

There is a wonderful kind of writing
Which is never written NOW
About this moment. It's always done later
And redone until it is perfect.

Philip Whalen
Scenes Behind the Capital

REFLECTIONS ON THE HUMAN VOICE AND THE POETRY OF DANA WARD WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO PINDAR

BRANDON BROWN

In the 7th Isthmian Ode, Pindar relates an anecdote about the death of Strepsiades, the uncle of the victor whom he's been hired to celebrate (also named Strepsiades). After telling of the uncle's demise, the text switches from the past tense, third person narrative voice to the present tense, first person voice, and he writes, "I have an unspeakable grief." (*etlan...aphoton*). The unspeakability of this grief is strange, precisely on account of the fact that directly before making this claim, Pindar has been speaking of the reason for the grief, the occasion of which it grieves; moreover, to say "I have a grief" is, you know, to *say* it, and that obtains despite saying that it's unsayable.¹

But in the following lines we learn how the unsayable grief is made utterable and can be formally designated as "grief." The very victory of the younger Strepsiades, and the accompanying Pindaric ode, make it possible to speak of this grief. Perhaps a translation that reveals the complex temporality of the narrated events would be more like: "I had a grief, unspeakable until the moment Strepsiades was victorious in the pankration and hired me to write this poem, in which I find myself speaking about the unheretofore speakable grief."

In Dana Ward's *Goodnight Voice*, the voice is, as in Pindar's poem, affirmed to be absence. It acknowledges the voice as such in the form of a speech act, that is, a *voice* says "goodnight voice", suggesting that it is presence which gives itself the name "absence", that *that-which-can-give-a-name* (to itself) *must be presence, even if it names itself "absence."*

In *Goodnight Voice* the presence that announces itself in order to, among other speech acts, designate itself as its negative, announces itself also in other terms of presence. "Dana" is the "medium" – but this is not best understood in a schema in which the "medium" refers to a specific Modernist occult understanding of that term, nor really in the Spicerian sense wherein the "outside" is purposely indeterminate, to be argued later

as a mystical force, language itself, both, or neither.

The opening lines of *Goodnight Voice* address the issue of ownership over the utterance "I":

I think that I'm somebody else
and that thought is city block common
(“Kerri Says”)

The indeterminacy of the content of the “thought” is mirrored by the indeterminate relation between thinking “I am somebody else” and thinking *as* someone else. Benveniste argues that “it is what one can *say* that delimits and organizes what one can think.”

In some ways, it is that such content is phraseable that determines its not-quite-contingency. The sayability of “I’m somebody else” cannot discard the voice that articulates its articulability. This is what those who have a human voice have in “common:” a twin grief. The grief of speech is both that it can never say what it means and that it can never articulate its absence.

In *Ghostbusters*, Peter Venkman (Dan Ackroyd) confronts Dana (Sigourney Weaver) who has been possessed by a Hittite demon named Zool. When Venkman addresses Dana/Zool as “Dana,” Dana/Zool replies, “There is no Dana, only Zool.” The “voice” of “Dana” is suppressed by the voice of Zool who, though inhabiting the body of Dana, disavows that identity, making the voice the better or sole source of authoritative identification. However, this “voice” is not deployed in a communicative function, for Venkman cannot dissociate Dana, given the information registered by his eyes, from “Dana” – Venkman treats the voice of Zool as a superimposition on the “true Dana”.

“Dana” appears as a citable presence for “Dana” in “That Alice Notley and Jay-Z and Dana would Speak Through the Imperfect Media of Dana”. In this text, the “I” is not just “an other” but three others at least (“Dana” is not a “medium” but “media”, plural), and that includes “Dana” as *an other* which will speak through “Dana.”

So I'm a Horatio Alger condemned by my desert and city nativity
diamond hand over November the white picket shutter of night's
northern face
down the Rue Calincourt St. Mark's Place & Ft. Thomas
& Marcy I say with impertinence all here together as falsely
though no lie to me

The opening statement that the three voices inhere to make is that “I’m a

Horatio Alger." The uncanniness resides in the formulation, the indefinite article that defers an already disfigured identification. The device recurs in the rest of the poem as agglutinative not selective, i.e. the three voices do not fight for authority in the text, but lend to a singular figure. "Together" is "falsely" because beyond the "singular feeling", the voice does not permit numerous agents in expression (except as mimicry of an other which this text is clearly not attempting).

The voice names all of its places of origin, all of its lovers ("Sarah/ Doug/ Ted/ Beyonce"). The qualities, the voice says, "no one can separate."

The self I make up from constituent loves is a singular
thing that the market can alter the horror
of being unloved...

Agency given to both the "I" (who "makes the self") and the others (the "loves" who are "constituent") again only *appears*, in the voice, the "singular thing".

This singular voice laments the impossibility of expressing its polyvalent constituency, except that by *saying so* a textual problem emerges, similar to Pindar's "I have an unspeakable grief."

Such statements assume a zone of not-language, but paradoxically this zone itself can be signified (by such phrases as "A zone of not-language"). What is the place of not-language?

Benveniste: "Content receives form when it is uttered, and only thus."

Dana writes, "You have to console what expands beyond language with powerlessness." This indicates to me that for "Dana" agency is only imaginable as language, even as it calls itself negativity, as when Pindar states in speech that he cannot-say. Whatever is "beyond" language nevertheless finds powerlessness "consoling," which underscores the real grief of speech particular to Dana's work. If there is an acknowledgement that agency occurs only in speech, this agency is always *imperfect media*, always "crude and fragile like sewing a thumb on a marshmallow hammer." "I have one," the poem continues, "my grammar & meter."

Is there a redemption for the sheer negativity of the unsayable? Does anyone even want there to be one?

Is it prosody, the "silent music" through which the voice manifests (even if it does so only to deface itself). The redemption in Pindar's poem is prosodic and economical. A great deed does redeem the grief from the

realm of the unsayable, but this is only verified or enacted in terms of the "saying," that is, Pindar's poem.

In "Dana's" work, redemption is certainly not so assured or probably not even desired,² but something like it might reside in the affirmation of the other through finally speechless, haptic contact.

I Can't Feel My Face

I can't feel my face
but would have you still feel it
so I could say 'O
there it is.'
No one can touch
or destroy what is worthless.
Forbid me – we come
to a sponge station I
notice the full spectral dominance
feel the elite
in final sparkling strands.
The phone rings
in the bones of my face
it is also my neck, my back, my neck & my back.
I ask her not to be the one to let me die alone.

The opening statement, "I can't feel my face," means of course both that the experience of the having the face cannot be uttered in feeling-language (is thus formless and thus not real except as prosody can extract it) and also that touching one's own face is not the same as "feeling" it – for that is another grief of the voice, it's always already dehiscence: one's voice always "sounds strange," but "feels" familiar, so lacking in strangeness as to be, and this is real grief, "unremarkable."

The other, becoming the "I", *can* feel it, and can elicit the remark, "O / there it is." "O," not "Oh." Not the eureka!-Oh but a vocative address to what? to the phrase "there it is." This vocative to deixis explains why "No one can touch / or destroy what is worthless." Objects, faces, Dana's apartment in *Ghostbusters*, all of these can be destroyed, but as long as there is voice, there is deixis, worthless in that, constituting the grief of voice, it is never defined as anything outside the breadth of its own being-uttered.

It is the death of the voice that signals the death of the human. Venkman cannot kill Dana/Zool, for he is in love with what he must desperately assert is *there*, superimposed upon by the voice of Zool. There is some sense of affirmation, that the ongoing presence of the other means the ongoing

presence of remarks and remarkable things. The deictic acknowledges a world beyond language which is purely made of just language. Just footprints.³

NOTES:

<? There is a problem in this paragraph concerning the use of “say” and “write”, which is complicated, given the historical status of Pindar’s “texts”. There is no evidence of Pindar as a “writer,” and the texts he made were most certainly intended for public recitation in the victor’s hometown by singers. However, that said, the unorthodox meters with which he made his poems, far from the dactylic hexameter of Homer, perfectly suitable to memorization, might suggest that another technology was in place to assist with the preservation of the text.

<? Dana, unlike Pindar, is not often paid vast sums of money for his work.

<? I want to provide a citation for this last phrase, because the text in which it appears is being to some degree concealed. In the infamous 1978 Poetry Center event commemorating the life and work of Louis Zukofsky, as Barrett Watten was delivering his remarks, Robert Duncan ascended the stage and interrupted him. Duncan, obviously referencing the burgeoning work of Watten (and pointedly “claiming” Zukofsky as disapproving from the grave), says (to paraphrase), “there is no such thing as just language. There is no such thing as just language any more than there is just footprints.”

TEARING AT THE VEIL

SOME THOUGHTS ON DONOVAN'S DEVOTIONS

MICHAEL CROSS

That Thom Donovan enjoys intensely devoted readers, despite the plainly criminal fact that his work remains difficult to find, provides an important approach to his poetics. Those in proximity to his person and practice (his person *as* practice), in regional communities such as Buffalo, New York, and San Francisco, read his writing with inestimable interest, and recognize immediately that engaging with Donovan is implicitly acknowledging *community as practice* – a fact made tangible by his few *distributed* works, which, to date, amount to two collaborations: the meditative short text, *Tears Are These Veils*, in collaboration with collage artist Abby Walton, and *Mantle*, a long poem written with Kyle Schlesinger (after George Oppen). As such, Donovan's writing asks to be read as polyphonic *response* to collective aesthetical investigation, even when his voice is ostensibly alone (though it rarely is, as his poetry nearly always doubles *as dedication*). Each line is a renewed engagement, a *flicker*, a *splitting*, in the sense that the poem gauges the temperature of his thinking *with others/for others*, and as such tunes the *pitch* of engagement as variously extensive and infinitely progressive.

I'd attribute Donovan's reticence to "conquer" the publishing establishment to an ethics of *approach*. He does not so much *occupy* textual engagement as outline an aperture one *could* inhabit, as I imagine Levinas might as poet, only to reject this spectral architecture for another *possible* room, another possible mode of engagement. As such, I experience Donovan's writing as a kind of *divining*, a responsive intimacy that refuses to differentiate joy from mourning, *interiority* from *exteriority*. The result is reminiscent of Gordon Matta Clark's architectural *excavations*, in which interior intimacy opens to exterior gaze (and visa versa). Donovan accordingly strikes holes in the partitions of affect – investigating refraction, repetition, reflection by insisting (in the words of Carl Andre) that "a thing is a hole in the thing it is not." In fact, I read *all* of Donovan's work as *devotional texts*, prayers that leave tears in their objects of devotion, loosening, overlapping, developing an intimate proximity *other than* quotidian collage, quotation, and montage.

These are devotions to mentors, devotions to colleagues, sites of homage to visual art, minimalist music, and cinema, especially to the flicker films of Tony Conrad, the visual tableaux of Sergei Paradjanov, the conceptual apparatus of Robert Smithson. These voices, coupled with an interest in the poetry of John Taggart, where the loop *produces* a splitting or flicker, creates the *ta'wil* of the bardo site, where potential refuses to exhaust itself in act, but *resurrects* to a place of potential. His homage occludes and occults only to *wash out* in a crystallization he might call, after Benjamin, *white eschatology*.

He writes in *Tears are These Veils*,

In incidents
How blessed the difference
The difference open-air makes
Vision is a disagreement
Focus has with itself
We are not these walls anyway
For which shadows are cast
These cuts of trees & cut water
Mourning when attention wasn't
Of unreal things
Their misshapen joy in a refracted beam

In this lyric missive, Donovan applies the lens of Objectivist detail to the shape of *concept*, so that sight, sound, and intellection (liquid, solid, gas), stand in the kind of equilibrium Zukofsky privileged with the gift of his late imagination, where to “understand” is to “under-stand,” and compound composition retains its complexity by insisting on its naked *simplicity* (in whole and part). I think of Donovan as one part Robert Smithson, one part George Oppen, or, better, the love child of Ad Reinhardt and Charles Reznikoff (however gruesome that sounds!) – a *shmoosh* of conceptual art and objectivist sensibility that retains simplicity and accuracy of detail by challenging “simplicity,” “accuracy,” and “detail” in conceptual terms *with* conceptual rigor.

In his recent publication, *Into Bride (Army of Roses)*, which couples Maya Deren's *Mesher of the Afternoon* with a meditation on female suicide bombers, Donovan executes this practice by formally alternating between the conceptual apparatus of *suiciding* and the intimacy of a lyric voice *undertaking*. He's best, however, when the conceptual-lyrical blurs the dividing line between thought and song (interior and exterior):

Disjunctively a paradise in clearer shades
Clear Light of vows what
veiled accomplice trials of mesh what mirror felt to face salvation inside

in

And later,

Eternity (no One) is yet Divine not the staircase yet “you” would ascend
the ledge
& fail to fall to descend a fatal ladder creative of Any unwaking

More than any writer of my generation (with whom I am acquainted), Thom Donovan is a writer of *ideas*, a poet I might, in good conscious, call *experimental*. Rather than satisfy himself with our generation’s desire for parataxis, “surprise,” irony (in other words, what often *passes* as experiment), Donovan challenges his writing to truly *engage* with the secret collusion between “concept” and “image:” *visually sonic thought*. I see in his poetry the “new lyric” presaged by the *New Coast*, but what’s genuinely *new* is a “lyric” model that refuses to foreclose “musical intimacy” in “immediacy” or “transparency.”

Donovan’s *Into Bride (Army of Roses)* is printed in its entirety in O Books’ recent anthology, *War and Peace 3*, and his collaboration with Kyle Schlesinger, *Mantle*, is available in Schlesinger’s new volume, *Hello Helicopter* (BlazeVox). A Donovan primer would begin with his long out of print collaboration *Tears Are These Veils*, which can be read on his weblog, *Wild Horses of Fire* (whof.blogspot.com).

MY KARI EDWARDS

TIM PETERSON

kari edwards was a truly difficult person, and by difficult I mean persistently radical. One of the things I remember most fondly about her is that when anyone asked questions about her work, her way of answering was to interrogate and dissect the question itself.

If one was to examine on a deep psychoanalytic mode, one would find continual displacements and disjunctions.

She refused to be anyone else's oracle of authority, and she refused to "make nice" for the sake of being polite. When we first met online and started corresponding in 2003, I found these qualities to be extremely irritating. To be honest, we fought about quite a few things, because at first I found a lot of her positions on politics to be unrealistic...in retrospect I should have seen they were utopian.

no body no borders...art making is a revolutionary process...it takes one out of the act of commodification...but only the act...then it is a product

Once she made a statement that gender didn't matter, that everything was about power. My response was that if you're a hammer, then everything may look like a nail, and I felt the emphasis on power to be concerned with the ways people are disappointing rather than the ways in which they can be strong. What I didn't realize at the time was that we shared a similar viewpoint, that kari was concerned with power in the productive sense of the word, of empowerment, redistributing and sharing power, critiquing the oppressive misuse of it.

All gender is state enforced territory...controlled by the war machine.

Never operating from a top-down conception of things, kari's work and her behavior in life was always a grassroots vision of literature. She often published her poetry in new journals, young journals, places that were just

getting started. She often failed to recognize existing hierarchies of power in poetry, frequently encouraging young writers who had no “cultural capital.” kari’s model was a kind of cantankerous generosity and inclusion, and the rhizomatic relationship between all her acts cumulatively accounts for the tremendous outpouring of sympathy from the poetry community when she died in December of 2006. Her work in all its forms drew attention to the contemporary contradiction between solidarity-in-diversity grassroots activism and the Orwellian language of the Bush administration.

Strategic essentialism...sounds scary...really scary...

The increased speed of networking created by an explosion in poetry blogs and other public online interaction in the aughty-aughts celebrated the individual while showing young writers that they can do it themselves and can make a difference. But a situation of mutual surveillance was created which has since affected our way of being social and defining intimacy in relation to other writers. It seems to me now that kari in her poetry was involved in multiple, often contradictory acts of describing that space and how we function within it as bodies, how we relate to the social psychology of it. Transgenderism in her work is among many other things an allegory for the possibilities of this virtual space and the fractured body politic of language that it was composed of (and vice versa).

there is no answer, there is revolution on a one-to-one level...with the intention of transformation which may lead to the insight of the multiple forms of oppression.

kari negotiated these contradictions by acknowledging that literary formalism was not enough, that we need to step outside of poetry and spread the word about all the injustices happening in the world. Her transdada blog was a stream of intense, painful, constant reminders of the injustices committed against people of marginalized gender every day. kari made struggles of gender visible in contemporary poetry at a time when the subject had largely been ignored by the poetry community, except perhaps when transgender bodies are fetishized as merely the site of freaky operations. kari edwards represented all of these different things to many people. However, the distinction needs to be made: she is not a symbol for anything, not a synecdoche. It remains to be seen whether she is a hero, a term with which she did not appear to identify.

it can never be about the mirror, the mirror is deceptive, a liar...what you think you should see is a seed planted with spectacle bits as a form of social control...there is no true self-reflection

She was certainly an incredible writer. kari’s poetry is original in the way it

destabilizes language in the process of thinking-through. Her poetry is at once maximal and decentered. But whereas Whitman's poetry includes the Brazilian vaquero, the Brooklyn Bridge, and a ton of other miscellaneous stuff, the philosophically exigent poetry of kari edwards cycles through all the permutations, includes all the possibilities involved in the engendering of a thought. It's about the process before it reaches completion, before the juridical, but also anticipating and projecting potentialities into the future. It is a utopian poetry, and the figure of the writer is placed so precariously within it, as a simultaneous coalescing and dispersal of energies. I have learned a great deal from these ethereal, expansive poems which seem to also contain a world of suffering.

I can not embody your turmoil you not mine

I was changed, continually turned inside-out, by my relationship with kari, who was an important mentor to many. She was a supportive friend when it came to advising me about issues of gender identity on a personal level. I felt a deep solidarity with her in this regard, and a deep compassion for the contradictions she lived through, of wanting to see and write without gender but wanting also to pass as a woman, of wanting to coalesce into a new identity without that identity actually being stated and thereby commodified. I feel changed by kari's sincere engagement with thinking out loud in public, including the struggles and mistakes of thought in the poem, by her ability to reach outside the literary tradition for subject matter and inspiration, and by her refusal to recognize existing hierarchies (thereby avoiding the exhausting matter of choreographing literary positionality). For many of us, kari represents the person who accurately named how the space of the virtual is transforming what activism and embodiment can mean in our era. For me personally, she represents the persistent possibility of meeting someone in the mall of online performance who can become a true friend, like a person gradually emerging out of a background of language, coalescing, cumulative, radically decentered.

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CHALLENGING TRANSMISSIONS

DJ /RUPTURE BREAKS THE GLOBAL BEAT

ALAN GILBERT

It's been pointed out on many occasions that the Spanish-sponsored "discovery" of the Americas by Christopher Columbus occurred in the same year King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella decided to expel the Jewish population from Spain. Less frequently noted is that 1492 is the year when nearly eight centuries of Muslim rule on the Iberian Peninsula officially ended. The expulsion of Muslims began soon thereafter, and continued throughout the next century. Prior to this, Muslim dominion over Spain had at one point encompassed all but the northernmost region of the country, and was part of a much larger Islamic empire that rivaled the size and might of Rome, and substantially duplicated its landmass. Beginning in the early eighth century, Spain was invaded by indigenous tribes from northwest Africa who themselves had recently been subsumed within this Islamic empire. The extent of these tribes' territorial reach and strength in Spain peaked around 1000 A.D. This presence had shrunk to the city of Granada and its immediate environs when the keys to the city were turned over on 2 January 1492 to Ferdinand and Isabella, with Columbus part of the royal retinue.

More significant than the story of kingdoms rising and falling is the relatively open and pluralistic society that existed in Spain under Muslim rule. Scholars and historians continue to vigorously debate just how harmoniously Muslims, Christians, Jews, and others lived in the Islamic Spain of al-Andalus, but there can be little doubt that to this day it's among the notable historical examples of a flourishing co-existence among substantially different ethnic and religious groups. It wasn't a state of affairs that continued under subsequent Christian regimes, as attested to by the expulsions and persecutions of entire ethnicities and religions. This isn't to say there wasn't persecution and violence under Muslim rule (including a massacre of Jews in Granada in 1066), or disproportionate taxation and tribute structures, or constant resistance to this rule from within and without. In fact, the demise of al-Andalus resulted less from pressure applied by the northern Spanish Christian kingdoms than from political

infighting and subsequent invasions by “fellow” Muslims from the south.

But such is the nature of power and hegemony. They unfold according to a dynamics of domination and resistance, and, more often than not, entail two-way negotiations between both subjugator and subjugated. Not all of al-Andalus was physically conquered by the invading tribes; those parts that weren’t were brought into the kingdom through treaties. Jews and Christians occupied some of the highest advisory posts in the Muslim administration. They also partook in a transmission of Islamic intellectual culture that helped extricate Europe from the Dark Ages. Specifically, the introduction of Aristotle’s texts through the al-Andalus Arab scholar Averroës invigorated European philosophy, science, medicine, and even Christianity. One of Judaism’s primary mystical texts, the *Zohar*, was written in the wake of al-Andalus. Arab lyrical poetry was a direct influence on the troubadour poets in the regions bordering Islamic Spain, and those poets in turn have served as a source of inspiration for everything from heretical religious and political traditions to Ezra Pound’s version of modernism.

Arabic was one of many languages spoken in al-Andalus, and the need for constant translation between these languages may serve as the best metaphor for the syncretic culture created at the time. This notion of translation within a poly-cultural context is also useful for understanding the work of DJ /rupture (a.k.a. Jace Clayton) who in 2000 arrived seemingly full-formed on various underground music scenes with his rugged bootleg mix CD *Gold Teeth Thief*. The mix garnered a fair amount of attention for many reasons, not the least of which was its ability to remain committed to a post-drum’n’bass breakbeat scene while literally expanding this genre’s horizons beyond beats per minutes cranked-up too fast to count and obsessives sitting at computers turning swiped samples into potential sonic drill bits. Moreover, DJ /rupture’s mix reintroduced the frequently forgotten skeleton in drum’n’bass’s closet: hip-hop. For DJ /rupture, this included not only alternative hip-hop (Cannibal Ox, Dead Prez, etc.), but big and gleaming mainstream hip-hop, albeit mainstream hip-hop with imaginative production styles. Also of note was *Gold Teeth Thief*’s range of expression: where it wasn’t raw with scorched and splintered beats, it was raw with social and emotional content usually spit most ferociously by dancehall toasters.

All of DJ /rupture’s work then and since has involved this act of translating between cultures. Until very recently, critics and theorists might have called this process hybridization or creolization, but the abrasiveness in DJ /rupture’s work, its recurring disharmony, asks listeners to rethink and question these terms and their idea(l) of relatively seamless blending – and mixing. Cultural co-existence is difficult, as Muslim and later Christian

Spain make clear. Yet difference fetishized leads to ghettoization (or worse), while with difference ignored comes homogenization (imposed or not). How, then, to respect and appreciate difference – to realize that not all form and content ever come across in a translation no matter how accurate it is – while nevertheless maintaining dialogue and seeking shared connections? This is one of the most important questions DJ /rupture's work asks. It answers it mostly by leaving it as a question; not in the sense of easy ambiguities or an anything goes that ends up reaffirming the status quo, but by forcing the listener to ask anew the issue of difference each time she or he encounters difficulties in the work, difficulties DJ /rupture consciously injects.

