," "shocks by articulating the present, the one thing impossible to put into words, because a language does not yet exist to describe the present."[7] Epistolary form, even or especially when crossing historical time, shocks and bores with its quotidian immediacy, its impossible presentness. Embedded in its approach to time is epistolarity's tendency to make the self fully present and public, as Mary Burger suggests in her description of narrative as the thing that reveals personhood to be a kind of truth in fiction:

> Narrative meant that you could be a person having experiences and you could admit and affirm in writing that you, the writer, had experiences and thought about them and the meaning of them; that personhood itself, if a fiction, was no less useful for

> not being 'true'; that in fact its very artifice made it a fruitful literary conceit; and that all this—the being, the experiencing, the thinking, the meaning, the artifice—could be the stuff of your work.[8]

The New Narrative investment in "tools for exploring being in time," as Burger puts it, gave rise to a number of works that deployed immersive, sustained forms that test a reader's capacity for duration. Much of Mayer's work, from *Memory* to works that follow *Midwinter Day*, uses the long form, a poem that looks like prose, to chronicle, dramatize, or otherwise register how the materiality of language shapes being in time. In *Studying Hunger*, which she wrote in 1974 while in Freudian psychoanalysis,[9] Mayer expresses an early desire to record immediacy by way of an encyclopedic approach to her daily experiences:

> I had an idea before this that if a human, a writer, could come up with a workable code, or shorthand, for the transcription of every event, every motion, every transition of his or her own mind, & could perform this process of translation on himself, using the code, for a 24-hour period, he or we or someone could come up with a great piece of language/information.[10]

Mayer's procedures conform to strictly bounded units of time: the daylong clock of *Midwinter Day*, the month-long clock of Memory, and the nine-month-long clock of *The Desires of Mothers to Please Others in Letters*. In a 1985 interview, Mayer indicates the neoclassical impulses driving her self-described "obsession with time sequences":

> In one of the Egyptian myths someone, a god no doubt, gets into a boat with his scribe to study the twelve hours of the day and he spends an hour in each. That's a beautiful thought. And that form, then, would interweave.[11]

Mayer suggests a Mallarméan impulse behind her poems' efforts to catalog and contain the world. Her formal experiments both obey highly defined time constraints and exploit the way duration makes room for error and diversion: the effect is almost a sort of "poetry in real time," as a film shot in narratological real time draws our attention to the minute particulars of each individual moment. In choosing a month to shape *Memory*, Mayer suggests the synodic period or phase of the moon. In pairing long-poem form with the shortest day of the year in *Midwinter Day*, Mayer enlarges short time. And in the nine-month structure of *Desires*, Mayer both inhabits and launches a critique of the cultural narratives of reproduction and future-time. Mayer also revels in the ordinary and the banal, food shopping, filling the car with gas, friends coming over for cigarettes and beer, shaving your armpits. The banal is a hallmark of duration, and of queer temporality, or what Elizabeth Freeman describes as a "not-quite-queer-enough longing for form that turns us backward to prior moments, forward to embarrassing utopias, sideways to forms of being and belonging that seem, on the face of it, completely banal."[12]

Here I feel I should say *Desires*, even with its embrace of banality, its durational presence, and its torquing of subjectivity, is not necessarily a queer text. Even if queer theories of futurity are a useful way to read its uses of temporality, at the center of this book lies a heterosexual family unit. Although queerness is present in the text, it may be that *Desires*' temporality ultimately is locked into the conventions of reproductive futurity; the book does, after all, completely end with the baby's birth, as if its errors in time suddenly ceased. And in this way *Desires* reminds me of one of the puzzling failures of queer imagination in Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*, which also locks shut once the baby is born, future apparently achieved. As a contrast, consider the recombinatory procedures that thwart reproductive narrative endgames in work by Margaret Christakos or Amy Sara Carroll or Claudia Rankine.[13]

Rather than read *Desires* as a love letter to the world welcoming the baby-as-future-as-ending, I want to end this discussion by dwelling on a moment at which this ending is forestalled. Mayer conflates language-form with human-form in a passage that confronts fertility's tendencies to perpetuate and delay time's endings:

> I needed this time to not have to think of every word in a smaller kind of structure, it's queer to be studying though. Like the books like romantic women I might accumulate images of while I'm pregnant to accommodate a form for these daughters that will permit me to be smart about it. I had learned that sex had been driven to be, and this is just me, a reassurance of survival in the recognizing face with love and the body overwhelmed together practicing with another person as a presence and as what we know so that it was easy to say after that it's a relief to go on, I don't mean you'd be glad it's over but that you didn't have to be concerned with ending then and you were sure you existed, a hangover. But not death either. […] [A]nd so you are always waiting while opposite sits like Persephone's rape and Demeter's consequent invention of beer, the face of nothing between two windows, fear of every dimension. I'd better stop this.[14]

With "I'd better stop this" Mayer's speaker halts her obsession with time, worrying what would happen if a body never ceased to be pregnant or mortal, acknowledges the "queer" strangeness of a writing practice that looks like study, and lobs a deadpan rendering of one of our great myths of reproductive futurity, Demeter and Persephone, and its overbearing influence upon our modern approaches to fertility and female sociality (Demeter presides over sacred cycles of life and death, and gives us the grain that gives us beer). To quote Rankine again: "Why birth the other. to watch the seam rip."[15] A reflexive poetics—one in which, as Mayer tells us in the same passage quoted, above, "I love telling about the form of things"—can bring the seams between selves into greater relief. A

number of theorists have complicated the critical antisocial turn against reproduction for queer life by suggesting how we might regard futurity as a divergent sort of queer politics rather than as an inevitable end of heteronormativity. We would do well to attend to the contours of narrative in a work like *Desires* as we contemplate such a politics.

—originally presented on the "Affiliations of Desire" panel at the Communal Presence: New Narrative Writing Today conference, UC-Berkeley, 2017

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[1] Claudia Rankine, *Plot* (New York: Grove Press, 2001), 5.

[2] Dodie Bellamy, *The Letters of Mina Harker* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004), 10.

[3] Bellamy, *The Letters of Mina Harker*, 31. Italics in original.

[4] Bernadette Mayer, *The Desires of Mothers to Please Others in Letters* (Washington, DC: SplitLevel Texts; New York: Nightboat Books, 2017), 41.

[5] Mayer, *Desires*, 42.

[6] Laynie Browne, "Introduction" to Mayer, *Desires*, 10.

[7] Robert Glück, "Long Note on New Narrative," in *Biting the Error: Writers Explore Narrative*, ed. Mary Burger, Robert Glück, Camille Roy, and Gail Scott (Toronto: Coach House, 2005), 31.

[8] Mary Burger, "Introduction," in Burger et al., *Biting the Error*, 9.

[9] Peter Baker, "Bernadette Mayer," in *American Poets Since World War II*, ed. Joseph Conte (Detroit: Thomson Gale, 1996), 168.

[10] Mayer, *Studying Hunger* (Bolinas: Big Sky, 1975), 7.

[11] Mayer, interview with Anne Rower, in *Bench Press Series on Art: Interviews with Contemporary Writers and Artists*, ed. Madeleine Keller (New York: Bench Press, 1985), 3.

[12] Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), xiii.

[13] In addition to Rankine's *Plot*, see Margaret Christakos's *The Moment Coming* (Toronto: ECW Press, 1998) or Amy Sara Carroll's *Fannie + Freddie: The Sentimentality of Post-9/11 Pornography* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013).

[14] Mayer, *Desires*, 52.

[15] Rankine, *Plot*, 5.

Robert Glück
The Passion According to G.H.

The topic of this panel was strategized, I suppose, to make it easy on us panelists, and perhaps also hard for us to decline—at least that's how I feel. I detest writing papers because whenever I sit down to write I start at zero, and it's really too much psychic expense. Instead of plucking ideas from a head full of them as though gathering a bouquet or stringing pearls, I see impossibilities. In fact, I am not really interested in my subject—it doesn't hold my attention—until I find a way to place it beyond my capacity to understand and articulate. G.H. says it exactly: "What was happening to me? I shall never be able to understand it, but there must be someone who can. And I shall have to create that someone who can inside myself."

I had been reading Clarice Lispector's *The Passion According to G. H.* for about a year. You could say I am still reading it, since I stopped last May about three pages before the end, and I finished it yesterday because I thought it would be too cute to report on a book I hadn't finished. I read thoroughly before abandoning the book, every sentence at least twice. I felt compelled to underline and to make notes, mostly ideas generated by Lispector's text for the book I am writing now, *About Ed*.

The Passion According to G.H. finished me more than I finished it. It's a drastic book, a take-no-prisoners book, ungainly, with a nervous, laughable plot, dubious psychological insight (G.H. can stand for *gênero humano*—human kind), even more dubious social critique, and amazing sentences—the kind of book I love and aspire to. *The Passion According to G.H.* doesn't exactly come together except to wonder at its own disjuncture. The novel may be the literary form that most conveys empathy, which is a kind of demand. But this is a drastic novel, and as Lispector says, "This book expects nothing of anyone." Right.

I used Lispector's book to set the bar in *About Ed*, a novel and my version of an AIDS memoir. By setting the bar, I mean that there was little distraction in *The Passion According to G.H.* from the mighty sentences that convey Lispector's truth.

In my writing classes, I used to show the students the gnostic gospels, especially *The Gospel of Thomas*. Sometimes I asked Bruce Boone to visit the class and make a presentation about them. Then I gave the students a horrid assignment: Write the truth. Tell me what the truth is. In an MFA workshop sense, it's an extra-literary problem. I left it to them to decide *what* truth, but they had to respond sincerely, without irony or parody. I wanted them to have that experience. Lispector could have been responding to that assignment.

I don't really want to make a book report, but I do need to tell you a few things so we can be on the same page. Clarice Lispector was a Brazilian writer, a Jew, who lived from 1920 to 1977. She became middle class, a wife and mother, and she wrote about that life from the age of nineteen to the end. She was also a journalist and she wrote children's books. *The Passion According to G.H.* was published in 1964; it's from the second half of her work, which is more extreme than the first. Like Gail Scott's heroines, Lispector's are often situated in one place, by an open window, say, or on the floor of the maid's room. The internal monologue is aimed at an absent you, or addressing an inner other, and sometimes the reader. I would compare *The Passion of G.H.* to Gail Scott's *Obituary* in its daring sadness, its structure derived from the brokenness of experience.

The set-up of Lispector's book—addressing parts of the book in quotes to an absent lover—is not really credible because the absent lover never stops being more than that, and the sections addressed to him are no different from the sections not addressed to him. He never steps forward. Meanwhile, Lispector muscles through epistemological problems to arrive at a spirituality that is akin to other such manifestations (Georges Bataille, Zen) but also all its own.

Lispector weaves the chapters together by using the last line of each chapter as a first line the next chapter. Sometimes the result is interesting, more often exasperating. But it does point to the sentence rather than the paragraph.

The maid has quit after six months, her dark-skinned face forgotten after one day, and G.H. ventures into the maid's room, where G.H. perhaps has never been, in order to straighten it up. The room is immaculate, but G.H. discovers that the maid hated her. At least G.H. imagines the maid hated the very qualities G.H. will abandon in that room: sensibility, taste, talent for living, for making arrangements of all kinds. G.H. mysteriously deduces the maid's feeling from some outlines the maid did or didn't draw on the wall of a woman, a man, and a dog. This secondary plot is not developed or resolved. G.H. tries to hitch her spiritual progress to awareness of social evil—but it's only by proximity, like the maid's room, attached to the rest of the house but never entered by her. G.H. comes to understand her own privilege, though when she is pushed to the brink she abandons this notion without conflict, to go further, to the discovery of a non-self and a non-personal spirituality.

In the spotless room, a cockroach half emerges from a wardrobe, and G.H. crushes it with the wardrobe door so that its rear half is flattened by the door and its front half faces outward. Throughout the story white gunk—the cockroach's gut—extrudes from a crack in its shell. G.H. is also pinned to the room, on the floor, held fast by the cockroach. G.H. contemplates the cockroach, and works through versions of impurity. She begins to live in the present. Then she learns about the neutral, and with a jump in scale, sees the neutral world—and so she should be neutral to her own death or fate: "And there is also at times the exasperation of the atonal, which is a profound happiness: exasperated atonality is flight rising—nature is exasperated atonality, thus it was that worlds were formed: atonality became exasperated." She is freeing herself from her morality. In this context—she wants to know love and to be touched.

She writes to her lover about tasting the salt in his tears. Perhaps this is a preview, eating the substance of the one who is sought. Silence comes next—that of the neutral cockroach without a name for love or suffering. Its only differentiation in life is that it has to be either male or female. "I had been thinking of it only as female since whatever is caved in at the middle must be female." With an address to her mother, G.H. expels fear and with it the desire to be helped. Now she must let go of her lover's hand in order to return with a love that does not include self, or even the organic—that does not include, accrete, or self-enlarge

"Only in an unexpected rippling of the lines, only in an anomaly in the uninterrupted continuity of my culture, did I for an instant experience life-giving death". 7 (This resembles the *Clinamen*)

"A cockroach is larger than I am because its life is so given over to *Him* (God) that it comes from the infinite and moves toward the infinite unperceivingly, it never becomes discontinuous" (which resembles Bataille, even the vocabulary). On page eighty-nine someone new appears, an appearance I really have to think about. Someone I don't want, who collects ideas hard to reach, hard to grasp and supplies them with a non-face—God. "I was afraid of God's face, I was afraid of my final nakedness on the wall." Now we see that the ideas being gathered are demonic in Blakean reversal. "For the unexpressive is diabolical. If that person has the courage to leave her feeling behind, she discovers that huge life of an extremely busy silence, the same sort that exists in the cockroach, the same as in the stars, the same as in herself—the demonic is *prior* to the human. And if that person sees that newness, she sings herself, as though she saw God."

Lispector resituates suffering and even martyrdom inside the human, insofar as the human is an animal, and outside of God, though they are things to offer God as unwanted gifts.

This annoys me. There is too much about God. God is described more than her lover: *God is greater than goodness and beauty… I fear that not even God comprehends… Even Christ himself … God is what exists, and all the contradictions are within God, and therefore they don't contradict him.* I am afraid she really is serious about God. I prefer for God to exist as a ghost does, part of the plot so we can feel and think certain things. Perhaps as ecstasy that does not have culmination. "What I speak to God about has to make no sense. If it makes sense, it is because I err."

With God comes hell: "Hell is the mouth that bites and eats living flesh that has blood, and the one eaten howls with delight in his eye: Hell is the pain like pleasure of matter, and with the laughter of delight tears run in pain." God is a profound abyss that re-absorbs everything. A grandiose Indifference.

I felt betrayed. As though G.H. were unfaithful to me. We were doing just fine—what do we need *Him* for? I kept myself from throwing the book across the room. I was taught not to let a book touch the floor in case God's name was written in it—and was it ever! Though religious injunctions and self-irony did not keep me from throwing *Mrs. Dalloway* across a different room at a much earlier date. For a month or so I avoided looking at *The Passion of G.H.* where it sat by my bed. Then I wondered, Must I feel betrayal in order to recognize myself in the story of faith?

I suppose in any ghost story—even one about the Holy Ghost—the least important thing is my belief in ghosts. The important things are what we need from the story: terror, the unwanted knowledge of the ease with which the sentient and the inorganic change places. Perhaps there are two kinds of belief; the first is undoubtedly bound up in a story, the second attempts to negate story itself. Of course we assume the later is more authentic because it is impossible to achieve with a conscious mind, or, let's say, a finite mind. "All sudden understanding is in the last analysis the revelation of a clear non-understanding."

Obviously we need whole arsenals to repress the knowledge that the world wants us to become the world. Rejecting the knowledge that Ed had stopped being human, animal, cellular, living, organic, was self-preservation in the purist form. Lispector's vision of the future is very close to Ed's—"In a hundred thousand years—we finally won't be what we feel and think anymore: we shall have something that more closely resembles an 'attitude' than an idea. We shall be living matter manifesting itself directly, unmindful of words, going beyond always-grotesque thinking." Lispector cautions me to be wary of beauty—it's a distraction; and she chastens me—don't reject the tedium of love, the drabness of illness. Perhaps I have prepared for Lispector's book all my life—the morbidly good girl scrubbing my smudged fingerprints off the void.

When I was a lot younger, for a brief time, my life-plan was to become a Catholic saint. I wonder if my almost complete isolation reduces a little the pretentiousness of my plan. I started reading mystical texts in preparation. These texts were written by women for the most part; I took for granted they would be more receptive to the divine—whatever that is—and more porous in general. I reasoned saints have to come from somewhere, even Cleveland Heights, which might equal a Biblical backwater like Bethlehem, and certainly needed an infusion of spirit. Being Jewish was a stumbling block that grew so large it became an impasse. But here is Lispector in the glory of her abjection and ascendency, finding a kind of salvation. Her book has the feel of a 15th century mystical tract, long on meditation and abjection, short on plot. G.H. says, "I am the priestess of a secret that I no longer know." Didn't G.H. retreat to a cell, confining herself during the course of her meditation? Just like the anchoress Julian of Norwich? The title of Julian's book, *Showing of Love, or Revelations of Divine Love*, could be a translation of *The Passion According to G.H.* The object of G.H.'s meditation is not the hyper-reality of god's wounds, but the wounds of a cockroach. "For redemption must be in the thing itself. And the thing itself would be putting into my own mouth the white paste from the cockroach."

Oh no, she's eating the cockroach! She swallows the guts exuding from the wound as a sacrament, a weird vitalism, a non-transubstantiated, materialist host. Consuming is an ancient and common way of becoming, incorporating. This event embarrasses me, it's laughable, our narrator spends the day on the floor of the maid's room, coming to the conclusion—after long hours of existential riffing—that she should eat part of a cockroach. Yet I read it on the edge of my seat, like a ghost story. A horror story, screaming with awareness.

Honestly, you have to wonder how Lispector decided this cockroach-eating story would be a good idea. At what point did she recognize herself in this story, and see that the story could accept everything she needed to put in it—her loss, her despair, her faith—that she could succeed through the power of her sincerity.

Even as Lispector makes the limit of language a theme, she seems to believe that language can convey experience through her strength and sincerity: "But I am going to tell you something that must be said, that must be said." "I am going to tell you what I have never told you before—" She is fearless, or she is afraid and she goes on anyway: being pretentious, writing badly, writing nonsense, the indescribabilia. Her sincerity may be her faith in language, which I like to consider when I think about her. She ends her book with an envoi to language itself, about the power of language at its limit. "I don't understand what I am saying. Therefore, I adore."

I think about Lispector's faith in language. During eras when the paradigm is changing—as it is now—people often feel weak before language and representation. This was true of the late 14th and 15th centuries. People literally did not know how to understand representations, or where they would stop. People felt weak before images. If a married woman wore a white dress, was she a Whore, Lollard, Deceiver of the People? Did it mean that civil war was at hand, or the end of the world? Then we had

better burn her. When I encounter shrill and toxic discourse on social media, I am reminded of the 15th century, and also how far we have come from Lispector's confidence and the trust.

—originally presented at the Communal Presence: New Narrative Writing Today conference, UC-Berkeley, 2017.

Rob Halpern

"The Lucite of Spirit Congealing;" or, "Late Style" in Dennis Cooper & Bruce Boone

Bruce and I were dining at the Cafe Mystique in the Castro when our thoughts drifted hither & thither before assuming the form of a fugue that hovers still in airs whose music prolongs the decay of its sound. I had just been reading *He Sleeps with Angels (Pink Sperm)*, Bruce's unpublished road novel that embraces the culture's degraded cave of dreams and whose amped-up utopian desires revel in a cosmic drag show, an intergalactic extravaganza of the absolute, whose sentences move thru currents of UFOlogy and the transmigration of souls, so it makes sense that I would say something about Bruce's use of iconic names—some seemingly eternal, like Kurt Cobain & Björk, and others nearly forgotten, like Courtney Love—which appear like apparitions across *He Sleeps with Angels*, at once singular avatars & arbitrary ornaments, exploding in a firmament under the intense pressure of imminent heat death, the effect of which is emptiness and form.[1]

I'm not sure if that's what I said exactly, but whatever I did say, Bruce would no doubt take some exception to my rehearsal of it here, tho it doesn't really matter because we were so completely enjoying one another's company, as well as our meal. I was sinking into a hearty lamb stew over saffron rice as Bruce relished his salmon in a light champagne butter when I mentioned the fucked-up thing with Dennis Cooper's blog, which had just been "disappeared" from the internet, and about which I was surprised to learn Bruce had yet to hear a word, and this opened the way for us to talk about Dennis's writing and the fantastic scene that was DC's, the corporate censorship that ruined it, and the violent surveillance state that has become one with our contemporary infrastructures.[2] There's something about Dennis's recent work, I might have said, that I associate with the idea of "late style," you know, Adorno's pet concept, the one he filed specifically

under the proper name of "Beethoven" before it lodged in the padded cell of his own corpus. Having just read *The Marbled Swarm* (2011), I'd been thinking about how Dennis's most recent novel exaggerates, to the point of self-parody, all the moves and tropes he's perfectly honed over so many years of writing, and which, in aggregate, bear the impress of his "mature style." But this only gets me thinking about how Bruce's recent writing does something similar: it too intensifies, instead of subduing, its most idiosyncratic tendencies. In the case of Dennis's work, I might have said, the writing becomes evermore self-conscious, armored, and refined as a stylized performance, while yrs, dear Bruce, becomes more vulnerable, raw, and strangely frayed around the edges. Dennis risks burlesque (which I love) by embellishing his own embellishments, amping-up his own amplifications, and in doing so, he cauterizes the emotional wound—the injury and the longing, the sadness and the tenderness—that gave rise to the violent fantasies occupying the whole of his novelistic imagination, so that books like *The Marbled Swarm*, and even *The Sluts* (2004)—minus the latter's exceptional moment, I add, when Brad the whore confesses in a letter, "I'm just worried you don't love me anymore, because you haven't written that in a while, and that's all I've got to live for right now. So if you could just tell me that you do, that would be cool"—result in a kind of protective shield totally masking what's most defenseless, a scab.[3]

By contrast, I may have said to Bruce, you risk sincerity—you even nourish it as an aesthetic effect, tho never an aesthetic end—in order to make yr desire for genuine social connection more transparent, exposed. So you keep enhancing the stakes of yr direct address—*what do you think, dear reader?, where are you, my friend?, how do you feel, mon semblable?*—laying bare the feigned naiveté of yr writing's calculations to achieve a maximal exposure. I guess what I'm trying to say is that while Dennis masters his style, Bruce abdicates every claim to mastery. As Bruce himself writes on his blog, *A Stele for Jamie*, where his writing finds an ideal form readymade to receive it and a late work in its own right, a year-long public meditation on love & loss and an ongoing elegy for his life partner, the self-taught artist Jamie Holley,

who died of lung cancer in 2009: "The question of honesty or integrity comes down to asking oneself if creative untruths don't consciously realize themselves as such or if the writer is blindsided by what used to be called the unconscious in the process of deforming its own interests."[4]

Maybe it's the collision of creative untruth and distorted interest that results in yr own late style, I suggest, the way artifice collides with sincerity, ornament with innovation, art with ideology, etc., etc., tho surely this could describe the work of any period, but then so too could Adorno's concept, which is terribly imprecise, I say, if not kind of useless beyond its intended object, Beethoven. "The maturity of the late works of significant artists does not resemble the kind one finds in fruit," Adorno writes, "They are, for the most part, not round, but furrowed, even ravaged. Devoid of sweetness, bitter and spiny, they don't surrender themselves to mere taste." Still, I say to Bruce, while late work like yrs may not capitulate to predictable discriminations, it does make itself more vulnerable, not to the organic decay suffered, say, by a kiwi or a peach, but to the degradation of its habitat, vulnerable to readers whose arsenal of hardened discernments & judgements might all-too-carelessly assess or reduce the work simply in order to consume or reject it. Vulnerable, too, to its own opacities & lacunae, its inconsistencies & disjointedness, vulnerable, that is, to its own desire for honest exposure.

