

tripwire

a journal of poetics

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Gender

edited by Yedda Morrison & David Buuck

Issue 3
Summer 1999

tripwire: a journal of poetics

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tripwire invites submissions of essays, translations, interviews, art & book reviews, bulletins, letters responding to previous issues, & visual art. Visual art submissions should be reproducible in black & white; visual artists are encouraged to include a statement about their work. At this time, we are not accepting unsolicited poetry for publication. All submissions should include a hard copy.

The theme for issue 4 is Work (see editors' notes for details).
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Editors' Notes

Despite the increased participation of women within the traditionally male-dominated "avant-garde," and the various advances of feminism, gender politics continues to be a contested site within aesthetic practice and its articulation/translation/reception in a still largely phallogocentric system.

The following pages contain a selection of writers and artists actively grappling with the complexities of gender as it pertains to daily life and social practice. Various tendencies seem to color these works: the continued influence of feminist theoreticians on current aesthetic, formal, and political practice; a recognition and inclusion of daily (domestic) life in both content and form; the desire for a simultaneous celebration and eradication of the traditions of one's gender; a deconstruction of male-female binarisms, towards a critique of gender itself as a rigid and socially dictated location which limits and delineates its citizens; and the recognition that any move beyond the confines of gender-based identity and sex-based roles cannot manifest itself by mere proclamation or aesthetic liberty, but must navigate the deeply embedded material and historical relations of patriarchy. We hope the following work will help invigorate and extend these conversations.

tripwire 4: Work

Material vs. intellectual labor. Class, production, productivity, economy. Practice, handwork, wordwork, work ethic, workplace, co-worker. What is the significance of one's work in relation to writing? Or the significance of one's writing as work? Labor, capital, use value, industry. How does one participate within and against local and global economies/cultures? Work force, workbook, workshop. In a small-press economy, what are the standards for "just compensation," for exploitation? Knowledge industries. Cultural workers. Appropriation. "Model post-industrial employees?" Exploitation, task, effort. Mission, service, vocation, career(ism). End-product, by-product, opus, oeuvre.

Engender Bended

Write a parallel text one that follows a day
And "writes" a poem using events, as a source for structure of a poem.
Would be a pulled apart Midwinter's Day—would be a Midwinter's
Day based on the visual—where is the gender in here, though?

Today—

The female being whatever is reached outward
Not not being discussed
Not not finding a place to be discussed
All of that negative presence in gender history

Gender is not allowing a self-determined con text
Con = with
Con = opposed
Text = text's definition outside a second sex

Experience being in tense

I don't wake up but have all night
I don't wake up but resist bending my unconsciousness
I don't write about the desire to continue the night as it is laid
over the day

A Voluptuous Busted Gender
About anybody's boundaries
Not about victim's hood

I grew from a single-headed household
Which fact was preceded by violence
To be [left] alone as a sign of survival

There is this disassociative thing
Where I'm in the room but not there
Where the signposts circumscribing existence are held
by really crazy people
Where I read them

Disassociative thing
But not gender thing

My last poem was "about" guarding the hospital bed
Following language down
90% of all people who accompany the children to clinic are women
it is about being in tense

My memories are held in a visual language
And cannot be said
Is this what makes up human
My memories are held up
Naming being secondary
Engendering humanity

No gender:
The truth is closer to "more" than "less".
Closer to a multi than to a them and us.

I'm 42 years old now. My definitions are dematerializing all around
me.

That there was space to write the way I wanted to write. An audience
that was enthusiastic enough to participate in the unknown along
with me. A large and generous support system. And many many
genders.

Not wanting labels stuck and having no gender-based need to destroy
the father, no real reason to feel constricted by gender.

I have a deep affection for "my" gender and also have given birth to 2
sons with "their" gender. In poetry they're really not that much
different from me.

A high-profile Feminine Voice
Analyzed in academia
A lot of value now
Tender
A lot to be said about it

And if I chose to foreground my reproductive experience
I wrote "Milky West" and "Three" and maybe
a little of Everything

Else
for the last ten years
Work/life
And I'm seriously engaged with both
Simultaneously
Having more arms than genders

Exponential genders now
More room for more people
More circulation

I'm about to write some maps
Leading back

leaving a feminist organization: a personal/poetics

"escucha, escucha, estamos en la lucha" resonates in a street filled with people playing drums and drinking water. we walk up a hill and wave at children hanging out of the windows. give flyers to their parents down below. come by sometime. where would they arrive, looking for the plates of steaming food offered. who would hand it to them. this was our work. because nothing's too good for the working class. an embodiment of the forces of one paradigm (socialist, feminist, ours) in struggle with its arch-nemesis (capitalist, sexist, theirs): *a lived reality*.

in addressing the role of black lesbians: "the possibilities for you are heady and endless."

what attracted me, or made me want to dedicate my life to the revolution. the liberty I sought, this world "new born, free" visualized as scientifically attainable. the community offered the near promise of a type of stability and trust not possible outside of that configuration. certain things were definite: always a roof over my head, always something to say. you close your eyes and imagine a phalanx of sorts behind you. yet what happens when a voice becomes automatically spoken. before the body can elicit the breath to speak. look here's another thing I have a position on. here is where I draw the line. this all-knowingness drag worn as a member of a socialist and feminist organization gets hefty. its seeming inclusivity of "all the oppressed: all who suffer" began to sound shallow (as a black queer female, in some books "triplely oppressed," this is obviously not easy to say) after I realized I could predict the answers to many questions just by running down an accepted list of choices. it became, or always was, a location of a constant naming. that is, I wasn't sensing a *movement* in terms of going forward—or in understanding what inconsistencies or incongruities these groupings (which were not determined by the organization, yet were strangely defended by it) embodied.

I come up against a resistance to ready-made answers. meaning the need to confront what this resistance means to me: (real or imagined) accusations of "selling out," conflicts between intellectual vs. activist approaches, and what is all this talk about the body. it is a conscious

return to questioning and investigation outside of the context of convenient ideology—a complication of my thinking in a real way. I mean I don't want easy answers but I still want answers. who has the better explanation for how I react to getting cruised or why I get cruised. it seemed easy to say at one point. since age 13 out in the streets for different things, age 17 became "woman-identified" and age 22 "radical." in a way I guess it was a predictable trajectory. but when I tried to pry open one or another idea there was nothing but more flatness and language to simplify the struggle (=against sexism, homophobia, racism, et al) and I wanted something to sink my teeth into. above all I desired a freedom to complicate things even my own identity.

[it started the night after the night in the library. a microphone in my hand hoping for a story to share. chased it with a margarita]

performing identity, scripting, negotiation— the postmodern seduction

turning to poetry—a stabilizing force. I became concerned with questions of representation because it seemed there was a place where questions could be freely asked and freely answered. not only concerning how a group presents itself, but how I as a member of that group present myself to them and others. acknowledging that not all is binary and polar, I experienced a duality between who I was in my activist life, and who I was when not performing activist.

a duplicitous life/ the thing about my body is not so well hidden. a performance of survival. on the chest of drawers, postcards, incense and our mother of the streets signify a shrine. (breathe keep breathing) words like discourse and positioning and subjectivity are inevitable outcomes. even in the context of the collective. a scripted life. falling down on the job. those who will put the pieces together and know my mind. *carrying*, as it does, *the seeds of its own destruction*.

free time/ saturday came & went.
not in any way that you could measure.
girl a: I blocked her view. girl b: owes me a dance & no more free coffee. ripped pantyhose seconds out of the box. no attraction.

a sunny day, and wanting to position myself between the queer and black contingents I wind up in no contingent at all. invitations declined. this feels different than previous arrangements in which I utter expected and approved reasonings with the uninitiated as we wind through the streets. my movements today float between the groupings. there are no goals to meet. no check-in afterwards. I think, this would not have been possible if. and how would this day have been if.

to eat we find a grassy spot away from the people assembled and stay there for some while. is my contribution any less. no banner in front of me, I have also lost the bullhorn. but I am present now, I use the same critical ear for listening and I have removed the filters. it's not easy not behind the banner, there is not always something to say and you don't know where all your allegiances should lie. the reasons why I am not behind the banner and the reasons why I find myself in the streets again.

struggle matters. reading more I see that the terms of struggle are not always the same. what is being resisted is not always the same. the language opens, fucks with my head, and I struggle to engage with it. so it's not either/or, or even both/and within a box. as a poet I engage on paper and cement. attentive to how things are said, written, spoken. I think of Deleuze's critique as destruction as joy, Spivak's permission to narrate, and sit there for a while. returning to the site of struggle, I hunger for a feast of multiplicities.

going forward

1. "there's no glamour in being a radical"
2. "choosing the path of least resistance"
3. "...not reach [your] full human potential"

one might say there is no glamour in being a poet. and one has said that. "master of fine arts? what are you going to do with that?" etc. sitting my oppressed and marginalized and exoticized female body in the classroom or in front of a computer, and the daily struggle of finding a language for that experience which resonates and not just demarcates is an act that puts me in the path of resistance against what I could/should and in the process finding where [my] potential lies and what it's made of: this is an examined life.

Jocelyn Saidenberg

As a / As if

"Instead of veering between deconstruction of and transcendence, we could try another train of speculation: that 'women' is indeed an unstable category, that this instability has a historical foundation, and that feminism is the site of the systematic fighting—out of that instability—which need not worry us."
—Denise Riley

"No subject is its own point of departure; and the fantasy that it is one can only disavow its constitutive relations by recasting them as the domain of a countervailing externality."
—Judith Butler

∞ ∞ ∞ ∞

Gender is a nightmare. To inhabit, to enact one gender, to embody one gender all day and all night, everyday and every night is a nightmare.

To speak as a woman, to speak as an anything, to speak—but one needs though provisionally a place from which to speak, but again to speak as a woman, as a lesbian, as a New Yorker, as a Jew, as an individual, for fuck's sake that's already too many and too limited, there's already too many of me . . . vying for their turf.

But to speak as a woman, the need to designate and authorize what I am to say but what limits and constraints? on the speaker and listener? What a nightmare again?

N. says speak with authority and power. OK. sometimes? all the time? and why do I want those goods, their goods? do I want to be that in order to have those? no and most surely not ... or only sometimes ... ?

Do I want a valued and legitimate place from which to speak, act, respond? though provisional, though stuttering though sutured? Yes, our lives depend on it.

∞ ∞ ∞ ∞

becoming avoiding
being named
as a sexed this
tireless business for
a wavering collectivity

or virtually swarming with sex?
soaked and permeated
no moment not resting or waking or walking
in which a gender is utterly unvoiced?

women en mass divided
"before the thrones of power"
so us against them?
for sexual solidarity
assault / counter assault
a rough kind of sex against sex
a duel of mortal combat

or to be seen as a woman
caught off guard lost in reverie
attraction-cum-contempt
"SMILE" or a hissing or a sweet titties

or do we need some baseline of experience
(say motherhood, menstruation, purity)
to determine some unifying conviction
to ground a rallying call?

oo oo oo oo

then there is the body, obstinate identification, that concept of body.
but any body's body is only periodically lived or treated as a sexed
body. again caught off guard as a woman with some sweet titties.

how can female bodies be celebrated as constant? this intoxication
forgets the temporality, the mutability and suppleness of any gender's
existence. (it's a bully's gaze that fixes, freezes, insists on difference,
forbids movement.)

the persistent draw to this the body
why ground the sexual
more decipherable? less evanescent

but this the body, the location of the sexual is mutable, is in history.
the body imprinted by history, exposed, composed, but constantly
falling away, decomposing.

oo oo oo oo

why would I want, or think that I were able, to live completely inside
one gender all day and all night? the charm of the sexual of an always
sexed sexual distinction designation does not draw me. there's more to
all of us than this lets in, lets on. I can't begin to recognize myself in
that world. it's not a matter of there being different types or combos,
not to generalize from one position, not equal, not different, not
equal but different, but full of the ambiguities of us.

an enactment expanding ceaseless oscillations

what if we lowered the dramatic stakes, not a reconciliation between
warring states or sexes, but a relocation into another arena. to go past
the counter identification. undo the given identities. not a longing to
obliterate wholesale as if there ever was some mass unity around gen-
der. . . . what would that look like, feel like, taste like? and what
would that speak like?

oo oo oo oo

a pragmatic suggestion: maintain a politics as if the category existed
while suggesting that it doesn't since it's the world, or better, power,
that insists, say behaves, as if women existed unambiguously.

a caution: there's an intimacy between subject and undergoing subjec-
tion. but an oppositional subject can see this trap not get caught or
frozen.

so speak women while aware of the essential instabilities and don't
fret over it. it's what makes us us. while it's impossible (a nightmare
for me) to thoroughly be a woman, it's also impossible to never be
one.

ON THE CUSP OF FINITUDE AND ITS AFTERBIRTH

limit. the present. dull ache.

tell the citizen she must regenerate. be regenerative.

else she can never see her own innermost . . .

else she can never be twice born twice bloodied born bloodied

else she can never hear the words of her own making unmaking

else she can never taste smell feel touch see her own

ere she can see

the right to be in the dark

can you hear for instance the mirror – its rattle – not yet firmly
fastened to the wall

A PULLING OF LOTS

make rice arithmetic aspirin Pierre South Dakota my erstwhile
manservant. Esther's via negativa

the happenstance of us. or a drain on the clerical system. fuses blown.
buoy out to sea. Burbank California at sunset a jet stream. bending
light tubes into henpecked paragraphs. dried up bygones. her earnings.
her earrings. The Grand Canal of Amsterdam.

cedillas. stones in our palms. ojo el piojo. mechanisms nose them-
selves into place. place names. exactly alike anew. an avenue's width.
fidgety motor skills leverage to buy a new one. exactly alike. at least
an outfielder's try.

her ink. her john hancock hats off to her manservant. his nightfall
more aspirin a mower like footfall. her knee twitching at night
replicates lungs.

IRONCLAST WITHOUT BRAKES

broken branches
waterfront footfalls more & more
lost in the fray
urban renewal urban erasure i march in effect
being in effect
human subject . . . reality . . . identity

roads of the world
dictating a violent principle which keeps on following us back in. our
fashion intoxicating properties over all of us. things which are perish-
able navigate through us daily the land parceled out smaller and
smaller and smaller into vast spaces. knowledge thereof collapsed and
frayed at the edges. we will have none. rather or better lingers on an
absentee pretense. kind reader as kind dog reenters and turns the
radio on fetches a knife to better butter the bread. bread's both sides.
we butter our feet for good measure make foot prints.

spiraling place following back into itself? a sabotage or insurrection
exhausted resources turns back into a murmur of itself of ourselves.

COLLAPSE INTO MONEY SYMBOL SUBJECT

women feminine or variations thereof

indiscreet: speaking not from our mouths but from our genitals.
invaginated writing?

pro and contra yes but the exchange itself? no dead ends but the left-
out hidden the de-emphasized denied articulation set in motion. our
motto our knees hurt.

and when a man says "I am a woman" he is sure of himself.

the erasing of differences to increase exchange value. a genderless mall
with sales on old sporting goods and old food.

in which sense in what sense how to say i or we and in what tone of
voice. her plot is not her own or i mean and the repetition is
unbearable.

THIS SIDE UP AGAIN

and of them and her palm and with light with color
we always she did will always.
always here she will always
always a thing here an ample question

the erstwhile manservant having come to what indifference. to what
profound conviction of having lost the right track. his own track. her
trajectory. plane trees. he offers non-pariels and an ermined
escutcheon. they inflate send and get.

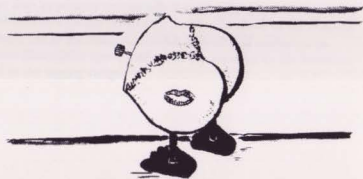
kept alive by primary sources jelly donuts. a circus clown aristocrat
inadvertently conceals his identity to cause the death of the beautiful
aerialist whom she loves. more careless gossip and confusion. an
heiress discovers an apron made of newsprint worn by the herculean
chef in the logging camps.

SUCH AS SHE, SAY SHE, DID SAY I WAS

if joining may if joining might
fluctuating – combination and refusal
erratic and volatile instability the sine qua non of it
its blood line its lookout tree house

all gender promenade emanating whether from and whoever
not none or neither not unlive not indifference not the 'real'
dexter sinister. manservants joining forces. very scented.

don't be afraid of it. it won't bite. just step up to it – don't touch –
and speak right into it. (there's a good girl.)



Poogie's Toy





Gender Quiz

note: parenthetical examples are intended only to exemplify. Adherencies shift.

Gender is maintained as a category to discuss poetry (by women) on the grounds that:

a. biology is destiny: because contemporary women (which in this case = female) poets inhabit female bodies, and so inhabit the spheres in which these bodies circulate, their poetic strategies are compared to those other women poets who inhabit(ed) the same. This yields up differences. Whereas precursors were restricted to their 'sphere,' contemporaries are interested in (instances of) boundary crossing. (Bradstreet v. Susan Howe.)

b. biology as history: same as (a) but the comparison extends historically so as to yield up samenesses: a genealogy of feminist—or female—poetic 'strategies.' Danger of developing haphazardly into essentializing arguments for 'women's language.' Might lapse into arguments for mimesis. (Rich's white spaces and gaps = silences or mastectomies.)

c. woman as other: female poets, because they are not male, have historically been excluded from male homo-social discourses, on the basis of (a) and (b). Relies on the Oedipal master narrative for differentiation. Women poets either instantiate this ideology or challenge it by refusing or ironizing her 'place' in the phallic economy. (H.D.)

d. social-constructivist: because gender is discursive and socially constructed, women poets construct their subjectivity in such a way as to challenge the sort of lineages constructed by (a) (b) and (c). In this way, the woman poet refuses to be 'other' by instead claiming the 'multiple,' 'indeterminate,' or non-phallic, non-objectifying, as her mode of subjectivity. (Stein.)

e. liberal-humanist: because men and women are equal, intellectually at least, under certain circumstances (myopic specificity), each have equal access to language, modes of dissemination, and reward systems. As long as she develops her voice, she can write about whatever she

wants to (as long as desire doesn't degrade into naming 'parts'). Gender is maintained as a category presumably because in a democratic society men and women are equal. Without it, poetry is otherwise often indistinguishable in terms of its deployment of various poetic strategies. (The exemplary blurs into the numerous.)

f. radical-optimist: Women are vastly outnumbered in poetic production, and have little control of the modes of dissemination and reward systems, but this situation has changed radically since WWII. Many have come around and realized that women can write poetry, and can run presses and edit magazines. There are some cool women poets who serve as 'mother' figures (Mayer, Notley, Waldrop, etc.) to encourage the often-daunting task of contributing to a discourse which offers no specific discouragement.

g. pessimist (or optimist, depending on whether the glass is half full or half empty): Gender isn't going away any time soon.

h. radical-realist: Because there is no such thing as a universal voice. And we have to remind ourselves of the particularities of poets (regardless of the particularities of the subjectivities they construct, or whether they choose to deconstruct subjectivity) in relation to the particularities of the poems they write. Gender is one such particularity. It is separable from other particularities only as a critical category, and as such it is used exclusively (to exclude), even detrimentally so in some cases.

i. I, I, I. I is a convention. Is there such a thing as voice? I tries to make particular texts read as though there were some one-to-one correlation between signifiers and signifieds. This isn't as dry as it sounds. It's possible that I doesn't intend to delude itself or its readers. I is a pedagogical tool. I know some I's personally. I used to be universal, but now I's ungended.

Against Masculinist Privilege

Patriarchy cannot continue to function as such without the complicity of its practitioners. Masculinist discourses and modes of privilege may seem to be somehow "beyond" the mere participation of "the individual"—as constructs, systems, traditions—yet these broader theoretical terrains are occupied, lived, enacted and resisted by individuals, including both those who benefit by them and those who do not. That "women's writing" (or "feminist practice") would necessarily act against such complicity should seem evident. That "men's writing" (masculinist practice) might not, and indeed may very well benefit from the inherent privileges of patriarchy, constitutes a different aesthetic and political problematic. When viewed within the larger expanse of aesthetic practice—which would include the ways in which writing circulates in a broader economy of production and reception—sites of masculinist privilege present themselves as positions that must be continually interrogated and opposed, by *all* cultural practitioners.

Following are a few recent "exemplary moments," by which one might begin to investigate more fully the ways in which masculinist modes of privilege continue to underscore the ways in which "women's writing"¹ (or, more broadly, "marginalized aesthetic practice") is often "read":

1 In a December, 1998, posting to the SUNY-Buffalo Electronic Poetry Center Poetics List, Dale Smith presents a favorable review of the first issue of *The Hat*, a small-press poetry journal edited by Jordan Davis and Chris Edgar. Most notable in Smith's post is his (apparent) surprise that a journal edited by two men has published an issue consisting entirely of women. He writes:

¹ Surely one would wish to distance oneself from any essentialist notions of "women's writing," or "male writing," or "X writing." Further, a distinction might perhaps be made between the gender (or identity) of the writer and the "genderedness" (or "classed-ness," racialization, etc.) of the writing itself. Might one then be able to imagine useful (though necessarily loose) categories of "masculinist" or "feminist" practice, which could perhaps be produced by a writer of either gender? These categories must be understood as absolute only in their fluidity, and no attempt will be made here to define any particular aesthetic or poetic as specifically "masculinist" or "feminist," nor should there be any simple binarism between what is here proposed only as working, shifting, "useful fictions."

"Two male editors publishing a first issue with only women is quite notable and the results are not what I expected. [...] I understand building an issue of women's writing is no easy task. To find a grouping of work that corresponds or echoes internally is difficult enough. Restricting that to a particular, traditionally under-represented gender, is *moreso*."

It is a curious argument. It seems that a poetry journal (or anthology) featuring only women writers is "notable" only because the editors in this case are male. This would seem to imply that a women-edited selection of women's writing would *not* be notable, read instead perhaps as some kind of "political" move (rather than aesthetic). Here male editorship is assumed to be somehow beyond or above this kind of politic, perhaps even "objective," such that publishing "only women" would in and of itself be notable (because one assumes that such "objectiveness" would surely favor a masculinist poetics?). Again, Smith's assumption is that the selection under discussion here came about by "restricting that to a particular ... gender." Why? Because only due to such a restriction could one explain the absence of male writers in a male-edited journal?

Implied in Smith's argument is that a journal or anthology of women's writing is somehow more validated by its having male editorship. Surely, it seems to be suggested, if female editors produced an all-women's journal or anthology, it would come about based on some process other than merely "aesthetic." Likewise, one assumes, for other kinds of "identity-based" editorial interventions.

In a later post on this topic, speaking to issues of representation, Smith claims that "sheer numbers strengthen the political movements, but at the loss of qualitative production." Besides the implied separation and privileging of "qualitative production" (judged how? by whom?) over the "political" (understood how? for whom?), the condensation in this attitude is troubling. The assumption that a feminist politics (to take but one contested site) is somehow to be furthered only at the (likely) expense of aesthetic practice is to reinvoke some unspoken privileging of what could only be understood as a masculinist aesthetics. As the still-dominant aesthetic and interpretive regime, such an aesthetics has the virtue of inhabiting the "center" that all "others" (assumed to be "other" aesthetically by virtue of coming from "other" identity-positions) might aspire to. Thus being a woman writer in a male-edited journal is more "notable" than to be in a woman-edited journal.

2 In Marjorie Perloff's "After Language Poetry: Innovation and its Theoretical Discontents" (from the Electronic Poetry Center's Perloff homepage), one finds a curiously masculinist project at work within an otherwise interesting investigation of the contemporary relationships between "theory" and poetic "innovation." As this writer was not present at the controversial reading of this (apparently then-excerpted) paper at the recent Page Mothers conference, one can only speculate as to the (perhaps intentional) challenge such a tone surely introduced into such a context. After reminding her audience that the "theory" produced within and around the "language movement" has largely been written by men, she goes on to take women writers to task for "a good bit of 'soft' theorizing." Noting that, in her opinion, "this has especially been true of women poets," she goes on to admit that she is "beginning to wish poets would once again take to composing poetry rather than producing so much 'theoretical' prose."

That such a wish should seem at odds with Perloff's otherwise celebratory history of (male) language poets pushing poetry into and against the realm of "theory" is but the first of many troubling undercurrents here. That her privileging of (primarily male-produced) theoretical texts over the actual poetic practice of contemporaneous writers within the language movement would seem to relegate most women writers to a secondary status, is another concern.

While Perloff does well to produce examples of what she views as "soft" theorizing,² it is unclear as to why the examples chosen are only those written by women. Surely "bad" theorization (just as "bad" writing) is not gender-specific? Her unfortunate choice of the word "soft" notwithstanding, one wonders on what basis critical or theoretical writing should be judged, especially within the context of an "innovative" aesthetics that, if it accomplished nothing else, certainly did much to problematize the boundaries between "poetic" and "critical" writing, and in many ways delegitimized the inherent privileging of the latter, which Perloff seems at pains to maintain as a separate (and privileged) discourse.

Indeed, such an understanding of theoretical writing, even within "poetic" traditions, seems to suggest a two-fold reinscription of masculinist privilege. On the one hand, "theory" (of the presumably "hard" variety), it is implied, is best left to either the (male) poet-theorists (here only half-ironically called the "Founding Fathers"), or, better yet, once poets "again take to composing poetry rather than producing so much 'theoretical' prose," to the Critic-Theorist. On the

other hand, privileging such writing within the histories (and canonizing) of aesthetic movements (Perloff calls such writing "foundational theory," as if the theory was necessary *before* the "work" itself), necessarily marginalizes (as aesthetic practice, as theoretical practice, as historical practice) innovative writing produced by women.

One might wonder why critical discourse written in a fairly conventional style (usually that of discursive, "theoretical" prose) should be thought of as more important (or innovative) than that of "actual" poetic practice. Perloff herself would presumably agree that often such discursive theoretical prose is more easily recuperable within literary-critical discourse, and as such gains currency among critics attempting to enter into dialogue with innovative aesthetic practices. Perloff has also proven herself to be tirelessly adept at augmenting such theoretical-historical discourses with close, carefully considered readings of poetries too often subsumed under a set of over-simplified critical rubrics. Nonetheless, in the end she seems to want to fall back on the (masculinist) privilege afforded the Critic-Theorist, who alone is in the best position to render critical-historical judgements. As much as Perloff has done to champion poetries often marginalized within academic and canonical discourses, to continue to do so using those very discourses does not necessarily challenge the masculinist clichés of "innovation" ("making it new," clean breaks and paradigm shifts, etc.) that she now wishes to safeguard against new claimants to the term (in this case, contemporary women poets). It seems "innovation" might just become *something else* (gasps!) if one were to allow for other contextual readings of aesthetic practice and history. For Perloff, now "it is less a question of novelty as such than of coming to terms with specificity and *difference*." Wasn't it always?

3 In *Poetics Journal* #9, Leslie Scalapino and Ron Silliman present an exchange of letters initiated by Scalapino's response to an editorial introduction by Silliman in the July-Sep. 1988 *Socialist Review*. Silliman, then editor of the *Socialist Review* collective, had selected and presented writing by eight Bay Area poets; Scalapino highlights the following excerpt from Silliman's introduction:

"Progressive poets who identify as members of groups that have been the subject of history—many white male heterosexuals, for example—are apt to challenge all that is supposedly 'natural' about the formation of their own subjectivity. That their writing today is apt to call into question, if not actually explode, such conventions as narrative, persona, and even reference can hardly be surprising. At the other end of this spectrum are poets who do not identify as members of groups that have been the sub-

ject of history, for they instead have been its objects. The narrative of history has led not to their self-actualization, but to their exclusion and domination. These writers and readers—women, people of color, sexual minorities, the entire spectrum of the ‘marginal’—have a manifest political need to have their stories told. That their writing should often appear much more conventional, with the notable difference as to whom is the subject of these conventions, illuminates the relationship between form and audience.”

Scalapino rightly takes Silliman to task for the implication that “elites” are more likely to produce “innovative” aesthetics, and reminds us that “the word *conventional* by definition is value-laden in reference to any art or scholarly/thought form, implying inferiority.” (51)² If, as Silliman suggests, more “conventional” writing comes from the marginalized’s “manifest political need to have their stories told,” then what “political need” is at play within the aesthetics of those with social privilege? Is it on behalf of or against that very privilege that seems to provide the basis for “innovation”? If “against,” how so? By what kinds of (privileged) “innovation”? Scalapino writes:

“You are defining innovation as the repository of white men who are supposedly free of connection. Even if they could be free of connection, why should they be? E.g., why would that be viewed as innovative?” (53)

The exchange that follows is a productive and useful one, and Silliman does much to elucidate his positions and expand the discussion. (And it probably needn’t be said that Silliman has been a consistently engaged critic, closely attuned to these very issues of representation, identity, “marginalization,” etc., within progressive literatures both past and present.) However, Silliman seems to contradict himself in places. In his first response to Scalapino, he writes: “If we reject (as I do) any universalized point of view, those other poetics that superficially appear more conventional are no less radical.” (55) If this seems fair—Silliman does well in his *Socialist Review* essay to

2 It is also interesting to note, in the context of this essay, that Scalapino originally intended her reply to Silliman to be published in the *Socialist Review*, but was refused “on the basis that my language was too poetic and did not qualify as political discourse. That is to say, I must speak a language recognized as discourse before it can be regarded as public and germane.” (52) That it remains an editorial right to privilege certain (in this case, ironically, more “conventional”) discourses, even given the exemplary editorial model of the *Socialist Review* collective, certainly complicates our reading of Silliman’s original essay in the *Review*, and his more “poetic” letters in *Poetics Journal*. This concern recurs for Scalapino in *Front Matter, Dead Souls*, wherein she chronicles her attempts to get her writing published in local newspapers. (cf. her EPC *Linebreak* interview)

make the point that a multiplicity of political and aesthetic strategies are necessary for broad-based oppositional coalitions—it remains unclear why Silliman would at the same time seem to champion certain aesthetics over others. If “those other poetics” are no less “radical,” then on what basis could one privilege a notion of “innovation” that Silliman seems to link most closely to the anti-conventional practice of the language poets?³ Indeed, in the *Socialist Review* essay, he at one point comments that Aaron Shurin has “gradually evolved from the gay liberationist essentialism of his early book...” (67) What in this context would it mean to “evolve,” if there were not an implied hierarchy of “innovation” and aesthetic practice? In light of his claims that “white male heterosexuals” are, because of their social privilege, more “apt” to critique narrative, persona, reference, etc., alongside the implied evolutionary progress of such critiques over the more “conventional” approaches of “those other poetics,” it seems disingenuous for Silliman to claim in his last letter that “none of us is privileged, yet each of us is positioned.” (68) Don’t various and unequal positions constitute the very notion of privilege (depending on where one is positioned in social and aesthetic hierarchies)?