For instance, *Gold Teeth Thief* begins with Missy Elliott's "Get Ur Freak On," which segues into the instrumental of Nas's "Oochie Wally," followed by dancehall artist Bling Dawg's "Risen to the Top." So far so good, and nothing too radically dissimilar from the mix tapes that circulate on the margins of the commercial hip-hop music industry, especially now that dancehall has crossed over into the U.S. hip-hop mainstream. But then DJ /rupture drops DJ Scud's blistering "Badman Time" into the mix, and expectations – and what the street calls "flow" – are instantly scrambled. "Badman Time" picks up on the aggressive energy of Bling Dawg, while disrupting and rechanneling it across a cultural chasm that DJ /rupture certainly wasn't the first to recognize (cf., British punk rock and later jungle's infatuation with reggae's righteous anger), but around which he creates a relation of both sympathetic proximity and near impossible difference. But this also occurs within the mainstream cuts he uses to open his mix, most famously in Missy Elliott and producer Timbaland's appropriation of Indian tablas and sitars for the beat to "Get Ur Freak On." Or the erasure of Nas's fantasy gangbang lyrics with the looped Chinese flute of the instrumental version. Or the way Bling Dawg's "makin' cheese" visions are in dialectical – or is it diametrical? – relation to the Kingston, Jamaica, tenements that are dancehall's derelict wellspring.

Ultimately, however, it's not an interpersonal ethics of difference or a formal investigation of the limits of sampling and mixing that DJ /rupture presents, but a cultural (geo-)politics. In particular, his work focuses on the role of borders and their transgression. While this concern is somewhat obviously hinted at in the border-jumping links he forges between dancehall, hip-hop, and breakbeat, it's more complexly articulated in his engagement with Middle Eastern and African music. That the latter interest may be subtler in his work doesn't mean it's any less foundational. While DJ /rupture's acclaimed release *Minesweeper Suite* (2002) further refined and shredded the three turntable strategies of *Gold Teeth Thief*, his sampling and electronics-based work under the moniker Nettle reveals a deep involvement with Middle Eastern and African musical styles and struc-

tures. Nearly all of the songs on Nettle's *Build a Fort, Set That on Fire* (2002) begin with discernibly Arabic melodies rendered less discernible during a track's progression as cultural references both pile up and pull apart at the seams. Less beat-oriented than DJ /rupture's mixes, Nettle creates a denser layering of cross-cultural interactions that leans away from U.S. hip-hop and Jamaican dancehall and toward the intermixing of Europe, Africa, and the Middle East that has always occurred in the Mediterranean region.

Some of this is no doubt geographical: DJ /rupture-Nettle-Jace Clayton's proximity to North Africa and the Middle East while he was living in Barcelona, and Spain's long history with Africa, the Middle East, and Islam. But it's much larger than personal biography. And it's a particular form of geography. DJ /rupture's Soot Records website declares the music presented there – which includes his own – to be “a strike against geography.” This shouldn't be confused with globalism as an abstraction. Rather, it's a dual strike: against the potentially universalizing discourse of globalization and against the internal and external borders-enforcing nation state. The areas DJ /rupture and Nettle's work map are ones linked through cultural transmissions, not political alliances. It's important to remember here that the nation state is a relatively recent invention. Most maps of medieval Spain contain a “frontier region” that doesn't land cleanly under the jurisdiction of either Muslim or Christian authority. Similarly, DJ /rupture's work targets national boundaries and territories without falling back on the frequently ill-defined concept of globalization and its language of one world, good or bad.

Rather, it may be more productive to think in terms of unconventional topographies and frontier regions documented as well as imagined by DJ /rupture's work. These are spaces found in the fraying interstices of imperial powers old and new. When African percussion via Islamic music intermingles with Jamaican dub, U.S. hip-hop, and a spliced recording of someone saying, “It's a little scraped up, and it has a lot of black on it,” only to be shattered by a blast of manic breakbeats – as happens in “The Ballad of Jimmy Hollin (Disco Mix)” on *Build a Fort, Set That on Fire* – how does one draw a map of that? Perhaps by remixing originals that are themselves *mélanges* of alternative cultural traditions passed across and between families, communities, and official borders. The Arabs who conquered medieval Spain weren't Arabs, they were Berbers (Moors) from northwest Africa. Both their ethnicity and their version of Islam were considered inferior by “authentic” Middle Eastern Arabs. By proposing culture as an ongoing exchange between different social and ethnic groups, DJ /rupture upsets notions of it as uncontaminated and exclusive. One result of this debunking is an awareness of distinctions within cultures previously viewed as uniformly other.

In 2004, DJ /rupture and DJ /rupture as Nettle moved toward collaborations as a supplement to mixing and sampling. DJ /rupture's *Special Gunpowder* (2004) is a studio project featuring a variety of singers and musicians. Nettle has also played live shows with Moroccan oud, violin, and percussion accompaniment. Both *Special Gunpowder* and these concerts attempt to make concrete the theoretical aspects of previous projects. In this sense, what makes DJ /rupture's work so provocative is that it's thinking all the time, even when a listener's body feels like dancing or head hurts from the sonic assault. Despite this critical edge, it's not afraid to have fun and be celebratory, as when DJ /rupture dropped an extended excerpt from J-Kwon's "Topsy" – one of the most popular hip-hop singles of 2004 – into the heart of his second John Peel Session (18 May 2004). Reviewers of *Special Gunpowder* in particular have noted that it's less cacophonous than previous releases. Is this compromise or just the necessary negotiations non-unilateral interactions take? DJ /rupture continues to emphasize non-translatibility as a component of cross-cultural communication. But who can fault him for accentuating dialogue when the authorities pursue a deadly policy of not listening?

STEPPING OFF THE PLATFORM

NOTES ON MICHAEL DEBEYER'S POETRY

JASON CHRISTIE

Michael deBeyer writes achingly lyric scenes wrought in an observant and critical language intended to reveal and then fuzz the boundary that keeps things familiar; linebreaks jar grammar and stack syntax to an eventual bust. His poems enact the uncanny call and response between the language we use to describe real things and a Real that we can never directly access and instead can only annex with language. Rather than relying on familiarity to establish a bond of trust between author and reader with the text as a silent partner, deBeyer reveals his doubts about how language operates in a world that despite being told is solid, stable and dependable feels increasingly fragmented, intangible and varying. His writing evokes and challenges the desire to ignore implications of the saying while focusing entirely on the said, finding the familiar in language and stopping, and instead places us right before the saying in a moment of doubt as to why we thought we could all agree on what will be said.

In *Rural Night Catalogue* (2002), and *Change in a Razor-backed Season* (2005) both from Gaspereau Press, deBeyer uses echolalia as a means to alter his own poems, a device that amounts to him remembering and writing his poems again. The poems deBeyer processes using echolalia are shorter, make more disjunctive leaps, and reveal a distance from their source similar to the distance from which readers relate to a text. Echolalia serves as a marker for the relationship between talking about things and the things themselves; it is the doubling back of an authentic voice that results in an equally real echo that troubles the existence of 'realism.' deBeyer's poetry 'rings true' and then keeps ringing until we are lost in cascading soundwaves, until truth is lost somewhere amongst the coordinates and we experience nostalgia for a source we no longer recognize. His poems are at once familiar and strange, distant and evocative of the impossibility of reproducing a world in writing.

In his poem 'Realizing the Depth Paradigm,' from *Rural Night Catalogue*, deBeyer suggests that language resembles an ambivalence hidden inside

a supposed surety. In this poem, deBeyer creates a moment with the structures built to investigate darkness and depth, i.e. the unknown. In the poem deBeyer offers an architect and miners, a crane and a large dark opening. It isn't too much of a stretch to envisage the architect of this poem as either reader or writer and the architecture as language made to 'effect' some meaning. Architecture involves exploring space, amassing structures over space, constructing, sometimes elaborate, sometimes simple structures that fill previously 'empty' space. The architect uses language structures, like a poem, to explain, imagine, or describe something that previously did not exist, to persuade a reader into believing in the presented reality. And when a person begins to fall from these structures, in the poem the architect steps off the crane, into the unknown, in the poem the pit sprawling below, then as deBeyer writes "you'll be needing/ yourself, the architect, to catch you" by providing further structures of stability through the architecture of language; a net, some escape, a poem, a finely wrought reading to convey the experience.

The relationship of a writer and a reader where an image of reality is presented has never settled well with me. An air of realism seems condescending when it is not acknowledged as fake or constructed. Many people can point to their media studies degree and savvy deciphering of truly difficult texts as a shield against manipulation, but what if that's all part of the con? Just because there isn't a single driving force organizing all of the aspects that keep people frozen in the face of Capitalist reality, doesn't mean they ain't out to get you. The architect stepping off the crane into the space of the text mirrors the only acceptable way to negotiate language. Bolster yourself against a consumerist attitude towards reading and understanding, avoid neatly packaged products including masterful readings wherever possible, and realize that at the end of the day, when the whistle blows, the only things left are the apparatuses helping us to suspend our disbelief, a crane and a weak scaffold.

ON CROSS'S THRONE

ELI DRABMAN

The first of the two epigraphs that introduce Michael Cross's most recently published work, *Throne* (Dos Press, 2007), comes from Jack Spicer and describes, I think, the tractor beam in whose pull the poem is caught, halfway between home's twinkle and a death star. Michael wants us to hear Spicer's invocation of the absolute as both an invitation and a warning: "Once you try to embrace an absolute geometric circle the naked loss stays with you like a picture echoing." These figures (circularity, geometry, nudity, loss, echo) are the seething underbelly of what *Throne*, in its pulling away, drones to presence. The geometry of Spicer's baseball diamond, the nudity of Duncan's law, and the angled perfection of Lorca and Hemmingway's bullfighters, dancing ever close to danger's source (working close to the bull), are appropriate leads for the detective work the poem demands. What I mean is that *Throne's* danger is also its delicacy, a brazen fusion of the object's hardest rule (law's absolute) and an enacted romantic sense of necessity, the necessity of evacuating one's literality into the poem. This is critical, working class expressionism, the brutality inherent in making oneself an object for poems belonging to an absolute, or tending at least to go off like an IED, sharding what the poem is not. Thus *thetic*, *Throne's* first movement, blends idioms of readerly intimacy, the last line's "*bon mot*," with street talk in the sun. Here's an excerpt, example of law made sensuous, an objective romance:

draw paren to the sun brand
as to sun I tell this guy
in water in water, bottlenecks the dynast's
hand, by bore flayed boxwood
lip to lave by lawmen's banded eyes
bunches in the hand the same as me
poised upon the polished fats a wedge

Is there water in water? After polishing fats, is it time to eat? Circling in upon these questions, whether or not the lawman's hand will ever free

itself from the neck of the bottle, how the poet becomes like that lawman, bunched and blind yet graceful, would seem a primary element of the thinking by which these movements must be crossed. The demand at the heart of this work is, I think, to stand at its center, to *be*, in a sense, that center, and keep looking around, trying on the poem's costumed diction to see how it fits. The poem wears a hood, and it fits strangely. Following *thetic*, the second movement, *sars/pneume*, fills a bad neighborhood with "sea-foam," enacting a scene in which the poet, drawn to images of self-defense and incarceration, wears his hoodie backwards, facing its seam:

to vetting folks
I seen at the carwash
iterant's catch at the choke
for pleathers thins in white
rims the place one wants a world for
sacerdotally, at least, the seam
in the hood I face

Do these rims keep spinning? It is not enough to note the distance, one Cross repeatedly cultivates, between street-level and ivory tower discourses and dictions (*sacerdotally*, *anornos*, *vulpine* defining and defined by the poetic space in which *pleather* and a *carwash* will also figure) as irony. We are not here being treated to yet another experiment in the now exhausted, and usually reconciliatory, staged crash between entrenched vocabularies. Rather, romantically, we are faced with a strangeness more genuine, a necessary homelessness by which the objects one confronts come to composition such that, in speaking them, we record the suffering to which Spicer's epigram alludes. Tending toward absolution, one finds that one's vehicle, the available vehicles, are filthy. Responsive to *Throne's* imposed force, a black geometry made delicate, one faces "the subject's front to come," a temporality by whose law dead things desire commerce with the living. What I find realized, at the opening of *Throne's* final movement, *nunc age*, is that, in this poem's midst, I have eaten "what feeds me to ashes."

ON BELLE GIRONDA

KATIE YATES

A gloss of Belle Gironda's poems across two decades reveals that a conversation about conflict is the focus of her inquiry followed quickly by intuitive-like-certainty or might we say her writing offers simply an accurate graph of emotional life? Both. No doubt her work is serious-minded like that of Rachel Blau DuPlessis (Draft 85) while maintaining the delicacy found in Ann Lauterbach's essays.

*From now on
use knives only as mirrors.*

I won't say the best time is at dawn (c. 1987)

Happily, Belle's writing is experimental and trans-genre, surviving the transparency of any single such experiment. Her vocal tracks in the sound mixes of *purkinge* (c. 1994) resonate with emotional clarity in a rhythm rare in acoustic mélange of this kind and then her video/text poems don't hesitate come off as raw and complicated.

*one wants to claim:
there is almost no geography anymore (c. 2000)*

So if she does, as she says, following the exhortations of a 'poetics of the field,' (Charles Olson / Don Byrd) for poets to know something, then, she succeeds in a complex political landscape such is the present. One wonders what there is to know that would be of any help and then Belle's poetry reminds us. Without such writers I wonder what I would have but ginger recipes for despair.

*First, the broken sleep of caring and tending
There the tenderness of reaching*

Quiet sounds of simmering, under long

bands of horizontal light

"Look, I want to say..." or, just, "Look." (c.2008)

What I relish in Belle's work is a strength beyond exhortation that propels me into thinking outside my own taut circumstances: I feel awakened. As in haiku, her poems bear the suggestion that we consider what it is we are doing and perhaps to experience a genuine resolve.

AN INTERLUDE ON POETICS AS DIRT

CACONRAD & BRENDA IIJIMA

CONRAD:

OKAY BRENDA! My friend! DIRT! The real thing MEETS poetry, the other real thing! We're both Capricorns so it feels right to be discussing DIRT with POETRY, Capricorn being the last island before the zodiac is engulfed by total air and water. Whenever I've had boyfriends who are also Earth signs the union to dirt is a merry and serious occasion. One summer I asked my boyfriend Robin to locate with me five different varieties of dirt to explore and eat. Our enthusiastic search (land)ed some exquisite side effects. We were in southwestern New York State at a pagan festival, and our friend the Reverend Velveteen Sly from the Church of the Subgenius officiated our DIRT UNION. To be honest, it turned out to actually be that holy, this search-and-eat dirt expedition. The plots of dirt were chosen carefully for texture and color as we were trying to find the perfect combination corresponding to the four cardinal elements and the fifth, unseen element. (At the time we referred to this fifth element as Wyrð, after the blank rune, but this was before hearing Freya Asswyn lecture on Wyrð being an American neo-pagan invention, and without historic location in the Rhineland and other Nordic regions.) The dirt in the woods is what made Robin sick, I think, but he had also been drinking a lot the night before, this crap alcohol called Purple Jesus. The dirt from the woods was near a rotting tree, fresh with life, and without a doubt the most ALIVE of all the dirt selections, I mean you could FEEL your heart racing ten minutes after eating it, your blood rich with its complex nutrients. We ate each selection at each location, small mouthfuls, chewing a long time, especially the dry, red dirt, which was probably an old clay bed long since baked to dust in the sun. Smell, taste, texture, inculcated information in the most unexpected ways which revealed itself in my dreams that night. I was in a submarine, which was not marine at all, but in the ground, and the machine didn't make tunnels, it didn't burrow, it simply moved through the dirt and the dirt healed behind it much like water would do. And yes, the periscope, you have to have a peri-

scope, and I could SEE the festival dancers, naked around the campfire with the drummers, dancing and drumming all night long, as they do every night of these festivals. It felt like an out of body experience, only, instead of floating out of the body into the air it was underground PUSHING PUSHING THROUGH DIRT THE FRONT WINDOW OF THE MACHINE REVEALING ROOTS OF EVERY KIND SOME LIKE RED CHICKEN CLAWS AND DIRT DIRT DIRT WORMS DIRT DIRT DIRT PEBBLES AND COCOONS! I will ALWAYS remember this dream, this INCREDIBLE dream! It was most likely just a dream though, not astral travel, but what a vivid, MAGNIFICENT dream it was! I woke violently and suddenly and wrote without thinking about it, this little poem, which is part of my forthcoming CHAX Press book, *THE BOOK OF FRANK*:

Frank remembers
shirts of buried generals
flying in formation
over schoolyards

blowing wasps from sleeves

Dirt informed this poem directly, the graves sending the shirts into the sky, *threatening!* I remember thinking while eating one of the five selections of dirt *THIS IS OUTSIDE COMMERCE, FUCK THE BANKS, FUCK THE GROCERY BUSINESS, FUCK ALL BUSINESS, THIS ONE IS OUTSIDE THEIR REACH, WE TWO FAGS AND THE EARTH!* The desire to be Outside the functions of our culture have always been strong in me, but never stronger as on that day, slowly eating our mouthfuls of dirt together. One of the selections actually tasted like flesh, but it wasn't a rotted animal, it was dust, but tasted like meat. Even though I was vegetarian, it made the continuum of dirt, plant, and animal blink epiphanies throughout the day. Outside of waking violently from my submarine dream, the experience of our DIRT UNION was total pleasure. Earth as pleasure, something to strive for in this time of Earth as utilitarian, mineral scavenging, damn building, bomb craters, graves graves graves graves *fucking war-filled graves!* One of the most beautiful moments Robin and I shared in the pleasure of dirt this day was when the Reverend Velveteen Sly officiated our DIRT UNION, and we dug a little hole in the field, made love at her command (the Reverend enjoys telling fags when to get going), and deposited our semen into the hole simultaneously, putting a little dirt over our deposit, then an acorn, then more dirt. Sex and dirt and poetry have an endless braid of possibilities! *Horticulture and poetry and sex!*

IIJIMA:

That meaty flavor you tasted was most likely iron. Many stones in New

England contain copious amounts of iron – it bleeds out of the rocks. Dirt – ground down stones, the continuum of terrestrial matter in heady sedimentary patterns – where the nouns return to, only to reverb. Geophagy! There is substantial evidence that humans have been consuming dirt for medicinal reasons for over forty thousand years (reports Cindy Engel in *Wild Health: Lessons in Natural Wellness from the Animal Kingdom*) – animals go to great lengths to lick at dirt and clay which helps them deal with toxicity in their diets, etc. I’m attracted to dirt for its moist microbial richness – dirt of subterranean (or interior) eco systems where movement involves burrowing, tunneling, and digging. (Eating this top layer is a bit hazardous because that’s where most of the bacteria live – though my sister and I would feast on the occasional “dirt brownie”). As a child I used to dig holes in various places and lay my face into the concave excavation – in order to pick up vibrations of the earth and also to smell and feel the contours. And I found, if I inhaled short quick successive breaths I could gain access to the changeable dirt/earth scents quite like a fox, nose to mossy floor. Easy transition from solid to liquid interest me too. Pour a little water on dirt and you get mud. These shape shifting unstable properties point to a changeability not often conceded to in the lived out world of civilization. Dirt is disarticulation and re-absorption – the break down of civilization into dirt. Now, with our biomedical bodies loading up on synthetic chemicals we need dirt evermore to purify our own excretions. Dirt is the local blend – all this returning local color under our soles. Love your androgynous mother(ing) dirt! An acre of soil might contain 130 pounds each of algae and protozoa, 890 lbs. of insects, nearly 900 pounds of earthworms and about 2,000 pounds each of bacteria and fungi as well as a larger weight of plant roots than the above-the-ground plant parts. Worm gardens are the opposite of captivity. Mega processes going on including electron exchange and chemical transformation – the soil is charged I say. Dirt is erroneously thought to be dirty when in fact it is actively cleansing – and yes, there is the rotting stage, as you mention – and then there’s the fact of the autotrophs and their hunger for compounds. And the fact of the heterotrophs and their insatiable appetite for autotrophs...I am very greedy about earthworm shit. I feed and I feed them, feed and feed and feed them. They become thick, plump and agile and their castings keep the tilth subtle, thick, aggregate, dense. The sticky binding element of soil is a protein called glomalin and 30% of soil mass consists of this substance. Glomalin contains 1-9% iron, so you might have tasted it’s slightly bloody meat flavor. What glomalin does is store carbon – 30-40% would be released into the atmosphere without this homeopathic glue.

I feel I have to evoke the material rich nano reality of dirt before I can wiggle amongst the symbols. There is so much fear of the pre-technical, and it is thought of as inferior, lower life – the untamed, undomesticated, not given to husbandry. As far as poetry is concerned, there must be room

for the ugly, unsculpted, corrupted, unstable utterance – or something unformed and less than pristine. I look to dirt for a modality of the raw. An instance of what I mean is encapsulated in *Snow Sensitive Skin*, a moody, sensitive collaboration between Rob Halpern and Taylor Brady that they worked on during the conflict between Lebanon and Israel, the horrible aggression that was meted out, turning life to rubble...

– my carbon credits *public smog*
our outposts on the commons
being waste expands there
no limit to what's left over-
time remains *say life itself*
where gulls wheel scout mark
mountains of what won't decay
no future reference a bird-
filled sky affirms

– what guarantees the working day

Here's Abraham Smith from his book *Whim Man Mannon* – sultry soil
– mortal tactile tract – troubling the farm:

secret soil coital
he dover here
sounds blonde as
whipped oil
please appeal to
wimpling skies
journeying trees
there is but one fence
bone true and
one blockhead dog
inside
to rend
the smarts
of trees
at journey's end

And James Thomas Stevens' tangible matter with matter:

The vegetable earth on its mineral spine

CONRAD:

Much of what you say makes your book *AROUND SEA* more complete! If that makes sense? Tell us how *AROUND SEA* is part of your total immersion into Earth.

IIJIMA:

There seemed to be so much taxonomy to cut through to visualize the flow of the ecosystem. Things are parsed out for value and quality and how this relates to human concern. I wanted to understand beyond thingness, to understand systems and how they surge within networks – in and out of formation/form – dissipating outlines.

CA, I love your poetry for its passionate creation and lyrical insistence of a commons of culture and an ecology of inclusively. “we are not between trees between hairs/split mine in two so you can get it going/keep it soaring” (broadside by CAConrad read at *Peace on A*, 3/1/08 – from *going to 108*).

