

# Xcp 10

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ASSEMBLY POETICS IN THE GLOBAL ECONOMY: NICARAGUA  
(AN ESSAY BY BRUCE CAMPBELL)

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EDWIN TORRES, ROSMARIE WALDRUP, & OTHERS

AN INTERVIEW WITH NTOZAKE SHANGE (BY FREDERICK LUIS ALDAMA)

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*THE PRICE OF DISSENT: TESTIMONIES TO POLITICAL REPRESSION IN AMERICA,*  
*ALICE NOTLEY'S DISOBEDIENCE, & MUCH MORE*

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• ARTICULATION

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ALTERITY •







## ASSEMBLY POETICS IN THE GLOBAL ECONOMY: NICARAGUA

Bruce Campbell

The plane put me there. I went looking for meaning in the newspapers. This is a practice of mine no matter where I am. I suppose that I do what many people do in different places. I shake my way through the big pages, looking for signs that things are improving, or maybe getting worse. Under the Habermasian lens, reading in this respect pertains to the array of competencies and concerns of the public sphere, of the arena of discourse on collective interests and identities. But this contextualizing lens is complicated precisely by the matter of context. The signs I was looking for were of a kind peculiar to the place where I went to find them: Nicaragua. And yet, my reading there did not remove me entirely from the sphere of U.S. citizenship. Nicaraguan labor activists had recently visited Minneapolis as part of a campaign by organized labor to draw U.S. public support for union organizing in the Managua *maquila* zone. Their transnational movements, like my own, were organized to intersect with a national circulation of signs elsewhere. From the outset, therefore, the location of the sphere of public competencies in which my reading was to operate was an open question. The task of critical reading confronted me as a displaced endeavor, a form of cultural agency that appeared as out of place as it did necessary.

The motives of my reading, in the broadest of terms, arose from this unsettled relation between the procedures of an engaged cultural criticism (i.e., one that takes its objects and its own discourse to be inseparable from collective concerns) and the global horizon of its many current public contexts. Certainly, one of the public contexts for cultural criticism has been the historical form of the nation, circumscribing and motivating critique at once. (The paradigmatic lineage for this kind of criticism can perhaps be traced to Marx's "Eighteenth Brumaire.") Ideology critique and other modalities for the leveraging of transformative social movement from analytical discourse have operated not just within the context of the nation but, in an important sense, on the nation as a collective "state of mind" fastened to power in the administrative form of the nation-state. David Lloyd has demonstrated persuasively that the nation in this latter sense constitutes a two-sided form of subjectivity that is enjoined by state power and yet exceeds official order (Lloyd). For this same reason, the nation remains an indispensable category for the cultural politics of the so-called New World Order. Nonetheless, it is a virtual truism that the nation (whether considered as territorialized public context or collective "state of mind") maps uneasily onto the so-called age of globalization.

One can perceive this disjuncture concretely in the articulation of post-revolutionary Nicaragua with the global economy through disparate and overlapping transnational institutions, norms and practices. Whereas the Sandinista revolutionary project of the 1980s had organized the developmental trajectory of

Nicaragua around state power allied with a “patriotic bloc” of bourgeois, *campesino* and organized labor sectors, the post-revolutionary nation is organized for development through the subordination of local populations as a seemingly infinite surplus army of the unemployed, supplying the *maquiladoras* of the export sector with a cheap and vulnerable work force. The collapse of the revolutionary state gave way to the construction of a neo-liberal state, and in the process of the re-organization of official power the nation has been officially repositioned as a local enclave and agent for global capital. The residual forms of the Sandinista nation are not co-terminous with the neo-liberal nation under construction, although there is considerable overlap in the petty bourgeois subjectivity diagnosed by Orlando Nuñez as one of the ideological limits of Sandinismo (Nuñez, 1988, 108-9).

As has been noted from different global angles of interest, the collective concerns and conditions of Nicaragua cannot be easily disarticulated from those of organized labor in the United States (Brecher and Costello, 22). The assembly plants “there” are constitutive of conditions “here,” a contextual consideration for criticism that can be illustrated in its reverse corollary by the visits in 2000 to the U.S. of labor organizers from the Chentex textile plant in Managua. The public appeals of Nicaraguan labor activists to Minnesotans (as well as other strategic U.S. consumers) has helped to successfully bring local consumer pressure on large retail outlets such as Kohl’s in order to leverage a change in the labor practices of Taiwanese *maquila* owners in Managua. Conditions “here,” not surprisingly, are constitutive of conditions “there.” These same axiomatics of transnationalization can be identified along the axis of movement between Miami and Managua of the virulently anti-Sandinista former exile community.

If this state of affairs is unsettling for the received terms of cultural criticism, it also poses new critical obligations to perceive transnationally the terms of social and cultural crisis and transformation. Located amid the instabilities of what Arjun Appadurai calls the “transnation” (Appadurai, 173-77), cultural criticism is obliged to take the form of a kind of meta-deixis working through the transnational ligatures of the “here” and the “there.” The “here” and “there” of the global economy remain, however, significantly national loci. In fact, the form of the nation weighs heavily on Appadurai’s own theorizing where he names “America” (by which he means the U.S.) the site of the emergence of the form of the “transnation” – a designator contested by Latin Americans as a sign of U.S. regional hegemony.

Despite the imaginable comforts of embracing a “postnational” ethics (Appadurai, Shapiro), the nation insinuates itself for cultural criticism not only as another site to be traversed but as a collective subject whose agency bears upon the possibilities for democratic forms of economic, cultural and political life, wherever these might take place. Inasmuch as “globalization” shows signs of being synonymous with “Americanization,” what the form of the nation represents, meanwhile, must be opened to question. As Lloyd notes, nationalisms can represent

meaningful resistance to the cultural and ideological homogenization of the global order. On the other hand, transnational solidarity with the nation as a line of defense against “McWorld” hegemony cannot afford to be automatic if it wants to avoid implication in repressive instances of state power. Rather, “it is [the] conjunctural relation [of the nation] to other social movements that needs to be emphasized and furthered, at both theoretical and practical levels.” (Lloyd, 192)

If the category of the nation is pressured critically by the processes of globalization, the meaning of the “global” also remains unsettled, accented in mutually antagonistic fashion by transnational corporate elites and a host of non-commercial interests. This struggle, which gives new meaning to what Volosinov called the struggle over the “world of the sign” (Volosinov, 10), provides some indication of the strategic arenas of critical cultural competence. Examined closely, the character of the recent movement toward an alternative “globalization from below” (Brecher and Costello, 78-80) carries with it an implicit research agenda for cultural studies. Because of the hierarchical lines of conflict over the meaning of globalization (the central axis of which remains capital vs. labor), reading for the sphere of collective concerns must follow ever more closely the sign “on the ground,” as it were, seeking out those cultural forms that mediate collective concerns locally and nationally, but that are generally absented from the global media and marginal to the dominant discourse on globalization. Perhaps more importantly, the lines of conflict over the meaning of globalization correspond also to competing modalities of publicity, the dominant mode being that which has marked the term almost universally as a synonym for advertising and the cult of celebrity. The stakes of the clash of modes of production of public sense and sensibilities, recognized as collective experience by Negt and Kluge at an earlier moment of the national public sphere (Negt and Kluge), have been complicated by the transnationalization of experience. Meanwhile, there beneath the apparent brand-name and celebrity homogenization of the global order subsist a range of national cultural forms - associated with the nation-state and exceeding it significantly - that have historically contributed to the constitution of official and unofficial spheres for the articulation of collective interests, identities and action.

The research agenda that motivates my reading of Nicaraguan newspapers comprises working through the cultural archives of the national public sphere, which is, of course, what is categorically absented from publicity as constituted by the global mediations “from above.” In suggesting that nation-specific modes of publicity represent an archival region for struggles attendant to globalization, I do not intend to represent the nation and nationalism as the recalcitrant pre-history of the present in the manner of some celebrants of globalism. Rather, what is entailed here is a transposition of Michel Foucault’s figure of the archive as “a privileged region” of cultural analysis which aims at detailing the conditions of discursive practice (Foucault). As regards analysis of public discourse and practice in a global context, nation-specific forms of publicity cannot be excluded from an effort at “mapping the enunciative field” (Foucault) for the politics of globalization

any more than they can be discarded by efforts at alternative enunciations of the global.

### **Reading Nicaragua Reading Poetry**

With that in mind, here's the question I had composed for my reading: What is poetry doing in Nicaragua's daily newspapers? In Nicaragua, nation and poetry give the impression of a certain isomorphism. This is a place where poets are said to be a special kind of citizen - telling truths in verse, or making up stories, singing the praise and the dirges, noticing things that escape public attention, powering ideas around with the muscle of music, image, "voice." But Nicaraguan citizens are also characterized as poets; the Nicaraguan, as poet, represents a special kind of citizen who contrasts sharply with nationals elsewhere. In fact, many Nicaraguan intellectuals are fond of citing the "voice" of the poet as somehow fundamental to the national character. There are, of course, variations on this construction of the national. Here is a representative sampling of conservative discourse on the subject:

[T]he Nicaraguan enjoys positive attributes to his character that form his basic personality. We are referring, for example, to the facility for verbal communication, to his lively, creative and mythomaniacal imagination. Those characteristics make the Nicaraguan a poet, orator, salesman, negotiator, improviser, storyteller [Esos rasgos convierten al nicaragüense en poeta, orador, vendedor, negociador, improvisador, cuentista]. Of all of these, the most frequent is "poet," cultivated by all social classes and every age group. (Alvarez, 56-57) [N.B. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from the Spanish are my own.]

Nicaragua, and Nicaraguan national identity, in other words, is presented as an arrangement of associated social types articulated at the hinge of an essentialized voice. Tellingly, this is a literary voice by reference to the poet and to the storyteller, but it is one that insists upon presence, on the reversal of the critical Derridean axiom that writing comes before speech. The national character makes literature, not the other way around, or so we are told. The national character is invariable, shared and the author of, rather than authored by, constituting practices (i.e., politics). Nonetheless, the national "voice" that is made here to speak through and across variations in the social body is written as fundamentally poetic insofar as the traditional terms of *poiesis* (creativity, mythomania, imagination) insinuate themselves as cause, and not only effect, of the nation. Through the same scriptural procedure that amplifies the poetic "voice" of the nation, social antagonisms are flattened out, and class conflict disappears except as the trace cultural authority instituted in the subtle differentiation between poet and "poet."

The way in which this ideologically motivated articulation of the national is underwritten by poetic “voice” serves to provoke again, now with greater precision, the question that most interests me. Of what is poetry constitutive in Nicaragua? The question of what poetry is doing in Nicaragua necessarily restores politics to the “voicing” of the national. But, you will say to me, I wasn’t a reader of literature here, I was a reader of newspapers. I came looking for meaning in the newspapers. Still, I knew that not so long ago the Sandinista revolution (1979-1990) distinguished Nicaragua as the first nation for which poetry and sweeping social, economic and political change were closely identified. There were poetry workshops designed to create readers and writers of poetry, and readers and writers of poetry working at reading and writing the nation. Famously, “a nation of poets” was declared, pronounced, spoken, read into being in the 1980s. There was poetry in the newspapers, of all possible places for poetry to be.

This had been a sign of revolution. But the revolution is over, or so I read. Nonetheless, even the conservative version of the poet as derivative of the nation enables – indeed insists upon – an extra-literary, collective profile for poetry. The nationalizing of poetry continues to confront the concentration of cultural capital with popular dispersal, despite the conservative effort at ideological containment of this effect by suspending the value of the cultural agent between quotation marks when referring to the nation as a whole (i.e., “the most frequent is ‘poet,’ cultivated by all social classes”). Poetry, invested with national meaning, takes on a public frame of reference that outstrips the traditional aesthetic ideology of the literary. So, what is poetry doing in Nicaragua after the revolution? Particularly, what is poetry doing in the newspapers? These are unavoidably questions regarding the ideological construals of the nation.

The Sandinista revolution, the event from below that upended the Somoza dynasty once and for all in 1979, extended through the 1980s in the exercise of state power on the side of a possible nation, reaching for sovereignty, cultural democratization, equality and economic development. The terms of modernity – technology, rationality, democracy, capital – were to be determined in national terms. But Nicaragua was a nation whose nationhood (its sovereignty, its boundaries, its development as a distinctive locus for human development – the collective subject aspiring to set the terms of modernity) had been disrupted repeatedly by centers of power and wealth located elsewhere (read, especially, the United States). The core of the matter was whose national terms would be the determining ones as Nicaragua reached again across the wide, post-colonial gap yawning between conditions here and conditions there. Nationhood itself, as it turns out, is just such a differential to be determined.

The printed word matters in this regard, providing historically the “technical means for ‘re-presenting’ the kind of imagined community that is the nation” (Anderson, 25), as does the capitalist mode of production that historically has generated the expansion of technical means of all kinds, and that structures decision-making about conditions here and conditions there. Nationhood is,

therefore, a differential caught up in the technical means of representation and the structures of capitalism that organize those means. Consequently, the peripheral nation is a special instance of the “imagined community” – the imagination of “modern” community taking place on the outer perimeters of a modernity manufactured in the metropole. The peripheral nation is assembled at the margins of metropolitan modernity.

This also means that the Sandinista nation had emerged as a special instance of the peripheral nation, seeking to turn the margins of metropolitan modernity into a site of alternative modernity. The newspapers I went to read are themselves indexical signs of the revolutionary project. Where there is smoke, there was fire. The Sandinista nation was declared, pronounced, spoken, read into being in, among other venues, two new daily newspapers: *El Nuevo Diario* (1980) and *Barricada* (1979), both of Sandinista orientation. The previous monopoly on national newsprint of the conservative *La Prensa* found itself confronted by and losing ground to the growing circulation in print of this other nation. Although *Barricada* discontinued publication as a daily newspaper in 1997, *La Prensa* is still read by fewer people than *El Nuevo Diario*. Even now, the literacy rate remains significantly higher than before the revolutionary nation emerged. Another national daily, *La Tribuna*, was founded in 1993.

And in the newspapers one finds poems – not just then, but now as well. A nation of poets, it seems, shaking its way through the big pages, declares, speaks, reads itself there. There are poems about this and that; poems adjacent the crossword puzzle; epigraphic verse introducing editorial opinions; stories about poets in the culture section; poetry cited in the course of arguing about public policy in print; vituperative verse aimed corrosively at public figures; elegaic verse celebrating the individual life in lyrical biographies; editorial poems addressing issues of public concern on the opinion page, in the “politics” section.