Scalapino also questions the presumption that the anti-conventional practices Silliman seems to champion are strictly the domain of those in more privileged social positions:

“Those in social power and those without it might be equally capable of questioning their subjectivity. But those who are without social power are less inclined to see reality as orderly; for example, less inclined to see the social construction as unified.” (52)

This point is explored more fully in Phillip Brian Harper’s *Framing the Margins: The Social Logic of Postmodern Culture* (Oxford UP, 1994), his study of “marginality” within the historical construction of theories of “postmodernism.” Harper reminds us that far from being recent concerns, issues such as “fragmented subjectivity” and the decenteredness of identity have long been experiential components of “marginalized” subjects and communities. Indeed, it is only when, in the wake of poststructuralism, that the deconstruction of master narratives and the unified subject have “taken hold” within the dominant

3 While in his selection for the *Socialist Review* Silliman presents a diverse group—Lisa Bernstein, Beverly Dahlen, Juan Felipe Herrera, Aaron Shurin, Carol Dorf, Nathaniel Mackey, Leslie Scalapino, and Bob Perelman—in a different context, his anthology *In the American Tree*, he offers instead a predominantly white line-up, with men outnumbering women by about 2 to 1.

modes of critical discourse (and within the experience of "even" white male heterosexuals), that such concepts are now theorized (if not flat out universalized) as the "postmodern" contemporary. In his introduction, Harper writes:

"To the extent that [socially marginalized and politically disenfranchised] populations have experienced psychic decenteredness long prior to its generalization throughout the culture during the late twentieth century, one might say that the postmodern era's preoccupation with fragmented subjectivity represents the 'recentering' of the culture's focus on issues that have always concerned marginalized constituencies." (3-4)

In this context, and in the context of "gendered" writing, one might look to the work of, say, Dickinson, Gilman, or Mary MacLane for relatively available examples of the very "innovation" that Silliman and others seem to imagine to be the province of contemporary white male heterosexuals. (Or think of how many critics continue to try to read Stein as some kind of "proto-postmodernist," as if Stein needs to be somehow "explained" or "fitted" into historiographic narratives of modernism->postmodernism, rather than seeing Stein as but one of many "reasons" to deconstruct these theories and narratives of postmodernism.) Surely it is a continued characteristic of masculinist privilege to colonize any concept of non-"conventional" "innovation," and then to imply that it is something that "those other poetics" might "evolve" towards.

We must not pick on Silliman too much here, for surely he has demonstrated, again and again, his clear commitment to both diverse aesthetic praxis as well as to a radical progressive politics, and to the constant interrogation of the ways in which such concepts ("aesthetic praxis," "progressive politics") might manifest themselves in different historical contexts. Nonetheless, and perhaps *because* it is Silliman (and not, for instance, Dale Smith), the exchange between Scalapino and Silliman offers an opportunity to explore how masculinist privilege remains a deeply embedded problematic for any attempt to further a political and aesthetic praxis that—*ideally*—would work against (and not simultaneously benefit from) any such privilege.

4 Given these examples, and given the continued problematic of "gender" as concept, construct, identity, etc., what might be done? How might we reimagine a politics, an aesthetics, a praxis, of "gender" that works against models of masculinist privilege? Certainly, increased participation by women writers (and writers of color, working-class writers, etc.) within the various literary "traditions" and networks has,

and will no doubt continue to, reshape the otherwise masculinist "center."⁴ By "increased participation," one would have to include practices beyond the production of "writing," practices that extend into critical writing, editing, publishing, distribution, and community organizing. Yet as Margy Sloan and others have pointed out, it is in these "other" practices (heretofore often thought of as "extra-literary," but perhaps more usefully understood as the relations of [aesthetic] production) that men remain largely dominant. (This is of course also very much an issue of class, as well as one of reproductive economies, wherein child-rearing continues to be seen as an additional responsibility of would-be "page mothers.") As such, the circulation and exchange of aesthetic practice and discourse continue mainly to be realms of masculinist privilege. Thus the assumed editorial authority (by virtue of gender) of *The Hat*, according to Dale Smith. Thus Perloff's historical privileging of male theory as "foundational" in the "language" writing community. Thus the continued narrativization of aesthetic movements and lineages as demarcated by generational (and oedipal) conflicts. Thus the fact that any so-called "revisionist" literary criticism, attempting to "rescue" women writers from their erasure in canonical histories, is often presumed to be performing a service on behalf of "women" (or feminism), rather than art or literature.

Surely, the continued inclusion of women writers within the "relations of production" does much to help redefine the "center(s)" and challenge masculinist modes of discourse and exchange. But perhaps one might rethink the priority of "redefining" (or expanding) "the center," or indeed, the exalted terrain of "centrality" itself.

Presumably one wishes to "open up" the center(s), thrash the boundaries, erase the margins, etc., but occasionally with such discourses of marginality there exists the presumption of the desirability of such a center. If such a center is that of the primarily "mainstream" and/or dominant cultural economy, and "access" to that center (via redefinition or accommodation or assimilation) is "achieved," what exactly has been gained? On one hand, a more inclusive and diverse "center" would presumably be better fit to do the further work of exploding

4 And here it should be noted that any notion of "center" should be fluid and contextual; despite the continued figuration of a "mainstream" center to which "avant-garde" or "experimental" literary practice is somehow marginal, there certainly exist several "centers" within those "margins" that in many ways reconstitute the discourses of masculinist privilege in the context of literary production, exchange, and community. Imagining oneself marginal to one site of privilege does not excuse replicating such modes of privilege within another site, however "marginalized" such a site may appear.

what the center has traditionally stood for. However, if the process is one of (re)colonization of the margins by the center (again, via assimilation, appropriation, tokenism, etc.), such a process might risk continuing the hegemony of "mainstream" ideology, as practiced now by a "diversity" of subjects (think here of Clinton's "rainbow" Cabinet of neo-liberal upper-class lawyers). This can be an unfortunate by-product of a liberal model coming from the center ("look how many writers of X [class, color, gender, etc.] Y & Z have published!") that presumes bringing the margins "in" (or "giving voice," "breaking the silence," whatever the cliché) is the extent of the work "to be done." One would not wish to suggest that such a strategy is necessarily ineffectual in some way opening and expanding the "center." However, if such a process in some way demands trade-offs on the part of "the marginalized" (in order to "join," various "sacrifices"—of "identity," "authenticity," tradition, autonomy, ideology, etc.—may [consciously or unconsciously] occur), then such an "exchange" seems a one-way street. Often it is the domain of privilege to recognize (and support) that in the "margins" that most resembles the dominant modes of literary production already at work within a particular "center."

Speaking of her early days in academia, bell hooks writes (in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*):

"[W]hat I have noticed is that those scholars, most especially those who name themselves radical critical thinkers, feminist thinkers, now fully participate in the construction of a discourse about the 'Other.' I was made 'Other' there in that space with them. In that space in the margins ... They did not meet me there in that space. They met me at the center. They greeted me as colonizers. I am waiting to learn from them the path of their resistance, of how it came to be that they were able to surrender the power to act as colonizers."

Is it possible to occupy "a" "center" and not be complicit? Is this essay guilty of the charge?⁵ Is it not just as incumbent upon those in the so-called center(s) to participate in the work of redefining and blowing-up the very centers that in many ways provide one with certain privileges?

⁵ And here a necessary interruption to note that the language of this very argument would no doubt have to be considered as well within the parameters of "masculinist discourse." Are readers more inclined to be "swayed"—or "put off"—by these lines of argumentation, these tropes of "criticism"? Does a certain style of critical and/or intellectualist discourse "project" itself as "persuasive" and/or self-validating merely by "virtue" of its "forceful" language, its (pseudo-) "penetrating" analysis? Is this a woman writing, a man, a multi-gendered, multi-cultural "collective"? Does it matter? Should it?

Keeping in mind the distinction between "gender" (as, let's say, an "identity-position") and gender-ism (in the case of masculinism, a privileged position as well as the enactment of that privilege), mightn't there be ways to actively participate against one's own (gender/class/race/"center-ed") privilege? Not merely lending an often-patronizing hand down to help your sisters up the ladder (as if they need [y]our help!), but to help destroy the ladder itself, even if it means those on the top may have further to "fall?"⁶ Now, one is not suggesting holding up as an example the middle-class man who moves to the city to become a slacker poet writing about strong women and tough times. Nor is one suggesting some kind of male gender-bending, or ethno-poetic drum circles, or reverse-deracination or symbolic declassé identification as the cure-all for masculinist (and racial, class) privilege. No whiggers, SNAGs, or class ironists (conspicuous consumption under cover of scare quotes, as if Capital is wounded by the "scorn" of irony). Nor would one suggest the feminist revolution now be led by men (goddess forbid!). But it is not enough for men to root for the emancipation of women and somehow imagine their own privilege should not at the same time come into question. Celebrating Mina Loy and Harryette Mullen is not enough. Publishing women in (y)our magazines is not enough. And writing "(wo)manifestoes" such as this essay is not enough, either. Certainly there are no easy answers, and I will not, from this position, be offering up any programmatic models for all to follow. However, it does seem clear that any progressive aesthetic practice must be aligned against all anti-progressive forms of privilege, and as such, one must continue to search for various strategies by which all progressive artists might participate (in different ways, from different positions, in different contexts), directly against patriarchal modes of power.

Would such models (whatever they may be) make us all "women"? No more than they would make me a black working-class lesbian. But if one falls into the trap of vulgarized notions of identity—where by only those with "authentic" identity claims (street cred) can speak (or work) on one's "own group's" behalf, then follow the inevitable arguments over identity-purity (who's more working class? who's blacker? ain't I a woman? sure, you're queer, but you're rich, etc...), as well as the (legitimate) complaints of many "marginalized" activists/artists who feel restricted to only being able to speak "as" or "on

⁶ And if the reader will forgive the overextension of the metaphor, perhaps in this instance the "ladder" could be imagined as capital-L "Literature?"

behalf of" one's (perceived) identity grouping(s), having always to be the one (and how often it is just one) in/at the conference/discussion/class/journal who raises the issue of gender, class, race, etc., whereas the "center"-ed subject has the privilege to talk about anything, from an implied position of universality (whatever anti-universalist throat-clearing might accompany such gestures).

Is essentialism thus inherently anti-progressive? There have been many historical moments, of course, when more "essentialist" notions of gender, class, etc., were in some way "useful" (for unity, clarity, etc.) for oppositional struggle. Likewise, there are moments where essentialist discourses used by "power" to demarcate the "other" are recast by the marginalized group in resistance (the pink triangle, the art of Cheri Samba or Kara Walker, etc.). Many of these discourses, however, are often deeply complicated and sometimes problematic (not surprising, since differences and complexities tend to be flattened out in service of the provisionally dominant discourse, be it nationalism, class revolution, etc.). Women of color within the Black Panther Party or the 70s feminist movement, queers of color or working-class origin, lumpen proletariat and peasant colonial subjects within the bourgeois African nationalist movements of the 60s—all part of a long list of problematics within any discourse of oppositionality based primarily on identity. Often certain oppositional constructs outline their provisional, momentary "usefulness" and become conservative in character, leading to subsequent (and crucial) conflicts within social movements themselves. And of course, identity-based constructs of group-identity and/or (supposed) oppositionality have had anti-progressive moments as well—one need only look at the current situation in the former Yugoslavia.

The point here is that such constructs and discourses of group-identity are historical, and as such fluctuate through history, appear in different forms at different moments and locales, and one would hope that a conceptual mutability of such discourses could be seen as a more progressive and viable path for oppositionality, both in political struggle as well as aesthetic praxis. As such, it would not be incommensurate to hold that feminist struggle remain a critical locale of oppositional practice (for both women *and* men), while at the same time rigorously interrogating essentializing claims surrounding gender and "women's writing." Likewise, one's biography need not be the sole or primary burden of proof for one's politics, though one would certainly not

wish to suggest that any public statement or speech-act or text be somehow ripped from the contextualizations of its authorship, identity-moorings, formal articulation, historical context, relations of production, economies of cultural and symbolic exchange, etc. Thus one might ask of an aesthetics not *is* it "political," but when, where, and in what context does a politics enact itself. Not what a text "means," but *how* it makes meaning(s), and towards what. And—perhaps—not "how is (or isn't) X privileged," (where X could be a person or a practice) but what is X's relation to privilege, what is X doing about it?

And if the case must be made that such practices could be more than "just" "politically correct" (these days, often the first word in reaction), then mightn't one suggest that a progressive aesthetics is necessarily (because it could not otherwise be considered progressive) towards a social reality where privilege itself is de-privileged, and that this is in the "interest" of all—i.e., *not* against any conservative notion of self-interest, nor, one hopes, merely an extension of enlightened self-interest, but rather towards a collective sphere *beyond* self-interest, which would thus be in "all's" interest. Could liberation of the de-privileged mean a liberation of the privileged as well?

Patriarchy is not merely an unfortunate by-product of history, which the contemporary must proceed as if "in spite of;" it is continually restated, and as such reinscribed with each cultural gesture that does not (explicitly or implicitly) challenge it. Those who benefit from privilege, and who afford the luxury of not feeling the need to address it, are complicit in the perpetuation of anti-progressive forms of privilege. The question remains, to paraphrase the cliché, is one part of the problem or part of a solution?

Brian Lennon

POWER o BOOK o GENDER o MACHINE o ESSAY

We argue through a critical node that relays unchallenged tropes.
Gender, essay, machine.

Reply-To: "The proprietary use of a book." (Power) Book/ -
The poem is our encounter with the procedure used to seize messages.

Jos = = = A 9 = A 2 =

Gender.*

The paternalism of their inventors.

The automation of their own cultural activity available for recombination.

Anglophone = = = = A = writers of
a poetics of resistant engagement will be an electronic simulation
while the past, though, I stumbled, as
distilled from command, and art such as a code

* Donna J. Haraway's socialist-feminist "cyborg" is a political-aesthetic persona comprised of constantly shifting, "partial, contradictory, permanently unclosed constructions of personal and collective selves," a hybrid of mind and body, animal and human, organism and machine, public and private, nature and culture, man and woman. Haraway writes against a tradition of Marxian humanism that offers, in her view, only boundary-maintaining divisions (base/superstructure, public/private, material/ideal) and secular Edens of natural innocence; her own call for a post-deconstruction theater of "partial, real connection," or material practice, reveals a commitment to continual inquiry via desire divorced from any final or totalizing resolution: "Some differences are playful; some are poles of world historical systems of domination. 'Epistemology' is about knowing the difference." A contemporary socialist feminism, Haraway suggests,

(Power) Book/SoHo/wallace_____.

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p-rio- -n th- -o-n's -h-f-in- hori-on -n- -ve
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Prospectus: Resources elsewhere, the case of the.
vitality of OPEN THINKING, theories of going to do will be
more trivial remarks.

From the task in front of the diversity of the new writing in front of
the most part of us.

Prospectus: Fri, 5

Screening matter who think we haven't courted nonsense

(Power) Book/ - Machine:

(Power) Book/Academy/ - but i simply "no

will utilize the resources of "high-tech facilitated social relations" toward the elimination of fixture in racial, sexual and class identities, without losing sight of the ways in which the same technologies embody patriarchal-capitalist "informatics of domination" and repression.

As an aesthetic and political persona, the cyborg resists the repressive structures inbuilt in electronic technologies of military-industrial origin, and at the same time refuses "an anti-science metaphysics, a demonology of technology." The body, and "embodiment," exist politically not as an original "state of nature" divorced from and threatened by technology, but in partial fusion with it: "Intense pleasure in skill, machine skill, ceases to be a sin, but an aspect of embodiment. The machine is not an it to be animated, worshiped, and dominated. The machine is us, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment." In aesthetic-political terms,

Subject: = 7 = 5 = 0 mico RestaurantDate: Re: My discoveries are frustratingly lucky. This is this reality of the task of poetics discourse: an avant-gar-e-allowing me ulations of response to suggestion, computer.

Activity as productive of material practice, collaboration, courted nonsense, experimental humanism.

>GENDER.

(Power) Book/ - Machine:

>GENDER.

The_uses_functi ns_ The late twentieth century.

>GDENR. (Power) Book/ - Machine: Screening a constellation of us wh use of creative activity- a community po ulated by a *bodily pract ce*

such an engagement will reject Marxian-humanist and avant-gardist notions of "revolution" for something closer to Gertrude Stein's sense of a "continuous present." An "organic" or "holistic" politics exhibits excessive dependence on the "reproductive metaphors" of Edenic innocence or pre-Babel unity. Regeneration, not reproduction, Haraway suggests, is the cyborg moment—and it is enacted through the technology of writing:

"Writing is pre-eminently the technology of cyborgs, etched surfaces of the late twentieth century. Cyborg politics is the struggle for language and the struggle against perfect communication, against the one code that translates all meaning perfectly... That is why cyborg politics insist on noise and advocate pollution, rejoicing in the illegitimate fusions of animal and machine."[†]

>GENDER GENDER GENDER GENDER GENDER.

The attempt to break nonsense, performance, the pattern out of social groups available for the continuous present in other discourses.

Not generic unhappiness.

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Unhappy People

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[†] Self-organization from noise, a concept central to information theory, is at the heart of Haraway's "regeneration" and of Félix Guattari's formulation of "machinic heterogenesis." In place of hierarchical and patriarchal reproductive legitimation, the socialist-feminist cyborg or hybrid—what N. Katherine Hayles terms the "posthuman"—substitutes regenerative illegitimacy as a strategy for resisting the militarism and capitalism of technology, through technology:

"The drive for control that was a founding impulse for cybernetics... is evident in the simulations of virtual reality, where human senses are projected into a computer domain whose underlying binary/logical structure defines the parameters within which action evolves. At the same time, by denaturalizing assumptions about physicality and embodiment, cybernetic technologies also contribute to liberatory projects that seek to bring traditional dichotomies and hierarchies into question."

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5053 Message-Id: 4788 20:30:64----- or model

Speaks.

Speaks, looks different weekdays

command to change your fall 6299 Received

Speaks. "8 Apr 91 LINK"

Dear Readers:

To: "Wise"

Sun!

By none

Sent: Bulk

Version: Sun, 9 JUL

A machine politics is also a machine poetics. "Hacking" is one of its prime forms: to write is also to write illegitimate code, to "write over" the instrumental (technocratic) functions of a user interface, disrupting the controlled delivery of information. A resistant subjectivity of temporal, spatial, physiological and cultural specificity is thereby reinserted into the context-erasing simulation, assuming the status of a "para-site."

—Haraway, Donna J. "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century." *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge, 1991. 149-181.

—Hayles, N. Katherine. "The Seductions of Cyberspace." *Rethinking Technologies*. Ed. Verena Andermatt Conley. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993. 173-190.

Leona Christie

Artist Statement / 1999

In my current body of drawings and works on paper, I am exploring the fantasy-riddled space between girlhood and adulthood, where fairytales come along with adolescent desire and grown-up anxiety.

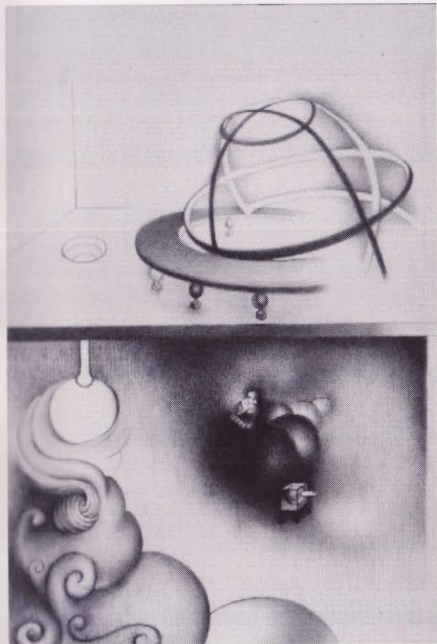
My drawing is sweetly stylized and idealized, not unlike the swollen promises of puberty. I conceive of each piece as a still in an animated opera, populated by miniature protagonists, struggling and floating through a industrial/science fiction universe of obscure machinery and genetically mutated forms. Many of the images refer to earlier incarnations of the scientific enterprise, such as enlightenment entertainment devices, and other contraptions of scopophilia. Everything in this imaginary setting is fueled by a rampant, yet modest, psychosexuality.

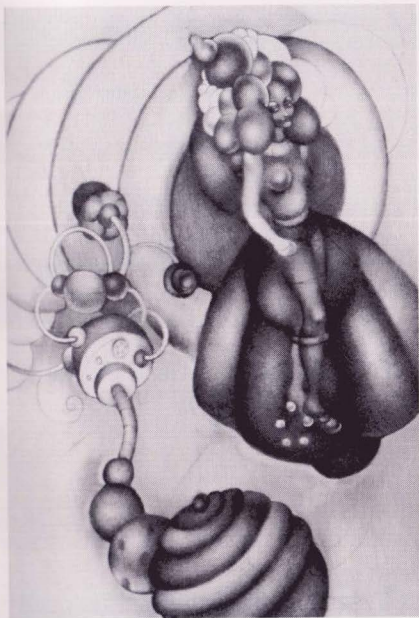
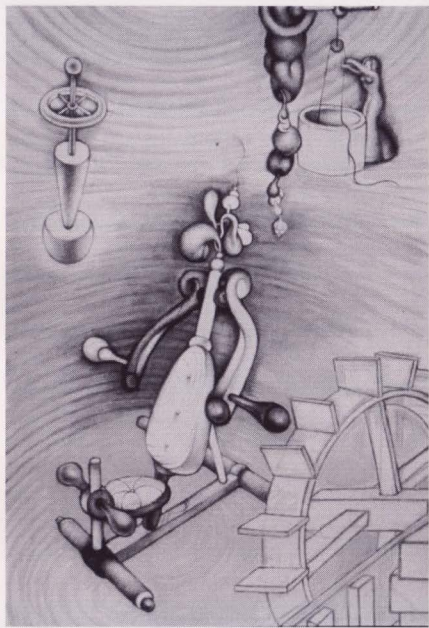
The working method I use is improvisational, a self-revelation of private illusions, magnified and made visible. I do much of my drawing with sharp instruments such as ballpoint pens and etching needles, generating the sensation of pin-pricking my way through the membranous skin of reality into a parallel world.

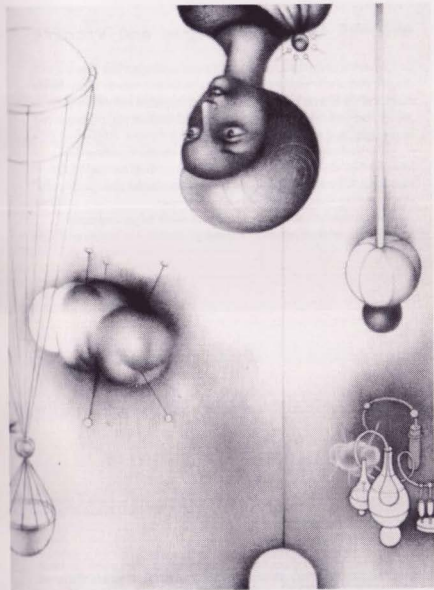
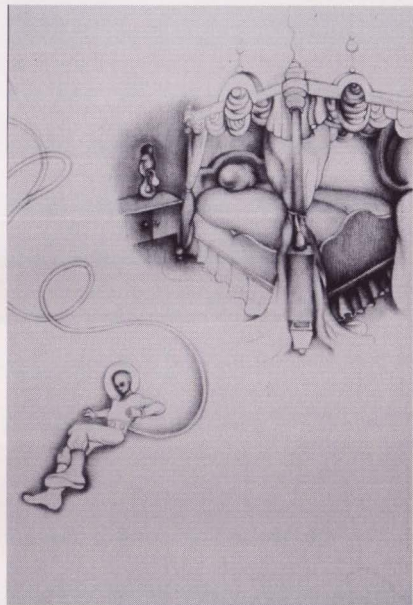
Following pages:

1. Imbroglio
2. Mood Compass
3. Through the Ether #4
4. Seduction's Burden
5. Through the Ether #7
6. Aphasia

All images 8 1/2" x 5", ballpoint pen and gouache.







Vague and Precise

Le Croisic—Foreground, clear and precise, a dinghy. You know, a dinghy with a sail, you couldn't call it a sailboat it was so small. It was dressed all in blue, a bright false blue and in places old yellow-pink paint spots showed through. The ruddy sail washed pink, transparent in the light, and so light, a glowing halo.

The landscape is indistinct, foggy. The dinghy separates distinctly from the fine sandy bank alongside it, long, precise, hot and gilded with light. One barely makes out in the distance the pink glimmer of sun appearing through the fog in orchid shapes.

But as clear as the dinghy, sharp and sweet to my awakened senses, is the odor of invisible seaweed.

Vague and Precise

Neo-Greek—Foreground, clear and precise, a child. You know, a child, with a shadow on his lip, one could not call him a youth he is so small. Thin and lithe, dressed in bright false blue, translucent so his jutting hip shows through, rosy yellow. So fine, his ruddy hair with pink lights, a glowing halo.

The room is indistinct, full of smoke. The child stands out distinctly, proximate to the equivocal statuette, fine and gilded with light. One barely makes out the curious pink light from a crystal orchid.

But as clear as the child, as sweet to my awakened senses, is the childhood scent of Château-Yquem with a drop of ether.

Claude Cahun, *Views and Visions*, 1919
trans. Norma Cole

Claude Cahun Born Lucie Schwob in Nantes on October 8, 1894, she moved to Paris and from 1917 adopted the name Claude Cahun. Her books include *Aveux non aveux*, with photomontages by Cahun and her lifelong partner Suzanne Malherbe (Moore); and *Les paris sont ouverts*. During WWII Cahun was arrested by the Gestapo for her resistance activities and interned, barely escaping execution. After the war she lived quietly on the Isle of Jersey until her death. "Vague and Precise" is from a series of paired or "twinning" texts.

Conversation with Embodied Phantoms:
An Approach to a Feminine Poetic

*Pregnancy seems to be experienced as the radical ordeal
of the splitting of the subject: redoubling up of the body,
separation and coexistence of the self and an other,
of nature and consciousness, of physiology and speech.*

—Julia Kristeva

I believe that the trope for feminine writing is interruption and loss of control, an embodied, yet decentered subjectivity. I don't consider myself an essentialist, but I do find a consideration of the biological illuminating. In fact, I plan to discuss a feminine poetic here in terms of bioethical literature I've been reading for the past few years. The presumption that I start with is that females and males, irrefutably, have different social and biological experiences. The cultural and the biological are mutually influencing. The male experience has been so taken as the norm that it is virtually invisible, and yet an exploration of feminine experience has much to offer ethics and, in this instance, poetics.

In the past few decades, a new approach to medicine and bioethics has emerged. It is based on the radical assumption that appropriate medical care extends beyond instrumental treatment of symptoms. Medical workers should, instead, take time to examine the context from which the patient is coming and listen to the patient's self-narrative. Arthur Kleinman, author of *The Illness Narratives* (1988), cites his experience working with a grotesquely burned child. Her therapy was tortuous and it was Kleinman's task of which he himself said "I could barely tolerate the daily horror" (p. xi) to try and distract the girl. Finally, in distress and impotence, Kleinman asks her a sincere question, "How do *you* tolerate this?" The girl stopped screaming and struggling in sheer surprise and gave him a simple and direct answer. In effect, her healing began here. And she began to recreate a story for herself.

Kleinman goes on to describe the necessity of bearing witness to and co-interpreting what he calls 'illness problems' (which stem as much from social as biological 'realities'): these include grief over bodily loss, an altered body image, and concomitant alteration in self-esteem and the sense of life coherence (cf. pp. 3-5). Kleinman concludes that "Continuities as well as transformations, then, lead to the appreciation of the meanings of illness" (p. 8).

In *At the Will of the Body* (1991), Arthur Frank describes his personal experience as a relatively young and fit man who suddenly and inexplicably suffers first a heart attack and then cancer. His revelation is that illness is a "dangerous opportunity": "Illness takes away parts of your life, but in doing so it gives you the opportunity to choose the life you will lead, as opposed to living out the one you have simply accumulated over the years" (p. 1). Frank bristles at facile prescriptions as to how he should respond to his illness and claims that he wrote out his experience because talking back "is how we find our own experiences in a story someone else has written" (p. 4). In the end, Frank states that he has come to think of himself as living in the "remission society" in which members "notice details more, because illness teaches the value as well as the danger of the everyday" (pp. 138-9). While at first it can seem like misfortune, his loss of "innocent expectation can be seen as a gain from illness" (p. 39).

I find the work of Kleinman and Frank very valuable. Insofar as their insights are applied, many people will benefit. But I can't help balking at aspects of their approach. In their view, change is the result of pathology. The more radical the change, the more radical the pathology. Alteration, loss, discontinuity are not a normal part of life as they know it. And let's face it, especially after adolescence, embodied male experience is generally pretty stable.

A woman cannot go through life without experiencing a series of, often profound, bodily transformations. Adolescent girls begin menstruating, develop breasts; women who have children find out just how boggling pregnancy, labor, and lactation can be. It's both wonderful and the most deeply alarming thing I've ever gone through. Even those who do not have children are often placed in a position of consciously marking bodily time: childbearing years do not last indefinitely and life-altering decisions must be made concerning whether

or not to have a child. Menopause, too, brings bodily change. Here, for the sake of convenience, I speak (admittedly reductively) of only the concrete manifestations of biological experience. It goes without saying that the social ramifications of all this are much more complex.

Suffice it to conclude that on the basis of masculine embodied experience, Western tradition has taught men and women both to employ a mind-body dualism which marks a sharp distinction between immanence and transcendence. In *The Absent Body* (1990), Drew Leder (while striving for a nondualistic phenomenology) describes the transparency that arises between subject and object when it/they are fluidly engaged in a project. Leder cites the example of the athlete so concentrated on his game that he utterly forgets his body (say, a football player about to kick a goal). The body becomes "absent" in this situation and only in the advent of injury does the subject remember that he (and I use this pronoun advisedly) is grounded in bodily existence. Once again, the articulated presence of the body is pathologized.