I concur with Slavoj Žižek that the paradigm of apartheid, instead of disappearing is reinvigorating. And, as he says, “Ecology becomes a problem of sustainable development” when there is this division between the included and excluded, so environmental issues are parsed by personal decisions that involve money and style, for instance, “How do I build a green patio, or is my bamboo flooring eco friendly?”, or “See my new fuel efficient *Prius*”: myopic, self-serving consumerist attitudes that distract from the intensities of interrelating local and global issues that take a lot more gumption to address. He uses the term “polluting excluded” to comment on the atmosphere in the United States and Europe surrounding immigration, refugees – displaced persons – articulated in another way, people that are viewed as dirt, objects of disgust. Wild animals are viewed with the same derision. Coyotes, boars and numerous other animals continually poisoned because they are in the way of huge industrial ranching interests and corporate farms. The irony is of course, that dubious industrial practices poison with synthetics – sublimely and stealthily; very threateningly.

Dirt contains the shrapnel, skin, blood and guts – dirt contains the trace. Dirt is primordial but present and presently breathing. Dirt is the real (as in Real) if we need to separate out the symbolic and the imaginative into distinct categories, (corporeal experience tells me they swirl together in such a jumble they are one and the same with differentiation within, like a spectrum)...Well, Žižek brings them together here: “The Real is thus effectively all three dimensions at the same time: the abyssal vortex that ruins every consistent structure, the mathematized consistent structure of reality, the fragile pure appearance.” (*Organs Without Bodies* p. 103.). I’m much

less interested in Platonic forms than the surging, gesticulating, teetering materiality of the mineral and viscous that never quite stabilizes. Beverly Dahlen from, *A Reading* 8-10 (note her emphatic usage of vitality):

the vitality of dying forms. Having taken part in it, an image
of the historical, when the dying forms falls apart: the litter,
monumental, of dead forms.

Leslie Scalapino:

The land and 1.2 billion living are in
a – one's – thorax – chemical wasteland in

paper mills, steel factories, coal the
waste acid pours as sky into the huge

river – and sky pairs in visible hell of
no seeing and living – workers

from *The Public World/Syntactically Impermanence*

and Tyrone Williams:

Both the appeal of a bell –
or disturbed soil –
strike twice: bend both
ears on graveyard shift:
tilt the table –
exhalt exhume –

"err on the side of life", etc.
from *On Spec*

CONRAD:

Filth is another word for pollution, for garbage, for the bacteria-laden STINK we sweep out the door to become someone else's problem, some other environment's stinking problem. Garbage is on the streets all over Philadelphia and sometimes I see it and feel an affinity. It feels important to not only admit this affinity, but to examine how and why there would be. It's not surrendering to the total breakdown, but accepting and understanding that IT IS ME the breakdown, as much as it is all of us. The garbage on the street is who we are. I've thought about inventing a long, hollow, clear plastic dress connected to a vacuum, and I would go around the city sucking up garbage, which would slowly fill my dress. And a sign

mounted on my wig would read: EVERYTHING FROM EXPLODING STARS! Or maybe: PLEASE LITTER SO I CAN BE PRETTY! Or maybe: WALTZ ME WITH LOVE'S RECYCLING IN YOUR EYES! Or maybe: CONURBATION OR BUST! Or maybe: BE A SANITATION BEAUTY QUEEN! Or maybe: OUR BAROQUE CESSPOOL AND IMPENDING OVERDRAFT OF RESOURCES APPROACHETH! Or maybe: DECAY IS AT HAND YOUNG AND OLD! Or maybe: SCRUPLES ARE FOR HEALTHY PLANETS! Or maybe: JESUS DIED FOR YOUR INORDINATE CONSUMPTION OF SHIT! Or maybe: PLEASE PETITION AL QUEDA TO HELP END POLLUTION! Or maybe: GARBAGE SOON FOR ALL PROXIMITY OF DEGENERATES LIKE US!

IJJIMA:

CA, could you talk at greater length about your engagement in reinvigorating the cultural commons?

CONRAD:

(Soma)tic Poetics, and thanks for asking this in this way. The Body, somatic, is FROM dirt, and is walking ON dirt. Spirit is Soma. This is a poetry conducted through the Soma and Somatic, literally, by manipulating our bodies and other anatomies of our physical world to connect our spiritual centers for a more holistic poetry. The brain has too much rule over our lives the more mechanized our world becomes, pushing us further and further into forgetting THE DIRT we come from, THE DIRT WE ARE. (Soma)tic Poetics relocates the intelligence of the physical and spiritual worlds and alerts and alters other aspects of our lives as a result, keeping us tuned into the frequencies of wood, toenail, blood, sleet, all the neighboring carbon, gentle AND NOT. Being in this world, this way, taking no THING for granted for our poetry to recognize, fully observe, and even alleviate the stress from Alice Notley's wise observation, "Poetry's so common hardly anyone can find it." (from "C-81," *Mysteries of Small Houses*). But it's also true to say that (Soma)tic Poetics is informed by the destruction of our planet, and the planet is our Body of bodies. Actually, I don't really believe it's being destroyed, but that it's being reinvented, but in such a way that we humans may not survive it's transformation. But for now it's our planet and our problem. And our poetry. Our American invasion and occupation of Iraq led me, ultimately, to this idea of the body being a marker for what we are doing, what we can do. I stopped cutting my hair on the 3rd anniversary of our invasion in order to have some THING IN my life as a daily reminder that we are at war. It's getting longer, and needing more and more care, my hair. But so is the war, getting longer, and needing more care. Suffering is not disconnected here, or anywhere, no matter how much we strive to forget. My war

hair helped me formulate roads into SEEING poetry in a new way with the body. Jack Kimball is publishing my first collection of (Soma)tic poems called (Soma)tic Midge on his FAUX Press. There is a very brief introductory note I wrote for that book that I would like to share here:

I cannot stress enough how much this mechanistic world, as it becomes more and more efficient, resulting in ever increasing brutality, has required me to FIND MY BODY to FIND MY PLANET in order to find my poetry. If I am an extension of this world then I am an extension of garbage, shit, pesticides, bombed and smoldering cities, microchips, cyber, astral and biological pollution, BUT ALSO the beauty of a patch of unspoiled sand, all that croaks from the mud, talons on the cliff that take rock and silt so seriously flying over the spectacle for a closer examination is nothing short of necessary. The most idle looking pebble will suddenly match any hunger, any rage. Suddenly, and will be realized at no other speed than suddenly.

Recently I was at a poetry reading and one of the poets announced, "IT'S GREAT SPRING IS FINALLY HERE, I'VE HAD ENOUGH OF WINTER!" The audience ERUPTED with shouts and applause. It startled me. I sat there turning my head around to look at everyone for that brief revelry against winter. "What is this?" I asked myself. This winter has been one of the mildest winters I have ever experienced in Philadelphia, and I've been here more than half my life. So, it couldn't possibly BE that everyone was tired of snow and ice, since we hardly had any. What is this? Weather is the enemy, JUST LISTEN TO the weather reports on the news stations of the radio and TV, their adjectives are gathered around this idea of Weather being our enemy. But how could it be? Maybe I'm wrong, BUT I've been thinking that everyone is SO STRESSED OUT with the war, with the politics, with all the darkness, with all the denial surrounding the darkness, and in the end it cannot be denied enough. There's never enough noise to shout down a war, especially a war WE ALL KNOW should not have happened. Over a MILLION lives, REAL HUMAN LIVES have been taken for this war which FILLS THE POCKETS OF THE WEALTHIEST CITIZENS OF OUR NATION WITH AMERICA'S WEALTHIEST TOP FIVE PERCENT INCREASING THEIR WEALTH BY FORTY PERCENT IN THE LAST FIVE YEARS. The EXACT age of the war, let me point out. Remember these facts, and try to sleep. Remember these facts, and try to wait for spring each year. Winter is not the enemy, not when Philadelphia had such a mild winter even the tulips were confused. No-no, spring is more than welcome in these dark times. And I don't blame anyone for wanting it, HELL YES I WANT SPRING AS MUCH AS THE NEXT PERSON, but I also want to live with the truth at the same time, and I KNOW winter is not to blame for our silent pain of being citizens funding the misery and bloodshed the rich have been dreaming of since the last war. We pay the price for paying our taxes, and it's terrible to

live with, truly terrible.

Brenda, a couple of years ago you were on stage at the St. Mark's Poetry Project for the big New Year's Day marathon reading, and there were literally hundreds of us sitting, watching. You did this marvelous THING where you said, "Never forget the body," then gave us a brief, beautiful dance. After that you read your poems. There was something magical about it, and we all gasped! For me, I think, what you did was TAKE the power of the Body, and all that IS the Body (all the bodies of the Body, mind/flesh/spirit/other) and DIRECT them into the microphone. It was a moment to always remember. It was so ENLIGHTENING! It made the poems really SING out of you! And MOST IMPORTANT is that when you did this it seemed to take ALL OF US, all the many Bodies in the room, and get us into a common FLESH for a moment. Maybe I'm taking this too far, this idea, but it FELT like this. I had a physical reaction to it, goose bumps, and we all gasped, I can still hear us and feel the cool air of the gasp entering my throat. It felt shared, and holy.

IIJIMA:

It just seemed that the set up – the audience OUT THERE sitting passively and the reader IN FRONT, on stage, usually very non-gestural – at the podium – the hierarchic structural furniture needed intervention – this configuration doesn't get beyond the spectacle associated with religiosity, politics and education where convention dictates body positionings. I wanted to pay tribute to the fact that poetry is surely not only a cerebral process – that body brains are intersubjective. How to generate kinetic energy – note all the varying energies available...that's the question and motivation. We watch wars on TV where bodies are explicitly involved – yet this lived reality is repressed. To witness whole persons, bodies in motion, palpable, tangible, organic – changeable. Plus, there is body curiosity – don't you wish you could witness each person's individual way of engaging their body in dance? Maybe what we should be doing is reading in the nude once a year, to access our vulnerabilities, to share these delicate human states. How easy to change the context merely by introducing the body!

revv. you'll – ution, the manuscript I'm working on right now is guttural-visceral. Much of the language is vernacular, raw, vascular (if that can be applied to language) and grotesque (by this I mean there is a clash of supposedly incompatible elements). And somehow, it moves back in time to the present by considering homo sapien roots, cave people, burials, excavations, quaking underlayers, body sensing and incarceration, etc. by filtering through the concept of revolution with all its varied implications. Maybe it is a flailing, spasmodic, agitated dance.

Could you write more about the incredible activations in your (Soma)tic Poetics? Each poem contains energetic instructions...you are compelling us to experience!

CONRAD:

(Soma)tic Poetics is insistence for the instance you make. Experience OUT OF what's normal for us, that's key to what (Soma)tic Poetics expects to HAPPEN to us. It's about bringing the Body into the conversation, much like you were saying about your marvelous dance before reading, how it's not just the brain, poetry. In fact, often the best poems (or maybe I mean my FAVORITE poems) seem to involve all sensory.

Chris Martin was just here in Philadelphia to read with Kevin Varrone and Paul Siegell, it was great, the three of them were really fantastic together! When Chris was up there though he talked about DISEQUILIBRIUM, and how it's this shift that NEEDS TO happen inside us sometimes to create a new kind of processing in order for us to be able to take on new information. With DISEQUILIBRIUM we get a new set of equations to work things out with, and new kinds of places to hold information, and from this major perception shifts can occur. It's truly revolutionary to make new room inside for THE NEW ROOM INSIDE!

This is EXACTLY what (Soma)tic Poetics is about, especially the exercises, which I update monthly. (SomaticPoetryExercises.blogspot.com) These are a series of odd choices, odd meaning not normal. Since I have always felt odd, and feel comfortable (especially comfortable at this point in my odd life) feeling odd, it took me to realize that IT'S THE CHOICES I MAKE that make me access poems. So if I can get other humans to get odd they can find a doorway when they're needing to. Getting us OFF TRACK, to STOP the normal way we wander into our days, THIS is how we create new ideas. You can ENTER new ideas for the brain by creating new ideas for the body. Does that make sense? I mean to say the Body is ONE BIG WEB of muscle, memory, sensation, bone, eyelash, etc., working together, so you can enter into thought with a physical sensation as well as doing a math problem. In fact the real discovery of course is that it's always happening anyway, but this is a way to be consciously doing it. It's like lucid dreaming while awake, such awareness.

In one exercise I ask you to stand naked in a bucket of water while looking through the peep hole of your front door. The water is room temperature. And you may not be used to being at your front door except to open it for someone else to walk through, or for you to walk in or out of, and that's it. But to STAND there, just STAND there, naked, in a bucket of water, spending time there, and really taking it all in and TAKING IT ALL IN

while naked, it really will open new portals for you, I promise! I ask that you keep paper and pen RIGHT THERE so you can get writing.

For ten years I was macrobiotic (I'm just vegetarian now). But macrobiotics is really being SPECIFIC about choices which get into THE BIG LIFE (which is what the word macrobiotic means). For me what it did most besides healing ailments I had, was to show me how the body is this MARVELOUS organism, that, if we get the brain to truly understand the Body, to allow the Body to feed on the best choices of grains and beans and vegetables, that the Body will work as best as it can. And the brain will also be properly fed and in turn work as best as it can. And you can SMELL deeper, BREATHE deeper, SEX IS MUCH MORE SUBSTANTIAL, and everything TASTES BRAND NEW!

Before macrobiotics I had a drug dealer boyfriend and THAT WAS A LOT OF FANTASTIC PARTIES is what that was, but after macrobiotics I could access the world on a very holy, deep water sensation, just like I could with drugs, only, without the side effects of feeling irritable and depressed. But, (Soma)tic Poetics is very much part of this because, like my choice to let my hair grow to FEEL AND SEE the every lengthening American war in Iraq, macrobiotics came first for me in making me a totally aware animal. Before macrobiotics so many parts of me were asleep. (Soma)tic Poetics would have never been possible without this ten year study of the organism I live in and am. The body is far more resilient, pliable, CAPABLE than I would have ever realized otherwise. I feel very fortunate for these discoveries.

I'd like to request a preview of the manuscript you're working on, *revv. you'll-ution*. And maybe give us more details about this spasmodic dance?

IIJIMA:

At the threshold of meaning are unaccountable gestures that might open up in understandings as variegated assertions – where difference and temporality bloom. Spasmodic because bodily gesture and response can be a site of uncontrollability and this feels like an alternative conception of freedom in being. Volatilization not necessarily violent – these are spontaneous gesticulations that may have resided dominantly in the body, been previously foreclosed.

I guess society is close to producing a factory model of the body – this is getting to be true for “livestock” – but yet, their bodies resist.

The issue that got me involved with *revv. you'll – ution* is this incredible erasure or cloaking of recognition regarding the Haitian Revolution

in terms of how this revolution in particular participated and shaped concepts of modernism – historians, academic and otherwise have spent good energy ignoring this successful struggle for racial equality – this sent spasms through my body system. This was a way my body communicated with (in) me. And too as is known, the body is a host for numerous various life forms, so they spasm occasionally too, territorializing, recalibrating, harmonizing.

C.J. MARTIN

POETICS OF THE PILE

ANDREW RIPPEON

I.

One thing is one thing. One hundred things are one hundred things. One thing plus one thing is two things. One thing plus one hundred things is one hundred one things. One thing is not a pile. For any number n , if n things are not a pile, then the addition of just one more thing does not make them a pile. But in each case, then, we can never get to the pile, because each thing added leaves us just as much without a pile as before. Where then; when, then, do we arrive at the pile? Between number and too many to number (which must be a number, but must be a number we can't know) is Martin's poetics of the pile:

So CITY was mourning & they missed it,
mourning but not really answering.
A toy, a doll's eyes, for I have
a head now, too, where all manner --
instead they live upon have until now.
Not a dozen mourn on the road to Carna.
7/2d, 1882, "Down in the woods":
If I do it at all I must delay no longer.
(CITY: Vigilance, 2007, received by mail)

Certainly not a breath-line. Against the best of breath-line poetics (after Olson, Creeley, etc.), the end-stops (, . -- . . : .) are glaring, and the lines as units sit more or less on top of each other with little syntactic-semantic torque – the hallmark, if there is one, of the breath-line. Torque, a manipulation of the line against reasonable expectations of its semantic completion, is a register of the time of the poem. The breath-line poem, the torqued line, happens always and over again in its own time.

In the above poem, though, vertical development suggests less a passage of particular, particularized time than it does a simple accretion of discrete

units stacked, as I said, one upon the other. The first and second lines, as a sentence hinged on a comma, are their own unit. While that hinge of the comma suggests one function of the line-break (a place where the modifying clause gets added), the movement from the second line to the third –

mourning but not really answering.
A toy, a doll's eyes, for I have

– is to move from one frame of semantic reference to another. "CITY" and "they" disappear as subjects, and "I" appears as it gains head and eyes with the poem's movement from the third and into its fourth lines. This "I," though, is no more useful, in the ordinary ways, for organizing the experience of the poem than breath, torque, or time.

Though the first two and second two sets of lines read as pairs, the movement from one pair to the next is not to move forward in time as an experience curated by the poem. Nothing, other than that one set happens first and the other happens second, signals that these two sets should be understood as subsequent, or even related. In fact, the shift in frame of reference suggests the opposite. But not a relation of opposition, rather, of accident, indifference?

But the poem didn't happen, one senses, and especially in the deliberateness of the fifth line, but was carefully, carefully, carefully made. As the poem moves to its completion, the hint of the discrete promised by lines one and two, and three and four, comes to full bloom in the last four lines (and reflects back on the first four, bringing their hint to flower). Neither the line-break nor the aleatorical nor the processual nor the operational, the most interesting things begin to happen as they've been hammered into the middle of the lines: after the double-en at the end of the fourth line (another hinge proposing non-relation), lines are both unassailably complete-in-themselves –

Not a dozen mourn on the road to Carna.
[...]
If I do it at all I must delay no longer.

– and radically refracted, composite, constructed –

instead they live upon have until now.
[...]
7/2d, 1882, "Down in the woods":

And in no moment is a whole described or implied. What I want to be clear

about is the complete (and stunning) non-relation of the poem to itself.

If I can pretend to make a later poem in the same series speak for itself, for this poetics, it is something like a “Bushel mechanism,” a gathering to bulk, and not to kind. The poem:

Bushel mechanism --
else than mechanical drift,
if to increase the between
(touch & thing):
this means drafts, chances.

Minnows in the house.

Bright doll annealing

“Bushel mechanism” is better, but let me call it a “soritical [*soros*: Gr. for ‘heap’] poetics.” This means drafts, chances. A soritical poetics brings both together, not in a poetics of process, transparent practice, or auto-commentary, but in a petition for the worth of the pile, an appeal to the power of the vague. The poems here come close to the state of a pile – we could find a source for the quotes, a context for the statements, a reference for the dates, but then where would the poems be?

II.

The pile is a special set of relations. It is, in fact, a relation by way of non-relation. If relation is predicated on one of the simplest and most fundamental properties of the thing (its number, i.e. that it *is* one thing, and not two, or three, etc.), then the pile is first and foremost an effacement of that property. A pile asks that the things that make it up forego their property of number. If they retain their property of number, however, then the pile is not a pile – it is a collection of n things, where n is a number that we know.

Thinking the pile tends to think *toward* the pile: One thing is not a pile. If we add one thing to that one thing, the thinking goes, the two things that result are not a pile. The same with an additional thing, added to those two things, and so on, *ad infinitum*. As logic has it, then, we can never arrive at the pile. So what to call these papers, these books here on my desk? Logic would have that my experience of them as “pile” is wrong – they are something else, then, obscured by the easy (or lazy) conceptual category of pile. If I took the time, I could say exactly what they were, without recourse to “pile.”

But a soritical regard for the papers on my desk would allow my experience of “pile” to stand, and it would take issue with the idea that numbering the papers (destroying the pile, destroying the *experience* of pile) is the correct way to know them:

If ‘A line just distinguishes it,’ duration
puts it over--first locally--then gathers
piles in pans & barrows, quits altogether.
For reason of too long absent, to whom
relation’s a place of universal thralldom
... So called because only in decomposi-
tion is her thought commensurable to a
law of form. The world of objects matters
urges. Bother. -- WORM as function,
maybe, but minus proximity (which was
recent) so finally clear of its uncertain
residue. Remains here, herself, by culti-
vating methods of citing leaving. And so
for her leaving family, city.

(CITY: Vigilance, 2007)

This is to think the pile from the perspective of the pile, not from the perspective of the thing, and this, in turn, is to respect both pile and thing. Starting from the pile, the logic is undone: one thing taken from the pile does not erase the pile. Nor does it make two piles (one a pile of one-thing, the other a pile-minus-one). The pile remains, unchanged, when the thing is removed, and the thing then comes into relief in the senses of the viewer, standing sharply as the sign of what it was formerly a part: the grain of sand, taken from a pile of sand, owes its discrete appearance to the pile behind it.

A soritical practice, then, doesn’t try to *build* a world by adding thing to thing, but instead to *preserve* it, though the practice may appear to be of fragments, stutters, incompletions, starts and stops, drafts, chances. The practice is to select, present the grains, one by one. Not in the effort to make a pile, but to preserve what remains unrepresented *as pile*. Like Wittgenstein will say of the *Tractatus*, this writing is composed of two parts, one being all of that which it says, and the other being all that has been left out:

IT ISN’T A SENTENCE WERE OVELY, BUT
they’d been in augur over’t.
As at century’s scrap (in An American
Exodus): were incessant grand-
father’d, who - were - each -

other's – needs –
becoming

[...]

THE NATURALLY TRIED (BUT IT HOLDS
its lowered virtue)
ever collecting kind.
For when – and then as much as –
was at least something,
slowly. – Rigs it, blown.

(*Lo, Bittern*: Atticus/Finch, 2008, Buffalo, NY)

Thinking from the pile, not towards it, no amount of things taken from what is already understood as a pile will destroy the pile, as long as the number of things taken is known, and the starting point is, in fact and especially experience, a pile. Where language was once structure, then post-structural rupture, is now pile, an experience to be curated. More than a citational practice, more than a documentary practice, more than an aleatorical practice (all of which have hints in Martin's work), the soritical offers a re-thinking of relation, a re-attachment of the poem to the world. Like the grain of sand against the pile, a soritical poem achieves itself only against the backdrop of the inviolable yet fragile pile from which it was drawn, and at the same time is the sign of (makes visible) that pile.