One cannot miss certain signs. In *La Tribuna*, founded by bourgeois returnees – Nicaraguan capitalists who returned to the peripheral nation from the metropole only after the electoral defeat of the Sandinistas in 1990 – one reads an advertisement placed by the editors: “Se buscan poetas.” Poets wanted – the declaration hails readers as potential poets, and poets as electricians, plumbers, typists, to meet the market demand for product, for service. In *La Prensa*, poetry has been published often in the opinion section titled “La voz del pueblo.” This “voice of the people” conjugates easily letters to the editor with readers’ poems on issues of the day, sent in unsolicited. (A member of *La Prensa*’s staff explained to me how the editors often don’t know where to put these poems, opting for the Saturday literary supplement when the poem is deemed of “literary” quality.) In *El Nuevo Diario*, the “voice” of the people appeared through 1997 in the pungent editorializing verse of the pseudonymous “Juan Pueblo,” a poetical fixture of the opinion page.

With this in mind, I was reading poetry in the newspapers in Nicaragua in the post-revolutionary period (1990-2001). I was shaking my way through the

big pages, trying to determine what poetry was doing in the newspapers. I was looking into signs of present conditions. The national conditions available for perusal on a daily basis, turning from page to page, suggest unavoidably public circumstances for the poetical. Set in black ink and arranged in columns, a field of discourse is organized, yielding up representations of national realities, narratives, “voices,” issues of the day. Circumstances of life and death are described. An article refers to pre-requisites for the fulfillment of a contractual promise in a labor dispute. Appearing next to the horoscopes, a poem titled “I am Innocent!” addresses the reader in the first person: “...it is difficult for me to accept flags/borders,/and because of all the colors I prefer them all.” (“...me cuesta aceptar las banderas,/las fronteras,/y porque de los colores yo los prefiero a todos.” *El Nuevo Diario*, 7/18/93, 11). An opinion piece calls for limits to be set to commerce. Another one raises questions: Equality? Democracy? Speed limits for the rapid transit of capital? Someone suggests that limits are imposed by commerce – limits set to human development. A story describes distribution of food. A cursory reading on any given day turns up signs of exploitation, violence, broken things difficult to fix. In the *maquiladoras* there are hands assembling things the parts for which have arrived pre-fabricated from another place. A poem celebrates an historic figure on the anniversary of his death. Official corruption is intimated, described, alleged, denounced. Holes in the roof are visible in a photograph. In the reading room where I sit, there are groups of people looking for signs of change, newspapers rustling. A poem on the “Página de opinión” declares in its title “Impossible to be Silent.” (*El Nuevo Diario*, 2/6/96, 6)

What is poetry doing in the newspapers after the revolution? Some answers cannot be read off the surface of the newspaper. Reading for such answers is complicated further by the fact that some of the most fundamental answers can only be developed, assembled, organized, and not just given or received in a transparent exchange of messages. What’s more, as suggested above, the national conditions of development include national consciousness in development, practical consciousness – the development of a collective subject to set the terms of development.

A sense of conditions is therefore always assembled in the present. All of the formalities of present conditions – institutions, social formations, distribution of wealth, media of communication, etc. – have what Raymond Williams called “effective presence.” That is to say, conditions are not just received, ready-made from the past (or from elsewhere in the present) as fixed and clearly delineated social forms; they are also “lived, actively, in real relationships, and moreover in relationships which are more than systematic exchanges between fixed units. Indeed just because all consciousness is social, its processes occur not only between but within the relationship and the related.” (Williams, 130) Effective presence thus corresponds also to an *affective* presence, to a practical social consciousness lived as “an unease, a stress, a displacement, a latency” (Williams, 130) within

the received institutions, materials, structures, rituals and media of the official social order.

The question of what poetry is doing in Nicaragua is also therefore a matter of feeling the presence of people feeling their way through structures. The signs one reads are not just conventions, forms, but entail a certain concentration of feeling through forms – a felt relation to received conventions that Raymond Williams characterized as “structures of feeling.” (Williams, 128-35) Not long ago verse was organized into signs of revolutionary conditions in Nicaragua, of revolutionary agency, of the affective presence of a nation located outside the sphere of metropolitan influence – a certain kind of national feeling. Now, however, national feeling, of whatever kind, is immersed baptismally in international waters, everywhere. One must acknowledge, with the strictest irony, that the utopics of globalization touch every place on earth.

Under these circumstances I now return to my reading. In Nicaragua, poetry was a way of making signs of the future, of the past, of the present, organized around, in, by a nation under revolutionary development. Now what does it do?

**Sign, #1:**

An essay on the *Página de Opinión* of *El Nuevo Diario*, dated December 28, 1998, situates the nation in the context of globalization in the following terms:

Globalization has only one sign. It can never be an aggregate system of law, but rather a system of capitalist values, acting as a communicative vessel between nations. It is logical that we cannot ask that our Nicaragua be an economic power, but we can ask that it have a conscious, effective State in which there is respect for human rights and the law.

The global sign and the national subject are contrapositives in the author’s appeal on behalf of “our Nicaragua.” The advocate of the national, speaking as if he were a defense attorney whose client faces a public tribunal, goes on to argue about the development of the nation. His point of departure is that the nation has not yet developed – a commonplace rather than an extraordinary claim in Nicaragua. The author insists that the very possibility of a national identity, of the development of what he terms a “new kind of citizen and society,” is compromised by the unequal modernizing forces of globalization. (The manufacture of metropolitan modernity increasingly emphasizes assemblage at the periphery on behalf of the metropole. The national terms of modernity are arrested everywhere, placed on trial.) On the author’s view, the transnationalization of capitalist production does not mean well for the fate of the nation. As capital moves across sovereign boundaries, the sovereignty of the national subject is also transgressed. The author seems unsettled especially by the technical means of development: “technology carries with it social changes and the opening of



markets, deploying its effects toward the interior of the country, and consequently penetrates the will of the social being faced with the state of things.”

In other words, the state of things is troubling both inside and outside this national subject. What the citizen-advocate posits as the national moral will finds its locus in the citizen, and is invaded there by what he identifies as the techno-capitalist sign of the global. There, in its home, it is rendered inert, in the midst of, in the thick of, the troubling “state of things.” It is at this critical moment – in point of fact, at this critical site – that the author responds to the national moral crisis of the will with a lengthy quotation from Rubén Darío’s 1885 poem “Ecce Homo”:

You, those above, the nobility/ powerful, tyrannical;/ you make thievish use of your hands and nails/ and you wind up headless./ What is your power?/ To have mercenary adulators/ who take from you your surplus/ swinging fragrant censers;/ to eat pretty good;/ to have your intestines stuffed like sausage/ and to live on the throne on high/ like a pig in the mud.

[Vosotros, los de arriba, la nobleza,  
poderosos, tiranos;  
usáis mucho las uñas y las manos  
y venís a quedaros sin cabeza.  
¿Qué es vuestro poderío?  
Tener aduladores mercenarios  
que os quiten el hastío  
manejando olorosos incensarios;  
comer bastante bueno;  
tener el intestino bien relleno  
y vivir en el trono en alto rango  
como cerdo en el fango.]

At the locus of crisis, the “voice” of the nation hails from below, speaks back to, the global order. The dead poet’s discourse enters into complicity with the argument of the essayist. What the literary critic would term the poetic voice, released now from the generic constraints of the literary by the criticism of the citizen, constructs and addresses the “headless” subjects of capitalist globalization, insisting upon the moral dereliction of their rule. The dominant class position is named and coded as base, as are the entitlements toward which the globalizing subject aspires. It remains for the advocate of the national only to draw out his argument with a brief but pointed, morally-charged coda, his own “voice” plangent with that of the poet, hailing now the nation in turn. What Nicaragua needs is less grasping with the hands and nails, and greater moral substance in its public life.

The “headless” global order must be overturned by a right thinking national citizenry. And, it goes without saying - because the poetic subject denouncing “those above” says it so well in person – that Rubén Darío is a good place to start. Rubén Darío, Nicaraguan poet and inventor of *modernismo*, “the prince of Spanish letters,” is re-animated, called up from the dead to censure the global elite and excoriate the globalizing subject from the national. Among the resources of the nation, as it turns out, one may count verse. Against the sign of globalization, the sign of the poet.

## **Sign, #2:**

Earlier the same year, the U.S. State Department publishes an annual report on commercial conditions in Nicaragua, prepared by the U.S. embassy staff in Managua for the U.S. business community. The *Country Commercial Guide* reports are developed by U.S. embassies around the world in collaboration with other U.S. agencies, and draw heavily upon the State Department’s *Country Reports on Economic Policy and Trade Practices*, mandated under section 2202 of the Omnibus Trade and Competitiveness Act of 1988 (P.L. 100-418). The reports are modeled on the State Department’s annual country-by-country human rights reports, mandated since the Carter administration (and the beginnings of the Sandinista revolution). Testifying to the dominant discourse on globalization, the U.S. State Department speaks of its differences with Nicaragua in the *Country Commercial Guide* under the rubric “Major Roadblocks to Doing Business”:

The major roadblocks are:

\*Resolution of commercial and investment disputes is unpredictable. The legal system is cumbersome. The enforcement of judicial rulings is uncertain and sometimes subject to non-legal considerations.

\*The government’s slow resolution of claims on properties confiscated during the Sandinista era (including numerous U.S. citizen properties) sours the investment climate, although foreign investment in real estate is now increasing. Potential investors should consult a local attorney to carefully verify property titles before purchasing property.

\*Port and highway infrastructure is substandard. Import tariffs and taxes are high on many items, although these should drop significantly under the new tax law.

\*Nicaragua’s intellectual property rights regime is outmoded. (United States State Department, FY 1998 Country Commercial Guide, “Nicaragua”)

The global order dresses down the nation. (The identity of the “potential investors” is indicated only obliquely by the necessity of “a local attorney,” but there can be no doubt that these are operatives of the global sign, examining the teeth of the nation. The United States provides the only national terms clearly

available under this sign, and even these go unmentioned.) One doesn't need to go looking for this sign in Nicaraguan newspapers; this kind of talk circulates everywhere else. But one also finds it in the news, in the discourse that presents the news, as the news itself, in public opinion. The techno-capitalist sign of the global addresses the nation; in the address to the nation, the nation is constructed anew, addresses itself, and consequently speaks in a "voice" conscious of having been dressed down on the global stage.

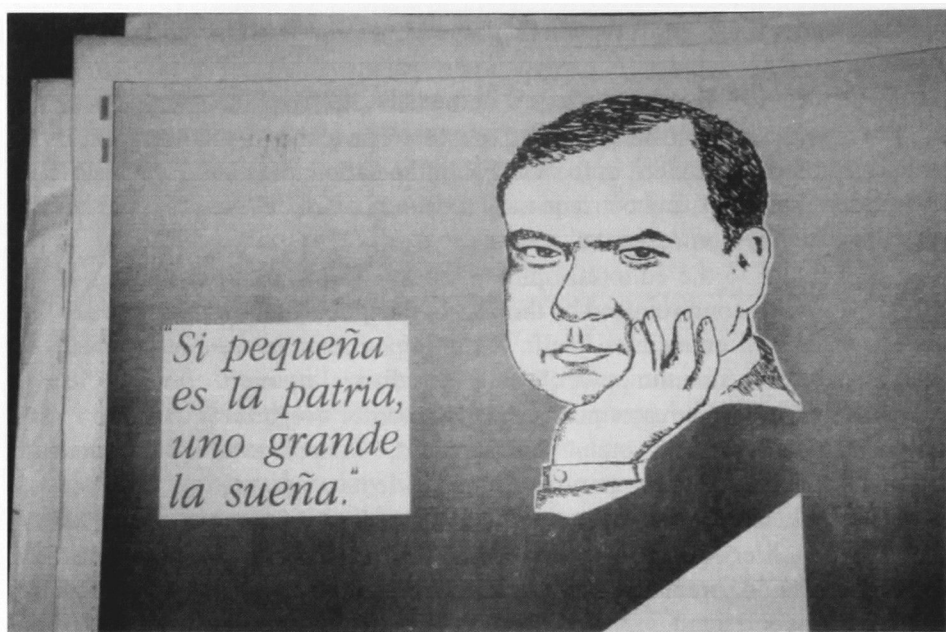
I return to the editorial opinion essay. The will of the citizen, of the public "voice," is compromised by the sign of the global at the very moment of its speech, even as it enunciates itself: "It is logical that we cannot ask that our Nicaragua be an economic power," says the editorial opinion. One can hear in the citizen's speech the resonance of the global order's regard for the nation. The nation is "slow," "cumbersome," "substandard," "unpredictable," "outmoded." It is all quite logical that this nation cannot decide its economic fate, let alone ask for a favorable decision elsewhere. You don't go looking for this kind of talk; it comes to you, everywhere. You do not read it so much as it reads you, construes you. You must do something with it. There must be some exchange. The global order looks over the nation. The nation looks back, "uncertain."

The citizen-advocate of the voice of Darío, and thereby a version of the nation-as-subject, is marked by a moralizing professionalism, a concern with logic and the rules, insistence on the agency of the intellect and an acknowledgement that economic decisions lie beyond his powers. Re-read sign, #1: the local attorney, middle class professional, faces off with a global order that instrumentalizes him.

### **Sign, #3:**

In a full page paid advertisement for the Banco Mercantil (see figure 1), Rubén Darío faces the reader and speaks: "If the *patria* is small, one dreams it large." Here's the poet looking back at the public that reads him. Here's the voice of the poet instructing the reader in the work of the imagined community; here's his gaze supervising the task. The statement has the quality of one of those compensatory admonishments designed to stifle complaint about injustice and emphasize instead what is proper, what is "one's own": If life gives you lemons, you make lemonade. Distribution isn't the problem; one's imagination is.

Let us examine more closely what is assembled here: poetry, the poet, the newspaper, advertising, the nation. The image is an advertisement for the Banco Mercantil, the first privately-owned bank incorporated in Nicaragua after the Sandinista period. The image and text were published in *La Tribuna* in 1994, and reproduced in later years as well. The primary technical means for the representation of the "kind of imagined community that is the nation" remains print after nearly two hundred years of nationhood. The medium of the nation also conjures other matters, however: "Most business advertising and trade promotion in Nicaragua is conducted through the print media." (United States State Department, FY 1998 Country Commercial Guide)



**figure 1: Detail of advertisement for Banco Mercantil, *La Tribuna*, 2/1/94.**

The imagined community pieced together around the ready-made Darío represents a specific predication on the national subject. Both the Banco Mercantil and *La Tribuna* were founded by the Montealegre family, members of the most dynamic segment of the Nicaraguan bourgeoisie in the early post-revolutionary period – capitalists who had fled the country during the revolutionary period and returned in the 1990s, investing in the export and finance sectors (Spalding). The transnational movement of capital behind the image provides a telling contrast to the print medium. The means of representation in Nicaragua remain, in fact, decidedly national in their printed character, despite the close association between transnational capital and telecommunications networks globally. Darío regards the reader from the precarious intersection of the national and the global.