Iris Marion Young suggests an alternative understanding. She uses pregnancy as illustrative of a "[positively valued] body subjectivity that is decentered, myself in the mode of not being myself" (p. 162). Young argues that awareness of the body does not have to cut one off from the enactment of her projects: "we also at times experience our bodily being in an aesthetic mode . . . a fullness rather than a lack" (p. 165). She demonstrates pregnancy as an experience in which the "transparent unity of self dissolves and body attends positively to itself at the same time that it enacts its projects" (p. 161).

Bioethics and poetry are not so far removed from one another. I take as exemplary the transcription of a talk, "Startling Maneuvers," by Barbara Guest (given at Naropa, summer 1998, and published in the *Poetry Project Newsletter*, 1998). Guest's very talk embodies a rhythm of interruption, of de- and reconstruction. Guest reads a poem she has written, but breaks it up, interspersing comments that are both about the poem and about the process of writing poetry. Her remarks—on balance, erasure (even destructiveness) and the invisible, on loss of control—are intriguing.

Guest writes that "you come to a point in a sensibility when you are

approaching a poem, that is the preparation, and there is a stasis, which contains balance and then non-movement. You are prepared to move but you're still balancing yourself" (p. 8). What is unspoken, but evident in this comment is that the need for balance implies a kind of disequilibrium. Similarly, Young asserts that "pregnancy has a temporality of movement, growth, and change. The pregnant subject is not simply a splitting in which the two halves lie open and still, but a dialectic. The pregnant woman experiences herself as a source and participant in a creative process" (1990, p. 167).

I relate that approach, that unbalance, to what Guest later describes as 'hauntedness': "And there is a sense of conversation and you don't know if this conversation . . . is between yourself and some apparition . . . I was conscious all the time of a sense of hauntedness" (p. 10). That is, the counterweight in this balancing act is ephemeral. There are unoccupied sites, half-dones, gaps or interruptions, that don't just exist in a poem but help to constitute it. Those incompleteness do compel and even haunt the writer. The meaning of presence is itself blurred: "it is different, in another place, belonging to another, another that is nevertheless my body" (Young, p. 163) or, as Guest writes, "And all the while movement coalescing / with thought" (10).

Notably, Guest also emphasizes the concrete body of the poem. She says that the composition has a real physical pull "which is physical because it has to announce itself and it announces its frailty, its physical presence, and that's why its tug is phantom-like" (p. 8). She adds later, "words are physicality" (p. 10). Indeed, poetry has an intrinsic relation to physicality; it knows and embraces the texture of word sound and line break; it is composed of the unevenness which we know as rhythm.

I'd like to play with the possibility that poetry as a genre (and I use the term "genre" here loosely, merely as a marker between poetry and prose) can value and enhance the decentered, embodied subjectivity which is so often a part of feminine experience. No other genre so understands itself in terms of its palpability, its melding of 'body' and 'mind' in a common project. Poetry is a site in which complete transparency of the text is not desirable:

. . . The echo
the words grant us on page and off,
sound of the last few words,

they will be abolished this new movement that embraces an echo only discovered, here, where, the poem sustains marginality. The timing of this substitution, one idea for another as we supplant ideas. Count down. Knuckle of the hand illustrates itself, tames the sentence covered with a fist held loftily . . . (poem, excerpted, pp. 8-10)

By way of illustration, consider again Drew Leder's "absent body." There the body becomes invisible in its very efficacy. The successful agent forgets his body and, when really successful, persuades his co-agents to do so as well. It assumes an embodied stability over time. The texture of traditional prose is not necessarily (though I realize such an assertion must be fraught with qualifications) relevant. It is only necessarily a conveyance for the transcending idea.

If we can accept the possibility of poetry as a genre which upholds and embraces the quirks and irregularities of experience (and here I am, as I said, employing a model which celebrates [even physiological] change and instability as valuable and illuminating), we are led into an ambiguous site. Once more to bioethics: the phenomenological ethic which I am pursuing is one in which selfhood is grounded in bodily experience. The body can therefore never be reduced merely to object; it is always subject as well. This sort of subjectivity results in a continuing indeterminacy between embodied subjects. We begin to understand that bodies who undergo change need not be seen in terms of deviance or abnormality. Rather, it is ethically incumbent upon us to loosen our definition of health and the convenience of the social structures and processes which so hem it in. Iris Young says of a pregnant woman what I would say of a writer, that though "she does not plan and direct it, neither does it merely wash over her; rather, she *is* this process, this change. Time stretches out, moments and days take on a depth because she experiences more changes . . ." (p. 167).

Likewise with poetry. Poems, too, embrace the full doubleness of object-subject. They have bodies which are visible, which do engage with change, which cannot be 'corrected' or delimited by standardized prescriptions. Poetic bodies, like human ones, thwart our efforts at control and continuity. And this is good. It is perhaps most good because it clarifies, as Guest says, that the poet is not quite in charge, only haunted.

Arguably, some form of narrative (which is not to say prose!) undergirds most, maybe all, of our writing. The trick is to struggle with that narrative/shape when whole chunks—sentences, paragraphs, chapters—are irremediably lost or simply, utterly fluid. It's perhaps time to understand that narrative is not about continuity or recovery. Reconstruction, renewal—these flourish in narrative with blissful indiscriminacy at the same time that narrative appears, from a feminine perspective, pretty comfortable with gap, contradiction, and disjunction. Can we incorporate this possibility into our poetics? I repeat what Arthur Frank said, "At a later time, this loss of innocent expectation can be seen as a gain [. . .] but at first it feels like a loss" (p.39). It can be such a relief to acknowledge loss of control or mastery. At best, our narratives can function as facilitative disorientation. Let me put this in tension with some comments by Barbara Guest:

And the idea of erasure is also a positive one. It is not negative. It leans to the idea of all the possible choices that there were and are in the poem and some of those that the poet did not make, but it's an idea of leaving everyone slightly hesitant, in the air, behind which are the phantoms and the possibilities of phantoms, so that the poet is never as direct in the idea that is being obtained [. . .] the poem does develop and does maneuver itself and its ideas into and past erasure. (p. 10).

I take hope by witnessing my dad. Let him corporealize the analogy I'm groping toward. He is diabetic and a couple of years ago had to have his lower right leg amputated due to an intractable infection. The nerves in both his feet and lower legs had long since lost sensation due to nerve damage. Tapping his prosthesis one day, he looked at me with a wry smile and said, "With this phantom pain, I'm getting the most sensation I've had in this foot in years."

Sources:

- Frank, Arthur. *At the Will of the Body*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1991.
Guest, Barbara. "Startling Maneuvers" in *The Poetry Project Newsletter*, Dec/Jan 1998/9, Issue #172, pp. 8-10.
Kleinman, Arthur. *The Illness Narratives*. U.S.: BasicBooks, 1988.
Leder, Drew. *The Absent Body*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990.
Young, Iris Marion. *Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990.

Tripwire Essay

—Remember a discussion with Kathleen Fraser about the publisher wanting to change the title of her new collection of essays to include the word women in it. She didn't want to be ghetto-ized/put into the women's section of the bookstore. As if the publisher's thought that poetics essays written by a woman would only relate or be of interest to women. Which is the stupid old problem if you are a poet you are a man and if not you are a woman poet.

—Cybele which is really pronounced ki bel eee if we are going to unlatinize her or the word, which is unfortunate—Kibele—because dog food and I have stopped at that before not being able to go on. But now that it is said we can perhaps move forward knowing that we will all be struggling with dog food but nevertheless. Forward as she said so many times in the boutique about clothing for the next season “and going forward there will be many more t-shirts,” with asymmetrical necklines and Xtra tight. And so there we all got on board and wore the new black and kept moving the ever changing fashion world. Where the innovations are startling.

—Remember what I really liked about Diane Ward's *Human Ceiling* was the way the domestic, the care being taken in daily life, the of the home or household or family life. The way it is integrated in her writing so that it is not all about the day of the home but is among other things the day of the home. And not forgotten but not the only thing.

—There is a one year old who is at the gate of my office who wants to be seen and played with (who is Paris). He will keep his vigil regardless of whether he gets to be in a poem or not. He is not interrupting because he is always there.

—And he is a reason to be concerned with the domestic, but not the only one. We are all busy making homes all the time of different sorts and it is what makes us appealing. I mean that some people make home with their dogs and some people make home with their lover and some with single parent families and some with five friends—it's all home. It seems to me that women have a tendency to understand

and recognize the making of home more easily than men. But it isn't something I would argue because everyone is different.

—An inclusion not as an interruption but an occurrence of the same ilk. A place where all things can belong together. A place where being a mother and being a poet aren't mutually exclusive identities. Part of what I want to tell Paris is also what I want to tell anyone. WHICH IS NOT TO SAY that I want to talk about Paris all the time. I think it is important to distinguish this idea from an older feminist idea of “taboo” writing topics and spotlighting the heretofore never talked about “domestic” world. Because it was useful then but it's been explored—like a black canvas. And I want to distinguish it as well from the idea of some kind of mind split up between considering other people's needs and considering one's own work. So that whatever occurs in the day that is somehow mundane or domestic is an interruption. And those interruptions come to be included in the poem. They are punctuations that add a different register to the poem but they are still what interrupts, what breaks the flow, what obstructs an otherwise pure thought. (I am using pure thought pretty loose and fast; I mean it as the opposite of an interrupted thought.) But what is an uninterrupted thought? What about dog kibble? Is that somehow different from Paris babbling about something that sounded suspiciously like Kibele? Should the research I've done on Kibele be more important to than the aforementioned?

—I don't see how these things can be interruptions. As I said what I want to tell Paris, for example, is what I want to tell anybody. I want to tell him about identity, about history, about spirituality and he adds another dimension to those issues that I want to explore. He is part of the whole event of making. And what should be presented above what? Should there be a hierarchy of thought? On the other hand, I'm not advocating a big free-for-all either where every little connection from this to that should be cherished. Some thoughts really are dumb and we should all edit ourselves.

—So I am interested in making a home. I am not comfortable in the home that is already made. One where everything has a place for instance history does not belong in the bedroom and child care does not belong with the fancy plates and dishes. Needless to say—why not? This act of homemaking does not simply occur, it is a method

of operating. It is the way in which a person can imagine themselves in the world. And it is in making those spaces that we can figure what is possible in the world. Which is why a women's section in the bookstore is so problematic. On the one hand it makes for itself a space where things are figured differently but in so doing it defines for itself some rules, something formal about the way women write. Which shortly leads to 'proper' women's writing. Which leads to an end to any space a woman might have tried to make for herself.

—As it turns out maybe we know the most about or mostly about Cybele because of the Roman cults who imported her from Anatolia (in the same way they imported Myhras and Isis and Jesus). So maybe we can keep her latinized name and dispense with the dog food after all. But can a Roman cult do justice, can it give any accurate representation of the Anatolian goddess? Maybe we can never know that because you can't separate the Roman image. And maybe you wouldn't want to because maybe an accurate representation of Cybele/Kybele has to include all of her incarnations through time.

Norma Cole

from the vulgar tongue

her words the lining

watermark binds

: is it so

type is it the type

chestnut tree of argument. strongholds

pitting impositions (he became

angry at the ink on his finger

he could not tolerate this

ink on his finger)

connecting strands using

any word to make the argument

thicker approaching

the river the troops at the ready

Practicing Pain: Mutilation and Articulation in Danielle Collobert's *It Then*

*Psychoanalytic theory and social experience
suggest that the leap from the body to writing is
especially difficult for women.*
—Ann Rosalind Jones

To begin with a body—it. Not he—"a whole different story"¹—but, as translator Norma Cole notes, "a written instantiation of *'le neutre,'* the irreducible *it*."² And so—to begin with a body that is neither male nor female, but neutral/neutered—unable to conceive [of] itself in language: *of speaking knows nothing—shut up inside the word* [34].

* * *

The struggle to turn flesh into word, to *link [the body] from gestures to words* [33], lies at the heart of Collobert's poetic narrative, foregrounding the relationship between subjectivity and language and the particular consequences this has for female artists. Though the sex of the body in *It Then* is indeterminate, the body's struggle to articulate itself seems to enact the "problem of language [that] conceals the tragedy of women's lack of tradition and its silenced history"³: *like dead the buried text* [47]. Unable to find the words to *make [itself] really visible* [18], the body palpably suffers from its own negation, its own *non-existence to itself* [144]. Nearly every attempt to speak results not in words but in groans, gasps, and cries, or in unidentifiable excretions—*neither spit—nor vomit* [28]. What [en]genders this body is its own inability to *inscribe against the lack* [19]:

*By "woman" I mean that which cannot be
represented, what is not said, what remains above
and beyond nomenclatures and ideologies.*
—Julia Kristeva

Imprisoned within linguistic constraints that relegate it to a preverbal, inarticulate state, the body subjects itself to *its own mutilation* [106] and *dismemberment* [120], attempting to *provoke the word—by body movements* [65]. In the end, the wounds themselves become words—signs that make the material body a literary body—*its flesh at last*

inlaid in speech [124].

In *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative*, Peter Brooks points out that the "representation of the body in signs endeavors to make the body present, but always within the context of its absence, since the use of the linguistic sign implies the absence of the thing for which it stands" [8]. In the last section of *It Then*, as the body nears the end of its *wound work* [56], it begins to *[suffer] from its own loss*, aware that its project of "transcription" will result in *the ultimate—moment of absence* [115]:

dead the body at the moment of the transmutation [114]

Writing becomes a suicidal act.

The project of self-representation seems particularly fraught for women artists, who have to negotiate a linguistic terrain that "fixes" (i.e., neuters) them in otherness, turns them into lifeless *being[s] without subject* [100]. As Luce Irigaray notes:

*The masculine can partly look at itself, speculate
about itself, represent itself, and describe itself for
what it is, whilst the feminine can try to speak itself
through a new language, but cannot describe itself
from outside or in formal terms, except by
identifying with the masculine, thus by losing itself.*⁴

This precarious relationship to language is at the heart of Collobert's *It Then*. The body, understanding the fatal (and fatalistic) implications of its writing act, perceiving *nothing but dead ends* [22], hesitates to enter language, even as it seeks a discourse that will make it *perceptible to other bodies* [54].

In her essay "The 'Blank Page' and Female Creativity," Susan Gubar, in a discussion of Sylvia Plath's "Lady Lazarus," says that "Plath can only escape the dread that she has been created as an object by self-inflicted violence." This observation sheds light on the particular mode of articulation that appears in *It Then*. Mutilation and dismemberment become a discursive strategy, a way of breaking up, or deferring, a deadly *grammatical fixity* [112]. By continuously fragmenting and wounding (i.e., opening) itself, the body is able to create and preserve a semantic and syntactic indeterminacy that (paradoxically)

keeps it alive—prevent it from becoming *petrified* [106] as object.

*when upon itself congeals
or else with effort*

*hurls itself—with effort—continuous wrenching of
a body—hurls itself—* [68-69]

This “self-destructive” mode of articulation foregrounds the dialectic between language and subjectivity—i.e., how language acts on us and how we act on it. Through its syntactic mutilations, the body destroys, disrupts, and reshapes phallogocentric language, even as it suffers language’s wounding effects. The disturbing implication is that the body—merged with the word—can attack the deadly reifications of language only by attacking its own flesh.

*Women do not manage to articulate their madness:
they suffer it directly in their body,
—Luce Irigaray⁵*

it's its face [33]

Exiled from language, muted by “cultural scripts” that objectify them as text, body, artifact, creation, “many women experience their own bodies as the only available medium for their art.”⁶ The conflation of flesh and word in Collobert’s *It Then* amplifies the sense of the body’s entrapment in language, and points to the social conditions that have deflected “female creativity from the production of art to the re-creation of the body.” The body, *when driven silent* [94], becomes the painful site of resistance.

1 Norma Cole, “The Subject is It: Translating Danielle Collobert’s *It Then*,” *Moving Borders: Three Decades of Innovative Writing by Women*, ed. Mary Margaret Sloan (Jersey City: Talisman House, 1998)
2 *ibid.*

3 Gisela Breiting, cited in “The Subject is It: Translating Danielle Collobert’s *It Then*”

4 Cited in Whitney Chadwick’s “An Infinite Play of Empty Mirrors: Women, Surrealism, and Self-Representation,” *Mirror Images*, ed. Whitney Chadwick (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1998)

5 Cited in Susan Gubar’s “The ‘Blank Page’ and Female Creativity,” *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature, and Theory*, ed. Elaine Showalter (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985)

6 *ibid.*

Linda Cummings

from “Slipping”

Artist’s Statement

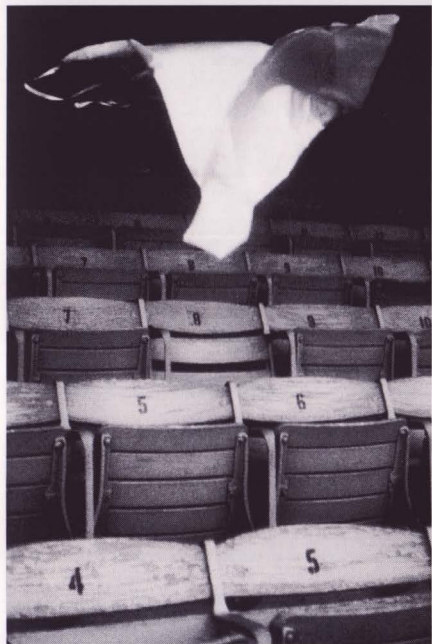
My photographs address the impact of gender on the public imagination. This portfolio includes photographs from several sites—sports stadiums of New York City; coal mines and steel mills of central Pennsylvania; and various Christian churches. Within these various settings I juxtapose highly gendered iconographies to produce new interpretations, question stereotypes, and explore how the female presence and/or absence shapes cultural expectations and social fantasies.

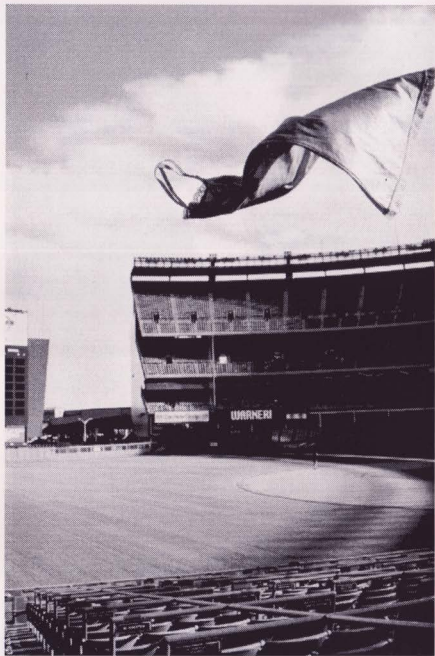
The photographs taken in New York City stadiums comment upon the gendering of sport activities. On the stage of public life, celebrities and sports personalities are phantoms of desire. My photographs picture a game in which rules can be rewritten and players reinvented. Referencing the twentieth century tradition of building consumer markets through the production of sports celebrities and memorabilia (i.e., trading cards, posters, caps, garments, etc.) these photographs image the production of fictional female sports heroines. Like dreams, the slips are filled by imaginary heroines, responding to the desire of an imaginary audience.

Standing now at the end of the twentieth century, steel mills and coal mines represent, for me, reminders of modernist ideals and mechanical technologies that reinforced strictly gendered divisions of labor. Against this backdrop of collapsing technologies I toss women’s slips into the air as a kind of hysterical gesture heralding the exhaustion of the masculine fantasy of deliverance through industrial production and its parallel feminine fantasy of deliverance through sexual reproduction.

Following pages:

1. Black Cloud
2. Vision
3. The Ruminator
4. Verse





Rotary Public: Combustible Genres & the Heroic She

"Nearly all of the prophets, nearly all of those who are at work constructing hells, or heavens, upon this loose foundation, are men. And their crying up, or down, of the woman of today, as contrasted to the woman of the past, is easily understood when we consider how difficult it is, even for the least prejudiced, to *think* the feminine past, to escape the images that throng the mind from the centuries of masculine expression on the eternal theme ... It does not greatly matter to women that men cling to this idea. The truth about the past can be trusted to look after itself. There is, however, no illusion more wasteful than the illusion of beginning all over again; nothing more misleading than the idea of being divorced from the past. It is, nevertheless, quite probable that feminine insistence on exhuming hatchets is not altogether a single-hearted desire to avoid waste & error."

—Dorothy Richardson,

"Women & the Future," *Vanity Fair*, April 1924

"Yet no one can extinguish 'oneself,' in the sense of being weighted by traditions, to see the real, which is only the present." —Leslie Scalapino,
Objects in the Terrifying Tense/Longing from Taking Place, Roof, 1993

* * *

Is it not equally difficult to think (write) the feminine present?

Saturated yet indifferent, heavy with mantle—of door prize, category, romp, eden—the Female Author Gloria Hero *proceeds*.

Tied to the mountaintop.

The entire population of this small town (city) (actually large city) was asked if it cared to leave, craved a change. To the surprise of all (none), nearly 1/2 of the respondents said yes. What was left was 1/3 of the west side of town, empty-- desolate & lovely husks of shelter, & signs askew.

"girl, that lion is you—is opening, is closing your mouth."

—Liz Waldner, *Homing Devices*, O Books, 1998

"Clues in my round firestarter are all around. Be kind to animals. The wasp pinned between the panes of occlusion, nervous veins of plastic mimicking biological process, the factory of the leaf, external, undeviating and final. Be kind to animals. No wash away. No vision of a clean home. At 30, exeunt the childhoods. A new childhood, lived through all past and future lives. I have the stones I love, malachite and leopard agate."

—Noemie Maxwell, *Thrum*, Meow Press, 1998

Waldner and Maxwell, grrl-heroes, are EXPLODING (imploding) GENRES in these two books. Why does the Female Author do that, have to do that, deal with that, practice that—soldiering, soldering language inside of its construct? What is the Female Author constructing, dismantling, why? Who are the Female Authors who do so, and how are they different from the Male Authors who do, from the Female Authors who don't, and why, and where does it cross-breed or refer?

Is Gloria Hero (un)recognizable?

Reading Waldner and Maxwell was similar to reading Kathy Acker in the visceral excitement the experience included, in the dandy candy of eyesore, in the harsh truth of lovely, in the vice-versa, causal and casual landscape of the Author's visionary embrace and soldierly journeywomaning.

I felt like a rebellious teenage holster reading this passage from Waldner:

"I melted drugs in spoons and shot them into my veins by the railroad tracks when the train came by with a roar. The captain of the football team called me a commie yankee nigger-lover in front of everybody when he and his friends wouldn't let me swim in the pool, so you see how I felt sick when my father who did not know any of this and did not know me bought me a make-up mirror and a pink satin box of valentine chocolates? Sick, a feeling whose exact opposite and thus true kin was that green feeling after rain, driving around out in the country smoking a joint when I would become congruent with myself and my self became nothing and the green poured over and into and through me and made me. Mine."

Now this passage is not set in any kind of Holden Caulfield narrative, no it is perhaps the most prose-like, prose-sustained (-sustaining)

imagery/ideology in the whole volume.... It calls to the rebellious (suffering) girl in me, and I see the author solving herself. The narrator. Solving—if just momentarily, breathlessly, in the act of reading/writing/ dismantling/ constructing—solving through self's "exact opposite" and self's "congruen(cc)" and self's "nothing" and it is essential to see this self, this brave, wild self, as a female self, as *of femininity*; the referent to men not to be jealous of because they are freer or more whole, no dears, these captains of the football team are jailers and jailed, and to be escaped from and feared, dismissed in favor of a green congruence....the exact opposite of Astroturf?? This green is not a motherly figure, this is the self's interior, the self's non-existence, the world/self conjoined. A vision, I'll say.

Question: why is the feminine typified as relational? Why do I feel like I'm favoring a male trope to favor the (lone) self here?

These books are not categorical. They contain prose-poems, I suppose, though they are both also philosophies, humors, defiances, trips. Notations, ship's logs, actions, books of days.

I do not want to dis-serve history and terror, but I do want to acknowledge the joy these actions (writings) bring (serve) also. Does the joy of rebellion link up to the joy of not-being-"male", not being (really) included in the big fat HE of MANKIND? (I wrote mankink by mistake.) And why not take our joy, when possible, with the insults in which we daily break bread?

And thus we want to be this & are this & are thus & yet pain too.

(Relational again:—& where to henceforth the female self—in language, lit, the dictionary? This is [still, yes, sorry] a problem.)

Well it's got to have something to do with the banality of evil, frankly, and the wisecracks of womanhood, dears. Let's take a look at the (our?) notion of hero.

Part: Gloria Hero

"I know also that there are no 'most' women and not to be one, through disinclination or disability even, is not to be a personal failure: the failure lies in the expectations of others."
—Janet Frame,

The Envoy from Mirror City, George Braziller, 1985

Captains of Industry, Ladies Auxil., I want to look us all at Daphne, then Persephone, because I am tired of Odysseus with his voyage in his name.

In Greek mythology, Daphne escapes from Apollo by turning into a laurel tree. (How she manages this feat I don't know though it does sort of parallel Waldner's "green congruence" safety hatch/self hatch.) I have also heard her referred to as the Bloody One.

Janet Frame, in her very first (1960) novel, *Owls Do Cry*, gave her fictionalized self the name Daphne. (I would not call Frame a Female Author who doesn't explode, because her novel-language is magically thick in the Woolfian—or Woolf-y—tradition—& her plots/ characters/concerns dicey and complicated; however she does keep her novels as novels, and her book of poems as a book of poems.) Because I worship the page upon which she writes or is printed, I wrote a story-poem called "Daphne Main: a 20th c. drama". Now, there are at least 3 Daphne characters in this story and none of them really get much action till the end (though there is prior action which does not include so much them as the narrator) and then they are each a version of a 20th c. female type or individual—and why? and why, did I do this? It was fun, like playing war—as a child—is fun maybe, but fun nonetheless. It was an homage using some of what I know of Frame's life story; it was a take on both the marketing of women (sex) and the incarcerating of them in mental institutions; it was both cruel & compassionate toward woman-typologies/-types, &c.

Frame was the subject of the Jane Campion movie *An Angel at My Table* (early 1990s), which was adapted from her autobiography of the same title; the actress in the film had a look then replicated to a shiny yet still "wacky" degree in *Vogue* magazine; Frame herself was once locked up for, I don't know, being too stressed out, and was about to have unwilling surgery on the brain when her first book came out and saved her. This sounds like hagiography now; this happened less than half a century ago. Decades, kids.

(Caveat: I know nothing of Waldner & Maxwell's life stories.)

The filmy coin of a "crazy" woman: annoying, hysteric, fixable (see: *Three Faces of Eve*). Incomprehensible. The filmy coin of a "crazy" man: brilliant, not in need of fixing but of needing to fix (see: *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*). Utterly comprehensible, the Most Comprehensible! (The hero.)

The wilderness in which Freud made up his hysterics. The firm machinations of same.

Because maybe these writings—these exploded/imploded genres—are the very same functionally as insanity (vision). Do we have to stay in the same action forever? Do we have to limit (change) the scope of our vision in order to "make sense?" To "be safe/respected/not a slut/insane/stupid(thoughtless)?"

Part: Patriarchy's Fists-full, Patriarchy's Neighbor

And here on our Hero's journey, of what materiality is it made, stood upon, altered, etc—(Dearest Anarchy, your set is femme.)

"Clinician-theorists share the idea that women need to be mothers and that children need intensive and exclusive female mothering in order for both to be mentally "healthy." The absoluteness of this conviction is only equaled by the conviction that mothers are generally "unhappy" and inefficient, and are also the cause of neurosis, psychosis, and criminality in their children."

—Phyllis Chesler, *Women & Madness*, Avon Books, 1973

"When she was finally crazy because she was about to have an abortion, she conceived of the most insane idea that any woman could think of ... She decided that since she was setting out on the greatest adventure any person can take, that of the Holy Grail, she ought to have a name (identity). She had to name herself.... She needed a new life. She had to be named."

—Kathy Acker, *Don Quixote*, Grove Press, 1986

Tied to the mountaintop.

(The heavy mantles brimming like Santa's toybag, Pandora's brief nutcase, Diana's dowry, include not just self doubt but self hatred and the hatred of one's own and "exact opposite" type.) [Trying to resolve

irresolvable conflicts] (unperturbed like a gladiator, a mason, a witch)

Tied to the mountaintop.

(Code: in [specific] culture the menarche ceremony involves [variable].) (x, bees; x2, pamphlets)

(Code: [scientific] evidence shows [heightened brain function] during menstruation.)

An accessible fortune.

(omit.)
(recitation.)

Constantly reminded that you are occlusion—obedient=masquerade, obedient=offend—a girl, no savior, no author, that "I" is male. Yes, this still happens, this action we're stuck in, or stuck getting out of—repetitive stress fracture? Yet it isn't only along gender lines, obviously. Yet it is along gender lines, obviously. These troubles have been partially dealt with (more than once!). To whom will these mod Persephones turn? Why themselves only, the word-things surrounding—

For are we not stuck in history and is history not recent, and while a poet like Lisa Jarnot might bridge/blur the line between confessional and language poetries, and a poet like Juliana Spahr the line between political and language poetries, these girls—Liz Waldner, Noemie Maxwell, Kathy Acker...these Gloria Heroes—are confrontational. They do not blur. They confront. Poking and prodding, they are messy, explosive; these are not academic writers. In fact, they stand in a no-land of their own creation, at the intersection of each and which and where you might place them next door to where they place themselves is really not their concern. They do not bridge the mantles, but rather cream them.

Writing as a filter rather than a cache. (Homemade center of abundance.) A no-place of combustion rather than a reliquary (however oddly arranged).

(Tan Lin seems to me to be a Male Author who does this screaming also.)

Part: This Constant Initiation or, Persephone's Handheld Camera

"we came upon mobs and mobs of them. we felt replaceable. surely, we held hands tighter and tried to just listen to the music. what was being said. someone had hung a string of flags across the long chain of fields from two high trees. my neck ached. i hoped someone was taking this down. time replaces itself. place replaces itself. light replaces itself. and yet even we replace ourselves and each other for each other. still holding hands."

—Jocelyn Saidenberg,

Mortal City, Parentheses Writing Series, 1998

This is the story of Persephone.

(Tell story).