It is the regard for experience in the soritical, in Martin's practice, that is so important. Experience of the pile, perhaps my experience itself as a pile, is what makes a pile a pile. Nothing else. The pile is vague, and this is precisely its strength, because in its vagueness is a special sort of care. Martin's practice is to name the grains, to select them, bring them forward, one by one by one by one by one, and the resultant poems testify most to where they have, where they must have come from. And this is a hopeful practice, because to think the poem in relation to the pile, to propose the pile first, and then the thing, is to save the one from itself: after Martin's practice, it seems that even the one (that if we added to other ones would never make a pile), when thought from the perspective of the pile itself, always refers to the pile. That is, one is one, but is never alone:

2 LITTLE HEAPS PARTITION:
behind all positive lengths, return-
ing me, a hedge doles
the leaving out

(*Lo, Bittern*, Atticus/Finch, 2008)

GUTTER CROSSING ON EMILY McVARISH

KYLE SCHLESINGER

The San Francisco Bay Area has been a hotbed for innovative fine press publishing, poetry and artists' books for at least a century. Beginning with Gelett Burgess' bohemian journal *The Lark*, an antecedent for its magical counterpoint *La Petit Journal des Refusées* (established a year or two later by Burgess, Bruce Porter and Porter Garnett in 1896) was printed on scraps of wallpaper and cut into a trapezoid. The covers were graced with spoof woodcuts in the style of Aubrey Beardsley, while the frenetic mirage of satirical texts and illustrations within attempted to rock the "bromides" (the conservative bourgeois) that Burgess and his young cohorts reviled. Three of America's best fine presses of the 1920s, including Taylor and Taylor, John Henry Nash and the Grabhorn brothers were also based in San Francisco. From 1944 to 1948, another Porter (the found-language poet pioneer Bern Porter) and George Leite co-published *Circle*, and in 1946, Porter published Kenneth Patchen's *Panels for the Walls of Heaven* in a typographically adventurous trade and unique hand-painted edition. In the years following the Second World War, a group of artists met at a camp for conscientious objectors in Waldport, Oregon and formed the Untide Press, which included maverick printers William Everson and Adrian Wilson. The ensemble disbanded at the end of the War after they collaborated on their most sophisticated book, Patchen's *An Astonished Eye Looks Out of the Air*, which brought Paul Renner's anti-fascist Futura into dialogue with the pacifist poetry and politics of the time.

The end of World War II signaled a radical shift in the art of the book and commercial printing technologies, and this transformation was embodied by the New American poetry and poetics of the 1950s. Wallace Berman's roving magazine *Semina* (1955-1964), was printed and assembled by hand using an eclectic assemblage of poems and photographs. *Semina* was a refuge for transgressive artists that served as a crucial point of reference for a younger generation of aspiring poets, printers and a rare breed of artists working somewhere in between that would, in the mid-1970s, come to be known as "book artists." The individuals who were part of a rejuvenation

in Bay Area book art that rivaled the Modernist European Avant-Garde included, but were by no means limited to: Dave Haselwood (Auerhahn); Graham Mackintosh; Holbrook Teter and Michael Myers (Zephyrus Image); Betsy Davids and Jim Petrillo (Rebis); Frances Butler and Alastair Johnston (Poltroon); Jamie Robles; Kathy Walkup; and Johanna Drucker. I am indebted to Drucker for introducing me to the work of Emily McVarish, one of the most inspiring and accomplished artists of my generation.

When I first encountered McVarish's work, I primarily gravitated towards handmade paper, quality binding, exquisite printing, and above all else, books that featured meaningful, previously unpublished writing. Sumptuous reprints of classics like *Ulysses* and *Moby Dick* didn't interest me (still don't), nor did the new wave of technique-driven virtuoso sculptural books where the text (if any) appeared an afterthought. One afternoon at the Rare Book School at the University of Virginia in the summer of 2003, Drucker presented me with a small, apparently anonymous, obviously handmade book, comprised of envelopes bound to the spine in place of pages, and asked me for my thoughts. The book baffled me favorably, but I couldn't explain why. I had never seen anything like it. It reminded me of Dickinson's electrifying Master Letters – personal but not private, mediated and mysterious. Each fragile envelope contained what appeared to be a poorly photocopied letter that struck me as some sort of epistolary cut-up. I later learned that this book, *being the letters* (1990), was an early work by McVarish based on Freud's *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* produced in an edition of just thirteen copies. Nearly twenty years later, she continues to work with found and procedurally generated texts to produce books and printed objects that destabilize traditional binaries by reminding us that words *are* images, that form *is* content and that conceptual writing and art can continue to live harmoniously in the form of a book long after the heyday of the supposedly democratic multiple. Although her books are always historically informed, they are not retro – her approach is consistently fresh, labor-intensive and rigorous. Masterfully printed by hand, McVarish's works have never exuded the read-me-not preciousness that many handmade books exhibit. Here one finds a cool, unadorned, mechanically polished aesthetic, that has as far as I'm concerned turned the world of letterpress printing on its feet (quite literally).

Letters, words, books, and libraries are of primal importance for most poets (even, or should I say *especially*, those engaged with new media practices), and yet I can think of few writing today whose work is as irrevocably bound to the book as McVarish (master of obsolete media). My tendency is to think inclusively and practically about what qualifies as poetry (artists' books too, for that matter). If a given mode of discourse or vocabulary lends itself to a particular work of art, my preference is to put

it to use. McVarish's practice occupies a unique place in a rare constellation of artists whose work stands between poetry and visual art, a horizon where individuals as various as William Blake, Stéphane Mallarmé, Iliazd, Dick Higgins, Raymond Queneau, H.N. Werkman, Guillaume Apollinaire, and Ruth Laxson would commune. Since I'm writing this essay with the notion of contemporaries looming in the background, I would like to dwell for a moment on the questions of where and how one encounters the work. Unlike most of the poets of my generation (or otherwise), McVarish rarely reads her writing aloud, at least not in the usual venues where one goes for a poetry reading. If there is any correlation between her work and that of the Russian Futurists it is conceptual and yet I often wonder how one would read one of her books aloud based on a kindred system of linguistic experiments in sound symbolism. The books perform the reading of the writing, a kind of writing that (take this with a grain of salt) does not lend itself to other modes of publication and distribution as conveniently as poetries whose lexical and semantic values are less contingent on context and the material embodiment of the work itself. That said, I should also point out that one cannot find her books at Small Press Distribution or any of the other usual haunts. It seems as if issues of distribution and availability aren't really issues for McVarish – they are natural extensions of what matters most – the work itself.

Cover of Betty Bright's *No Longer Innocent*, Granary Books (2005).



McVarish is too young to have been addressed in Betty Bright's *No Longer Innocent*, a recent study of book art in America that covers two rich decades of activity between 1960 and 1980, so I find it particularly interesting that she was asked to design the cover, in essence, to offer an identity to the era of her childhood. At a glance, it appears as if she simply opened a mock-up of Bright's book (or one on a similar subject) to an index, slapped it down on the scanner and sent it off, but upon closer examination this design *incises* some of the recurrent critical paradigms at work in McVarish's poetics, namely presence and absence, clarity and illeg-

ibility, and the acute attention she has brought to the gutter for nearly twenty years. Here, the flattened two-dimensional gutter portrays the book as an outside folded in – an immanently political, social, embedded, and in this case indexical history of the books itself. The cover doesn't conceal, it opens, suggesting that the book, any book, is always open (like Duchamp's *Door at 11 rue Larrey*). The page is a dynamic structure in space, not a flat sleepy thing. A gutter is defined by the OED as "the white space between the pages of a book," a "channel forming a receptacle for dirt or filth" and a "shallow trough fixed under the eaves of a roof, or a channel running between two sloping roofs, to carry off the rain-water." In urban architecture, as Kevin Lynch and others have noted, the gutter is one of the most significant, although often discrete, aspects of efficient design. The same is true of the book according to Graham Mackintosh who notes in his brief essay "Mis-en-page," ". . .one of the most annoying aspects of modern trade books is the 'pinching' that goes on in the gutter." In works as various as those designed by William Morris, Jan Tschichold and Ed Ruscha, the gutter (and its absence) is a consciously constructed negative space as integral as the positive.



In McVarish's *'S*, printed in an edition of 50 in 2005, the words "MY WILL-HOLD HAS WORN YOU TO A SLIP'S TRANSPARENCY. YOU WHISTLE ASSURANCES BILLOWING . . ." appear in bluish-gray ink printed from sans serif type (the hyphen is red). The text runs like a strip of tickertape that begins on the third from final page of the book with the letter "M."

These two sentences, most likely printed from photopolymer plates, read backwards (much in the way that a printer must learn to read letterforms). In order to make sense of the text as it appears above, the reader must turn the pages from back to front, holding the reversed word-fragments in mind as they traverse the book's gutter, jumping from one page to the next. The fragments accumulate, forming words, and from the words, a line like a contingent spark that requires seeing, reading and meaning to ignite. To make sense of the line as such challenges my habitual attentions as a reader, as if I was deciphering a language I did not understand. Here are the same two sentences. I have substituted line-breaks for page-breaks.

M
Y WIL
L – HOL
D HAS
WORN
YOU T
O A S
LIP'S
TRAN
SPARE
NCY. Y
OU WH
ISTLE
ASSUR
ANCES
BILLO
WING . . .

Opposite: 'S
(2005)

Although this arrangement has done momentary harm to McVarish's art, I have presented the text in this fashion only to show how her textual severing, syntactical scrambling and obfuscation of the word could be aligned with minimalist and conceptual poets like Aram Saroyan and Vito Acconci, as well as formal experiments in composition attributed to New York School and Language poets. The second major element at work in this book is the line that reads front to back, right to left in red sans serif letters of the same point size:

BE ST
ILL F
OR ME.
NOTH
ING I
S WHO
LE BU

T YOU
AS FA
R AS
THE E
YE CA
N SEE.

These two lines are just a hairline apart, regularized by the use of capitals with a consistent x-height (lower-case letters usually have ascenders and descenders). A third element is introduced: in tiny sans serif, irregularly woven into the white space between the letters that form the upper-line of text, the phrases “Behind the wheel,” “a driver merges” “with the drive” “and the outcome’s” “transparency” (next page-spread) “Homecoming, home,” “sitting, and seat” “converge in the pull” “of a thousand” “tacit purposes” (next page-spread) “that shoot” “and lodge” “untouched.” The fourth primary element at work is a running photographic header and footer, the former a street-level snapshot of traffic, the latter a city skyscraper scene. I want to underscore at least three of the cyclical forces generated in this book: text, text as image, and the constraint imposed on both by the opaque divisions of the book. ‘S happens to be a sewn pamphlet, and yet this unassuming form subverts the desire to read complacently by exposing an intricate, almost infinite, array of approaches. In an interview conducted by Lytle Shaw, McVarish states, “The ways in which these relations may be ambiguous are unlimited, but the expectation of a certain intended meaning behind every compositional decision persists, if only because between the oldest rules [style, size, or color of characters, composition of lines, etc.] and those more recently established in the field of graphic design conventions of reading exist on every typographical level, and this expectation of intent may be infinitely engaged.”

Books are one of the most ordinary forms of art: a book of matches, a telephone book, an address book, etc., each a representative form of address. *The Man Walking* presents a combinatory bookscape/cityscape wherein the double-literal floating signifier, in this case, a dapper businessman cast in a porous pop-inspired dark red hue embarks on a Situationist-inspired *dérive*. Alphabetic tabs line the face of the book, and behind each tab, a word. In the first spread, let’s call it “spread a,” the word “the” is behind “a.” Buildings (again) create a pattern of running photographic headers and footers that yield a certain sense of urban chaos within regulated rectangular units. Moving through the architecture of the city and the architecture of the book simultaneously, the relationship between text and image changes; perspective shifts in alarming and unsettling ways as the narrative progresses and digresses in this exquisite labyrinthine drift. *The Man Walking* is a guidebook, map, an unusual directory that is also the subject it directs. It concludes with this cascading line, justified left:

The
views
afforded
by
evenly
spaced
windows
now
indiscrete
may
seem
a
film,
and
the
street,
its
tireless
projector.

Temporality, mechanical reproduction, scale, and montage are just a few of the themes that Vertov's classic *Man with the Movie Camera* (1929) shares with *Was Here* (2001). The epigraph, under the scrutiny of a gigantic stooped silhouette of a man leaning into the foredge says: "Now, let us see / what the still holds / in store for us" On the title-page the same figure in the same place on the page in duotone (black and greenish-gray) examines the bold red caps that claim: "EVERY MOMENT OF OUR LIVES" (cut to verso) "HAS A HOLE PUNCHED IN IT." In this world, windows are images and images are windows and what may in a given instant appear translucent may in the next become opaque – a lens, a mirror, an eye. Three images of people walking down a city street through memory's haze, an antiquated morning fog, a frosted history. These picture-portals situated within the oversized frame of the page drift in a Bergsonian landscape – each an accomplice to a caption. In order to incite a revolutionary value, Walter Benjamin argued that writers must break through the barrier between writing and image and start taking photographs, for the ". . . illiteracy of the future" he prophesized, citing László Moholy-Nagy, "will be ignorance not of reading and writing, but of photography." Interiority and exteriority engage in an awe-inspiring ricochet that transcends the potentially clearly delineated narrative values ascribed to individual subjectivity and ideology. A sophisticated visual and textual integration in the conception and design of the whole is carried on throughout, creating an indigenous grammar and lexicon that figures in a continuum that includes *Flicker* (2005), the artists' most accomplished work



to date. Technically and conceptually, *Flicker* has set a precedent for innovative printing, design and writing for the next century of artists' books. The rich, midnight-purple pages are composed of thousands of pieces of lead type turned upside down and printed as a solid matrix so the feet (not the face) are what comes into contact with the paper yielding a bizarre background medium that resembles television static or bitmapped digital images astonishingly produced by a technology that has existed, with relatively little alteration, for over four hundred years. The text, some of it gleaned from *The New Yorker* and *The Economist*, appears in the non-inked areas where type has been flipped rightside up to show its readable face. The book revisits the themes of the city and the *flâneur*, this time introducing the flicker as a rupture in the bloodlines of media ranging from cinematic perception to radio transmission to the book itself. Early on, McVarish realized that the "page would show the grid that, at every level, underlines letterpress composition" and to "show connections between a quaintly obsolete technology and a screen made up of pixels, those tiny, quantifiable clocks that can take on a value or not but are always in a

sense *there* to configure content.” This micro-grid also holds isolated wood letters and small duotones printed from polymer plates of digital video stills. As in *Was Here*, McVarish has elaborated on the reversible relationship between presence and absence by complicating relations between negative and positive space and of sequence by using die-cut holes to link images and texts through multiple spreads. The text is a color-coded intersection where buildings, traffic, a pedestrian, and “linguistic bricolage” break – that is, to give pause and deconstruct simultaneously so that, the artist explains, “by the time all the relational levels are perceived, many effects will have been lost, if only by competition (though whatever graphic elements caused them have not actually been effaced, and so will still be there, vying to be seen in the particular – partial – context which gives them their significance) and thus, the idea of an event as *the* event may well have been destroyed.”

Special thanks to Steve Clay for sharing his collection of McVarish’s books, and to the artist for providing these photographs.

Opposite: detail from *Flicker*, Granary Books (2005). Below: open page spread.



DALE SMITH

TAKING STOCK OF THE WRECKAGE

RICHARD OWENS

The figure neither outward nor inward – rather a figure of migration moving across time, across place, refusing the simple convenience any split affords. Stampede of force thinking itself through the small hours, when time is tight and the passage narrow. These are the geo-rhetorical contours Dale Smith’s poetry has navigated for over a decade, moving blithely through the strait on a makeshift raft – determined to avoid the logic that would force him to choose between Charybdean whirlpools and the six heads of Scylla.

it’s not enough
to imagine it
 only the whole body
 knows what took place

(American Rambler 57)

Investigating the shape of love and the consequences of capital through the corpus of his work, it is the *whole* body Smith situates in that narrow passage ruthlessly governed by epistemological limits: “There’s a thin edge between the known and the unknown, and the self’s that limit stretched between” (*Black Stone* 53). Consciousness, bound to the body, negotiates these limits, moves between them, at home in the homelessness of not knowing:

Forget what I’m
supposed to do
or be or know.

[...]

That ol’ drag
Mnemosyne –

give it a rest
already.

Sometimes it's enough
pulling goose grass
from my shoelaces.

(*Black Stone* 58)

Smith insists on searching among stones for the blackness of that *one*, an absent center, a site of negativity or non-identity. The center is a stone. And it exceeds the instrument of investigation – language. But it is a stone which, for Smith, must be approached, however unprepared one might be to encounter it. He searches among those materials available to him, most near him – texts taken from stacks open or closed, the mythos embedded in everyday experience, the cycles of seasonal change and the daily rhythms of the domestic. The introductory note to *Black Stone* – published independently of his other book-length works *American Rambler*, *The Flood & The Garden*, *The Ass* and *Susquehanna* – offers what might be framed as a point of entry into these other works and is worth quoting in its entirety:

I began *Black Stone* on the first day of the Christian observance of Lent. My second son, Waylon, was born during that period, and I wanted to explore the narrative of days around his birth. The poem ends on Easter, the end of Lent, the day Christ is said to have come back to life on earth. Christ is beautiful, but he casts an extraordinary shadow. I think of that shadow as a kind of stone, and I find it more useful and scary than the sweet piety of the crucified god. That shadow of Christ remains in the world, while the rest of *his* goodness was absorbed into the flesh of generations of Europe and America and elsewhere. So much blood has been spilled in the meaning of that goodness, but the shadow – that blackness – remains, hidden, undocumented, thankfully, by the Human Inspector General. And so the image of the stone, finally, compelled me to meet it.

Groping in the dark for this blackness beyond good and evil, the hitherto undocumented, has been Smith's project all along, from his first short collections *Sillycon Valley* (Gas, 1997) and *Texas Crude* (Blue Press, 1999) through *Susquehanna* (Punch Press, 2008). It is this search for the hidden shadow, a keystone, which allows Smith to take stock of the wreckage through the reading and construction of poems. If I can use the language of Kenneth Burke – whose work Smith has read closely and absorbed into his carefully measured sense of the poem – the search for this shadow by way of poetic production invites Smith to develop strategies for living,

allowing him to name a situation that cannot otherwise be named –

Slowly, I am pushed toward an edge between abundance and poverty, the known and the unknown, memory and imagination. And poetry gathers the historical fragments... (*American Rambler* 92).

Smith does not commit himself to a rhetoric of good and evil or known and unknown. He is not concerned with splitting the hairs that separate evildoers from doers of good. Instead he aspires to reside in the productive space situated between the two, confounding the systems of logic that separate the two and give rise to the “conspiracy of the mind” that would “detach itself from the consequences of the body...” (ibid).

For Smith the body is always already present – a metaphysics of knowing that, without *this* flesh (eyeball roving across page; ear attuned to conversation) the traces of consciousness encoded in the texts left behind by bodies cannot be reconstituted or searched among. Meaning for Smith inhabits interstitial spaces, the spaces between bodies and those things in the world produced by bodies. These spaces are rhetorical spaces – that is, these are the spaces which allow the power of rhetoric to exist and act on the world.

Take the following. In the last section of his *Susquehanna* – a book-length poem that attempts to think Coleridge’s failed vision of a utopia on the banks of the Susquehanna –

Smith targets what is perhaps the most characteristically Hegelian of all Hegel’s propositions: “The Spirit is a Bone.” Žižek makes much of this radically paradoxical proposition in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, offering a Lacanian reading of the proposition which views this “idealist wager” as one that would take bone and transform it from the “lack of the signifier into the signifier of the lack” (Žižek 209). The thing before us – invested with meaning – stands in for what is not there, calling attention to the presence of what can never be present, but which is also precisely that thing which allows things to be present to us – what for Smith is that hidden and persistently elusive black shadow, the stone. Not despite but *precisely through* this conflation of the pure negativity of spirit and the unforgiving rigidity of bone, Smith works through this radical contradiction in the space *between* spirit and bone – the space of rhetoric.

Moving in the late 1990s from the Bay Area to Austin with his partner, poet Hoa Nguyen, Smith extricated himself from the discipline of poetics. In doing so he also removed himself from those debates surrounding innovation and the new. As his interest in Burke suggests, Smith threw himself into the study of rhetoric, an all but forgotten discipline and one not presently in vogue among contemporary poets. A former student of Tom Clark given in part to the work of Ed Dorn, Smith’s move into the study

of rhetoric has – intentionally or by chance – allowed him to follow the contours of Dorn’s intellectual development. In a talk given March 4, 2008 at the University of Colorado at a symposium on the work of Dorn, Smith writes:

By turning to the Enlightenment during the 1970s and ‘80s... Dorn moved beyond the internal formal debates of experimental poetics to do something more politically effective. He renewed public modes of argumentation in satiric poetry in order to orient a public mind to the value of language within a democratic context.... The poem, treated as an agonistic field of exchange, provides a rhetorical space in which the demands of both author and audience meet. Ideas and insights to specific cultural situations motivate his writing more than their formal possibilities.

A committed and careful reader of Dorn for more than a decade, Smith could easily have been speaking to his own poetic practice here. Sans Dorn’s scathing satirical assault on audiences, Smith’s work similarly solicits encounter and is more concerned with thinking through the possibilities of entering into productive dialog with an audience than with formal innovation.

We find this in Smith’s *Susquehanna*. The poem often relies on the rhetorical trope of direct address, an appeal to an unknown reader beyond the text, a reader which *we* address when we read the work aloud to ourselves or others:

A time will come
when those waters carry
away the surplus of the country
and appetites reveal aping agencies
a bitterness in the wind
in the shadow of what you are ashamed of

(*Susquehanna* 62)

Given the instability of shifting pronouns, we sense that an author(ity) speaks to us and we – at precisely the same moment – speak to others, parroting the prophetic tradition, announcing a time to come when the real might disclose itself in the shadow of what we are ashamed of – here where

the shadow is a stone, the spirit a bone – a time when we might think through all the filth, blood and grit that would produce a Columbine, an unwarranted invasion, a Katrina, a Cormac McCarthy novel. In this careful use of the pronoun – relying on its radical ambiguity – Smith carefully skirts around the impossible choice between author and audience, mind and body, known and unknown. As with the entire corpus of his work Smith chooses to steer between Scylla and Charybdis, choosing neither and navigating instead the space between the two.

LAUREN SHUFRAN & OR, MARK DICKINSON: UNPUBLISHED AND PUBLISHED WORKS TO WATCH FOR

EDRIC MESMER

If I should hold here and there in my mind to justify a parallax, the poetics of Lauren Shufuran alongside Mark Dickinson's could locate elocution.

And of requisite in the former being paradigm shifts; shifts linguistic, vocal, and self-referent. Also of immediate note: Shufuran's camp inflections of fraternity – inversing at play Butler's 'xample – as (and here her hypotheses become occasional) if the intimations of performance theoretically possess their own shiftless contentedness. Decadence need not only apply...

Begun in that paradigmatic isn't framework plus (example)ⁿ alone, but primarily "of a conjugation or declension" linguistically performative "in all its inflectional" glory, Shufuran's poems analogize dominant variants in unlikelihood's extant. Take for instants the miscellaneous apparitions of Captain, I, or "my lover," "and my brothers" peopling the exhaustive recollections and prophetic odes of Shufuran's recent production. Just as visual texts may obviate unilateral meaning like a pinwheel, so too the shiftlessness of repeat competitions may repeat competitions, withholding the declarative.

Of more recent, again premising visuality, "in the analogy," Shufuran turns upon the curatorial inclination eras colonial, imperial, and *highly* discursive, explorative of historical demeanor, mock-splendor, and tilt. Thus destined untoward manifestation, American currency masquerades in the Anglophonic perversion of the French occupation of Morocco as told through traditional mitres Arabic. If horizon hath a flipside, its mathematicians must look no further than Deep Web.