The image of the citizen-poet offered by Darío's gaze is caught up in, and projects the nation out of, this intersection of nationally-grounded print medium and transnational capital. However, communication technology and capital are not entirely impersonal; they are also a matter of what is proper, what is property. The image of the nation as sedimented in the image of the citizen-poet is animated by this logic. If Darío's presence in the image appears strangely disembodied - drawn out of context in much the same way as the verse presented has been removed from the lyrical body of its origins - it is because this image and these lines of verse also appear on the 100 *córdoba* note. The poet decapitated, his headless body elsewhere, declaims in verse that circulates as property. The

projection of the nation through the mediations of print capital produce, in this instance, an image that is simultaneously a symbol of and for the imagined community, and an iconic sign of private property. The materials and work of the poet and those of the entrepreneur are articulated tightly. Dreaming the nation large takes on an entrepreneurial cast, requires an investment of capital.

The reader looks at Darío looking back, and knows the poet means business. The nation's cultural subject and its economic subject appear as one and the same in this transnational predication upon the poet, in this presentation of the poet as the articulating medium (in a collective séance) bringing the national into line with the global economic order.

**Sign, #4:**

Solo puede ser el fin del mundo que ya viene!

Arthur Rimbaud  
(Traducción libre)

El solitario no hace comparaciones.  
El solitario se echa con la muerte  
y se levanta viudo.

Por las noches se purifica.  
En limpias, profundísimas aguas  
se sumerge.

El solitario no conoce la soledad:  
el mundo lo acompaña.

Ernesto Mejía Sánchez

La décima optosilaba:

**La Calumnia**

Puede una gota de lodo  
sobre un diamante caer,  
puede también de este modo  
su fulgor obscurecer;  
pero aunque el diamante todo  
se encuentre de fango lleno,  
el valor que lo hace bueno  
no perderá ni un instante,  
y ha de ser siempre diamante  
por más que lo manche el cieno.

Rubén Darío

Si algo traigo para decir, dispensadme,  
en el bello camino lo he olvidado.  
Por un descuido me comí la espuma,  
perdonadme, que vengo enamorado.

Joaquín Pasos

**Ocho de noviembre**

Carlos Fonseca Amador: Nació  
cuando no pudieron  
matarlo, porque es  
de los muertos que  
nunca mueren.

Leonel Rugama/Tomás Berge

**figure 2: Carlos Fonseca and sundry poems – Barricada, November 4, 1995**

In the weekly cultural supplement to *Barricada*, I come across an assemblage of short poems organized visually around a photograph of Carlos Fonseca Amador, co-founder and chief intellectual architect of the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional. While Fonseca is not addressed directly in most of the poems, the personalized empiricism of the photograph presents him

in such a way that the adjacent poems are infused with the lyrical figure of apostrophe – the emphatic evocation of the dead through personal address. Oddly enough, the visual-scriptural arrangement of poems and photograph situates together, as belonging to the same legible space, a poem by Darío on the subject of slander, a first person verse by Joaquín Pasos - of the *vanguardista* generation that had broken with Darío's *modernismo* in the 1930s and 1940s - and a brief epitaph-like poem apparently co-authored by Tomás Borge, last surviving founding member of the FSLN leadership, and Leonel Rugama, a Sandinista militant and poet killed by the National Guard in 1970.

A couple of details are important here in reading through the montage of poetic history constituting Fonseca's lyrical aura. The first of these is a matter of contextual detail: the text at hand was published in 1995, after several years during which anti-Sandinista ideologues had attempted to destroy Fonseca's tomb in Managua. Reactionary efforts to obliterate the public vestiges of the Sandinista revolution had included, early in the transition from Sandinista rule, bomb attacks on Fonseca's tomb and on a nearby monument to the revolutionary proletarian and campesino sectors. At the same time, the anti-Sandinista mayor of Managua, Liberal Arnoldo Alemán, directed public monies to the destruction of Sandinista murals. In the words of Juan Pueblo: "It is the cruel and destructive work/ of meanness without a soul,/ of those who do not tolerate culture/ and instead of a brain possess a hole." (Es la tarea cruel y destructora/ de los canallas que no tienen alma,/ de los que no toleran la cultura/ y por cerebro tienen cualquier cosa. *El Nuevo Diario*, 1/8/93, 4). Alemán's Managua administration (1990-1995) also implemented a strategy that would continue with his presidency (1996-2001): the promotion of Catholic cultural projects for the official public sphere aiming to displace further Sandinista public discourse and presence in public space. (*Alemanista* cultural politics would eventually culminate in the supplanting of the Plaza Carlos Fonseca adjacent Lake Managua with the Plaza de la Fe "Juan Pablo II" in 2000.) The embattled status of Fonseca as patriot had also been complicated by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the public discrediting of socialist politics.

This context, characterized by the corrosion and defacing of the monumental referents for collective memory of the revolution, is determinative of the peculiar accenting of the Darío poem made possible by its juxtaposition to Fonseca's photograph. The eight syllable *décima* comprises an argument regarding the perdurance of value despite the corrosiveness of slander: "Perhaps a dribble of mud may/ down upon a diamond fall;/ and perhaps also in this way/ the gem's light darkness might befall ... the value that makes it good will/ be lost not even a moment..." (Puede una gota de lodo/ sobre un diamante caer;/ puede también de este modo/ su fulgor obscurecer . . . el valor que lo hace bueno/ no perderá ni un instante). Darío's metaphorical characterization of slander as "mud" is thus contrasted to the newly accented "diamond" that represents the truth, purity and strength of Fonseca's character.

The appearance of Darío in the newspapers is one of the constants of post-revolutionary public discourse. Of course, this is not a new phenomenon. In fact, the cultural capital invested in the modernist poet has long been caught up in ideological struggles over the articulation of national identity with state power (Whisnant, 313-43). The writings of Fonseca himself include an article that attributed the impoverished state of Darío's literary legacy within Nicaragua to the U.S.-backed Somoza regime (Fonseca, 407-408). However, whereas Darío had been appropriated for and adequated to Sandinista discourse, Sandinismo maintained its emphasis on Sandino as the principal monument of revolutionary national identity. In the post-revolutionary period, Darío has emerged as the hegemonic point of reference for legitimation of competing projects of national identity. In a sense, this state of affairs signifies a return to the *status quo ante* as regards the exercise of cultural hegemony, which during the Somoza regime was structured around an elite, apolitical Darío whose cosmopolitanism and "cultured" character determined his utility as official national referent.

Unlike the pre-Sandinista period, however, there is not currently a stable official Darío. Although Darío has attained a renewed centrality and dominance in struggle over the articulation of nation with state power, one can perceive within the nuanced mobilizations of Darío in public discourse fractious extra-official predications on the nation. In other words, in the various revivals of Darío's "voice" one encounters differential articulations of the nation, with the dead poet speaking from the nation's "interior" in each case. (One can imagine a very different Darío speaking to the question of value in the poem on slander, were this poem accented by the discourse of the finance sector instead of a Sandinista militancy in retreat.) The recycling of Darío's verse for the representation of competing, seemingly mutually exclusive projections of the nation suggests that the medium of struggle is not interpretation, as suggested by Whisnant (Whisnant, 313-14), but the very lyric discourse guaranteed by the poet.

What this entails can be rendered legible by attending to the second noteworthy detail of the *Barricada* text. The Borge/Rugama epitaph represents a poetic recycling of a famous anecdote: imprisoned together in the 1960s, Borge and Rugama were falsely informed by their jailers that Fonseca had been killed. According to legend, their response was to say that Fonseca could not be killed because he was one of the dead that do not die. The epitaph that accompanies Fonseca's image inscribes the legend lyrically: "Carlos Fonseca/ Amador: He was born/ when they could not/ kill him..." (Carlos Fonseca/ Amador: Nació/ cuando no pudieron/ matarlo...). Notably, Borge's is the only "voice" on the printed page associated with a living body. And yet, the visual and scriptural texts arranged here bespeak a collection of first person subjects whose subjective mode of address to the reader stages an inter-subjective scenario.

The proper names of the poets, each associated with an instance of poetic "voice," lend themselves to the construction of a first person plural subject, arrayed alongside the eyes of Fonseca and the discourse of Pasos – "If there is something

I have to say..." (Si algo traigo para decir..."). The subjects of the discursive composite in this visual space include Fonseca, who looks out at the reader from the newspaper, and other dead whose poetry is entered into the public record as evidence that they do not die. The reader, and these other subjects spoken in verse and image, are oriented to the present by the prescience of history. That they cohabit the same historical moment despite the existential separations imposed by mortality is a fact presaged in the prior moment of struggle inscribed in verse. The reader faces a nation of dead who do not die, an extra-official nation that defies the death sentence issued by the official order. The lyrical staging of this scene does not place a timeless Darío at its center; its drama arises from the fact that the life of these dead can only be secured by the reader.

### **Sign, #5:**

The nation of the dead that I read in the eyes of Fonseca and the poetical speech that bears him up in public discourse does not represent an idiosyncratic moment in the editing of *Barricada*, nor are the ingredients of this discursive composite restricted to the Saturday literary supplements. Returning to the images above (figures 1 and 2) and surveying others in print, the dead literally look in on the living from the inked pages of the newspapers. The presence of the dead poet, citizen, militant is made inter-subjective by the "head shot" or by the photographic image framed around a figure that regards the reader from a place in history. The nation of the dead conjured in the *Barricada* text, and legible elsewhere also, is most strongly felt in relation to Sandinista discourse regarding "heroes and martyrs" of the revolution, but it cannot be reduced to Sandinismo in the post-revolutionary period because of the implication of the latter in governing structures and discourses of official neo-liberalism. Rather, the nation of the dead is a nation that is both lyrical and oppositional vis-a-vis official determinations of the nation and national history.

Evidence of a counter-official nation of the dead abounds, although it cannot be precisely delimited. An image of national life in negative circulates in the post-revolutionary period on the anniversaries of the signal deaths of the imagined community, those deaths that mark out the profile of a collective project left undone. This image is comprised of historical absences, or rather absences made by history and filled back in by the work of collective memory. Newspaper editor Pedro Joaquín Chamorro makes an appearance, most frequently in *La Prensa*, but often in *El Nuevo Diario*, usually in January near the anniversary of his 1978 assassination by Somoza's hired thugs. Carlos Fonseca appears in November, in the Sandinista dailies, during commemoration of his death in battle during the insurrection against the Somoza regime. Darío commonly makes appearances in February, in all of the papers. Sandino typically steps into newsprint in February, around the anniversary of his 1934 assassination. Sandinista militants gunned down by Somoza's national guard, such as Roberto Huembes and Eduardo Contreras, occasionally appear, as do pre-Sandinista poets Edwin Castro and



Rigoberto López, implicated in the assassination of Anastasio Somoza García in 1956.

The nation of the dead is evoked in editorial discourse, poetry and photographs. The nation of the dead is a lyrical one in several senses. Photographs of revolutionary Sandinista “heroes and martyrs,” of “exemplary citizen” Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, of guerrilla leader Augusto César Sandino, of Rubén Darío and other poets are frequently accompanied by verse. Verse is often directed to the dead, and just as often originates from the dead, as with the image (figure 3) of Edwin Castro accompanied by short poems he wrote while in prison, shortly before his death at the hands of prison guards in 1960. And there is always that frontal address to the reader articulated by the first person portraiture of the photograph, generally augmented and intensified by poetical enunciation that interpellates the reader through first person discourse, as with Castro’s “Rain” (Lluvia): “It rains,/ the breeze enters/ greasing up the cell bars:/ it has drenched my face/ and painted my hands with memories.” (Llueve,/ la brisa se entra/ pingando los barrotes de la celda:/ ha empapado mi rostro,/ y me pintó las manos de recuerdos. *Barricada*, 2/17/96, 5).

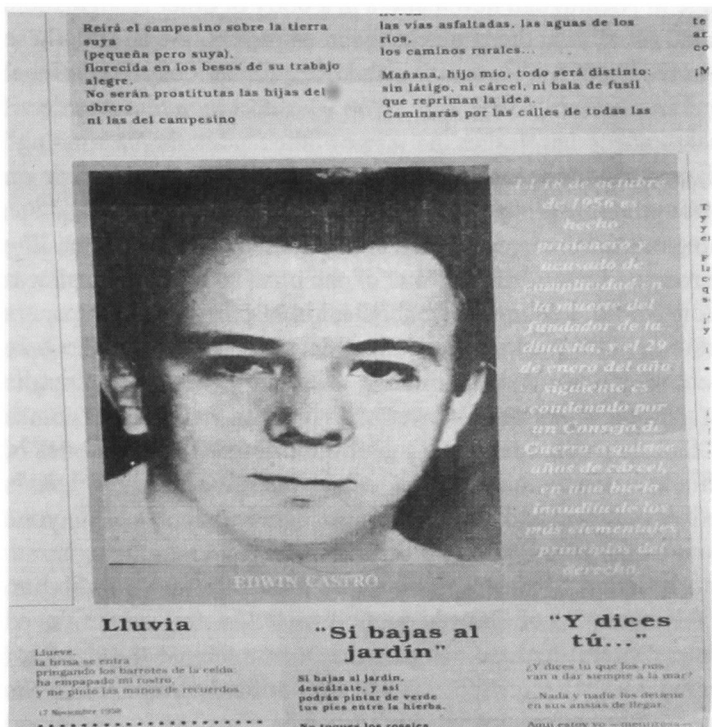


figure 3: Edwin Castro and selected prison poems.

In order to discern the affective presence of lyrical discourse for the nation of the dead, it is necessary to draw out the terms of the image with greater

clarity. Specifically, alongside the discourse of newspaper poetry, the reader must come to terms with the photographic image. In surveying photographs taken by Koen Wessing in Nicaragua during the 1979 insurrection, Roland Barthes draws a useful distinction between what he terms *studium*, or the broad cultural field of legible signifiers constituting what is of interest to the general reader, and *punctum*, the piercing detail of the photographic image that cuts through the *studium* and provokes a concrete sense of historical experience (Barthes, 22-27). The critical principle of Barthes' discursive duality is recognition of the ideological character of the disinterestedly general layer of signification that settles into place to screen out historical consciousness in mass media photography, despite the fact that the photographic medium is always also contingent – i.e., close to historical experience in its concrete referentiality.