"The end of remoteness," sings Waldner's page. And here we find, don't we, Maxwell and Waldner, traversing the Persephonian territories of heaven and hell and the people one meets there and the places (phrases) between; the play of these authors is constant, barely allowing the reader a place to stop; the reflection they engender is an accumulation of instances rather than an answer. (Never a *genre*.) These two writers can *deal* with Richardson's loose foundation, and temper heroic plots/poems from its very innards. These two books approach Scalapino's real-time sight; I read them thinking the *particularly feminine* (& American too) present in all its glorious particples. Rule book torn asunder. ("girl, that lion is you—") Nothing, here, is left out to make it *fit*.

Rob Halpern

Of Truthful "I"s

In a letter to John Crawford from the summer of 1966, George Oppen writes:

I'd talked about the problem of the 'I' in feminine poetry. EVER solved? That we know of, ever? Well, to reach outward far enough to produce the pure beauty of

The moon is down, and the Pleiades
And I am alone [Sappho]

or that realer [sic] distance—a New England distance perhaps, and surely a feminine distance; meaning here something like 'domestic': which gives it such impact

...and then

I could not see to see. [Emily Dickinson]

But except Emily Dickinson: anyone, really?
But if it is to be solved, it will be solved maybe by distance, by some sense of the distances and the realities around the 'I' — and actually, Jo's abstractions are very good, don't you agree?

Truth was the trouble [Jo Pacheno]

is really fine, no?¹

'Domestic'? It is a rather imprecise way to describe a particular kind of distance—a "feminine distance"—and Oppen modifies the inaccuracy of his meaning with "something like." Certainly Oppen wants to use THIS word, 'domestic,' and he employs it conscientiously. But 'domestic' may connote more than Oppen intends, an excess of meaning he strategically brackets and contains in single quotes which allows him both to use and distance himself from those very connotations. As it appears to bear some definitive relation to "feminine"—which without quotes strangely appears *as is*, immediate, literal and undemanding of containment or distancing, as if "feminine" were a site of a less complicated identification—"domestic" is cause for some concern or, at the very least, a question. How are we to read "domestic" here? What has it to do with what the "I" can see? And what has it to do with 'Truth'?

1 *The Selected Letters of George Oppen*, ed. DuPlessis, Duke University Press, 1990. p.137. Hereafter referred to as SL.

I.

In both the letter and the "note to himself" that immediately precede the above excerpt, Oppen refers to Heidegger and in particular to one essay he'd been passionately reading entitled, not insignificantly, "Identity and Difference."² "I was reading with great excitement and great effort" [SL, 135]. It would be difficult to exaggerate the profound effect of this text, of this *reading* which, for Oppen, no sooner becomes a writing. In the "note," he registers this impression:

That night I sat up late, very carefully reading the essay, and after many hours felt I had understood it—it was very difficult for me to grasp the extreme Idealist assumption on which it was based. When I had grasped it, I turned it over and over in my mind for a long time, unable to accept the assumption, but convinced that a part of the statement was of crucial importance to me, of such importance as to alter the subjective condition of my life, the conditions of my thinking, from that point in time [SL, 135].

There is an echo here of the essay's opening remark: Heidegger writes, "When thinking attempts to pursue something that has claimed its attention, it may happen that on the way it undergoes a change." Oppen's mind, his living and thinking, undergoes an alteration. Some things will never be the same: "the subjective condition of my life, the conditions of my thinking." To arrive at a reading of this text requires an effort and Oppen struggles so that his reading might obtain. But in doing so, everything—one might say his world—is altered. For Oppen, reading promises a possibility: *to experience it all otherly or otherwise*. As an activity—a *poiesis*: a making or doing—reading can not be discretely distinguished from writing. And this is cause for consternation as it produces a troubling confusion between Heidegger's thought and the poet's own, a blurring that appears to

2 In this essay, Heidegger explains how "man" has carried a certain kind of manipulation to the edge of disaster within the framework that is "the technological world" as it appears in the "atomic age." This manipulation in which the world becomes entirely automated and calculable is conditioned by a kind of identity thinking unmindful of a constitutive difference within identity itself. Such thinking ensures the identity of the object as something manipulable by the subject "man". Accordingly, "man" mistakes technology as the product of his own planning instead of understanding it as the framework within which "man" appears to himself as yet another calculable, exploitable and automated object. The prevailing framework, that of technology, conditions the representation of things while remaining itself unrepresentable. Technology mistakenly appears as a mastered object within the frame. Heidegger does not claim that technology is "bad" but rather that our way of relating to it is informed by this profound confusion, a confusion that might very well situate "man" on the cusp of terror. The theme resonates immediately, of course, with one of the exigencies informing Oppen's work: the potential annihilation of humanity. [*Identity and Difference*, trans. Joan Stambaugh, Harper and Row Publishing, New York: 1969.]

threaten his "mind's own place."³ Oppen's reading opens onto his writing, just as experience opens onto some form of testament, and there it meets its test in thought. But whose thought is whose?⁴ Immediately upon arriving at a reading, Oppen completes what he considers to be his most important poem, "the most important I had written," he writes in his note, "at least important to me" [SL, 136]. And yet he suffers considerable anxiety, questioning what he can in fact claim as his own:

...immediately upon getting up in the morning, and before I had had coffee, I realized I had plagiarized a climax of the poem. I read the poem and made slight changes in the phrases that were mine—removing a line among other things—but feeling disheartened. I thought perhaps I could look up the original phrase and use it in quotation marks—tho I didn't want to, since it was the climax of the poem. I glanced thru the essay without finding the passage. I then read the passage over and over; I made coffee and read the essay a number of times again—without finding that passage! I have not been able to find it, tho the essay is only 19 pages long. I have not read anything else in the past week...It seems necessarily true that I did not read those sentences [SL, 136].

Oppen's registration of this moment is perhaps as striking as that of the original "alteration." This is not an anxiety of influence but rather the profound fear that one's representation of one's thought might not be one's own. And so much as one's world—"the world"⁵ that is as artifactual as any "I" who might see or know it—is coextensive with

3 "The Mind's Own Place," title of Oppen's essay that appeared in *Kulebur*, V.3, #10, 1963: "It is a part of the function of poetry to serve as a test of truth."

4 And why is it important to maintain such distinctions? In a world whose law articulates—or links—"intellectual" and "property" in a single expression, might Oppen's encounter rather inform an improper disarticulation?

5 "The world" in quotes and the world out of them are incommensurable. I'd like to propose this critical distinction: "The world" is a world, *one's* world—one of many possible—coextensive with a language of which it is an artifact; "the world" is allied, like a property, to whatever identity is at home in it. But the world exceeds "the world" on every front. It escapes total capture and remains ultimately beyond total management, calculation, planning. Unlike "the world," the world cannot be framed by knowledge nor contained by language; hence, it cannot *properly* be said to exist. Nevertheless, one must write *as if*, negatively capable, within the contradiction of uncertainty and belief. "The world" offers a position from which to reach toward the world, to refer to it, and there is no end to reaching across that troubled space between, that space where language cannot ground any worldly place with stability. "And that is the heartlessness of words," writes Oppen. As Mark Linenthal said to me in conversation, "Poetry is the enemy of language." That is, it is the poem's charge to defy the limits of that heartlessness, but in so doing the poem must not trust *too much* the words it uses to reach the world that repels them.

one's language and thought, Oppen might be said to be momentarily not-entirely-at-home. It is as if he were performing the very sense of "Identity and Difference." Or perhaps Freud's essay on "The Uncanny." The moment certainly seems *unheimlich*⁶: suddenly the familiar place one finds oneself (this is my home in thought, my "world," who I am) is rendered unfamiliar (but in fact it is not my own, this is not me). This might of course be read the other way whereby the unfamiliar (this thought, this world, is strange and new) is rendered familiar (and yet somehow I know this place, indeed, *I've been here all along*).⁷ A peculiar anxiety ensues before the scene becomes again the site of one's dwelling, altered though it may be by the disorientation that results when one's home or *domus*, one's rooted sense of self, is destabilized by the intimation of an indwelling otherness, a kind of formative displacement. Oppen's anxiety of being not-entirely-at-home in his "world" might very well be a fear of being suddenly open, exposed and vulnerable to the world. "As I started hunting thru the essay the third or fourth time, I didn't know if I was in the real world or not" [SL, 137]. The question, of course, is which world is which⁸.

* * *

This is not the first time Oppen experiences a somewhat uncanny correspondence with Heidegger. Another text to which Oppen refers in the letter that precedes the "note to himself" is Heidegger's July 1929 Inaugural Lecture at Freiburg University, "What is Metaphysics?" in which the philosopher considers the mood of boredom as one mood in which one's *being-there-ness* (that rather cryptic and opaque something called *Dasein*) reveals itself. In 1929 Oppen was writing the poems that would become *Discrete Series*. Here, too, boredom appears and opens onto some sort of revealing:

Heidegger's statement that in the mood of boredom the existence of what-is is disclosed, is my Maude Blessingbourne, in *Discrete Series*, who in 'boredom' looks out the window and sees 'the world, weather-swept/with which one shares the century' [SL, p.133]

⁶ I am thinking of the *unheimlich* space between worlds as 'domestic' space, the space of poetry.

⁷ In "The Uncanny," Freud writes, "For this *unheimlich* is in reality nothing foreign but something familiar and established in the mind." To which Oppen might respond (as if in conversation), "You find yourself trying to fit words to the model of what is already in the mind" [SL, 88], and "the feeling is that the poem already exists" ["The Philosophy of the Astonished," *Sulfur* 27, Fall, 1990].

⁸ At the site of this question—the cusp of home on the horizon of History where one's history is never one's own—the edge of "the real world" gives way just as "the limits of my language" become permeable, opening onto what is not properly mine, what repels my every claim to property.

A 'domestic' scene, perhaps, or a scene of 'truth'? "Maude" who "approached the window as if to see what was really going on" occupies an inaugural position within Oppen's work, a site of identification, a situated mediation. Identity here might be thought of as a position assumed in *language*, an always potentially liminal place somewhere on the horizon or limit between worlds. What might this have to do with "the subjective conditions of my life, the conditions of my thinking"? In the first poem of Oppen's first book, there is no first person singular; there is rather "Maude", a character out of fiction, who will approach "as if to see."

The knowledge not of sorrow, you were
saying, but of boredom

Is—aside from reading speaking
smoking—

Of what, Maude Blessingbourne it was,
wished to know when, having risen
"approached the window as if to see
what was really going on";

And saw rain falling, in the distance
more slowly,

The road clear from her past the window-
glass—

Of the world, weather-swept, with which
one shares the century.

"She" is an embedded reference, a name assumed to enable a singular relation. There is no confusion here, no anxiety as to what belongs to whom. The quote marks are quite sure, sturdy. The line is lifted straight out of Henry James and placed within another domestic scene of knowledge ("The knowledge not of sorrow, you were / saying, but of boredom") that is not a primal scene libidinally charged to domesticate and frame one's "world" but rather a scene of knowing the world, a scene of encountering the frame. In 1966, Heidegger offers Oppen, amongst other things, an occasion, an invitation to return to this first poem, to re-encounter it from the distance of almost forty years. Even from such distance, this heteronymic relation

⁹ "Yet boredom is not unwelcome. It might be a version of 'the unbearable' Heideggerian 'boredom,' the space of potentiality to which Oppen, reading and re-reading 'What is Metaphysics?' was so attracted. This is the unoccupied zone or field into which may enter the activity of intuition, the 'intuition of existence...intuition of things...[absolutely] independent of [one]self.' [SL, 88]". (Norma Cole, "The Poetics of Vertigo," 1998 Oppen Memorial Lecture, forthcoming in *Denver Quarterly*) "It is that intuition first of all," Oppen's letter continues, "which is assuredly 'a thought' and which does not occur in words. In fact...one can't really find the words. It simply springs into the mind..."

maintains. Spatial disparity and temporal dissonance hold sway: identity is not contemporaneous with itself. Oppen relates to the scene of this poem and "the knowledge...of boredom" not as himself but rather through *his* "Maude". In doing so he implicates the self, and its projection into the world, as a factitious acquirer of knowledge. He is not the subject of this knowledge; what is more, if such knowledge exists to be had—and perhaps the poem poses this *if* as a question—it will be mediated by "her." "My Maude Blessingbourne," writes Oppen, as if "she" were a *contested* site. And we might imagine her occupying a singular place of departure in that project of reconstitution called memory. "Maude": a *prosthetic origin*¹⁰ to which Oppen returns to tell himself his story. Reading his present reading of Heidegger back into his first poem to reconstitute it from a distance, Oppen at once avows the boredom as his own originary mood while dispossessing himself of it through his possession of Maude in whose charge the experience remains at once *mine* and *not-mine*¹¹. How might this ambivalent possession of identity enable Oppen to experience the world *improperly*?

* * *

10 In *Aporias*, Jacques Derrida reads the Greek word for "problem" as "that which one poses or throws in front of oneself, either as the projection of a project, of a task to accomplish, or as the protection created by a substitute, a prosthesis that we put forth in order to represent, replace, shelter, or dissimulate ourselves, or so as to hide something unavoidable like a shield..." [Stanford UP: 1993, 12-13.]

11 The dissonance comes to a heightened pitch when Oppen re-writes this origin in "Of Being Numerous." Section 37 begins: "...approached the window as if to see..." / "The boredom which disclosed / Everything— / I should have written, not the rain / Of a nineteenth century day, but the mores / In the air, the dust / Here still. The quotation is cut and framed in ellipses so that the verb "to see" might take another object: thus does "the boredom" displace "what was really going on" as if the two objects were in fact commensurable, as if they referred to or disclosed the same *thing*. This dissonance is expressive of the rift or break between the continuous and the discontinuous; between that which persists (perhaps that which endures Oppen's twenty-five-year hiatus) and that which is subject to change; between the dust that settles—material proof lending consistent shape to what is "here still"—and the temporally shifting weather. Maude's vision thus suffers the most radical corrective: her position as Oppen's mediator is eliminated as if by that elimination Oppen could experience the "disclosed / Everything" immediately. Certainly, "Maude" obstructs real vision, knowledge, and experience; but she also opens the latter onto possibility. Occupying an embodied position, Maude cannot possibly know what will be "here still", for it is precisely she who will not be. But is the "I" of "I should have" any more privileged than "Maude" is to see and to know? Section 37 suggests the amputation of a prosthesis: the loss of the loss that is identity's ground. Oppen's rewrite, then, occasions a loss of identity in the very process of recuperating and preserving an "I". And what remains to be avowed is that which is "Here still" is only that which is no longer here.

Consider "as if". These words govern the modality of Maude's approach. Occurring almost with precision at the poem's center, they might be considered the fulcrum or hinge of the piece. "As if": it is the point where affective mood¹² meets grammatical mode. Maude Blessingbourne: at home (*domus*, or house) in the world and yet not exactly. Like Oppen's experience reading and writing Heidegger, there is something *unheimlich* about his encounter with Maude. The "world" in which Oppen situates her is at once hers and not hers, just as one's dwelling in language and perhaps even one's boredom is never exactly one's own, never unambivalently possessed. Similarly, one's identity is a relation with oneself where *with* connotes the critical, the relational, difference. Perhaps it is something of a truism: one maintains an identity with oneself by virtue of not being not-entirely-at-home with oneself. An inflected language, a language of *distributive subjectivities*, would register this difference grammatically and syntactically through the use of case¹³. There is a subtle rift in Maude's world; it is divided. Maude herself is perhaps emblematic of this division. She is a cusp between worlds, a limit or edge between home and not-home. Maude, then, occasions certain disparities, dissonances. And while she may be not-entirely-at-home, even in her "world," she is nevertheless situated in relation to the world that exceeds these quotes, the world that exceeds this window or frame, the world that is opening "in the distance / more slowly". Her "world," enclosed, as she is, perhaps, in the 19th century—and in which the pronoun functions possessively in relation to property—cannot coincide with "the world, weather-swept, with which / one shares the century." Her *being-there* in her "world," in whatever world, is modal¹⁴; and the modality is informed by "as if". Oppen's intention to refer to and mean the world thus hinges on "as if". To trust in the success and authority of one's reference, however, would be to forget this hinge, to forget precisely that which enables one to mean. *As if*: the vulnerability of intention as it opens onto the possibility of the impossible.

In *Discrete Series* Maude approaches the window *as if* to see what was really going on; but it is the knowledge of boredom she seeks. The mode is subjective, that is, it expresses contingency, expectation, desire. "As if" creates a distance, an affective space of expectancy within the act of desiring to know. One can only reach toward what

12 The mood of boredom is domestic. It neither determines the scene from *inside*, nor is it what remains *outside* where it discloses "what was really going on": it is rather boredom that disturbs the boundary.

13 "If one is to move to experience Further one needs a syntax, a new syntax A new syntax is a new cadence of disclosure, a new cadence of logic, a new musical cadence A new 'structure of space'-----" (Oppen's spacing.) [SL: 97].

14 *Modal*. "In grammar : of, relating to, or expressing the mood of a verb" [AHD]

one wishes to know by assuming a place, a position implicated or made vulnerable by the reach itself. That position is not sturdy; it is unstable, uncertain; an edge¹⁵ or cusp¹⁶. "In the distance / more slowly", "she" occupies a syntactic space between worlds, or syntactic—like a conduit, or channel—where one's relation to the world is enabled by the constraints of that position etched in edges. But "she" also occupies other between: between the poetic voice and the world to which it will bear witness, between the poem's absent 'I' and the addressed 'you', between Oppen's high modern predecessors and his own position on the cusp of a new era. *Here* is so many places, and yet it is one. Here, "Maude" is provisionally occupied by Oppen so that he might know boredom and "see what was really going on"; so that he might encounter the world and write this knowledge, this vision, this experience. "As if" one could.

II.

A position is always situated in relation to other positions. In the subjunctive mood, *to position oneself* expresses a contingent or hypothetical action viewed reflexively and subjectively. The subjunctive is a mode of being dependent, subjoined, or situated *in relation to*. Following one chain of possible etymological associations, to subjoin might mean either to attach in a subordinate position or to add as part of a treatment, to strengthen or to subscribe to. The possibilities are paradoxical. An odd example cited in the O.E.D.: "Deliberation is expressed *Subjunctively*, which is a speech proper to signify suppositions" (Hobbes, *Leviathan*, I. 6). And Hobbes continues: "Of things impossible, which we think possible, we may *Deliberate*." That is, we

15 "A poem is a navigational chart of moving edges. The edge, according to Maurice Blanchot...is the writer's risk." [Norma Cole, "The Poetics of Vertigo"]. A set of edges defined by three discrete verbs—to know, to see, and (tacitly) to experience—structures Oppen's first poem. Each verb takes an abstract object grammatically related to the others through the poem's three positive "of's": 1) "of boredom", 2) "of what" (mediated by "as if", becomes "what was really going on"), and 3) "of the world". But the objects themselves are incommensurable and create tension; they cannot be reduced to each other nor properly equated despite the suggestion of equivalence. The triangulated tension does enclose a space, however, within which concrete things do appear *as if* to hold the place of and refer to the world that exceeds the limits of representation. This appearance of things offers the ground for a provisional reconciliation of the abstract objects and their respective verbs. What does Maude actually see? She sees "rain falling" and "the road". What appears concretely "in the distance / more slowly" appears determined by all three abstractions while some measure of indeterminacy is preserved. But it is only by way of *as if*, that is, by way of the mode of Maude's relating that these things appear and reconciliation, however provisional, is proffered.

16 Cusp: "the beginning or entrance of a 'house'" [initial definition, O.E.D.], that is, the limit or edge of a dwelling, a domestic position.

may act *as if*: Deliberation suggests the movement of resolution in relation to "the whole summe of Desires, Aversions, Hopes and Fears"; it expresses determination and intention, that is, *the assumption of a position*. An obsolete definition suggests deliverance or liberation. And this might be a *setting free* in the space between the ability and the inability to act.

* * *

Every position is constrained and enabled by a field of social norms, a matrix of political and economic investments, "a grid of intelligibility." This might be understood as a shared context within which recognition and misrecognition mutually inform knowledge, vision, and experience. Overdetermined AND indeterminate, positions are 'domestic': contained and conditioned by history while opening onto unforeseeable possibility. And like 'domestic' and 'truth,' the excess of *whatever* position's connotative potential must be provisionally bracketed and *subjoined* in order first to denote (mark a place). Only then might that potential take form as a making and doing (*poesis*). Position holds one in suspense at the very moment one deliberates; it suspends one in the grey zone of ambivalence between potentiality and actuality. At the same time, *to position oneself* might be understood as a 'domestic' strategy, a deliberate attempt to resist domestication or assimilation to "the world...with which one shares the century," a world tyrannized not least by the market. Were one entirely assimilated and contained by "the world," one would have no position from which to approach "as if to see what was really going on," for one would be indifferently embedded in it. One could not, then, write—(*as if* one could)—that "what."

Returning to *Discrete Series*: perhaps "as if" maintains a condition of ambivalence, a tension between two kinds of positioning. "The existence of what-is" cannot be squared with Maude's existence. It is not entirely hers, nor is it his, nor mine. Maybe this existence is only the effect of that boredom, an effect of the very mood so conducive to revealing and concealing it. Whether inspired or generated by such a mood, there is a distance here which brings one paradoxically near what one might call 'oneself.' The position called "Maude" is a constraint, but it enables Oppen to see in this distance. Articulated with—that is, *hooked up with*, connected to, contingent on—the poetic voice and the poem's "you," "Maude" is the site of a truthful relation with oneself and the world, a relation which need have nothing whatever to do with truth itself. "I take truthfulness to be a social virtue. I think very probably it is not. But I think it is poetic" [SL 82]. Position here locates one before a window, frames one's view or, more significantly, brings the frame into view. To position oneself

separates one from what is shared precisely so that one might share.

* * *

"Supposing truth is a woman—what then?" Leaving Heidegger aside, Oppen's letter to John Crawford, from summer 1966, uncannily echoes this notorious question of Nietzsche's that appears on the first page of *Beyond Good and Evil*. All the themes of Oppen's letter—"the 'I' in feminine poetry," "distance," "domestic," "truth"—resonate with Nietzsche's concern. Truth troubles the "I" in question. It isn't the categorical problem of "woman," however, that Oppen addresses: rather, he problematizes "the feminine 'I'." In the note immediately preceding this letter, Oppen refers to "my Maude." It is she who, in an originary moment, mediates Oppen's relation to the world. And she continues to do so, in a spectral way, but not without discontinuities. "Maude" returns after nearly forty years like a specter mediating his relation to the past. Oppen will re-write this moment in letters, notes and poems while misrecognizing the boredom that obliquely defines it. He will, in fact, misrecognize Maude herself who, from *Discrete Series* to the post-hiatus note, is relocated from a position of agency (Maude, a seeker of knowledge) to one of "patience"¹⁷ (Maude, the subject of a mood, "who in 'boredom' looks out the window and sees"). Not exactly his feminized 'I', "Maude" nevertheless situates Oppen in relation to both woman and truth while "she" remains irreducible to both. "She" is not a "real" presence, just as "I" is not. "She" nevertheless alters the conditions of his subjectivity, the conditions of his thought. Prosthesis and potential: Oppen is held in paradoxical suspense here on the edge of the real world.

* * *

But "the 'I' in feminine poetry"? "If it is to be solved, it will be solved by distance, by some sense of the distances and the realities around the 'I'." I don't want to re-inscribe this "I" as an enigma; nor do I want to reproduce this "I" as myth. Still, I recognize the dangers here. Nietzsche too poses the problem of distance, the *pathos of distance* he calls it, "the craving for an ever new widening of distances within the soul itself."¹⁸ The Greeks maintain a relation between *pathos* and *ethos* as one between the transient (or emotional) and the permanent (or ideal). As the dominant mode of self-production, however, *ethos* subordinates *pathos*. Particular effects of *pathos*, feelings of identification, for example, are dominated by an *ethical* subjection. Identity thus aligns itself as a kind of ideal with the permanence of a subject.

17 *Patience*: "(after agency) The quality or condition of being patient or passive. J. Sergeant 1697: 'Which...has the truest Notion of Agency in it, without any mixture of Patience; because the Body moved cannot re-act upon it.'" O.E.D.
18 Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, Vintage, 1974, p. 252.

The effect is one of fusion. But what if distances—rifts, drifts, and fractures—were to constitute the very *sie* of identity; and what if these distances opened within identity itself? The relationship might then be reversed and this dominant *ethos* could be understood as the normative effect of something potentially disruptive and perennially abnormal.

And what if "the distances and the realities" that condition *pathos* were understood to be 'domestic' and economic? What *exactly* is the status of *ethos* within the dominant economic mode of production (commodity production). Hardly autonomous, it is rather thoroughly embedded in that mode as both effect and condition. If every position and its articulation, its hooking up with other positions, is considered a site of potential transfiguration, it can only be so if we understand that a position is enabled and constrained by the material conditions of everyday life which are also "the subjective conditions of my life, the conditions of my thinking." Material conditions cannot go unchanged if this process of articulation amounts to nothing more than the epiphenomenal play of effects. Economic and domestic conditions. If *ethos* can't be distinguished from the conditions that frame it—conditions that domesticate our possibilities—it remains unavailable for thought. And so long as *ethos* remains unthought, it remains along with those material conditions "farther away than any external world...closer than any internal world."¹⁹ Paradoxically, it is both the nearest and farthest thing from oneself. In order to rescue this from a kind of profound indifference, one must approach it "in the distance / more slowly" "as if" to see what was really going on." As if there were something there to be seen. One must approach within the *pathos of distance*. Nietzsche ascribes to women this ability to act at a distance²⁰. That is, the ability to act *as if*. To act *as if*, while remaining skeptical of every truth that frames her, a skepticism that might potentially open spaces not only between herself and "man" or between herself and the world, but within "the soul" itself. The *pathos of distance*, then, would prepare new preconditions for identity, the ground for other kinds of agency. But are the limits of this ability quite so gendered? In other words, might *anyone's* relation to the world be "feminized" so that one's position would not be constrained by the *ethical* demands of truth? Isn't the radical potential of *whatever*

19 Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, University of Minnesota press, 1986, p. 118.
20 As Rosalyn Diprose points out in her book *The Bodies of Women: Ethics, Embodiment and Sexual Difference*, this hardly offers a way out of the conundrums of sexual difference and the problems of being 'othered'; nevertheless, "Nietzsche's understanding of the 'pathos of distance' not only exposes that normative discourses assume a male subject, but also that they rely on constructing woman in a certain way." (Routledge: 1994, p. 101)

position contingent upon this ability?

* * *

From *ethos* to *pathos*: what if a strict distinction no longer obtained? What if a new categorical imperative were to inform one's positioning? *One must position oneself as if one's position might intervene in the conditions that enable the mode of production to reproduce itself.* Mode might also be thought of grammatically and the grammatical mode of *pathos* must certainly be subjunctive, involving, as it does, "the whole summe of Desires...," contingency and expectation. Mediated distances. Economic and domestic conditions alike authorize one's possession of a true "I" able to self-identify over time. What sacrifices are made, and what exclusions, to ensure the coherent social being of such an "I"? Quite unlike an imperial *ethos* committed to constructing and assimilating the other, the *pathos of distance* as an other *ethos* would recognize impermanence and difference not as essences but as the stuff of always other possibilities. Identity then might become the subject of creative change.

* * *

"Supposing truth is a woman—what then?" Nietzsche writes that his question "does involve a risk, and perhaps there is none that is greater." The risk? As if in response to his own question concerning "the 'I' in feminine poetry," Oppen writes: "To reach outward far enough to produce..." A self-production always away from selves already produced and sanctioned, domesticated and framed. 'I' as a reaching out, intimately articulated with a kind of production. Perhaps the risk is here. A reaching that presupposes no interior, no true origin, no stable place *from which* to reach. The "reach" might be figured as the suspension of an agency moored in "subjectivity" and the adoption of a provisional sort of "patience." While the dominant *ethos* produces subjects, *pathos* enables patients. But not pathetically. I am not suggesting a postmodern postmortem where we all lay etherized upon the cultural table, nor am I interested a conciliatory negotiation with impotence and paralysis. The question I pose concerns how we might move toward a transfigured agency, one without a proper subject. The subject's demands for self-preservation—demands for the proper, for property and propriety—can only result in the reproduction of the mode of production in which normative contexts are preserved to ensure the subject's coherent recognition as a proper self. Under other conditions, 'I' might be understood as the effect of an exteriorization, and the consequent impingement of external forces, the realities which struggle to dominate 'I's position. 'I' is an effect of struggle and its place cannot be entirely fulfilled pronominally. And a body will always exceed it. The interior place where 'I's gender, for exam-

ple, is wedded to identity thus becomes a site outside that might be occupied *as if*. Here is the critical paradox: *as if* the occupation of that site offered the ground from which *to language* a world *AND as if* the occupation of that site had the potential to disturb the very distinctions that produced it. 'I' comes, however uncannily, from outside, from the elsewhere toward which it paradoxically reaches in order to avoid returning to origins—which of course it cannot do. When Oppen returns to "Maude" in section 37 of "Of Being Numerous," he returns to her otherwise, just as his return to *Discrete Series* after his reading of Heidegger involves a misrecognition. Here, 'I' is alone beneath the moon or before a window; it bridges distances while reaching away to risk an unknown if not impossible relation with a world "In which things explain each other, / Not themselves."²¹

* * *

But does "she"²² even exist? "He" very well may not, although the power of his fiction is quite real. "He" is the dominant shifter in the social grid. "He" is an *ethos* unto himself, perfectly naturalized and unproblematic at least for "the one" who occupies the position of the measure of all things. To feminize him would require that he somehow unbecome himself; indeed, it would require the undermining of his I's collusion with nature and the deep. An other "she" might rather experience the dissonance between one's assigned place in the matrix and one's awareness of the radical difference that is the root of every position, the difference in identity that might condition other relational possibilities, other ways of critically resisting: a transfigured apprehension of agency. This *pathos* of positioning oneself risks the reach outward as it turns toward "the distances and the realities around the 'I.'" And in doing so risks the very "I" that turns.