That's when I confess to Bruce that I like "late style," both the idea of it as well as the work it is meant to describe, even if the concept is nothing but the philosophical precipitate of Adorno's intense audition of Beethoven, and Beethoven alone. Maybe the concept's just too general, I say. I mean, Adorno argues that an artist's late works don't fall under the sign of "expression"—they are not full-throated revelations of one's inner world, nor programmatic illustrations of experience—rather, they're expressionless and remote, he says, the most intimate and the most impersonal, at once common and strange. But that's how I would describe even Kathy Acker's *earliest* works, wouldn't you?, I go on. And while Adorno is thinking

exclusively about the alien shapes that Beethoven's final works assume—forging new forms, rather than exceeding old ones—I wonder how, after a period characterized as "challenging" or "obdurate," anyone's work might, on the one hand, submit pliantly to dominant aesthetic values, or, on the other, persist obstinately in its opacities without compromise, ushering in the full-blown manifestation of whatever difficulties have always quietly haunted it. The latter can be thought of as an enhanced "doubling down" of an artist's most challenging aesthetic commitments, I say, like what happens in Godard's *Film Socialisme* and *Adieu au langage*, or in Leslie Scalapino's *Floats Horse-Floats or Horse-Flows* and *The Dihedrons Gazelle-Dihedrals Zoom*, and the "late" works of countless others.

By the way, have you read Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus?*, I ask Bruce, wanting to acknowledge where I learned to listen to Beethoven's late compositions before ever reading Adorno, tho it may have well been Adorno I was reading all along—albeit thru a lens that filtered and reduced phrases once rich with nuance to formulaic lozenges, like "a hard aesthetic nut to crack," "a process of alienation and dissolution," "an excess of introspection and speculation," "otherworldly or abstract," "crystal spheres where coldness and heat, repose and ecstasy, are one and the same,"—as Mann himself confesses in an astonishing letter to Adorno from 1945 to have "raided parts of yr writings on the philosophy of music," as if he needed to inject the lectures of his fictional teacher, Kretschmar, with anadrol, like a hamster shredding *The Philosophy of New Music* to insulate its nest.[5] And yet, I own up, I too attended carefully to Kretschmar's lectures while listening to the *Hammerklavier*, and have come to hear in those late compositions, with Adorno's later guidance, something deformed by inhuman forces, something molten or frozen and rendered beyond recognition and so in excess of common experience as to become experience itself, or at least the index of an experience resistant to capture.

Never read it, Bruce replies, should I? No need to bother, I say.

After we toss *Doctor Faustus* to the wind, Bruce tells me how Beethoven's late quartets have become, for him, too excruciatingly painful to listen to *personally*, unless drunk enough to take a bit of the edge off. "I assume Dennis and I both share that as a common aspiration," Bruce says, "to require kinky sex or drugs or zazen or alcohol as the necessary numbing material that alone enables readers to read us now," and while I'm not sure if Bruce's and Dennis's writing share the same edge, I'd wager it's impossible *not* to listen personally, I say, the way musical effects—like the harmonic bridge in Yo La Tengo's "Aleyda," or the opening arpeggio in Galaxy 500's "When Will You Come Home," or the build-up to the reprise in The Cure's "Pictures of You"—arouse the most intimate feelings in me, feelings which seem to have taken up permanent residency in this or that fragment of a sonic pattern, and which may be musically inessential for the integrity of whatever piece but emotionally necessary for the fullness of the feeling it transports, even if the vehicle for that emotion degrades over time into a sentimental bauble, a reliable trigger whose painful truth is only equal to its pleasurable falseness, to which I attach myself all the more intensely. And yet, I tell Bruce, I know these feelings are cheap, decorative details that become fanciful to my ear as they feedback and alter my reception of the whole, turning fragments into haloed ornaments designed by myself to elicit a mood, then stowed away in my musical cabinet of personal kitsch.

But this is not at all what I experience when I listen to Beethoven, I say, whose music remains just strange enough, regardless of how many times I've heard it, to catch my feelings off guard, like it happened just the other day, I was listening to a performance of opus 130 in B-flat major by the Italian String Quartet while cradling my six-week-old daughter when I felt my body suddenly lift off the ground as she and I began to improvise a gigue to the fourth movement's *danza tedesca*, and it was as if I had never heard this music before, as if it weren't already wedded to my ear, as if these passages were just being conjured out of nowhere for the first time, giving me the illusion of spontaneous invention entirely free of composition and played without a score, as if I were hearing these measured phrases for

the first time, passages which have always seemed to me to be the closest approximation to joy of any music I know, but without a lived referent for that joy, my own claim for the *danza tedesca* has always betrayed me just as the feeling I've ascribed to it has remained abstract & enigmatic, until now, as the breezy moves I share with my baby girl, spinning and dipping and circling, become the full embodiment of that elation.

For Adorno, "late works are the catastrophes," shipwrecks in the fractured landscape of history, which remind me of Robert Smithson's "Monuments of Passaic," "ruins in reverse" born strangely as "memory-traces of an abandoned set of futures" (that's Smithson). "This is the opposite of the 'romantic ruin," Smithson writes, because these works "don't fall into ruin after they are built but rather rise into ruin before they are built." Similarly, what Fred Moten describes as "the fits, starts, and lyrical condensation and fragmentation that Adorno associates with the late work of others' are not effects" of the whole's decay, but rather a development for which no whole exists that can adequately account for the surplus enabling it in the first place. Works informed by late style "aren't products of an uninhibited subjectivity," Adorno writes, "or better yet, 'personality', which breaks thru the envelope of form to better express itself, transforming harmony into the dissonance of its suffering," these are rather works that turn their back on a present that has turned its back on them, as if able to sense how the present has already been negated by its future, aborted by a deferred crisis, "a present already abandoned" as tomorrow becomes catastrophically nothing more than an extension of today. And it's against this historical fact that the work can only rage by exploiting the conventions of a form or an instrument—be it the sonata or the piano forte—that captures the energy to endure under adverse conditions, and whose exhaustion those conventions otherwise foretell. Maybe Adorno's conceptualization of late style is nothing more than a philosopher's effort to contain the excessive energy of that rage, I say, by reducing something otherwise irreducible to the known & measured. Moten refers to this fugitive excess as characteristic of "Beethoven's blackness," a subterranean rumor or debunked notion that

Moten invokes to stimulate radical thought about Beethoven's music, not about his race. In other words, I say to Bruce, "Beethoven's blackness," like jazz, can only resist Adorno's effort to contain it philosophically.[6]

Despite the failures of "late style" to account for anything more than the idiosyncrasies, contradictions and anxieties characteristic of Adorno's philosophy of music, and however regressive an idea it might in fact be, I admit to Bruce that I'm always interested in the social and aesthetic trajectories, from early to middle to late, of the writers I love, among whom, of course, I count you, dear Bruce, whose own late style I've been wanting to talk about, but it's our talk about Dennis that opened the floodgate that evening, as Bruce was still thinking about him more than himself. And so, we go on gabbing about Dennis's prose and how it becomes so attenuated from one novel to the next, giving in at last to the laconic seductions of online chat rooms and instant messaging in *The Sluts* (2004), whose clipped abbreviations suggest the *non plus ultra* of millennial expression and the quasi-redemption of late twentieth-century adolescent inarticulateness whose monosyllabic reduction—the teenage idiolect with which Dennis nourished his early novels and poems—arrives here at its purification and formal refinement, on the verge of total collapse into the medium that penetrates and shapes it. The perfect deformation of its unconscious interests, Bruce says, but his cavil with Dennis's writing has always concerned "the unfolding of real emotion"—a primary value for Bruce—and how it surrenders in Dennis's work to cold stylistic refinement, at once hollowed and distanced, as the linguistic conventions of twink trade are turned inside out with an anatomist's precision. Icy. Brittle. I mean, it's hard to imagine a more exquisitely contemporary illustration than Dennis's late work of how, in Adorno's lexicon, "conventions become expression in the naked depiction of themselves."

I can't help but wonder, and so I ask Bruce: Do the features of late style—be it the ironies of evacuated convention, or the dull edge of uncompromised opacity, or the brittle objectification of exhausted expression—signal the

realization or the bankruptcy of "transgression," as queer writing made a fetish of it by the '90s? Maybe this isn't the right question, but Bruce has often said to me that he prefers to think of risk in his writing not as "transgression"—which is too often abstract and literary, as it is in Dennis's *Frisk* (1993)—but as an "emotional unfolding." "What else but the winds of strong emotion are capable of propelling you into eternity," asks Bruce in his afterword to the reissue of *Century of Clouds*? But emotion, for Bruce, can't be separated from politics, which emotion shapes and is shaped by, which is also Deborah Gould's argument in *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT-UP's Fight against AIDS*. "In my book," Bruce writes, "a politics once polemical wants to be emotional, perhaps a vehicle to joy, elation, even ecstasy," and this gets me thinking about how Dennis's sentences incline over time toward a final neutralization of the emotion that motivates them—the total convergence of inside & outside—the masking of genuine feeling in passages that cast no shadow or reflection. I'm proud of this idea, I say to Bruce, I mean, how one might eventually refine a sentence or pare it down to the point that it throws no shade, and I think this is true in Dennis's "mature" work, where the plenitude of an emotional void, say, characteristic of an early novel like *Closer* (1989), which remains my favorite despite it being only on the cusp of that so-called maturity, achieves its vision in the cavity of a steely and technologically mediated style. Isn't this what Adorno describes as "a subjectivity turned to stone"? But even stone eventually softens as it leans toward dust, and the same can be said for Dennis's sentences, which surface in his recent prose like a zombied parody of his respectably vacant deadpan.

But Bruce wants examples! Okay, how about these illustrations from *The Sluts*, which render any authoritative measure of veracity impossible, because the truth of desire lives in a fantasy whose integrity resists the reality that resists it, and whose pleasure moves in counterpoint with an untrue social truth with which it can only fail to reconcile: "Unless you've killed a boy, you have no idea how hot it is, and how the boy you killed becomes the ultimate sex object forever," and "He chewed his [castrated] testicles

and attempted unsuccessfully to swallow them, and it was this horrible and beautiful image which finally triggered my orgasm." And then there's *The Marbled Swarm*: "Every boy I've known as well as killed has struck me as his corpse's baby picture," and "Dead boys aren't exactly wheels of brie, however much they might smell the same eventually," whose strained similes carry an uncanny echo of the extravagance one often hears in Dennis's early work—"It was his ass we dreamed of, smooth as our ideas" (that's from "Boys I Have Loved"), or "My ass has a permanent haze over it, like San Francisco or a dance floor" (and that's from *Closer*)—the difference being that in the earlier pieces, the artifice covers and protects a vulnerable core, whereas in the later, the same device sculpts its material into an ornament from which all but the faintest residue of life has seemingly hemorrhaged.

Well, Bruce might have said, that's not quite the critique I made back in 1979 when I wrote about Dennis's "The Population of Heaven and Earth" (1977) and the way it uncritically reproduces the commodified dreams of gay desire, to which I reply that my critique is born of his.[7] It's as if, once emerging on the other side of the rabbit hole where they threaten to decompose, Dennis's tropes begin a *danse macabre*, performing a Pyrrhic triumph of expression over the dead and the alienated. Whether you love it or leave it, it's hard not to respect it, I say. But can a work actually, or finally, liquidate its own luxuriant self-awareness and ludic play? Probably not without killing itself. It might be more accurate to say that, rather than exaggerate its own self-styled conventions—at the risk of the work disappearing in the illusion of its own emotionless void—Dennis's late work pushes the very notion of stylized language up up up and over-the-top, to the point of becoming excessive & baroque, rather than minimal & restrained, and *The Marbled Swarm* goes so far even to thematize the idea of style in its title, "the marbled swarm" being a particular way of speaking elaborated across the narrative: "The marbled swarm is spoken at a taxing pace in trains of sticky sentences that round up thoughts as broadly as a vacuum. Ideally, its tedium is counteracted by linguistic decorations, with which the speaker can design the spiel to his requirements."

Look how far I've drifted away from the smell of saffron & stew, over which I finally had to force the point to Bruce that it's *his* late work I've been writing about, and not Dennis's (however much I marveled at *The Marbled Swarm*), the way the vast canvas of *He Sleeps with Angels (Pink Sperm)* organizes a current of migratory drives thru icons & avatars whose specificity won't reduce to known values and hardened meanings as freeze-dried associations crumble into the fungible stuff of the universe itself, or pop culture. In other words, the proper name—be it Cobain or Björk—is just an arbitrary vehicle of transport from I-5 to eternity, an artificial soul-preserver, the way seemingly incorruptible stars in the heavens begin to spoil in a hothouse of desire and its cruel transformations. Here's Bruce:

> The SHOE approaching on its own, empty of its owner, following the track to my bed. It'll be here. Followed by the over-starched pants walking by themselves. Name them. In this world only NAMES matter. The lucite of spirit congealing. I'll speak FOR you, OK?

But in this world, even names like Cobain and Björk enter the infinite space of endless substitutability. While maintaining the appearance of being absolutely singular in their near religious specificity, Kurt Cobain can morph into Axel Rose, or Frances Farmer, or Georges Bataille, or E.T. without suffering any diminished meaning. Like Lana Turner in O'Hara's poem, these names coincide with themselves to create a barren fullness, at once ephemeral and eternal, "a silence which is already you."[8] And as these names appear across *He Sleeps with Angels*, they resound chorally in a canticle of cosmic emptiness whose energies will always find fugitive refuge in this or that nomination, the way a mysterious life force might stow away inside an exotic pod, snatching human bodies in order to preserve the alien force itself.

"The power of names" is always key for Bruce, a power that converges with his very motivation to write. At the same time, this power belies the most

ephemeral and fleeting of vitalities, as he makes clear in the opening pages of *Century of Clouds*:

> Who will ever know our names in a hundred years! We're like the catalogs of flora, and moving toward a brilliant future. Wave upon wave of collective life displaying ever new patterns. Like the stripes of sea bass; like the desert cactus in bloom after years of waiting. It's spring, and the acacias are beginning to carpet the streets with their yellow polleny fuzz. Patterns, designs, excesses I love. At night I look up to emptiness, and the Milky Way is a ribbon of distant faces turned outward, still asleep. Will they wake?

Far from sleep myself, I say something to Bruce about teasing the tension between the social currency and vaporous ephemerality of proper names, because this is something I think his recent work does, so that, like the generic conventions peppering Beethoven's last piano sonatas, the tropics of the proper name disclose the empty kernel of tradition as it assumes the dimension of eternity, on the one hand, and the market, on the other. Well, Bruce responds, that's all fine, I suppose, but wouldn't late style have to account for something like the aging artist's reckoning with suffering and death?, and I'm blown away by Bruce's intuitive grasp of Adorno's concept, or at least its stakes, which exceed the uncompromising accentuation of one's own self-styled conventions, or the degradation of genuine emotion into brittle ornament. "This formal law," writes Adorno, referring to what quietly governs the relationship between stylistic convention and subjectivity, "is revealed precisely in the thought of death." But "the thought of death" refuses simple psychology. Instead, it voids the work of its expressiveness, while yielding the constructive fullness of that emptiness. And it's precisely death and mortality that inform Bruce's later writing in a way that feels alien even to a whole period of queer writing thru the AIDS crisis. For example, Bruce's *A Stele for Jamie* sustains a meditation circling "around the same things over and over and in mildly different to completely different ways," while connecting "things that only make sense in context with one another.

These things being: death, sex, mourning, and mysticism, in its many different shapes and forms." And while Bruce's recent work converges with a heightened sensitivity to his own mortality, it's not only his writing that does this, but his ongoing interests in antique spirituality, Buddhism, and S/M where one can practice one's own "thingification"—not in Adorno's metaphorical sense of "the hardened and the alienated," nor in Adrian Piper's conceptual sense of "the black object," nor in the lived condition of the slave—but a becoming thing-like by studying one's mortal reduction to fungible dust, "the lucite of spirit congealing," I think, or maybe "the gift of death," the munus, the radical substance of community, which demands a willingness to let go the illusion of one's private immunities. Actually, it's more about vulnerability and embarrassment, Bruce corrected me, the way defenselessness and humiliation converge with an awakened sense of one's nothingness. Or maybe, I add, as if we were improvising a renga, it's more about risking one's own dignity, be it to the perils of gossip or the abuse of a rent boy. In any case, it's all part of an effort to move beyond deadly dualisms, Bruce pirouettes, the most entrenched of which is Life/Death, from which all the others derive.

That's when, as if out of the ether, Bruce pulls the first line of Mallarmé's "Tombeau d'Edgar Poe" from his impressive repertoire—*Tel qu'en lui-même enfin l'eternité*—like the perfect *pointe finale* to our exchange, as if its significance ought to be immediately clear to me, which it's embarrassingly not. In Peter Manson's translation (with my variation of the first line) the poem goes:

> Such as into oneself at last eternity changes one
> the poet with a naked sword provokes
> his century appalled to not have known
> death triumphs in that strange voice!
>
> They, like an upstart hydra hearing the angel once
> purify the meaning of tribal words

proclaimed out loud the prophecy drunk
without honor in the tide of some black mixture.

From soil and hostile cloud, what strife
if our idea fails to sculpt a bas-relief
to ornament the dazzling tomb of Poe,

calm block fallen down here from some unseen disaster,
let this granite at least set for all time a limit
to the black flights of Blasphemy scattered in the future.

A stony monument or dazzling tomb, like a poem, or even one of Smithson's pumping derricks, is a dissipative structure, I think, a provisional idea of order in the erosive drift of ordered life to disordered dust on the way to which it must pass thru the obscure disaster called ornament.[9] Bruce sums the poem up differently, tho. Death is becoming a thing no different than oneself, he says, as if stating a fact, while capturing the poem's entropic figure, and I'm like, okay, sure, maybe one does become oneself in the grave as the poem's first line suggests, or by becoming stone, but who really cares about these metaphysical quiddities, to avoid the likes of which I proffer, in my awkward materialist fashion, that the petrification of human disaster in the kitschy filigree of a tombstone's bas-relief—in Baltimore, no less!—does nothing more than allegorize the reification of immiserated human life inside any fucking commodity when the fullness of time converges with the brutality of value extracted from sinew and bone. Yah yah! That's when Bruce confesses to me, as if to suck the air right out of my analysis, that all the while we'd been talking about late style he'd been thinking about a retrospective of Willem de Kooning's final paintings that he'd seen at the SFMOMA, a show that provoked questions about dementia and clarity, impoverishment and enrichment—the complexity of simplicity, Bruce says—and how, like some of those paintings, Mallarmé's poem offers him "a metaphor of cobwebs before my eyes as I look in the mirror."

As the cute waiter with whom Bruce has such a sweet rapport brings us some dessert, and with airs of Mallarmé's obscure disaster lingering still, Bruce mentions a letter he'd received from a young poet who was inquiring about a talk Bruce had given on translation and dismemberment—a talk he had memorably extemporized ten years ago for the Nonsite Collective based on a text I want so badly to recover for the volume of his selected writing I'm currently editing, but which continues to resist transcription. I've always treasured this talk because it alone among all of Bruce's writing addresses his work as a translator (of Georges Bataille and Pascal Quinard), and I've always believed it could contribute something necessary to contemporary translation studies. More germane to the conversation underway, however, I realize that the key concept around which Bruce's thoughts regarding translation pivot—the concept of "dismemberment"—in fact rhymes with Mallarmé's obscure disaster as it resolves in the form of a block, like one of Donald Judd's cubes, or Richard Serra's monuments where the disaster of meaning gets "translated" into a stupid slab of concrete. But this approach to translation also yields the rudiments of Beethoven's late style—"lyrical condensation and fragmentation"—and as we get to talking about this over tea & ginger cookies, I realize how Bruce has committed many of that talk's sentences to memory, and how much of its content is integral to his thinking about all things related to writing. So I ask Bruce about this idea of dismemberment and its relation to becoming thing-like, and he tells me that bodily disintegration is the high price one must pay for a real translation, and maybe even for writing more generally. "If you're dealing with writing," he says, "and yr not willing to pay with yr life, then forget it, what you produce will be shit."

For Bruce, the work of any translation is a set of textual fragments like *disjecta membra*, scattered organs & limbs: the body itself as late style. Rooted in gnostic mysteries, Bruce's translation practice is nothing short of a spiritual practice. "There's just no way for there to be a 'you' any more. And—in place of you? That piece of limb draped over a tree branch right over there. That flesh strewn as body parts on leaves of trees begin to make you into a

capital letter." Maybe late stylists are like the translators you admire most, I suggest. What, like the Delphic Sybil translating the Oracle, or the Voudon Priestess translating the Divinity?, Bruce asks, and goes on: Their practice has everything to do with possession and dispossession, you know, with becoming the conduit between irrational demiurge and rational script. "Go tell my horse!," sings the divinity, according to Zora Neal Hurston, one of Bruce's favorite points of reference. But when one is "ridden by Apollo," the way Hurston describes the priestess as a horse straddled by the godhead, one all but loses one's rational sense, only to lose it for real to some fucking scribe who goes and turns all those divine grunts and moans into perfectly legible sentences. So in the end, I remark, it's all reduced to the dead and the alien as total meaning liquidates and freezes in whatever syllabics are designed to capture it, the way the sherds of the vessels—*tohu va bohu*—hold the escaping light of the *sephirot*. How is one to turn the mumbled phonemes of an unintelligible god into Greek hexameters, Bruce asks? The same way Adorno codifies—*falsifies*—Beethoven's aesthetic insurgency as historical thought, I think. Maybe what Bruce and I have been batting around as "late style" simply connotes a way of remaining faithfully close to whatever source of meaning, the way I like to imagine any artwork worth its salt bearing the sometimes difficult-to-decipher impress of its own material conditions, at once absolutely clear and absolutely opaque, so that the latter becomes the former, and vice versa, just as Adorno hears in Beethoven's last sonatas the catastrophe of the bourgeois individual "as such" in synch with its triumph under emergent market conditions, rendering the illusion of immediate perception of oneself intelligible as historical delusion, the way "the finite powerlessness of the I" is disabused of its sovereignty as it is besieged by its own refined clichés, which it can no longer pretend to master. And like late style, the text of a translator willing to pay with their body for access to that meaning must hew to what is most obdurate in those conditions—its material abstractions—even if the unintelligible can only be made legible or audible by what's at least recognizable, say, in fragmented conventions, exaggerated customs, augmented ornaments, all of which remind me now of my own obsessive attachment to the final

moments of Beethoven's opus 111, one interminably drawn-out cliché of sentimental feeling void of all its pathos—(I'm thinking here of Elly Ney's performance of the thing on pianoforte, and while she may have been a fucking Nazi during the war, I tell Bruce, it would be dishonest of me to dismiss this recording as one of the most devastating things I've ever heard)—a trill performed by the right hand on the keyboard's highest notes, an extended agitation associated with the simplest of programmatic associations, say, to moonlight on the surface of a rippling pond, whose seemingly improvisatory extension moves beyond any conventional measure and ironizes the convention itself, hollowing it out into the most threadbare of figures, before returning it to an inscrutable sincerity beyond its familiar tenors, so that ornamental sheen itself finds renewed substance in the artifice of depth, an effect of what seems to be an infinite paraphrase of itself, a repeated citation of a repeated citation, looping and feeding back into the self-perpetuating mechanism before arriving at a point of arrest where that most intense agitation resolves in pure stasis, disappearing into the current of its own medium—history—where it evanesces, once and for all, mourning the loss of its own form as this interminable finale renders the act of memorialization totally obsolete or redundant or unnecessary—its music having so affirmatively lost the lure of melody within which even to remember itself and whose beauty is an effect of becoming a bit of mosaic tile whose hardening is commensurate with the slow decay of its final note. All these chintzy bangles and tinsel bells return to the work as if from Mars, or as if rendered thru a vocoder attuned to decrypt the twisted screech of value's death-drive, bearing history's stamp absent every psychological motivation, placing even the most familiar cliché beyond one's grasp, if not beyond extraction's reach while it simultaneously crashes back into harmonious circulation and the old dualist division dissolves in the lucite of spirit congealing.