The general legibility of the *studium* would correspond, in Nicaraguan news photography that concerns the dead, to those overarching signifieds that are the building blocks of the linear movement of official history: historic moments in the past, an abstract nationhood, the value of patriotism, the exceptional biography. What Barthes calls the *studium* of the photograph moves in and around each individual image in Nicaraguan newspapers in a body of other recognizable images, all reproduced ritually on the pages of the newspapers. As a field, these dead walk together as the background, the rank and file companions, of a national line of march toward an inevitable official present. Barthes' *punctum*, the detail of the lived historical moment that flashes in the eye of the reader, the “wounding” presence of the real, arises in the regarding eyes of the dead. The dead look in on the reading nation from the inked pages of the national record.

Each hero regards the reader in an exchange of glances, the dead regarding the living, and vice versa. This is, in fact, one of the most strikingly consistent details of the repertoire of funereal images published in Nicaragua's newspapers – the formal composition of the portrait, the look of the citizen returning the gaze of the camera. There are no accidental gestures, no blurred motion, nothing is wasted. And in that reciprocal glance of viewer and viewed, where each becomes the Other, one can feel the reader recognizing in the briefest flash a model of historical agency, the flesh of a nation in action, whose presence indicates what is lacking under current conditions, and whose absence is made palpable. If anyone speaks in this exchange of citizens' gazes, it is the poet.

Indeed, the lyricism of these photographs casts, retrospectively, an intriguing light on the examples of Darío's poetic “voice” in action introduced earlier in my reading. After all, these also suggest a reviving of the dead for public speech. One might want to conclude that the similarities between the nation of the dead and those other nations cited above (middle class professional and transnational capitalist) lie in the projection of the nation through the inter-subjective speech of the dead poet. The difference, however, is that with the collective nation of the dead Darío is integrated to a nation that defies officialdom

and his “voice” is interchangeable with that of others in the “voicing” of counter-official citizenship.

Whereas other ideologically-motivated inflections of Darío position the modernist poet centrally as model citizen-subject for the national public order, the nation of the dead confronts the reader with the related tasks of collective memory and struggle against official predations on the body politic – against the regimented forgetting of historical experience forwarded by the adequation of the nation to the neo-liberal state. For the same reason, while the lyrical nation instantiated here coincides in some respects with Sandinismo, given the latter’s complicated relationship to the post-revolutionary official order the counter-official nation exceeds Sandinismo significantly. The present and the past, the reading citizen and the poet, the living and the dead are conjugated in a poetic voice that declares itself Nicaraguan and poet in the same breath as it defends those dead threatened by the official order. It is this defense of the dead which represents the principal counter-official axis of the politics of poetry in the newspapers of post-revolutionary Nicaragua.

### **Conclusion:**

The post-revolutionary period in Nicaragua is characterized by heightened tensions between the global and national orders as adversarial frameworks and loci for development. Poetry published, cited or mobilized in newsprint partakes of this antagonism via its correspondence with a discursive field of subject constitution, including extra-official national subjects, that opens in the newspapers. Following the decline of Sandinista cultural hegemony, the figure of Rubén Darío emerged as the dominant poetical mover of this field in the print media, combining cultural capital with the individual embodiment of citizenship, transcendent national cultural agency and public “voice.” The “voice” of the modernist poet bespeaks the nation in interested fashion. But obvious lines of cleavage between nation and globalization dissolve, upon closer examination, into numerous fractured and conflictual - albeit at times overlapping – articulations of the poet with the nation. Ideological predications on this “voice” include the clash, if somewhat subdued, of middle class professional appropriations of Darío for a nationalist individualism (see Sign, #1) against bourgeois efforts to adequate the citizen-poet subject to the economic agency of the entrepreneur and legitimation of the export and finance sectors (Sign, #3).

The differential articulations of poetical discourse in post-revolutionary Nicaragua are indicative of the antagonistic textures of the national imaginary in the context of globalization. Far from being a stable mediation of a territorial administration as *sui generis* and uniquely legitimate in its executions of power, the nation under construction in post-revolutionary Nicaragua is legibly contested. The legitimate exercise of state power hinges in part on the hyphen that secures power in the form of the nation-state. Of course, it is not the existence of the nation that is placed in question in post-revolutionary Nicaraguan poetry, but rather

its character. This latter term is a rich one, the polysemic valences of which are quite appropriate for elaborating on the cultural work of Nicaraguan newspaper poetry. Whether as moral substance or literary figure, this poetry construes and contests the national character in the public sphere.

The poet, construed as heroic combatant, morally-grounded citizen, civic-minded republican, or selfless martyr, is presented as a model national subject. From this position “inside” the very substance of the nation, the “voice” of the poet also enters into the public record as a moment of or referent for public propositions of different kinds. Globalization, nation, justice and poverty are themes of collective concern treated, argued and propounded upon lyrically in the print media. Differences of opinion abound, of course, as do differences in “voice.” But, and this is vital to understanding what poetry is doing in Nicaraguan newspapers, the public propositions forwarded in verse are not co-terminous with the “content” thematized explicitly. Rather, the poetic “voice” itself represents, arguably, the most publicly significant propositional content forwarded in newsprint poetics. Despite obvious differences in ideological “content,” what matters most is the forms of subjectivity conjured in and by poetical discourse.

In this respect, it would be a mistake to reduce the poetic “voice” of the post-revolutionary period to that of Darío alone; the very mutability of the modernist poet’s “speech” in public discourse suggests that poetry surfaces in public media as a kind of ventriloquism through which the voicing of the public interest moves from body to body. The range of ideological predications on Darío is in turn implicated in the discursive constitution of reading subjects as poetic subjects – subjects of/for poetry or the poetical (i.e., creativity) positioned in relation to the global and the national. The subjectivity posited in Nicaraguan newspaper poetry (poetry plus the deictical markers of public discourse – i.e., one reads as a member of the nation, as a citizen, here in this place, among others of similar concerns) interjects an inter-subjective mode into the otherwise one-sided subjectivity of reading journalistic discourse. The “empty, homogeneous time” necessary for imagining the nation as a coherent space (Anderson, 22-36), supported in the third person “objectivity” of reporting conventions and the shared date line of the breadth of reportage, is ruptured by poetry with modes of address that assemble readers around concrete historical agents and experiences and invade the temporal abstractions of the linear calendar with revivals of the past.

The interpellative operations of public discourse and the exercise of forms of public authority are here concretized discursively in I-Thou relationships that traverse not only space (the territory of the nation) but time as well (the nation as imaginative construct). Both the Darío-centered and the collective lyricism in newsprint are characterized by an almost exclusive masculinity, an unspoken sign of dominance. However, the kind of inter-subjectivity special to the lyrical nation of the dead is grounded not only by reference to national history and collective memory, but also by the loving aura of the interpersonal. The reader and the dead regard one another. One does not only read, one is read, in a sense, by history.

The nation of the dead assembled lyrically is distinguishable from Darío-centered voicing of the nation by its ultimately collective character (Darío is one among other protagonists of the nation), and by its constitution against officialdom and domination. The scene of reading becomes the site of defense of an agency that is doubly threatened by the official order – first via physical oppression, then via collective forgetting. The interpersonal character of this nation lends itself to an imaginable unboundedness, a kinetic charge, where the poetically inclined might imagine the re-surfacing of counter-official historical agents (such as women) as yet still buried beneath the sediment of dominant historical memory.

I began my reading with the question of what poetry is doing in the newspapers in post-revolutionary Nicaragua. But there are other critical questions left to be raised. The reader will reasonably ask what I am doing here. What is it that I am assembling with my reading? The question is a critical one, and suggests that I turn my attention to feelings and structures away from “there,” alighting instead on the “here,” attending now to the locus of this authorship, asking for a critical self-awareness. Nationals, occupying different local positions on a globalized map, feel their way through structures, conditions and problems differently. The global conditioning of the national includes transnational movements (of capital, of social bodies, etc.), circulation of discourse and, increasingly, de-nationalized state power exercised as “the coactive or juridical force of the interests of globalization,” for which the common good becomes ever more illegible, everywhere (Núñez, 1998, 81). If there is an immediate practical purpose to my reading, it is to draw into contact readers of poetry, readers of Nicaragua, and readers of the global.

My evocation of readership, one will have noticed, speaks to the discernment of collective concerns and interests. What are the local and national conditions for the enunciation of an alternative transnationalism? What might be the national conditionings of the global effected in transnational encounters, (between readers and poets, Nicaraguan and U.S. citizens, in this case)? As a practical question, as a question regarding the development of the terms of development of such matters, the answer is not an easy one to articulate. Nor is it, in the end, mine alone to give. For this practical reason, I cannot help but direct the same question back to you, fellow reader, as you join me in reading. What are we doing here, assembled around these revolutionary dead? Is this just a distant, studious interest? Or might it perhaps be something else?

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## TRANSPARENCIES

*Ranjani Neriya*

some sorties are just  
leaf and rumble  
a ceaseless universe  
that does not allow sleep

*the axle's needle wail  
on puckered macadam  
means an oxen team is  
burdened with pain*

some clouds do not rain  
merely skim darkling waves  
while the beached shell's sandy mouth  
fills with sky

*a candle must burn somewhere  
at both ends to  
demonize a god, cause  
sudden midnight at noon*

transparencies  
redefining perspective  
in this cerebral chink between  
darkness ahead, darkness behind

be bone-eased, riven  
with heart-hum, monkish  
in a fluid cowl of light

who has seen beginning  
or told the end  
as is where is, is

something like promise  
stole out of forest plush  
sheer as algae

bequest of race  
unloseable fissional grain  
unafraid to deviate

finger reach into  
arabesque, water stoked  
paradisaal air

sea salt spun, synaptic  
dew-drum nettled  
in theta rush

rowels cast in ambergris  
seed pearl glume dangled  
for your sole sipping

and lo, eyes are still not done  
fleeing from crag to stone  
clay-struck, malleable

layered to keep search  
for suffering alive  
never to give up dying

this long passing is,  
life is, so many waves  
lapping pure the shore



***DIVING***  
**“A ONE-ACT PLAY”**

by  
May Mahala

## CAST OF CHARACTERS

RACINE  
EL CAPITAIN  
THE FLYING DUTCHMAN  
MAN  
WOMAN/ FLIGHT ATTENDANT  
BEBE

## TIME

Dream Time

## PLACE

The World. Specifically: America, West Africa, Scandinavia, and Outer Space.

## CODE OF CONDUCT

Empty parentheses are used to indicate a large silence. Mathematically () = pause

## CASTING NOTE

RACINE, EL CAPITAIN, and THE FLYING DUTCHMAN are all to be played by women. RACINE must be African-American, the other characters may be decided upon by the director. I envision either an all black cast or a multi-cultural cast with THE FLYING DUTCHMAN, RACINE, and EL CAPITAIN each being a different race. The actress who plays WOMAN should also play FLIGHT ATTENDANT.

## **SCENE 1.**

In the beginning.

LIGHTS come up slowly on a figure in the dark.

RACINE begins to move her fingers slightly, then her arms. She begins to twitch. She opens her eyes, blinking. She twitches and jerks and flails her limbs violently, then suddenly she is still.

The lights come all the way up.

RACINE

Born out of ashes, dust to dust we come back to ourselves. Red root, I come into myself, I find a fossil of the former me. I am exploring the small things like shells and such. Deep, I dive into myself. Deeper and deeper into caves, I am born into myself again and again. I bear it myself, I hold up the world. I ask myself who am I, where did I come from? I try to remember () my own birth.

## **SCENE 2.**

Space discovery.

THE FLYING DUTCHMAN enters. She carries a transistor radio and wears a white motorcycle helmet and a white leather motorcycle suit that suffices as astro gear.

THE FLYING DUTCHMAN

Hhhhh. Well folks the surface looks inhabitable. Most likely this surface was inhabitable, at least at some time. () El Jefe, this is an honor. Je suis fier. This surface looks inhabitable. It's muddy here. Yes. Muddy and rocky. The essence of life is present here is this mud. This is an honor. El Jefe, no sign of the goodies yet but don't worry. We've got the essence of life here. () Booty follows logically. I have been waiting for this my whole life. Boy. This is an honor.

BEBE floats by.

BEBE

Beep beep beep.

THE FLYING DUTCHMAN

Holy Smoke!

BEBE

Beep beep beep.

THE FLYING DUTCHMAN

Life form! Life form here, Life form, I knew it!

BEBE

(Going)

Beep.

THE FLYING DUTCHMAN

Hey Jefe, monsieur president, Life form! Should I secure it? Requesting permission to secure.

BEBE

(Floating away)

Beep.

THE FLYING DUTCHMAN

I knew it! () You folks tuned in at home, we've got inhabitable space here, the essence of life, and a life form. I knew it. What an honor. Whoa.

**SCENE 3.**

Sailing.

EL CAPITAIN enters in his wooden boat which is on rollers and moves freely across the stage when he rows. He wears a sailor's hat made out of newspaper, there are many props in the boat such as a spy glass, compass, etc.

EL CAPITAIN

(Singing)

Sailing, sailing, over the bounty way.

(Stops singing)

In 1492 Columbus sailed the ocean blue. () The Nina, The Pinta, The Santa Maria. The Mayflower. The Bounty. The SS Titanic, The Royal Princess. () And let's not forget () the Love Boat. Then there were U-boats, Q boats, and all the rest. Like all the rest, I beat the frothy wave. From the Arctic poles to the South Seas. I beat the frothy wave. (pause)

Some people are inner explorers, they wonder what makes them tick, why they are here, what their purpose is and all that. Some people just try and escape out...out of their heads, out of the atmosphere, whatever, but I'm not like that. I've always known my mission. () I'm hunting. () I'm going hunting. I am insatiable. I want to () spread () out.

(Takes out compass, checks direction.)

Hmmm. () Where is my... what was I looking for? I was looking for something. I was looking for... () Where is it? () Where is he? I've lost him. Shit. I've lost little brother. That's the problem with these explorations is that you can't leave everything behind, I mean you are always taking some kind of baggage along with you. You always end up taking something. Something precious or something nasty. Sometimes both but shit. He was right here, I had him down there, he seemed perfectly happy. Arggggh, I've lost him. Fuck.

(Sighs)

Temperature?

(Checks)

35. Wind from the southwest. () To the starboard!

(Leans right)

To the leeward.

(Leans left)

Full Speed Ahead!

#### **SCENE 4.**

Setting up House.