Or; to correlate:

Like sea \approx mirror (per Zack Finch) or, more aptly, Atlantic, how may the painting analogy above rotate paradigms of tradition this side of tilting?

Mark Dickinson's poetry connects frenetic axes in (think Sutherland and Channing, "Chaos, control. You like?") revolutionary phasing. Indeed, the only thus-far counterpoint to the essence of patriarchal overdetermination found in such rhetorical priming of *voice* jostles amid the evolutionary phrasing of vocabulary; as Dickinson has it, "stems from a ubiquitous zero; a heron with an unearthly pause mimetic in view."¹ Note adjective after-thought flown before anima in limbo, where form finds negative definition suitable to fluvial mediation.

The littoral is not the only stopover, however, but a cross-range through which terrae nova and incognita might desist from firmer quandaries for the indeterminate play found at cyclic *terra aqua*. (It's no wonder Dickinson bides time surfing.) Description hovers over chancier bases, familiar apparati at hand if submerged, with headway made sheer by stroke by stroke. That the issuance of view – and even review (see Dickinson's "Candace Ward's *The Moon Sees the One*") – takes serial form likewise unfirms our 'notations of voice at one with parched register.

Their separate idioms squared, Shufan and Dickinson triangulate for me further the notional states at which we flux, clot, and froth forth.

¹ Dickinson, Mark. "from The Speed of Clouds." *Intercapillary Space*. Ed. Edmund Hardy. 1 January 2008. 22 March 2008. <<http://intercapillaryspace.blogspot.com/2006/02/about.html>>.

IN PROGRESS FOR HOA NGUYEN

DALE SMITH

It's not uncommon to gauge one's self by way of others. Those "others," of course, are possessed too of their own imagination. The heart and mind are populated by figures through which the imagination produces life (rather than reality, though the Real interjects itself as the black matter on which the imagination struggles into its own existence). I'm sure Levinas, or Lacan, or some other theory heavyweight could put this into terms more commonly known, though I understand the gauge of self through Robert Duncan and Charles Olson, most clearly. This is a very stupid way to begin trying to say something about someone I love.

The first time I saw Hoa Nguyen she was wearing black motorcycle boots, I believe, and a short skirt. I was married. And that ended. I moved with Hoa to Texas only two years later.

A little while ago I found a picture of us taken in San Francisco, at Anselm Berrigan's apartment, I believe, on Paige Street in the Lower Haight, ca. 1995. For more than a decade I've lived with her and her work.

I remember reading her poems in a coffee shop on Valencia Street in the Mission. I remember editing a student magazine with her. I remember sitting with her in a garden overlooking the City. I remember looking across a room at her in Tom Clark's seminar on Charles Olson. I remember moving into her place on Folsom Street and drinking coffee and reading the *Sunday Times* on a deck overlooking a bank of bright bougainvillea. I remember stopping in Luna, New Mexico, during a lunar eclipse on our drive from California to Texas. I remember her serving cocktails at Katz's. I remember setting type to her book *Dark*. I remember long arguments about how to edit magazines. I remember when she first proposed we publish our own journal. I remember how exciting it was to publish our first book, Kenward Elmslie's *Blast from the Past*. I remember driving a delivery van. I remember when we planted our first redbud tree in the house we bought in East Austin. I remember coming home to find Hoa wearing black

motorcycle boots, holding a glass of wine, and telling me that there was a snake in the house. I remember her pregnant and swimming. I remember learning how to look at words through her words. I remember reading her poems and learning that sound is in conflict with ideas. I remember how she delights in poems by Wyatt and Keats. I remember her reading "To Autumn" at equinox. I remember turning 40 and thinking our days accumulate like others – with energy and motion. I remember working through much she had already figured out. I remember that Time will drag its Claws through us. I remember how she loves Johnny Cash's version of "Hurt." I remember her planting the butterfly bush and digging up ragweed. I remember her ability to make good campfires.

I don't know what I wanted to be. Somehow I became a particular kind of writer. I live with a writer. Writers claim authority, whether they like it or not. Perhaps it's the way one's hand falls in conversation. Perhaps it's the turn of an eye on your words, making you see yourself through some other, unspoken, perspective. Authority can be claimed in many ways: the pitch of voice, the accumulation of insights, and the willingness to revise one's claims, the embrace of the dailiness of things – the "river of shit" a friend calls it. And poems float out of this river too.

Hoa writes slowly. She composes during a class she teaches now from our home on Sundays. I take our children – Keaton and Waylon – out to play. She teaches, writes. I come home. She types. She likes to look at her poems. I read them. Or I listen to her read them. She has a thing about words, going by ear. It's New American, or Black Mountain: Olson, Creeley, Kyger. She is not one with things. She is she. Words are other. I am other. The children, too, are other. The salvia and sage. The distraction of the news. Other. And yet in the field of her poems, life.

Wore a Hemp Hat

Wore a hemp hat ate grapes
A list of future baby names:
Waylon Angelica Martin Lucia
Rhymed some words & read a poem
Still damp (the laundry) Come on sun
Swished the toilets and watered the plants
By March I'll have gained 2 pounds
In uterine muscle Ate gross cinnamon bun

I know that hat. I see the word "hat" in the poem above. Do I still "know" that "hat?" Now, turned through Hoa, "hat" is prelude to a grape snack. A lot happens in this short poem. There are baby names. Domestic duties. The marvelous, penultimate line-break brings attention to the maternal fact

– the Real – an intrusion of tissue. The cultural context of conventional food as “gross” resonates with the engorged muscle – the body’s ripening.

We were preparing to leave for New York City. November. Hoa told me she was pregnant. I had no imagination of what that could mean. Hoa, by contrast, had the necessary foresight to look into things. “I don’t want to vaccinate our child,” she said. I began looking at the debate around vaccination. She began baking bread, making cheese, fermenting cabbages. We slept with the baby between us. She found communities of parents who, like us, related the child’s life through the ritual of the day rather than the disciplining of the young mind by force. (You want to build authority in the child, not to exert yours on him. Authority is not a possession. It is a perception of otherness anyway.) She had the mind to find out the essentials. And the fortitude to stand by her knowledge of bodies and babies. She was determined to protect her domestic space from the poisonous other – a culture gone berserk on chemicals. She turned to an old knowledge, and old ways.

Hoa and I both have had affinities for the works of prior generations. We come from what the media called Generation X. Hoa grew up in the punk rock dens of Washington, D. C., while I found my language composed of the vocabulary of country music. An older, mournful sound: Hank Williams, Waylon Jennings, Buck Owens, Tammy Wynett. I think of our affinities often in poetry. We are bound to the obscure, the observant. Those who weave life and art as one practice, as ways to encounter what is other. We pretend to distrust baby boomers. Sometimes we jokingly call them the Lost Generation. Spoiled, impatient, demanding, and destructive. In *The Grand Piano* Barrett Watten, more than any other contributor to that “experiment in collective autobiography,” exemplifies the negative traits of his generation. Once, after reading him, I wondered about the limits of self-appetite. I wondered if this “experiment” would be in print if Creeley were still alive. Watten challenges a New American authority. He questions another generation’s claims of love. And yet, these are not questions. They are assertions, railroading over the other, the prior. To bury acts of mind in the noise of self. “*Love*,” Watten writes in reference to the New Americans, “became the hitting end of a *big stick*, the final authority by which all difference, particularity, and belatedness would be put down forever. *Love*, my friends may remembers, was the big stick Duncan used to protect his originary interest in Zukofsky.” Next to this passage which deals more too with Sherman Paul’s *The Lost America of Love*, essays, on Dorn, Duncan, and Creeley, I have drawn a long, vertical line. Hoa laughs at the annotation penciled along this marking: “assholery.”

If I Can't Have Another Baby

If I can't have another baby

I'll bake

midnight cookies a little nut cookie

Forming something out of nothing

or more precisely a more complex something
from a simpler something

"The rising flood is the begetter of gods"

I drink from a cup and so draw my omens

The man said, "We could never do that..."
motioning toward my toddler-infant "balancing act"

Hoa's poetry looks back to another generation's concerns – but in a new way – because she is not of that other world. It is difficult to imagine a "language poet" baking in a poem. We have been so trained to suspect the pronoun "I" and to recoil at the subject's "lyric" momentum in a poem. Rightly. There are numerous horrors in poems named "I" that drag readers through an endless metaphor (tree) to arrive at some ambiguous epiphany ("I suck"). Barrett Watten wanted to read Zukofsky at Iowa. He argued against the epiphanic syllogism practiced by his more conventional peers. He favored the dislocated subject fragmented in the materiality of language. But the New Americans dealt with these problems too – in *their* ways – making claims of authority – with a pitch of voice – a trust and willingness to abide by their perceptive cues. Hoa trusts that voice. There are "omens" in her poems. "I" drinks "from a cup." And yet the problem of subjectivity and language remains. The poem provides testament to this snarl. The poet's authority arrives through the organizational pitch of the poem. It is not a networked plan of action. One must really scratch their heads in wonder, I once said to Hoa. There are genuine poet-heroes in the figures of Olson, Dorn, Creeley, and Duncan. What figures of comparable magnitude follow theirs – perceptually?

I remember eating Chinese food with Hoa and others at a place in North Beach I now forget the name of with Philip Whalen. I remember the first time we saw a copies of *J* and *Black Mountain Review* at Joanne Kyger's house in Bolinas. I remember meeting Diane di Prima with Hoa in Japan Town. I remember Diane telling us about meeting Ezra Pound and about giving the poem a material place in the world as an object. I remember sitting in Wheeler Hall with Hoa as Charles Bernstein read poems and thinking that this was the same place Charles Olson lead an all-night poetry filibuster. I remember seeing a picture of Amiri Baraka reading from *Skanky Possum*. I remember seeing Larry Eigner wheeled into the New College auditorium. I remember being driven with Hoa by Kent Johnson

through southern Wisconsin and stopping for beer and cheese in the little town of Monroe one early and cold December. I remember that Hoa and I drove with Rachel Levitsky one Thanksgiving to meet Roberto Tejada and how the next day we visited Robert Creeley and a hawk landed in his backyard so we named our son, who Hoa then carried, Keaton which, among other things, means “place of the hawks.” I remember how Hoa and I met Charles Bernstein at Lincoln Center during the intermission of Kenward Elmslie’s opera, *Lizzie Borden*. I remember riding on the subway with Steven Clay. I remember eating blitzes with Simon Pettet. I remember meeting Trevor Winkfield. I remember throwing wildflower seeds in late winter with Hoa.

[Pretty Headdress on Kidumiel]

Pretty headdress on Kidumiel
Kick the angel in the air
Kick and beat the brilliant air
Adorn your loud voice

Hurt my broken grinding kiss
Keep your pretty headdress house
I love you, afraid mother
Pure angel Lameck leave me

infant kisses on my T-shirt
Let me bleed fat and big
Slide alongside my boat
to mix my years with serpent tears

Kidumiel, an amulet angel invoked to protect the newborn child. Lameck, “a pure angel, invoked in black-magic rites, specifically in the conjuration of the Sword.” Tenderness and ferocity joined in the “afraid mother.” Protect the child. Turn on her imagination of new life. The other of her mother body. The others of the phenomenal realm. “Serpent tears” because all things end, transposing from the tension of spirit and matter to other matter.

Love as warfare. As an utterance – a secretion. A sound by which to rest. An active verb or authorship. A unwinding and decomposing. A belief in other to reveal the world. A right word held fast and then tossed. A deed. A testament to a silence that will blow over us – our ash.

Green anole visits the desert willow. Another thrives in Hoa’s closet, brown, careful to avoid children.

And meanwhile there's work to do.

ON BEV DAHLEN

TENNEY NATHANSON

“What’s the difference,” David Shapiro famously asks, “between a cloud and a spanked boy.” Hmm. So what’s the difference between Leslie Scalapino and Beverly Dahlen? Well, they both live in the Bay Area, for one thing. But more to the point, at least in the 1970s & 80s, they were arguably working on, or out of, the same difference, one which Wittgenstein might have enjoyed: what does it feel like to try to articulate the shape of a structure from inside that structure, especially when it’s the big sort of structure that – hello Saussure, Levi-Strauss, and Lacan – gives us language and kinship exchange and a self of whom it can be said, there where it was it is my duty that I shall come to being (that’s Lacan twisting the hell out of Freud’s “where id was, there shall ego be.”)? The other half of that same difference being: so how does the speaking subject that’s brought into being and stained (scarred) by that structuration also stain it, or wander around Certeau-like among its furtive, or awkward, or suddenly sexy or beautiful by-ways? And the difference would be, maybe, that while they both end up in these places, Bev lets her poetry wander there a little more often, and seems a little more bemused, though no less startled, when wandering, or wandering memory, wafts her there – the stakes and the terrain can feel dauntingly large in the work of both poets, but in Bev’s work the landscape, and the wanderer, feel a little less tensed, and warmer. So the work, while difficult, is also inviting.

So now, thanks Emily, what about internal difference, where the meanings are? (I mean in Bev’s work, work to work.) This is probably wrong, but re-reading *A Reading* 1-7 it feels like, let’s say, the big structure, call it the name of the father, gets there before the poet gets started, and the poet knows it: “before that and before that. everything in a line. where it was broken into, the house. not the body [where the dreamer says “that’s not my mother,” says Freud, read “that’s my mother”] but still I could not see that it didn’t have a roof. then there was something to cry about.” So that the work wanders in that prolepsis, briefly but repeatedly, into what suddenly feels like the gift of contingency, the grain of some particular, even if rendered abstractly:

“remember by forgetting. the grace of attention. that attentiveness to the materials, that argument, he said, with the material, and that would be that place where it was not all smoothed out, over. that would be its meaning. . . . over and out over and out. the crackling of voices, the wisp of dogs, barking. never done. an opening into it. a round forest magnified. we came there. I forgot it immediately. I said I want to drop this, I want to lay this down, not carry it, are you still carrying that stone? . . . the *I Ching* reminds us constantly no blame. no blame is nothing settles.”

Whereas the later-written *Eighteen Sonnets* seem to *begin*, all wide-eyed, wandering through the midst of the merely contingent. Here’s a terrific one:

a man called the police late one night because he was worried
about his downstairs neighbor whose shower he had heard
running for hours having become gradually a ware of the
persistent sound of streaming water as he sat in his chair
reading and finally rising and walk ing to the open window
in his own bathroom he stood listening and

then he called into the airshaft the question *hello?* and his
neighbor’s name which he knew then waited and listened and
questioned again now checking his watch now staring into
the dark air outside the window hear ing the spray of the
water below and no other sound now though he felt himself
straining then abruptly he rush ed out to the phone

(Sonnet 10)

It’s just what happens to be happening, right? Right. Which might always be something else. But there’s the usually unobtrusive but cannily cumulative registration of all those fourteen line units, set box-like like prose, or like boxes, and sometimes the goofy/awkward breaking of a word at line-end (no hyphen) just where it happens to thunk against the box’s right hand wall. So gradually one thinks to ask: what shapes this world? What is it that makes it be what it is, whereas maybe something else might have made it be what it’s not. Why is late modernity late modernity, why is America America? Without ever saying so. Or: why is the world what it is, instead of something else? So that the political question is also, oddly, what we might call somewhat awkwardly the religious one. As one zen koan has it, “what is this?” To which the right answer, it turns out, is just to fall down in praise and blessing. Which these poems do.

skip:

Or as Norman Fischer notes, “We need to resort to drastic measures. It’s a shame. Just so that we can remember a little more often the simple fact that

we are alive right now. It's a total situation. And it's never going to happen again. . . . The most important thing is that the spirit, the feeling, with which you do all this is a feeling of kindness. It's very important that you have a feeling of kindness and lightness in the doing of this." Which the poems do. Please welcome Beverly Dahlen.

A POETICS

ALLIE WARREN & SUSAN STEIN

We talk to each other.

We began this project on 10/12/06, after reading Berkson and Mayer's What's Your Idea of a Good Time? (Tuumba Press), and our conversation continues. The following is a selection. Each of us chose from the other's responses what to share with the readers of ON.

Dear _____, even though we said this was to be a during-the-work-day project, here it is 5:30pm, I am still at work, and still working even...

What's your sense of the use of "I" in your own work and/or poetry at large?

I do not identify with the "I" that appears in my work. I think of that "I" as a plurality or an Other, which maybe is not to say that the "I" does not identify with ME. Sometimes my autobiography even still. In all other poetries I think it depends. There are many writers, Stacy Doris would be one, where the "I" rarely appears and yet the work is presently articulated through a single authorial identity, or so I feel. In other places, Martin Corless-Smith is an example for me right now, everywhere the "I" is denied textually instead feels like a slipping, fainting denial of a forceful authority of authorship – this in neither case is a criticism, not exactly.

When was the last time you took a bath?

It was the day I took the Tramadol and had a terrible drug-addled anxiety reaction to it, and S_____ and L_____ had to take care of me all day while I freaked out as if on a bad acid trip. Towards the late afternoon, they made me drink a beer and take an epsom-salt bath. It helped. That was sometime

in the summer I think.

Your strongest sensory memory of growing up in the San Fernando Valley, what is it?

Summer. The hot concrete in my backyard, swimming all day, celery and peanut butter, ice-cream, wasps, the hot insides of cars, playing horse with my brother, naps in the late afternoon in my bedroom with the blinds shut, the light late into evening, night swimming ("deserves a quiet night")

. . . I find myself thinking a lot a lot about our questions and answers. Especially the question of "unified essential subject" as it does or does not appear in the "I" in my/your/our work. And your question to yourself about what do you do with the "I" when it appears to you "authentic", ie, attached to your own history, experience, concerns. I experience my "I", when it appears, as diffuse in most circumstance, and sometimes I wonder if I shouldn't be making the obverse of the action you are describing, I mean I often ask myself if I shouldn't land more squarely on myself as a speaking, experiencing, expressive voice in my work. Land squarely on the front side. For me in almost all cases the appearing "I" is all the characters of a piece of writing at once, all of its character, or it takes all the characters at different moments. It stands in for. Or something. But then this weekend I was working on a poem I was writing for S____ [and here's another thing, how much of your work is written towards some one? I often think mine is directed nowhere but I lie to my self because I think almost all of it is directed towards one. Or is generated from one insurrectionary source outside myself? I mean, someone I know. This is very confused.] Anyway I was writing this thing for S____, and it appeared that the I there was so DEFINITELY myself. And I don't want to problematize it, but I feel ashamed or guilty of letting it stand. Who am "I" to speak "I-ly" thus?

How do you feel about a poet self-publishing (her own work)?

I like a poetry that works outside of our economic machine, and I think to self-publish is one form of rejection of that machine. I have self-published my own work and I did it because I had this thing that needed to be contained in a certain shape at a certain time, and I wanted to give it away. I think anything borne of necessity is good (maybe even violence. See below). I wanted to do it right away, myself, and I never thought for a minute of sending it to someone else to publish, and no one was asking to publish it. There isn't much in the way of big-house publishing of poetry, and even the tiniest presses are necessarily limited in their scope. I think it can be a sign of generosity or of assault, the self-publishing, depending, and it's easy to tell which is which. I like the subpoenaics "self-publish or perish" motto. Sometimes that's all there is.

Do you think poetry can or should change the world?

I've thought a lot about this one, on my own, and now that you've asked it. My sense of your work and our friendship particularly colors my response. If I tend to think of the question within a limited political frame, my answer is more discouraged. It seems true that not very many non-poets read poetry, and so inevitably any world-changing capacities poetry might have are severely limited. Popular television and film and direct political action, which occur outside the realm of the "high arts," seem to enact more immediate (or at least the semblance of) change.

But there is also another sense of "changing the world" which I like to remind myself to consider. At a physical and psychic level, the psychosurgical procedure does effect change. It seems so obvious now, but it took me awhile to get past my analytic training and accept that spiritual/psychic entities do have a real effect in the world. And how embedded we are in language, how we are nothing but language, and any directed use of this language is political and does make change. We exist, and make ripples. They're small, and often intangible, but real.

Do you love me, and what do you mean when you say that you do?

"I love you" seems like a placeholder for an inexpressible, a lacuna between this gigantic breadth of emotion and history and socio-personal relations and the ability to express oneself in language. Sometimes, a strong hug seems much more expressive than "I love you." But I am (in) language, and I do feel that strong feeling, whatever it is, that makes the utterance true and worthwhile.

Do you think, as Berkson and Mayer keep discussing between them, that this project is a narcissistic one? Do you think that narcissism is still a useful form of relationality?

An epistolary, interview-based relationship seems to me no more narcissistic than any other relationship between people. Isn't there always – in strong relationships, at least – that inquisitiveness? And you learn about yourself along the way, which is a good thing. If not for an other, how would we represent ourselves to ourselves? At what point do we label a relationship "narcissistic"? (www.m-w.com: egoism: 1a: a doctrine that individual self-interest is the actual motive of all conscious action; b: a doctrine that individual self-interest is the valid end of all actions; 2: excessive concern for oneself with or without exaggerated feelings of self-importance). I'm not sure there's really such a relationship at all. Maybe we shouldn't call it a relationship, but two egoists exchanging self-interests.

What does it mean, "to correspond"?

Co-respond Jointly Re-volving Attention. Co-partnership of Company. A Re-ply Fulfills a Lack. Re-cognition. Re-thinking Addressing Re-thinking.

Also, the internet says "an engaged pillar supporting an arch or closing a colonnade or arcade."

How do you feel about yourself generally, as a person?

Oh, to have had this one turned back to me. I started to respond to this on April 6 and now it is April 20 and I'm returning to it. I wonder if I feel about myself "as a person" at all? There's the habitual part of my own thinking which is that I like to believe I am a kind person, and on reflection [this moment] I know that I am invested in an idea of myself as being "kind" and that the idea of wishing to be kind, to others, affects how I do in fact treat others, which is I think often but not always, with "kindness". I think this means sometimes "patience" which even belies "kindness". I want "to be" "good". "I" "wants" "to care". I make a lot of mistakes, I fail at being what I think is the "right" sort of citizen, for example I don't read the papers much or follow the news much which seems like a terrible badness of personhood and citizenry and a total failure of a certain kind of social responsibility, which I am not sure I understand/believe, which would be the responsibility to understand, interrogate, articulate a sort of citizen's participation in the social world. I don't understand money, I think that implicates failure on my part. I don't read enough or do enough I don't like how I look, I am afraid my work fails to address what it ought really to address, I can't understand the world very well, I don't speak as well as I would wish to, I don't see you enough, these all seem like failures of personhood to me somehow.

Are you competitive? How do you feel about competitiveness?

Yes, I am. I was surprised to find this was part of my nature, and I discovered it when I started _____. I'm also envious, jealous, and suspicious. I feel that the envy, jealousy, and suspiciousness are a correlative of my competitiveness, and that my feelings of competitiveness are located in my not having yet and perhaps never having possibility of reaching the kind of formal, emotional, temperamental, structural achievement of an altogether realized and effective poetic. Against whom am I competing? if I ask it this way, no one.