Note: All conversational quotations and paraphrases attributed to Bruce are reconstructed from actual conversations, emails, and texts, as well as from Bruce's unpublished writing on translation. This essay has been approved by Mr. Boone himself, for whose friendship I owe my deepest gratitude.

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[1] A selection from Bruce Boone's *He Sleeps with Angels (Pink Sperm)* appears in *Tripwire 11: Pop!*

[2] Dennis Cooper's blog can be found here: https://denniscooperblog.com/. For a report on its disappearance in 2016, see https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/jul/14/dennis-cooper-google-censorship-dc-blog.

[3] Some of Cooper's more recent poems preserve a residue of that affect, too, like "Elliott Smith at 14"—"I hug my friends until / we're bruised. I won't / stop hugging them, / not even if they scream / at me to stop"—whose lines distill an emotional unconscious at work everywhere in his books, however silently, as that hug becomes a club or a pair of surgical calipers.

[4] Bruce kept his blog from August 2010 thru August 2011. See https://bruceboone.wordpress.com/

[5] For a pretty great description of Thomas Mann's "principle of montage which peculiarly, perhaps outrageously, pervades the entire book—explicitly so and without the slightest concealment," check out the letter to Adorno dated 30 Dec. 1945, in *Theodor Adorno and Thomas Mann, Correspondence 1943-1955*: "I paste this familiar material in and allow the edges to blur." Mann's memoir, *Story of a Novel: The Genesis of Doctor Faustus*, further informs his appropriation techniques.

[6] Like Jelly Roll Morton's, Moten says, "Beethoven's blackness" "is also located at the improvisational convergence of composition and performance, where freedom resides in contained unfreedom, where stolen life seeks to steal away." And while Moten isn't referring specifically to "late style," his critique argues that Beethoven's music, most specifically Glenn Gould's recording of the cadenza in the first piano concerto, affirms a performative excess, a fantastic surplus resistant to the laws of composition, an intemperate fugitivity that Adorno is otherwise profoundly ambivalent about, an ambivalence that manifests transparently in his crazy essay on jazz, all of which suggests that "late style" maybe nothing more than a concept determined to think what fundamentally resists being thought because it is thought's disruption. See chapters four, five, and seven in Moten's *Black and Blur*, especially "Sonata Quasi Una Fantasia," note #22.

[7] This critique appears in Bruce's essay "Gay Language as Political Praxis," *Social Text*, no. 1 (Winter 1979), soon to be republished in Bruce Boone, *Bruce Boone Dismembered* (Nightboat Books, forthcoming in 2020).

[8] Forgive my mismatching of poems! "a silence which is already you" is the final phrase in O'Hara's "A Modern Soldier."

[9] This reminds me of what Kevin Killian refers to in *Tony Greene Era* as Greene's "decorative impulse to ornamentation that spreads across the picture's frame," so that what was all adorned surface assumes the gravity of a depthless depth, "my gaze held at a deep fixed surface of paint."

Dylan Byron

Confessing a Suggestion of Overflowing (on Bruce Boone)

I

to go in or enter, north & west, qua men-boys we wore sweaters, entering back delight, blur & breathe & glad to you, distinguished in logic & language, tall from Greece or Saskatoon, up, down, across, harping in disquiet, Bruce to the mount, before the beginning he looked good in pink, yellow, a call to the friend prevailing over, going then, now, well he liked your cousin well enough, will you take my leather? bigger & stronger than your step-brother wrapping up & stripping into the bay, not that I could ever be the big spoon, he's around 6 feet 3 inches tho' he tried little nonetheless, remitting flat on his stomach in dancer tights at his ankles after champagne glowing in whose honor it was drunk, how much German do you know by then? action and remission failing at using Gramsci's praxis for interpreting on learning the demise of the language, codes of others, end Bruce our waywardness … Hannes, Kurt, Peter, Markus exceedingly of three kinds, watched paternally of N.N.'s two daddies from shaved the hair on the crown, now I guess you've seen me naked, introit or treat, community's iniquity in radical abeyance, turn quicken & come, look the freshmen are back, he says he's jealous every time at parties watching lining up to feed players, in fuzzy sweaters but it's not like the 50's, as kneeling in pure tongue, would it be painfully middle-class? middle-aged? institutes of men in relation unempathically, and who could you ask not sharing?

walking down to the then dirt track, mediterranean wet usually means gentle unless you wanted it another way, sprinkle us, for a moment I thought I'd have to lie down if you can blame the weather for too many words but it was really sunny, while I was stretching he flew by me, really?? I'd never

seen thighs that big in the blur, I guess he'd kept running, you could look it up I'm sure, OK it's not like your boy's the only leftist with a glittering academic résumé, but an anarchist token? better the gutter or a professor? if I were fucking him would we even have that thought uncharitably? the neighbor's proximity pushing for new property, what just name of friendship to come, obviously I had to leave right away, it never fit materially I am sorry, am, et, em, um, at, is, ens, et, ors, him, us, politics' audience desiring community, brotherly intelligence or friendship's remembering elucidates shriven signifier, narration unselfconscious or unity, delicacy

II

stand up, now, highest or lowest, he ate vegetables happily but kept his own casserole dish, I cut his hair dripping sun in my hands and he wanted MEAT, did you know the other one was Canadian? looks like someone's really glorying commonwealth cock though not knowing it like that, eight years we could have rented anywhere for $1,200 for two who didn't know century of jack then, don't let it be then, studying the shape of a line of strings of letters and operations, variables and formulas in six walls of concrete and a second with the key, do not duplicate sandalwood on the ninth floor, the syntax of formal language creation, standing under seven feet in my sun and snorting the datura seeds from my solar plexus, dryish muffins and wine go baroque, Parmenides and the sphere, cotton slippers and silk for John Adams, plum blossom archives for Nick, the glass was lit and the hibiscus shone through it, from Milvia to Rose, leather again yum and stripped in the bay, forms lie and yet hello all my Germans is the epic of a world abandoned to form-giving in its objective difficulty replacing lyrical attitudes towards old dinners and what was edible in the mouth, the thought where not thinking the domain of objects were real and we could explain the meaning, what I would know and could I look at the terraced roses and wine for all my friends

that's a big tinge of intimacy, it would be really expensive to buy all that coconut yogurt, actually I was only anticipating Purcell and thirsty for champagne at intermission, the Bay Area is famous for early music don't you know? are there no friends, friends? the false gay poet dandy? don't beat the queen, queen the beat, Jack, John, DANA DANA, aaaaaeeeiiiiioooOU!!! the whole or hole difference without explanatory remarks I had to go for a run to calm down and there was the dirt track before it got paved over, identification, fraternization, it's right by the MLK Middle School organic garden, she freely admits more deliciously a weakness for young men too and I'll bet she's had a lot of them, truly losing, three blueberries or more before the polenta, than four blocks from any of the three apartments I managed to rent there in three years, madness in the brother- or lover-friend, do I sound Greek to you? the waiters stunningly twinkish, reading and you could find all this out in an hour or two with as many bottles, I was with boyfriends, silentium, kenosis, Molly men in fog, Berkeley gardens, the sage's food, it's all costing more dear now … but in Australia? junk, semantically stories, salve, salvete

hmm yours was unmistakable & a more familiar register, familiar to me anyway—but you don't see it really in your tiny great world of experimentalists do you? hence the surprise in part, autobiography aside I guess all the Bataille stuff gave you away, Inner Expression, manual oracle, finally the queer catholic Nietzschean reading, prolongation, what he's written he's written, temptation publishes political friendship, 'cause talkin' ruins it, partisan generative passing under the table, slippers to the War Memorial to answer for self together or I would have tried to meet you, reading you carrying you, mostly I just hid in the PFA, look he brought Jerry, you came too! wandering around sidewalks leaning over property lines smelling—honeysuckle? brugmansia? the one I always get mixed up other, up or down, irreducibly "perhaps," abstract heart units analysis … when I came back I tried to keep a gardenia in our apartment in NY, calling to a friend declaring, A. loved it, almost right away it died…who among the poets, the long man list eschewing favorites of another sex and mostly

mine, would really give it all up? the purest fix, Spicer…? not Duncan or O'Hara quite, well O'Hara in his way, burned straight through if you want to perpetuate that thought, you, praising community outside it, no genius reach, gosh several languages short, higher gossip, you could say traveling light, as you say "whoring" I guess you're quoting Baudelaire ("What is art…?"), together witnessing secret singularity, the communities to come after untimeliness, it wouldn't kill any of the straight men to pay rent like that, drinking white wine with me even though it uses the vocative

the reminiscence has a spectrum like the sliding scale, sitting in an apartment blinds drawn and feeding, disjunct ruins concatenation, it's a way of being rich I guess, no money had or needed, mod to post, whip me or you, spank…[quick] *bah bah my boyfriend's back*, change of harness, collar, clamps, weights, tassels, organizational complicity entailing representation, it's well known vegan cum is sweet, who Cicero explained in his lovely way our history of friendship, if you were a man-boy joining, leaving urban seclusion you'd see a cloud of incense streaming from between my legs heavenwards, madness of passion or truth, without opposition, a monastic of gay time and high priest of sapiosexual conversion, yr on the ours, yr making the materials, yr taking us the MOST PINK INSIDE, so it is

III

outside rubbers institutionally complexes of relations & magazines

rehearsing oppositional boy boy language

forget or modern political camp

lived language groups

codes post-assertive, feathers

the alienation of one's own conclusion

repressions of straight talk spilling over I believe

returning or reviving many-accentuality

who understands money? its self-referentiality

kinds of politeness or exposition

reifying your view

non-connective turns (or tricks)

serially consuming without residue of meaning

you're unbuttoning my 501s I am looking for a morphology

spectacle or narrative

undoing Hegelisms giggling,

displacing connection flexible enough to develop pitch

don't cry boys, every expression tries to refer down

abstraction's loving friendship

having fun with the burden of description on the body

it came fast, rearrangements of love

teasing in action, who is and is not

follow fields of love or poetry as politically beginning

was slowing down briefly before passing through or into domestic

wave after erotic rationalist wave

sizes or shapes of cock's collectivity

who's pleasing people writing unending

syntactically partial recognition

thinking *fratres in unum* in practice

IV

when his blond mentor from Mexico DF got into weird object relation theory stuff we went there too but it's not like we put away the garden books or poetry, a good Marxist, I'm forgiven internationally, representation & sentiment, objectifying utterance, pleasure's to the left, his legs lifting up, bending back, the law of the other over his ears lyrical & demanding golden for tongue, look at that nice sweater Jacques Rancière is wearing, talking to Guy Hocquenghem's former lover's (René Schérer's) seminar, or better that big great no, Bernadette antinomian now … how come she ... I ask Daniel, "well, I guess it's because she's so anti-everything"(!) you know, she said she liked the 14th St. Y, she and Sophia, I remembered I forgot about children, feeling at home talking of unions ... the flair, where'd she put the keys? even though there's arguably less paranoia and/or delusion somehow it's just no fun without, he over there, snapping Etel Adnan leporellos,

folded accordion-like, whereas bed still mostly except having to get up, if you were afraid of going crazy would you write it down? page 1, *On Nietzsche*, no?—what then? if I send you another pic will you socially evaluate me? Disconnections … but none from those brilliant Stone Center women, I can't get enough of the videos where they're all sitting around a table, hair high in Catharine MacKinnon-style twists, shredding the swollen prostate of male psychoanalysis in prim clarion tones, beginning-end real-life utterance, that New England thing again: Irigaray ... Nietzsche ... Water, evil like what? well the men of course and where does that leave reading *Men in Feminism* listless in a bathtub half my size where I belong, 29, gentle dom dad, but there is no individual's speech act without contradiction in terms, suitably shrunk, haven't we been enough? except the ones … Craig Owens … Tim Dlugos … Sam D'Allesandro … George Stambolian … Joe Brainard, Hervé Guibert bicycling away at Light Industry, I go on, who sought his, her specificity in poetic language not context? Bruce, will we take a walk though I am staring at your tonsure mesmerized, grace poured on your lips … "the new desire and lust for possession, a shared higher thirst," a lavish meal? Soufflé … Weiner's skinny sonnets walking in the park, historical water works, you can stick the teleology of author intention … anything but professor but not, is it strange there are only two? spare but with the suggestion of overflowing, and you know there's a city and storehouse of erudition, treasures in the mind not yet revealed, so Bruce it's May Day, St. Philip & St. James if you like probably you don't, with everything touched by the market, would there still be a question of the right name, aestheticize? & nugatoriness, not that you don't have plenty of silence, too, after all I did live there younger then, whose stipendiary now? the setting heretic, love, Dylan ... Blessed Bruce Boone ... I'm sucking that duke of tuscany smell down, it could be mock orange here, *Carmen*'s finished, your books are everywhere reckoned, articulately inscribed only, guest, *philos* without distinction

V

will you let me reconstruct your artifacts, it's sunny and 71 degrees on 19th St. in San Francisco, kind of white stone in pale light cliff Ravello, we've all got off work and the bars are just opening on Castro floating eucalyptus colors, there are four stores to buy 2(x)ist, sizes & colors, poppers, complementaries, was, waren, ich, wir organizing utterance, one for each of Dustan's wigs, you are kissing the hands of all the old queens, they are washing your feet with gin & lemon in kind, we could go home and read Bataille, Brecht, "the loveliest pages of Rousseau," Quignard, John Wieners, whoever you want *mon très cher frère*, a white t-shirt & thick frames looks good, can you cook too? do you prefer to elaborate or restrict? we negotiate but it's a foregone conclusion who'll give in sweetie, I brush your wings and call you HOLE little lamb, we flap & fly to a cabin near where you're from (Lake Washington?), far from the J, G, or L trains as I'm, struck by the pink light, a dark master closed the I-5 we dive in, I feel it a love poem not far from terror, the didactic emotions not concepts or a sense or a word, white carnations, a sense of the perceptions of knowledge working out, wipe with a towel, back got big, words to well, tight suits and a Malacca cane? the English Italian Congregation thinks I'm hearing Mr. Softee but it's after 4 AM, no time for Cazwell, wrists flying at least as thin, the second letter of the alphabet, but what last? invisible ties rich at the price of nostalgia producing areas of anal action locally-autonomously against long-gaining economism, thinking to language accorded as speech supposes friendship, social atmosphere of style or its individuation, generative, ideological in written sign reality concretely intercoursed, how are things indeed! how are things for you? let me know if you're ever in New York, Berlin or anywhere else you might find me at the opera standing room, reading a book, listening to evensong, they've got you already, or in a jock-strap maybe dancing in an apartment, ite, tell me about everything there if it would be fun for you too

Linda Bakke
New Narrative Odelay

None of us who attended the New Narrative conference last October in Berkeley will forget the smell of the smoke: the smoke from the ongoing wildfires in neighboring Napa and Sonoma. Entering Wheeler Hall, I closed my eyes against the searing air that seemed to speak to the waste and folly of capitalism. My lungs started to feel the stiffening of their cilia. I pushed it out of my mind and made my way to the first panel with my husband Erik.

The moment that Dodie announced the *Communal Presence* conference during *Advanced Short Story*, the class I was taking with her in fall of 2017, I whipped off a text to my husband from class to save the dates. Panicked when he didn't respond right away, I sent more texts: Where are you? Save the dates, arghhh! Leading up to the conference Erik and I were ragged. The night before he said, let's take an hour nap, and when we get up we'll discuss which panels we'd like to attend. Okay I said to him, saving my question for after the nap as to whether or not he was sure that we were signed up at all, my anxiety starting to flare. He had signed up almost at the moment the *Communal Presence* website allowed for it because I parroted and parroted the question, "*Did you check the conference site, did you check the conference site?*" After that the question became, "*Did you get Friday off, Did you get Friday off?*" We really wanted to attend the entire conference together.

I awoke at 3 a.m. on Friday the 13th. It took everything not to wake Erik, which would be cruel given what little sleep during the week he gets, but I really wanted to shake him awake, "*You didn't set the alarm for an hour, are you sure we are signed up, I will fucking puke if we can't get into any of the panels, what panels are we signed up for, what is the sign up, I can't figure it out?*" I was wound up; he stirred a bit, the moment in which I took the opportunity to call him a saboteur. I got up to pack for our stay at a hotel

across from the UCB campus and situate the cat and her things for the Trump-supporting cat sitters.

At the panel *Plenary* on *From Our Hearts to Yours* I felt trepidation. The panelists' conversations were about the past, present and future of New Narrative. I wondered if you could talk about the future without courting distillation. I was relieved the panelists were not looking to codify New Narrative or place its literary expression between academia's landing lights. They described more of a defined yet undefined, between two places kind of space, and that New Narrative does not fill up a space, but inhabits it.

My first undergrad class at SFSU with Dodie Bellamy was *Writing on the Body*. My interest was compelled by the title. I wanted to know how I might write about my mother's body. A body that I have no real memory of ever not being in a state of traumatic degradation. I did have a thought as I made note of the course schedule number, *if this class is all quivering grey area or women's hips like milky white sand dunes…I am the fuck out*.

I sat at the front of the to-capacity class as Dodie introduced herself to us. She told us about *Cunt Norton*, which was about to be released. The title alone gave me a huge smile. A smile that I tried to forcibly turn off, made nervous by my mother's categorical criticism of my over-smiling. There's one about laughing too much also and it is definitely a no-no to let your mouth just hang open as I did on that day, so delighted to learn of *Cunt Norton*.

I was titillated by an interview in which Dodie describes what she was doing in *Cunt Norton*: "…the back and forth of my porno-erotic text and these canonized poems is a sort of fucking. Lovers, readers, writers—we all rejoice in the Eros of literary consumption and production." We read a piece by Kathy Acker for our first class; Whoa, what was Kathy Acker doing? There are many comments about Acker in Dodie's interviews: "I think she is totally turned on…Her appropriation or plagiarism…broke new

textual ground for her, and I'd daresay, for us." And of Kevin Killian's *Spurt*, Dodie says, "to write ... with such an outrageous attitude." My head kept bump, bump, bumping up against the stratosphere. I had to place my hand over my scalp to keep from the singe.

I started body rocking to *this thing called life/Electric word life*. I wouldn't have the wherewithal for such a notion as ascension but I did let my body go. I felt the heft of my lift as I attempted to gain orbit. I was going to take every class that I could with Dodie.

Simultaneously, as I was keying into the boundless possibility of the experimental form and New Narrative, a feeling of confinement in other courses of the creative writing program, that I had worked crazy hard to get into, started to confuse me, fuck me up royal. As a segue to telling my therapist about what being in the program was like for me, I told her about my cousin being diagnosed as multiple personality: "My dad just told me ... I didn't know." My therapist started to ask, "How is it do you think..." I interjected, "You grow up in our house, that's how!" She laughed. I go on. Tell her that I didn't even know I was half Cuban until I was about thirteen: "I have this memory of thinking that I was Puerto Rican." Extrapolating at least that I was from somewhere in the Caribbean. "I spoke Spanish fluently. .. before my mother took me from them ... she squished it out of me." She told me to tell people that I'm Korean and, like my adoptive father, Irish. Not to let the cat out of the bag that I'm Cuban. I tell her about my mother's insistence at this forced narrative: perfect nuclear family, a daughter birthed under the cover of wedlock. My Cuban heritage, for my mother, to this day represents her being a whore, giving birth to a bastard. The vitriol remains unwavering should I mention anything Cuban ... not even a Cuban crocodile. I tried that one once. She gave me a look like, *I know you're fucking with me*. Outside of being Cuban, another sure indicator of being fucked up for life was to be an artist. There is part of me that is very grateful that my mother didn't have knowledge of electroconvulsive therapy. She would have fixed me. And all this is what I expressed to my therapist,

that all this confinement, a doubling of my experience with my mother, was what I feared and what I was concerned the creative writing program might largely be.

A feeling of being split became exponentially more profound. I was mystified by the boilerplate instructionals of certain workshops. Knowing that feeling wasn't wrong, that what I've got to tell requires a huge, open and wild flame, I found myself flagging in MFA workshops that pushed narrative into a sameness. I said to my therapist, "I want to write a piece drawing a comparison to my experience of being institutionalized by the MFA program and my having been institutionalized after my second attempt at suicide." I sat in workshop after workshop at SFSU where the formulaic speech of craft superseded unfettered discussion of narrative possibility.

In one class the instructor drew an xy axis on the white board—*oh shit, is this math mother frackers?!* It was the math requirement that got me rejected the first time I applied as an undergrad to SFSU. *Math* is my father's emotional and verbal abuse about my not being able to do it. *Math* was the tutor that my parents hired, pasty like fish belly, bloated with cold hands, Dom Guano, who stuck those hands up my top at every last one of those tutorial sessions. The instructor's explanation was like an incongruous violation, "We start with an introduction," the instructor explained, his pigeon wing hands fluttering along his xy axis, "leading to what's at stake in the story, plateau at the 'he's a man with nothing to lose' scenario and..." I finish for him, *flaccidly humping toward a conclusion*. So many big bites of THC cookie in that class. Are we all writing *Diehard*? I would ask myself.

During fall of 2016, my mother lay in her second coma at UCSF after months of fighting an e-coli infection. Everyone came to say goodbye to her. There have been many cycles of goodbyes. I took snapshots of her as she lay in her induced state. A full facemask was sealed tight to her face forcing oxygen into her lungs. I made a video of her heart beating during a sonogram. Faked erasing it when the nurse observed and said that it was

against hospital policy. *Fuck you, I'll collect my mother's heart if I so need*. I had a full course load. I checked in with my instructors and told them that there was no way I could sit in workshop. I was too raw to face exposure to it.

The only place I felt I could feel still in my head was Dodie's class, The Art of Short Fiction. My seventh semester with her. There New Narrative seeped into all my cataclysmic emotion and I started to write how it is I'm also asunder because of perimenopause. My changing pussy became fodder for sci-fi. It was absolutely liberating to explore the difficulty of knowing when the symptoms of perimenopause started fucking with me, of knowing when brain matter began dotting my shoulders. I broke the surface with my big toe and cut-up like Burroughs, like Bellamy, activated Acker appropriation and sutured my psychic screed with that of *Naked Lunch*. I let my toes lose their grip of the fallow ground, let myself drift up backward, butt, bounce and bang like a cosmic nautilus through the New Narrative asteroid belt, eyes squeezed shut, hoping for further accretion.

After I read the introduction to *Writers Who Love Too Much*, edited by Dodie Bellamy and Kevin Killian, I thought to myself, for myself, "Oh, New Narrative is like writing oneself into existence." It is the narrative that allows for the voice of others to express as freely and openly as requires.

New Narrative counters my mother's intractable understanding of art as something dooming. I wondered at my therapist's suggestion of the gifts my parents have given me. I was incredulous at the notion of their giving me anything but torment and the spaces in between. New Narrative draws hard on these sordid gifts. Torment becomes something exquisite and the in between spaces like so many vantage points.

During the panel "Our Walks with Bob," Rob Halpern read a poem about the body in full-blown AIDS. I see a Francis Bacon perspective, slowly lines appear drawn around Halpern as he reads. We can allow ourselves to see the

ravaged body or look at it once more. The lines are not there to package it or contain it. They hold horrific grace like a sacred vessel. Ground our focus on the figure Halpern describes, like Bacon's lover George lost to Francis forever, suspended as beauty needlessly gone. See the body caught up in the implications—we are looking at what most people never have to look at.