WOMAN

Can we keep him?

MAN

He gives me a warm feeling.

BEBE

Ya Doo Meep.

WOMAN

He can be our goldfish.

MAN

The last goldfish, it gives me a warm feeling.

BEBE

Awwwww.

WOMAN

He makes me happy.

MAN

Our guppy.

WOMAN

He makes me so happy.

MAN

I'm sick of my career. I just want to stay home and love our guppy. But who would wear all my clothes?

WOMAN

You have such nice suits dear.

MAN

I just want to piddle around and love our guppy.

WOMAN

If we never went ashore you wouldn't have to work. We could move into the country, live in a cave, and love our guppy.

MAN

Yes but we'd probably be burnt to cinders.

WOMAN

If we heat our cave, we could be burnt to cinders.

MAN AND WOMAN

But our guppy country life and daffodils. We'll live in a cave. We'll be happy. We wont do anything.

MAN

Can we live from a store of gold?

WOMAN

Yes we can live from our store of gold.

### **SCENE 5.**

THE FLYING DUTCHMAN sits on a large hill.  
Her motorcycle helmet rests beside her

THE FLYING DUTCHMAN

Yes folks, now we are up on the heights. We are high. One might say taking a little vacation from the depths. Vacationing in the privacy of our own skulls. I

live to explore the upper most heights. Everest for example. No oxygen. This is how I got started in the space exploration field. The distance of life and the coldness of space. Just chillin in the cold among the stars. Nothing but you and mind space. Perfect. Well nearly perfect, I've lost the life form but I'll find him. This has happened before.

## **SCENE 6.**

Split scene.

EL CAPITAIN, RACINE, and THE FLYING DUTCHMAN are all in different areas of the set. EL CAPITAIN looks through a spyglass. THE FLYING DUTCHMAN is smoking. RACINE is shaking.

EL CAPITAIN

Vestiges of a city I once loved. A city of canals. A shipping place. Pirates! Free Enterprise. The Beginning of capitalism. The most powerful city state.

RACINE

A city on the coast. Elmina castle. I can't remember, I can remember, I can remember but, I remember but, I'm looking...

FLYING DUTCHMAN

No. Amsterdam. Canals that run in circles, drained out ocean floor, the numb feeling of hash bars and red lights. The dancing. I, feel underwater.

EL CAPITAIN

Back in the day. () Once upon a time Rollo battled with Gunthar. In this very stream. Gunthar's band barricaded themselves inside. They smoked them out.

RACINE

Fire!

EL CAPITAIN

They smoked them out and dealt them their death blows as they ran out. A few jumped out and ran to the stream. Gunthar almost made it to the church.

RACINE

His hand touched the doorknob. () He was thrown overboard, he was dragged down.

EL CAPITAIN

His hand touched the doorknob but Rollo pulled him back and dealt him his death blow. ()

FLYING DUTCHMAN

Thrown into the canal like old bicycles, like their houses with the hooks on them, they're for moving pianos, but I used them to pull *them* out, I pulled them out of the mud and tried to keep them from drowning.

EL CAPITAIN

It was a trade dispute over the waterways.

RACINE

I remember, it was the smell.

FLYING DUTCHMAN

It was like drowning.

EL CAPITAIN

They were burnt to cinders. () When they burnt I was left alone.

FLYING DUTCHMAN

I wondered? () I, wandered.

EL CAPITAIN

Big Brother?

RACINE

Nomadic, I wandered. Homeless, cut off.

FLYING DUTCHMAN

I had all these ()

ALL

Yearnings

EL CAPITAIN

I didn't want to stop.

RACINE

What does it mean to be from somewhere?

FLYING DUTCHMAN

A native speaker.

RACINE

When you loose your roots, you turn inside out and you grow up.



FLYING DUTCHMAN

You grow up fast.

**SCENE 7.**

MAN

It's getting hot in here.

WOMAN

Whew, It's like a sauna.

MAN

I don't like this, I wanted to settle down by the river and raise our guppy.

EL CAPITAIN (offstage)

Vous etes mes prisoniers.

WOMAN

I'm not going out.

MAN

We'll be burnt to cinders.

WOMAN

I'm scared but I'm not going out.

MAN

I wont go out either.

WOMAN

What about little guppy?

MAN

I'm not going back to work. I'm not going to do that kind of work.

WOMAN

Doesn't someone have to go out and fight them?

MAN

What about guppy?

WOMAN

It's getting hot in here.

MAN

Boy, it's hot in here. () Hold me and kiss me.

WOMAN

We'll burn up

MAN

We'll smother

WOMAN

We'll drown

BOTH

Together. () Waaaaaaaaaaa.

They hold each other and cry, then slowly they turn to look at each other, there is a silence and they kiss.

### **SCENE 8.**

In the Atmosphere

FLIGHT ATTENDANT (WOMAN)

I'm sorry, the flight has been canceled. () You won't be able to leave.

FLYING DUTCHMAN

What?

FLIGHT ATTENDANT

The flight has been canceled.

FLYING DUTCHMAN

I don't think you know who I am. () I'm the pilot.

FLIGHT ATTENDANT

I'm sorry but the pilot has been engaged in un-American activities and his license is pending. I'm sorry you can't leave, you won't be able to escape.

FLYING DUTCHMAN

I am the pilot. () I have to get home. () I have to get high, I get things high, that's my job.

FLIGHT ATTENDANT

Do I know you? I think we've met.

FLYING DUTCHMAN

I can assure you, I am 100% American. All American, I am fully capable of getting up there.

FLIGHT ATTENDANT

Do I know you? Do you know where you've come from? Do you speak English?

FLYING DUTCHMAN

What? () Yes. () Of course.

FLIGHT ATTENDANT

It's just...I might love you, if I had to. You have that kind of exotic look about you. That exotic absent look, looks like I may have met you.

FLYING DUTCHMAN

Well, I guess you look familiar.

FLIGHT ATTENDANT

Tell me about your family.

FLYING DUTCHMAN

Can't remember. Don't want to anyways.

FLIGHT ATTENDANT

Let me tell you about mine.

FLYING DUTCHMAN

Fine.

FLIGHT ATTENDANT

I either had a baby or I was a baby, I can't remember which.

FLYING DUTCHMAN

Yes, I've seen a baby, it makes a kind of beeping noise.

FLIGHT ATTENDANT

There was a fire and the whole thing burned. Somebody burned us out. The cat stuck to the floor like a frozen popsicle. It was my kitty. I looked down and it seemed like it had drowned but really it had asphyxiated. It was winter-time and the water froze it. It stuck to the floor. We lost the baby in the confusion.

FLYING DUTCHMAN

Wasn't he stolen by gangsters?

FLIGHT ATTENDANT

Yes, He was either stolen by pirates/robbers/police or he was lost in the confusion. Anyway, we never saw him again.

FLYING DUTCHMAN

I saw a baby beeping and I thought it was a satellite.() Would you like another smoke?

FLIGHT ATTENDANT

Did you want to fuck? I like exotic.

FLYING DUTCHMAN

What?

FLIGHT ATTENDANT

What? () No thanks, I'm trying to cut down.

**SCENE 9.**

EL CAPITAIN rows onto stage in boat. RACINE is center stage taking Scuba gear out of a large chest.

EL CAPITAIN

Land Ho.

(Climbs out of boat)

What a shit heap.

RACINE

It was right here, I can feel it. I'm getting closer. Warmer, warmer. I'm really close now, I'm getting close to the root. I'm, burning up.

EL CAPITAIN

Hey you! () Vous etes mon prisonier.

RACINE

What?

EL CAPITAIN

Mon Prisonier. Vous etes mon prisonier ()  
(sighs)

My prisoner. () You're my prisoner.

RACINE

Right.

EL CAPITAIN

Yes, I think I'll take you around the world.

RACINE

Too late, already been there.

EL CAPITAIN

Impossible! () Listen here, you need to see civilization. Civilization needs you. Now.

RACINE

Please don't bother me, I haven't been at home, I've been studying Abroad. Abroad has been studying me. I'm about to start a very important ocean excavation. I have to be careful not to, damage the roots.

EL CAPITAIN

What spunk. You mean to tell me that you're not going to play along?

RACINE

No.

EL CAPITAIN

Well, I'll make you.

(Pulls out wooden sword)

Ha. Now you'll play.

(At top of lungs)

VOUS ETES MON PRISONIER! Hee hee hee.

RACINE

Screw you.

RACINE starts to put on Scuba gear. EL CAP advances on RACINE, gives her a little gab with a wooden sword. RACINE hits EL CAP in the face with a flipper.

EL CAPITAIN

Oww. God damn it. Why'd you hit me? It really hurts.

RACINE

I don't want to play, can't you see I'm busy here.

EL CAPITAIN

()You're diving huh?

(Excitedly)

You think there's any gold down there?

RACINE

No!

(Slowly, exasperated)

OK. () This is an ancient sight of battle. Mommy and Daddy lived here before they were burnt to cinders/ burnt to cinders or stolen. I am trying to find the traces of little guppy who has been lost all these years. His bones may be down here or maybe he swam downstream. In any case I need to get started.

EL CAPITAIN

I've lost little brother so if you see him down there let me know. My insatiable appetite for blood and glory causes me to be leaving now but if there's any gold down there I'll be back.

RACINE

Hmmm.

EL CAPITAIN

I'm off to beat the frothy wave.

RACINE

See ya.

EL CAPITAIN exits. RACINE continues with the scuba preparation. THE FLYING DUTCHMAN jumps or swings down from "The heights" holding her pants up with one hand. She approaches RACINE pulling up and buttoning her pants. She sits down on a pile of dirt and starts smoking a cigarette.

FLYING DUTCHMAN

Ugh. Do I know you?

RACINE

(Not looking)

No.

FLYING DUTCHMAN

You look familiar. () Do you happen to know where we are? I mean, I think I've gotten rather lost. I mean, I am suppose to be up on the heights and this looks like down in the depths to me. ()

I'm not used to being on the ground, that's all, I feel a little sick. Not enough oxygen, or too much all of a sudden, I think.

(She takes a hit off of RACINE's oxygen tank.)

That's better. () You know you should be careful in this area. It's restricted. Land mines. Also satellites You don't have permission. All the technological advancements of the day, they have satellites disguised as babies, they beep, if you're found trespassing they'll blow your head right off. I saw one once, thought it was my big break, a life form you know...but of course everything's dead. Yes. Everything's all dead.

RACINE

Wait a minute.

(RACINE exits in full Scuba gear)

FLYING DUTCHMAN

All I ever wanted was to be a great explorer. Cape to Cairo, no shit.

RACINE (from offstage)

I think I've found something.

FLYING DUTCHMAN

I was always wondering who is who and what is what.

RACINE (offstage)

This is getting good.

FLYING DUTCHMAN

Who am I and all that, how can I define myself against others, other things and other places, in the world.

RACINE enters dripping wet and carrying the paper mache head of BEBE, the little brother. She pulls off her scuba mask and puts on the BEBE mask.

RACINE

I think I've found him.

EL CAPITAIN climbs out of the scuba chest and looks around wide-eyed.

FLYING DUTCHMAN

I guess there's really no point, you can't ever really know who you are. I mean there's no point in bashing your head against a wall, or bashing others head in when...

(She looks at RACINE, she sees EL CAPITAIN)

Holy shit.

ALL are frozen looking at each other. Then slowly

EL CAPITAIN

Life () form.

FLYING DUTCHMAN

Little guppy. Holy shit.

RACINE (to herself)

Big brother. () Is it you?

As if waking from a sleep, it dawning.

EL CAPITAIN

We've found him.

FLYING DUTCHMAN

We've found him. What we were looking for, yearning, wandering.

RACINE

Yes yes. It's me. Myself. I've birthed him. It's me but it isn't only me, it's us.

We three. We've found him haven't we. Resurrected. It's all three of us isn't it?

(Looking at each other)

EL CAPITAIN

How can it be us, we aren't the same. We aren't the same are we? Well, we aren't.

FLYING DUTCHMAN

No, of course we aren't, we're not but, all the same, yes, it's us, we've found him, haven't we? It's us isn't it? The result of us. Our () interaction. We've finally found him. It us, we've found him, finally but we're not the same.

Grand pause.

EL CAPITAIN

Well. Finally. What now? Since it's us, what now?



FLYING DUTCHMAN

I guess we stay here. () Work things out. I () don't know if I can. What kind of root is this?

RACINE

What kind of root is this? Well, I can. It's me, of course I can. () and I've been lost.

EL CAPITAIN and THE FLYING DUTCHMAN

Yes, we've been lost, drowned, burned, burning, drowning () together. () Are we found?

ALL

Are we're found?

(They look at each other)

They look at each other in silence, they stretch their fingers out toward each other, the lights fade down. Blackout.