I'm trying to begin working on a new project/book, and my desire is to have an idea about the form, my materials, the Idea of the work before I begin (which

(because?) is not something I've done before). So this question emerges selfishly, but also because I really am tremendously curious about your process. I mean, do you usually start writing with an idea of what you want the work to be, what it will be "about", what texts you will use? If so, can you offer any advice on HOW to begin to do this?

This is a question I wish I knew how to answer properly. Each project – I think there are projects – seems to arise in its own way. One way is I wake up in the middle of the night knowing what is supposed to come next. Another way is someone asks me to fulfill a promise, like give a reading, and I observe the problems inherent in the usual frame of the promise and work against them. Sometimes I want to give myself a form to work inside of, so I spell something out, like, these are the titles of the chapters. Then I pretty much ignore all of that. When it comes to materials, I think you are meaning "outside" sources, I have handfuls or stacks of things that seem to be adjacent to my concerns, and I keep them nearby, or I imagine, hey I'll read that book on how to frame a house, but mostly I just think about the idea that I would like to know how to frame a house and I never open the text. I'm sorry. This doesn't seem helpful. I guess I could say that I wish to god in heaven I could do what B_____ does, which is, set a form, know the road, so speak, and then go about traveling it, which of course is always an unforeseeable adventure of its own.

What is humility?

Humidity is vapor in the air of a person when speaking and acting in the world with others. One of the most variable characteristics of the atmosphere, humidity is an important factor in social exchange and artistic action: it regulates air temperature by absorbing thermal radiation both from the Angry and the Dominant; it is directly proportional to the latent energy available for a generation of poets; and it is the ultimate source of all forms of condensation and precipitation in poetic works. Humidity varies because the water-holding capacity of poets is determined by disposition. When a volume of air at a given temperature holds the maximum amount of care possible, the air is said to be saturated. Saturated air has a relative humidity of 100%; near the Bay Area the relative humidity rarely falls below 30%.

Would you call yourself a hopeful person?

No. I'm pessimistic and cynical, it is very bad for me to read the news.

Tonight you didn't come to the poetry reading at T_____ 's house, and I was so disappointed, because one reason I went was for the chance to see you. But I understand the not going to poetry readings. How do you feel about the calendar

of readings generally and how do you feel about 'the poetry reading' as a form specifically?

O, I love that this "tonight" has a completely different referent now, months later...

Anyway, the calendar. It's hard to complain. I feel privileged to live in an area with so many events, and energy, and opportunities for the community to interact. That is one of the main reasons I moved here after all. Lately though I've had the experience of feeling obligated to attend readings, and I don't like that feeling at all. You know how it is, the community is so small, we're our own audience, there's a give and take and a constant shuffling of energy. But my plan is to make a concerted effort to go to a reading only if I really have a desire to hear the work. It shouldn't be like going to church.

As for the form? That's more difficult. We all lead such busy lives and don't often have a chance to read each other's work. The reading is a convenient and sometimes exciting way to share recent poems with your community. It can spur new work (for both the reader and the audience), and create dialogue. And yet, that is something that is lacking –dialogue. I want more dialogue about the work, around, in and after readings. I think different ways of performing, outside of "the reading," are more productive of those kinds of discussions. I like what the Nonsite Collective is doing, for example. I like talks and the intimate party atmosphere of events held in homes and apartments. I like reading groups. I like what you do when you're asked to give a reading. And there is something to be said for keeping things interesting and trying to cast our nets wider than the same old audience. Of trying to bring non-poets to events (gasp). Maybe the way to do this is to go beyond "the reading."

Can I read something you're working on now?

The poem I mentioned earlier, the one I've just finished, is the first poem I've written since _____. As I always complain to you, I'm a very slow writer – the work comes not in spurts but in feeble dribbles. And I've learned to be patient, but I never fail to freak out when a dry spell is pushing three or four months. That's when I get nervous, I'll never write again, I'm not a "real poet," etc. Anyway, all a way of saying I don't have anything to share with you. I would if I could but I can't.

How do you feel about making books of poetry? What is the "value of" a book of poetry? What goes in to a book 'of poetry'?

Many times we've had the conversation in which I complain that I can't

write a book. About my insecurities around that, especially living in the Bay Area and how it seems very much to be the form our community writes towards. I find myself wanting to be writing a book, as form, how I think about poetry, about what it can do. I think a book brings poetry closer to the kinds of conceptual work one finds in the art world. Which I often (jealously) find wildly more successful than poetry. What do I mean by “success”?

So there is that appreciation of the form, of my desire to write a book, of my frustration at constantly failing. The book is almost the complete opposite of how poetry actually comes to me. It’s a much more visceral process for me. So if work does turn out to become a book – that shape will have been tacked on, or formed after the work is already generated. And so I do not achieve what I set out to, I fail. Spicer is a total guide for me – structure, series, and process.

Alice Notley said she never tried to be anything other than a poet. What does that statement elicit in you?

It’s funny, this question, immediately following the one above. Lately I’ve been reading Notley’s early poems in the Selected. For the first time. (Wow). Those poems are just so massively intimate and strange and fucked. In the best ways possible. And they don’t seem to me to fit into a book. They are very much Notley being a poet and writing poems.

I don’t know what to do with this statement though. Is it an artistic stance or a cultural one? As a stance in poetry world, it calls to mind The NY School. It seems anti-academic, which I understand, but also find problematic. Does it aim to limit the kind of work a poet “should” write? The more interesting interpretation for me is to take Notley’s statement as a sort of socio-economic stance. In American culture. Does the poet stand against capital and useful production necessarily?

Tell me some of your thoughts about our performance at _____. Were you happy with how we proceeded through it? The responses received? Did you have any expectations? Were they fulfilled?

Now it seems infinitely long ago, but it was June 2. My only real regret about that evening was not being able to stay grounded enough to properly perform it, to stay in touch with it and not be swayed or undone by my projections about the audience’s experience, and then to have become so unmoored by those many feelings as to be unable to properly articulate responses to the many criticisms afterwards, to properly stand up for the work and the attempt, which has real value. I do think it was too long – or at any rate, lots of people felt it was ‘too long’, and so I have to wonder

about that. As B_____ said to me in an email later, if you're going to work against people's expectations about what a reading is, you've got to be prepared for the backlash, you can't expect to get the love. Some of the responses were disappointing to me, but illuminating. The question which was addressed to me multiple times was, "Did you do this because you're not writing?". And also, "Are you afraid to read your own writing?" Those questions are so reductive, and so blind to the question which was being presented, which is, where IS poetry in fact? I mean, where is that which is poetry? It reminded me, or made clear to me, how terribly conservative some many poets are or can be in their thinking about what is poetry. In a world of practice that includes something like Flarf for example, or conceptual art or performance art, how could the question here be so I have to say IDIOTICALLY reduced to "Are you afraid to read your poems?" That's just a lazy personal projection of the person who asks it, and again, it is illuminating about what many people desire from "poetry", which is, to experience themselves, to be mirrored, or to find ways to mirror themselves in their listening. I don't know that I exempt myself from that accusation. I'm "just saying".

On the other hand, many people wanted to ask questions and talk about it later and for a long time and I had lots of conversations that night, so I got back what one so rarely 'gets back' after a reading, which is, direct and immediate engagement, as a group. That's an amazing thing to have been able to generate, even if I had to feel uncomfortable throughout.

Your question about expectations is a difficult one. I wish I'd thought ahead of time how to stand up for the work, to articulate that what we were reading/demonstrating WAS/IS poetry, it IS writing, and to be better able to have the conversation about why it is or is not writing. But you know, X was sitting in the _____ row, and I'd had sex with X the month before, and it had been awkward, and X had kind of blown me off, or, would weirdly contact me but not try to see me, and we hadn't seen each other at all since having sex, and we had had no conversations about closure or continuance, and I was feeling both desired and rejected, and feeling both desire and repulsion, and also feeling tremendously uncertain, and it was very discomfiting and difficult to hold ground under that circumstance, which is the circumstance of life and being fragile and human and vulnerable. And afterwards X told me I was rude to my audience and that if people were nice to me or said positive or engaged things it was because they were my "allies" (not friends, not people who might have come out because they were interested in my work), and X also said X didn't understand what I was doing, and couldn't follow it, and it was too long, and X felt that because X didn't know who the artists were who were speaking for us, or know their work, X was shut out of the possibility of understanding what was happening/being said. So that colored my feelings about it for

a little while, and pre-empted my ability to wonder what my expectations had been and pre-empted my ability to know what it was that had actually taken place. It was valuable to recognize that lots of people were going to feel the way X did, that it wasn't poetry and that it was rude, but then I also felt personally wounded, that someone I liked well enough to have sex with could be that ungenerous with me, and assume not that I was a person deeply invested in thinking through all problems of poetry, with a deep love for language, and poetry, and what together they could do, and with deep love of and respect for other people thinking about poetry themselves, and being engaged, completely, in a life of poetry, and with a fantastic desire to communicate for and with the audience who so generously came to hear us, but instead that person assumed that I was lazy and withholding and ashamed or afraid to read "real" poetry. That was a very painful but educative experience.

"Love is form", Charles Olson. "Love is form", Robin Blaser. "All we love is form", Stacy Doris. What do you think this means? (I asked this one before. You had an excel spreadsheet to attend to and begged off for now.)

I just finished a poem today which is a new form for me, and also is about form. It seems to be about transit and commerce and language and the face. It was generated on BART and revised while at work. So it is also about the Bay Area and labor. More and more it seems to me that my work is mostly form. I haven't been generating any content lately but form has been there. And the two bleed together. What was it that Creeley said? "Form is never more than an extension of content."

I'm more inclined to say yes to Doris' mutation on the phrase than Blaser's or Olson's. Stacy's phrasing for me takes the emphasis off "love" and onto form. Not that love shouldn't be emphasized, of course, but I have a hard time imagining what the boys mean here. Are they referring to poetry, or to actual human love? I think this is why I begged off the question originally. A love relationship has formal characteristics certainly, even to the extent that it is just that, form, but what does this mean? What does it mean that poets are saying this? ...Thinking now of the performance Steven Benson gave at the Unitarian Center a few years back...in which he basically performed a phrase. I can't remember the original phrase he began from – can you? – but one of the mutations was "when we love each other the war ends." War is form. The face is form. One hopes that there is love in the face.

I did not answer the question as I wanted. But I don't know how to. It could go on for years.

CAN CAN

JEN HOFER & SAWAKO NAKAYASU

Necessity-Luxury Continuum

Jen: I keep wondering lately – and trying to find ways to write through this wondering – and then failing – and then wondering – how much of our lives or practice is fear-based? Is the way to spin fear into something useful to write from risk? What is “risk” for a person with the level of privilege we have, as compared, for example, to women living in much of the rest of the world?

Sawako: The risk of speaking, writing, opening any small orifice or enclosure of the self – be it ear or mouth or tightly clenched fist, asshole – vulnerability in every kind of open, or in sports: to be open (as in ready, ready to receive) or the open space, ready to be conquered, overtaken, used. My students remind me of the bravery it takes to expose one’s words to strangers. My family reminds me that it would take a different kind of bravery to expose my words to them. Risks in writing, writing into the unknown, any kind of venture which involves movement, travel, displacement, blindness, unfamiliar textures and sounds and deeply engrained habits, customs, traditions – of living, being, writing. The traditions and hierarchies and patternings we inherit, and a consciousness about those which should be kept and those which should be tossed out the back window of a speeding pickup truck driven by a small Asian woman, those which should be taken around the corner and encouraged not to come back until they know to treat people with more respect and equality. Implied in risk: audience, interaction, response. Safer to stay home on all counts, at the risk of loneliness and further alienation, risk of badness, rejection. Lacking the standard units and apparatus for measuring goodness, unconventional work runs a large risk of badness. Rewarded in risk: membership in a different club, perhaps one more friendly or coveted or kindred, and is this membership for life or is it contingent on how much risk one continues to take? Risk, and its ante. Having had my wallet stolen, having lost my membership card, I no longer have proof of my belonging. Will the avant-

gardists throw me out, away, overboard, if I write too many ant poems that too many people can understand easily? Will it no longer be special?

Risk in writing and living: both of my first two books were written under, around, about, through, some “risky” or otherwise unstable condition of life. Also, sometimes it occurs to me that it is a marvelous gift that my parents (and most of my family) are unable to comprehend English-language poetry, since it frees me from their scrutiny. I’m not sure if this is a problem for other people at all, but all the work I write in English, I wouldn’t possibly be able to say in Japanese – it’d be physically (technically) and emotionally impossible.

Jen: I think there is risk in the familiar and there is risk in the unfamiliar. As translators, nomads, foreigners (in a certain sense and in a variety of senses – and that is not to imply that in certain contexts we are not also “at home” or even actually homebodies, which you know I am!), and as adventurers generally – in our aesthetic tastes, our culinary tastes, our intellectual expeditions, our geographic and peripatetic and affective and sexual and literary and filmic and sonic and conversational and transit (and lots of other kinds of) desires – we might tend toward the unfamiliar. Or rather, we might tend toward a desire to inhabit the space where the familiar meets the foreign, where what is known is interrupted and energized and challenged and electrified by what is unknown or unfamiliar. I certainly see that impulse manifesting in your writing and your translating (not to mention your way of living), as well as in my own.

And I also see clearly in your writing – particularly in *nothing fictional* – a desire to find the unfamiliar in the familiar, where “travel” or “exploration” or even “expedition” are incorporated into the weird familiarity of the everyday. As mentioned above in a different context, the world is so weird, and all we have to do to illuminate that weirdness is contemplate the world for a moment – and poetry is perhaps the light of that contemplation? I mean “light” literally, not metaphorically or transcendently – I’m thinking of the way a magnifying glass casts a flared cone of light when held between the sun and an object (not an ant! not an ant!), and see poetry as that sort of light – a light with parameters, edges, which demarcates a space of attention within which things are seen for what they are, and thus seen differently. And the act of seeing is made different as well. That attention literally reverberates, ricochets, and thus creates molecular change.

(A question: are all the changes poetry can incite on the molecular level? And is that why it is on the one hand so difficult to see the politics in a poetics? – or to put it more bluntly, is that why it’s so easy to feel like poetry doesn’t fucking matter at all? And is that also why I wholeheartedly believe that poetry *is* political, when enacted in a way that suspends both

belief and disbelief about the ways language can function?)

At the same time, and especially lately, I'm thinking about the risks of familiarity. There are "given" familiarities – i.e. our families, our nationalities, our ethnicities, the contexts in which we were raised and educated. And then there are chosen (or desired) familiarities – that is, people to whom we open ourselves willingly and this opening involves immense risk, so more often than not the willingness to open – the desire to open, the desire to connect – is tempered or even truncated by resistance. Sometimes I think the impulse to travel the world (literarily or literally) stems from a desire to know. And sometimes I think it stems from a desire *not* to know – not to know the self. In the familiar – especially in intimacy – we are known by the other and we know the other in a way that can be radically unsettling. What is the relationship between the familiar and the unfamiliar in this context? Is an encounter with the unfamiliar at heart a challenge to the self? Which brings me back to my by now quite well-worn thoughts about the ways that translation effects changes on English, more than anything else – that it is a way to radically unsettle the hegemonies that crowd our use of English, as much as it is an impulse to know an "other" literature.

And how might such thinking manifest in writing? Or maybe writing is inherently a manifestation of such thinking? Are we not, at heart, repeatedly attempting to communicate – and to communicate in very specific, very sincere, very honest ways when we write poems, paragraphs, letters, essays?

Laura Moriarty posed the question of risk in writing to Patrick Durgin some time ago, and that question got transposed into one of Patrick's letters to me and then taken up in our correspondence in *The Route*. I – we – were thinking of it then in more social/political terms – writing in conditions of risk not created by the writing itself – that is, in conditions of actual political or economic or life-threatening risk. In a sense, your questions about writing (or specifically "experimental" writing?) as a bourgeois luxury (I think of Audre Lorde's essay "Poetry Is Not A Luxury" here) are cousins to those questions Patrick and I were considering. It's easy to feel that writing doesn't matter, or doesn't have political weight. But what does not have political weight, really? Or perhaps another way to frame the question: what makes Semezdin Mehmedinović able to write through the bombing of Sarajevo, or Mazen Kerbaj able to improvise trumpet through the bombing of Beirut? Or not just "able," but what makes their writing/composing *crucial* in the contexts of those particular violences? It seems that indeed poetry can and does *do* something. But what? Or perhaps we do not need to know what, but just that it does, and so we do too.

Sawako: Audre Lorde says that writing is not a luxury – *for women*. Which implies that the necessity for writing is heightened for those with less privilege, freedom, resources, comfort, representation (which would then imply that on a necessity-luxury continuum, the more privilege one has, the more likely one is to engage in the arts, and the less of a “necessity” it becomes to be one who makes art...). So part of your question seems to be, if you’ll forgive my crass way of putting it, how does one write from a position of privilege (of whatever kind)? And my question – do we feel inclined or obligated, then, as people who fall somewhere in between on that spectrum, to write from our less privileged parts (as if these parts were separable!)? And then, again, translation seems to be one of the answers, if we manage to successfully navigate around its imperialist trappings...

Framelock

Sawako: I remember an earlier conversation we had about other poets who did the marriage thing – as a means of articulating that “marriage” could be done well, differently, independently, etc – that it doesn’t have to fall into the usual suspect conditions of power and gender roles and traditional attitudes. In that way (now I’m starting with the very last thing you say in “framelock”¹), you are a good model for being a “white American” – that you take the time to consider it for all it is and isn’t, that you work hard to question its privileges and assumptions and (false or undeserved or unquestioned) power.

Jen: I am trying to intersperse unpleasant tasks (writing my first-ever “real” academic job letter – ugh, what a gnarled form!! I know for sure I am not a talented hoop-jumper! Or maybe if it were a flaming hoop and I could wear an orange tutu?) with semi-pleasant tasks (sweeping and mopping the kitchen floor; hand-washing the lacy panties and fishnets; sweeping eight thousand tons of cat hair from under my bed) with totally-pleasant tasks (writing Renee a letter about her latest manuscript; responding – finally! – to this incredible missive from you).

It’s very strange to be a “white American” who absolutely reads as white and USAmerican yet is not exactly “white” and not exactly “American” – or maybe the condition of being the child of an immigrant is exactly American? I suspect so. One question that seems crucial is whether people who truly benefit from the system-as-is (hegemony, to use one shorthand term) can be willing to truly give up privilege. I’d say I benefit from certain

1 * “Not What But Where: Some Provisional Thoughts on Translation as Social Practice,” by Jen Hofer, originally written for the unnamed idea-exchange project edited by David Brazil, Erika Staiti and Brian Whitener and here called “framelock” for short.

aspects of institutionalized racism and USAmericanism, certainly, and also from class privilege, but I wouldn't say I'm a "true beneficiary" of the system in the same way that an upper-class white male is. But some part of me doesn't even want to go down this road, thought-wise. Somehow the very reinscribing of categories – while maybe necessary in some ways, in terms of recognition of privilege – seems to exhibit the problem rather than challenge the problem.

Sawako: Actually, at dinner tonight, some things Eugene was saying resonated a little: that being in China, we have this "opportunity" to live, right up against and next to, some very poor people. And coming from the wealthier countries, as we do, we have a tendency to criticize the wealthy and the privileged, and along those lines, ennoble the poor. And yet the truth of it is, once you come to observing it up close and on a daily basis, there can be quite a lack of civility, kindness, honesty in these people. Of course I am generalizing, but any ordinary day can involve pushing and shoving, scooting out of the way of flying phlegm, hyper-awareness of prices so that you don't get overcharged, making sure your valuables are safe (I just had my wallet stolen). Poverty is not pretty. (Just read a *NY Times* article about "slum tours," "poorism" – as a growing industry in India, and the controversies it has raised.)

Jen: I think it's crucial to be able to critique anyone and everyone for unkind, disrespectful behavior. That's not a refusal to acknowledge cultural difference (some cultures spit in the street, some don't – fine) – and certainly ideas about personal space (shoving, cutting in line, etc) and ideas about "acceptable" public actions differ radically from one culture to another – but I think some basic sense of respect for other humans can be expected of absolutely everyone, regardless of their level of poverty or whatever. To excuse, for instance, hideously violent behavior (the results of which I see all the time in court) because a person had no education or economic opportunities is bullshit – a person who is able to think and has the smarts to survive the streets of L.A. ghettos and/or get their hands on weapons and/or etc is smart enough to think about the personhood of another being. That's on the one hand. On the other hand, to critique "bad behavior" (to put it reductively) without taking into account socioeconomic and political factors seems to me completely suspect – as if there is a level playing field, which we both know there absolutely is not.

Sawako: ...and this plays into laws (the word and concept) and *laws* – (your book manuscript). . . (and the laws (lawns) of excluded middle, (R. Waldrop), or other laws: law of the land (which, here in Shanghai, includes spitting, bargaining), laws of motion, point of no return (is that a law. . . ? Perhaps not). Your book makes me consider the continuum of laws within which we live – from the laws of logic and physics (Japanese word for physics: thing-

reason), to personal, intuitive, or biological mechanisms, institutions and governments and society, laws of language and grammar and literature. . .and so then, within these systems and institutionalized structures within which we live, how does white privilege come into play? Should I believe that you would wish to not be white, and wish to relinquish all the privileges that come with it...?

Jen: I know it's terribly un-pc to say it, but I would in fact wish not to be white. It's difficult to separate this from wishing not to be me – not that “me” is inherently white, but that my ethnicity is tied to my family is tied to the difficulty of being me. You know? Alternately, we might think of it this way: I lived as a lesbian for years, though I've probably always been bi and always will be bi. But recently I've been with more men than women. Knowing intimately what it feels like not to have heterosexual privilege, how do I respond to the fact that when I walk down the street with a man (even if we're not overtly exhibiting affection of any sort but especially if we are) we get read as a hetero couple and afforded certain privileges? How do I refuse that privilege without depriving myself of the experience of being with someone I want to be with? And how do I refuse it honestly? That is, for me to be out as queer – because I am – in all that I do, that's one thing. But for me to pretend somehow that I don't receive heterosexual privilege in various manifestations in the times when I'm with a man, well, that's simply dishonest. That would be like my calling myself “Latina” without acknowledging that I'm also white, and that I'm Latina by immigration (as are most Latinos, but some more than others), and that I'm only half a half-breed, & etc.

Sawako: Framelock, framing, reframing: I find this terminology very useful, both in terms of explicit and implicit privileges, as well as the consideration of travel as dislocation – both physically, geographically – and “literary travel” via translation. But I would add that this “framelock” exists at both ends – one's efforts can be rendered both adequate *and* inadequate, and the problem lies in the “lock” part of it, the hope being in a fluidity of the “frame” –

Translation also intervenes in typical forms of canonization, as potentially even counter to it (though I suppose it forms its own kind of canon in the process – but perhaps the more “canons” we create through alternative methods, the more we are able to lessen its limiting impact/s on the community). . .