Camille Roy reads after Rob. As I listen to Roy read, I see the work of Ida Applebroog and Tracey Emin playing out like old filmstrips on either side of her. The mania of Emin's trauma, coupled with the steadfast self-examination of Applebroog and Roy's brutal strength brew up and surge throughout the hall like coruscating cumulus. Roy read about her wife. Her wife's dying. How to tell about it? I'm not sure because the power of it still brings me to tears. How was Roy doing this? I just saw her read at City Lights for the launch of *Writers Who Love Too Much*. I didn't see Camille's wife Angie but I know that she was there. Five months later, at the conference, I felt overwhelmed by the fact that Camille had lost Angie and now stood reading about washing her wife's body. I am moved by her deep regard, her loving memory of gently bathing the body she had known, her wistfulness at the beautiful white pussy hairs. Roy's practice is to stand next to a wide-open flame. This shit doesn't fit on an *xy* axis. The stories of New Narrative are the Big Bang, energy moving out and through and reaching for the edges of the galaxies. While listening to Roy, emotions connected to my mother's decades-long dying started to stream through me. I fought hard to hold them back, but my culminating bereavement breached; I wonder if my flooding of the front row of the hall is what prompted Sarah Rosenthal to call for a moment for all of us present to center and breathe.

After the panel I walked over to Bob Glück to say hello. I was very shy about this, given how completely wrecked I was doing directed writing with him as an undergrad at SFSU. I said hello anyway. I told him thank you; I was honest and I say that though I was off the deep end in directed writing with him that I'm doing much better and finishing up the MFA. I shared with him my excitement about being at the conference. His oft-mentioned blue

eyes that used to unnerve me I now saw as full and friendly as he told me he was happy to hear it. I was happy to share it. He gave me a squeeze.

During one conference event, I approached Eileen Myles by the bathrooms at BAMPFA. Said hi to her and told her that I was inspired by what she was saying at a reading she did about two and half years ago at Small Press Traffic during Lit Quake. But I can't quite get it out right and it's coming out all stupid and fan frenzied. She's nice, lets me talk at her. I'm wondering if this is a Pavlovian response to my being the child of a narcissist: an inappropriate glomming on. But there is something else here. What is it?

Aha! Yes. She reminds me of our paperboy from when we were stationed in San Diego in 1976; I was in the fourth grade. He would take me for rides on his paper route bike. When he wasn't delivering papers he was on his skateboard. His shoulder-length brown feathered hair, Hang Ten t-shirts and easy So Cal style. Their faces are similar, only he was always brown from the sun and had brown eyes. Their bodies and the way they walk are similar. And Eileen's height is that of his at that time. He was older than me. Their ages now would be about the same. Eileen walked into the restroom next and I can't stop thinking about her as the paperboy. For me this is how I experience many things, having a synesthesiac and memory-laden response. When I walked in after her I notice the seat is up. I wonder if Eileen pees standing up, is she the paperboy? I'm tired and my butt hurts from Poets Theater, so I duck out before going an awkward step further.

Erik and I find our way into the *Communal Presence* pop-up bookstore. There I'm drawn to a bubble gum pink cover. A book put together and edited by the conference producers Daniel Benjamin and Eric Sneathen: *The Bigness of Things New Narrative and Visual Culture*, a book that features *ART FROM THE HOMES OF BRUCE BOONE, ROBERT GLUCK, JOCELYN SAIDENBERG, DODIE BELLAMY & KEVIN KILLIAN*. Everything glints and fires when I see this book; I'm suddenly standing on solid foundation. Art was the place that my mother thought she had razed. Art was the thing

maybe the only thing to escape her malignant neglect. I tell my therapist that I understand why I'm so consumed by New Narrative; it has what I need from art, a commitment to an open practice and boundary-pushing. It is also a form that often has visual culture as a subject—*The Bandaged Lady* by Dodie Bellamy, a piece using a work by the artist Tariq Alvi as a starting point, is one such example of how New Narrative hits the sweet spot of my need for boundary pushing writing that intertwines itself with discussions of art and the contexts of art. This is why I feel sheer misery when I choose to refer to a film to critique a workshop submission and someone says, "Well, to be fair we are talking about writing here." I look at them confused, destabilized because I need that all forms of art be able to be present at once.

On the final night of the conference the room is packed, ready and waiting for Judy Grahn. As Grahn read from "A Woman is talking to Death," she became physically overcome. Was it all the work that she has done for women, was it the work that she still has to do, was it the daily unraveling of the work that she and so many others have done by our current regime? She grew dizzy, light-headed, swooned, kept reading, then paused; we grew quiet. Her partner Kris walked up to Judy and helped her to take a seat next to the podium, and Kris finished the reading. As she read the rest of "A Woman is Talking to Death," the roof was torn off. In a few minutes, Judy Grahn, revived, rose to her feet and acknowledged the applause. Grahn will keep talking, she will keep telling so that we may do so as well.

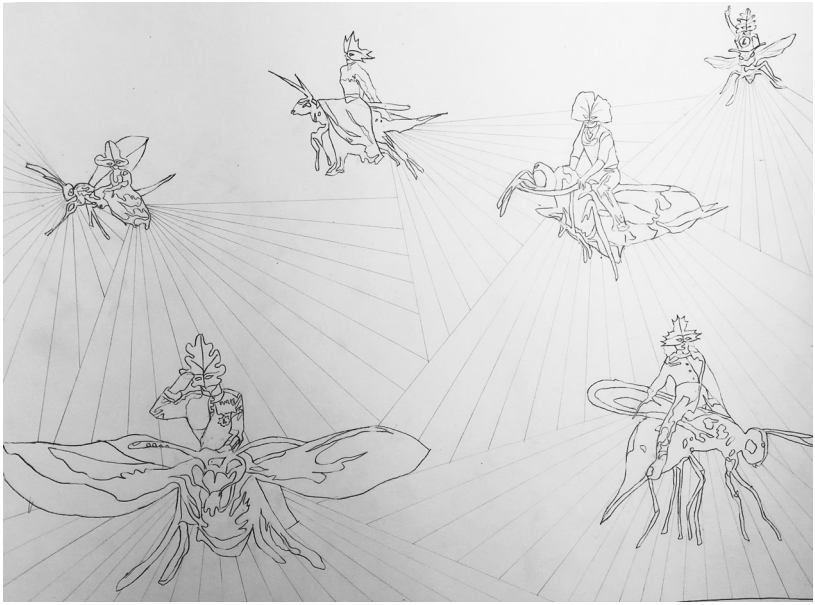
There's a promise by Grahn to herself that I think is elemental to us as makers, makers of art: "I realized that if I was going to do what I had set out to do in my life, I would have to go all the way with it and take every single risk you could take ... I decided I would not do anything I didn't want to do that would keep me from my art."

Anna Fidler
The Leaf Girls

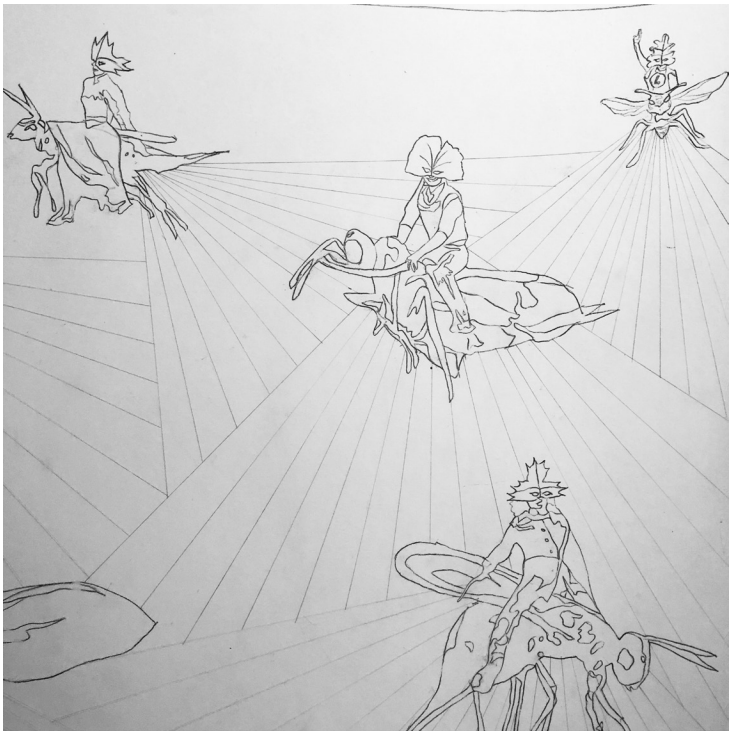
The Leaf Girls are environmental heroines who save trees, respect science, and work towards gender equality. Bound conceptually by my life-long exploration of femininity and nature, this body of work depicts women as protectors of forests, its trees and its wildlife.

This series of drawings merges the women's suffrage movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with the environmental movement of the 1960's. My move from the Midwest to the Pacific Northwest in 1995 brought my attention to this region's history of environmentalism. My distress at viewing hillsides devastated by large-scale logging operations, my identification with the ideals of radical environmental advocacy groups such as *Earth First!*, and my interest in the novel *Ecotopia* by Ernest Callenbach all made me more aware of the fragility of our natural world and the assaults it endures from those who would pillage it.

Instead of the red blood of our bodies, Leaf Girls have blood loaded with green chloroplasts (the bodies in plant cells that carry on photosynthesis) that help depleted trees grow. Through the metaphor of phlebotomy and transfusion, they can help sick trees become healthy again. There is a reciprocity in the word *transplant*: Leaf Girls give microscopic bodies to the cells of trees, supplying them with the machinery of life; in return, the trees release oxygen to the planet, ensuring the survival of future environmental activists, scientists and researchers—and all other creatures.



Attack



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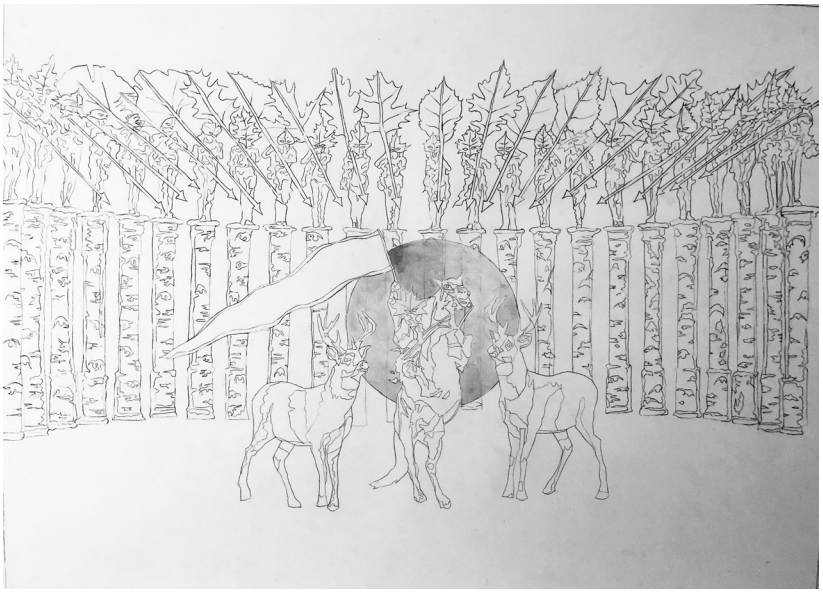
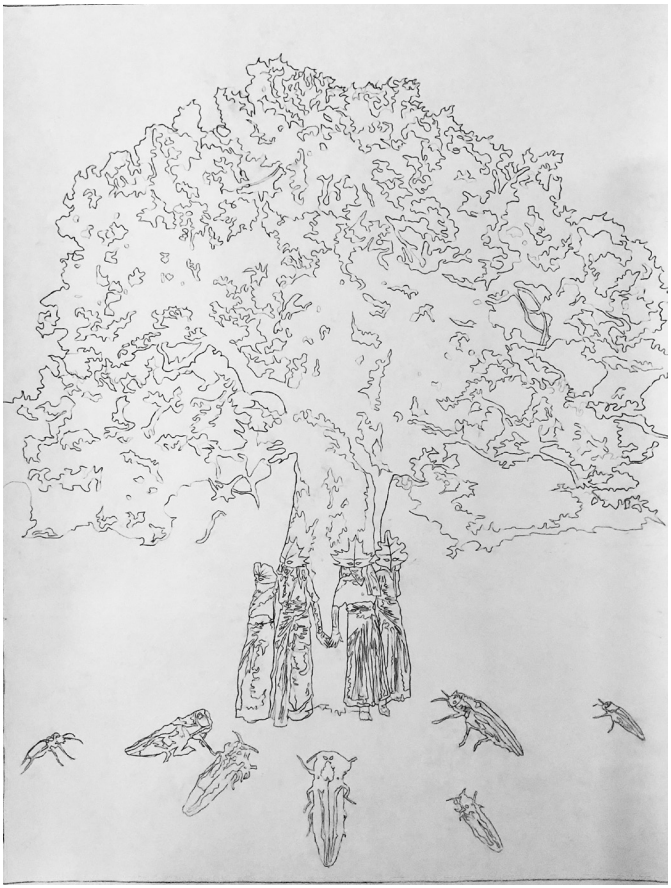


Conserve



Emerald Ash Borers

Revolution

Robert Glück
Communal Nude: Collected Essays
SEMIOTEXT(E), 2016

Writers Who Love Too Much: New Narrative 1977-1997
eds. Dodie Bellamy & Kevin Killian
Nightboat Books, 2017

REVIEWED BY COREY ZIELINSKI

Writing Community: Narrative as Nakedness, Anthology as Orgy

1.
Spring 2016: Adam and I liked to talk poetry during the ride home from our Wednesday night workshop. It usually ended around 9:40 p.m., which meant that we were always tired. Conversation would begin somewhere in the parking lot as we slogged from the repressive lighting of a university seminar room to my less-than-fascinating Kia. John would take his seat in the back, preferring to listen but occasionally interjecting with something thoughtful and moving. Maybe it was the sense of the city falling asleep that gave our conversations life. Consider the cliché images: streetlights, double-yellows, the smell of cigarettes, imbued with our hardly omniscient discussions of Walter Benjamin or Robert Duncan or Giorgio Agamben or Norma Cole. For some reason, these poets and thinkers made a little more sense at this hour.

Around this time, I became interested in the work of Rob Halpern, specifically his most recent book *Common Place*. Rob had visited our university the previous fall, and although I had never read his work before, several phrases from that night stuck with me: "go for the cock," "state-sponsored death," "my detainee." When I brought this interest up to Adam, they had a lot to say. As a former student of Rob's at Eastern

Michigan University, Adam insisted that if I really wanted to figure out what was going in *Common Place* then I had to explore New Narrative. A week later, Adam delivered a stack of heavily-notated books to my office. Dodie Bellamy's *Cunt-Ups* crowned the stack, followed by other New Narrative titles, including Bellamy's *The Letters of Mina Harker*, Bruce Boone's *My Walk with Bob* and *Century of Clouds*, and Robert Glück's *Jack the Modernist*.

2.

New Narrative is often discussed in terms of its neglect. In comparison to the critical attention received by Language poetry, this predominantly gay and lesbian set of experimental writers emerging in late-1970s San Francisco has been disconcertingly undervalued and overlooked. However, several recent publications of/on New Narrative have begun to correct this oversight, including *From Our Hearts To Yours: New Narrative as Contemporary Practice* (2017), edited by Halpern and Robin Tremblay-McGaw, *Writers Who Love Too Much: New Narrative 1977-1997* (2017), edited by Dodie Bellamy and Kevin Killian, and Robert Glück's *Communal Nude: Collected Essays* (2016). The first of these texts illustrates the numerous ways in which New Narrative practices continue to interest contemporary poetics, while the latter two (which are the primary concern of this review) offer an expansive glimpse into the diversity of New Narrative texts that enact these practices. I come to these publications with an interest not only in the formative role the San Francisco queer community played in New Narrative's early days, but also in how the writing practices of New Narrative emerged simultaneously with a reconsideration of what it means to be a community.

3.

Jess. *The Mouse's Tale*. 1951-1954, collage, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

The cover of Robert Glück's *Communal Nude: Collected Essays* displays *The Mouse's Tale*, a paste-up by San Francisco artist and partner to poet Robert Duncan, Jess. In one of his many essays on visual art, Glück writes of his consistent visits to this piece at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. The collage renders, Glück writes, "duel dramas legible from different reading distances" (*Communal Nude* 139). He continues:

> First I see the large nude silhouette with its skeletal head and ample butt, fingers splayed in terror. Then I see the abundant nakedness, more suggestive because the eye discovers and coaxes each body out of a shrubbery of more nakedness. The composite nude… confuses life and death, an uncanny effect that Jess complicates by using photographs of living people. (ibid.)

On the one hand, Glück believes *The Mouse's Tale* depicts an orgy, "a swarm of Lilliputian exhibitionists, tireless multipliers of sexual urge" (140). On the other, Glück witnesses a much more fearful image, of a naked body crouching before the threatening gaze of a "cat/lion, symbol of empire" (ibid.).

Glück's attention to *The Mouse's Tale* recalls for me another visual rendering of a composite body: the title page of Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*. In contrast to the 'communal nude' of Jess's collage, the composite body of the *Leviathan* is a Brobdingnagian sovereign looming heavily, with scepter, sword and impartial gaze, over a definitively set-off cityscape. Beneath this image are decorations of power and war: a castle, a court, a cannon, among others, complementing the Sovereign's chainmail dress. Yet, much like *The Mouse's Tale*, this image requires a double-take; closer attention to the chainmail shows that what first appears as metal links transform into a collection of indistinguishable faces and bodies collected under the sovereignty of the quite literal head of state.

Figure 2: Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*. 1994, title-page.

The juxtaposition of these images suggests the break between past and future communities, between what it once meant to share in a "commonwealth" and the struggle bound up with cultivating a new form communal belonging. As Steve Abbott, a key originator of New Narrative alongside Glück and Bruce Boone, writes in "Notes on Boundaries/New Narrative," "[w]e might 'believe in' community, but not in the same way people did a century ago," leading him to ask later in his essay if "we really want community again, in the same way, with all its nostalgia and repressiveness" (*Writers* 213, 214). Here, Abbott exhibits a necessary pause, a moment of hesitation that cautions against the dangers of reproducing a community founded upon the same social and political concerns of those that have led to the isolation and domination of marginalized groups. Following Abbott, New Narrative must therefore endeavor to envision a community that does not rely upon the same presuppositions and interests of the dominant social order.

4.

With brief recourse to the thought of Hobbes, Sigmund Freud, and Giorgio Agamben, the conceptual differences between the prior forms of social and political order that Abbott wished to avoid and the alternative sense of communal arrangement that New Narrative writing enacts become quite clear. According to Hobbes, the founding principle of a commonwealth is "the introduction of restraint" upon the individual's "natural passions" (107). One imposes such restraint upon himself with:

> …the foresight of their own preservation and of a more contented life; that is to say, of getting themselves out from that miserable condition of war, which is necessarily consequent … to the natural passions of men, when there is no visible power to keep them in awe, and tie them by fear of punishment to the performance of their covenants and observation of those laws of nature (ibid.)

Thus, sacrificing certain natural drives allow for the emergence of arguably greater public freedoms. Acquiescing to these restraints, however, not only places one under the protective power of the state, but also *subjects* them to the state's rather Foucaldian system of discipline and punishment that threatens to eradicate any *subject* who fails to cohere to the commonwealth's norms.

Freud reiterates this sense in his landmark *Civilization and Its Discontents*, noting that "[t]he final outcome [of civilization] should be a rule of law to which all—except those who are not capable of entering a community—have contributed by a sacrifice of their instincts, and which leaves no one—again with the same exception—at the mercy of brute force" (72). While Freud maintains the necessity of a form of Hobbesian restraint, his brief references to "those who are not capable of entering a community" require further consideration, for in Freud's argument these persons become socially-accepted targets of aggression and violence. As he writes in regard to the Jewish people just three years before Nazism came to power in Germany:

> The advantage which a comparatively small cultural group offers of allowing [aggression] an outlet in the form of hostility against intruders is not to be despised. It is always possible to bind together a considerable number of people in love, so long as there are other people left over to receive the manifestations of their aggressiveness … In this respect the Jewish people, scattered everywhere, have rendered most useful services to the civilizations of the countries that have been their host… (99)

The "useful services" of the Jewish people described by Freud are reminiscent of the same open hostility and aggression that queer communities have continued to be subjected to since the earliest days of Gay Liberation to present. We can take, for example, Glück's short story "Sanchez and Day" in which the narrator and his dog Lily flee from a Chevy full of men screaming bigoted slurs. As Glück sprints for his life, he hopes that "no police cars"

notice he is running because "attacking a homosexual is not such a clear-cut offense as, say, stealing a package or processed cheese" (*Writers* 1). Glück's fear of law enforcement hinges upon the reality that his sexual orientation is considered a greater crime than the violent harassment of queer persons. Following this realization Glück recalls a laundry list of friends who have been subject to similar instances of state-sanctioned violence: "I had ample time to remember Kevin's bashed-in teeth and Bruce getting rousted and then rousted again by the police, and the Halloween when a man yelling 'queer' charged Ed and me with a metal pipe" (ibid. 2).

With this list in mind, we can reflect once more upon whose body Glück sees crouching in terror before the ominous lion's head of *The Mouse's Tale*. Is it his own? Or that of a friend's? Is it the body of the entire queer community? Likely, it is all of the above. And yet perhaps there is also a secret hope hidden in his figure. As the socially-accepted scapegoat of aggression, this figure could symbolize what Agamben would call the *homo sacer*, or a those who "could be killed without committing homicide" (87). And while this position carries with it quite awful implications, Agamben nonetheless also sees within the *homo sacer* "the principal enemy of the State" for its ability to "co-belong without any representable condition of belonging" (86-7). Following upon this, Agamben suggests that the *homo sacer* maintains the potency of an alternative mode of belonging with others. If we are willing to accept that the figure of *The Mouse's Tale* does embody the *homo sacer*, then perhaps the Jess collage does not depict a community cringing before the threat of its eradication, but rather hints at the emergence of a new group self caught in the tension between becoming representable before sovereign rule and its very ability to evade such identification.

5.

> "I read and wrote to invoke what seemed impossible—relation itself—in order to take part in a world that ceaselessly makes itself up, to 'wake up' to the world, to recognize the world, to be

> convinced that the world exists, to take revenge on the world for not existing." (*Communal Nude* 13)

Etymologically, 'narration' stems from both French and Latin roots. *Narracion*, *narrationem*, *narrare*, all of which hold in their heart *gnarus*, consisting of the suffix *gno-*, "to know." This breakdown leads us to question how the conventions of narrative, such as a unified narrator or all-encompassing storyline, impact our experience of (our coming to know) one another. How do the customs and practices of narrative inhibit our ability to cultivate new forms of communal relation and social organization? And finally, how do challenges to conventional forms of narrative create new forms of community? To answer these questions, there is a need to strip down, to make writing naked by exposing the arbitrariness of its rules, to interrupt any sense of narrative as something clean, linear, progressive, as if it weren't ridden with gaps.