## HE WAS LIKE US: A WAR STORY

*Jeffery Renard Allen*

i.

tune your ear to fresh graves  
backwashed blood lingers

said he would calm the raging sea  
steer the sails of revolt

ride this boat  
even if it's all night long  
pilgrim you got to cross over

got shoes  
    come here and  
walk around  
got wings  
    come here and  
fly around

ii.

tires spool out noise and grit  
distance remains  
    stretched before us like a mortician's sheet

birds peel from glistening sky and  
drop from sight  
square reflections on neat horizon  
headeye blind

have seen warriors with chests wide as the baobab tree  
downed  
sunken bodies in dry stream bed  
powdered remains in pockmarked minefield  
satan on the gunrun

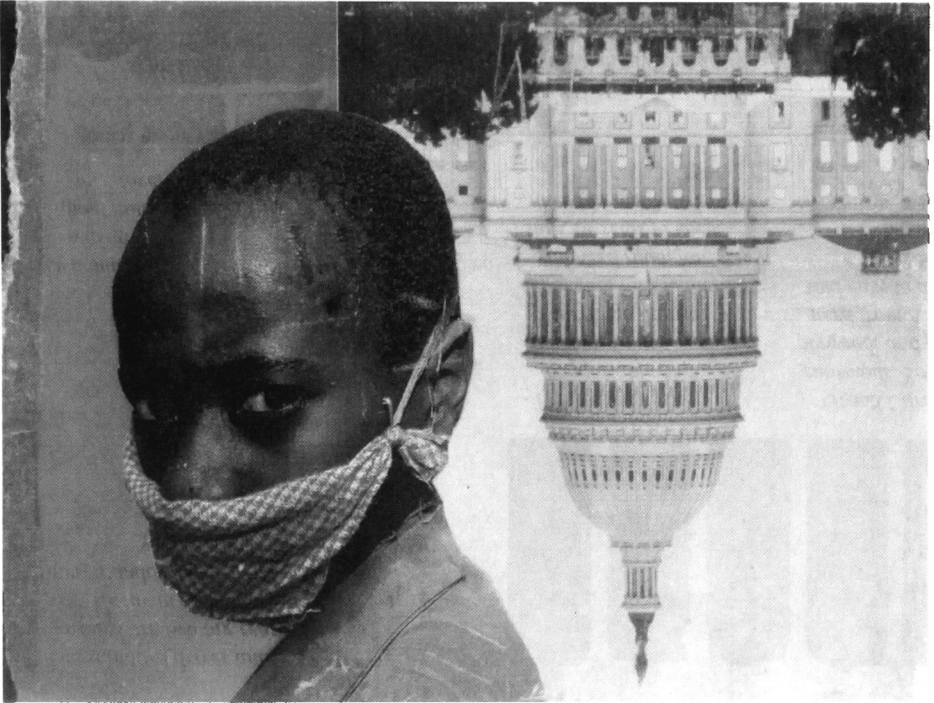
buzz and plead for iron sanctuary  
minimal fists tapping against maximum doors





**GALLERY:  
THEODORE HARRIS &  
AMIRI BARAKA**

**Theodore A. Harris**, a collagist, poet, and muralist, was born in New York City in 1966 and reared in Philadelphia. Since 1983 he has painted murals throughout the city of Philadelphia with the Mural Arts Program. Harris's collage portrait of Paul Robeson hangs in the University of Pennsylvania Paul Robeson Research Center. In 1998 his first one-person show was mounted at Rutgers University, and in 1999 he was set/artistic consultant for the Lincoln Theatre's production of Langston Hughes's play *Black Nativity*. Harris's work has appeared in various publications including *Long Shot*, *Paterson Literary Review*, and *Left Curve*, and is out or forthcoming in three anthologies: *In Defense of Mumia* (Writers and Readers), *ROLE CALL: A Generational Anthology of Social and Political Black Literature & Art* (Third World Press), and *Bumrush the Page* (Crown). The poems on page 53 ("Seize The Time") and page 55 ("What street is this?") were written by Amiri Baraka specifically for the adjacent Harris images; Baraka also provided the brief essay, "Teddy Harris's Work," that appears on page 57.



**VETOED DREAMS (1995)**



**SEIZE THE TIME (1995)**

## SEIZE THE TIME

If you come out

The tree

& get caught

by the beast

w/ his 666

shooter

up against

yr knot

say to yrself

Oh, Beast you is

Not a human

& never will be

Alas

Yr most progressive

Odor is name Giuliani

& we trying to get

an antidote for that





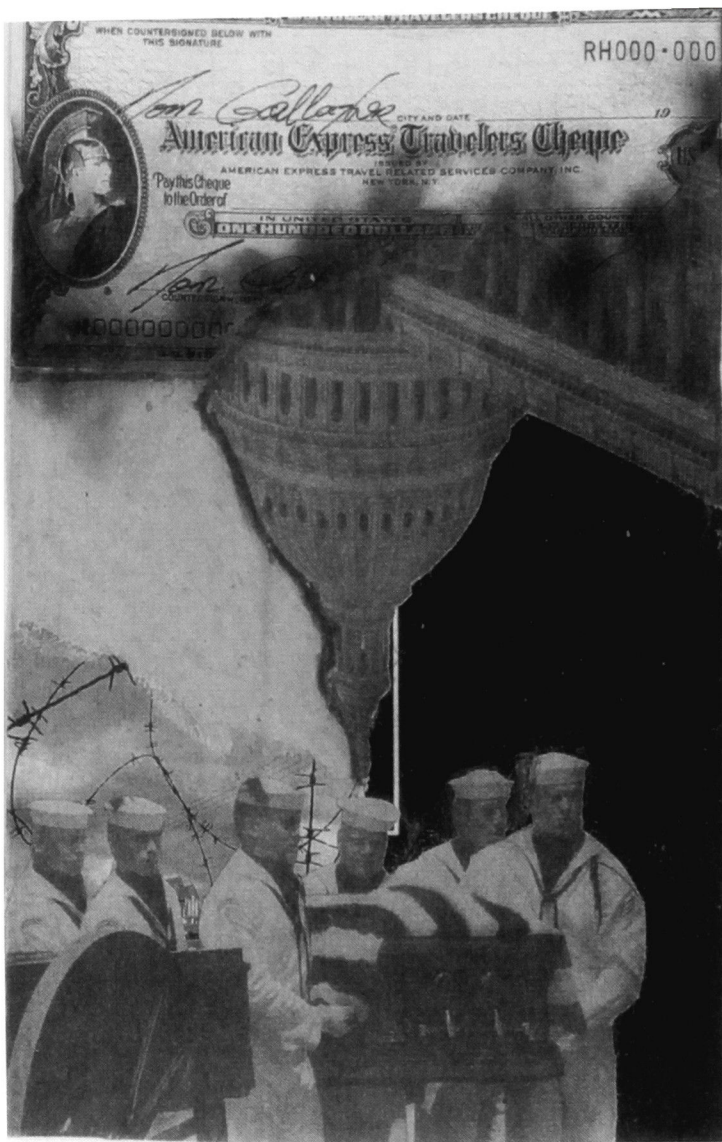
What street is this?  
What this is that?  
Oh greed is not just a cry  
It leaved him to fly

The Beast name 666  
Rules the world  
With Billion Karats  
A Billion sticks

But if you see  
& ask the question  
Elegba  
Put you on  
The  
Good  
Foot

You got Brother Malcolm's  
Multiplying history  
Like the river you cross  
Is signed  
With a kiss

(to celebrate  
the Death  
of DIS!)



**2:00 A.M. SEPTEMBER 11, 2001**

## TEDDY HARRIS'S WORK

*Amiri Baraka*

Teddy Harris's work is the modernism of everyday perception and rationale. He makes works from vouchsafes and unrealized dreams, lies and advertisements for the nowheres. That is, he takes scraps of America North and threads them through his truthoscopic sensibility, for instance, pieces of newspapers, headlines, images from the diversity of our mostly grim experience, and he tells it to us again, and clearer.

Harris is a collagist, itself a modern form, and one that has been used to great advantage in pinning the political tail on the donkey, or elephant (or corrupt tiger, as the case may be, e.g. one of the greatest practitioners of the collage art for popular advantage, that is, to tell the truth, was the German collagist Heartfield, who actually pulled Hitler's tail during the waning years of democracy in Germany. Right-wing politicians feared Heartfield (Herzfeld) because he used the collage to whack them sharply across the face, and lips, revealing their lies and evil to the people).

Harris, still a young man, has entered the collage with an astonishing clarity of form. The diverse pieces of reflected reality and unreality he thinks and pastes together create new images, replenishing our knowledge of the known, or making us aware of the unknown. There is a clarity and cleanness to his craftsmanship, which heightens the ideational projection the image sprays at us. At times, visual image actually seems to "say" out loud what maybe we know or need to know. Yet, he has put it together with an impressive display of knowledge about the medium he is using. There are no sloppy or half put together "slapdashes" which we must sympathetically take to the hoop with our political sympathies. Harris is a fine "auteur" (as the film magazines say, meaning author, creator). And with this, the content, which, for me, is *always* principal, emerges bright and striking.

He tells about the peoples' struggles, world wide, against oppression and exploitation. Our lives under racism and the twisted rule of capital. At times, the images he thrusts at us are sharp enough to make us wince, with understanding and recognition. Harris's work is fundamentally about consciousness raising, and that is what art does. Mao says, "All art is propaganda, but not all propaganda is Art!" Harris's work speaks to us truthfully, forcefully, and with great skill. You need to check it out!

# SONG OF THE RED LAMB

*Edwin Torres*

Who Lives On That Lamb Red -

Who Lives On That Lamb Red -

Who Lives On That Lamb Red - - Leg

Who Lives On That Lamb Red - - Leg

*(Please Help Me Out)* - That Lamb Red

Who Lives On That

- (eg)(head) - ministration

In This - - recessional

In That - - infra-sssss-tration

In This - - mens-in-gullys-tense-in-sin-t-uation

Who Lives On That Lamb Red -

Who Lives On That Lamb Red -

*(Who Lives On That)*

Please Help -

*(Who Lives On That)*

Please Help - Mmmmbbbb

Help Me By - increntation

Help Me By - incrimination

Help Me By - inconstraintion

Help Me By - incretination

- insinuation

- concentration

- ensentation

- infenestration

- penetration

- menustation

- mommentration

- penancesation

- flagemation

- magination - - This

Uni Mastermmmmation' nnnnnation - mmmm

More lies on That - fffffruss - tration

Moola issa - penetration - fulla - fenestration

*(Please Help Mmmmbbbb)*

*(Please Help Mmmmbbbb)*

*(Please Help Mmmmbbbb)*

Who Lives On That Lamb Red -

Who Lives On That -

## FIVE WORDS IN A STEIN

Craig Dworkin

*Where coincidence intends no harm,  
who will be the first to sue the stone for celebrating?*

—Louis Zukofsky

We have never been able to read Gertrude Stein. Which is not to say that we any longer lack good readings of particular passages and works, but that there is still no collective sense, on opening one of her books, of how to go about it word-by-word. And as the theoretical and biographical writing about her continues to proliferate, the need to come to terms with those books themselves has become ever more pressing. Scholars have recently provided historical contexts, psychoanalytic frameworks, feminist perspectives, and a range of broadly staked claims for the importance of Stein's oeuvre, but they have very rarely given us any sense of how to proceed when faced with the specific language of her decidedly difficult texts. I want to suggest a model for reading even Stein's most restive works by complicating what has long been taken as one of her most accessible, and least significant, books: the unconventional (or in some ways hyperconventional) detective novel *Blood on the Dining-Room Floor*.<sup>1</sup>

Like George Perec's *La disparition*, Stein's work is a mystery in which the clues — as well as the characters, victims and suspects alike — turn out to be the words themselves. Although parallels for some of the novel's plot can be found in events during Stein's 1933 stay in the French countryside near Bilignin par Belly (Ain), to read the work simply as a mannered autobiography "in which Gertrude's visitors and neighbors are transparently present," or as a dialogic pastiche in which "the major reader interest is not linguistic but generic," fails to account for the text's virtuosic display of graphical and lexical detail.<sup>2</sup> Whatever their strengths, such readings underestimate the importance of the bluntly obvious word-play that characterizes so much of Stein's work. Readers of *Blood* preoccupied with conventional characters and plot — like the police detectives in Poe's *Purloined Letter* — are looking in the wrong place and missing the real action, which turns out to be right before their eyes. Rather than pass over that word-play as too bald to be significant, one might read the facile paronomasia and textual transformations — such as "How do you cry about a crime," or "Leave me and believe me" — as protocols for reading the text's less evident, and far more subtle, effects.

In fact, one must read the surface of the text *in order* to access those biographical referents of *Blood* that otherwise remain unnoticed by readers distracted by the more transparent and obvious allusions to Bilignin (which accounts, perhaps, for why no one has noticed the significance of Stein's wonderfully lurid title for a work in which neither blood nor dining rooms appear).

Stein herself was particularly pleased with the title, and its reference is worth considering.<sup>3</sup> During her stay in the countryside that year, Stein seems to have been preoccupied with recollections of the break with her brother Leo.<sup>4</sup> Retracing that break, Gertrude would also surely have recalled her former salon friend, and the person who — much to Gertrude’s dismay — had rented her Italian villa to Leo and his lover: *Florence Blood*.

As the title’s encrypted referent illustrates, Stein’s reader would do well to heed her repeated enjoinders in *Blood* to “listen carefully” and to “see what I mean.” Against a refrain of “do you understand[?],” these injunctions might be understood not just as nagging taunts to the reader of a flagrantly inconsistent and incoherent plot (the exact crime, much less its solution, is indefinitely withheld), but rather as cues to stop, look, and listen to the specifics of the language itself. Since such details so frequently suffer in the face of the larger claims made for Stein’s work, I want to demonstrate the micro-level workings of Stein’s language by following five of the novel’s words as they circulate through a fluid textual economy, moving rapidly and simultaneously along lines of reference, history, sound, and visual form, and translating fluently between different languages and registers.

**case** To take one of Stein's recurrent c[l]ues and "read the beginning again," the novel opens: "They had a country house. A house in the country is not the same as a country house." Obvious perhaps, but the qualification would only make sense in an uninflected language such as English. In an inflected language like the German of Stein's childhood, the words would be distinguished — locative from genitive (or their equivalents) — by case.<sup>5</sup> A case in point: half of Chapter Eleven advertises Stein's facility with a case based language like Latin: "Marius to Mario I think easily." Since the story at hand is itself in fact a (detective) case, let us keep an eye out for motives, or at least for motivations. A few sentences later the first characters are introduced: "The first husband and wife were Italian." "House," in Italian *la casa*, is close by a vowel to "case" (*caso*). Apt, aptote. The villa (like Florence Blood's Villa Gamberaria at Settignano), if not the villain, revealed.

*fall* *Blood* was composed in the autumn — the one season conspicuously omitted from the catalogue which opens Chapter Six. Another name noticeable in its omission is the surname of “Lizzy,” whom Stein directly addresses throughout the novel. “Borden,” possibly, which would invoke the legendary *Fall* River. Stein entitled a related work “A Water-fall and a Piano.” That piano (to which we’ll return) makes its ostentatious appearance in *Blood* as well; in the margin beside two passages its letters fall vertically down the page so that it is, quite literally, an *upright* “piano” (as in the “Piano” section of *Tender Buttons*, “the place is the same as upstanding”). In this grammatically attuned text, with its crime-story plot hinging on causation, these typographic appearances would no doubt be the instrumental case. A ghost of the waterfall survives as well in the description of the man who “had a cataract in one eye and nobody saw anybody cry,” where the falling water of the tear neatly balances the “cataract,” in its geological rather than ocular sense.

But the earlier work is not evidently a detective story, and the mystery, in this case, concerns a woman who falls through the *casement* of an open window. “A window has another spelling, it has ‘f’ all together,” Stein writes in *Tender Buttons*, reminding the reader that other languages could always be used (*fenêtre*, in French), and as the letters f-all together in *Blood* one might recall that *Fall*, in German, means “case.” A false lead, a trap (German *Falle*)? Remember that bodies aren’t the only things to fall: words decline (German *fallen*) into cases to indicate what is meant.