Jen: Yes, I think it's crucial to acknowledge the ways we re-canonize. Questioning the taken-for-granted canon is of course better than not questioning it, but I've been distressed, in some ways, to realize, for instance, that the writers in my anthology are now read differently in Mexico

because of their having been in my anthology. It's gross that it took some gringa coming down to Mexico to create an anthology (with the intent of unsettling and expanding literary conversations back home, mind you, not with the intent of shaking things up in Mexico, unless you count shaking things up inside my own thinking via living in Mexico, which of course I do) for these excellent writers to be read with any attention in Mexico – that's indicative of gender bias, marginalization of innovative language use, and small-mindedness generally among Mexican literary communities. And in some way, despite the grossness, it's wonderful that these writers – at least some of them – are now being considered more seriously than they were before.

Sawako: It would have been even grosser if your anthology did not have as much of an effect because you are gringa and not gringo. Does this mean that your whiteness trumps your gender, when it comes to perception in Mexico? In any case, I tend to see the wonderfulness of what you did as far greater than the pre-existing grossness. . .

And when you refer to a practice revolving “out of a radical openness to difference in the self. . .” Comparing China to our usual western standards, there are many aspects of life here that remind me that this is still a developing nation. And because I tend to see translation as a literary enactment of (or parallel to) traveling, inhabiting a foreign territory and language, I end up reading your words on translation with the word “travel” lurking in the shadows. And so what of it – even as we consciously try to eschew the obvious enactments of privilege (maids, chauffeurs, over-priced expat-bars), as we try to avoid that which smells of imperialist, colonial tendencies, the fact of our privilege does not go away. But what does that mean? While I'm studying Chinese in some gesture of “openness,” in an attempt to learn, understand, and integrate (to the extent that I can) with the culture, Chinese people are studying English because it leads to employment, and is a means out of poverty. And what good is my “openness” in the face of tremendous economic disparity? Who can be bothered to be “open” if all they want is to be able to buy food?

Which leads me to some thoughts about writing, art-making, “experimental art” and the fact that it is, largely, a bourgeois act. One has no time to make poems and stories and paintings and music, if that same time needs to be spent working and earning a living, having enough money to survive. Art can be made only when the basic necessities of life can be taken for granted.

Jen: There is a part of me that agrees with this wholeheartedly – that can see this absolutely. It's clear that economic subjugation functions, in part, to ensure that resistances of all sorts (artistic and otherwise) will

not be enacted. If people are distracted worrying about mere survival, about feeding, housing and clothing themselves and their children, about adequate (or even inadequate) medical care, about all the basic necessities, of course they do not have any leisure time whatsoever to be practitioners of the arts or enjoyers of the arts. And at the same time, I think it's important to acknowledge all the ways that creativity manifests in the world – all the ways that innovations are enacted, whether or not a person is participating in any aspect of the “art world” (and here I include the literary world). So that the ways people put together their living spaces or vehicles or shoes or whatever are, in some basic sense, art. Isn't a thing still art if it's used for daily life rather than consumed in a moment of leisure? And if art-making is crucial to our thinking – I mean, really crucial to it – how do we differentiate between what is “leisure” and what is “necessity”? These questions are so complicated! (I think, though, about the ways that slang functions in Mexico City, those kinds of innovations in language, which are totally wild, and wonder. . .)

Sawako: As for art-making existing in non-officially-sanctioned locales for art, yes absolutely. . . I think this especially with regards to poetry and language, and the people I know who produce such pleasurable and interesting moments of poetry in language, yet have no desire or need to make it official as “art.” Slang is a great example – those teenage Japanese and Mexican girls should have a slang-slam contest of some sort –

Jen: Another thought: in many ways I very much agree with your inscription (a harmonic inscription) of travel into/through questions of translation. But I think there's a difference, or at least it seems so to me from this vantage point. And that is that if you're really translating (and that phrase could be unpacked, for sure!!) you're necessarily letting go of the self to deeply engage with and enter the work/thinking/vocabulary/philosophy/ expression of another writer/artist. I don't think it's possible to do what I think of as translation without that. And I do know that it's possible to travel without really “getting in” – and consequently, without really being changed or affected by the experience of travel. How do you think of this?

Sawako: I still do think they are parallel – that writers are also capable of translating in a similarly surface-level way. I like to think that we both strive to do both (travel, translation) in as engaged a way as possible, but even when I consider having translated one book by one poet – in a country full of writers and literature – it seems not-so-different from getting to know only one person in a new land.

Jen: Another thought: there are different kinds of necessity. The necessity born of economic deprivation (i.e. the root of most immigration to the U.S.) seems to me to be a completely different kind of necessity (though

not unrelated?) to the necessity of getting outside the self and/or engaging in curiosity (to use an Oppen term) about the rest of the world (the root of most travel). I do think of the latter as a necessity (and also a luxury) – because I think it’s necessary for us to participate in reconfiguring the fucked up world we live in (which we inherited, which we are building) – but I do see that there’s necessity and then again there’s necessity. And now, my necessity is to get myself on my bike and get to work!

Sawako: I must say that you use the word “panties” a lot! What significance does this have? When I was in college I knew a girl who hated the word “panties,” and boys would tease her by frequently dropping the word “panties” into conversation (yes, I said college). I remember the way she squirmed and struggled each time she heard it, and now I realize that although it has never been of terrible concern to me, there is a part of me that squirms, on her behalf, when I hear the word “panties.” We are empathetic creatures to the core.

You ask: whether people who benefit from current-day hegemony are willing to give it up. The sad truth seems to be “no” – what do you think? Would I give up my education so that someone less privileged might have taken my place? Do I want to live in a tiny dirty shack and work for \$5 an hour if I don’t have to? \$10? However idealistic I may feel, I’m still, essentially, overwhelmingly glad and grateful to be who I am, where I am. . . it seems crass, but I have to admit it. So then the question becomes, how great is it to be living here? To be reminded on a daily basis how privileged I am? And to witness others with similar privileges flaunting it in less subtle, sometimes offensive ways (often the case with super-wealthy Chinese people)? Is it better to be here, seeing and feeling my privileged status explicitly, rather than in the US, reading about China’s pollution in the *New York Times* online? And – in either case I feel like I am not doing much to ameliorate matters. . .

Jen: I like the word “panties” – especially when used in relation to men’s underwear – but I’m sorry to make you squirm.

Reading as white carries with it certain privileges which are afforded me whether I want them or not – I benefit regardless of my beliefs about the system that creates institutionalized racism and the white privilege that is corollary to that. I can’t not read as white, so perhaps my being “not-exactly” white signals the complexities of whiteness, rather than any actual non-whiteness on my part? But what to make of the fact of being the daughter of an immigrant who is himself the son of an immigrant, the daughter of a non-native English speaker, someone who has had a consciousness about race and ethnicity and language all her life that’s (I think) different from the consciousness or lack of consciousness most

white folks have (or don't have). Am I trying to say I'm special, or exempt from racism, or exempt from critique of my privilege? Not at all. Am I trying to understand where I come from and where I stand, in order to move through the world in a more activated, more thoughtful, more self-aware way? Surely. And am I trying to figure out ways to work against inequalities of all sorts and the distorted manifestations of privilege and disadvantage that seem so egregious everywhere (differently egregious, as you've noted, in China than in the U.S., for instance, or in Mexico or Argentina or wherever)? Definitely.

When I talk about ceding privilege, I'm not talking about completely giving up what we have – and it's certainly impossible to give up what we *had* – i.e. our educations and their attendant privileges already happened, the fact that I come from a family that can afford health insurance and to own a home is non-negotiable and continues to reverberate in the ways I navigate the world. As I see it, the idea isn't for those of us who have privileges to live in misery in order for others not to live in misery (as if!). It doesn't shift anything structurally for you to become disadvantaged in favor of someone else's "taking your place" (as if that were even possible). But would I have been willing to go to a state school instead of Brown if the money saved would have been used to send some other kid to college who otherwise wouldn't have been able to afford it? Absolutely. When I was going to college there wasn't a way to make that happen (or I wasn't in a place to construct one?) and, perhaps even more to the point, it seems to me that what we need is structural and societal change, not single people making space to help other single people – though that's good too, and desperately needed.

Your working in a sweat shop or maquila doesn't help change the fact that sweat shops and maquilas exist and exploit workers. This is totally improvisational thinking here, because these are questions that bedevil me no end and cause me quite a bit of anguish in terms of my own concerns about how to make myself useful to the world in daily life – and they are questions for which I have really absolutely no answers – but it seems to me that there are maybe two different fields or zones we're trying to talk/write into? One is a concrete sociopolitical space that requires structural thinking and structural change in order to become different and more humane, more viable, more equal. Another (and obviously these are not completely opposed by any stretch) is a space of subjectivity and/or interpersonal relation and/or thinking/philosophy in which we can actually think about ways to work against our own privilege. For instance, I can dedicate significant space in my own literary practice to translation, rather than simply to creating and promoting my own work. Or for instance, I can work as an interpreter in social justice settings, so that instead of privileging my own voice in various political struggles, I'm using my voice and

skills to enable people to talk with one another who would not otherwise be able to communicate. Which is not to congratulate myself in the least, but rather to say that I'm just at the very beginning of figuring out how to make a life that actively and variously works toward constructing the world-as-it-might-be-imagined and actively and variously struggles against the world-as-it-is.

Sawako: Canonizing, re-canonizing, labeling, identity, ethnicity. . . one of the things I loved about Kenjiro Okazaki (at the Yotsuya Art Studium, in Tokyo) was that often in his lectures he made transparent the dubious means by which art got canonized into and through art history. And then he'd rewrite it, on the spot, in any number of ways. This of course applies to all arts, not just visual art, but all of it seems particularly interesting at this moment in time, when people shift geographies more fluidly, globalization (for better or worse) continues to affect people in different parts of the world similarly, and there is more of a blurring between ethnicities, languages, literature, genre, border (or am I making that up?! This is probably a description of my world, not necessarily universal. . .). And I want to turn this a little towards our own projects in writing, language, art, performance. I see your poetics manifest not just in your poetry but in your performativity, the puppet theater, and then again not only in art – your poetics are part of your daily lived life, it resonates with the way you arrange your home, ride your bike everywhere, the Whirly Girls, and how you engage with real people in real life in real time.

But what I was going to say earlier: perhaps this idea of border crossing-blending could now be applied to canonization, re-canonization. That it could all be loosened up, so instead of having canon or no canon or this canon or that cannon, we could have caaaanons, canoanons, cancanons, and so on.

Jen: As for can-can's and no-no's of all sorts, and all sorts of crossings of all sorts of borders, I think that wild plurality and depth of engagement are equally important. Do I risk canonizing Dolores and/or Laura's work by saying – as I have said and honestly believe – that I will translate every book that each of them writes? Certainly. But my sense is that the depth of my engagement with their work is central (inextricably so) to the effects of that engagement: how informative it is for me, how challenging to my own ideas about writing and language and selfhood, and how nourishing to my own work and thinking it is. And then hopefully these effects reverberate with other readers of their work. Also, I sincerely hope that the limitations of my own translation practice (how necessarily partial, for example, the list of writers I included in my anthology was) will galvanize others to translate more, and more widely than I am able to. So that yes, the borders of the canons constantly being created are also constantly in flux – doing

the can-can, with skirts flying and an occasional titillating glimpse of panties.

P.S.

Rather than reproducing the effusively affectionate opening and closing salutations of all our letters, we decided to create an “affection concordance” with numeric illustration of our mutual adoration society, culled from the exchange of 355 e-mails between February 14, 2008 and April 11, 2008:

instances of the word “darling,” “darlingest,” “darlink,” “dear,” “dearest,” “dearie,” or “sweetie” at the beginning of letters: 157

instances of declarations of love, much love, or much much love love (a Chinese construction) at the close of letters: 110

kisses: 374

hugs: 358

Jen and Sawako welcome correspondence, and can be contacted at jenhofer@gmail.com and sawako@gmail.com respectively.

Or Wall Or Wall

bricked up but not bricked
over, stacking, counting, not counting,
similar to no known quantity (she maneuvers
an endeavor of architecture, physicality of
accretion, cumulative intents everlasting &
otherwise considered an instigator of
still-shifting synthetics (she accrues
plastics & properties, further opacities
patently bloom, intrinsically rerouted
or yet-to-be manifest, bundle of which
joy, time-kill or tremble, a helping of grace,
how many doses of ongoing uncertainty,
relentlessly progressive and yet mired
to the hilt or hinting at history, inhaling
or exhaling as the body wavers, woes
and wants, glimpses and grasps (she
rearranges identifications, modular
tonalities hung into the core of that
which springs forth when, or that which
remains pendant, resonant, the part of
sound which is milked, well after the act of
making itself appear, milky, touched
as obligation pendulous, verdant
as datura or detour, fluidly fluted back-
wards, pungent spongy invertebrate
sill or not doing her job (she suits
up, unsuited or uncut, rough material
of whose making, cut to the quick and
spun out of a fleeting color, moment,
gloom or looming endgame, breaking
point, match, set, on, onward, forward
modulations or merely a flicker tailored
to whose specifications, recruited or
convinced, rather unconvinced, moderated
by which we hold close, clutch, rekindled
and trampled designs of a finer hour or two
waiting in the wings or pit, cleft or swell,
distended new bellies to utter abandon
or belly up, signs of submission sweep
temporal ligatures untied, by which we
realize the decision made us making it
denatured unspecified felled had glimpsed had

fled had undone, itself a fashion of law,
lawful mindfulness in direct opposition to
which neighboring position which companion
resisting completion itself become liquid structured
to resist to transit to neighbor as if
somewhere in there the life were to be found
as if tender battle, hankered to the quick, all
speeds of faith, trust, blood, beginning with
or falling-stepping out, dropping in-out, a
new lease, never new, never not noticed
or being notified of further goose-stepped
regulations, having become regimented (she
half-lives or forward-march under, unto,
from-with and there-there, a neighboring thought
trying to friendly it up with an old thought,
digression, antimonious or antipathy's end-
run run-down worn-out out-and-out last
best thought as if best were the point where
these delicate flowers are concerned, concerning
being beside the best point, having yet to
ante itself up for the greater or finer hour of
engagement, purpose intention not-with
standing, awaiting, not with-standing nor
ponying up her seat, transit, regulation vinyl
cracked, starting to, coming to, striving
tete-a-tete or toe-to-toe, a toe in the hold of
a transitory boulder: thank you, you've moved a
wall, face, continent, surfeit, fault line, cleft of
which essential movement imperceptibly routs
regressive fauna, and aren't we all, fonder
failures furrow gratitude's geometry, fodder
for which expendable geographies of risk,
tendentious inhalations of oncoming traffic
bent over itself to ask the same question
vaporously in swirled circuits funneling
toxins under the skin of inquiry dead-
ended, up or given over to which cracked
night, what such truce, when the other shoe,
buckled up or buckled in, over, in heat,
in close-companioned dusk, element of
electro-magnetic diffusion, loss, total
loss, wrecking-ball dispersion, nuzzled
clusters negated and denied, denuded,
naturalized with no future morning

THE MATTER IN COMMON SENSE TAYLOR BRADY'S DIALECTICAL LYRIC

ROB HALPERN

*There is a simple ego in a lyric,
A strange one in war.*

— George Oppen

Anything but a 'return to the lyric'—this is the cadence itself, whose recuperative translation from hazarded address to the metalanguages of settlement has always demanded such a pre-emptive return. To parlay the phatic gamble of the lyric into the general clamor and desperation of intra-Imperial counter-communication, is to build a language that does not return.

— Taylor Brady

I'm reading the final section of Taylor Brady's *Yesterday's News* (Factory School, 2004), "They Store it Up (slight return)," which offers a sustained and meditative declaration on the consequence of lyric poetry under conditions of unending war and global disaster, "this time without interval in which language undergoes a liquidation" (259).

Subtitled "notes around lines by George Oppen," the writing is at once rigorous and beautiful. The lines around which Taylor composes his notes come from a late unpublished poem called "The Poem:" "I think there is no light in the world / but the world // And I think there is light." While these lines underscore what I'll dare to call Oppen's dialectical lyric (despite Oppen's emphatic claim to the contrary – "NOT A DIALECTIC BUT VISION" – which I just read in the *Selected Prose, Daybooks, and Papers*, much to my astonishment, while editing this piece for ON, and about which there's too much to say here), I've found it useful to read Taylor's pages beside several stanzas by Oppen in addition to these lines.

From "Of Being Numerous" (section 26):

We want to say
'Common sense'
And cannot. We stand on

That denial
Of death that paved the cities

Generation
For generation and the pavement

Is filthy as the corridors
Of the police

[...]

Street lamps shine on the parked cars
Steadily in the clear night

It is true the great mineral silence
Vibrates, hums, a process
Completing itself

In which the windshield wipers
Of the cars are visible

The power of the mind, the
Power and weight
Of the mind which
Is not enough, it is nothing
And does nothing

Against the natural world

"We want to say / 'Common sense' / And cannot." "As I keep saying, 'happiness' has to be defined realistically and empirically; not on some 'common sense' assumption which in practice has been continually proven untrue" (Oppen, *Selected Letters*). Whatever lyric poetry has the potential to sense may not yet be common, but whatever sense once activated our common ideas has hardened into the opposite of living feeling. What we *can* call 'common sense,' Oppen suggests, is just another name for "the denial / of death that paved the cities:" and what is lyric's vocation – I mean, *what is lyric calling us to hear* – from somewhere inside that?

*

Next to Taylor's work, and Oppen's, I'm reading Antonio Gramsci's "The Study of Philosophy," so I'm already tempted to digress. For Gramsci, sense can only become common by way of a struggle to be historically useful. "Every philosophical current leaves behind a sedimentation of 'common sense;' this is the document of its historical effectiveness" (*The Prison Notebooks*, 326). As a form of thought and feeling responsive to whatever social ecology pressures and constrains it, lyric can't exempt itself from that struggle without betraying its call *to sing 'common sense,' as if for the first time*.

Gramsci is thinking about what he refers to as a "philosophy of praxis." He's thinking about how thought and action become historical by connecting with *intervening in and transforming* whatever goes by the name of "common sense," and how, in doing so, thought and action can reconstruct that common sense, raising it to a new level of self-critical coherence: "A philosophy of praxis cannot but present itself at the outset in a polemical and critical guise [... but] it must be a criticism of 'common sense,' basing itself initially, however, on common sense" (330). This is a rich idea, and it suggests a way of thinking about lyric, which, in its received form (Taylor reminds me), might very well be the "common sense" of poetry, whose once living sense has become a fossil sedimented in the historical record.

For Gramsci, this is all part of the struggle for hegemony: the work of constructing common sense anew – a form of consensus – and with it, the conditions of possibility for a new commons. This involves politicizing already existing activities, activities hardened and compromised by reigning common sense. Gramsci goes on to propose "politics" as the activity where "common sense" and the "upper level of philosophy" couple for the purpose of building what he refers to as an "intellectual-moral bloc," which "can make possible the intellectual progress of everyone and not only small intellectual groups" (332).

Gramsci then turns to the self, and we might imagine him here discussing lyric poetry as another such political activity: "critical understanding of self takes place therefore through a struggle of political 'hegemonies' and of opposing directions [...] in order to arrive at the working out at a higher level one's own conception of reality" (333). The aim is to politicize the self critically, as if it too were the scene of a politics. In other words, one's critical understanding of one's subjectivity *is* political activity, even when it fails to appear as such. Social antagonism, tension, disparity, opposition: without accounting for these things, without taking account of them as the stuff of one's constitution, any self-reckoning *one's own conception of reality* can only be rendered as unreal.

One can't be asked or expected to bracket the self *or the body for that matter* in order to treat the social material of language and sense objectively and realistically, without compromising all objectivity, all realism. Insofar as the self and the body, fused by sense, are penetrated by and perceptible thru that material, the dialectic – that struggle of opposing directions, each persisting in and thru the other *The sense of self among the motor cars* (Oppen, *Selected Prose*) – is already quietly at work, and one can only disavow it in bad faith.

As part of Gramsci's struggle for a common sense, lyric would "necessarily suppose an intellectual unity [of theory and practice] and an ethic in conformity with a conception of reality that has gone beyond common sense and has become a critical conception" (333). In becoming critical, then, lyric participates in an ongoing historical process of overcoming common sense *by way of common sense*. This, I think, is Oppen's ethic, and Taylor's.

*

Opposites persist in and thru one another. Risking sense that is not yet common, Taylor's lyric remains faithful to the buried promise of an emergent commons. In doing so, the writing obeys the taboo on lyric – no resurrection of so dead a form – as if what passes for common sense had reduced lyric to something that a poetics more attentive to the history of the present would be obliged to forbid. But that adherence to the taboo is only maintained by way of its transgression, and its responsiveness to another imperative *to return to lyric by way of a language that does not return my voice to me*.

In *Yesterday's News*, lyric becomes possible under present conditions, as if for the first time. "I think my poetry has arrived at a constricted moment where the lyric, far from returning, is finally *possible*." And although "the opening made by the lyric is less than exemplary" – it may even be "compromised, clownish" (perhaps because that opening can only be unevenly developed; or, because of the motley range of affects the work activates, from paranoia to disgust, all of which arguably register, ready, and *tone*, a kind of emotional commons) – "it is necessary, and it has taken this long" (258).

These propositions startle as they cut against the grain of a certain "post-avant" common sense, and they challenge the commonplace that lyric may no longer be possible except in an attitude of bad faith whereby a poem would have to feign naïve belief in the symmetries of song's fullness and the self's plenitude. At the same time, a more conservative common sense would hold that lyric remains as possible today as it's always been, indif-

ferent to the time of history. In contrast to these bad alternatives – the one historicist and the other ahistorical – Taylor suggests a more historically nuanced approach to lyric, responding to something radically specific in our present tense *the historicity of lyric valuables*.

“They Store It Up” formulates the knotted temporality of lyric’s present tense with devastating precision:

One can only deny for so long (though this may be a much longer time than we are ready to endure) complicity with a world that knows it is one’s own exact reflection, especially in those events in which one misses or averts the resemblance. Always after there is the sole remaining response, and the words must fill the space of complicit consonance so as to void it. The network’s enclosed commons of communication is most us when we think to have turned our backs, shouting ‘here, here, here’ into the unfenced void. (257)

Empire has its own time, and we can’t neatly distinguish this from the present tense of lyric time, at least not without recourse to the persistence of a common sense myth that posits poetry’s exemption from history. Under empire, the future may be nothing more than a projection of the present’s dominant ideas about itself, and this of course is no future at all. Subject to this temporality, words are obliged to “fill the space of complicit consonance” just to be audible according to the protocols of reigning common sense, a kind of second nature, a natural extension of “the enclosed commons of communication.” But such words can only concede our “failure to have articulated an opening to the future.”

Only in a hollow gesture of expressive autonomy does poetry turn away from its own time *to hear my voice return my name to me* and thus it pays the price of its own consequence. A more historically tuned lyric *in which common sense becomes critical* resists the terms of that cost and the failure it implies by responding to an always other injunction *to risk something beyond that consonance and the image of myself it underwrites* something other than the deadly echo returning our illusion of “the unfenced void,” that hoary trope for freedom hovering still at the limit of expression’s possibility. But this unfenced zone – even when figured as *silence*, or some other theoretical confection, like “the outside” – too often mystifies a geopolitical impossibility.