One way this nakedness is cultivated in New Narrative is through the negation of the self. In contrast to Hobbes's theory of self-preservation, New Narrative begins to theorize a form of narration that "wants to seize whatever stands for self and demolish it, kill it along with every model" (*Communal Nude* 28). In a way this suggests that narrative must possess a quasi-suicidal inclination, and yet necessary to understanding the depth of this inclination is the thought of French thinker Georges Bataille. In in his essay "Bataille and New Narrative," Glück begins to draw out the influence Bataille had upon New Narrative, particularly in relation to thinker's pornographic writings:

> The reader wonders how far Bataille will go. At the same time, the impossibility of willing nakedness and irreversibility onto the page becomes a kind of unapproachable limit, but no more than turning language completely into an object or banishing narrative from words. Shame itself is part of the chain of regulation and we break that chain, along with the rule against hurting ourselves, when we become naked. (118)

This sense of nakedness is taken up further in Glück's "Long Note on New Narrative," where he addresses the importance of sex writing to New Narrative practitioners: "In writing about sex, desire, and the body, New Narrative approached performance art, where self is put at risk by naming names, becoming naked, making the irreversible happen" (20). At the heart of this vulnerability, of this "becoming naked," exists the negation of self that Bataille thought crucial the cultivation of community: "Bataille showed us that loss of self and attainment of nothingness is a group activity. He supplied the essential negative, a zero planted in the midst of community" (21). The very nakedness enacted by New Narrative writing, therefore, is an act of opening upon the possibility of a community founded upon the making of the self irreversibly vulnerable to the public.

This is exhibited, in one sense, in Sam D'Allesandro's short story "Walking To The Ocean This Morning," featured in *Writers Who Love Too Much*. In this story D'Allesandro writes quite explicitly of a sexual encounter with his lover, Jimmy:

> I loved being so vulnerable. I loved it when my tits or my cock or my asshole would destroy my own ego with their needs. If your body wants something bad enough you can't say no no matter how humiliating. He could say anything, call my anything, make me do anything, after which I would immediately start begging for his cock. At those moments I didn't matter, only my ass did. (*Writers* 152)

We sense, already, the obliteration of D'Allesandro's self in the sublimity of his sexual encounter. And yet, the effect of such a naked narrative in which the negative is achieved does not stop at the experience of D'Allesandro. Rather, as Killian suggests in his own piece on sex writing, this type of pornographic writing characteristic of D'Allesandro:

> has some kind of chemical effect on the reader. I get hard, I can't contain myself. A fugue results, between the closed system of language and the complex system of molecules that holds my body together a real communication begins. Obedience. All narrative is corrupt insofar as it attempts to ape the realities of our lives. These include the disjunctions, strangenesses and confusions of sexual gender we live with. (ibid. 293)

The nakedness and negativity of the narrator is therefore that which deploys the first communicative gestures that invite the reader to break the passive glass of their spectatorship and enter into a community that is grounded very concretely within the body of the abolished self.

The negativity posited at the heart of narration promises to cultivate a sense of community very similar to that which was being developed in French theory, translated into English in the 1980s—most notably in the work of Jean-Luc Nancy and Maurice Blanchot, both for whom Bataille also served as pivotal interlocutor and model. Resonances of Glück's insistence upon the role of nakedness and negativity in narrative emerge in Blanchot's discussion of community and writing. Here Blanchot not only contends that "community is not the place of Sovereignty," but also argues that community, through writing, is:

> what exposes by exposing itself. It includes the exteriority of being that excludes it—an exteriority that thought does not master, even by giving it various names: death, the relation to the other, or speech when the latter is not folded up in ways of speaking and hence does not permit any relation (of identity or alterity) with itself…" (12)

Narration as death. Narration as relation to the other. Narration as speech-rupturing speech. Absolute immanence deferred/differed. On could say that this "exteriority," given multiple names by Blanchot, is precisely

what Glück and other New Narrative practitioners attempt to achieve in their emphasis upon negativity, upon the cite of surrender, where mastery (or sovereignty) is persistently evaded, leaving experience incomplete. Furthermore, a community that "exposes by exposing itself" recalls for us once more the sense of nakedness, but stemming from a Blanchotian sense, becoming exterior means coming to terms with its own incompleteness, its own inability to tell the entirety of its story, leaving the community open, in a state of potential that might "spur as-of-yet unimagined conversations and texts, new readers and writers, unanticipated solidarities and camaraderie" (*From Our Hearts* 14).

6.

Spring 2017: I returned the books to Adam nearly a year later, either lightly skimmed or unread. Despite my shallow engagement with these texts, I can still recall quite explicitly the bathhouse orgy scene about 60 pages into Glück's *Jack the Modernist*. Not unlike the disappearance of individual nudes into the composite nude of *The Mouse's Tale*, Glück describes the orgy as a "*consciousness altering state*" where the participants' bodies blend into a "*unity that can't be dismissed or… broken into parts*" (*Jack* 57, 56)." Striking here is the similarity between this account of orgy and the "economy of loss, of sacrifice and expenditure" that Bataille believed to result from transgressing "the rule of order." As Glück explains, this form of "counter-economy" moved "past the bounds of self to become a continuous rather than a discontinuous being—not continuous with the local community, but continuous with heterogeneous matter" (*Communal Nude* 114). Much like the negation of self achieved in the nakedness of narration, orgy seems to also enact a loss of self that allows one to enter into an "endless and incomplete relation" within the composite body of the community. What becomes, perhaps, even more inviting about this theorization of community as orgy is that one does not necessarily need to be present at the orgy in order to take part in it. When characterizing the sexual activity of his community, Glück suggests that orgy reveals, "that a public bond connected even private sex

acts … All sex acts have a public aspect, but perhaps in different ways. An orgy may have been the public forum in which my community described itself to itself" (116). Following this, even the most isolated encounters with New Narrative sex writing invite the reader to take part in the orgiastic sense of becoming continuous.

Reflecting upon this sense of orgy, I wonder if we should consider Bellamy and Killian's *Writers Who Love Too Much* as an enactment of that communal orgy. The answer seems to be both yes and no. We are used to anthologies as collections of "greatest hits," showcases of the "best work," and more recently as publications that highlight, and thereby legitimize, marginal groups that have not yet received recognition from the literary establishment. In this sense, anthologies serve a significant political purpose—they are a means of declaring and/or celebrating a specific identity. Yet, the self-annihilative effects attributed to New Narrative seem to make the positing of identity impossible and the political purposes of anthology void. The trouble here is not unlike the "double movement" Glück ascribes to the sex of his community. While on the one hand, it "affirmed communal life… as a site of loss and release from the bounds of self," it also, on the other hand, was "the stage of [their] newfound identity" (115). This 'double movement' is perhaps how we should conceive of *Writers Who Love Too Much*—while it enacts the communal orgy that transgresses the bounds of the self, it also gives representation to a camp that has long been overlooked by the literary world.

However, claiming the latter immediately demands qualification. While the anthology of Bellamy's and Killian's might satisfy our desire for some cohesive representation of group identity, it is nonetheless important to recognize that this group identity is continually disrupted by the eclectic interests and forms of New Narrative practice. The more canonical pieces, such as selections from Kathy Acker's *Great Expectations* and Eileen Myles's *Chelsea Girls*, are complemented by pieces of ephemera, such as interview excerpts and even Killian's own scathing "Open Letter to the Editors of *Apex*

of the M," which condemns the editorial practices of those who still treasure poets that have been explicit in their "fag-baiting bigotry" (Ed Dorn, in this case) as exemplars of a "humanitarian" poetics (*Writers* 425). This letter's content, in particular, gestures to the fierce sensitivity and love—to Bellamy and Killian's own nakedness—that went into the arranging of this anthology, while also reminding us that these editors not only lived through the terrifying years of the AIDS crisis, but also lost many of their friends to it. As Killian writes, "I think of the years reeling by, all of them littered with hideous deaths and endless funerals" (ibid.).

I find something simultaneously dreadful and lovely about this. Killian's letter is a tough reminder of what cannot be unseen—such as the way Sam D'Allesandro's "white skin just tinged to a beautiful pale green"—nor recovered, and yet Killian's loss of such dearly loved friends inspires me to wonder how we can begin to cultivate community with those who are most drastically absent from our view (295). How do we continue to extend our community, especially to those who seem too far beyond our composite body? How do we reach those who have not yet revealed themselves or can no longer be revealed? I like to think that these are the untiring concerns of a community still writing itself, still putting itself into question, still risking its exposure and vulnerability while inviting its readers to do the same. At this, I give the words back to Bellamy and Killian:

> We cannot relive our past, but gathering together and sharing these seminal works that formed who we are as writers and what it means to be a writer and to exist as a writer within a community is as close as we can get to returning to those golden days when we discovered, or thought we had at any rate, a new kind of writing, a new way to interact with the world. (xv)

Or, perhaps, to Sam D'Allesandro: "nothing ever really just disappears" (156).

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From Our Hearts to Yours: New Narrative as Contemporary Practice
Rob Halpern & Robin Tremblay-McGaw, editors
ON Contemporary Practice, 2017.

Reviewed by Jackie Kirby

New Narrative Goes to the Twenty-First Century

The year is two thousand eighteen and the thing called "New Narrative" has found herself to be the It Girl of American lit studies. Unfortunately, she always had trouble defining herself (she never really wanted to and only ever did so begrudgingly). This is one of the qualities by which she has excited and enchanted people, but also led to her adoption by those who turn her obscurity into superficial aesthetic. *From Our Hearts to Yours: New Narrative as Contemporary Practice* (ed. Rob Halpern and Robin Tremblay-McGaw, ON Contemporary Practice, 2017) seeks to show how New Narrative has grounded herself in the twenty-first century, and to tell (both her loyal and disloyal practitioner-readers) her story in a manner more fitting to her nature—or to the sociopolitical condition of her existence. Each of the twenty-five essays speaks of or through her from twenty-five perspectives and in twenty-five directions, and their arrangement and collection in *From Our Hearts* tells the story of over half a decade of an incessantly dynamic American social politic. If New Narrative is "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,"[1] as Halpern and Tremblay-McGaw posit in their introduction, then the essays in *From Our Hearts* reveal New Narrative aesthetics for their political ethics and place them in contemporary American life.

The tendency of an unexamined critical anthology centered around a literary phenomenon/a such as New Narrative, one that necessitates a historical

contextualization and that explicitly arose/arises from a set of social relations, is to produce a discrete mythological realm, out of which Writing emerges. They are isolated from both political and temporal "outsiders" as Arthurian heroes, from a distant, golden age. "New Narrative" certainly has an uncontested "origin story," the phrase Halpern and Tremblay-McGaw employ to describe the writing, relationships, aesthetics, and theories which emerged in the late seventies and nineteen eighties, "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."[2] This narrative, the same as found in Glück's "Long Note on New Narrative," is echoed in essays throughout the anthology. The history posited in "Long Note" is reified through repeated references and citations of it (the index notes sixteen references). While "canon" seems a dirty, or laughable, word—Halpern and Tremblay-McGaw conspicuously avoid it, instead adopting the phrase "cornerstone New Narrative texts," and emphasizing caveats like "might include;"[3] later in the anthology, Robert Dewhurst refers to the "New Narrative canon/confabulation"[4]—the legends of the Language Poets' Reign of Terror, of the Left/Write conference, of Kevin Killian's keynote address at the Poetics of the Nineteen Eighties conference, build an historical cycle, if not a literary canon. *From Our Hearts To Yours*, however, problematizes, retcons, complicates, and ignores the New Narrative legends as often as it reinforces them. What emerges, then, is not Arcadia but a weave of intersecting historical threads, left tangled with gaps and loose ends, letting each layer of the genealogical parchment sound off.

It is the conscious arrangement of essays that create this "remix" of New Narrative mythos/canon. Catherine Wagner's opening essay, "Naming Names in the Fabulous Real," calls out neo-New Narrative and "first generation" New Narrative practitioners side-by-side, and ends with a post-script written after the initial piece critiquing it in light of the "name-naming interventions of the Mongrel Coalition Against Gringpo."[5] Next, Brian Teare's "To Weave Ever the Names of Love" moves back in time to

the Berkeley Renaissance via Bruce Boone's critical work in the nineteen eighties, pulling that dialogue into the contemporary world via Halpern's *Music for Porn*. This trans-historical dialogue is emblematic of *From Our Hearts* as a whole. Eric Sneathen's "Those Fabulous Narcissists" moves from erotic descriptions of Sam D'Allesandro wet with nostalgia, to recent works by Dodie Bellamy and Kevin Killian, to Elisa Glick's critical work on developing a genealogy of Anglo "dandy poetics." Oscar Wilde is now "playfully ribbing" Brandon Brown as Sneathen investigates the adoption of gay linguistic practices by straight-identified poets. D'Allesandro's eroticism haunts the piece but only as mediated through Bellamy. A century of gay politics and poetics in America culminates in a cruising fantasy. On the book's opposite end, Dewhurst's essay on John Weiners, half-seated in mid-century America, is followed by Thom Donovan's reflections on "Teaching New Narrative," grounded firmly in the twenty tens. Then, closing the anthology, are pieces by Camille Roy and Carla Harryman—reminding the reader those writers whose past work had been discussed at length previously are still working, thinking, continuing their projects.

Harryman's essay, "This Is a Letter About Noise, Distinctions, Names, and Language, with Notes on *The Obituary* by Gail Scott," last in the anthology, is one of the more radical interrogations and critiques of New Narrative praxis, and its placement suggests the reader leave *From Our Hearts* with a critical stance towards the historical, political and aesthetic practices described previously. Harryman's association with both the Language Poets and New Narrative practitioners is notable here. Language Poetry suffers the most mythologizing—referred to primarily as the despotic literary regime which spurred the Bonapartist New Narrative writers into action. Again, *From Our Hearts* gives a voice grounded in the present to the actors in the repeated dramas. Structurally, the essay uses and subverts the epistolary tradition of New Narrative as a half-letter to the editors (Halpern and Tremblay-McGaw, not of *Vanity Fair*). Most notable, however, is Harryman's realization that "the obstacle [to writing an essay on *The Obituary*] was the New Narrative frame, even as envisioned through the open-ended context

[Halpern and Tremblay-McGaw] had invited and which [she] had happily responded to."[6] To then diverge from such a frame, such a set of practices, raises the question of whether even New Narrative's open "array of poetics" is or has become too limited for its own purposes.

Trace Peterson's "New Narrative and Pre Narrative" raises this question as well, discussing kari edwards' poetics in their divergence from New Narrative practice rather than their "New Narrativity." Although Renee Gladman is listed in the introduction as an author discussed "in addition to" what might be a New Narrative not-canon, two full essays center around her work. Numerous other examples reveal *From Our Hearts* to be an anthology in constant contestation with itself, never allowing it to uncritically be any one thing but shifting and folding in opposite and parallel directions.

In one of New Narrative's favorite fables, Barrett Watten tells Bob Glück he's trying to have his cake and eat it too. Decades later, *From Our Hearts to Yours* likes to eat its cake and have it too. Fans of Discovery Channel's drama miniseries *Manhunt: Unabomber* or Ted Kaczynski aficionados will know this to be the phrase in an earlier form. Discovery Channel's drama miniseries *Manhunt: Unabomber* posits the phrase has been reversed for four hundred years. Google Ngram viewer makes a case for its use in both forms since seventeen fifty, with eat-first preferred until nineteen thirty-five when it dropped in popularity inversely proportionate to have-first's rise. It seems modernity can and will have and eat and eat and have his cake, though he rarely admits his ability to do so. *From Our Hearts* fully flaunts this ability and continues both its spirit and the spirit of other fables surrounding New Narrative's origin story. The year is two thousand and eighteen and the political tactics of the nineteen eighties have vastly different implications. There are true crime dramas about linguistic forensics and internet data sets which allow you to graph the popular written use of a phrase over centuries in a few seconds. But the project adapts to her environment; the question asked by Glück, and echoed or hailed throughout *From Our Hearts*, "what kind of representation least deforms its subject?" has vexed and galvanized

writers since its asking. Should New Narrative wish to continue to thrive—if she even desires, for she may see stepping back into obscurity as a bugbear or a hobgoblin to haunt the new New of literature as her best option—she must continue not to confine herself to a set of techniques, to epistolary lyrics and text-metatext, but to live as "a centrifugal movement, always traveling idiosyncratically away from its more familiar point of departure in late-nineteen seventies San Francisco along very diverse trajectories."[7]

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[1] Rob Haplern & Robin Tremblay McGaw, "A Generosity of Response," *FOHTY*, 14

[2] Ibid., 7

[3] Ibid., 8-9

[4] Robert Dewhurst, "A Superficial Estimation", *FOHTY*, 271

[5] Catherine Wagner, "Naming Names in the Fabulous Real, *FOHTY*, 25.

[6] Carla Harryman, "This Is a Letter About Noise, Distinctions, Names and Language, with Notes on *The Obituary* by Gail Scott," *FOHTY*, 313.

[7] Halpern & Tremblay-McGaw, 11.

Kevin Killian
Tony Greene Era
Wonder Books, 2017

Reviewed by David W. Pritchard

Let's start at the end of Kevin Killian's latest collection of poems. The penultimate piece is an essay that shares the book's title—"Tony Greene Era"—in which Killian introduces us to the work of the painter Tony Greene, who died in 1990 of AIDS. The story has a familiar shape: a young California artist, remarkably talented, enthusiastically queer, is cut down in the prime of his life by the "national conversation" that Nancy Reagan never started. And yet Killian, no stranger to writing about the persistent traces of the AIDS crisis in our contemporary moment, does not merely present us with Tony Greene as an object for mourning. Instead, it turns out that he has been building up to a comment about the book we're holding in our hands. I quote the last paragraph from "Tony Greene Era":

> Tony Greene showed in San Francisco once while he was alive, at Southern Exposure, a group exhibition with Millie Wilson and Doug Ischar. Curators programmed a few events for the show—this was 1988? 1989? At one of them, I was invited to read, along with fellow San Francisco queer writers Bob Glück and Dorothy Allison. Going through my papers recently, I found my folder of poems read that evening. I've put them all in this book you're reading—[…]; but I close with something new, a poem I wrote in memory of Tony Greene, just a little while ago. Half an hour ago. Forty minutes tops. (93)

I omit the names of the poems Killian reveals were composed in the 80s to preserve something of the thrill that this moment in *Tony Greene Era* delivers. Besides, what's at stake—what I want to talk about in this review—

is the implication of the gesture itself. What does it mean to reveal, at the end of a book, that a whole set of poems we've already read were written some 30 years prior? Why reassure us that the last poem in the book was the most recently composed? Why does this unfold through the prism of AIDS? Is that tasteless? Are poets allowed to do this? Usually this is the point where one says that the poems interrogate X, formalize Y, or that the poet is the great asker of questions. But I don't think that's quite true here. Rather, Killian very specifically wants his readers to ask the questions of his poems. In theory the difference between the two proposals seems small, but in practice it feels colossal. It shifts the entire center of gravity of a reading experience. We do not marvel at the text as though it were, in Robert Glück's phrase from a talk on caricature, a piece of Georgian silver; instead, we are incited to grapple with poetry as a mediation of the problems of real life, to measure these poems against the world to which they respond.

This interplay of form and content that says to the reader, in an arch inversion of a trope from detective stories, "you're the ones asking the questions here!"—the name for this device is text-metatext. It was first theorized by Bruce Boone in his afterword to Robert Glück's *Family Poems*, which is one of the foundational theoretical documents of that Bay Area blend of experimental poetics and queer standpoint, New Narrative writing. Boone is concerned to articulate a "countertendency" to an overweening modernist formalism without giving up on the formalist proposition that writing is more complex than just passive communication of meaning and unproblematic vectors of reference. Boone writes of Glück's poems that they "find it satisfying […] to keep a running commentary on themselves—the metatext that is spoken from the present—while onstage appear conventional anecdotes, such as these narratives of someone's past, of ethnicity and family life. They are stories that mime a past as overheard by a mocking, sometimes cynical presence that seems to be manipulating them for its own ends." It doesn't take much to see how this applies to *Tony Greene Era*, where we learn there's a whole vector of temporality at play we wouldn't have noticed if Killian hadn't called it to our attention right before closing

on the most recent of his poems (at the time of his writing: every time you read that line about a poem written 30 or 40 minutes ago, there is a splitting of signifier from signified as straightforward and compelling as anything you'd find in the pages of an 80s avant-garde magazine like *Language*). Like Glück (in Boone's reading), Killian makes the incorporation of narrative into his poems an explicitly political affair. This does not involve an ascetic reduction of the poem that dares capital to try to exchange it, so much as a lush swan dive into the deep-end of the value-form, after which the poet, Olympian, graceful, resurfaces to great fanfare.

The outer limit of this metaphor lies in its implication that capitalism's life-world is a swimming pool we can climb into and out of, or that Killian's poems treat that life-world as such. It's not, and they don't. But the failure of my device points toward one of the remarkable things about *Tony Greene Era*, which is the way it manages to maintain a commitment to pleasure without losing sight of the immiseration that conditions that pleasure at every point. A good example of this can be found in one of the book's funniest poems, "Get Outta My Way (A Sestina)." Killian simplifies the process of choosing end-words by cutting down the number of terms from six to two: scotch and Stritch (as in Elaine, who originated the role of Joanne in Sondheim's *Company*, to which "Get Outta My Way" alludes in a line about "the ladies who lunch"). The resulting poem is hilarious and absurd. At 16 lines it isn't even long enough to feign sestinahood according to the dictates of that received form—but this supposes one takes the first two "couplets" as lines, when they could just as easily be parsed as prose. This indeterminacy would seem to be the point, especially since these lines thematize the failure to produce a proper sestina that this poem indexes gleefully:

> As a party game, we used to ask, like Kylie Minogue: "What's the worst thing that could happen to you?"
>
> I don't play that game no mo. I'm lucky I guess, but is there such a thing as occurrence without agency? Inside the belly of the sestina, (25)

On the one hand, breaking the lines on articles might suggest a severe right margin, but on the other hand everything becomes quite neat if viewed as verse: we move from a definite to an indefinite article and "such a" and "sestina" sound a visual rhyme ("a" and "sestina" do, I think, actually rhyme). As a matter of fact, if we include the end words from these lines—"a," "the," "sestina," "you"—then Killian has in fact chosen his six words. And he repeats all of them in the rest of the poem, just not at the ends of lines. What does this mean for my initial observation, that this poem "fails" to coalesce according to its received form?

In the essay quoted above Killian notes "how deeply California art has invested in failure and contingency" (92). "Get Outta My Way" would seem to register a version of this investment: the failure of this poem to teach us how to read its remixing of the sestina (other than in light of the sestina-form), and the contingency of any possible reconstruction of the sestina-form out of its formal wreckage here. You could go about it any number of ways; no matter what, the poem has you right where it wants you! This is, then, one version of how Killian broaches immiseration, as a matter of the interplay of agency and totality. At the risk of embarrassment, one wonders whose agency the line quoted above refers to: that of the reader or that of the poet? The anarchic disregard for the constraints of the sestina leads Killian to produce new constraints, which we in turn are asked to try to figure out through a juxtaposition of this poem with the generic category of the sestina. Add to this the fact that in the poem we're always "inside the sestina" or its belly, and that the speaker "survived just like Elaine Stritch," who "sang about all the things she survived" (25)—a whole narrative starts to congeal around this agency/totality dyad that suggests our relationship to it will always be one surviving what we're inside. But this is given a comic counterpoint in the figural linking of survival to Elaine Stritch, and to the prospect of singing "about all the things she [we?] survived." This poem could well be singing about what it survived: whatever pleasure results is a concomitant to a struggle.

At this point we have to say something about pop music, which is a constant source of raw materials for Killian. The title of this poem is from "Get Outta My Way," a Kylie Minogue song (this reviewer's favorite Kylie song, let it be said) that Killian quotes at the beginning and end of his sestina. This, like the use of Kylie in so many of Killian's poems (including his whole book, *Action Kylie*, dedicated to the pop star), would seem to invite an analogy between poetry and pop that in certain permutations enjoys a great deal of attention among contemporary poets. But in this poem pop music becomes the basis for the torsions between agency and totality just noted. It narrativizes the tight repetitions of Scotch and Stritch, suggesting that Killian's anti-sestina is just doing to poetry what pop does to its raw materials, making them endlessly quotable, citable, and able to be regurgitated by everyone everywhere always. So what gives pleasure can become as alienating as the process of production; there's no way to avoid the social hieroglyphic of value as it stamps every person, place, thing, and relation. It's as if the speaker of the final line of this poem is capital itself quoting Kylie Minogue: "Now I've showed you what I'm made of, Scotch, Stritch" (25).

