

# A WORK OF THE ACTUAL ON BRENDA IIJIMA

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Encountering Brenda Iijima's poetry I am struck by the demands of a work of generosity and generativity, two terms which characterize Iijima's labors as an activist, publisher, visual artist and poet. When I first read *Around Sea* (O Books, 2004), Iijima's first trade edition publication, I was struck by the openness of this offering, how the work would seem to keep going forever, that it was perpetual in some way. This openness is a dream of American modernism founded by Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman and Dickinson in particular, and which continues into the present. This dream may be most manifest in Robert Duncan's *The H.D. Book*, where Duncan shows H.D.'s poetics to embody a form of organic life that is not telic, but experimental, horizontal and creative; that embodies what Henri Bergson called "intuition," and Erwin Schrödinger "life."

Against clichéd and often inappropriate uses of the term "creative" employed by undergraduate English departments, Iijima's work is creative in the way Duncan and others thought through this term in the 60s and 70s after countless eclectic philosophies, scientific findings, etymologies, mythologies, and idiosyncratic cosmologies. What Duncan and his peers realized was that composition should manifest and reflect forms of life, vital signs and direct formal engagements, if not embody life itself as it manifests itself on the page in print, and through other cultural expressions. This special use of the term *composition* harkens back to Duncan's other great influence, Stein, who in her lectures in America claimed to embody those things "really living," what could show itself to be moving in and of itself against a background of other entities, technologies, beings and facts.

In *Around Sea*, the mythological and the historical maintain an integral dialogue with one another. Something that is unique about Iijima's dialogue of the mythological and historical versus many of her predecessors and contemporaries is that neither category subsumes the other, and instead inform and relate one another. Which is to say, the two are ultimately open to one another. Achieving this relationship is no small task considering the difficulty of this negotiation for American Modernists such as Eliot, Pound, Williams and Olson, who too often subsumed the historical in self-mythology and mythologies of various glorified social pasts. Such was the object of Zukofsky's critique of Pound in particular through his famous statement that more can be learned about the world by studying the historical uses of indefinite and definite articles ("the" and "a") than any mythology.

Teaching Williams last fall, I was struck by this problematic negotiation of myth and historicity in *Paterson*, where autobiographical percepts and local artifacts are continually swept into a generalizing ontological quest for the recreation of the individual and the socius/polis within a fallen world. But while writers after Zukofsky, such as many of those associated with LANGUAGE, have been loathe to make reference to mythology

except perhaps to deflate and make ironic its importance for cultural imaginations, Iijima is able to use mythological references without irony. In Iijima's work mythology becomes affirmative in the way it does not subsume the historical, but instead creates conditions of possibility within the historical while demonstrating how actuality (historicity, being) is always mediated by mythopoetic intentions and projections.

In Iijima's work, a toolbox of spiritual instruments are taken-up to address the ethical dilemmas of the world in its facts, facts that Iijima has on hand through her vigilant attention to media, scholarship, literature, art, science, and interpersonal experience. In this way, Iijima affirms the Buddhist-inflected works of a Philip Whalen or Leslie Scalapino who often envelop personal and worldly exigencies in Eastern wisdom, understanding and imagination. In the work of Whalen or Scalapino, any partitioning between the actual world and another/others is paper thin, and I believe it is this partition that Iijima pierces consistently through her work. Likewise, for Iijima, form is permeated by "impermanence" – a need for the form of the poem to evolve at a pace with the shifting facts of consciousness, the unveiling of possible worlds of experience.

In Iijima's first two books, *Around Sea* and *Animate, Inanimate Aims* (Litmus Press, 2007), Iijima makes meaning from what she sees and actualizes as language, beyond what language may communicate or be "about." While I am not always sure of Iijima's resources, which come from daily encounter as much as from delving in dictionaries, concordances, and a variety of other source texts, I am often struck how appropriate a certain word or line feels, how sincere their composition and proposition is. Critics and scholars tend to avoid the way I am using the word "feel" in this last sentence. And yet this word haunts me when I reflect on Iijima's poetics. For feeling, a feeling for the line and the way things "hang-together" as a construction among lines, often account for the energy (or metabolism) of Iijima's poems, their tendency towards generosity and openness.