**coin-** All mere coincidence? Perhaps, but coincidence, as Stein tells us, is  
**cid-** all to the point: “A fact is not surprising, a coincidence is surprising  
**ence** and that is the reason that crime is surprising. There is always a  
coincidence in crime.” What seems at first to be another typically  
enigmatic Steinian assertion turns out to make both the most literal  
and figurative sense in a novel that conflates the ‘crime’ of the  
woman’s defenestration and a series of adulterous affairs (a ‘fallen  
woman,’ in either case) when one learns that “coincidence,” from the  
Latin root *cadere*, means “falling in together.” The opposite plays out  
as well, both with speculations on what will “relieve a crime” (Latin *re*  
+ *levare*, “to raise again”), and also with the text’s contrast of  
“coincidence” with “succession” (directly from the Latin *succedere* “to  
go up,” from *cedere*, just a step from *cadere*). That same *cadere*, from  
*casus*, also gives us “accident” (German *Zufall*), as chance would have  
it; and indeed, the equivocating story suggests that the victim may  
have simply been somnambulating when she fell. *Cadere*,  
significantly, is also the basis of “case,” as well as “cadaver” — what  
the fall leads to in both the narrative and etymological cases. Window  
her to widower.

**cem-ent** Casement to c[as]ement: “she fell upon the pavement of cement.” That change and chance (themselves so close) which moves from *cadere* to *cædere* (Latin: “to cut”), and again to “cement.” Cement, inevitably, to cemetery. Cement, which is to say, concrete. Like a fact, which is not, according to Stein, surprising. As she asks again and again: do you *see* what is *meant*? Given the work’s conflation of crime and infidelity, its musings on fathers and paternity, “cement” also stands in for the unspoken “semen” as well. French cream: *ciment*, seem, *crim*, crime.

The word recurs in a striking passage: “She played the piano and at the same time put cement between the keys so that they would not sound. You see how easy it is to have cement around.” If the earlier connection with “house” needed corroboration, the emphasized “around” might remind us that *Gehäuse*, in German, means “encasement.” *Fenster*, fenced her, encased her, casement, case meant. The cement keeps the keys from “playing” in both senses, just as cases in linguistics keep a word from playing more than one role. One scarcely needs to mention the obvious: that part of the piano which holds the keyboard is the case. But what might be the motivation for the seemingly mad act of cementing the keys?

*key* Perhaps the solution is that cement is made with *clay* (*Steingut*, in German, interestingly enough), and that “to cement,” in German, is *kleben*. Both of which are homophones for a musical signature, or *clef*: the key in which the piano keys are (or in this case, are not) played. Or that the key of that *clavier* (the text has never strayed far from “cadaver”) is graphically only a descender away from “clay” (and descending, or falling, is epidemic in this text of declensions — the same holds true for the vocabulary of “pavement” and “payment” which runs through the story). In a work which is partially a *roman à clef*, this is yet another key to solving the mystery of an extended mediation on the occupation of one of the suspects, who happens to be a cook, which is to say, in the Bilignin setting, *un chef*. But that leads us onto a different course.

Indeed, one could continue to follow the footprints of the words in *Blood*, shadowing them through changes of disguise, tracing their secret histories (etymology), and attempting to reconstruct what Jean-Jacques LeCercle calls the “violence of language.”<sup>6</sup> No ledge, knowledge, watch your step. But the mystery remains unsolved, the case never closed, because language is always guilty of conversions, covert distributions, and all-too-graphic dismemberments. The words have been clues all along, and in plain sight. Indeed *prints* are all to the point — not only for the detective, but also for the poet. In its closing moments, Stein’s book blows its cover, so to speak: “It made its impression. Not only which they sew.” Printing (impression) and binding (sew) might remind us of the bibliographic register of keys and cases: typewriters and printing presses. Is this a slip-case (like the one in which *Blood* was first issued, letterpressed and hand sewn)? Blood, *sang*, song, *chant*, chance. The facts and nothing but.

## (Endnotes)

<sup>1</sup> Just to make sure: my title references “Five words in a line,” the self-reflexive sentence with which Stein describes her typical manuscript line — a combined product of her large handwriting and small notebook pages — and to which Joseph Kosuth also alludes in his eponymous sculpture “Five Words In Blue Neon.” First published in 1948 (New York: Banyon Press), more recent editions have appeared edited by John Herbert Gill (Berkeley: Creative Arts Book Company, 1982; London: Virago Press, 1985).

<sup>2</sup>John Brinnin, *The Third Rose: Gertrude Stein and Her World* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1959): 313; Michael J. Hoffman, *Gertrude Stein* (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1976): 96. For a “dialogic” reading of the novel, see Harriet Chessman, *The Public is Invited to Dance: representation, the body, and dialogue in Gertrude Stein* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989). With its quotidian details that fail to ever coalesce from potential clues into meaningful evidence, and its introduction of hypothetical characters with entire chapters devoted to their development (“There is no Mary M. in this case, but if there were this is what she would do”), *Blood* does serve as one example of the “sideshadowing” recently considered by Michael André Bernstein in his study *Foregone Conclusions: Against Apocalyptic History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

<sup>3</sup>“Why I Like Detective Stories,” *Harper’s Bazaar* [London] XVII (November 1937): 106.

<sup>4</sup>Richard Bridgman, *Gertrude Stein In Pieces* (NY: Oxford U. P., 1970): 277 *et passim*.

<sup>5</sup>While most grammarians would agree that English actually does possess a morphological case system, the status is debatable; English seems to inhabit a borderline between languages which clearly do have such a system and those that clearly do not. See Richard Hudson’s provocative “Does English Really Have Case?” in the *Journal of Linguistics* 31 (1995): 375-392.

<sup>6</sup>See *The Violence of Language* (New York: Routledge, 1990). In LeCercle’s vocabulary, Stein’s text exhibits the “Wolfsonization” of language, since it resembles the simultaneous interlingual translations of Louis Wolfson, who recounts his compulsive linguistic acrobatics in the autobiographical *Le schizo et les langues* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970). Recall Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari: “To be a foreigner, but in one’s own tongue, not only when speaking a language other than one’s own. To be bilingual, multilingual, but in one and the same language” (*Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi [Minneapolis: U. of Minnesota P., 1987]: 98).

# **“WHITE MALE HETEROSEXUAL AUTHOR SEEKS...”: THE ARTICULATION OF QUEER PERFORMATIVITY BETWEEN MEN IN LEONARD COHEN’S *BEAUTIFUL LOSERS***

*Ulf Cronquist*

“It must all be considered as if spoken by a character in a novel.”

— Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*

## **Introduction**

In this text I begin to examine how Leonard Cohen, generally always-already considered an exclusively white male heterosexual author, published a second novel, *Beautiful Losers*,<sup>1</sup> that remains quite “queerful.” To begin with, in line with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s theorizing, the focus seems to be on a male-female romantics but what really takes place is a trafficking in women that strengthens homosocial bonds between men (Sedgwick 1985). Also, there is the queering notion of dramatic and non-referential performativity in the novel, as individual identities are theatricalized in the fashion that has been distinctly formulated by Judith Butler (1990, 1993). The fact is that although Leonard Cohen has always been acknowledged as a radically *perverse* writer — especially with the novel *Beautiful Losers* — nobody has of yet begun to place his poetic vision in a queer context. One can begin to see, here, a larger subversive potential in Cohen’s sexed writing than has been outlined so far in previous research.

## **1 Leonard Cohen, Who Are You Then?**

Are you (1934-)? Are you a beautiful loser? Is that enough? Can I read your (white male heterosexual) text without shame or guilt? Let me interpret and investigate the fibers of the weave. Have you come dressed in these rags for us, have you come as a writer of this trans-vestive text, a novel called *Beautiful Losers*? Can we let your text out of its web of desire and let go into the desire of a so-called “critic”? Are *you* always-already willing to be second best — according to the loser ethos?

Yes. Desire rules the world. Magic is afoot.

There is a gallery of beautiful losers.

## **2 I, the White Male Heterosexual, Who Seeks I/dentity.**

The I that seeks a self beyond shame and guilt.

F. (1856-1939) is my friend. Is he? Is that enough?

F. for Freud, of course. One possible F.-identity. Yes. Or Frankenstein creating, composing, cleaving.

What woman wants is our problem — problem not yet solved 2001?

This will take us back beyond the pleasure principle:

“What we cannot reach flying we must reach limping... The Book tells us it is no sin to limp”.<sup>2</sup> Yes. *That* really takes us back *beyond the pleasure principle*...

### 3 IF There Is Some Logic: in a Pyrotechnic Postmodern Novel...

...“I,” the narrator of part one in *Beautiful Losers*, says: “The King of France was a man. I was a man. Therefore I was the King of France. F! I’m sinking again” (78).

F. for Freud — that could be the F-word... Or Frankenstein.

F., the chronicler of part two in *Beautiful Losers*, says:

I have let women lead me anywhere, and I am not sorry. Convents, kitchens, perfumed telephone booths, poetry courses — I followed women anywhere. I followed women into Parliament because I know how they love power. I followed women into the beds of men so that I could learn what they found there. (145-46)

IF is I +F.

Two characters form an “IF.”

That is a not-so remote possibility. Two men. Between men I + F. equals IF. If we were all men, between men. Is that enough? Two? Shouldn’t there always be three? Let us return to our homosocial desire and our trafficking in Edith, wife of “I,” mistress to F. Yes, we will return to Edith’s triangular position below.

### 4 Are There Any New and Old Scholars out There?

I quote a *Beautiful Losers*’ question:

“Is All The World A Prayer To Some Star?” (89)

I quote the first two affirmative sentences of *Beautiful Losers*, “I” speaking:

“I am an old scholar, better-looking now than when I was young. That’s what sitting on your ass does to your face.” (3)

And now we *are* getting ready for queer performativity.

Just wait. Listen to “I”:

Can I Be Torn Away From The Roulette Wheel? . . . Oh God I Love So Many Things It Will Need Years To Take Them Away One By One. I

Adore Thy Details . . . . . May I Unfasten My Loneliness And Collide  
Once Again With A Beautiful Greedy Body? . . . . . May I Pray At All?  
(90)

Pray we are ready for a scholarly analysis of queer performativity now.

## 5 This Is the Emptiness of Performance and Phallic Nothingness

Most of the time when “I” interacts with his wife Edith and his friend F., there is a tendency toward theatrical acting and a parody of heteronormative identity roles as contrasted with the normative heterosexist system. Many scenes in the novel seem *staged* to problematize notions of shame, pride, self-effacement — and it is especially “I” who keeps performing to present his shattered identity. The initial triangular formation between “I” and his wife Edith and F. is clear: F. functions as a friend and a father/mentor to “I” and also takes Edith to bed.

In one scene in “I’s” basement apartment (104-09), we can see an example of how “I” stages his body, his bodily identity, in front of F. and Edith. According to F.’s logic, “I” is the only one of the three who can get naked and use the sunlamp, because both F. and Edith have seen his private parts — while F. and Edith have not (the latter obviously being a lie). “I” feels outspokenly “queer” about letting his pants down and is unsure whether he should get an erection or not (105). As regards identity and homosocial desire, “I” makes the interesting comment here that, “F. was using me like an advertisement for his own body . . . His expression seemed to say to Edith: “If a thing like that can breathe and get up in the morning, think of the fuck you can get off of me” (105). That is, “I” displays *his* body — but the focus of attention turns overtly to the relation between F. and Edith

Then the perspective in the scene shifts into the description of F. and Edith as hardened heroin users. In this way the heightened sexual tension between F. and Edith (with “I” out of the triangle) is displaced into a drug addict relation with its “extremely ritualistic . . . preparing [of] the hypodermic syringe and [the] ‘toasting’ [of] the ‘horse’” (105). “I’s” reaction to this heroin ritual is that he objects to their ‘social’ drug bonding, not being let in to their sister-brotherhood. Comically enough he then leaves the room because “watching them use the needles,” as he remarks, always gives him a hard-on (106).

There is an acting out of sexual identities in this scene, an acting out on the erotic stage that is bound, repressed, as regards “I’s” erection and the sublimation of F.’s and Edith’s bodies through the usage of the drug that literally turns them off. There is play, pleasure, dread and weariness in the interplay between the erotographic signifiers here. And, for sure, nothing leads to nothing here: “I’s” private parts remain soft, F.’s phallic meddling induces heroin hibernation and Edith’s two lips keep touching themselves, sealed off, triangular but out of touch.

## 6 The Greatest Performativity Show

And it is literally a show — *Beautiful Losers* also involves, unlike the scene just discussed, two very erect private parts, not unsurprisingly those of “I” and F. Undoubtedly the stage here is F.’s, as he is driving down to Ottawa to make his Maiden Speech in Parliament the following day. “I” is in the passenger’s seat when F., while increasing the speed, unzips, displays his erection and begins to masturbate.

F. is celebrating that he has become a Member of Parliament and to underline his homosocial sense of power he comments: “I’m in the world of men” (92). “I” agrees to the phallic power on display: “I’ve never seen you so big!” (92) “I” wants to hold it or go down on F. but F. insists on his auto-erotic feast, indeed claiming that this “is between me and G-d” (92).

“I” instead begins to touch himself and there they exist together “in some eye for a second: two men in a hurtling steel shell aimed at Ottawa, blinded by a mechanical mounting ecstasy . . . two swelling pricks pointing at eternity” (93). And there you have it: the perfect image of male homosocial bonding, the women are out of it, ecstasy is on its way to Parliament — and then the geysers of semen on the dashboard.

But not for “I” who is “suddenly without desire” (93), since the car now suddenly is a fraction of a second from running into a wall.

And so it does.

And not — since the wall is in fact “a scrim of painted silk” (93) and F. stops the car safely in an empty field behind it. The whole show has been rigged by F. and Edith. It is an ecstatic joke, a set-up that does not seem to make any sense at all. “I” is surprised to learn that Edith is in on it, that Edith apparently knows about his and F.’s, as he calls it, “filthy activities,” that they are “fairies” (93). Thus, we can tell that F. and Edith have not set up the ecstatic joke in order to test “I’s” sexual identity. Their male bonding merging into a ‘perverse’ auto-erotic and voyeuristic experience also seems an everyday occurrence: there is no doubt what goes on between the two men, in the triangle of trafficking with Edith; while the two men’s desires are also, ultimately, directed at their own male bodies and specifically their comparative phallic powers. Thus queer performativity in this scene is *i/dentity as reiterative performance*, a non-referential play both in theatrical terms and as a double one-hand (left-right) movement in an opaque sense.