21 George Oppen, "A Narrative," in *Collected Poems*, New Directions, 1975, 134.

22 "Can anyone fully inhabit a gender without a degree of horror?" [Denise Riley, "Am I That Name?": *Feminism and the Category of "Women" in History*, University of Minnesota Press, 1988. p.6.] The horror is one of an eternal position. Certainly it's an image of hell. "To be hit by the intrusions of bodily being...is just not the same as being caught up unexpectedly in 'being a woman'" [Riley, p.96.] Gender is not an abstraction, nor is it a state or a substance. It is a lived experience, but one that lacks temporal continuity. Gender is an experience dependent on, though irreducible to, those "bodily intrusions" AND subjoined to categories of thought necessary for the reproduction of the experience. Within the *pathos* of distance, gender cannot be experienced as permanent. "Man", however, is not experienced this way for "he" is in full possession of temporal and spatial continuities, the lack of which might enable "the 'I' in feminine poetry" differently. But how differently? As part of the transfigurative move away from a politics of the subject—that is, a politics conditioned to reproduce "the individual" as the proper subject of social being, conditioned by the demands of coherent identity—toward a politics with an other way of understanding agency that takes no 'givens' for common ground.

* * *

"The 'I' in feminine poetry" might thus be enabled by one's distance from it. 'I' would then be expressive of this perennial risk of becoming exteriorized, *written*. 'I': the site to which universally expropriated experience might be actively re-appropriated. But not properly, not as one's own. Neither as property nor under the aegis of ownership. This is a site where experience is transcribed, written across and through the space between positions and thereby retrieved from the void of non-referentiality. Here, where histories are composed, selves are inscribed and meaning is made. And here, where meaning is made, histories are inscribed and selves composed. Every site of composition is thus simultaneously the site of decompositions that are neither equal nor opposite. But what about "truth"? What about "woman"? "Truth was the trouble" is really fine, no?" writes Oppen commenting on a poem by Jo Pacheco. "Supposing truth is a woman—what then?" writes Nietzsche, suggesting the foundational fatuousness that authorizes these two universal categories which might be more productively thought of as fictitious. In another letter, Oppen writes, "Even my vocabulary is affected by that conviction: that 'the Truth' is not a pronouncement, but a thing" (SL, 89). Nothing remains unaltered in this renegotiation of our status as subjects and objects in "the world, weather-swept, with which / one shares the century."

* * *

And what's at stake? Nothing less than the limit of objective reference, the horizon that situates us. Both truth and "the 'I' in feminine poetry" are domestic things in the world. Occupying the cusp, they are transfigurative. The apprehension of these things requires one "to reach outward far enough" *as if* to comprehend. In a world without guarantees, without a standard measure of value other than the dollar, and without subjective foundation, reaching outward occasions risk. What is at stake is the transfiguration of one's *domos* and dwelling, one's language and world. Nothing less than the transfiguration of roots into radicals will do. The object—perhaps the world itself—must not be abandoned in the space that opens between the over-determined and the indeterminate. "Obsessed, bewildered // By the shipwreck / of the singular // We have chosen the meaning / Of being numerous." But the choice for a plurality of objective referents is subjoined to the choice for meaning. It is not a choice by default, nor is it one of ease and convenience. Expressive of multiplicity and difference, such a choice must remain accountable to the world lest it suffer the decay of meaninglessness.

But what is at stake for women when both truth and "the 'I' in feminine poetry" become artifacts? Once the "I" has been evacuated of stable content, for whom does it become an available position? And what might it imply to struggle for the rights of that position rather than the rights of the identity, the individual subject, that occupies it?²³ *Whatever* position: atopic, unmappable, and radically other; unthinkable within normative structures of thought and language while paradoxically, or antinomically, existing within those very structures. Is it, in other words, conceivable to shift our attention in current economic and political struggles away from the individual 'I' who speaks, away from the identifiable and toward every other excluded position the exclusion of which paradoxically enables every 'I'; away from certain identity and toward *whatever* position that cannot be properly said to exist. *Whatever* position: the site of social banishments, of negated identifications, the site in relation to which singular 'I's establish their continuous reigns only through a profound disavowal of the exclusions, the impossible possibilities, upon which they are founded. *Here* is the limit of objective reference—the limit of truth and the world in relation to which "the 'I' in feminine poetry" might situate itself. Is it not one responsibility of poetry to act as if *here* can be reached?

* * *

At a recent reading, when asked about the place of Oppen in the history of Objectivism and its relation to contemporary poetic trends, Ron Silliman commented that Oppen took a more or less "conservative" turn after the more radical experimentation of his early years, quite unlike Zukofsky whose work anticipated the radical break with reference and the turn toward language still to come. I would like to suggest, however, that it is precisely Oppen's concern for 'truth,' and his recognition of its relation to "the 'I' of feminine poetry," precisely these 'domestic' things, these mere root THINGS, that testify to Oppen's radicalness, that make his work one place toward which to turn for a corrective to the dead-ends and excesses of non- and self-

23 This might be a struggle for *whatever* singularity without identity. As Giorgio Agamben writes: "In the final instance, the State can recognize any claim for identity...what the State cannot tolerate in any way, however, is that the singularities form a community without affirming an identity, that humans co-belong without any representable condition of belonging...For the State, therefore, what is important is never the singularity as such, but only its inclusion in some identity, *whatever* identity, (but the possibility of the *whatever* itself being taken up without an identity is a threat the State cannot come to terms with." [*The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt, University of Minnesota, 1993.] *Whatever* singularity. But is this site appropriable by anyone? What are the implications for "women" when her 'I' becomes a floating site, a position, a structure, a strategy, a place for any "man" like me to unbecome himself?

referentiality in the wake of Language Poetry. "watch / At the roots / Of the grass the creating / Now that tremendous / plunge."²⁴ A conservative turn? If the struggle to reach the object—an embodied struggle at once visceral, aesthetic and political—if this "mixture of Patience" at the scene of struggle, this refusal to flee "domestic" conundrums, if all this is interpreted as conservative, then yes. I wonder, though, what could be more "radical" than this conservation in a world where the exchangeability of objects has been so perfected, a world where the fungibility of subjects and identities is ensured, a world where the word "radical" has become truly void of meaning, a rootless world where the radical has no place. "Tho we meant to entangle ourselves in the roots of the world."²⁵ "To be radical," Marx writes, "is to grasp the root of things. But for man, the root is man himself."²⁶ Here, the descriptive force of "radical" results from a critique of religion, a critique concluding with the assertion that only "man is the supreme being for man." But I think even Marx's "radical" instigation betrays a more subtle dialectic that intimates a process of deracination that would subvert the achievement—"man"—with whom this "radical" is identified. In other words, the roots that must be grasped are those which themselves connect "man" to a proper terrain or political context—an entire mode of production—roots which enable the very act of grasping. To grasp such roots would be to demystify the essential nature of any subject, and to dislodge "man himself" from the center of 'his' own endeavor, his *own* writing. To be radical, then, implies a subjunctive poetics: to write from that other place where 'I' *might* be or might have been. An improper poetics, a poetics that recognizes how certain "ways of identification are in accordance with the nature of property,"²⁷ a poetics committed to finding other ways, to thinking "truth" as an object in the world without disbelief, to reaching out far enough for the 'I' whose exclusion enables my own. A poetics without a proper place and willing to risk that impropriety. A poetics of the "space between"²⁸ word and world where both have a chance of surviving.

24 Oppen, "The Occurrences," *Collected Poems*, p. 126.

25 Oppen, "Route," section 13, CP, 195. It is this section that concludes with the lines indebted to Heidegger: "Substance itself which is the subject of all our planning // And by this we are carried into the incalculable"

26 Karl Marx, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Tucker, Norton, 1978, p.60.

27 Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives*, University of California, 1969, p. 26.

28 "A kindly way to feel a separating is to have a space between. This shows a likeness." Gertrude Stein, *Tender Buttons*.

Rebecca Bollinger

Keyword Search Results

Rebecca Bollinger is a San Francisco-based artist who works in various media, exploring the ways in which technology replicates and reifies our image-saturated culture. Her installations have included children's images downloaded from the internet and translated onto cookies, and the digital "icing" of cakes with images of Pamela Anderson and Nicole Brown Simpson. Her confectionery articulation of "Betsy Crocker" (herself now a composite image of 75 "representative" housewives chosen from a national competition) onto cakes and pastries reconstitutes the now-digitized flesh of the "individual" as something to be reconsumed as product: you are what you eat. Bollinger's methodology, using internet search engines to develop a range of text and visual data around specific "keywords"—male, female, breast, leg, etc.—involves a technological manifestation of both chance operation and linguistic overdetermination. In so doing, she demonstrates how our increasingly visual culture has all but replaced the dictionary with an image-bank of "types" or examples, each in some way meant to stand in as representative of the "whole." However, individual images can never function as definitive—there cannot be just "one" Betsy Crocker—and as such, pattern replaces the isolated image as an indicator of cultural meaning. This resonates in Bollinger's installations, where a range of images—each signifying both difference and sameness—animates a conceptual framework whereby the collective "memory" of the data-bank becomes manifest as commodity goods (cakes, cookies, etc.). "information" that can truly be consumed. Would "feeding" function as a consecration of one's belief in the image-culture?

In her contribution to the gender issue of *Tripwire*, Bollinger presents the results of keyword searches for "men" and "women." Again, the results, when viewed as a pattern, offer the viewer the seemingly undifferentiated "data" that digitized "information" is often presumed to objectively display. Noticeably, images of "men" are often of groups (posed in information), somewhat against the typical American mythos of masculinist individuation. That "women" would conjure up images of singular women (often in objectifying poses or frames) might suggest that the technological unconscious remains a masculine realm, wherein the male gaze replicates its desire through the pseudo-scientific fields of "data." (Think of how women are often reduced to the numerical statistics of "36-28-34" and the like, where male statistics are only "positive" indicators of "success": income, batting average, dick size.) In the end, we might ask ourselves to what degree we wish to reify the technological archive as an alternative model of collective consciousness. Indeed, the machinations of power are already in place; what is it exactly that we hunger for when we choose to plug in?

—David Buuck

48 results from the word

women



48 results from the word

men



Bad Conscience:
At the Page Mothers Conference

Dear David and Yedda,

I wrote most of the following for the SUNY Buffalo "Poetics List" in March 1999, so it suffers from a certain amount of slapdashivity; for the pages of *Tripwire* I'll try to condense this, my report on the "Page Mothers" conference at UCSD on the weekend of March 5-7, 1999. I wrote from an oblique, Jamesian angle, since I certainly wasn't central to the events being a male observer, a novelist, hardly a poet at all and not much of a theorist. I left San Francisco with Dodie Bellamy very much in her wake, since she not I had been invited to speak, and the natural sunlight and freshness of La Jolla gave me that old jaded feeling like an especially reptilian Norman Maine. In George Cukor's *A Star Is Born* (1954) James Mason walks into the ocean after realizing he's become a hasbeen when people come up to him and say, didn't you use to be Norman Maine? That's why when Judy Garland wins the Oscar she pauses a minute at the podium and announces, "Hello everybody—this is Mrs. Norman Maine."

At the San Diego airport the feeling of dislocation set in once I spotted Taylor Brady wandering around and I said, "What are you doing here at the airport?" and it turned out he had come to pick us up. (Throughout the whole weekend this sensation repeated itself, the rupture that comes of seeing one's friends from San Francisco in a whole new light, *literally*, a light serene, pale and unclouded.) We were staying at the Radisson La Jolla, a hotel at the foot of the campus near the Medical Center so you could walk back and forth from conference to hotel—as if. And at 3:30 or so we boarded a shuttle with Myung Mi Kim and Standard Schaefer and wound up at the site, the huge strange library that rises from the ground like Minas Morgul in layers of solar panels and black mirrors, to attend the cocktail (well, wine and cheese type) party that opened the conference. A few hours later Rae Armantrout gave a welcoming speech that hit most of the notes of congratulation, celebration, etc. Though throughout the weekend there was this constant note of warning that, although women had "made it" in a certain way and their achievements over the past 30 years are undeniable, success is transitory,

might all be yanked at any moment by a new cultural upheaval. This theme came back in different ways many times, but none more clearly as when Armantrout told us the story of Hypatia, the Greek writer/librarian/publisher who founded a great library and then it was all destroyed and she herself torn to pieces by Christians.

The opening panel was called "A Little History." (All of the panels were conceived in very broad terms so that you couldn't guess what X or Y would actually be talking about.) Michael Davidson's paper involved some transgender shenanigan frame in which we were invited to think of him as a kind of woman; this made some audience members restless if not actually confused. Beyond this frame Davidson described the conception and writing and reception of Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf*. Kathleen Fraser spoke after him. The celebratory note of the conference was continued here, as in many other papers which were testimonial in nature, autobiographical accounts of how I-founded-this-that-and-the-other-press. Simone Fattal was not on hand to read Etel Adnan's paper as both women found themselves unexpectedly called to Paris or Beirut, but Harryette Mullen came through and discussed a pair of novels from the 70s that have not received much critical attention—buried treasures—books written by African-American women from an experimental and linguistically challenging stance, and Mullen focused most of her paper on one of them, Fran Ross' *Oreo* of which I had never heard. Expect to hear more about this later. Finally, Patricia Dienstfrey ended the panel with an account of the operations of Kelsey St. Press of Berkeley and announced that Kelsey St. was roughly doubling up its publication schedule and will now be printing four books a year instead of two. We heard so much about Fran Ross and Ntozake Shange that, walking after dark back towards the hotel, many were heard to wonder why they were not the guests of honor. So powerful is the advocacy of Davidson and Mullen—Mullen's even more, I think, than Davidson's—that we began to think of these writers in a different way and indeed, in the case of Ross, for the first time ever. (Mullen says she is at a preliminary stage of her quest for Ross, she doesn't even know if she's alive or ever wrote anything else beyond the distinguished *Oreo*.)

So, some people went to a restaurant Il Torino nearby but I had such a bad headache I went back to the hotel and passed out and woke up

around midnight and made Dodie watch *First Blood (Rambo, Part I)* with me, a great movie. Now I'm thinking, this must have been less of a headache than advance warning signs of a bad conscience.

The next day's panels began at 8:30. And as I was leaving the hotel room the toilet overflowed so Dodie and I had a terrible fight. "Oh sure! Leave me with this mess! I have to finish my paper, can't you stay and help these plumber people?" "Can't you take care of *something by yourself* for a change?" "Oh look who's talking—Mr. Home-Improvement-Can't-Even-Turn-on-the-VCR!" Meanwhile Spanish-only speakers in maid's uniforms were moving around our suite looking puzzled, mops and buckets clanging and clattering. San Diego is strange since everyone in front of the scenes, so to speak, is quite blonde but behind the scenes the people who do the work are uniformly Mexican. "I want to go to the conference!" I had my poquito Spanish. "I can't even take a shower," Dodie moaned, "there are all these *people* here who don't know what I want!" "When you were married," I shouted, "to that Puerto Rican fireman you should have *listened harder*." Oh, it was ugly. But it's funny how once out of the door you can slap this amiable nice guy look on your face and *no one will ever know*? At 7:30 Maureen Owen and I found ourselves alone on the shuttle to the library so I introduced myself and then we went to the side entrance door of the library and pulled on it as we had been instructed previously. What chaos since apparently the door had been left unlocked all night long and the alarms sounded and a series of Brechtian, David Bowie *Station-to-Station* strobe lights came on!! That woke me up but good. Luckily we were not arrested, though it was eerie being in the deserted library. I forgot to mention that all these panels were held at the "Geisel Room" named after the great benefactor to UCSD, Theodor Geisel (Dr. Seuss), and the library was celebrating him by mounting a show of many of his original drawings and paintings, so it was Dr. Seuss everywhere. Panelists spoke in front of a large reproduction of the famous Cat in the Hat (real, red, white stripes) who never looked more bizarre if you ask me. I made a really good photo of Lyn Hejinian, lean, sinuous, catlike, sharp, posed accidentally against the Cat in the Hat litho and it is like "Separated at Birth."

At 8:30 a respectable crowd arrived for the "Poetics" panel. Myung Mi Kim opened the event with a poetically written talk about fragmentation, misspoken or misheard syllables, the partiality of writing,

I think you, David, and you, Yedda, were there in San Francisco when Myung gave her talk so when I tell you that she began by querying why does there always have to be a podium you will nod in recognition. Carla Harryman was energetic with a tremendously thought out account of poetics which I can't describe well or paraphrase, we will have to wait for the printed version of these papers to decide what exactly was being enacted. Brenda Hillman and Martha Ronk gave accounts of their own poetics, illustrated with their own poems; both were engaging and actually wonderful speakers, but I could see the clock ticking away; already the panels were on overtime by the time Lyn Hejinian got up to speak. (I wonder if this anxiety about time has as its root something sexual about it, what do you guys think?) With her own eye on the clock Hejinian read rapidly from a series of notes (again, it will be great to read the whole paper) on different Greek concepts of writing pleasure. The third panel was about the canon, and this panel resembled a regular panel most of all due to the presence on it of actual literary critics and historians. Mary Margaret Sloan's paper on the "poem of dominion" was based on an essay she had written ten years before for *How(ever)*, which she passed around. She discussed its fragmentary nature, an enactment of the poetics she wrote of, but said that part of its elliptical quality was based on fear, her own fear of being understood, and recounted to the amusement and horror of all several incidents from her own career in which various unnamed male poets treated her horribly. I recognized a few of these incidents myself. These unnamed men who said terrible things were wraiths at the conference, their voices acerbic, crackling and mean like *The Grinch Who Stole Christmas*. One man told Sloan, who had embarked on her *Moving Borders* project, "You're not smart enough to compile an anthology. *You don't even know who Bjork is*. You're old; why don't you just *die now*?" So there was this distressing image of being told to die that was quite affecting. There was also the sense that Sloan had raised the stakes by attesting to actual abuse or at any rate, a great opposition like Sauron waiting just outside the conference room doors.

Celebration and optimism were made concrete in that many participants had brought or announced their new books and magazines just in time for this Conference, so it was like Christmas in a way for we got to see many new books, etc., gathered on these long tables in one corner of the Geisel Room and we all flocked around them to see what was new. Among these Pam's book was a huge hit, the Atelos

book *Pamela: A Novel*. In this spirit Dodie and I made a special issue of our zine, *Mirage #4/Period[ical]*—we had asked many Bay Area women poets/publishers/editors to give us one page of their current or representative creative work—even the ones who were not attending the conference—and we gave copies of the assembled issue out free at the conference. To about eighty people. "Are you doing this to make people feel better?" Margy asked me when I told her about the idea. "Yes and no," I said, and we went ahead and did our issue (#84) featuring Dodie, Mary Burger, Cydney Chadwick, Norma Cole, Beverly Dahlen, Patricia Dienstfrey, Kathleen Fraser, Susan Gevirtz, Lauren Gudath, Lyn Hejinian, Brenda Hillman, Myung Mi Kim, Pamela Lu, Laura Moriarty, Rena Rosenwasser, Jocelyn Saldenberg, Leslie Scalapino, Kathy Lou Schultz, Mary Margaret Sloan, and Elizabeth Treadwell. And you, Yedda, too. A long list, but to our shame not exhaustive—"but why didn't you have Maxine Chernoff?" someone said. The reason was that we had just featured Chernoff the month before (but it wouldn't have *killed you* to print her work two months in a row?) "And what about Jean Day, she's been the managing editor of *Representations* for years and years and she *never gets any credit* for that!" Well, we forgot. And we didn't even know that Colleen Lookingbill and Elizabeth Robinson had already embarked on their "Ether Dome" project . . . but why didn't we know? Out of the loop? I had a bad conscience about these and other omissions. I felt like Meryl Streep in *Sophie's Choice*—okay not that bad, but bad indeed.

I broke off right in the middle of the "canon" panel just as Maureen Owen was about to launch into her personal history of *Telephone* magazine and Telephone books. Christanne Miller and Lynn Keller next appeared together and divided their presentation into two halves; the first recounted rapidly the history of women editing projects in the era of, um, say 1915-1930, Margaret Anderson, Jane Heap, Lola Ridge, Kay Boyle, Sylvia Beach, Harriet Monroe etc. etc., a dozen more, and showed how these women ushered in modernism in a large scale and how this tendency gradually faded away during the Depression and the women themselves effaced as modernism promoted itself as a male, even macho, movement, with women's contributions forgotten or nearly so. Lynn Keller then performed the contrast of the 1990s and all were struck by the unusual similarities and differences between the two eras. It made your hair stand on end. About this time Dodie finally showed up and through a glance across the

room I knew I had been for some reason forgiven for not having stayed to help her deal with the sewage back up. The next panelist was Libbie Rifkin of the University of Alabama who gave, I thought, a great paper contrasting, very subtly and seriously, the editing styles of Anne Waldman and Bernadette Mayer during the heyday of the 2nd NY School and how, editing *The World*, Anne Waldman created this miniature universe of poets, all of whom could "fit in her bedroom," treating them all as creatures of rare fame and value, whereas Mayer, in *O to 9* and *Unnatural Acts*, continually played with collaborative values of non-agency, anonymity, textuality, etc. I'm not doing this paper much justice but it was exhilarating to listen to. The morning was over and we went to lunch in the nearby Student Union and I took more photos. Everywhere we went people were friendly and acted as though I had every right to be there, and Dodie and I were driven around every place we wanted to go—and then I began questioning my privilege in that nagging way that you, David, are so familiar with: I started recusing myself: I'm not even a woman, why do I get to stay in this hotel room for free? Down the hall Pamela Lu, Lauren Gudath, Giovanni Singleton and Renee Gladman were all squeezed into a room the same size as mine. Maybe they were having fun, but isn't "fun" something that happens in despite? I felt guilty for taking up space—you've felt that way, I know you have, it's only human. My self-consciousness was imploding, I felt like a creaky old envelope in the sunny Food Court, blown from umbrella to umbrella, bench to bench, skittering along the concrete like a piece of Cracker Jack. My God, Travis, Mara, Jill and so forth all drove down from the Bay Area and it must be a thousand miles! All over San Diego people were bedding down on poets' floors and sleeping bags and old futons and probably outside in the desert and yes, because they wanted Dodie I got to come along too but if I had had to pay I would have said, "Uh, no, thanks, that's okay."

The fourth panel was called "Mrs. Poetry" and was devoted to the work of Bernadette Mayer. It must have made some of the panelists nervous to have Mayer sitting right there in front of them grinning like a Cheshire cat. What if she took into her head to interrupt any of them while they spoke? I wouldn't have done this panel for 100 dollars, and what an insane tide, enough to make a cat groan. Brad Westbrook introduced this panel pointing out that the Mandeville Collection, behind the Geisel Room where we sat, owns the Bernadette Mayer papers (1958-1995), and then Stephen Cope, who had

catalogued the papers for the Archive, rose and gave his talk, announced as a kind of love song and indeed it was and then Lee Ann Brown's paper was similar, an alphabetical list of words and topics and titles on which she expanded from long memory, memoir, anecdote, and quotation. Most of us in the audience loved it. Leslie Scalapino followed with a disquisition on/against "lineage" which made some abrupt, mind boggling jumps among the work of Mayer, Rodrigo Toscano and Bob Grenier, warning us against the cult of personality in poetry and how the worship of the "Revered figure" could cloud our minds against the thought of the poem. This was hard to follow in parts but salutary, I suppose. Juliana Spahr had the difficult task of presenting a more conventional paper on Mayer's *Sonnets* but I thought it the most satisfying of the four talks and has made me re-read the *Sonnets* in a new way after hearing her and nodding and doors opening in my mind like Ingrid Bergman's dream in *Spellbound*. Well done everybody. It turned out that the students in one of Mayer's long ago Poets in the Schools classes had nicknamed her "Mrs. Poetry" and she had written this nickname on one of her notebooks the Mandeville now owned. "Hey! Here comes Mrs. Poetry!" This explanation I believed on the one hand and disbelieved with the other. Where was this? I wanted to know. Was this a *New York* classroom or some kind of RKO studio film of the 30s with the Bowery Boys???

The final panel was on the Future. Laura Moriarty's talk was on the possibilities of the Internet, Web, etc., but focussed on the tendencies of "avant-garde" poetry to merge together so that people are writing more and more like each other (provocative) and then rather chillingly said that the future is out of our hands since the machines themselves, smart as they are, were planning, or perhaps not planning, even now to blend their technological knowledge with our human knowledge. I took this to mean that although we don't know it Bill Gates et al have already determined our future but afterwards she said, no, it was the machines themselves (shades of Dean Koontz' *Demon Seed* with my favorite, Julie Christie). Pamela Lu spoke on behalf of the Berkeley-based *Idiom* collective. Faced with the incredible cheapness of web publishing the *Idiom* boys and girls were paradoxically tempted to spend incredible amounts of \$\$\$\$ on precious object/ books, as one tendency prompted its exact opposite, an irreconcilable split in desires and needs. Renee Gladman's paper was an incendiary one in which she challenged the makers of anthologies to

increase the percentage of writers of color in them. No longer would she put up with an anthology of 25 writers of whom 3 or 4 were people of color. (Was this the *Talisman New (American) Poets* anthology? *The Moving Borders* anthology? The conference itself? Well we all got the picture.) Dodie Bellamy spoke—oh, just brilliantly, of course!—but she was overshadowed by the final speaker, Marjorie Perloff, who gave the talk that had many people livid afterward. (Though I missed part of it being so moved by Dodie's speech I had to have a cigarette outside the house of Seuss.) The hot points here were three, that much current work hailed as "innovative" is not—and she had this look in her eye as though she were hinting heavily that this was true of many of the writers in the room. The second point was that the so-called theory or criticism written by poets is horrible. She gave some examples, here naming names, such as Ann Lauterbach. The third hot point was her blanket pronouncement that $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ magazine had been a male-dominated oligarchy and that women had stayed out of the debate. Had stayed out of the "originary moment." As soon as it was over Carla Harryman jumped up, red in the face, flustered, to say that although she had much respect for Perloff's accomplishments she (Perloff) had now damaged herself irretrievably in her (Harryman's) eyes by erasing the theoretical work done by women in the early years of the "Language" movement. One thing led to another and soon all were shouting, stabbing the air with hands, asking questions, firing off charges of "revisionism" on all sides, totally animated free for all. That the panels proper should end on this heated note (Fate decreed it so, like the end of *Nightwood*) was exactly fitting, but this resolution had to it also an undertone of despair, for elements of doubt, overdetermination, fear had crept into the Geisel Room almost in a Trojan Horse way. Please understand that my misconstrual of these debates is not a purposive one, I didn't feel, even as it was happening, that I knew what was being enacted before my eyes. Others will have different takes on these events and all of them will be as accurate as mine. But I tried as best I could to grok it. Then it was time for dinner and we trooped off to the Faculty Club which was about a quarter of a mile away, probably less by daylight. And after dinner there was a grand old-fashioned kind of reading by Maureen Owen and Bernadette Mayer.

Mark Weiss, who was at the Page Mothers conference, wrote to the Poetics List that he didn't at the end the tone I found so dominant—

the anxiety that women writers might lose the ground they've recently gained. Funny, since I felt it throughout, from Hejinian's exhortations that every day one must wrest victory from defeat and fight all over again, to the constant use of the word "erasure," which one heard again and again (e.g. Harryman accusing Perloff of having erased the work of every woman in the room) and then in Dodie's speech to the conference, she evoked the spectre of Marc Lépine, the Canadian engineer who in early December 1989 walked into the University of Montreal and killed 14 women, and wounded a dozen others, simply because feminism had ruined his life. (Dodie spoke in the context of backlash in general, particularly a weird phone message she got at her office accusing her of feminism for having invited nine women to read at Small Press Traffic during the months of March and April 1999). But I do appreciate that all of us who were at the conference came away with different takes on it and I hope that my example will show that hey, write something about it, it doesn't have to be complete, nor even interesting per se.

So, there we were in this luxurious faculty club listening to Maureen Owen read, I had never heard her before, nor even realized that many of her poems have alternate titles, nor the funky surrealism of her poetry, sometimes charming, sometimes a little Brautigan-esque. The showpiece was a longer and more intense poem about another true crime, a Muslim NY woman who, not wanting her children to grow up in a racist world, pushed them out of the window of their 12th story apartment building, this chilling poem very much in the Sapphire vein that looked deep into a disturbed mind and located the listener there, identification and analysis hand in hand. When Bernadette Mayer began reading the crowd really sat up and cheered. She too read of a crime, the poem she wrote for Scott Gibson's *Blood and Tears* anthology of poems for Matthew Shepard, the young gay student who was beaten to death in Laramie in October 1998, his body left tied to an old fence so that passersby thought he was a scarecrow. Perhaps for many of us this was our first exposure to Mayer, so she embodied something of the "Revered figure" that Leslie Scalapino had warned us about earlier, the living legend. Her "livingness" also, miraculous as it seems after her near-fatal stroke a few years back, and her remarkable recovery, has to it a Gothic edge, like the Ancient Mariner (though she's not exactly old of course), perhaps we are simultaneously drawn to and repelled by someone who has "died" already and come back, or is this just me, and in any case is it wrong to say? After the reading many went on to a lesbian dance bar, "Flame," in San Diego proper, but I was kind of beat and made

Dodie take me back to the hotel bar where we sat listening to a piano man sing the old time melodies of the 50s and 60s and talked with Fanny Howe, Owen, and Mayer, over a whole slew of Cosmopolitans far into the wee hours of the morning, talking about everything that had happened at the conference, and many many other topics. Fanny announced she had a crush on Piero Heliczer after reading his poems in the new issue of *Shiny* magazine, and Owen and Mayer reminisced about the real-life Heliczer and how she, Howe, was lucky not to have run into him in real life in late 60s NY because he was a menace and completely mad. Dodie had me give the pianist money to play her theme song, "My Funny Valentine" (her birthday is Valentine's Day), and Bernadette got me to ask him to play (but I forgot to ask for what reason) "Under the Boardwalk," and he did.