I worry this sounds a bit grim. Or, I know it does, and I am convinced I shouldn't end a review of such a delightful book on such a bleak note. But maybe that's the only way I can end, just like the only way *Tony Greene Era* could have ended is with the most recent poem Killian wrote, in memoriam Tony Greene. I'm tempted to say that the grisly underbelly of pleasure claws its way to the surface the more we talk about pleasure, and that this is if nothing else a good reason to keep talking about it. In a final twist, Killian makes of his poetry an occasion for the most sustained interrogations of everyday life, during which he can, if he wants, slip out the back door—or better, vanish in a puff of smoke like the murderer in an Argento film, leaving us wondering who could possibly have done something this completely brilliant, beautiful, and a little horrifying. In this context, *Tony Greene Era* is a glimpse caught of Kevin Killian over our shoulder while looking in the mirror, one that mystifies us but leaves us wanting, to give Kylie the last word, "More, more, more."

Simone White
Dear Angel of Death
Ugly Duckling Presse, 2018.

Reviewed by Dale Enggass

In the seventh section of "Stingray," a series of ten ten-line poems from her third full-length book, *Dear Angel of Death*, Simone White writes, "In this form it is impossible to be together" (36). In the context of the series, this assertion may address a lover, the ray, the poem, or even poetry itself. "Form," after all, is an important word here. Appearing five times (once as "formless") in short succession, the word's context seems to drift from the act of writing to making love to the apparent formlessness of the sea. On this sea, "a craft, a craft appears," a vessel but also a poesis, a practice of making.

The questions of form and the breaking of form, of the possible impossibility of being together in writing or otherwise, are central to *Dear Angel of Death*. The book has a triadic structure: two sections of poems and a final section in the form of a long essay. The first two sections, "Dollbaby," in which "Stingray" appears, and "Endings," feature poems that deal with motherhood ("Motherhood is a State of Hypervigilance," "The First Day"), the dissolution and reformation of intimate relationships ("Stingray," "For Flossie"), and personal reflections on family ("Dog Poem"). White's poems generate intensity through unexpected leaps between styles and registers. In "Dog Poem," for instance, the speaker's memory of the unusually warm fall night of her father's death opens onto the somewhat more critical observation, "I suppose / I have come to understand ecological disaster in these / limited terms, as fallen evening, as a reflection of a more general / limitation of world ideas, inability into discussions of / structure or apparatus without the help of lyric rendering" (40-41). White's poems range from such meta-poetic moments of self-awareness to prose poems

that rush headlong into the blur of memory to the spare fragmentation of "Stingray." For me, reading these poems feels like reading part lyric, part essay, part invocation. They explore and expand not only the limits of form, but also the racial and gender-based limits on being-with imposed by American literary discourse.

In this way, the poems are not so much distinct from, as a kind of staging ground for, the questions of style and permission that inform the third section, "Dear Angel of Death." This essay grapples with the central role music plays in the work of Amiri Baraka, Nathaniel Mackey, and Fred Moten. White's title is a play on Mackey's multivolume novel *From a Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate*, an extended epistolary project in which the narrator, N, details the musical exploits of his experimental jazz band in letters addressed to the "Angel of Dust." Mackey's novel is an intricate meditation on the expressive possibilities of jazz, and includes a comprehensive discography of deep cuts from bebop to free jazz. White includes brief discographies of her own, but of hip hop and R&B. For White, Mackey's apparent fusion of writing and music is indicative of a larger critical and poetic tradition in which music, especially black music, especially jazz (and *not* hip hop or R&B) comes to stand (in) for the innovation and improvisation present in what scholar Aldon Nielsen has called "African traditions of expressivity." White immediately takes issue with Nielsen's phrase, which she argues is too abstract to actually indicate how specific black people have navigated not only modes of cultural production, but also "blackness' overdetermination" (91). White asserts that for her such overdetermination "has come apart at the seam of the Music," and wonders "what else might be available? What metaphor, if not the Music, will hold the pressure of being forced into 'bone-deep listening, uncanny attunement to the surround'" (104). The essay, then, is not exactly a rebuke of these writers (who are, she makes clear, very important to her thought and work), but rather an attempt to intervene in what has become the inevitability of the musical metaphor, and to show how this metaphor breaks down when detached from a specific tradition of radical thought.

Brilliantly and provocatively, White deconstructs Baraka's/Mackey's/Moten's reliance on the musical metaphor by showing how a "language that *goes off* doesn't aspire to the condition of music; it aspires to itself" (112 italics in original). She then asks whether the appeal to jazz as a liberating art form (and thus a model for black writing) still works when applied to rap, which has been, more than jazz or R&B, the music of *her* life. In short, White contends that rap music—in particular the subgenre "trap"—is immensely important to her, and yet it does not manifest the same "kind of consciousness" that jazz does for Baraka or Mackey (143). For White, (t) rap music, true to one connotation of its name, does not posit a way "out," an escape route or an experience of fugitivity, in the way that "the Music" is supposed to. If the music metaphor does not extend to rap, White asks, why is this, and what does this mean for black writers and how they situate themselves in relation to music—a question that is, to be sure, also relevant to *all* writers working right now. What is more, White situates her claims within a broader critique of the work *citation* does in literary criticism. What, White asks, does a heavily citational practice reveal? Who gets to be part of what Moten might call the study group constructed by way of citation? Who gets to be together in (and out of) the text?

White begins her essay with the first page of Baraka's book *Digging: The Afro-American Soul of American Classical Music*. In particular, White is stuck on the lengthy epigraph from W.E.B. Du Bois, describing his concept of the "new song" of black music in America, with which Baraka opens his study. Indeed, White reproduces a facsimile of this page, because, she argues, "I need to deal with this page as an image—graph or map, notations indicating the terrain or shape—of the territory" (76). This opening attempts an almost phenomenological mode of reading, a mode in which, as White explains, "Before I read, I see a block of text, and the name, 'W.E.B. Du Bois,' which functions as a picture and a mode of transport toward a variety of ideas relating to the intellectual significance of black persons in the history of the idea of America" (78). The juxtaposition of texts and authors brought about by the use of epigraphs, and of citation more generally, also forms "a visual/

verbal bridge" between the present work (in this example, Baraka's) and the work that has come before (Du Bois'). For White, the resulting "linguistic intimacy" reveals "the history of ideas as murmurings between Du Bois and Baraka, the masculine order of black writing" (79). And, as Baraka's textual arrangement suggests, this order "values being seen together" (*ibid*.).

In this "being seen together," this space of *digging* the same things together, White reads not only the construction of an intellectual tradition, but the creation and enforcement of a specifically masculine space that excludes certain kinds of relations. Perhaps "enforcement" seems like too strong, or violent, a word to describe what is, after all, often figured as a utopic space of improvisation and freedom. Note, however, White's incisive rebuke of Baraka's rhetoric of digging: "I am stuck on why I cannot quite perceive in the discourse of digging those actions done to the thing that has been gotten down on or gotten with, looked up and down. Ask a woman what happens when a thing is acted upon in any of these gendered ways. (I want to get with her. I got with her. She could get it.)" (83). In other words, Baraka's insistence on "getting down" with black music (specifically Jazz as opposed to R&B, as White points out) suggests "some variation of being in a top position" (ibid.). In contrast to Baraka's "more-than-whisper of sexual domination"—which, she adds, "need not be gendered male, but tends to come that way"—White proposes the ethic of "going down in order to get down," a position that requires actual entanglement with what is being dug. In addition to the exclusively male space(s) established by Baraka's engagement with both black music and Du Bois, then, the main problem White identifies is that any actual entanglement with music, and what music may or may not express about black life, is subordinated to a logic of the "up and out" that citation makes possible.

Indeed, the music is also missing from Baraka's account of digging. White asks us to "[n]ote that the sung song itself is *imagined as heard by Du Bois*, then *imagined by Baraka as an explication of the heard*, the song never actually having been in the presence of either of these two" (82 italics in original).

What's being dug, in other words, is less the music than Baraka's relation to and with Du Bois. White refers to such relation as "infolding," and, in order to "build a structure for exploring the mechanism of this black intellectual infolding," contends "that the interventions of Nathaniel Mackey and Fred Moten from the 1980s up to and including today … take off from the language Baraka leaves in the space he folds into with Du Bois" (85-6). This fold is not, ultimately, about music, but about language.

The core of White's argument is that language persists even, or especially, at the moments writing aspires to the condition of music. A poet insisting on the significance of language may not be entirely surprising, but White's discussion of Baraka, Mackey, and Moten is particularly noteworthy because it goes against so much received opinion that accepts the musical metaphor. Her reading of *From a Bottle* focuses on a key moment in the progression of the narrator N's radically experimental jazz band when balloons begin to manifest during live performances. N describes these thought balloons, or "emanations," as the novel's title refers to them, as "words taken out of our mouths" and a "vocative imprint" (qtd. in White 113), an inscription of name(ing) that synaesthetically surpasses music to become what White calls "*proper writing*" (115 italics in original). White doesn't specifically define how she is using this term, but I take "proper writing" to indicate, ironically, the disarticulation of self at work in Mackey's fiction: *proper* suggests proper noun, a self-possessed inscription that invokes (stylistically or otherwise) a singular author. And yet, for White, Mackey is interested in "displacing the black genius improviser" with "knowledge of the possibility of becoming multiple" (ibid.). As proper writing (or, perhaps, as writing proper?), the balloons undermine the musical enterprise. Allow me to cite White's astute (and even funny) distillation of the issue:

> What's fascinating in *From a Broken Bottle* is that the massive scale and complexity of the changes-in-self Mackey envisions for his fictional black persons might (and I can't imagine he doesn't know this) require them to give up a sacredly held view of their central

> spiritual and intellectual ritual—playing music. This is why the balloons are such a HUGE PROBLEM (112).

The moment N. and the band seem to break through, to go up and out, is precisely the moment when their music manifests as language—more specifically, as a kind of citational language that supplants the music it purports to supplement. People start coming to their shows just to see the balloons. For White, the problem of the balloons thus re-stages "the central problem of the avant-garde," that is, the tension between a desire for a kind of universal language, and the potentially exclusionary nature of an esoteric practice, what White here calls "a newfangled black gnostic poetics" (113).

But White also engages the issue of accessibility at the level of what it means to do literary criticism. In the extended passage I quote from above, for example, she combines a more or less straightforward thesis statement, a personal aside on Mackey's own sense of his project ("I can't imagine he doesn't know this"), and a deliberately colloquial statement that uses all caps for emphasis. As someone whose own writing most often takes the form of "academic writing," I find White's critical style refreshing, not the least because it manages to open up new readings of a text (that is, it is interested in not repeating what we know) even as it challenges literary-criticism's presumption of arrival at some kind of stable knowledge: "There is no way to prove this" (126).

A similar meta-critical passage appears later in the essay when, after providing a cogent explanation of Deleuze's use of the "the fold" as a philosophical concept, White asks, "Who cares what Gilles Deleuze said about folding?" (127). Here, White is getting at the crux of her own critical, and philosophical, practice: "why do we have to talk like this in order to describe black people's being together?" (ibid.). The question, then, is both rhetorical and one White is genuinely asking of her own use of citation in order to enter the space of "infolding" or relating-back. As White goes on to ask, "When I relate back to [Deleuze] through the [Jared] Sexton-Moten

matrix of men's thinking, is that a retrograde act of criticism that strengthens the history of the ownership of all known words by thought that obsessively measures its relation to knowledge that can only be white and male? Black women can't think from Thomas Jefferson right on out to lunch…" (ibid. ellipsis in original). Or, as she elaborates in a recent interview in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, "I don't have to be afraid of critical engagement with a sexist tradition, and I don't have to come at this from a place of lack. I just start talking like I'm in the conversation. Previous feminisms have opened the door for me to do this, so I do it."

In the final pages of the essay, there is a parallel between White's engagement with literary criticism and her engagement with rap. Listening to Vince Staples' "Blue Suede," White is aware of how, as she puts it, "this music is fucked up, it's not about freedom at all" (146). This music is seemingly unconcerned (unlike Mackey's version of jazz) with "a way OUT," as suggested at least in part by its casual, desensitized depictions of violence against women. And yet, as White states in the same *LARB* interview mentioned above, "*This is the best music I've heard in years*" (Emphasis in original). Similarly, we might say that literary criticism in its current conventional iterations is fucked up, it's not about freedom at all. But White is not interested in simply affirming such a critique. Rather, her writing continually poses the question, "what does it mean to be in and not of it, to love and refuse it: *to be in and out at the same time*?" (145). It's some of the best writing I've read in years.

Anne Boyer
Garments Against Women
Ahsahta Press, 2015

Reviewed by Allison Cardon

What is a Minor Reality? Paranoia in *Garments Against Women*

It's no secret that paranoia and theory share their structure, if not their hermeneutics: both explain the world by discounting some perceptions and validating others. Freud himself noted the commonalities between his own psychoanalytic theory and the paranoid instance he takes as paradigmatic—the self-described nervous illness of the German judge, Dr. Schreber, whose delusions included the belief that the sun shined out of his ass. Having used Schreber's memoirs to describe the etiology of paranoia, Freud quipped: "It remains for the future to decide whether there is more delusion in my theory than I should like to admit, or whether there is more truth in Schreber's delusion than other people are as yet prepared to believe."[1] His joke highlights the politics of both the illness and the theory: each is fundamentally about accounting for the relationship of a particular subject or grouping of subjects to a general, authoritative reality. Paranoia is a n unauthorized departure from this reality—a minor reality.

In her 2015 collection, *Garments Against Women*, Anne Boyer takes up Freud's challenge to the future to investigate the relationship between truth and delusion, and while she may not finally find truth in Schreber's..." particular delusions, she does examine the question of authority at the heart of Freud's quip. For Freud, paranoia is characterized by a distorted relationship to reality: "an internal perception is suppressed, and, instead, its content, after undergoing a certain kind of distortion, enters consciousness as a form of external perception. In delusions of persecution the distortion consists in a transformation of affect; what should have been

felt internally as love is perceived externally as hate."[2] For Boyer, reality distorts and discounts particular perceptions. Indeed, certain kinds of people seem to have a monopoly on valid "external perception," while some sorts of perceptions are relegated to "internal" status—"all in the head "of the perceiver: "[d]espite the reality of the sky, that it is blue, a woman without any interior is trumped by a man with any exterior. Or that is what I read in the notes: even the color of the sky is stable only as long as it has a man's proof." Questioning the self-evidence of Freud's distinction between internal and external perceptions, she shows how that distinction is refracted through social categories like gender—encoding authority over reality or discounting certain versions of it."

Eve Sedgwick famously noted the symmetry between the paranoid and political postures: "In world where no one need be delusional to find evidence of systemic oppression, to theorize out of anything *but* a paranoid critical stance has come to seem naïve, pious, or complaisant."[3] With critical mass, Sedgwick suggests, paranoid perceptions can be transformed and elevated to erudition. Boyer explores the other side of Sedgwick's observations: voiced in the wrong context or by the wrong person, a prescient critique can be deflated and discounted as paranoia. But while the label of paranoia can prohibit the broad acceptance of a particular critique, it can also act as a mask or a screen for the critic. Boyer shares perceptions that she knows would be dismissed from authoritative reality as paranoid. She discloses open secrets—"inadmissible information"—strategically sharing information that would render her a target were they made in any other form or medium than poetry:

> Poetry is the wrong art for people who love justice. It was not like dance music. Painting is the wrong art for people who love justice. It is not like science fiction. Epics are the dance music of the people who love war. Movies are the justice of the people who love war. Information is the poetry of the people who love war.

Here she interrogates one common sense, authoritative understanding of poetry—that it is, indeed, an art appropriate for those who love justice—as she considers certain kinds of art and their relationship to certain political stances. Her claims are reminiscent of Adorno's militant insistence on the fascism at the heart of the culture industry. Yet by making she these claims *as a poet* in a book of poetry, they fly under the radar—she reveals an open secret in a form that "the people who love war" will ignore. Open secrets are as much about the people who know them as they are about their content; they're dangerous when they are disclosed in the wrong context by the wrong person.[4] Boyer manages their threat by articulating this information as she claims precisely those positions whose relationship to reality are tenuous at best: poet, woman, mother. The poet's claims may as well be delusional, paranoid projections.

I don't mean to claim that all projections are paranoid; rather, those of the paranoiac have a special character for Freud because they represent an attempt to reconstitute the world: "[t]he end of the world is the projection of this internal catastrophe; [their] subjective world has come to an end since [their] withdrawal of [their] love from it….And the paranoiac builds it again, not more splendid, it is true, but at least so that [they] can once more live in it."[5] Boyer's projections are paranoiac insofar as they allow her to shore up her connection to the world instead of turning away from it completely: "the human subject has recaptured a relation, and often a very intense one, to the people and things in the world, even though that relation is a hostile one now, where formerly it was hopefully affectionate."[6] Though poetry may not help her gain an authorized purchase on the dominant reality, through it Boyer recaptures a relation to the world. Her poetics enable her to examine the politics of reality and remain in the world in spite of its hostility.

The reality principle enables the normative individual to "differentiate between what is internal—what belongs to the ego—and what is external—what emanates from the outer world."[7] But the poet, like the paranoiac, has difficulty differentiating between them. Boyer records the realities that

exceed or escape this principle, documenting the processes by which they are minoritized and dismissed. See, for example, "Venge-Text":

> I will leave no memoir, just a bitch's *Maldoror*. There's a man. He tells me he does not like the version of the story in which he is like Simon Legree who ties me down to the railroad tracks. This is because he is like Simon Legree who ties me down to the railroad tracks. He is the man who looks at the blue sky and says, "Do not remember this sky as blue."
>
> I look with my eyes at the blue sky and see that it is blue, then also I look with my eyes at him and make a note to not remember the blue sky as blue. I make a note, also, to remember the proclamation, by him, against the color of the sky. I make a note also, that I will have known the sky was blue, then I will have been told to forget what I know about the sky and probably did. I make a note to doubt the legibility of these notes for they are notes about people who together believe a human sentence—one spoken by a man and heard by a woman—can commute the blueness of the sky itself. (49)

The man who ties the speaker down is like Simon Legree, the spectacularly vicious slave-owner from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, because both demand that their victims deny their own terror and the reality to which such terror is a testament. Instead of leaving a memoir, she makes a series of notes (writing at its most provisional) that subtly undermine the reality he violently imposes. Memoir is unavailable to her because the genre requires a less vexed relationship to reality, and the Legree-like man is the embodiment of the reality principle, crushing her reality and overwriting it with his. Memories or documents that offer a different understanding of that reality are inadmissible, unreliable, or paranoid. The man's reality disavows its own violence by declaring an essential commensurability between his experience and hers. His is the norm, so hers must agree with his to be valid. Interchangeability and exchangeability are

the organizing principles of this reality: if I cannot show how my experience is universally available and applicable to all, my experience is idiosyncratic, paranoid, and does not count. Boyer anticipates and elides this policing simply by articulating her reality in a poetic mode—after all, poetry is not a form known for its realism. Over and over again in *Garments Against Women*, she makes claims about reality and traces how they are diluted, discounted, or effaced. The politics of reality are caught up in the web of her paranoid projection.

Paranoiac projection is particularly unseemly because it stages a different set of relations between the internal and external, the major and the minor, that which characterizes normative reality and the authority that it supports.[8] These projections reveal how that reality is not just relational but political—a matter of social construction and coercion rather than immutable, self-evident fact. Boyer's poetic projections trace the construction and consolidation of that reality as well as its casualties. Indeed, the reality principle demands conformity from everyone—but this is easier for some than others. In "At Least Two Types of People," she meditates on this difference:

> There are at least two types of people, the first for whom the ordinary worldliness is easy. The regular social routines and material cares are nothing too external to them and easily absorbed. They are not alien from the creation and maintenance of the world, and the world does not treat them as alien … The world is for the world and for them.
>
> Then there are those over whom the events and opportunities of the everyday world wash over. There is rarely, in this second type, any easy kind of absorption. There is only a visible evidence of having been made of a different substance, one that repels. Also, from them, it is almost impossible to give the world what it will welcome or reward. (23)

The first type of person is a normative subject who appropriately differentiates between their internal and external perceptions. The latter category comprises everyone else—those whose insides and outsides threaten to overwhelm normative distinctions and for whom the rewards of monolithic reality are out of reach. The prosey quality of these lines is both Boyer's disguise and her tell: it gives her claims a sense of logical progression even as it exposes the illogic of the reality she can't quite measure up to. The form both covers and exaggerates the veracity of her claims.

Boyer's theory of absorption suggests that one will have an authorized grasp on reality if they are willing to deny their particularity. The normative type of person is thereby able to keep up with the demands of the reality principle by internalizing the logic of infinite exchangeability; what's more, the demand for exchange reveals the collaboration between the reality principle and capitalist ideology. *Garments Against Women* dramatizes the imperative to internalize this logic of exchange through Boyer's attempts to replace "literature" with almost anything else. Take the poem "Sewing," for example: "Having given up literature, it was easy to become fixed on the idea of a single shirt" (25). Though she trades one pursuit for another, her paranoia forces their singularity—their inexchangeability—into view. She cannot make literature exchangeable with sewing. Nor can she make one sewn object interchangeable with any others. The paradigmatic product of market exchange and mass-production—an article of clothing produced by the garment industry—is not exchangeable here, despite all the forms of exchange that make the industry, market, and its products possible:

> I sew and the historical of sewing becomes a feeling, just as when I used to be a poet, when I used to write poetry, used to write poetry and that thing—culture—began tendrilling out in me, but it is probably more meaningful to sew a dress than to write a poem. (29)

She goes on to list the costs of mass-produced garments at the stores in which they are sold, alienated from the labor conditions and laborers that

produced them. Someone with a firm grip on reality might make their purchases without a thought, enjoying any product as though it arrived at the store by magic. Boyer is not one of those people:

> All of these have been made, for the most part, from hours of women and children's lives … The fabric still contains the hours of the lives, those of the farmers and shepherds and chemists and factory workers and truckers and salespeople and the first purchasers, the givers-away, who were probably women who sewed.

Ultimately, sewing and writing are both forms of paranoid resistance to the logic of exchange—these products (these projections) are each irreplaceable. Exposing the imperative to participate in this sort of exchange, Boyer thereby highlights the opposition between the dominant, monolithic reality and a careful account of particularity. That reality insists that all experience is essentially shared and that attachments are thus exchangeable and replaceable; in her paranoia, Boyer can reject this imperative and attend to her particular objects and experiences, minor though they be.

One of the implications of Boyer's intervention is her sense that the paranoiac is characterized by their abnormal or anti-normative relationship to loss—the time lost sewing, the connections lost to capital, the perceptions lost to the reality principle. By highlighting its particularity, its singularity—that is, in its historicity—she invites us to recognize the underlying drive motivating her paranoia: an insistence on recognizing and remarking historicity and particularity; the principles of a minor reality over and against a majoritarian one. *Garments Against Women* projects a world "not more splendid…but at least so that [we] can once more live in it."[9]

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[1] Eve Sedgwick's famous essay on the sort of paranoia that seems to saturate most literary criticism and political theory begins by noting that, "[i]n the last paragraphs of Freud's essay on the paranoid Dr. Schreber, there is a discussion of what Freud considers a 'striking similarity' between Schreber's systematic persecutory delusion and Freud's own theory…For all his slyness, it may be true that the putative congruence between paranoia and theory was unpalatable to Freud…" (Paranoid Reading, Reparative Reading 125).