In her life and work Iijima devotes herself to transcendence within immanence (what Jacques Derrida calls the "beyond-in" in his memorial lecture for Emmanuel Levinas, *Adieu*). The work feels, undergoes and loves at a fundamental level (the level of earth, ground, facts, things); it cares for the world in its properties, element and substance. The result of this fundamentalism, or rather what it produces, may appear "abstract" or "difficult" to description-minded readers. In *Around Sea* and *Animate, Inanimate Aims* the descriptive is eschewed for proposition, movement, substitution (metonymy), phonemic and morphemic play, and lines (in tandem with irregular tabs and breaks) led by sonic intuitions. While I am often left to guess what any singular poem in Iijima's first two books is "about" (however proper names, references, and citations often anchor such an understanding), what is more important to me are the ways the poems open to relations between the words themselves as the words bear out consequences of sense-making and indeterminacy. While I resist calling Iijima's work "collagist," many of these poems bear the mark of "cut and paste" in their craft, and their tendency towards a visible constructedness.

Beyond any procedure or form clearly operative in the work, Iijima's work moves, and in its movement constitutes an intention beyond descriptive, narrative or propositional qualities of the poem per se. This movement can be discerned in the lines themselves, and line breaks and tabbing in particular, but also in the ways the work has been scored by punctuation and diacritical marks. Throughout Iijima's work I am struck by her use of parentheses as they delay a reading consciousness, as well as her similar use of bullets in *Animate, Inanimate Aims*, where these bullets (in succession of twos) function somewhere between a hyphen, ellipses, and periods (because they resemble them). Iijima's use of these marks remind me that the poem can be a forming space for perception and consciousness. Through them Iijima attends and dramatizes the fact that she and her reader have bodies, are embodied consciousnesses, and that syntax can determine this.

The problem of these punctuation/diacritical marks lead me back to some of the subtler shorter poems of Zukofsky ("Proposition LXI," for instance, from the series poem, "29 Songs"), as well as Stein's sparse use of commas, and avoidance of question marks, semicolons and colons altogether. However I think even more of the ways Scalapino uses parenthetical marks effectively to create a dialogical consciousness within the poem (reading consciousness delayed in its reading and reflection upon what is being read in different textual intervals and durations) as well as Hannah Weiner's "interruptive" and "telepathic" texts. These marks are also cleaving as they intend active perception and reflection simultaneously as a singular event of consciousness. I am also reminded of Larry Eigner's struggles to articulate his unique embodied consciousness through the use of his typewriter, and how the traces of this struggle, a struggle neither merely neural or physical, hinge on certain concatenations of grammar, as well as spacing and recursive dynamics between words, phrases, and sentences (when sentences should occur at all).

In this way Iijima may be said to disable herself, or better yet realize writing as a *condition of dis-ability* where the intention of the writer is to enable active perception through the page as well as the instrument of writing (in Iijima's case the computer keyboard of a word processor as well as, I can only imagine, notebooks) mediating this process. While one could say that these marks merely score, I think they do more than score. What they do is *site* an embodied consciousness coming into being within the world (the page as an intention of the world) – what Madeline Gins calls in her book *Helen Keller or Arakawa* the "forming blank." Beyond scoring, the marks are what make this conveyance possible between reader and writer, one embodied consciousness circuiting with another. As the consequences of such markings have been little explored in writing, Iijima is brave in her doing so. In this way, I feel like she is advancing little advanced ground for the ways we experience composition as a force potentializing thought's body, its ever twisting and folding substance.