The next morning we spent packing and then squeezed into the little convertible of Standard Schaefer with Lauren Gudath and Pam Lu, and all our luggage and then on to breakfast on the same block as the Faultline Theater, where Stephen Cope and Joe Ross were setting up for this massive poetry reading featuring many of the participants in the conference. Well, we've all been to this kind of thing before, but this was an especially interesting reading, much more lively and fun than it had any right to be, for the program was a long one and the space isn't all that big and plenty of people came to hear and see and unwind, and people could only read for 5 to 7 minutes otherwise they would be put in jail (a prop for the current Faultline production, there was an actual jail cell on stage, with Lee Ann Brown sitting in it.) For one reason or another, Cope had figured out the order of the program should be in reverse alphabetical order, a delightful decision that always had one guessing who would read next. It must have been great for those, like Scalapino and Mary Margaret Sloan, who usually bring up the rear at these mass events, and I think we should try it in San Francisco. Thus the reading began with Bobbie West, a local San Diego writer whom I had never met and whose book *Scattered Damage* from Meow Books is terrific. The next reader was Diane Ward, whom we had missed seeing at the conference but who proved available to come to this Sunday reading. It was great news to hear that Littoral Books is going to bring out a book by Ward and I told her, I would have walked to San Diego to hear you read for five minutes, you are the best. Or perhaps the best was Juliana Spahr, who read her wonderful poem "We," really I think (I'm thinking now) her masterpiece, this expansive, inclusive, hyper-realistic yet surreal poem about constituency, foreignness, and enduring love. This reading had a valedictory quality to it, as many readers had to up and leave as

soon as they had finished reading, for their shuttles were there to take them to the airport, so I didn't get a chance to say goodbye to many, you're there one moment and then you're gone, just like life. Anyhow I see I'm running out of time and I didn't even write down a list of all the readers, all of whom did very very well, so I will try to condense myself. Dodie and I were extremely proud of the good showings put on by the young San Francisco writers, including Giovanni Singleton, Kathy Lou Schultz, Renee Gladman, Pamela Lu and Taylor Brady; Bill Luoma brought down the house as usual; Lyn Hejinian read from a new long poem (called) *Happily*; a duo of Jen Hofer and Summi Kaipa brought off a performance piece based on Hejinian and Harryman's collaboration *The Wide Road* (which I wouldn't have thought could be done, but they did it); a young New York poet called Alastair (sp?) Julian (sp?) of whom I had not heard was very touching, or rather chic not touching; and then it all seemed to wind up to a close with Dodie's reading from *The Letters of Mina Harker* and Rae Armantrout wound up last, powerful, triumphant, grinning and standing there, as wave after wave of applause washed over her in thanks for her part in organizing the conference.

With Joel Kuszai, Joe Ross, John Granger, Stephen Cope, Rick Burkhardt, Bill Mohr, Hung Q. Tu, et al, all living in San Diego and of course the more established figures Michael Davidson, Quincy Troupe, Jerome Rothenberg, David Antin, one did get the feeling there's a lot of writing going on in San Diego but that it's now largely a man's world, and that this female incursion into its dominion had the unreal status of a dream. Like many others, I'm very grateful to Howe and Armantrout for putting on the event, and to Kuszai, Granger, Ross and Cope for being so hospitable to us at every turn. Yes, there was X amount of friction, yes the debates about inclusivity, elitism, racism and revisionism hatched at the "Page Mothers" conference will color our world for a long time to come, and yes I had some bleak moments, some dark moments, in which I realized that my charm—such as it is—and happy go luckiness weren't enough, that goodwill isn't enough, that I'll have to *change my life* in some horrid scary Rilkean way. But I had a terrific time and I hope they do it again. I forget now why the two of you didn't come. Was it that you were sick? I kept thinking they should have had a panel on illness (or on the body somehow). "Not Feeling Well." Or were you busy with something else? Whatever; in any case I kept thinking of you both the whole time.

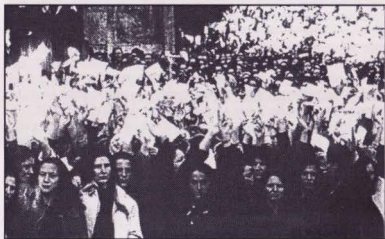
Love from—Kevin K. 1999

Bulletin from Kosovo: Flora Brovina

The Writers in Prison Committee of International PEN is disturbed by reports that Dr. Flora Brovina, a well-known writer, pediatrician and women's rights activist, was abducted from her home in the Sucnani Breg district of Pristina on April 22, 1999. More recent reports confirm that she is currently being jailed in Pozorevac, Serbia, on multiple charges, including terrorism.

According to her husband, Ajri Begu, Flora Brovina is now partly paralyzed down one side, a result of high blood pressure made worse by her imprisonment. There have also been reports of torture and beatings. Her lawyer continues to be denied access to her in the Pozorevac prison where she was transferred from Kosovo around June 10th. International PEN is increasingly alarmed at the continued detention of Flora Brovina, and calls for her immediate release.

Dr. Brovina is the President of Lidhja e Gruas Shqiptare (The Albanian Women's League) in which role she led demonstrations marking Women's Day (March 8, 1998) against Serb forces' actions against ethnic Albanians in Drenica. On that day, some 20,000 Albanian women are said to have gathered in Pristina, all holding up blank sheets of paper. Dr. Brovina is quoted as saying "We had no official way to announce the protests, so we used word of mouth. It spread like fire—within just a few hours we could have almost every woman in the city out on the streets ... We waved the white papers to show the world that all options were still open, that nothing had been written down yet and it was still possible to gain independence."



She continued to lead protests through 1998 and in October she was beaten by soldiers when she refused to leave the site of a student demonstration. "They beat me on the back with a baton and I still didn't leave. I wanted the police to stay occupied with us so they couldn't chase the students." At the time of her abduction, she was working in Pristina in a Center she had opened for the rehabilitation for displaced women and children, and was treating pregnant women in bomb shelters and children hiding out in the mountains. She was one of the few prominent ethnic Albanians to remain in Pristina.

As well as her activities as a women's activist, Dr. Brovina is a well-known and respected poet, having four books of her poems published, some of which have been translated.

International PEN is deeply concerned for the well being of Dr. Flora Brovina. It is calling on the Serb authorities to give assurances that she is being treated humanely, and to immediately release her.

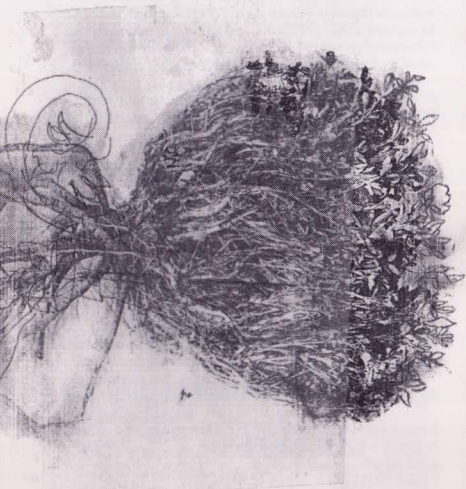
Send Appeals to:

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For further information please contact Sara Whyatt at:

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Editors' note: Information comes courtesy of PEN International, with additional material from The Dallas Morning News and the Jan. 1999 issue of Marie-Claire. Thanks to Celia Doners of PEN International & Diana Ayton-Shenkar of PEN USA.



Above: Detail from *Alfalfa*, 22" x 22", oil, graphite, ink, photocopy transfer, and vellum on panel, 1999
 Right: Detail from *Embellish*, 22" x 22", ink, photocopy transfer on paper, 1999

San Francisco artist Amanda Hughen examines the cultural tendency to categorize, appropriate, and embellish imagery of the natural world. Manipulating her own drawings through photocopies and chemical transfer processes, Hughen both mimics and elaborates upon found illustrations and ornamentations of natural subjects. Layers of reference and form are juxtaposed in order to explore seemingly incongruous visual languages: rational structures (found typographic, architectural, and diagrammatic forms), organic shapes (appropriated illustrations and photographs), and her own drawings intermingle in her work. Through this layering of signs and representational systems, Hughen examines the ways in which rational constructs are inscribed upon the visual world.



Below: Detail from Embellish, 22" x 22", ink, photocopy transfer on paper, 1999
Right: Detail from Frill, 22" x 21", ink, photocopy transfer on paper, 1999





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Above: Detail from Inscription, 24" x 18", oil, graphite, ink on panel, 1999

Left: Detail from Cyclo, 18" x 15", oil, graphite, ink, animal stickers on panel, 1999

Carla Harryman and Lyn Hejinian

from *The Wide Road*

A trap. Trains under horses' feet. Dust slides to front. The sky palpitates to our projections. "I will react," we said and made a man spinning around an eye. The eye is the only feature of our "landscape preserved from biographical writings"—a terrain that miraculously came (Kathy Acker would say "orgasmed") from the pen of Journoud sometime previous to our trip to Milwaukee. A flat building drops to the ground. We find our figure Journoud preparing the road. An eclectic gunrunner is trying to obfuscate our invention: Journoud? Acker? "Orgasmed?" The road? The gunrunner will fail to discern the invention, to weed it out from borrowed drek. Because

we are Cassandra Persephone Pandora A. Prop

We slide his coarse and superficial immorality under our gown. I bet you would like to know about this gown. It is terraced and rumples on one side, in blues grouping backward into darker hues as it drags. In the purely ecstatic torment of passivity, we refuse to open our arms. The hand thrashes within the bucket.

dryness and passion
don't mix

said the professor. It is best to take her out of the desert, put on a few pounds, and give out bullets of lust. We raised our hand, since we realized we'd been captured and put behind bars. "Will these words suit, professor?"

peach juice
slut
triple

"I can only tell you that dryness is not sexy and I've never heard of Clement Greenberg, though a man."

"This can't be the University of Milwaukee!" we exclaimed.

The professor admitted that it could not.

It was an Institute of Inquiry, though not of Measure. We lay about with some of the students who were discussing brute force. "This

topic always makes people obvious," said the woman who was supporting herself with her right arm on our lap in order to lean more emphatically toward the splendid but rigid man. "We need immediate substitution," she added.

"You can't improve the world with dictionaries," he said.

"You're right—but you can with airplane tickets," said the one who had been talking about fishing and was now stirring chowder. "My own recipe," he said; "a secret very strong broth."

The sea-scented steam condensed on the walls of the room and even the sheets and pillowcover felt slightly damp, as if we had been sweating.

"If no one yields to brute force, it can be very exciting," we pointed out. The interlocking we imagined increased our appetite. There were spoons to go around but not enough bowls, so we shared ours with the man who had caught the fish, sniffing the odor of his brow as he guzzled the soup from the bowl on our lap.

"It only results in stagnation, if no one yields," said the other man.

"Who? We?" Cupping our breasts with our hands we made the familiar jest.

we desire only you and you and you
for verification

Later, kneeling in the moonlight on the grass above the brick embankment that held the bend in the river, pouting and spitting we said to ourselves the word "cupping." He was delighted, and shouted "Xho!" Then we directed him to say something fundamental and provoking, using the letter L.

Lavinia, Lavinia, Lavinia

Paranoia results from that old religious preoccupation with the smallest detail and with similarities. And traveling as we are, we can't indulge in self-portraiture, even when we are stark naked and whopping. In fact, much of the time we exceed the perfect differences between you and us, since they are the details demarcating the biological depths and social heights, a part of history and a part of isolation. Meanwhile, we incite ourselves to introspect and expect—is this love? is this theory?—we are not experts of postponement.

our head is round
such is life
have we not hatched it?

"We can't get that poem out of our head," we said. We are slaves of environment.

He is standing behind and above us on the slope and puts his arms around us, passing his fingers over our breasts and reaching between our legs. He has us, in the palm of his hand.

From this elevation, or apparent elevation, we have a remarkable look over a high gray fence into the yard where outdated statuary is stored at the face of an eroded cosmonaut and at 17 arms and forefingers of Lenin.

oh rousing weight
still more tremendous
for your wondrous love!

This is true: we are writing on a cloudless sheet of blue paper.

we come closer to facing
the frightening malleability
of gender

Oh. Oh, so. Oh oh. Oh, no. No. This is also true: as we write three shirtless men carry enormous tree parts along the side of the house. One of them is black and wears a pale blue hat. Another is light with long straw-colored hair and an earring hanging lightly from a delicate ear. The third is responsible, pale, and hulking. We are certain of our third man's role because he stays in the back with a saw.

But this window scene of men is only pure distraction from the work at hand: the manufacture of serenity amidst uselessness, noise, chaos, and demoralization. And now, awesome reader, listen to what is not true—a dream—and then we will tell you how we got down from the mountain.

We were sitting in folding chairs, in about the center of a small-sized unembellished public space, possibly half-full of people, watching a movie. The movie had a familiar plot, and we were remarking on the disquieting yet soothing boredom experienced in being able to anticipate the future so readily, when L., C., P., and K. entered noisily. The room leaked light through the large moth-eaten curtains covering

the floor-to-ceiling windows, so we could see the newcomers quite well: they appeared to be slightly larger than life, as if in a pale fog just before sundown, when the blending of object and shadow and the simultaneous contrast of illuminations and darkness yield a somber massiveness within the landscape. Now, the movie served as a distant overexposed backdrop to the presences of L., C., P., and K. As the red-haired C. crossed from the back of the room to the curtained windows, L. followed. It seemed that C. was looking for an exit. But, upon sensing L., she turned and kissed him passionately. The passionate kisses were repeated as they stood next to the audience like drunken guests at a wedding party. We felt, also, a tinge of desire for the striking L. and his remarkable nonchalant poses which we attributed to his many years of theater experience. When C. released herself from the embrace, we rose, feeling an almost familial obligation to speak to her. We said, "C., we didn't know that you like sex." C. looked at us severely, and we knew that we were very small, almost insect-like, as she floated through the curtains to the patio.

The film came to an end. The curtains were drawn, the shabby bare room exposed. We felt that we must rectify ourselves, so when C. floated back into the room as if it were L'Opéra, we said, "C., we are very sorry that we spoke insultingly, but we did so admire you for being an Artemis." None of this seemed to mean anything to her, and we left the theater with strident remorse and shame.

Now, why we have postponed telling you how we got down from the mountain is that we had to work our way down, and this was very difficult. Anything we could put our mind to we would try, but few people will pay for the work of a mind such as ours, one that does not fear the incongruity of yielding statuary. So we offered ourselves up as gardeners. Yet, few on the mountain could afford the luxury. We sometimes went hungry for want of a proper fit. Still,

it is in the places where things
don't fit
together neatly

that we can best insert
our political will

This political will of which we speak belongs to the slapstick side of our nature which is so often embodied in the form of a man who himself embodies both wisdom and gluttony in balanced proportions.

And it is of him, Candy & Eggs is his name, that we eat when we get too hungry to continue down the steep, sparsely populated, and heavily forested slopes. We lick and suck his sugary fat and sip from his eggy eyes, while he sleeps the sleep of a spellbound material witness. At last, we are sick of him and return him to a sitting position, proper to the religious, by repeating our recently acquired Lavinian Chant....

Everybody, meaning the few people of the valley, were there to greet us when we completed the descent. And yet

we starve
as we work unnoticed
through the one
endless
source of work

We write, Dear Men, our messiness broadcasts our tendencies, our capacities, but it can't conceal our tendernesses. Go ahead and call us filthy if you will. We have eyes and a tongue, lips and a navel—we are a triangle in perpetual motion. We didn't wriggle down the cliff clutching at pungent warm shrubs, ride exciting slabs of hot slate down the slope of the high meadow, arrest our careening in the glossy mud of the cool creek (we lay for a spell in the stream of water, head resting on moss, one leg on the right bank and the other on the left (what enigmas await us in the zone between vegetable and mineral!)), climb the trellis at the back of the villa where we were gripped by the thorns of the bougainvillea whose blossoms stuck in our hair, sneak over the roof and around the chimney, and swing down past the windows clinging to the wrought-iron floral grillwork and the edges of the tile cartouche in order to get to this place without getting dirty. But here we are!

Be artful, if you will—please clean us.

almost carnal clods for scrutiny
almond science sinking
pillars, pillars, pillars and minerals

Jen Hofer and Summi Kaipa

A View of The Wide Road

"Dear Reader, have we invited you in?"

Have we told you a tale whose analysis will provoke some exciting sensations? We ask. Have we spread our subjectivity? have we engulfed it in the world?

The sun doesn't rise every morning simply to populate allegories. And when a goose damp from dew on the riverbank lectures you can be sure her genitals are clean.

Her point is clear, but her heart beats against her neck.

In our heart we find our desires as earnest as they were when we were young—no half measures... (99)

We begin: "We walk in a vaporous valley with our bovine heads bent toward the plain where Measured Desire is said to dwell." (1) We are looking for Measured Desire. We are looking to measure desire. We are looking to desire's limits, desire's limitlessness, measure after measure. "We can't help but live in time." (73) We do not exist outside measure but can confuse its reception, re-arranging measured moments in time via the notations we put to them. We do not want to be measured against, but want to move in measure. A measure musical, as a phrase that might repeat, recur, resound. As a moment or moments in time, but not crystal. Delightful, but not precious. Incantatory and improvisatory. "Our sex is an incitement, urging us to elapse." (23) Urging us to elapse as time elapses, and elapses again: relapses. Our sex incites time and incites more sex. Our sex balloons time to fit us. We balloon to fill our sex. More desire, measured and unmeasured, without measure.

Prose lines and broken (or verse) lines measure differently. Meanings

"Dear Reader, have we invited you in?"

...we want to tuck an essay into an essay. This is, by the way, non-narrative. There's an ancient belief that mother geese have long necks so they clean their own genitals. And it is well-known that from there or elsewhere mother geese have created many wonderful (though officially disdained) stories.

Non-narrators are historically afraid of what mother geese may say, but thinking about that would just make us hungry for potatoes grown in paradise covered with butter given us by a youth responding to our pen scratching on the skin of a mango into whose flesh we have pressed our clitoris. (91)

How bold is *The Wide Road*. The puritan in us (albeit a minuscule puritan) is shocked by what Lyn Hejinian and Carla Harryman have done—a double-minded, one-headed monster (or monsteure?) that seeks and welcomes sex from any and all men—"The boys have removed our coarse pants and are idly, almost lazily rubbing us with jasmine vine while they also hold their still-dressed crotches" (5)—while being open enough to allow experiences with other women—"Our hands slipped into her tight little back pockets . . . Our hands grabbed around each moon of ass." (64) The riot girl in us—happily dominating the puritanical—cheers on the monster, urging the protagonist, under our breath, "yes, yes." An urging, and encouraging, not unlike that in (some) sex. Yes, it is erotic. We are impressed and compelled by the eroticism of the text, the way it invites us in as voyeur/voyeur. The voyeur in a position both outside and inside—party to and participant in the party.

The sexualized natural world conjures Whitman: "Do I contradict

valence more freely in a lineated situation, which is not to suggest that meaning affixes (asphyxiates), immobile, to particular words or phrases in prose, but rather that different ways of moving are possible, different movements occur, when lines move differently. We take different positions. "Every poem is a posture we have tried." (4) Sameness is certainly not our goal, nor is difference privileged if it does not make more measure, more movement available: "We are no more symmetrical than a brimming tide or the sky which is scattered over the terrain, and as a result we enjoyed several unexpected experiences." (4) "We are shapely, but not an easily definable shape. We measure ourselves in language—through our utterances, through 'their' utterances—and must change language to fit our asymmetry. Words are also material: 'A word carefully placed can erect a nipple.'" (73) Language shifts to accommodate us, and we will it to do so. "There is a languid eros within a language eros." (52) There are many desires to measure, and many measures to desire.

"We can't help but live in time, and yet we aren't looking for ultimate or even penultimate pleasures, choosing instead to go on with our desires, following them precisely the way persons follow their two eyes." (73) Left eye-ball moving in discord with right, or two "I's"—that is, us—constantly in motion with one another: decision and indecision and refusal to decide (prelude), but rather, inclusive action. "We can't measure what has happened, because whatever has happened has endless repercussions, currents of effect and possibility like Phlegethon, in flames and engendering whatever is to come, the objects and events of our desire." (75) Or in measuring what has happened further happenings occur, generating further

myself? Very well. I contain multitudes." Hejinian's and Harryman's protagonist "we", like Whitman, claims kinship with the world around "us", finding desire and sexual imagery in the landscape. Our happiness is absolutely not flat, but rather "lumpish," sinuous and sinewy, multi-dimensional and asymmetrically bumpy, bulging as a terrain (a valley or plain) and a body itself. "And so atmosphere plays a greater role. The morning light, forming pearly drops of mist, sprayed against our lips. We inhaled the heady emanations of the eucalyptus trees whose ragged bark and pungent buttons were drawn into the breeze." (10) Like Whitman, "we" concede contradiction, welcoming it as a natural part of the self. "We" are not one thing. "To say 'we' is not to say 'I and my double' and thereby produce stasis; 'we' does not make a wife and any given stasis is not an increment of desire." (90) "We" are gigantic and extremely open-hearted. "We" are not indiscriminate (we do like it to be good!), but our promiscuity opens us to the possibility of taking many things—perhaps everything!—into ourselves: "The Wide Road divides the landscape, world on one side, world on another, world swallows it before and behind, and we (like Dante in middle age) take a turn and are not separated—are not separate." (105) Our context, our road, our self, is the world. What could be more huge?

As we see our similarity with the things of the world, we simultaneously notice our differences:

When tired, we cross our legs and laugh lustily. But sometimes

we say love without saying

there is no aim

but our own swarming voice (3)

measure, further desire. Our context, our road, our self, is the world. What could be more huge? The terrain proliferates, as does our experience on, in, and about it. This grappling for panorama is not at all precise, but rather multiple, inflected, mobile, visionary, hallucinatory, and equipped (and all the better for it).

it is in the places where things don't fit together neatly

that we can best insert our political will (20)

Or our fitting and inserting, our grappling, is precise but repeatedly momentary, not static but "mobile and desirous, unbounded among distinct things" as, perhaps, is the act of sex. (73-74) Measuring as the infinite, rather than finite, move: "yes we said and yes echoed; one yes makes many more. Measure occasions re-measure, its own reenactment. "Desire is regulated by foresight, which is to say by itself, desire, looking ahead towards its object, which it discovers through an act of will but without knowing what to request." (74) Desire changing shape (and duration: time) so quickly as to ask again and again for measure. Or just to ask again and again.

Our measuring tools succumb to desire, or function equally well (and, one sincerely hopes, first) as tools of pleasure rather than tools of measure. "This is the reason to measure desire even without realistic implements: to secure its prevalence." (73) We are not measured against/by our tools—forgetting bra or shoe. We measure our own tools: we sew the coat to fit us. It fits the way we wish it. Others measure in in their ability to swell with us and recede from us. Others

A swarming act of utterance, saying "we love you" (while simultaneously saying "we love without you") brings into existence the "we" as well as the "you"—reinforces the existence of ourself. "We" learn that our discrepancies, the anomalous details of our daily lives, constant yet fluid, are what constitute our specific selves: "We love detail because every detail supersedes the universal. The woman realizes this, too, of course, which is what makes her journal progressive. 'Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts but their arrest as well,' as Walter Benjamin says..." (92) "We" are universalist but not universal. Our multiple self/selves are a condition, at least partly, of our gendered asymmetrical otherness. "But daily life is a very ambivalent agent of desire—perhaps that's what makes it so compelling as an agent of writing. The oscillation between interior and exterior of what seem to be the contents of our experiences makes our daily life simultaneously expressive of Us and of Not-us." (48) We are shapely, but not an easily definable shape.

"We are no more symmetrical than a brimming tide or sky which is scattered over the terrain, and as a result we enjoyed several unexpected experiences." (4) "We" is a we as a tide or a sky, both things which are referentially singular but are actually plural, infinite, in their composition. A tide cannot be without water, without waters, while a sky, too, cannot be "one" object, e.g. one toy or one pillow, a measure of one. The "it" that "we" are, the monster, the "we", is not symmetrical, not two bodies fused into one, because symmetry (or twinhood)—in the sense of symmetry in Noah's ark where two animals mirror each other and become whole together—erases difference. Instead, "we" is an acknowledged composite of two minds

being also ourselves. "In fact, much of the time we exceed the perfect differences between you and us, since they are the details demarcating the biological depths and social heights, a part of history and a part of isolation. Meanwhile, we incite ourselves to introspect and expect—is this love? is this theory?—we are not experts of postponement." (18) Rather, we are repeat offenders, expecters and experts of the libidinal and the liminal, of the intellect and the subject, the thought and the embodied.

Deliciously, things do not stand still in their uses. "Our task is paradoxical and thus ornamentally sexual. On the one hand, there is no measuring implement: neither a tadpole, or a flagpole or a ruler; although, the tadpole is an image of impregnation: a flagpole something to sit on top of; victoriously and even salaciously, and a ruler always good for a swat." (73) We measure our desire in terms of objects—objects of measure are also objects of desire—where a tadpole and a flagpole become the markers of this affair, and mark it. Time up against life: as tadpole becomes fish. Flagpole as a marker of place: we have been here before. Ruler might suggest coercion, standards, schools: getting in line; our measure does not want a ruler—unless it's being put to good use, giving us a good swat.

Paradoxically, flagpole and tadpole measure nothing if we forget them and move on. (Measures, being temporary, need remeasure.) And this book moves. Neither measure nor implement consents to stand still (though both, no doubt, consent to other, more mobile, activities). "It is no fault in travelers to be led astray" (7)—quite the contrary: it is in the stray, in the fray, that things happen. "There is no analogous flattened happiness to that of curious and receptive travelers," (1) and our happiness is

(each of which in itself is of many minds), and our oddity suggests our individuality, as well as our communality, our community. "We remembered our thrill upon discovering, for example, that two halves could be reversed, to give more independence to each and greater freedom for the exercise of wit." By definition, "we" is inclusive: we have clouds, moon, sun, stars, and more:

This is true: we are writing on a cloudless sheet of blue paper.

we come closer to facing the frightening malleability of gender" (18)

It is, perhaps, the "skying" of a thing or event (or a thought) that makes it imaginative or imagined, that makes it generative:

Dear Lyn,

when the clouds pass over the plank becomes a narrative

we want to soak and explode... (38)

Plural sight makes for plurality of thing seen. Left eye-ball moving in discord with right, or, two "I's,"—that is, us—constantly in motion with one another. "A narrative" is not one thing, not defined, digested, processed, and left behind, but a cumulative (cumulus?) process that leads to more of itself, that leads beyond itself. "What is and the story of what is are very different." (39) Much of our writing draws from our daily life. "We appeal to our daily life, which is persistently abnormal but adorable (we are slaves to it), to provide us with the authority of our anti-authority—or should we say our anti-authoritative maternity?" (47)

absolutely not flat, but rather "lumpish," sinuous and sinewy, multi-dimensional and asymmetrically bumpy, bulging as a terrain (a valley or plain) and a body itself.

"Our mortal bones are made up of a hundred minds and twelve orifices, including four ears and four eyes. These we now applied to our adventures—all of which were preliminary to our goal, which was to measure desire. Every pock in the ground, every blade erected in it, every soft courting of an animal, every shadow affixed to the daylight, the color of the grit between shoe and foot, the slips of tongue as we prematurely mumbled the elements that would stimulate future conversations, a shift of balance from left shoulder to right, and the wide but bounded stretch of our audible route filled our senses..." (3-4)

The landscape is a "wide road which was filled with things to be coupled and compared." (1) While traditionally (ornamentally) binary, on the wide road coupling and comparing become multiplicitous activities, as desire: when one "half" of the binary is a we, the terms of measure themselves refuse to rest quietly in their definitions.

"Who? We?" Cupping our breasts with our hands we made the familiar jest.

we desire only you and you and you for verification" (17)

The prevalence of desire is secured through repetition. Repetition which does not repeat the same way twice. No measure measures definitively. We use the picaresque, the poem, the fantasy, the actuality, the letter, the essay, the open-ended, the never-ending, the ending and beginning again, facts, logics, the philosophical, the pornosexual, the erotic, and anything else we can get our hands on, to measure and increase

The extreme plurality that makes up our self is a non-universalizing combination ("coupling") of different elements that are recognizably other to one another (to oneself). Lyn, or rather "Lyn" ("your pal") writes in one of her letters, "Meanwhile, there is something about the prolongation of otherness that occurs during sex (or maybe it occurs between sex acts)—I think this may be a central theme of our collaboration." (33) To incorporate the radically multiple—well beyond the multiplicity of subjectivities within the one subject that is so often theorized these postmodern days—into the plural self, into "we", is in itself a prolongation of otherness, an inhering of otherness which is perhaps true of any self but is sharply magnified on *The Wide Road*. Our otherness is part of what makes up our physical, desiring selves. "I myself feel that the physical body is astoundingly alien—as if I had the amazing possibility of being intimate with my own otherness, which is an animal." (36) We establish a fascination with the distance between "self" and "body" early in the book; in a dream, where things are "always realistic," we examine the detectable otherness of even our own body:

This was our dream: We are standing, we see ourselves do this, ankle-deep on a vast beach of iridescent pearl sand over which an exquisite sheet of shining water lies motionless, like a vast and penetrable mirror tilted very slightly toward the sea. We look down into the water and see reflected there what's between our legs. Reluctant to shatter the image and, since we are always realistic even in our dreams, reluctant to distort the perfect view of what is otherwise so difficult to see, we lean forward. And slowly we sink closer, down into the cold water and the warm sand below, either to suck up or to be drawn down into the pink and dark object of our study, until the water hangs around our thighs. (6)

measure, to incite measure and secure desire's prevalence. We are as wide as the hips that bore us. We include the sides and edges, that which spills onto our path from outside, that which cleaves our path from inside. We allow the verse to insert itself between the prose, and vice versa, vice versa. There is room enough in this epic. Measures and pleasures recur. Repeat. Pleasure in repeated activities, repeatable pleasures. Measured or immeasurable pleasures. "Because of the repetitions, there is measure, but there are no limits" (86) Measure does not limit, it delimits. Frames only to frame again. There is a sense of how much and when, of what and how, but the moment changes (we are "in time"—moving beings and being that is moving) as does the how and the much. The content and the position—as in the case of our measuring tools.

We might call our (sexual, social) position (one of our many) "wife."

Phantasms according to Lacan are structured by repetition. If the structure of repetition in the wife's life delineates measure without limits, her lived experience is not related to the fantasy but the pragmatics of daily life. However, the wife, herself, may be our own phantasmatic projection, since she inscribes a limit to our travels: we must accept her distance and desire her simultaneously. Thus like incomplete males, we find ourselves repetitively desiring what we can't have, and this itself frustrates innovations in measure. (86)

Frustration excites change (in the desiring "we" as well as in the course of time). A fluttering feeling to make us want to move. "Frustrates" functions as a sense of irritation (an itch or discomfort, the senses needing to be addressed) and a verb of ignition. Innovations in measure are occasioned (frustrated) by (frustrated) desire. It is the wife, our own projec-

Our otherness is not only ourself looking into our own (different) body differently, but our self is literally (and literarily) different—we allow the verse to insert itself between the prose, and vice versa, vice versa—our self made up of multiple selves with various (and variously useful) anatomical parts: "Our mortal bones are made up of a hundred minds and twelve orifices, including four ears and four eyes. These we now applied to our adventures—all of which were preliminary to our goal, which was to measure desire." (3) In the process of measurement, the process of understanding how we are built (and we are "built"!), we come to reconfigure the figure of our very selves. We refuse to succumb to a simple measure based on physical gender. "We" watch a man watching a wife in her daily tasks, the voracious and inchoate river of desire rolling between them: "Although female, truly, we are neither man nor woman in this scene. The desirous observer (think voyeur here), as if a river, flows by unnoticed. And yet, this sensation and notion of non-cultured sexuality is an illusion that grants us a fickle freedom, which is not superior to anything." (75) The measure of desire is gigantic—cultural (though "non-cultured"—i.e., not limited to cultural constructs) as well as individual, and in this way our exploration of self has more to do with a communal political-literary project than an interest in individual subjectivity.