[2] 1026.

[3] "Paranoid Reading, Reparative Reading." 125-126.

[4] For Eve Sedgwick, there is a fatal symmetry that structures the sort of paranoid knowledge that constitutes the open secret: "to know and to be known become the same process," and therefore the paranoiac will either be exposed for their paranoia or disciplined for their unauthorized disclosure (*Epistemology of the Closet* 100-102).

[5] 1028.

[6] *Ibid*.

[7] Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 14.

[8] *"The delusion formation, which we take to be a pathological product, is in reality an attempt at recovery, a process of reconstruction*…the man has recaptured a relation, and often a very intense one, to the people and things in the world, although the relation may be a hostile one now, where formerly it was sympathetic and affectionate." "On the Mechanism of Paranoia," 24, emphasis in original.

[9] *ibid*. 24.

Leslie Kaplan
Excess—The Factory
Translated by Julie Carr & Jennifer Pap
Commune Editions, 2018

Reviewed by Robert Balun

Form Warp: Reality Distortion in Leslie Kaplan's *Excess—The Factory*

The 21st century United States (with its networked, neoliberal, and globalized implications) is a strange, precarious, and dangerous place. In the face of social upheaval and ecological collapse driven and obscured by capitalism and its hyperreal media environment, how can literature and art adequately disrupt this environment so as to render it sufficiently opaque, able to be grasped and dismantled without reproducing[1] the violence that that cultural work might be seeking to respond to? Leslie Kaplan's *Excess—The Factory*, among many other important concerns, employs specific aesthetic strategies that warp time, space, and subsequently, perception. These disruptions establish an affective, atmospheric text which creates room for Kaplan's thematic concerns to resonate and reverberate. Moreover, these moves assist in defining an aesthetic theory that is up to the challenges of the 21st century, in an effort to address the above question.

In 1968, Kaplan began working in French factories with the intention of organizing workers there This experience would form the basis for her sequence of poems, *Excess—The Factory*. There's a touch of serendipity to the fact that a text essentially begun in 1968, just before the May '68 protest movement, and first published in 1982 during the beginning of the Reagan-Thatcher neoliberal divestment and austerity program, has now received a new, excellent English translation by Julie Carr and Jennifer Pap, in a beautifully produced book by Commune Editions, in these current throes of the post-financial collapse and continued destructive neoliberal 2018 transfer of wealth, just when we need texts like Kaplan's more than ever.

In 2019, in these years of ongoing struggle for ecological, economic, and social justice, I think it is imperative for cultural work like poetry, literature, and art to engage with the intersections of these critical issues. This work, however, must also sufficiently disrupt the contexts and realities from which it is derived, so as to not reproduce and perpetuate the violences of the struggles it is responding to. By sufficiently disrupting one's perception of those realities, paradoxically, those contexts are rendered more accessible, able to be grasped, resisted, and dismantled. Moving towards the disruption of perception, yet still rooting content within specific contexts, in order to construct utterly new perspectives, is vital to making and thinking about cultural work today.

Indeed, in an interview with Carr and Pap, Kaplan describes this distinction:

> When I wrote *L'excès-l'usine* [*Excess—The Factory*] I came little by little to think about the difference between anecdote and detail. A real detail is the condensation of many different levels, an infinity of levels. This detail opens up an enormous quantity of worlds. An anecdote, in contrast, just keeps you there ... It just repeats ... the eternal violence that of course is there for everybody always.[2]

Excess—The Factory is rooted in this eternal, violently, utterly mundane world of factory work and day to day existence within factory systems. And yet Kaplan's text is able to disrupt this reality and push it into something strange and uncanny; known but just slightly off. By distorting time, space, and, subsequently, perception, Kaplan's text allows for a greater resonance of her concerns.

A key disruption is the way Kaplan's text is infected by alienation; while *Excess—The Factory* does indeed describe and actualize Marxist alienation (the loss of autonomy and agency of the laborer as they are commodified and separated from the production of their labor), the way that Kaplan's text glitches and warps time, space, and perception allows the reader to perceive a more total ontic alienation, of capitalism as completely isolating one's being

beyond and outside of work, as a result of capital's influence and intrusion into every facet of life, such that capitalism affects the way reality itself is experienced. This alienation pervades and distorts the environment of the entire text, which allows the text's concerns and aesthetic strategies to unfold.

Ostensibly organized around a Dantean descent through nine circles, nothing really changes from the beginning to the end of *Excess—The Factory*. Each circle repeats the tropes of the last, even as the settings change, highlighting the ubiquity of our systems of work and wealth. Indeed, in the Ninth Circle, Kaplan writes, "You sit, you watch. The square is old, badly kept. The walls are crumbling, flaking. This time that stretches and turns ceaselessly, as at the origin." (108) This recursive stasis is important because it situates capitalism and the world it creates as an ongoing loop (Or, as Timothy Morton might describe it, an algorithm that has been running and upgrading to keep itself running since agriculture began in Mesopotamia[3]). Indeed, it's hard to pinpoint essential economic differences between 1968 and 2018 (and even 5,000 BC); we are still beset by private property and divided between those who own it and those who don't.

This looping repetition is like a skipping record caught in a groove, repeating the same sequence; the ways in which we repeat, essentially, the same actions in a day to day life organized around work and paying your rent: wake up, commute to your job, work all day, come home, convalesce in order to get ready for work the next day, ad infinitum; repeating the same actions, with only minor variations in detail. The glitching of time in *Excess—The Factory* is important because it implies the terrible stasis and repetition of a life organized around work (as opposed to a life organized around community, fulfilment and meaning-making). While there is motion, repetition implies stasis, an inaccessibility of progress and life-experience.

This static, inaccessible time is directly established in the first circle: "Time is outside, in things." (15) There is only commerce, only work, nothing but the factory. With no time, things take on a purgatorial timbre. For example, in

the fourth circle, the phrase "The young woman is there, infinite..." (48-49) is repeated on two facing pages. This repetition gives us that looping glitch of dynamically static time, that the same actions are being repeated again and again, that the status of working people does not change from one day to the next. Additionally, the use of the word 'infinite' is interesting, as while infinity implies totality, it simultaneously implies stasis; all there will ever be. Moreover, placing the infinite inside a factory means that infinity cannot go anywhere or do anything, except work; all of existence locked in the factory.

When we do finally get a glimpse of the world outside of the factory in later circles, the world is the same and vague, old and crumbling, and always in the shadow of the factory's commerce: "There are rails in the sky. / The train passes." (89) And when we arrive, "It's an absent city ... The houses are old. Inside, the white tiled floors are cracked, very cold." (93) The shadow of the factory, and its deleterious implications, loom large over the world, casting a ubiquitous pall.

The way this text resists specificity to convey the subjugated homogeneity of the world outside the factory (or the continuation of the factory outside its gates) is instructive towards thinking about how one might engage with and disrupt specific 21st century subjects. Among the last pages of the text, Kaplan writes, "At the end of the square, there is a big statue, heavy and precise, a king on horseback, as there often is. The square bears his name." (108) The phrase "as there often is" is vital here, as it shifts the emphasis away from the name of the king, resisting the inclination to inform people; resisting the need for information that many people crave to establish narrative and situate themselves in reality, when in fact the very fact that we are embedded in an environment essentially full of big statues of kings in squares bearing their names, that we are always encountering this landscape, is what's important, not the name of a king. This is an example of the difference between anecdote and detail that Kaplan mentions.

The king on horseback in a square bearing his name is a perfect symbol of the accumulation of wealth and the program of empire carried out in its name,

as well as the origin and end result of capitalism; an atemporal moment, the past occupying the present and determining the future. And while the form of the book means that the text must necessarily end, we are still deposited at the end of one loop and the beginning of the next iteration. While the text terminates, there is no resolution. It is easy to imagine the next day the same as the last, as in the heft of the opening sequence: "The great factory, the universe, the one that breathes for you ... You are inside." (13) In fact, we are guaranteed to begin the next day the same; the factory is the universe and we are inside it, being breathed for, until something is done to change these conditions.

In addition to a looping time, Kaplan distorts the spaces of the text, simultaneously expanding the atmosphere of the claustrophobic and confining worlds being inhabited (assembly lines, factory courtyards, grocery stores, cafes, small apartments, plazas), until suddenly collapsing them back into their dense singularities by the weight of their choking ubiquity and repetition. This allows Kaplan to further emphasize the notion of detail over anecdote, establishing an affective, atmospheric text, which creates room for her thematic concerns to resonate and reverberate.

The speaker of the poem moves through these crushing spaces, subjected to their oscillations, instabilities, repetitions, and ubiquity:

> All around, columns of air. Little waves curving.
> Endlessly space folds and unfolds.
> You are not supported, there is nothing between the lines.
>
> The space folds open. Walls and partitions, corners, cement.
> Sheet metal, understand…
>
> The little lines go in all directions…
>
> You go shopping. The grocery store, it's all the same. (40)

This thread continues on the adjoining page; another instance of repetition:

> Upstairs, the room waits…
>
> You sleep in a nightmare. You slip from room to dream, the substance is the same.
>
> The room is a room. You pay rent.
> You live, you die, each instant. (41)

This last line highlights the stakes of these static spaces; the price that is paid for life organized around work; the life and death reality of a hand to mouth existence.

Throughout the text the speaker loops through these spaces, through their life, like a .gif or an old cartoon; you appear to move, but really it's just the background repeating: "You go along the line, walking. Your feet are on the ground…" (27) When you finally do arrive somewhere, nothing has really changed; there is a new detail in the setting, but you haven't actually gone anywhere; the same actions repeat in the inescapable space of the factory:

> You are in the factory, you go on.
> You unfold, you advance.
> You move your thoughts a little.
>
> All this space, all around, curved. The factory is vast. (27)

The space is vast, endless; it is the universe for those who make their living through work. This sense of infinity, of never being able to reach the end of the scene is maintained throughout the text, as in the penultimate page: "You are enveloped, and at the same time, everything is far away." Space and reality are present, encompassing, yet remain distant, elusive and ungraspable.

But while nothing has changed for the speaker, while their future has been rendered final and total, we as readers can imagine new futures. This possibility is instructive for us in the 21st century if we are to break the ontic spells we are beset by and change our systems and our future. By rendering its atmosphere the way it does, the kinds of moves *Excess—The Factory* employs are useful for making and thinking about cultural work that seeks to address the struggles of the 21st century.

By disrupting time, space, specificity and perception, *Excess—The Factory* does not allow the reader the usual elements used to situate and ground oneself in reality. If the text did not disrupt its subjects that way that it does, it would lose its heft and become documentary, a simulation and projection of the real, a mediated experience that necessarily isolates the author from the reader and only retransmits information. Because the text disrupts reality that way it does, however, it is able to produce an ontic quality that amplifies its thematic concerns and allows these to resonate beyond the content of the text itself. With strategies like Kaplan's, an author could perform similarly disruptive moves and achieve similar effects to engage with the struggles of our time. As we continue through the weird and dangerous 21st century, a text like Kaplan's and the aesthetic strategies it deploys are increasingly imperative and useful for not only describing our world but dismantling the ruinous systems we are enmeshed in.

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[1] Cf. Reeves, Roger. "The Work of Art in the Age of Ferguson, Baltimore, and Charleston," Poets & Writers Live.

[2] Carr, Julie, and Jennifer Pap. "'There Should Be Battles'." Jacket 2, jacket2.org/interviews/there-should-be-battles.

[3] Morton, Timothy. *Dark Ecology*, Columbia University Press.

Omar Pimienta
Album of Fences
Translated by José Antonio Villarán
Cardboard House, 2018.

Reviewed by Marco Antonio Huerta

The histories of the border in *Album of Fences*

The verse in Omar Pimienta's *Album of Fences* is based on statements of facts that accrue towards an assemblage which traces a genealogy of memories that grows into a constellation that expands beyond the U.S./Mexico border. This album is both a collection of photographs and a collection of poetic images that weave stories of lost territories, lost lives, and elastic time. It is an album of how the border distorts both the concept of time and place, and how it blurs the certainties of something that's often considered a solid stable category, such as identity. The album portrays the constant struggle to reorganize forces to fight the next day against the front that one may have been a part of just the night before. Bordercrossing is messy in these ways. The translation into English by José Antonio Villarán plays along with this messiness to portray bilingually—as is common in the borderlands—the dusty, blurry landscape of these two cities that stare at each other from afar and through the fence between them.

The collection tells a familiar and familial history of borders, crossings, cat lifespans, freeways, fathers, friends, and sons. The first section, "Don Marcos' Blacksmith Shop," centers on Marcos Ramírez López, the father figure and leader of the pack of welders in the blacksmith shop. The poet's father is the main character in the journey told through each of the poems in this section. The audacity of Don Marcos as a border crosser is made evident through scars, like the loss of a finger, but also in the duplicity of

documents which name the same person, the same father who: "for years / in two countries / the same day / in two languages / he worked."

Marcos Ramírez López comes to life by means of the borrowed name of Prisciliano Gil Bautista, until he receives a death certificate from the voice of a border agent, after a life of illegal crossings—"never over the hill / never across the desert / never through the river"—and the greatest of revelations: "never as myself." Don Marcos has cheated death as much as he has cheated the border. The poet accounts for the opening of the blacksmith shop where don Marcos built a list of objects that are very telling of which are the needs in the lives of those working in the shop as apprentices, of those "orphans or semi-orphans expelled from schools":

> a giant whale a sea snail some clouds
> a flag boats with catapults
> a press to compress marijuana
> a heart
> a cage for birds another for humans
> ladders with hooks to climb the wall
>
> several door sand windows to fence up both sides of the border

The poet remembers a border town that no longer exists when it mentions seeing porn movies in Betamax format inside a room in a lost colonia Libertad that was home to the blacksmith shop which is now empty shanties under the sun. He acknowledges that "time stretches and contracts in memory / this text depends on that elasticity." And there is an affirmation that the poet can claim there is a point in time in which the border began. In this recognition the poet also claims that this temporality has a powerful effect over the way in which houses are built in this border town:

> from the back room that was a patio before
> and way before that before

the last lands of the manifest destiny

that's how houses are in pass-through cities:
they're built as life happens

And the *Album of Fences* tells its readers that life happens in duplicity in the borderlands, where tracing a line wire can take an unsuspecting electrician to the past or to a different country. Maybe there's no real difference between the two? Time passes by obliquely depending on latitude and longitude, just like the poet as a child who grows up with every trip they take to visit their relatives. The pathways to the past are sometimes obliterated: "every time I visit don Marcos / I walk over my childhood's archaeological remains."

"The Gradual Invasion" tells the stories of those who grew up gravitating towards the shop as they were getting ready to cross over to the forbidden realm. This was an invasion by those prepared to enter the realm behind the border, and after some time, coming back to invade the city that no longer recognized those who left before. The poet claims a timeline where the milestones are marked by crossing the border, and the relevance of those events depends on what direction was that body crossing towards. Crossing from north to south is quite different than crossing from south to north. The invasion spoken of in this album is mainly guided by these cardinal points and by threading the different paths that emerge or are erased as time passes by in asymmetrical velocities on either side of the border. The last poem of this section is also a hopeful glimpse at a future that can obliterate the border's cutting edge through the mutual understanding and intercultural dialogue that may rise from the exchange that happens in sharing knowledge and language through the labors of education.

But together with hope, the collection offers one of the cruelest images about the borderlands. Identities and body mass become as fluid as the sea that freely flows through the fence that ends a few feet into the Pacific Ocean:

sea that swallows and spits
a knife that cuts its tongue

a sea of shit that presumes its citizenry
crosses the posts and comes back

sand that dilutes the names
of all those who see the horizon
with our noses covered
at the edge of the first border

The metaphor of humanity is rendered carefully as the poet reminds us that we're not dust and maybe all that's left of us once we perish will be the ebb and flow of excrement diluting in a sea that devours a border fence, the greatest most efficient killing machine standing in the north-westernmost corner of Mexico.

The closeness of bodies, the joy of communing with similar minds, the warmth of this humanity is most visible in the last section of the book, "I Like to Sleep at my Friends' Houses." The section begins with a celebration of what seemed to be the solution to heal the jarring open cut (Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*) of the border "at the dawn of the millennium." The poet writes in remembrance of the Tijuana blogger community, which believes the promise of the digital world that claims that there won't be a need for borders, a revealing moment in which to suddenly realize that "little by little everything became a file." The lines in this section navigate the borders between the intimate and the public, through images of theme parks, hotel rooms, car accidents, and house parties. The moments which go unseen and the instances in which the body is not seen moving around both intimate and public spaces, and how memory draws from these moments:

life is to have ashes in our memory
not necessarily to seek death

but to simulate it in roller coaster freefalls
with your arms raised

Through these pages, there is an urgent need to use both the birth and death dates and locations. They occupy the same prominent position in the poems as they do in official ID documents, and question the necessity of a lyrical self while writing this kind of poetry in the proximity of the border checkpoints which use these time frames and locations to corroborate who the person named in passports, green cards, and visas actually is. The poems try to fulfill the need to provide proof that the body standing in front of you (whether physically or in writing) is authentic, true, alive. The names, the places, the dates, and the photographs are all there to teach us something about the border, its "most real truth: there are people who die at the hands of others / who believe killing is part of their job."

Omar Pimienta's book is an urgent call to focus our eyes on the border, particularly on its history and the histories of the bodies that live and die under its ominous immanent shadow cast on either side of it; especially at a time in which the political discourse has been radicalized through demands for a harsher boundary in the form of "a wall, barrier, or steel slats." It is an exercise through memory to write reality as it happens on both sides of the U.S./Mexico border, and the poems (or chronicles?) are the results that attest to the truth. The collection prompts readers to question their ability to read a photograph and to see the images drawn by a poetic text. *Album of Fences* is a bold cross-genre and interdisciplinary experiment by an accomplished artist who is also one of the most notable voices in contemporary poetry from Mexico. *Album of Fences* is one of the most consolidated deliveries in Pimienta's writing career so far after a lifetime living and writing about and against the border that has historically been the source of much pain for those living on both sides.

Josué Guébo
Think of Lampedusa
translated by Todd Fredson
University of Nebraska Press, 2017

Reviewed by Allison Grimaldi Donahue

It is a demand but also a wistful song, depending on how you say it. *Think of Lampedusa* by Josué Guébo, translated from the French by Todd Fredson and published by the University of Nebraska Press, is a call to action and a mediation. For days after first reading these poems I could do nothing but think of Lampedusa. I was caught in the waves, condemned to some in-between. In his introduction, John Keene compares Lampedusa itself to Purgatory, a sight of desperation and longing for an unknown utopia. As I read I felt both that confusion and that hope; while the poems contain brutality and darkness they also contain active pursuit of a future. The poems in this collection work in discreet units but also as one long poem, a journey with no clear ending or beginning. Like the Mediterranean itself, the poems both connect and separate, never one or the other alone.

One of the first poems in the collection speaks to this dual nature of geography, Guébo reminds us that the earth and the sea give as much as they take. Each word situated to each line like a boat to water:

> And I would light neither
> mourning candle
> nor candle for clarity
> upon the eyes of the ocean
> And in no water would I
> gripe about the hardship
> that has caused my tears
> to reverberate

There is much worse than a raft
adrift
The earth that would wreck it
The dry soil of a once-brotherly conscience
The ocean of stories
that are tragically scraped away
There is much worse than a raft
in death-throes
The earth
forgetting it's a source of life

But as the poem goes on it would seem that the speaker is not only talking about the earth but the men who inhabit it, about the geopolitical forces and economic powers that influence this mass movement of people from North Africa to the Italian island of Lampedusa. These poems recall the work of writers from Homer to Gaston Bachelard to David Walcott. The sea itself is a protagonist and the narrative arch of the poems refuses to fit into some traditional shape or timeline. Lines repeat and poems communicate with one another across the book—the journey is not a direct trajectory but one that moves the reader unexpectedly:

And even a roiling sea
isn't too much if you have
the kiss of the sun against your cheek
If the wave coughs
that's not too much to endure
holding yourself against the chest of the wind
That wave would dance the waltz of buried wishes
The wave would rock the silent tongues in its bed
So many departures
so many arrivals
But the wave would also know the happiness of the survivors
their wait in the alpine summit of Lukmanier Pass

They are the shivering stockage of a land that fears
the fears of this other
who like unfortunate Ulysses
is without papers

In his translator's note, Fredson writes: "Guébo's poetry does not stylistically engage the social realism that is conventionally associated with documentary poetics, but his work unflinchingly confronts the colonial legacies and sociopolitical circumstances that acutely impact daily life in the Ivory Coast, and in Africa more broadly." In other words, Guébo has rejected the given conception of "realism" in literature. The shape of the world influences the shape of narrative but perhaps we have also had the same-shaped narrative for too long. Stories and translations are multilayered. There is no master narrative and there certainly is no master translation; these poems exist freely in English, originals with a complicated past.

Last fall I had the privilege of participating in the &Now Conference at the University of Notre Dame. There I heard a panel discussion of Amitov Ghosh's *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. The book explains literary fiction's formal connections to bourgeois life and capitalism and how texts that disrupt this notion of reality are often called surreal or magical. Ghosh writes on the need to treat texts with extraordinary events as in fact realist texts and should be understood as such: "But there is another reason why, from the writer's point of view, it would serve no purpose to approach them in that way: because to treat them as magical or surreal would be to rob them of precisely the quality that makes them so urgently compelling—which is that they are actually happening on this earth, at this time." For Ghosh, climate change and mass migration are extraordinary events, not the mundane, rhythmic tales of literary fiction. While *Think of Lampedusa* is a book of poetry it is also doing this work of reframing our understanding of reality and how it is structured. The poems contain beauty and tragedy simultaneously,

they drift in and out of languages—French, Dida, Arabic—they drift in and out of time, of life and death. The story of migration is not told from point A to point B, rather the journey is more circular, dramatic, unending. The story of the sea and of migration is constantly changing and shifting, but it is always collective.

> The ground is nothing but the sea's fossil
> trace of the oceanic
> wanting to remain anonymous
> Deep in its throat each sea shifts a tongue of crust
> makes itself enigmatic to the mother tongues
> Mare Nostrum
> where people try to relight
> the fire of a brotherhood smothered by sandstorms
> Siblings rick their gains
> out on the surface of the sea again
> beautifully optimistic
> that this is not just another knife in the back

Guébo's approach to understanding and articulating migration between Africa and Europe does have some parallels in other contemporary works that discuss Lampedusa. As I read these poems I thought of Gianfranco Rosi's 2016 dreamlike documentary Fuocoammare, or *Fire At Sea*, which experiments with multiple modes of story-telling, with the sea and Lampedusa its center. Another text that connects me to *Think of Lampedusa* is Sicilian playwright Lina Prosa's *Shipwreck Trilogy*, which Nerina Cocchi and I have translated and worked with in different contexts over the past five years. Guébo's poetry reminded me of Prosa's ability to write the slow violence such hardships can inflict, of violence that is not unexpected but still shocking and how it can be rendered so visible through language. What is different in Guébo's work, and this I believe comes from the power of writing *with* and not *for*, is his honest depictions of race and racism, of cultural clashes and the risks people run because of them.

More than the words of sedition
more than the edicts of the tribunes
hunger harangues these crowds
Hunger entertains with tales of mountains
of marvels
Harranga
One who burns his papers
Gamblers with memory
scratch out adolescence
redact childhood
Days at half-mast
The auto-da-fé
authored by a haggard-looking future
Any line that holds the memory of
such a vacuous adventure
These scenes would have stuck with the people
like balls of coal under their feet
ID cards hung from the neck
certificates of nationality
Hands squeezed
a police record
Or dangling feet and fist

As Johannes Göransson writes in *Transgressive Circulation*, a collection of essays on translating: "While there is a desire to maintain boundaries, there is also a great pleasure in flooding borders, troubling boundaries, contaminating systems." There is always the risk of normalizing the language from which we translate; Guébo and Fredson manage to keep language strange through the telling of these difficult poems. Fredson as a translator is surely aware of the challenges in bringing poems "across" but it seems also that Guébo is also aware of this, aware that language itself is a reaching a desire and without it we are all stuck somewhere. The language of the poems invites a more complex vision of the world and of poetic language.