Since this past fall I have become particularly interested in the convergence of "live art" in the 60s and 70s, and concurrent developments in poetry. After the cultural trauma of Vietnam, and the influxes of an information driven commodity-fetishistic economy, artists and writers in the 60s and 70s sought to embody themselves in different ways through their art. The practitioners of this embodiment are well known, yet understudied in relation to one another across disciplines: Vito Acconci, Chris Burden, Joseph Beuys, Trisha Brown, Ann Halprin, Dick Higgins, Allan Kaprow, Carolee Schneemann, Yvonne Rainer . . . (to name just a few names in terms of live art); Bruce Andrews, David Antin, Charles Bernstein, Robert Creeley, Larry Eigner, Robert Grenier, Lyn Hejinian, Bernadette Mayer, Leslie Scalapino, Hannah Weiner. . . (to name a few in terms of poetry). After Vietnam, and in the face of a representational crisis within culture (a crisis of who gets to say what to who through what imaginative or linguistic means), all of these artists (language and live) attempted to give fact to the problem of locating a network of bodies through actions in print, time, space, and image (photography, film). In Iijima's own ethical-activist venture as a language artist who may also consider her readings and printed works performances, I believe her to be enacting something in the spirit of these 60s and 70s artists and revisiting their poetics for our present. And through Iijima's poetics one may be able to discern a genealogy of aesthetic practices that continue after LANGAUGE and 60s/70s live art both – the "parent" generation of both myself and Iijima.

In Iijima's unpublished manuscript, *Remembering Animals*, I read this intention more specifically. For *Remembering Animals* is also a work of an endangered existence, an existence our parent generation experienced after Vietnam and in the atmosphere of the 60s and 70s. Only our generation contends with Iraq, global corporate imperialism, unprecedented ecological disasters, the disassembly of democratic superstructures since post-WWII, the occultation of sensual awareness by a corporate controlled, non-participatory, spectacle-

fueled mass media. . . (the list of reasons why embodied consciousness is endangered in our present obviously goes on and on). In the face of these cultural problems Iijima's *Remembering Animals* reads both as a handbook, an intervention, and an act of witness (à la Muriel Rukeyser's "Book of the Dead" and Charles Reznikoff's *Testimony* volumes) channeling public and communal mourning. It also reads as one of the great series poems of our moment as it extends itself in an inexhaustible variety of formal modes, subjects and rhetorical tactics.

One of the most effective of these modes in *Remembering Animals* is that of quotation. *Remembering Animals*, while much of it holds forth lyrically, actually includes any number of illuminating quotations, quotations which challenge what it means to cite and appropriate text among a broader discourse about "reuse." Many of these quotations (under)score and record the ways that the treatment of animal life reflect our humanity and society, such as in the section of *Remembering Animals* entitled "TRAGEDY (VISIBLE, SEMI-VISIBLE, UNBEKNOWNST TO THE ENCULTURED EYE + WHAT NIGHTLY TV)." Here a broad array of texts clash, brought together by the shared subject: animals. Such catalogues are pleasurable, as a Google search *can* also yield pleasure. Only in Iijima's hands, quotational compendiums become a tactical exhibit of highly meaningful (i.e., choice) quotes rather than mere revelry in fortuitous encounter and carnivalesque briolage (Surrealistic tendencies). Together the quotations of *Remembering Animals* resonate with broader fields of meaning as they reveal ideological antagonism and cultural understandings. The name/subject, "animal," acts as a selection device by which Iijima attends and draws attention to (i.e., frames) how gender, class, sexual and racial disparity are inflected by the treatment of animals in our culture, and by the ways animals are represented through language.

Textual appropriation and arrangement/affinement has been a feature of formally radical and socially inflected poetry since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (however *that* particular Modernism remains submerged by official verse culture). In the ways Iijima uses quotation and citation throughout *Remembering Animals* and subsequent works I am struck by the consequences of quotation and citation as a strategy for reading against dominant political, ethical, and ideological aims. In such tactical uses of quotation, Iijima teases out the ways that language is complicit with social-political complexes and matrices while also offering hope and possibility. Against other recent uses of appropriational strategies, including many of those employed by LANGUAGE after the ironic intersubjective positionings of New York School poetry, very few of Iijima's rhetorical/appropriative strategies serve the ends of irony. That is, they do not reify or enact the culturally symptomatic. Rather, Iijima's quotational practice provides her reader with a "mix" (as a DJ might mix) or arrangement to create a dialogue between texts as well as to reveal discrepant discourses. This is a serious business, and the effect of it is akin to some of the most accomplished (late) Modernist examples, including Hannah Weiner's "Radcliff and Guatemalan Women," and (quite recently) Judith Goldman's *Deathstar/Rico-chet*.