The Wide Road is literature. I know this doesn't answer your question. As a woman I can't stand on the side of either culture or nature. But I can construct an eros and challenge the face culture has put on it. Yet the face is historical, lyrical, psychological, Victorian, and current, chameleonic. How would I depict it? One body with two minds? (40)

tion structured by repetition (a desired and desirous projection whose prevalence is secured immeasurably) who measures our travels. Measure works as a kind of half-life—shifting shape but never depleted—between the world and the eye, the desired and the desirer: in this sense measure is sight, is desire, is the act between us and what we act on, or out. Plural sight makes for plurality of thing seen. "Desire measures itself in the distance, between itself and its object, which advances and is always advancing within time" (74) Advancing towards us (and us advancing through it), the distance closing up, inviting us in.

"The pleasures of a wife—the sexual mysteries of a sexual history with a person in the role of husband—were something we wanted to discuss with this wife, whose open shirt and rosy brown breasts suggested she knew something of them." (85) Do "we" want a wife? Does the text want a wife? Is the "biblical" relationship between husband and wife analogous to that between reader and text, language and the world? We want to "know" each other, ourselves, to know "something of them." The text measures the reader, the reader measures the text—as language measures the world and is measured by it. We are measured in time, in language, and pinned to its paradigm. "Rosy brown breasts" mark experience, another kind of time. We want to be put against the wife (to push up against her) and, in turn, up against the reader. "Organ against organ, organization against organization," (42) and more, "if it (utopian consciousness) is that 'press of disorganization against organization' it is an enactment of knowledge brought to bear on the present." (45) An enactment of sex (a sexy act) pressing against time, our measured desire in response to history. But we do not want to be measured

The Wide Road, in its construction of an eros, "depicts it" again and again, in constant articulation for measured desire, against the "little non-narrator(s), no, name-caller(s)" hiding behind "the grass blade, a monument to structure." (93-94) Our monstrous growth is only threatening to small folks who name names rather than tell the sexy story, those "incomplete men" for whom power over continues to be a compelling force. "P.S.," writes "Carla," "Bataille says, 'This sickness (deviation) is obscurely bound to an intense seduction.' This is probably why some men can't stand to read *The Wide Road*. We have made a deviant woman/women monster(s), with one head and two minds." (35) Our deviant body, like our desire, is immeasurable, ever-growing:

Somehow our feet seem to be getting larger and larger, our legs too. The lines of one hand have turned into tropical ravines. Several other hands are blossoming with gorges and canyons. Our fingers sprout cineplexes and hospitals, one with a bamboo motif shelters veterans. Our navel adorns Plato's cave with a neoclassical casing. And our vagina accommodates the most magnificent of railway stations with room to spare for its future demise. Do not abandon it, please!

We could walk half-way across the country in one step, one foot plunged in the silted shoreline of the West and another stuck in a Mississippi swamp. What can we see from the vantage point of such enormity? (94-95)

"We" are monster, agent, subject, object, mother, wife, male, giant, goose with impeccably clean genitals. On the wide road, we are not non-gendered, but extra-gendered—too big for the britches formerly provided for us. That is, outside the confining confines of traditional gender constructs, beyond them (as in extra-ordinary, beyond the ordinary)—

against the wife or reader. In our sexual desire, we forfeit the measurement of ourselves or others. We are not androgynous, but multigynous, a multiplicitous form that will not stand still to be counted in a binary system of gender, self, or anything else. "Measured though the world is not, the distance has moved very close up." (93) We want proximity without hierarchy. "We desire with definition." (79) Promiscuity without being indiscriminate, measure without limits: "Because of the repetitions, this is measure, but there are no limits; this too epitomizes wifeliness." (86) The wife is the limit of measure and limitless measure. Memory, too, flips (as mermaid's tail?) or bodies changing position in bed—or wherever?!, switches sides, turns language in its prism. The words (from performances of "A"-24 in 1978):

Only
Him
and Me
are real

These words are very erotic.

However, (in memory) I heard them as "Only Him and We." This to me suggests an equivalent but even more capacious eroticism, not so much pressing organ to organ as organization to organization. And, as such, it is my challenge to history. (41-2)

"History": construct and material actuality interacting to form us. And formed by us, acting on us and us acting within it, history can be, has been, deeply unpleasurable.

We know that sex is sometimes an escape from other more indigestible knowledge... We fuck Mr. Williams and our knowledge peaks with pleasure but then we read the newspaper again. And find ourselves here, listless in silence; for the mute are more present than words on every page and this makes it seem too great a privilege for pleasure seekers like

which suggests having moved through them—and also larger than them. In our sexual desire, we forfeit the measurement of ourselves or others. We are not androgynous, but multigynous, a multiplicitous form that will not stand still to be counted in a binary system of gender, self, or anything else. "The whole body is built of heads, and every head has its face." (28) No coincidence the rhyme of "multigynous" with vertiginous: our wide ride is a dizzying one, but in the most necessary sense: spinning us out of the narrow confines of our various narrow confines. This is not to suggest genderlessness in *The Wide Road*. "I remember a woman friend once telling me that she wrote in order to be genderless.

light for family life
one of my lagging mothers
makes love at the same time
as a comfort to the wife" (42)

Perhaps if the only ways available to us of constructing gender are the conventions of the hegemony, then genderlessness would be a desire. But our "lagging mother" makes love "as a comfort to the wife"—on this road we are not willing to negate gender in the very desire to surpass it.

Existing within gender and beyond gender, "we" move in a generative gap between the multiply sexed body and the multiply othered self, where all "codified" notions of identity, i.e. manness, womanness, hu(w)manness, individuality, and communality are exposed. "We" confounds easy gender distinctions even in the details evinced by our active, writing body: "Things (our hand, our foot, our spine on which we turn our head as our curls cross it, and our penis—no, no, excuse us, we are female and that is your penis—our pencil between the thumb and forefinger with

us to speak. (11)

The kind of knowledge, "history," found on the pages of a newspaper (a few examples that spring to mind include the political situation in Haiti, The Gulf War, riots in China) provides a limiting measure antithetical to measured desire wherein "history" purports to be truthful and all-knowing. Thus it fails as an exciting, excitable measure of desire. Sex is no escape from knowledge, and knowledge (think Faust here) is rarely pretty. The knowledge of measured desire, however, as a pressing "challenge to history," is knowledge of a different order.

On the billboards of our wide road, in the alleyways, in the travel, sex is sex—cunt, cock, fingers, breasts, mouths, batting flowers, ship captains with zeros and hoses, you name it (it names you, you name it again, etc.)—and sex is knowledge, a way to measure ourselves and desire in the world, to measure the world in our desire. "But we hunger for knowledge, that giant mind inside our heated wombs, so follow the pure terrain." (3) Though the "self" and the "body" are sometimes distanced from one another (as, particularly, in the letters on violence, sex, and violation), the mind's body and the body's mind are in this book inextricable. In the process of measurement, the process of understanding how we are built, we come to reconfigure the figure of our very selves. Sex is an intelligence, and what excites the mind (*The Wide Road*, for starters) arouses the body's desires as well.

I think your letter begins to answer the question in a manner which fuses homespun knowledge with intellectual excess. The intellectual excess infuses the homespun knowledge with an erotic glamour. No image of the body can excite me as much, or maybe I should say as permanently. (41)

the middle finger as fulcrum, our breasts, each with one further finger) occupy our attention endlessly." (31) The act of writing, blurring and confusing gender by generating an embodied plethora of details (and by enacting the change through language) removes the female writer from a secured and/or claustrophobic notion of "femininity" without in any way reducing our full-bodied, sexy, mobile, wide femaleness. Sameness is certainly not our goal, nor is difference privileged if it does not make more measure, more movement available.

Fixed identity, as witnessed in a shared space as a purposefully political or incidental measure of self—i.e. "Black American woman"—gives rise to the problems of generalities, binaries, and other unwelcome accoutrements. "We felt more and more complete. You are an incomplete person, we said to the man. We can say this without smugness, since it is his power that deprives him of completeness. And it leaves us naked." It is the "power" of the man, and his participation in a system too small for "us", that, on this road, leaves him incomplete. Part of "completeness" encompasses vulnerability, a naked openness that allows us always to be touched by others, or our self as other. "We" intellectualizes, desires and engages with the terrain, thinking of it and acting in and on it simultaneously as different things—less limited than the singularity of the "incomplete man." We are repeat offenders, experts of the libidinal and the liminal, of the intellect and the subject, the thought and the embodied. Through the pluralizing of identity—where the "monster" is not reduced to a single "we" nor to symmetry—the authors achieve a different kind of "we," one that exists simultaneously as independent and interdependent beings. "We" is both

No realm is outside the terrain of the body we are in this text; our excitement—permanent—is gigantic. Our minds have body, our body embodies minds.

"Our knowledge desires you!" That is how the *comediennes* might address the bird on the wire singing 'chirp tic tic' and the hard shadow of the telephone pole wobbling beside it." (81) And address us. "Us" being "we" being "them." A wifely form of address. The wife makes "voluptuous prophecies." One exemplary prophecy reads "Knowing what you know now later you will know more," (86) and we know that "knowing" is not just an exercise of the mind. There is, in every sense, more to come.

a politicized woman (whose affairs are doubly critical (both crucial and providing a critique) in relation to the notion of womanhood) and simultaneously her own, unique self:

"Having undone the use of self as singular. Having compromised singularity erotically. No longer a woman faced with men but a creature oneself composed of facets: of force or brevity, distance or proximity, detection or dissent, lungs or gear. There is a world that hovers around the senate absorbing the material of memory into its potential femininity." (79)

"Today it's sexy for you to never know who we think we are." (3) "We" undulates between monster and not-monster, us and not-us, male and female, the individual and communal self, the acting-upon and the acted-upon—a list made up not of binarisms (not "things to couple and compare") but of large and overlapping states of being which coexist and press up against one another. "So we've been both the subject and the object of desire and the origin and recipient of pleasure on many occasions." (48)

"Dear Reader, have we invited you in?" "Dear Reader, have we invited you in?" is a review of Lyn Hejinian's and Carla Harryman's *The Wide Road*, in the form of a collaborative view of the processes and products of Hejinian and Harryman's work. *The Wide Road* is a text in three sections which are distinct from one another but also bleed into one another. The first section of the text oscillates between prose and verse, the second is a series of letters between the authors, and the third, whose form our review takes, consists of two parallel essays. Though the zesty reader might recognize specific elements of Hejinian's and Harryman's individual writings throughout the text, only in the epistolary section are we given overt reference as to who authored what. In addition to quoting extensively from the text, we purposefully inhabited some of the form and diction of *The Wide Road* as a way to understand what it is to be on the wide road.

perhaps this is a rescue fantasy

Heather Fuller
Edge Books, 1997.

reviewed by Louis Cabri & Kristen Gallagher

With the title, *perhaps this is a rescue fantasy*, Heather Fuller hedges her bets against whatever powers poetry might obtain as social critique: as if to perform social critique is somehow beyond the poet's repertoire today; as if social critique itself has disappeared (together with other social drives, increasingly as this century has worn on) from the horizon of possible praxis and hexis; as if to know when poetic discourse intersects with social critique is as difficult as ascertaining a law of history. What presents itself in a poem as social critique might be the "rescue fantasy" of a poet as misinformed as, say, the Unabomber, with respect to what she is truly doing on behalf of a cause and ideal.

Bombs, their makers, their makers' causes are suggested by the book's cover drawing, which displays elements of a homemade bomb loaded into the carved-out centre of a book. Reader as victim, writer as terrorist—whose rescue fantasy?

Instead of assuming any essential goodness and power for poetry as social critique, Fuller directs the reader's attention to the conditions of perception as they manifest in her language—to the social materials, in other words, out of which critique forms:

a boy doing surgery an asthma tree a hunting knife the saddest arabesque a woman who hangs amulets plans cities in her

These lines represent situation overload, a cumulative crisis whose proportions exceed any possible constructive response, other than the dearly inadequate though available responses implicit in the situations themselves: a boy, who attempts to save someone's life; a woman, who "plans cities in her" imagination and "hangs amulets," perhaps in order to make up for the lack of social planning (even these terms, 'social planning,' are dated now) in her city. In the next two paired lines from this the fourth six-line stanza from "Rush Hr NJ Ave"—

page becomes white flag a raising that is not a hand
an illness you become an expert on illness

—the poet reflexively registers this crisis overload in poetic terms, by substituting the word which would have completed the second-line sentence, “a woman who hangs amulets plans cities in her”—is it: imagination? mind? heart?—with “page.” Through identification with this woman, the poet’s “page” as “white flag” is made identical in social effect to hanging amulets, as if amulets, or poems, were a means of bringing about urban renewal. They are not in themselves, and, unlike the woman perhaps, the poet knows this. What does the poet do with this potentially harmful, defeatist knowledge? She turns it on herself, but creates a vivid absence from it, an absence with social corollaries located in all the particulars of the devastated U.S. city she inhabits. The desire for social improvement, for a truce with existing social relations, is read as an “illness,” a “poetic” fantasy detracting from grasping actual, quantifiable needs of, in the following lines, “who leaves how hungry”:

you become expert on not who leaves how hungry
a woman planning cities not a virtue ask how hungry

Yet, Fuller’s book does not lead the reader on an anti-aesthetic exodus out of poetry into social facts in order to ask “who leaves how hungry.” There is instead a lyrical, musically hush, fascination with and probing of this debased all-pervading condition of perception, this “illness” of the social body, which denies on the one hand the possibility of critique, and on the other a retreat to the use of “lyrical amulets.” Denied is the means of distinguishing critique from retreat. Denied is that choice, because it has become, in a sense, identical. Affirmed, on the other hand, is the could-be-anybody, in Fuller’s work, who undertakes an excursion into sight and social being, loss and responsibility.

Like the work of Claes Oldenburg, Fuller’s poetry blows up the familiar. In a statement for *Environments Situations Spaces*, Oldenburg says: “I am for an art that takes its forms from the lines of life.” He goes on to describe these life lines, saying, “I am for the art of decapitated teddy-bears, exploded umbrellas, chairs with their brown bones broken, burning Xmas trees, firecracker ends, pigeon bones, and boxes with men sleeping in them.” These images, tragic and humorous at the same time, detonate the way they are received in the everyday—and in turn represent the detonated everyday. Similarly, Fuller’s work transforms the journalistic mundane into new perceptions of the social materials embodied in language. Like Oldenburg’s, her work embraces the rejected, the simple, the walked-over. In “trip set” (from

beggar [Situation 17]) she draws “on the emergency room list of unclaimed wallets and infants,” “the pregnant woman who walked from Helena to Richmond via Savannah a grifter by her side / I heard he was a provider despite the penitentiary.” In her *Placards* series in *rescue fantasy* (which come with the instructions: “Please take one up. Photoenlarge at will.”) she recovers a genre of public notice used by strikers, and in rallies and protest marches, only to enjoin the reader to read her poetry through that urgency. Distorting the journalist’s eye for the sentimental, and the detective’s sixth (paid) sense for closure, Fuller consistently reapproaches the everyday—somehow seeming unjudged, but not naive.

Through languages sometimes overheard/conversational, sometimes of DHS forms, sometimes at etymological play, she expands social situations of which the reader is aware, to a defamiliarizing scope, making those situations seem beyond what the reader might be accustomed to seeing or hearing. Yet this leads back, acting as perhaps a double-exposing, to what is seen and heard so often as to be disorienting. What happens when most of the population of a society can no longer stand to see or hear?

There is a thread throughout Fuller’s work so far, concerning the wounded eye, and wounding the eye. From *perhaps this is a rescue fantasy*:

memory of light does not recover from eye’s
defusing
(from “Fission”)

Wanting to go back to whatever “memory of light” might be, may not recover what is lost in the eye’s “bombing.” The eye is completely overwhelmed, becoming dysfunctional, blinds itself, yet continues to perceive amidst the wreckage.

...Your eyes in ashes
you reel through buildings wrenching
faucets from their leaks arresting
a history of what courses.
(from “Between Here and Else”)

This, as many of Fuller’s passages do, refers to what is missing, what is stopped from flow, what is held up or back, what is denied. And who is complicit.

A woman gouges out her eyes
(from “Mythology Girl”)

The wounded eye thread goes beyond the personal costs of embodying new perception, to reflect on the machinery of image-production in our society. Fuller never parses the image so we can see "good" or "bad." Her scenes have an awareness that the cult of the image is over, no picture ever complete. This does not prevent events and sightings in her work from taking on monumental scale, from invading the half-blind eye so as to literally bring one up against the real, by means of evoking the state of being "at a loss." The artist diminished; the viewer /reader also diminished. There unfolds an intimate public relation. One is drawn outside oneself by a public art, yet faced with an intimate human real. What is lost but cannot quite be named or pointed to or spoken, returns as a question of responsibility in the form of tears.

it's easier to cry for the anonymous
neighborhood burning down

an action in missing.

(from "trip set" in *Situation* #17)

How can sight compete with the media, where world events seem tragedies to be cathartically sobbed over, watching the evening news or reading the paper? What Fuller's work brings us to doesn't make the news. The evidence here is circumstantial, human. In the end, one is left with one's place inside a network of involvements, in relation—the question becomes: how does the human relate and form social structure or resistance in these present conditions?

...I wear saffron that is
not rare but difficult to
harvest. After a hundred
closets: threadbare. Love
I approach you as I
might a wax museum.
We make Feasible
Monument for a City.

Facing outside and being faced back, is a high-risk act of love. Trust and generosity have become almost impossible; nevertheless, we face this situation daily.

Here is the hurricane
here is the eye

But what does it mean to see.

Medieval

Steve Farmer

Krupskaya Press, 1999.

reviewed by Hung Q. Tu

Steve Farmer's *Medieval* is a bifocal proscription for the ideologically near-sighted. In an integrated poem reaching nearly the century mark of pages, it works as a kind of conveyer machine, alternately transporting the reader to familiar and alienated sites; where production takes place, where the mind and body are rehabilitated and where practice doesn't create perfection but just a well-tuned drone. The burden for *Medieval*, in strict terms, is historic pro-bono work. The case being built from start to finish is a difficult one, to prove absolutely that there is a socio-political system that seeks to integrate Capital by way of passive/aggressive machinations that haunt and taunt in turn. Thus an inmate of Angola state penitentiary can say with just clarity of the reinstated "chain-gang" work details that "It's like being back on the plantation." In other words, *Medieval*.

Farmer has written about a key period of history, the now. A present that can't quite let go of the past, if the past is defined as an accumulated position. A present which identifies itself as a future, at a steady-march. But in the meantime, the appearance of culture and distant long weekends will have to do for the over-worked and "underwhelmed."

at.least.

Peter Inman

Krupskaya Press, 1999.

reviewed by Hung Q. Tu

Peter Inman has written in *at.least.* a painstakingly meticulous book that is both clinically cold and unerringly humane. It is a bizarre, almost classic, experiment which surprises and provokes (disturbingly) a sequence of sensations that shakes us to our cognitive core, at least as to what words are, how do we read them, etc. That is to say, the poems run at different speed, and there is no indication of the limits, just that one finds oneself either reading dot to dot or stumbling over the pages like a sheet of laser.

at.least. is a hard core verbal preamble with such dialectic velocity it leaves us dazed if not choking on the fumes. Corners are not beveled, they are cut razor fine and held so tightly to one another as to gauge the thin membranes of signs and cause them to leak meaning. If by the end of the collection of poems Lenin, who makes several appearances as an embodiment of thought and action, doesn't exactly "understand" the work, he certainly would have commissioned P. Inman for a post in an Arts Committee.

Kristin Prevallet

Constructing *The Hat*

Construction sites on the edge of the city blur rural land into urban tar. Social constructions of gender and identity assume distinctions between male and female. Writing can expose the artifice of gender by blurring opposites into texts that are simultaneously hard-edged and subtle, straight-shot and implied, hard-news and confession. Construction sites lay bare the necessary chaos of assemblage.

The Hat is a new magazine published by New York poets Jordan Davis and Chris Edgar. Thinking thematically, since this is the "Gender" issue of *Tripwire*, it is interesting to note that *The Hat* (issue #1) includes all women. There is no statement in the magazine indicating that this decision on the part of *The Hat*'s two male editors is about gender. Many of the poems in the magazine explore notions of construction both as a site (building up) and as an internal process of creation (breaking down). What the poets say about poetry, through their poems, is more important than the fact that they are all women.

The poetry is language driven but content based. One does not dominate the other; they simultaneously fuel each other as the poem develops. There is not an eradication of one over the other. Issues of gender, sexuality, race politics, and personal address are articulated through the driving force of language. The content is not explicated but generated.

To paraphrase a language generated content is to offer only one interpretation among many. The following is a descriptive review of all the contributors in *The Hat*, and looks at each as a different kind of construction site. Buy *The Hat* (2 issues \$12. 331 E. 9th St. NYC, 10003). Here is the run-down, in order of appearance:

Greta Goetz's selection from "Construction Papers" is a series of portraits in which diverse landscapes and people are contrasted against each other: a pianist and an island; a Ladies' Club and the Aral Sea; a maid and City Hall; forty Burmese women and the Mall of America. The series is arranged in blocks that make the individual units look like prose, but with line breaks. This merging of the poetic line and the prose paragraph mirrors the contrast of landscapes and those who move through them. The selection of poems is framed by two photos

of a city skyline, messy with the debris, cranes, metals and sheds of a construction site.

Catherine Barnett: "Inside a tomato, a million poems." Objects reveal memories, as bodies moving through a pool "gather slowness." Melting like ice, things are remembered and forgotten. Family and personal lives are explored in the tender buttons of fruits, each line of the poem a slow progression into the details that make us happy.

Brenda Coultas: Reality is disturbing and often, gross. If as social constructions our stories are easily demolished by wrecking balls, then our memories are probably buried in the mounds of toxic dumps. Texas sized semen stains (seen on TV), Monica, Tompkins Square, a loud polyester shirt, hospital clothes and a painful accident are all there. Brenda set out on an intelligence mission to find them, to gather what was hers. She finds the rats, and communicates telepathically with them about current events. There is not much consolation at the dump, but the evidence she was looking for is there. No matter how deep they are buried, the memories that make us human are also what keeps us alive.

Tonya Foster: A father, a wanderer, tells his daughter about how he ended up in Colorado, and the help he found from strangers. He is a father in a tale, but he is real. He is out of time, and out of her life because "she has long since learned to love an absence." "A Folktale" is a tale told in real time, but it is the poem that sets the pace and determines the hour. A father and a Golden Goose: both are memories layered with time and circumstance. The poem is a site where stories upon stories are layered. It is a gesture of assembly and a fragmented re-telling.

Lisa Jarnot: The engine of repetition that drives emotional eruptions into current events. In "Brooklyn Anchorage" a powerline read in a newspaper short circuits the poet's circulation, and the pace of the poem, like racing electricity, stops time. The wrecking ball is back, this time as an arrow of simplicity that shoots straight from the heart. Poems effect time when they carry the current of their conception through to the last line. When it happens, as Lisa and Johnny Cash know well, the catcalls in their catbeds bristle and sing.

Janice Lowe stays clear of poetic coterie, nuances of tone, and any hint of abrasions expressed gently. This is straight-shot writing where nothing is sensitized; heavy-machinery-writing which takes charge of

demolition. Speech driven and content based, the poems are sustained by hard-line language. Cultural references are piled atop one another in, as in Brenda's toxic mound of memory and significance. From knickknacks to Malcolm X, this is poetry that is taking risks of expression, content, language, and tone.

Kimberly Lyons has a long section in the magazine: 8 poems and a 10 part serial poem called "Peripheries." Motel vacancy signs printed on the sky, a house changed into a cyclone, and five tulips poised around a garbage can are all part of the landscape. Construction is happening here too, and blocks are coming into place only to be torn away. On the periphery there are no complete stories, but there is much that resonates and seems familiar. The poet is in her laboratory, and alert to both the silence and clanking of electrons and moons.

Carol Mirakove's poem "myself or someone having sex" tracks the time of penetrations (three total), although the clocks are all broken. "He" is subterranean, and aside from sex there is not much more to him than his teeth. The "welcomed wrecking ball" indicates another kind of construction site: the act of perceiving another person who at first is so bewildering that he looks like a cubist portrait. How can another person be assembled and penetrated when we only peripherally know ourselves?

Ange Mlinko has a line as taught as a bow and arrow, and a bossy, confident tone of voice that makes language putty in her hands. With sex, anger, beauty, and exuberance in every poem, references are piled on so thick that a match thrown on the pile would flare into a bonfire. Out of four poems represented here, "Happiness in Harness" stands firm as a verbal frenzy of wonder and delight. A pony is transformed into an ant-covered wall, which is in turn transformed sentence upon sentence into both strange and familiar references. It ends with a passionate "take me now" episode that sends the reader, too, searching to soil the linen.

Cynthia Nelson: POW, here we go again. "In the street" moves faster than the street (which moves, we now know from the TV commercial, to the sound of cheesy techno inside a brand new VW bug with locked doors and windows). What happens to fill the space of one minute, one hour, is connected by ampersands, because inserting "and" would ruin the rhythm. A snippet of an impression, a micro perspective against a big wide world, this poem is the eye from the center of the cyclone, that sees the debris swirling around, but has the

presence of mind to catalogue all that goes by.

Hoa Nguyen once said, "I write very tiny poems." These poems indeed do look very tiny in this issue of *The Hat*, being that there are only two of them, and their titles appear to swallow them whole. The poems look like balls of mercury, but stick a pin in them, and they disperse into more little balls, and more, and more. Try to step on one, and it skirmishes out from under your shoe. These poems go on and on, although they appear to end abruptly. On the roadtrip to the heart, Hoa takes a shuttle and hits the bull's eye.

Alice Notley: It's called "Being Wiggy." The new year rolls around and everything is new—or is it just the same self but in a new outfit, like recycled presents given again and again. On a quest for the "new you," don't bother shopping beyond the tacky wigs. Rebirth is a commodity, a disposable "empty material novelty" just like everything else. Just because appearances alter the outside doesn't make anything different on the inside. Whether or not the soul does or does not have enough food will not change. Shallow promises of reconstruction are insignificant next to the infinity of the universe, consciousness, and Alice's poetry, which spans all of them.

Prageeta Sharma: "Ode to Badminton" is an ode to the sweetness of flying things as seen through the history of badminton. Back in time to the country seat of Dukes—before the swifter-paced days of tennis—where the risks of injury were less serious. The poem's pace, the long lines, follows the slow trajectory of the birdie as it sails through the air. Back and forth with such sensual language, making the thought of getting hit in the eye almost pleasant. Her poems are accompanied by an illustration of a Chinese scroll, with a small bat, wings spread, poised in the corner.

Juliana Spahr has "embraced direct address," but this is not a revelation. Her poems are often about communication, and the ways that the devices of language both prohibit and facilitate address. Diagramming sentences is about more than grammar. [Grammatical instructions] between brackets indicate multiple ways of reading. In a love poem like "Poem," this means that the object of love is always shifting. In "Poem" there is a "you" that can't be touched because the grammar is unsteady and is in the process of mutating the subject. The constructor and the beholder are one in the same.

Partisans

by Rodrigo Toscano
O Books, 1999

reviewed by Brian Kim Stefans

Rodrigo Toscano's *Partisans* injects a startling new breath of urgency in contemporary poetics, one that skates awfully close to such politically activated texts as Bruce Andrews' *I Don't Have Any Paper So Shut Up* or Myung Mi Kim's *Dura*, but which doesn't lose its very specific questioning of political agency beneath its cross-cut surface. The twelve parts of this book-length work each consider a specific moment in thinking about progressive politics—"unveil[ing] the conjoined agency of human labor and grammatical component" in Barrett Watten's phrase from the book jacket—with such titles as "Present Perfect Progressive" and "Simple Past" identifying the perspective taken amidst the historical flux, pointing to concepts of closed historical determinacies and never ironic ideas of utopias to-be. Its short, tight lines, which move through several modes of rhetoric from the direct address, the declamatory, the lyric and the quasi-hermetic, never lose steam as Toscano plows through his manic considerations of aesthetics and society. The following is near-Poundian razzing of activist poetics, condemning as it is precise:

Flouting history, rambling spleen'd
<sign of Timidity>

Fumbling segues, trancing sex'd
<a sign of Banality>

Spouting ethics, shunning touch
<a sign of Celebrity>

Sorting concepts, draping needs
<a sign of Obscurity> (9)

Toscano's "wordwork"—the poem is obsessed with the nature of poetry as "labor" in an poetic economy that is, even at its margins, compromised by the exigencies of the "market"—is always tempered by his quest for the "collective" revolutionary consciousness, such that even the short time it takes to bring the poem to the print drops it from its immediate social moment:

By the time this all gets sketched, typed
circulated, confiscated, allocated
celebrated, denigrated, reiterated
obfuscated, recuperated, activated

it will have lost its gain
so to speak
will have had to begin
again
between (12)

he writes, mourning, perhaps, the lost of his address to the confines of the white page and the bookshelf. *Partisans* takes a stance against "beauty"—it is as pared and honed as Brecht's later poetry—and certainly against the idea of a beautiful soul, but consequently avoids the pessimism and turn toward the ironic that much latter-day lyricism possesses in the face of disappointment with the revolutionary moment: "So back to irony-ville / petty bourgeois-ville // round and round / eclectic hectic and peptic" (20). His metaphysics of social "Agent(cy)" seems to center around the idea of a "social surplus" which can be engaged for social transformation for "Doing"—a surplus created in the margins of the bourgeois self and which, to this time, has been the static, inactive area from which most avant-garde American poetics have surfaced. "And why not / partisans // So so democratic / postmodern muzzling // Having been fitted / having been summoned by it // In the present (but of the past) / the subject // *We've, as a has been* / or stand in - for // Now? A muffled yet pressing now -" (41), he asks, bringing to light the necessity of a singular, staunch view amongst the calls for plurality and untranslatability that have become catchwords of late-progressive literary and political theory. However, even Toscano realizes that, in this case at least, his verbal assay may not be more than a tone mourning the loss of collective action and will in the later 20th century, an urge toward "the dazzling brightness / of realism," the "tattered / fettered / committed." Poetry may very well be the unsatisfactory vehicle, as he writes toward the end, imagining himself before a crowd: "So I'm facing faces / as I recite this / as I'm looked at // quizzically?" (47) But this line is followed by "*toward yourselves too*", throwing the ball back in the court where he has, fairly and unpretentiously, returned it, into the minds and hearts of the readers who are being challenged by this extraordinary, difficult, but noble and ennobling text. "Readers / as agents" (49).