*

In *Fantasies in Permeable Structures*, Laura Elrick makes a similar link between geopolitical space and lyric time:

What unfenced region? Receptacled we
vagrants of clock time fusing memory
with deceit. What fort-embattled term
or attitude, or zone...What pure meadow
that beckons (dusting regularity with impulse
thrown) in wild sensuous orders of
cinquefoil, paintbrush and blue. No unbarbed
region now. (XXII)

Now that the whole globe has achieved the appearance of an unbarbed region, where trade too often appears to occur without barriers, everything from real populations to imaginary signs seems to be floating freely in an orgy of exchange. This has irreversible implications for lyric, whose own temporality *never its own* can't escape the antagonism between the bound time of wage-labor and the "free-time" of finance capital. This antagonism informs lyric's material, and it's the medium thru which a poem moves. So the language of lyric is one of deep contradiction, whose potential for critical judgment must also contend with an uncritical and narcissistic logic internal to its utterance. It's as if lyric were pressured and constrained by the tension between two radically different voids, two forms of negation and avoidance. First, there's the negation that is already our unlivable world *the active non-existence of the world we've failed to make* where dead labor and unfreedom prepare for an already negated future, which both is as is not the present. This void always haunts, especially when lyric abandons the scene of enclosed communication *this deafening silence* as if by turning its back lyric might incline toward the semblance of something more truthful, say, the lure of a purer expression, perhaps a more authentic scream.

But the promise of an other space "*What unfenced region?, nature, the infinite, blank space, free trade?*" the so-called the unenclosed, the unbarbed, is just another version of the same void, a fantasy nourished by enclosure itself. Lyric's aversion and avoidance only disguises the void of its own "complicit consonance." Out of this void, our own language still returns to locate us thru the noise of some grave hush – "here, here, here" – despite whatever gesture the poem makes toward flight. This is lyric as the ongoing collaborative project of Echo and Narcissus, or as the social technology of communication in disguise, which itself refuses to communicate.

*

But Taylor seems to be pointing toward yet another kind of void that would

negate the first:

Lyric, because its fundamental is address to a world from a place within the world, and because neither of these can be known or given in advance. Without some authorizing cadence the clashing overtones cannot resolve, and an angular space of blank incision opens us. (257)

This is the “blank” that exposes us to the world as we collide dissonantly with that prior void of deadly consonance. From this other void *unguaranteed and ungraphed place of a world within this world* lyric might address us in a language that can neither echo nor resemble, a language that does not return to verify that we’re here. This void holds the still smoldering promise of real futurity, canceled or avoided by the world as it is, the very thing that has to be risked if there is to be anything at all that’s not already here. This is the blank where living labor *hope and promise of making an other future* will not have been entirely engulfed by the dead time of empire, which sadly continues to locate us thru “a burgeoning human cargo of dead labor” (256) *the ongoing piling up of bodies which both are and are not our own* and where our potential to make another world remains suspended.

The space of this possibility can be likened to the space of the beloved, and to risk its promise is to risk “the possibility that the beloved will not answer, is dead or absent” a possibility interior to lyric address, “the possibility that the poem takes place where space has vanished” (259). If modern lyric imagines itself to be singing freely in space *unfenced and unzoned* or even from the faults and fissures between fences and zones, and if these faults and fissures map onto a real geopolitical situation, how can we locate lyric’s place when these spaces and these interstices have all but vanished? This is the critical risk, for “here” lyric becomes “the recognition that one might not speak at all” (259). What is the value of *this* silence? And how might we activate it so that it doesn’t merely echo the deafening silence that is the world’s own? It may be that lyric *as possibility* stands and falls on this question.

*

For Oppen, one of the critical questions posed by lyric poetry is the question of bad faith: the problem of the poet using the poem to console some fundamental disbelief, while doubting the poem’s ability to do or say anything other than what the world is already saying and doing in its “great mineral silence.” Taylor’s lyric practice activates the above ideas and questions with an awareness that good conscience is out of the question. “Blank refusal was an option, and we continue in all our past tenses to have tried and tested it, each time as if it were the first and wholly unan-

ticipated. My poems are as rotten with this bad faith as anyone's" (256). But the "bad faith" Taylor can't disavow isn't the bad faith of good conscience, rather it's the residual bad faith that clings to lyric like a lingering temptation to abandon the world: a temptation whose persistence as "option" haunts lyric from within.

So lyric goes on flirting *some atavistic reflex it will never shake* with the familiar tension between hermetic and orphic alternatives – silence and non-communication, on the one hand; and, the expressive fullness of a self-identical presence, on the other – as if these exhausted its (im)possibility today. But the world's autopoiesis *the world as a vast display of commodities* has itself rendered these "lyric valuables – *from disaster*" (Oppen), the same disaster, for that matter, the disaster of production's autonomy, so these supposed alternatives may not be alternatives at all. Lyric's only move, then, if it is to rise self-critically to an effective conception of one's reality *never one's own* is to risk "the blank of incision," a figure for a kind of cut and an opening into and out of the fatal material from which our selves and our sense *our very bodies* and the world are similarly composed. "I think it is necessary to risk an inability to speak if I am to find whether anything can still be said" (258). Taylor's critical recognition of the "phatic gamble" *for me a real discovery* is that these two blanks – the "blank refusal" relocating us in the world as it is, and "the blank of incision" promising the possibility of living labor – can't be distinguished in advance. As opposing forces, they may even persist in and thru one another *and this is what continues to frighten me about writing lyric poems today, but it's also why I write them*.

If all that returns to us when we speak is our own distorted image coming back at us from the plenitude of a void, then lyric's parlay must be something other than that emphatic "here, here, here" where our echo returns to us alone. Lyric must rather construct "a language that does not return" out of the only materials at hand *all this "accumulated dead matter."* So there's no way out of the problem except back into it, no "blank refusal" to recognize that the world is here, and no denying that we must find a way to address one another *as well as something that is not here* from within it.

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Still, the threat of "silence" persists as the possibility that there is nothing that can then be said. This may be Oppen's "great mineral silence" of our "natural world," a world of second nature, completely enclosed by all our planning and calculation. But whereas for Oppen that fatality converged with the threat of nuclear annihilation – a threat that haunts his entire middle period – for us, that impenetrable "mineral fact" coincides with the self-evidence of empire, whose transparent appearance *common sense*

has become an opacity of unprecedented density. Perhaps this is what one cannot speak *the great mineral silence of our natural world, the pure noise of the totally commodified globe* and yet it's precisely this thing about which one cannot refuse to speak without unwittingly echoing that thing.

In *Yesterday's News*, the writing aims to encounter that silent noise *deadly common sense of production for production's sake* while locating some opening into and out of the enclosed commons of sanctioned communication, which has naturalized its own refusal to communicate and turned that refusal into complicit consonance. Taylor's writing does this not by cataloguing the language fragments of an eroded public sphere, nor by sampling the residues of subjectivity that cling to its surfaces, but by charging that material with the weak force of address to an emergent public *who will have been here to hear this?* as if to a lover who may well be absent, or a world that hasn't yet arrived.

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From *Yesterday's News*, dated March 21, 2003:

Beneath nothing but sky

*as the anchoring invention of zero
but downscale in explosive tons*

we'll arrive at ten

*chained in pairs
or rainfall from inside us*

*spotted by the optic nerve
life in weeping pores
for shelter from the shade*

*where light fails to reflect what
there we'll build*

Along lyric's frontier, Taylor's song persists in and thru this clamoring silence – perhaps our only real collective object – and I learn to listen so that my body and mind might hear the tone of *and be toned by* a present that will have been here.

A ROOM FOR OPAL, ROOM FOR TIME LISTENING WITH JULIE PATTON

JONATHAN SKINNER

A Room for Opal emerged in collaboration with poet and artist Julie Patton and our work together around *ecopoetics*, a journal I edit devoted to creative-critical edges between making (with an emphasis on poetry) and ecology, what I call the praxis of deliberate earthlings. What does it mean to live deliberately, in relation to all the others (human as well as other-than-human)? And what can possibly the oldest form of making – going to the root sense of “poetry,” as essentially a species of making – bring to this conversation?

ecopoetics was founded with these questions in mind, and one of the first submissions I received was Julie’s piece, “Slug Art”: a leaf perforated by a slug’s digestive juices, and a poem singing through the various ramifications of the word “slug,” from invertebrate, to bullet, to typesetting element. The playfulness of Julie’s work crossed received categories between “nature” and “culture,” between “art” and “nature,” between “human” and “invertebrate,” raising the question: what would an art created in the spaces between species look like?

Why, in a time when we desperately need to recalibrate our relations to the rest of the planet, do so many of the contemporary artists and writers attending to the crisis (thankfully enough) continue to posit a human “subject” here, a “nature” over there, reinstating the very dualism structuring our inability to relate? If art is a form of knowledge, it equals scientific cognition not by emulating scientific method but by methods intrinsic to its own love of paradox and open-ended form. Art allows us to think the unthinkable, say what cannot be said, and move around, inside and outside of the “rational” box. Art teaches us what science cannot. If slugs make art, it is human artists, rather than scientists, who will be their collaborators and critics.

That said, we owe to scientists the diagnosis of crisis, a measuring of affairs that translates into the language of power, and attention to the things that

really matter to slugs, and all other subjects of the taxonomic kingdoms – attention that, when ethically directed, can make scientists collaborators too. Art could do what science cannot by listening to science rather than ignoring it. Science could do what art cannot by listening to art, not ignoring it. Julie's work has taught me a great deal about listening: a seeing-hearing that begins with the letters and syllables we make our words of, extending to the forms of seeds, leaves and plants, the shapes of human and animal vocalizations, the curves a musical note writes on our nerves. Art can provide more than raw data for scientific method, science more than "facts" for artistic interpretation. Both are human activities positioned in a world desperately in need of our hearing, of both one another, and of those other-than-humans we have yet to invent (or remember) a mode of listening to.

Patton's book works, "paper toys," concrete poetics, "composaytions," floor plays, "recycle pedias," and "vociflors," amongst other performance and publication modes, extend the modernist "revolution of the word" into collaborative civic and natural spaces. Her daily site-specific installations of book and plant assemblages at Casa Malaparte in Capri, Italy (1995) or her floor installation with books at Stadtbucherei Ludenscheid in Ludenscheid, Germany (1997) exemplify her use of the book as magical object and architectural medium, interacting with natural materials. Language takes place in letters and breath, inscribed on paper pulped from plant materials, scrolled, accordioned or bound into books whose shapes, page layout and spatial forms are governed as much by principles of architecture as by those of literary composition. (In the case of her collaborations with Euphrosyne Bloom, from 1991 to 2001, the medium is film.) At the same time, these constructions are susceptible to "contamination" by the wild forms of flowers, branches and other plant elements, a form of "spelling" that helps turn them into instruments of magic.

Patton's practice as a gardener and forager, whether for subsistence or pleasure, has been as much a part of her work as her constructions and performances. More recently, her efforts have taken a civic turn, with the 1387 Corporation artists' cooperative, in Cleveland, Ohio (of which Patton is President), with her leadership and collaboration with City Planning officials and neighborhood youth around a re-design of bicycle pathways in the Cleveland parks, and with her works engaging civic trauma, such as the "Common Ground" memorial tree planting project and performance with local artists and community activists in Winston-Salem, North Carolina (2005). As a performer, Patton tours Europe regularly with composer Uri Caine, writing and improvising librettos for his eclectic "operas." Her performances sometimes take the form of "improvoications," where improvisation and voice conspire to provoke reflection around the submerged presence of race in politics or avant-garde practice, as in her

impersonation of Colin Powell as Othello for Caine's "Othello Syndrome," at La Biennale di Venezia della Musica (2003). In what she calls "Ju-Ju Pulp-its & Con Texts (where the body gets close to the hand turning the pages of the self as a paper doll)," Patton deploys the language of dance and mime alongside "paper toys" and "life-sized" letters, recalling the public modes of *commedia dell'arte* or marionette theater (see "play / sub mitted by/ "X," a "Soap Opera" documented in *Tripwire* #5, 2001).

In writing, Patton extends her work outside the identity politics that have configured and constrained so much postmodern African American art and poetry, with, amongst other projects, *Alphabet Soup*, an extended series on the alphabet, exploring and exploding a wild range of resonances, letter by letter: as in the existential, ontological riff on the "middle passage" of B, in *Teething on Type: 2*. (One of my favorite pieces is "Oxford Re-Verse," where Patton locates "black American" speech in lines from early English literature.) See volumes such as *Teething on Type*, *Not So Bella Donna*, *But A Deadly Nightshade!*, *Notes for Some (Nominally) Awake*, or anthologies such as *The Portable Boog Reader*, or *Moving Borders: Three Decades of Innovative Work by Women*. Patton's work brings much to the site of ecopoetics, in its fearless embrace of the indeterminate spaces between disciplines, its cultivation of an edge practice rather than exploitation of a professional niche, its commitment to diversity, and its willingness to inhabit parallel, even juxtaposed, dimensions – without demanding they drive into and reinforce one another on the same plane. Patton lets art, as a form of knowledge cultivated through the investigation of materials, make a difference, by placing art's investigations in social fields where the response is indeterminate, not random. Her work is responsive, and radically responsible to the contexts in which it takes place: while she draws on a particular repertoire of forms, vocabularies, gestures and vocalizations honed through years of practice, these are not marshaled to reproduce a portable concept. Rather, each work is time, place and community-specific, in a configuration determined through what the available materials make (unpredictably) available.

When Bates Museum Director Mark Bessire and Curator Anthony Shostak suggested I apply for a Synergy Grant, for potential participation in the Green Horizons Exhibit, and told me the grant would be for collaboration between a faculty member, a visiting artist and a community organization, I thus immediately thought of Julie's work. I also thought of the Thorncrag Bird Sanctuary (which the Stanton Bird Club administers), and the Morse Mountain Conservation Area (managed jointly by Bates College and the St. John family): sites miraculously dedicated to the well-being of other-than-human species, and to the widest possible sense of conversation. Julie and I had often traded tales of encounters with owls and other wild spirits, and I wanted to see what the Maine woods could bring to the conversation,

what we could offer. An additional notion was that Julie, as part of her residency at Bates, would help me teach a week of the May 2007 Short Term course in Ecopoetics: we would work onsite, with students, in collaboration with volunteers from the Lewiston-Auburn community, in an effort that would contribute to the Green Horizons installation. When we were fortunate enough to receive the grant, Julie immediately told me she'd like the students to read the "Mystical Nature Diary" of Opal Whiteley, *The Singing Creek Where the Willows Grow*. Thus was planted the seed that would become *A Room for Opal*.

Opal Whiteley was a young, very small but very precocious nature writer who published a best-selling diary in 1920. It soon went out of print, however, and Whiteley into obscurity, due to growing skepticism that she had actually written the diary. She claimed to have written it from 1904 to 1905, living with her family and attending school in Walden, a logging community in Oregon's Willamette Valley. As her editor Benjamin Hoff narrates, "There, in the latter half of her sixth year, Opal began to write a diary, which she kept in a hollow log in the nearby forest. In it she described her home, her animal friends, her cathedral area among the trees, and 'the singing creek where the willows grow.' Using her own phonetic form of spelling, she printed with crayons on pieces of scrap paper a neighbor woman brought her. The crayons were left for her in a secret place in the woods, where she would leave notes asking the fairies for more 'color pencils' to write with" (*The Singing Creek Where the Willows Grow: The Mystical Nature Diary of Opal Whiteley*, ed. Benjamin Hoff, Penguin: NY, 1994). Opal's ambition was to write books for children about the inhabitants of the field and forest; indeed, she soon gained a reputation as a "teacher of the forest and its ways," and would take logging-camp children on "explores" to her cathedral in the forest to listen to the singing of the birds. She would later finance her university education and the printing of her first book, *The Fairyland Around Us* (1919), by giving widely attended talks.

Opal populated her "explores" with other-than-human friends named after literary and mythological figures, such as Thomas Chatterton Jupiter Zeus, a wood-rat; Lars Porsena of Clusium, a crow; Plato and Apliny, two bats; Michael Angelo Sanzio Raphael, a fir tree; and Lucian Horace Ovid Virgil, a toad. The prose, incredible for a six year-old, is written in an approximation of French syntax, and seasoned with French words and names: "I did sing to the rivière a song. I sang it *le chant de Seine, de Havre et Essonne et Nonette et Roullon et Iton et Darnetal et Ourcq et Rille et Loing et Eure et Audelle et Nonette et Sarc.*" In it, she goes on explores: "I like to go in among the rushes where the black birds with red upon their wings do go. I like to touch fingertips with the rushes. I like to listen to the voices that whisper in the swamp." Opal sings to plants, puts her ear close to the rock and

listens to the “lichen folk” who “talk in gray tones,” imagines stretching out long and getting short again like an earth worm, and observes her toad friend Lucian Horace Ovid Virgil “use his hands to stuff [a worm] down his throat.”

A further biographical complication (and marvel) is that Opal Whiteley did not consider herself to be Opal Whiteley but, rather, Françoise, daughter to the Princess Marie and naturalist Henri d’Orléans, a prince of the French royal family of Bourbon. (Henri had died when Opal was four, at the end of an expedition through India and Indochina.) These were her Angel Mother and Father, who used to take her on walks and teach her to observe what was around her. Such beliefs earned her the increasing skepticism of her fellow humans, and a perilously marginal place in society. After ten months in India, where Opal lived in the maharana of Udaipur’s guest house, and time in an imperial convent in Vienna, she lived in London as a ward of the city. “During the second world war,” Hoff notes, “she was often seen scavenging for books in the rubble of bombed buildings.” Opal was committed in 1948 to Napsbury Hospital, outside London, where she would die in 1992 at the age of 95. Thus she takes her place beside writers like John Clare or Antonin Artaud (amongst others), “schizophrenic” poets who were punished by society for making public their visions and hearings.

In our dialogue, Julie and I discussed sustainability, or, rather, our reluctance to use the word, a term meant to designate (according to the World Commission on Environment and Development) “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” If sustainability is about generational self-reliance, it is largely about time, about how the energy crisis entails a crisis in our relationship to time. “Email bankruptcy” is a collective call for TIME OUT. How can we stop speeding and make time, to listen beyond the needs of our own generation, to “have feels” for the times of others? How can we make the time it takes to know a landscape, for instance, not just across seasons, but across years and decades – by listening at the overlap between generational horizons, at the stone walls of successional New England plots. Instead of sustainability, we discussed walking, we have always discussed walking, while walking, or in Paul Klee’s words, while “taking a line for a walk.”

We decided that with intergenerational walks through Thorncrag we would draw a timeline, by ear and by foot, across multiple horizons, including that of the retreat of the Laurentian Ice Sheet and that of the Great Flood, right down to the current shrinking of the polar ice caps and the inundation of coastal cities. The timeline would also focus on extinctions and recoveries, as in the recent, uncertain appearances of the Lord

God Bird. Susan Hayward helped us locate elders and children who were generous enough to walk with us at Thorncrag. (Rain cancelled the walk outdoors with Susan's Junior Naturalists, which led instead to an enchanted game of "Simon Says," exploring Thorncrag indoors at the Montello School.) Key collaborators in all of this were my "students" – a designation put in quotation marks, since they had so much to teach. And a key context was our meeting outside to read, discuss and write, amidst the singing birds and sprouting leaves, nearly every day for three weeks before Julie arrived. As a culmination of these meetings (but only one of several projects), each student wrote, printed, designed and constructed a book that found its way into the installation. There also was a performance at Bates College, Julie conducting music professor Dale Chapman, myself and the students, in a live "composaytion."

I collected recordings of our "composaytions" and conversations, for listening stations located in four of the bird houses: at one you hear the collaborative performance, at one the conversation with elders at Thorncrag, at one the conversation with children at the Montello School, and at one (the eponymous Bird House), a mix of Charlie Parker and Peterson's *Guide to Eastern/ Central Bird Song*. The bird houses, along with Noah's Ark, are "roofed" by the books of poetry composed at Thorncrag, and at various other sites (some urban) along the Androscoggin and Kennebec watersheds. For those who cannot kneel, a listening station shuffling segments of the various recordings is located at Opal's desk.

Opal's desk, amongst other things, indicates the Enlightenment classroom, with its alphabet blocks and birds' nests, an enchanted place in its own right, where natural history and childhood wonder are mutually illuminated. It is also, surely, a site of discipline and constraint: the hold of a society that has made us such poor listeners. (Opal often depicts herself being abused by non-comprehending adults.) The implication is that such deafness threatens the very life of the thing that is not being heard: an indictment the timeline of extinctions on the wall makes vivid, in place of the alphabet train. In a kind of parody of Opal's punishment for the truancy of her explores, an open book invites visitors to write out ecological resolutions, of their own devising, such as "I will not leave the water running while I brush my teeth."

To get things started, Julie's mother, Virgie Patton, wrote out several of these resolutions. Virgie, a painter herself, was also a key participant in the installation, making the collaboration very personal as well as inter-generational. In fact, the entire "hanging" atmosphere, with many of the artists (and friends and family) present at the same time working on their installations, was a vital aspect of this exhibit, a continuation of dialogue initiated during an artist's gathering the curators had organized earlier in

the year. Such collaboration, like the listenings that led us to *A Room for Opal*, is provisional, and can only model the conversations that must make up the very fabric of our days, before we can even begin to talk meaningfully about sustainability. We have a choice, to sustain our professional differences: “work,” “art,” “science,” “poetry,” “literature” (not to speak of “church,” “government”), or to listen across the differences, to begin to find out what it is we want to sustain. We find ourselves at a crossroads, where Opal’s timeline spills into the chaotic and indefinite future.

In this uncomfortable place, books kept Opal company: Hoff tells us that when she was committed she was found living in a flat “filled from floor to ceiling with wooden boxes holding an estimated total of ten to fifteen thousand books, many of which were said to contain underlined passages and notes in Opal’s handwriting.” Perhaps because they have long been powerful models for conversations that write lines across time, books are the medium in which Patton has chosen to sculpt her Room for Opal. They serve as pedestals for bird houses and various found objects, taking flight, casting their profiles on the time line. Their colors and textures make the piece as tactile as it is visual. Some are treasures from Patton’s own library, most, many ex-library copies, were found amidst the “rubble” at the local Salvation Army. The eerily pointed “talk” of the various titles and cover matter lends voice to the precarious, architectural forms.

One need not labor the visual puns between book and wing, book and house, book and mill – so many responses to the rich history, environment and town of Lewiston, Maine. Nor could one begin to enumerate, to describe the various historical and political vectors embedded in the imagery of Patton’s wondrous, often sharp, often humorous assemblage. It is like a wild, overgrown Joseph Cornell Box, still showing the vocabulary of its minimalist sensibility. Through Julie Patton, Opal invites us into her room for “explores,” to stay for more than a few minutes, to “look looks down upon the mill town,” and then to get small, on one’s knees, and begin to listen. As if to say, that it is only by making ourselves small that we can begin.