In many of Iijima's quotations I also feel in some way that reality is documented, a submerged reality, a reality only given now for those who are looking for it--incidentally, hungrily, vigilantly. And that Iijima's *Remembering Animals* serves both artifactual-historical and didactic ends as such. Here "poetry," that which may be defined by its address and distribution to a community/readership of poets in the present, is that which brings the news – literally. Not just revelation (though there is much revelation to be had thru Iijima's work), but actual news from a variety of media sources.

In the closing citation of *Remembering Animals*, one concerning a scientist who believes that it is "too late" for our existing ecology to be "saved," I read an ambivalence on Iijima's part about the news she brings through the appropriational arrangements of her manuscript. Does she include this citation to make her reader aware of a scientist who is offering

another solution to our ecological crisis (to put sulfur into the atmosphere and thus cool the surface of the globe)? Or the words of one given up on actuality – a nihilist, in other words? Beyond the ambivalence of this particular citation, many of Iijima's citations actually provide her reader with information useful for approaching the world we live in. In a time of coterminous media "saturation" (striation) and "blackout" (occultation) I can already recall a time when the future may look back on Iijima's *Remembering Animals* and wonder why the world was not better informed – and especially poets!

Several sections from *Remembering Animals* are entitled "Cries," and these "Cries" (the cries of animals? the cries of the poem presenting the cries of animals remembered? the cries of us – humans who are reading and thus mnemotechnical (i.e., remembering animals?)) engage one of the ultimate problems of Iijima's poetics as it puts an embodied consciousness in relation to political, ethical, social and soul-searching ends. This problem is one of *empathy*.

When I attended a series of panels about Leslie Scalapino's work at St. Mark's Church in October of 2005, organized by Iijima, I remember Iijima discussing Scalapino's work in terms of neurological research, and mirror neurons in particular. Mirror neurons constitute an activity within the brain activated when one feels empathy. Or, rather, they are what initiate empathic reactions when we recognize the embodied presence of another person: when we see or feel them through cognitive-imaginative contact. In some way, I think the idea of mirror neurons guides Iijima's own formal practice as she would like her reader to feel something through her work – for others, for animals as an other related to human others, for an ecology felt through these others, for an ecology that is an other (*the Other?*), for all others to be felt through particular uses of language.

In terms of poetry, mirror neurons "fire" through description and narrative tension, but more so I believe them to take effect through the feeling for words where they intend meaning rather than merely communicate or describe reality. In evoking the struggles of animals in relation to human challenges, Iijima would like us to feel their cries, if not remember them in relation to human ones. The way these cries are felt are through linguistic elements that are under-utilized (and radicalized) by poetic discourse, and yet the stuff of poetry's essence: sound, rhythm, movement, prosody, graphology. Once again, the grammatical/diacritical/punctuating elements of *Remembering Animals* underscore this fact, as double bullets and parentheses from *Around Sea* and *Animate, Inanimate Aims* are replaced by multiple dashes (lines) between words, phrases, and other graphic features which shape new habits of reading and encountering language on the page. Like many of Iijima's idiosyncratic uses of diacritical and punctuating marks these marks allegorize the struggle to reform embodied consciousness. For multiple dashes to cleave textual units between and within lines is to effectively activate a reader's sense of their embodied consciousness, and thus their responsibility before the page as a site of composition where the stakes of composition are high – an ethical demand.

In the case of the animal body, such bodies are in need of literal reformation and remembrance as they are eviscerated by scientific experiment for causes both humane and inhumane, and historically reified by Western discourses. In the case of the human animal, formally radical writing since the 60s has proven that in the face of empire and the strengthened sovereignty of exchange value the development of new compositional modes and strategies has become central to ways reader and writer are reformed and rendered through composition. After these cultural exigencies, the more "polished" and mannered writing of my generation seems totally outmoded by Iijima's own insofar as her work abandons received lyric qualities, syntaxes, grammars, prosodies and generic distinctions, eschewing manner and categorization for effectiveness, activity and creative affirmation (joy, blessedness).

This is a writing that is open and generous and that relates everything (since everything must be related now for the survival of human being and animal life both as we have known them). It is also a writing absolutely necessary as it tunes a commons where the received world ends and potential worlds begin. The creation of such a commons as it may be risked and born by writing is the common labor of those I consider peers among "my generation," and I continue to look to Iijima for the limits and shape this commons will take.