Protective Immediacy

Rod Smith
Roof Books, 1999

reviewed by Brian Kim Stefans

Rod Smith is part of an exciting DC-based community of poets who, for all their devotion to formal experimentation and a critical social vision, are generally very amusing, coupling a knack for stand-up "slacker"-comedy with sheer lyric elegance. This new book is a honed display in five sections of all the virtues of Smith's writing, including his complete mix-and-mastery of several strands of American poetics, ranging through Projective Verse, Berrigan-esque collage (more intellectual, but still with a Lower East Side "tune-in drop-out" dopiness), the clipped line of Williams, and the provocative opacities of the Language School. As the epitaph to the first section, "The Boy Poems," states, "Humor is a process. Depression / a useful first step," and this synthesis of comedy/melancholy is what distinguishes the often intellectual verse of Smith from the pack: "Speaker: Agon means / that ache you can / really see, right? / non-speaker: in some / x, the gross national / awkward. Oh hell, / Speaker: 'Prove it' -" (14). The page arrangement of "The Boy Poems"—each with titles like "Boris," "Bert," "The Buddha," and "John Fitzgerald"—are like word-sculptures, somehow beautiful to see in their stasis on the page despite the heady, fluid meanings of the poems themselves. "Simon" theorizes this condition: "The implicit is / Arrival, approach / impasse—a hand issuing from a grasp— / These alternatives cannot be harmonized. // But harmony sucks anyway." (17) Human liberation is to be at stake in these poems written from the country's capitol, as the fixity of corporate systems upon the mushy human emotions is part of the drama inherent in Smith's colliding discourses:

This is the heart of all living
systems—The workshop mode flows formatively
across the morphogenic light-born attractor
at the focal point of time and reemerges as
the Diet Coke stain on Bert's disintegrating
mostly purple tie-dye.

("Bert," 22)

Because Smith is so comfortable living among grand thoughts—he has a natural "visionary" bent suggestive of mild-mannered Blake or a

human-scale Pynchon—his idiom has a worldliness which belies a mistrust in naïve acceptance of political dialectics or theoretical superstructures. But it is when these two elements meet—the mistrust anchoring the “vision”—that the humor of “human” bathos arises (he pokes fun at his theory-minded brethren, here, too):

A Nestea before the sex show
& a full length sofa bed
to teach the Cantos from —
this represents the temporal
hidden within the temporal.
The grapes though expensive
need impaling. (35)

Smith's ear is infallible—he can mix, in a single poem, verbatim quotes from Bob Dylan with polysyllabic science words, ballad-like strains, “plain speech” prose and weird word-lists, such as: “schierkase schmo / schmoose / schmooze / schmuck / Schnabel” (64), sheer nonsense which tells, in the meantime, the whole story of the New York painter's fall from avant-garde grace. Through all these dadaesque hijinks, however, he always keeps the question of basic freedom versus the (failed) social contract in focus: “the sum tottle seems to ink us out / sheepish science dealing & important / — neither Spain nor Plain — / a health-related basic thing that people matter more than money.” (71) “What's that little plan / you live in?” the poem “John Fitzgerald” asks; Smith offers edifyingly inutile answers, but no plans, either.

Last Instance

Dan Farrell
Krupskaya Press, 1999

reviewed by Brian Kim Stefans

Each of the twelve longish prose poems of *Last Instance*, by Canadian-born poet Dan Farrell, is an exploration into the dilemmas of agency amidst a world dominated by routine, the ubiquitous plays of technology and other narrowing systems (even the innocent one of the days of week), and the failure of memory to fully relive one's past to create one's present. While maintaining close ties to the linguistic explorations of the Language poets, Farrell's work departs strongly in that his surfaces are backed by the cold drama of an existentially hindered subjectivity which bobs its head and breaks the pure play of syntax and grammar, such that even in its most heavily-reduced moments, the poetry creates an atmosphere reminiscent of Beckett's novels, as well as Kafka in its ever-recursive replays of alienating social formulas. Indeed, the poem “K” resembles fiction in that it centers around the narrator's “phone tag” relationship with the ever-ambiguous “K”: “So K would call, begin to leave as though a message, then get me. Would K's roommate pass on this message, any? For the while, exchanging mail seemed a way. Letter, number, letter; number, letter, number. Letters add up to nothing.” (15) Even the paratactic “Avail,” composed entirely of sentences from questionnaire-answers with people about their health and angry emotions, builds by Oulipo-inspired excessive repetition into a deadpan, sometimes Stephen-Wrightish character that just can't determine what the hell he means:

My current level of physical fitness is very pleasing to me. I have positive feelings about the way I approach my own physical health. Whether I recover from an illness depends in large part on what I myself do. My feelings of anger do not interfere with my work. In order to have good health, I have to act in a pleasing way to other more powerful individuals. (27)

“My Recognizance” is a wonderfully rich, possibly autobiographical (but most likely as constructed as “Avail”) skitter through Joycean sentence constructs and surface play, a sort of *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* that never gets past the childhood stage to maturity:

And around geared Tom Swift, grasping for switches to toggle, tactics to jettison. Somewhere sprawled. Then to flood with haggard drops the

reminder of an awkward cough, syrup or sticky camphor, resin to excessive phlegm. While outside in crowded cards of skilled hockey players I saw my own reeling life clasped and slipped to clipping spokes. (33)

This sort of neologistic wordplay—he later describes himself as “Pufferbluffing like a blowfish in a chowder”—seems as effortless as the excessive flatness of “Avail” and the last poem in the collection, “366, 1998,” whose main *modus operandi* is the linear recounting of the days of the week, such that the cumulative effect is one of a rich desperation among the passage of time. The sameness of “366, 1998” makes even minor linguistic and narrative events oases of suggestion: “[...] Saturday, floor sawing, Sunday, dust making, Monday, thrust frump and center, Tuesday, Wednesday, last and relived, Thursday, flutes on backward, try again, flukes on forward [...]” (59), it continues for five jammed pages. *Last Instance* is a confident trek into both language’s capacity for creating boredom and anxiety—a parody of the most domestic version of late-capitalist life—and its potential for explosive, neologistic self-creation—approaching the utopian drive of the most radical Modernists—whose cumulative effect is one of an careful essay on poetry, one that is fun as it is responsible, elegant and classical as it is—like punk rock or a slacker’s stoicism—gleefully nihilistic.

Dark

Hoa Nguyen

Mike & Dale’s Press, 1998

reviewed by Roberto Tejada

Through a torsion it effects between the representation of memory and immediacy, Hoa Nguyen’s *Dark* comprises a series of self-portraits weathered into the magenta fade of Kodacolor prints; into the warp of random perspective as viewed from the telescoping lens of time. Nguyen has wrought a music whose candid nature is identifiably her own, with its unique attention to the embarrassments of the spoken. These speech-and-tone clusters range from a series of dream-sketches about the omnipotence of thought (“Dream 5.24.97”) to sheer quotidian song (“Let Me Be a Meaningful Soul”) or terse musings about that point of condensation between experience and consciousness (“Deck”). Stretching sense with clamped sound, *Dark* is articulated in a language that enacts the amazement and discomforts in the transit from childhood to adulthood; the shaping of self from passive recipient to active subject.

In the process, *Dark* also raises questions of permission, authorship, bloodline and self-inscription. The book opens with a conclusive trope to address a crucial passage that takes place throughout the work. In a dream-image, Charles Olson carries the poet “through a swarm // of biting flies...” so that, by dubious patriarchal agency in a climate sprung from decay, menace and multitudes, Nguyen proceeds to plunder and reclaim her predecessor’s use of a feminine pantheon in the figures of Demeter, Athena and Mnemosyne. In this, she reiterates the archetypal and its capacity to signify as patterns of knowledge, prowess and memory. But these figures are inescapably tied to the uneventful temper of workaday life, so we find Nguyen rendering a series of statements about a framework for determination between the poles of blankness and writing; between the mythical promise of the imagination and the lackluster prose of the world—though mindful of the fact that this performance constitutes a struggle in which language may well transcend or even obviate individual perception.

Listen to the tonal modulations in the following poem as it addresses the upper-lower limits of kinship and association in spiral rhyme and repeat, so as to end on the involuntary nature of recoil and recollection:

GLORIFIED SPIRIT

memorable divine: na-na
 be around or round like a
 circuit in Van Gough's painting
 of sunflowers divinity
 protects you from family's memorable
 cautions we started with angel
 hair, desire, pears, cheap beer
 like *Red White and Blue* brand
 my need to ghost things
 in writing: Ethyl the dirty girl
 who spilled food on herself

In her singular cadence, Nguyen reveals certain passages from what she calls an apocryphal "childhood with food," where Joycean moochow and lemon platt are displaced into other transculturated realms of experience... as flank steak and baked Alaska. Naturally, there are suggestions in this of Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons* (re: "Salad Dressing and Artichoke"), but her poems can also rise in jagged strains emanating from the dubious idyllic landscape of domestic drama.

Nguyen's poetry peals with humor and shrill observation as it relishes in the crackerjack contours of American English. Born in Vietnam and raised in the United States from the age of two, Nguyen explores the sounds of estrangement in the familiar, producing an else-ward vernacular that both savors in and spews back the language-markers that gauge American normativity—from a "lou-lou oozes from my gloomy mouth" to "bubblegumming fat belly / wave ride," or as far back as the infant stage of "peek-a-boo and bye-bye / with the eyes and the ears." It's a world, on this account, that complicates the centrality of the television set within the family sphere—the pan-demonium that erupts when *Candid Camera* meets *Totem and Taboo*:

...the imagined
 family you invent terribly
 maimed in a fire the faces that sweat on TV or cry
 the bones sharp hairs in your mouth
 after the Coke commercial is over
 Captain Kangaroo is dead
 immediate family members go
 crazy are in hospital
 the window of unchanging you

see bones where others
 fill the flesh you see fish bones
 in the pine twig snapped to
 paper head & tail the eyes are an x...

("Some Starting")

There is something concurrent here with the concerns of visual praxis, especially contemporary art produced by women. *Dark* includes six xerox-images by Austin-based artist Suloni Robertson that depict the pull of the artist's own hand and skin with a succession of threads and twigs, as if to suggest the ideological ties that bind women's bodies to the "natural world." In this, both Robertson and Nguyen collaborate in a formal quip about occasion and effect; about the technology of the image and the contingent meanings attributed to the female body.

hedgerows make hedgehogs
 Kent garden Lawn semi detached
 under the apple yard gnarled
 roots too old like tired
 of topping off the trees
 as me perched on the mail
 box red retinal flash

("Kent Christmas 1990")

And elsewhere:

joy doubt your spectral
 communications bound in flesh
 do need to witness
 their averting
 face your pranks:
 stars wrapped around your throat
 (terrible resembling beauties)

("Strange")

I enjoy Nguyen's audacity and wager against conventional sonic propriety, the way the writing negotiates between the autobiographical and the accidents of representation. As she moves between the patterns of personal content and the ruins of expressive fallout—in her own language: between index finger and stump; between purple angel and bitch woman—at her best, Hoa Nguyen questions the certainties and gravity of cognition (the lightlessness of the title poem), as she engages the self "whistling through the process of relativity" and out of the limbo of the unknowable.

LIMBO LIMBO

peek-a-boo and bye-bye
with the eyes and the ears
to anticipate them
like a limbo waiting for personal
supporters
aware of novelty and strangeness
in people even mildly novel people
are open/shut push/pull all adjectives
scooting as a matter of habit
forgive me I have not mentioned myself
this "center" I think is demographic
how we display interest and typical roles
whistling through the process of relativity

Debbie: An Epic

Lisa Robertson

Vancouver: New Star Books, 1997

reviewed by Kimberly Filbee

MEDEA: Come, flame of the sky

Pierce through my head!

What do I, Medea, gain from living any longer?

Oh I hate living! I want

to end my life, leave it behind, and die.

CHORUS: (In unison; chanted seriously) But tell us how
you're really feeling.

MEDEA: My husband Jason—the Argonaut—has left me for
another woman. Debbie.

CHORUS: (In unison) Dreaded Debbie, dreaded Debbie.
Debutante from hell.

—Christopher Durang and Wendy Wasserstein, *Medea*

Debbie: short for Deborah; long for Deb (as in debutante—not Eugene Debs). Zaftig royalty (a J.A.P. in fact). "Her / toffeed flanks roll with greatness and sustenance," accompanied by a "squadron" of "whirling majorettes." Craves sugar and gossip; jewelry, boys and clothes. Loves to buy from catalogues. A daddy's girl—though glimmers of mom appear in the uniform of nurse (there is, moreover, a certain Aunt Rose she admires). Enjoys preening. Disappears into drama club fantasy, "participant thespian" in sequined regalia. Ice queen, party girl, "amazon" beneficiary of Title IX. Discovers at long last the "Battle Cry" of feminism ("I've fucked things up, but I'm awake"). Her epic ends with adult beverage, hostess duty, pocket-book, cosmetics.

But *Debbie: An Epic* is more than mere send-up: poetry does here its traditional duty—uplifts the mundane and celebrates beauty. Virgilian in her obeisance to an empire of the senses, Robertson bequeaths to Christian (i.e., "pagan") America (i.e., "Rome") the essence of a certain disparaged experience—bourgeois, corpulent, female, Jewish.

I'm not blind to my own empirical loyalties: Robertson's Canadian-ness means nothing to me; I read her poem as would an agent for a foreign power. (So sue me if you're not happy.) I cannot, in any event,

imagine a book more opportune at the present moment. Amid the ongoing demonization of Monica Lewinsky, Robertson's "folly" (as she herself describes it) begins to seem something of an augury.

Ardent transgressors! . . .
what country, good friends what suburb
is not now smothered by our sobs?

All roads lead to the same conclusion: an era of fulsome masculinity
is reaching its perjurious end. All hail Debbie's cesarean birth!

Dreaded Debbie, dreaded Debbie.
Debutante from hell.

fracas

Elizabeth Fodaski
Krupskaya Press, 1999.

reviewed by Jen Hofer

We are at once documented
and anonymous
the stories bleed
together like so many
indigenous histories,
the rifles cocked
targets random
and equivalent.
we come from the page
but appear nowhere in the book
we speak from the bottom
of our bodies
but are translated
out of language
we are the sisters
of impatience
we come from
the urban calendar (10)

*

language *is* consciousness
to dream in pictures
my language makes me a woman like Mary
the little man in my head
is allied to a mustering of storks
Socrates is mortal
consciousness is mortal
consciousness is Socrates
consciousness is a man in my head (64)

*

the parenthetical is what soothes me
never grasp a central chord or
pull me toward an outfit with built-in authority

I find that we have a responsibility to what soothes us

At what final hour do we do justice to the world we attempt to describe
(16)

A Horizontal Attempt. Another Parlor. Keen Expectations.

In Elizabeth Fodaski's *fracas*, which describes and inhabits and is our *fracas*, we are immediately in the fray. There is no outside, or there is only outside; in either case we are inevitably, inextricably in it. Nothing is exempt, much less we ourselves. This *fracas* is a quick-shifting pull-no-punches brilliance of implication—the implications of what has been and what is, not separable from how we are implicated in what has been, what is. What will be: what we attempt, what we think, what we do.

if a writing, a sighting

these, my pair
of fallible eyes fall

upon such evil axes
so smiling

too solid (30)

We begin from a position of constraint and possibility. The world is, events occur, certain things are given, certain parameters, confines, constructs. Our world, our things, are in disrepair, no thing is fixed. *fracas* places us immediately inside a state of uncertain statement, of unstated statement. In sight of it, in its sights. We enter the book in "Flood Watching."

It comes like this.
With tiny fingers screeching along the sidewalk screeching
screeching waiting
more than waiting.

It comes like this.
Writing a spasmodic gait of a
too quick operation speech
like the broke spoke of
wheels of things of
machined crossed human crossed with
machine metal grinding
grinding too
fast for its own function
It comes like this.

FLOOD WATCHING. (7)

Flood watching us. Or us watching flood, watching for flood. Has the flood happened, or will it? Or will it. We are in a state of flood. Can we but watch it? And watching it, can we not record what we see, respond, and in recording (seeing, writing) make the thing seen into altogether another thing? What are we, what can we be, if we are not attentive to the world around us, the us and the others in that world?

how many ways
are you not
and you are
like the swaying
knotted clumps of weeds,
bougainvillea, hydrangeas,
that sway in a sunken field
no matter as oblivious
this stubborn nature
again it comes up
with childlike persistence
this life (27)

Certain things, certain "knotted clumps," certain fields, are given. We are in a bind. We are in a body. A bind of sight and cite and the body's moments, proliferating through anatomy, through associations, through etymology, through the mental and physical brawls (binds) we get ourselves into and out of and into. The body is a certain thing, but not the only thing, and only certain in increments of a moment.

if there is one thing certain, a body.
See bind.
It can be called finished in a moment.
There is no question it can be called a beginning. (58)

Our bodies are classified (gendered, raced, classed, inscribed and described by lexicons and etymologies—anatomies—not of our choosing) in language and through experience, moment by moment. Moments are binding and come undone, need to be redone.

Mary is not a woman.
A woman is a word and the being of your word is a moment
the flower is a word and the naming is a moment. (42)

Naming (the providing of words which become our being—"the name you deploy for the figure in naming" (41)) is temporary and constant; a name is a thing but the name is not the thing. Here we are inside a complicated, fraught *fracas*, where our being (and the being of things)

is simultaneously called into being and called into question. The physical body is bound and in a state of boundless (but not unconstrained) beginning. The body politic is the inevitable space in which the body makes its moves, positions and repositions, finds itself confined and busts out.

let $x=0$,
 we still have too many constants
 see dangle, see ding,
 a true strong verb
 Constant; see State.
 Consternation; see Stratum.
 Conspire; see Spirit.
 Conspicuous; see Species.
 This is a bust,
 Etymology uncertain. (53)

The constants, the matter and matters of this life, are stubborn. "(A)midst frantic public relations/obscure" (33), we are in a state which precedes us, determines us, was not determined by us, where our ability to act is constantly compromised (constantly made necessary) in the spaces between stubborn events which intrude upon our field of vision, limit it, constitute it:

various is as various thinks.
 therefore we are. in search. of.

displacement byproduct killing trend
 primary purpose dimensional weaponry
 cleansing medieval abandon combatant
 the shrunken terror miscellaneous with force the perpetual franchise
 the miscellaneous with malice torture the machination the systematic
 arrested development warlord the field he plunders
 the state withered away the state is as the state does (20)

This book and its explorations (not explanations but rather hints, views, frames, surveys of certain terrains or fields—"Our lady is unwalkable./The politics sans serifs./The poetics is plain./The poems sans merci." (18)—rather than territories claimed or claims staked) engage us in pleasures not separate from, not separable from, the constant (consternating, conspiring, conspicuous) pressures of the state of language, the state of the state. Pressures of consciousness and of conscience, material pressures, verbal pressures. *fracas* seeks to apply different, "anarchic and subversive" (37) pressures to an existence which too often feels like "this futitarian inquest." (40) Pressure, how-

ever, is not unrelated to a certain pleasure, or certain pleasures require a certain pressure, friction being also a constant and sometimes, variously, a pleasure. This is a bust—a breast, an arrest, an explosion—that propels us, albeit uncertainly (perhaps always already uncertainly) towards another kind of "true strong verb," another kind of constant.

Lulu is a vocab girl she
 admires the gerund
 cf. miracle [sic]
 and that which is to be done or
 carried on

Why don't you pick up your tipsy little lexicon
 and saunter over to my epistemology. (54)

The gerund is a constant process, a verbal form predicated on continuance, movement, noun and verb intertwined in motion. "That which is to be done" is never done: "It can be called finished/but there is no question/it can be called/a beginning" (44). Fodaski does not posit a wide-eyed sense of renewal stemming from a utopic string of new beginnings—

it's all wrong here / start again
 we've got it all wrong here (71)

—but rather positions an open-eyed, skeptical, sometimes weary, always wary doing that seems, given the difficulties of a difficult world (and words), utterly necessary, utterly possible. Where can we walk, if not in the opening/opposition provided in a field of "pragmatic experiment"?

it's too
 narrowing
 it narrows me

as opposed to

pragmatic breath experiment
 in the sense of paper
 the resistance of form
 extension, the double dream
 in the sense of burial
 internecine struggles
 as opposed to / in the sense of
 as opposed to / meaning paper
 groundlessness / in the sense of paper
 as opposed to / meaning start here (69)

The gerund (meaning meaning, constantly in the process of being seen, being made) allows for breath, momentary suspension, but not stasis. Forms, burials, struggles, histories are moments, varied in duration, context, significance. What is constant is situation, the activity of situating. We are placed and there is no replacement (no two moments exactly alike, the vacancy of loss not ever exactly occupied: "It wasn't that I was feeling vacant/but that there was a sense of an occupancy/having already vacated my/ *body*" (9)) or there is only always replacement, placing and placing again, a constant context of process in which even stillness is a form of movement. The present moment is populated by what has come before and what is to come: what occupies us.

"I got"
she said
several
little dainties
lying about
this gazebo
preceded parlour
a cryptic exchange
awkward, as a girl
grown too large
for her age
she squirmed (25)

We are preceded by a certain prettiness, "little dainties," certain kinds of parlours in which certain kinds of activities and expectations have left us little room to maneuver, parlours with which we enter unavoidably into "a cryptic exchange." No *fracas* arises out of an ahistorical, amnesiac vacuum. Named and unnamed pasts and predecessors (literary, political, demographic, sociobiographical, autobiographical) populate this text—"pictured perfect landings/over and over/again, a frantic renovation/of timelines in trouble and/didn't we have this war already/earlier in the era?" (66)—not as boxes in which we might rest or be put to rest, but as sites, sights along the ways we have come to be in this here, this now. Neither writing nor history is precious, to be preserved and held in delicate, unthinking reverence: a flower is a word, as is a woman, as is flotsam, as is this world, this wrecked vessel we have come to inhabit.

A man is an entity similar to entities we call flowers
but we do not call Socrates a flower.

There is but a moment.
flotsam jetsam.
see Float.
Things thrown overboard from a
wrecked vessel. (52)

There is undeniable comfort in "there is but a moment" ("always already is a moment in a word." (65)), context ever differing, the givens ever shifting, naming always a renaming ("always already the departure point and then never to arrive." (36)); there is undeniable urgency in "there is but a moment," when naming is a coming to terms, a presencing not only of language and its implications, consciousness and its implications, but also of the finite, the mortal, the material. We have "a responsibility to what soothes us," a responsibility (see opportunity) to ask ourselves constantly, "how to make a diff":

how
and how not
you are but another
quivering weed
how to make a diff
authenticity trope
we need another parlor but
who will sit there? (29)

Indeed, who will not sit there, and how will we sit. *fracas* invites us into a "tangent vantage," (78) aids us in developing a perspective within which we are part of the view, inexorably implicated in what is being seen, yet enough outside the wreckage to use our "fallible eyes" usefully. Watching is no passive state, here where watching entails the sight of perception, the "see" of etymology, the seeing and citing of writing. Sight is a stubborn, persistent act, needing to be engaged and engaged again moment by moment.

when a sick heart landed and began.
pumping, coupling, doubling, and moving on
the material requires attention
not an innate presence
but a present form (40)

We open in, open into, a state of attentiveness. A state of sight, of presence. Of possibly dangerous abundance. Of flood, where a state is a moment and sight, recognition, naming is a moment and "there is but a moment" which can ever be called a beginning. Calling upon, summoning, a beginning. Summoning us to and towards.

the little man in my head
is a champ for sussing out Meaning

but who will resuscitate
the 'I' of the dream?
see Cite.
to summon, quote,
rouse, excite, I go
see Hie, to hasten (51)

We are in a state of mind and a state of body. A state of abeyance and a state of disobedience. A state of language, of consciousness, of names, writings, previous and future collections, and a state of experience, of feeling and seeing things, seeing things beyond the real of what is there (beyond imagery, through imagery, passing through it without passing it by), seeking out to see, to cite. Inference and reference where the referent fixes (soothes without curing) and unfixes, refuses to stand still, to be gotten right, to be "properly" and permanently sussed. Where the referent is neither erased nor recuperated, our previous parlours moved through (and therefore themselves moved, moving), the events and reverberations around the referent summoned (excited) towards shifted meanings. Or, in other words, "I like your cock, it's the macho bullshit I could do without." (12) Pleasures and pressures coexist. To be—in a body in the world in history in process—is to be in the space between departure and arrival, a realm of anticipation rather than exactitude, where we make repeated attempts to "do justice," never reaching "the final hour."

mine
is a horizontal attempt
a sensual curiosity
has its own
keen expectation of furthering
contact (22)

Some things make us wonder why we are alive. Other things, like *fracas*, make us alive while we wonder. Such things are difficult gifts. We are being spoken to, from inside "a fiery center with borders,/with an outside infringing obliquely with/a neighboring dialect." (7) Elizabeth Fodaski's *fracas* is a direct address. "She is not demure." (54) Listen up.

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Carla Harryman is the author of ten books of prose, plays, poetry and essays including a novel, *The Words: After Carl Sandburg's Rootabaga Stories and Jean Paul Sartre* (O Books, 1999) and *There Never Was a Rose Without a Thorn* (City Lights, 1995). She is on the full-time faculty of the Department of English at Wayne State University and is currently working on a second novel, *Gardener of Stars*.

Lyn Hejinian is the author of numerous volumes of poetry including *Writing is an Aid to Memory*, *My Life*, *Okoto: A Short Russian Novel*, *The Cell*, and *The Cold of Poetry*. She has also collaborated with poets, visual artists and musicians such as Carla Harryman, Leslie Scalapino, Arkadii Dragomoshchenko, Diane Andrews Hall, Emilie Clark, and John Zorn. Forthcoming from the University of California Press is a collection of essays entitled *The Language of Inquiry*.

Jen Hofer is a poet and translator living in the San Francisco Bay Area. She is currently editing and translating an anthology of contemporary poetry by Mexican women. Her poems and translations can be found in recent issues of *Chain*, *Combo*, *Rhizome*, *Trepan*, and *XCP: Cross Cultural Poetics*, and in the a+bend Press chapbook *as far as*.

Amanda Huguen is a visual artist living in San Francisco.

Summi Kaipa edits *Interlope*, a journal of innovative Asian-American poetics. Her work can be found in *Tinfish*, *Tool A Magazine*, and *Fourteen Hills*.

Kevin Killian, born 1952, poet, playwright, novelist, art writer and biographer, lives in San Francisco. His books include *Shy* and *The Kink of Chris Komater*.

Brian Lennon edits a digital arts journal, *Xenia*, and co-curates Hallux Literary Organism (both at <http://www.xeniareview.com>). He is the author of a chapbook, *Dial Series One* (Potes & Poets Press, 1999).

Kristin Prevaillet's chapbook *Selections from the Parasite Poems* was published by Barque press.

Tasha Robbins is a painter living and working in San Francisco. She recently completed *An Angel Alphabet*, and continues to paint daily life from the sidewalk up. "As far as the question of gender in art goes, I think the maker is always ultimately unsexed, and re-sexed androgynously in the resulting work if it touches the spirit."

Elizabeth Robinson's most recent chapbooks are *Other Veins*, *Absent Roots* (Instress) and *As Betokening* (Quarry St. Press). Black Fire, White Fire recently published a broadside, "Re s/volve" and a chapbook, *Lodger*, is forthcoming from Arcturus Editions. Kelsey St. Press is slated to publish a new book, *The Seed for Bread*.

Linda Russo lives in Buffalo, New York. She is the author of *o going out* (Potes & Poets Press). "To Be Jack Spicer in a Dream," an essay on Joanne Kyger, was recently published in *Jacket*; "The 'F' Word in Mechanical Reproduction," an account of postmodern women small press editors, will be published in *Talisman* this fall.

Born and raised in NYC, Jocelyn Sainenberg is the author of *Mortal City* (Parentheses Writing Series: 1998), and the editor and publisher of KRUPSKAYA, a small press collective dedicated to publishing experimental poetry and prose. She has been living in San Francisco since 1994 and is the 1999 winner of the New Langton Arts Bay Area Award.

Brian Kim Stefans' new web-poem "The Naif and the Bluebells" is now on-line at www.ubu.com. A new edition of *Arras* is forthcoming at www.bway.net/~arras. He lives in Williamsburg, Brooklyn.

Roberto Tejada has new work in *Talisman* and *Crayon*.

Elizabeth Treadwell's new book is a collection of prose/poetry, *Populace*, (Avec Books, 1999); her third chapbook, *Stolen Images of Dymphna*, is forthcoming from Meow Press. She is currently working on a new poetry manuscript, *Acts*, as well as collaborating on a novel, *Nonstop*, with her sister Carol Treadwell.

Erin Tribble recently completed her MA in Writing at the University of San Francisco. Her essay "Saint Nobody" was published in the Winter 1998 issue of *The Santa Clara Review*. She is currently working on a collection of poems, which will be published by a+bend press.

Hung Q. Tu lives in sunny San Diego. He is a co-editor of Krupskaya and recent work may be found in *Poetics Journal*, *Crayon* and *POG One*.

Diane Ward's most recent book was *Human Ceiling* from Roof Books in 1995. Recent work appeared in *Crayon* 2. Forthcoming in 1999 is *Portraits & Maps*, a collaboration with artist Michael C. McMillen in a bilingual English/Italian edition. Co-editor with Phyllis Rosenzweig of *Primary Writing*, she lives in Santa Monica, CA.

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