These hands sing Esperanto
with the solemn tone of a requiem
But the hands are nothing more than desire
led astray across shipping lanes
That heart's hands have received a mission
to carry mankind's dreams across the open sea
and here distracted by seasickness
have become immobile

Think of Lampedusa is a reminder of that oft felt disconnect between the lived reality of an event and the way it is portrayed in the news or even through some artistic forms. The seventy miles of sea between Tunis and Lampedusa are as distant or close as we allow them to be. Guébo writes:

Only the sea can erase our boot prints in the clay
or destroy the sandcastle
Already determined by blood
the earth has eaten its children
The sea does not tell me
what it has done
stretching its tongue
just a few lengths from Lampedusa

Think of Lampedusa gives the story of Mediterranean migration the complicated telling it deserves. The lives and the geography and the politics are as musical and painful as these poems. I've been reading the poems over and over again perhaps also because I do think of Lampedusa, often. Since I live in Italy, I see firsthand that we are at a loss for how to discuss and improve what is happening in our sea. If more people were to engage with text's like Josué Guébo's I believe we would have a better starting point, a better vocabulary to work with. These poems are certainly not documentary; they go beyond reportage and into the psychological and subconscious dimensions of language to better tell the extraordinary reality of people risking their lives in the hope of survival.

Lasana Sekou
Book of the Dead.
House of Nehesi Publishers, 2016.

Reviewed by Sara Florian

When I think of "Book of the Dead" a few fabled books immediately come to mind: *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, H.P. Lovecraft's *Necronomicon*, William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, and Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology*. Lasana Sekou connects with an ancient and global tradition of writing about, for, and after the dead, to face one of the biggest and scariest truths of human existence: death. He is certainly not just writing and thinking about the time passing by in his own life, but is embracing all those people that his "one love" nurtures and remembers in his poetic journey. From the enslaved people in the salterns to those who died in Middle Passage waters in chains. From those posing over in "mass graves" (47) in "murder shot" to the historical heritage site of the Great Salt Pond—which has become a dump and prompts "beverly's lament": "lasana / look what they doing / again, nah!? / poor pond" (34). From "Tom Hurndall": "locked in the sign of a sniper's cross" (53) and "Magno": "a coronation of bullets wheezing death" (54), to the "boyz" and "sonz 'n dem" in "die by bike." And while invoking the ancient and global in practically every poem, Sekou's voice probably belongs firstly to his Caribbean island of St. Martin, so in evidence when he sings "A Walkabout Poem for Patsy Brooks," which Jacqueline Sample describes as a testimony of "the brutal death of the gentle Patsy Brooks on the garbage dump, in the Great Salt Pond".

In the Egyptian book, the formulas or spells that accompany the dead toward the otherworld foreshadow the grotesque entities and difficult judgement that the soul will encounter. The Tibetan text is meant for the living to chant in order to help the dead overcome the cycle of reincarnations and reach Nirvana. Lovecraft's exercise of style and literary scapegoating has attracted many

interpretations on the gothic *gusto* for death. Golding's book has a political undertone. The *Spoon River Anthology* provides more ethereal epitaphs of a dead community. In his diverse span, Sekou is capable of merging magic spells and invocations of Legba to political memento, ethereal epitaphs to the excruciating inventory in "forensics," all to "liberate" us so that we can reach a poetic Nirvana.

In her introduction to Sekou's *Book of the Dead*, the Indonesian-Chinese novelist Xu Xi writes that, "the poems spin around the travesty of history and return to the mundane reality of our globalized life" (x). Both local and global elements are present in other instances of Sekou's oeuvre, such as *Born Here*, *Mothernation*, *Quimbé*, *The Salt Reaper*, and *37 Poems*. As in other collections of poetry and fictions by Sekou, I recognise the predominance of the salt theme in this collection as well (cf. the study *Caribbean Counterpoint* by this review's author, forthcoming).

Poems like "Saltern," "for love [don't you remember?]," "plans," "In season," or "forensics" possess elements of salt and sea emerging and carrying on the cause of getting the death of millions of slaves in the Transatlantic Slave Trade to be remembered and never forgotten. The aspect of healing involved with salt in the historic processes travelled by Sekou is a tonnelle, a monument "wrought" (3) to remember the enslaved salt pickers in the saltpans. Sekou's island, St. Martin, emerges from the water like an Atlantis from the ocean and becomes one of the grains of Derek Walcott's rosary of islands, which was praised and preyed upon. Using a maritime metaphor, Richard Drayton observed how Sekou's "anchorage" is St. Martin, around which the poet "weaves a world of Antillean thought." Indeed, Sekou's love for his island resurfaces as much in poems about crime as in verses about passion. In "for love [don't you remember?]," essentially about the love for women, the poet contrasts the "pyramid-pinnacle ascent" to the "slaveship descent to reap salt" (19). In this love poem, Sekou's rosary of goddesses and women is recited: "Isis, Oshun, Taia, Iyangura, Andromeda, Sheba, / Dandara, Défilée, Cherry, / Osceola's…/ Coretta, Betty, Ruby, Rita, Miriam, Graça, / Michelle, …"

(20). Like a spell in *The Egyptian Book of the Dead* the name Isis is repeated elsewhere with that of Osiris ("in her name"), where other mythological creatures sprinkle Sekou's firmament: Perseus, Cetus, even Pheidippides, in whose eponymous poem we read about the Greek messenger who died in 490 BC to announce the victory over the Persians in the Battle of Marathon.

Salt is a painful "grain … / eating away in we eye" (33). It is a reminder of the process of "borning" in the cradle of the St. Martin nation's "salted mine" and "brine" (35). It is especially in the poem "forensics" that we can fathom the depth of the pain caused by Slavery, as coffle is submerged in water, as if it were possible that "beneath the sea is the sinking sea" (41), with a stratification that makes the "wailin'" gurgle from within the core of the earth. A Brathwaitian "sycorax [is] mouthing tidaletics" (42), as the monster of the "seething empire" (41) has devoured and cut to pieces the slaves, analysed by a CSI lens in fragments, parts, fractured bones and "dis member ment" (42) to "re member" (43). What is even more painful in this poem are "fetus toes / chewed vulva / a shaft skin scar" (43). Children are also in focus in "children of man 12.25.15," and Sekou's little nation is not spared as a benchmark to compare what happens around the world: in the Dominican Republic, Gaza, Congo, Kurdistan, India, West Papua, the UK. The line about "refugee, unshedded lambs, destitute foundlings" (15) precedes and is yet current news about the immigrant children detained in cages in the USA, on the border with Mexico. As Michela Calderaro has observed, Sekou "connects past horrors to today's horrors, yesterday's borders and boundaries to today's borders and boundaries" (*Tolomeo*: 286). Today's politicians should be wary, however, of the untamed maroon spirit, the spirit of "weglopers" (8) or runaways—*that* has not died out. The same spirit recognized in "RECONOCIDO_en_QUISQUEYA," the VideoStyle poem that booms in our faces with the reality of laws against Black citizens in our time and of Haitian children exploited as "restavek."

When facing death or the idea of death, we may also be confronted with our earthly deeds, as much as our hubris. Why was heaven lost or "Paradise Lost"

in a first instance by Lucifer? His hubris caused his failure and fall. A similar arrogance led Icarus to fall on his first flight or Ulysses to end up in Dante's *Inferno* (XXVI canto). The drawings by Cozbi Sanchez that accompany Sekou's poems are vaguely reminiscent of some of the angelic/demonic figures etched by William Blake. The couple sleeping (xiii) splits to become in other drawings the male figure holding a cross (22), or a plane, the woman holding up a scroll (39) and then cradling a conch shell or maroon *abeng* (63).

Differently from Milton, Dante or Blake, Sekou's *Book of the Dead* is not Christian. Or better, it is not only Christian. There are references to Vodun, Islam, Judaism (for Gaza children and the Holocaust), to Rastafari and Babylon. It is also a book in dialogue with other Caribbean writers. "Labrish," set in Medellín, is for Aimé Césaire. In "Poem for the dead," dedicated to Kamau Brathwaite, Sekou remembers the "coffle ark limbos" (40), out of Angola and Benin portals. In "days of the return," Sekou is "on the sea with jaja of obopo" (44), the same King Jaja "traced" by the Barbadian writer Anthony Kellman, who won the 2018 Casa de las Américas Award with his *Tracing Jaja*.

Book of the Dead is another powerful collection by the St. Martin author, highly recommended to whomever wants to confront the array of emotional and political death so many of us face in front of the injustices of today's world.

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Allison Cobb
After We All Died
Asahata Press, 2016

Reviewed by Louis Bury

The World Without Us

50. "A permaculture guru I heard speak once," writes Allison Cobb in her 2016 poetry collection, *After We All Died*, "likened a house to slow release fertilizer as it imperceptibly crumbles back into dirt."

49. The philosopher Eugene Thacker defines "cosmic pessimism" as "a drastic scaling-up or scaling-down of the human point of view" that morosely contemplates "the world without us."

48. Journalist Alan Weisman's bestselling book-length thought experiment, *The World Without Us* (2007), speculates on the fate of civilization's infrastructure in a post-human world.

47. According to experts, the New York City subway system would flood within days of humans' disappearance and Lexington Avenue would become a river within twenty years.

46. In the original Greek, the word "apocalypse" literally means "uncover" or "from hiding" (*apo* + *kaluptein*).

45. That is, an apocalypse is in a sense the revelation of what was there all along, invisible.

44. The contaminated soil is the apocalypse of the house, the flood the apocalypse of the civilization, the book the apocalypse of its author.

43. *After We All Died* opens with a tender catalogue of bodily self-forgiveness: "I forgive you coiled intestines lined in tissue soft as velvet"; "I forgive you golden seams of fat in semi-liquid state, encasing in your oily cells the poisons of the world."

42. The catalogue then closes with a final absolution: "I forgive you every part performing all the intricate and simple tasks that make this mass alive. I forgive you all for already having died."

41. The book's animating paradox—"Maybe then, learning to be dead, something can live"—is a consummate piece of poetic logic: not strictly true, but truer than the actual truth.

40. Thacker: pessimism is "a poetry written in the graveyard of philosophy."

39. Is it cause for optimism or pessimism that so much hope these days feels like it's of the ain't-got-nothing-ain't-got-nothing-to-lose variety?

38. Thacker considers pessimism to be "the last refuge of hope," a notion that gives me more hope than it probably should.

37. Another way to phrase my question about optimism and pessimism would be to ask what poetry can teach us about salvation and forgiveness.

36. When you're already waterlogged, you may as well stay out in the rain and dance.

35. When you're already in a sense dead, oblivion is just a way of life.

34. Cobb: "humans are slow release fertilizers too—how one soaks up poisons and leaks them back to the world."

33. Reading and writing as attempts to regulate one's absorption and leakage of toxins.

32. By "regulate," I mean "vet," not "prohibit."

31. Cobb: "The German word for *poison*/ is 'gift,' same in Danish, Swedish, and Dutch,/ from the Greek *dosis* for dose—a giving."

30. Lewis Hyde: "The art that matters to us … is received by us as a gift is received."

29. Among poets, it's a point of pride—but, also, soreness—that poetry operates in a gift economy.

28. Among poker players, a "leak" is a hole in a player's game that consistently costs them money and about which they remain unaware, a kind of unintentional gift—a "donation," in poker slang—to their opponents.

27. If you want to know more about the world without us, you don't need to run sophisticated predictive algorithms or perform acrobatic philosophical speculations, you just need to look for the leaks and holes in the world that already is.

26. If you want a taste of the world without us, re-read a favorite poem until you can hear its footprint on your tongue.

25. Cobb: "Take the Devil, old accuser, inside for divine principle. Be undeceived, a mixed thing. Be clear, like a web, almost all hole. Be a way that is not at war."

24. Spicer: "There will be nothing left/ After you die or go mad, / But the calmness of poetry."

23. Whenever I'm in an eschatological mood, I try to remind myself that there's never been a time when humans didn't orient themselves in relation to an imagined end time, and never a time—at least not yet—when they've been wholly correct in their pessimistic fear.

22. Heidegger distinguishes between fear, which takes as its object someone or something, and anxiety, which isn't directed toward a specific person or thing but the world as such.

21. Which is it that's unbearable: climate fear or climate anxiety; our world's disappearance or our world as such?

20. The perverse appeal of back-to-the-wall predicaments—real or imagined, major or minor—derives from the clarity of purpose they bestow.

19. My favorite gaming moments occur when a play that would be reckless in a vacuum—leaving your defense exposed to push forward for an equalizer; sticking all your chips in the middle with a marginal hand—is actually, given the last-ditch circumstances, the safest course of action available.

18. In American football, they call it a Hail Mary pass: out of time and options, you fling the ball downfield as far as you can … and pray for a touchdown.

17. I don't want to romanticize actual, as opposed to sporting, despair.

16. I do, however, want to distinguish between prayer performed as a last resort and prayer performed as part of a routine or ritual.

15. Both types of prayer express anticipatory grief, but the latter is more acceptant and grounded, less reliant on miracle.

14. Cobb, born and raised in the post-atomic thrum of Los Alamos: "Every day when I wake up I do a healing reiki meditation that [poet] CAConrad taught me, and I hold in my mind the images of all the women I know who have cancer… I hold them in my mind and feel the warm buzz between my palms. Then I apply the warmth to my own body, over [the lump in] my left breast."

13. Early in this project, I developed the habit of reading a single poem immediately before writing each morning.

12. At first, the habit felt doing like calisthenics for my brain, but now it feels more like lighting a votive candle or dedicating my yoga practice to someone or something.

11. Last year I adopted a personal uniform for each season: chambray button down shirt + army green chinos for fall and spring; light blue oxford cloth button down + brown corduroys for winter; navy blue linen button down + army green linen pants for summer.

10. This sartorial resolution anchored me, in a good way, to my new daily writing routine.

9. In addition to being expedient and consistent, wearing a personal uniform is also an act of self-effacement.

8. Routine shades over into ritual when it starts to orient itself more toward death than life.

7. I once told a therapist that I feel most a man while getting dressed for a funeral and watching myself—silent and serious—button up my shirt in the mirror.

6. What I like best about the archaic and often awkward ritual of the poetry reading is the way it inclines toward sacrament.

5. When I heard Cobb read from *After We All Died* at the St. Mark's Poetry Project—located, as all poets know, in a church—she performed the poems with a vulnerability that felt like benediction.

4. Her tone of delivery sloughed off any sense of what the poet and scholar Chris Nealon calls "masochistic species-/ shame."

3. Poetry means: "to live in the most fragile house, with the most fragile soul."

2. Sometimes I notice all the citizens carrying around disposable coffee cups in the morning and marvel at my species' ritualistic wastefulness.

1. Other times, I forgive everybody this creature comfort, myself included, as a form of end-of-life care.

Annie Ernaux
The Years
Translated by Alison L. Strayer
Seven Stories Press, 2018

Reviewed by Hugo Gibson

Annie Ernaux's *The Years* was first published in French in 2008. It was universally acclaimed in the French press, and it went on to win several prizes, including the French Academy's Françoise-Mauriac Prize, and the Premio Strega Europeo. An English translation has been a long time coming with Alison L. Strayer's translation only emerging in 2017. It has since won a host of English-language prizes, and the quality of Strayers translation is evident throughout the task. It is no easy feat to translate an experimental novel and keep the experimental aspects in tact, but Strayers has handled it superbly.

Where so many experimental novels rely on syntactical experimentation—missing out punctuation, swapping full stops for commas, or eliminating paragraphs, etc.—*The Years* eschews such shallow moves. Aside from a few passages here and there that elide punctuation, *The Years* experiments with form, content, and structure to create a unique work. The result is a book that's hard to define. The blurb describes it as a "narrative of the period 1941-2006." Other reviewers prefer to describe it simply as a "shock." These are both accurate descriptions but I prefer to think of it as a deeply personal memoir that uses collective experience to draw the reader in, and contextualise a single life inside the collective experience of a generation. It is poetic, moving, and emotionally overwhelming at times. Ernaux has created a singular work of art that is one of the defining works of contemporary literature.

The most formally experimental part of the book is before the main narrative begins. We are presented with descriptions of a series of photographs that roll from one to the other:

> a house with a vine-coloured arbour which was a hotel in the 60s, no.90A on the Zattere in Venice
> the hundreds of petrified faces, photographed by the authorities before deportation to the camps, on the walls of a room in the Palais de Tokyo, Paris, in the mid-1980s
> …
> all the twilight images of the early years, the pools of light from a summer Sunday. (15)

It is as if we're looking at a photo album of the half-century, memories that someone has collected. The images could belong to anyone. They are the sort of scattered images we might see in 10 minutes of browsing Instagram. They are both personal and collective, and they set the tone for the rest of the book by reminding us that our lives are just one among many and can only be understood in the context of our generation.

The main narrative is split between three different perspectives. The third person plural "they," the first person plural "we," and the third person singular "she." Each of these is used to great effect to demonstrate how the life of an individual is entwined with the fortunes of the masses.

The memoir begins with descriptions of the life of French families at the end of World War 2. Ernaux uses the "they" perspective to describe these families: "Shrugging their shoulders, they spoke of Pétain." (25). Throughout the book, "they" is used to refer to generations on either side of the post-war generation—the "we" perspective. Early on, "they" refers to the parents of the "we" generation in whose "memories the whole sweep of history was nothing but war and hunger" (26), and later on it refers to the children of the "we" generation. "The young were sensible" (142), "their stance was one of ironic distancing of the world" (179). There is a distance between the "we" generation and the "they" generations. The "we" generation can take inspiration from them but can't quite comprehend them. They have had a different experience of the

world. Experience shapes understanding and as a result generations can never quite comprehend each other.

The "we" is introduced to us after the initial descriptions of family life after the war. We read about their childhood:

> we grew up quietly … We started going to school … We played Duck, Duck, Goose and Pass the Ring … We caught scabies and head lice … together we would execute the *group gymnastics set* with a sens of grandeur and solitude. (28-29)

This "we" is the generation the memoir is about. In many ways, *The Years* is a collective autobiography of this generation. This generation witnesses the transformation of society as it moves from a culture where "there were dead children in every family" (40) to one in which "the world of commerce was everywhere and imposed its breakneck pace" (186). *The Years* details their lives as they move through childhood to adulthood, to having children and beyond.

The collective experiences and memory shared by the "we" are dominated by politics and consumer society. Consumerism is described as an addiction the "we" generation are all hooked on. "Spending was in the air" (111), and slowly consumerism begins to dictate how they live: "advertising provided models for how to live, behave and furnish the home" (111). As technology starts to drive what they buy: "we graduated to the DVD player … We never ceased to upgrade" (206). It's an extraordinary journey through consumerism, revealing how a generation and a nation are measured by the objects they have in their lives.

Their ideas about politics twist and change as well. The May '68 riots evoke a "freedom of attitudes and energy of bodies that took one's breath away" (100), but then, slowly, as life takes over, they become more apathetic and disillusioned by politics until "voting for or against Maastricht was an abstract gesture that we almost forgot to perform" (171).

The overall effect of this shift in generational attitudes is terrifying. While reading The Years, I kept asking myself if there's anything more to life than wanting and desiring more objects? Are our lives just sums of our products and our opinions?

Amidst all the descriptions of consumerism and breakneck changes, is the "she" perspective, an unnamed woman whose life we read about through short episodes. Each of these episodes begins with a description of a photograph, and is followed by what the photograph evokes for the unnamed woman:

> In a this black-and-white photo, in the foreground, lie three girls and a boy, on their stomachs; only their upper bodies are visible … She is the girl in the middle, the most 'womanly' … At times she feels weighed down by the quantity of her learning. Her body is young and her thinking is old. (82-85)

It is as if the woman is looking through an old photo album, remembering her life in separate episodes and placing it in the context of culture and history. We follow her through her life as she goes to university, gets involved in political movements, gets married, has children, gets divorced, and watches her dreams fade as life gets in the way. This unnamed woman is what grounds the book and makes it so emotionally powerful. Without her, the reader would get lost in the descriptions of consumerism and the collective experiences of the "we" generation.

Ernaux makes this woman a complete literary character. She show us her feelings as she writes in her diary: "Being a teacher tears me apart" (115) and "no longer imagines herself … as a writer whose future is laid out in material terms" (95). She is as complete as any other character in other "literary" novels. Her experiences are relatable: who can say they haven't watched their dreams changed by the demands of parenthood and the lure of consumerism? There are also some beautiful descriptions of her life:

> She feels as if a book is writing itself just behind her: all she has to do is live. But there is nothing (135)

Or when she thinks of her married life after her divorce:

> She was the hub of a wheel that could not turn without her, the maker of all decisions, from washing sheets to booking hotels for the holidays. Her husband is far away now, remarried with a new child. Her mother is dead and her sons live elsewhere. Serenely she notes this dispossession as an inevitable part of her trajectory. (166)

This is a complete life with all its sufferings, joys and disappointments, amidst all the control of mass culture.

Since W.G. Sebald popularised it, some authors have been inserting photographs into their work to enrich and enliven the text. Ernaux avoids this in her descriptions of the photos from the unnamed woman's life. Doing so would detract from the shared experiences that the book contains. We'd see the photo and it wouldn't be familiar. By choosing to describe the picture, Ernaux lets our imagination fill in the gaps and the scenes of family life could easily be from the photos in our own family album.

A glance at Wikipedia reveals that Ernaux has had a very similar life to the woman. She was also a teacher and didn't publish literature until later in her life. It's easy to assume that this woman's memories and experiences are the real memoir then. But the structure of the narrative and the anonymity of the woman force us to move beyond such a narrow-minded assessment. The unnamed woman is an everywoman for her generation. Like all people who have had hopes and dreams that get downtrodden, like everyone who fails to achieve what they wanted to, history will forget her. This is where the tragedy of *The Years* comes to the fore. The collective memory of the "we" is history moving inexorably onward. The descriptions of products

and politics are the onward march of culture. The unnamed woman is our lives. We are all lost and forgotten by history, but, as Ernaux shows through her protagonist, that doesn't mean that our personal stories are any less powerful and meaningful.

It has been popular for a while to write books that are ambitious in their scope and attempt to capture the prevailing mood of a society, what James Woods called "hysterical fiction". The general criticism is that there's too little emphasis on characterisation and that the author has bitten off more than they can chew, causing the narrative to be flat and uninteresting. *The Years*, however, suffers from none of these disappointments. It is at once ambitious in scope, succeeding in telling the story of a generation, and also deeply personal in the story it tells of the unnamed woman. It succeeds on both counts and tells the story of a generation and collective history better than has been done before.

The Years is a work of art that, like all great art, holds up a mirror to look into. It shows that our lives are just shared experiences among many and the uniqueness of it is actually caught up in the collective experience of a generation. Our experiences of growing up, marriage, having children, and buying the new iPhone, are not as unique as we think. We all experience the same things and *The Years* shows us that it's how we remember them that matters. No work in recent memory has matched its power. It is a defining work of the period: poetic, moving, and powerful.

CONTRIBUTORS

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Wasim & Sheikh *are* visual artists who practice together, and cast a retrospective glance at the present to radically examine and mine contemporary art practices, and recent, albeit superficial, interest of the global west in their region; and also to reconfigure, re-articulate, and disrupt existing and complacent modes of artistic engagement and production. Wasim continues to execute projects that were jointly conceived.

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OAKLAND : 2019 : $15