But there is also a non-referential emptiness, somewhat beyond identity politics and queer theorizing that escapes the pleasure principle in this scene. That is, the only semen on the dashboard is F.’s, while after crashing through the silk wall “I’s” pride hangs out “like a stray thread” (94). We get a readerly instruction here as F. questions “I”: “[j]ust before you were about to come? Did you sense the emptiness? Did you get the freedom?”

At this point meaning is non-procreative.

“I” is close to emptiness, but no cigar.



F. does not dissolve the chaos of existence — for “I” or for himself. Instead, as a saint, he “rides the drifts like an escaped ski” (95).

## 7 Argentina in the Sixties: Free Love with Adolf Hitler

In queer performativity, nothing can be taken for granted as regards what constitutes a subject. We can be sure that we know what goes on between men. Or can we? The notion that the subject is contingent, an empty sign, a phenomenon within parenthesis — something *one becomes*, in a certain way, according to certain circumstances — may be a source of pleasure or tragedy. And there may still be identity-victims, lost causes, malcontented signifiers of identity and despair.

Listen to this, an ultimate exchange of identities in *Beautiful Losers*, listen to this and consider the “queer” identity of Adolf Hitler, alive in South-America in the 1960s, alive and curious about humanity, about “free love” and perverse sex, drugs and rock n’ roll. Yes, consider this.

In Argentina in a hotel room, F. plugs in a Danish Vibrator but is reluctant to hand over the phallic power to Edith (173). F. is in charge but not sure how to act. He calls himself “Dr. Frankenstein with a deadline” (175). F.: Freud or Frankenstein? Is Edith his creation — is woman his construction? “I had an idea of what a man should look like, but it kept changing” (175). And soon F. is outdone by the machinery, as he understands that the Danish Vibrator is alive *without* batteries: “It’s learned to feed itself” (178). Yes. F. is shocked: “Oh Father, Nameless and Free of Description, lead me from the Desert of the Possible” (178). And this he prays after the Danish Vibrator has dropped “a glob of Formula Cream at the top of . . . [his own, as he calls it,] muscular cleavage” (177).

And then F. loves Edith

And then Edith loves F.

And then F. loves “I.”

And then Edith loves “I.”

And then Adolf Hitler arrives, nude beneath his famous old raincoat and the rest is, as F. says, *old hat*: “we hardly cared to resist his sordid exciting commands, even when he made us kiss the whip” (182). They are three in a tub, with a bar of soap produced from Hitler’s raincoat pocket.

Yes. What a monster! F. — you created this fascist threesome.

And then the Danish Vibrator moves — life of its own — out into the waves of the Atlantic (180).

Now, that I would call “queer” non-referential performativity, in a climax of climaxes.

And between men, in virility, with fire in the belly, in a dance of masks, in the in-between-ness of identities, listen to “I” as he quotes Uncle’s identity — through “the greatest prayer he had ever learned” (130):

I change  
I am the same  
I change  
I am the same  
I change  
I am the same  
I change  
I am the same  
I change  
I am the same  
I change  
I am the same  
I change  
I am the same  
[And] He did not miss a syllable . . . (130-131)

And “I” saw that it was good and the shame and the guilt at the core of his self dissolved, for the moment.

And without shame he dressed in his rags, for us.

And he saw that it was good.

A——.

## Conclusion

As Breavman says in Cohen’s first novel *The Favourite Game*: “It is hard to show a pimple.”<sup>3</sup> We have seen here that in the gallery of beautiful losers in *Beautiful Losers*, nothing can be taken for granted as regards performed identities. It is easy to dis-play that desire rules the world beyond shame and guilt, but it is hard to paint the queer canvas possibility of an IF (a remote possibility; a conglomerate possibility). Self-effacement is hard to show if “I” loves so many things in the world; the emptiness of F.’s phallic performance is not so hard to show in terms of body and displacement. And poor Edith, the constructed scapegoat in the novel, the dark cave of heart, quite out of love’s triangular generousities. Yes, we have seen a fascist threesome and a dildo feeding itself, we have changed and we have remained the same — and we did not miss a syllable in the obsidian alphabet.

A——.

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**(Footnotes)**

<sup>1</sup> Leonard Cohen, *Beautiful Losers* (London: Black spring Press, 1992 [1966]). All further references appear parenthetically in the text.

<sup>2</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (Trans. James Strachey. New York: W. W. Norton, 1961), 78.

<sup>3</sup> Leonard Cohen, *The Favourite Game* (London: Black Spring Press, 1994 [1963]), 3.

## **WE WILL ALWAYS ASK, WHAT HAPPENED?**

*Rosmarie Waldrop*

Imagine a witch in the form of a naked girl. Now say her name. Is it foreign? Was the idea of the witch complete before you named the girl? Did you go down a passage that does not exist toward a well of dark water?

Your mind makes small rudimentary motions. Because the joke is against it? Because it does not know which way to turn and keeps reviewing the field of possible action? Acacias? Actresses?

I hear you sighing. Intention is neither an emotion nor yet lip-synch of longing. It is not a state of consciousness. It does not have genuine duration. I say, are you alright? Your sigh turns green.

Can you have an intention intermittently? abandon it like a soldier paralyzed the moment before battle? and resume it?

Could I order you to understand this sentence? just as I could tell you to run forward? Into the fire?

Would the understanding cast a shadow on the wall even though a premonition is not a bullet hole?

One symptom is that space is forced into a mirror. As if the event stood in readiness behind the silver. You move your hand, and it goes the other way. Then the earth opens up and you slide down your darkest desires.

Witches were killed by fire, by water, by hanging in air, burying in earth, by asphyxiation, penetration, striking, piercing, crushing in a thousand and one ways.

What was that name you gave her?

## AN INTERVIEW WITH NTOZAKE SHANGE

Frederick Luis Aldama

In 1975 Ntozake Shange blazed new trails into Manhattan's dramatic art world with her black-feminist focused, poetic-dance extravaganza, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf*. Since then, Shange's hasn't missed a beat. She's written, produced, and performed in dozens of dramatic art pieces. She's published numerous collections of poetry, novels, children's books—even a groundbreaking African-American historically informed cookbook. Along the way, she's amassed a trove of awards: several Obie awards, an *LA Times* Book Prize for poetry, a Pushcart Prize, a Guggenheim—and Tony, Grammy and Emmy nominations many times over. In her many creative endeavors, Ntozake Shange creates a unique blend of spoken word, poetic device, and choreographed form that frees up language and body to powerfully make visible the African-American experience within a dynamic cultural call and response exchange with Caribbean and American indigenous traditions. While Shange's work focuses largely on making visible the African-American woman's double oppression—down trodden by a racist mainstream and a sexist patriarchal black community—her ever expanding corpus of dramatic and aesthetic work employs equal measures of intelligence and humor, violence and sensuality to celebrate racial and gendered difference as well as to boldly open doors to affirm other communities. As Shange mixes African diaspora ritual and tradition (Yoruban religion and Caribbean Hoodoo) with indigenous (Caribbean Anansi tales and the spider/trickster figure in American Indian culture), spectators become actors, and actors spectators to disrupt the too-easy binary paradigms that simplify what it means to be American.

Shange fills her performance pieces with black women actor-dancers whose dancing languages and speaking bodies inhabit traditionally white-identified stage spaces. For example, in *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf* seven women use dance and poetic monologue to express their everyday lives filled with encounters with rapists, latent killers, and lovers that abuse. The beauty of the spoken word and the sensuality of body movement collide with the sociopolitical thematics to jolt her audience. In her piece “A Photograph: A Study of Cruelty” Shange complicates the picture of the African-American experience by introducing performance vignettes that flesh out the lives of men. And in “Spell #7” Shange's nine characters shift from discussing the racism that permeates the entertainment industry to appearing in overalls and minstrel-show black face. Here, she literalizes the characters' fight for personal integrity in a world where their roles have already been predetermined. Here, too, she uses black-face as way to call attention to her re-appropriation of stereotypes to infuse her black characters with voice and pro-active roles in their resistance to oppression.

Shange manipulates image, body, and tongue to create unique ways of understanding the layered experiences of being African American in today's world. In this spirit, Shange extends a line of black women dramatists and writers from the work of Zora Neale Hurston and Marita Bonner in the 1920s through Lorraine Hansberry in late 1950s to the more contemporary Robbie McCauley and Anna Deveare Smith. Like her black feminist predecessors, Shange seeks to keep alive black history and drama as it intersects with experiences of those traditionally kept at the silent margins: mothers, daughters, sisters, and wives. Like the long line of black feminist dramatists and writers she belongs to, issues of gender and sexuality are just as central as racial politics in Shange's work. As one of her characters says, "bein alive & bein a woman & bein colored is a metaphysical dilemma/ I haven't conquered yet/. . .my spirit is too ancient to understand the separation of soul and gender/my love is too delicate to have thrown back in my face"

Shange uses formal technique (structured poetics and choreography, for example) to make visible sociopolitical realities and to destroy any sense of generic and identity fixity. Like her often invoked Yoruban god Ogun—characterized by his creative and destructive trickster spirit—Shange finds a playful subversiveness within traditionally fixed structures. She miscegenates form, seamlessly juxtaposing high art of Greek choral poetry with Black vernacular drama to celebrate impure dramatic aesthetics and to emphasize her aim to un-fix predetermined fates attached to black women's bodies. She achieves this in her novels, too. In *Sassafrass, Cypress and Indigo* (1982), *Liliane* (1994), and *Betsy Brown* (1985) she mixes genres and storytelling technique to invent worlds where linear time and fixed space unravel around a panoply of black female characters who set out on journeys to discover a sense of collective belonging through art and dance. As her characters learn to metaphorically dance, Shange forces readers to open eyes to the complexity of black womanhood through innovative techniques that transcend traditional divisions between the personal essay and lyric poetry, drama with analytical writing. Finally, as her self-chosen African name conveys: Ntozake Shange is an artist who continues to write and perform "like a lion" that forces audiences and readers to see and experience the world in dramatically different and complex ways.

I interviewed Ntozake Shange in Berkeley during her touring of performances specifically aimed at engaging today's youth of color.

**Frederick Luis Aldama:** When did you feel a calling to write and perform?

**Ntozake Shange:** When I was nineteen, I started writing. When I was twenty, I started dancing seriously. Then, the two combined. If I had a good dance session, I went home, took a shower, had something to eat, then I'd write. So the energy that I got from dance fed into the need to write; it also freed up my writing. Even today, when I don't dance, I don't write.

- F.L.A:** Was there a particular moment when you said, “I’m going to be a performer, dancer, and poet!”
- N.S.:** Yeah. I was working with Raymond Sawyers’ Afro-Asian Dance Company in San Francisco, and Ed Mock’s Danceworks in San Francisco. And I worked with Halifo Sumari in the morning, going around to schools doing a show called “The History of Black Dance.” Between those three dance companies, I found the first set of women to dance with me. These four women were the foundation for what became my own dance company, For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide.
- F.L.A:** You tour your performances pieces all over the country. Can you speak to the different receptions of your performances in different regions of the country?
- N.S.:** Oh, it’s really has been wonderful. I’m really pleased. In New York, San Antonio, and at the National Black Theater Festival I did a piece called “Beneath the Necessity of Talking” that was very well received. The same piece was just as well received when we did it in New Hampshire. And even though the the two voices—one crazy and one sane—overlap in “Ellington Is Not a Street”, this more experimental piece continues to get an amazing response. In the “talk-back” that I’ve had with audiences, they’re right there. They know exactly what it’s about: the pathology of racism and how it effects women and children, and how racism carves a madness in us. It’s not like Bigger Thomas’s blanket madness, though. It’s a very specific, individually located madness that comes from being exposed to it—like a virus where everybody has a variety of symptoms and develops different coping mechanisms.
- F.L.A:** Your performance art crosses many national borders. Can you speak about this experience?
- N.S.:** I tour my work in Europe and give readings in Cuba and Nicaragua. They’ve all been wonderful experiences. And my books have been translated into at least twelve languages. The Norwegians really like me, which is peculiar. I don’t know why, but we have a big market in Holland and the Netherlands. I go over there and do these readings in English, and the audience follows along. It was a really funny experience. And a Puerto Rican theater company just asked for the copyright to *Colored Girls*. There have been productions on the island, but never on the U.S. mainland. It’ll be interesting to see their dramatic interpretation of the work.
- F.L.A:** What type of audiences do your performances tend to attract?
- N.S.:** I haven’t had many white audiences recently. Not like I used to. Which is good because that means that more Black, Latino, and Asian people know what it is I’m doing. They’re the ones who come out to see my performances. It also has to do with the multiplying number of venues across the country that rent theater spaces to performers of color; and the

fact that in recent years there's been an increase of people of color working as producing agents in cities.

**F.L.A.:** Do you think the climate has changed radically for performance artists since the days when Karen Finley and Robbie McAuley were struggling?

**N.S.:** Of course, Robbie and Karen Finley are still very active. But I still believe that theater leaves a lot to be desired. People would rather go see those big slapstick gospel plays rather than our performance art pieces. This said, because I can produce performances more efficiently and with a much lower overhead than those big slapstick productions, it's easier for me to find a producer to produce my work. All I need is one day of rehearsal in a space and I'm ready to go. This means that I don't have to compromise the integrity of my work by creating performances that cater to producers who might be a little more skittish about funding my projects.

**F.L.A.:** So you've never had to tone down the content of your performances for funding?

**N.S.:** I never stop myself from writing something I want to write, or stop performing something I want to perform. I tell the people, when I'm getting ready to do an adult piece, "This is an adult piece!" If people don't want their children to see something, just don't bring them to see me. Take them to see somebody else—like Barney.

**F.L.A.:** Do you think your use of non-Standard English still carries political clout in your performance art today?

**N.S.:** I use Black English, which seems to be a dead issue in today's post-Hip-Hop Nation climate. Still, this doesn't mean that I should change the language in my performances—or in my writing. Even in *If I Can Cook you Know God Can* I switch back and forth between Black English and straight English. Like Spanish, Black English is a second language in my creative acts. I will continue to use it as I see fit.

**F.L.A.:** When you switch registers from straight English to Black, do you find it offers more creative possibility?

**N.S.:** I was blessed with an ear to hear the rhythms of people's speech patterns: where they place verbs and adjectives, for example. I try to represent the beauty, play, magic, and the pyrotechnics of Black English in my work. This ability to represent Black English is a gift I've been given and also something that requires constant work. I'm constantly working on fine tuning that process of translating what I hear into my writing. If I stumble when I'm doing a reading, I figure out what I'm doing wrong in the line, then I rewrite the line. It might be a question of the consonants not providing me with the right rhythm and cadence. That's why readings are so important to me; they help me refine my work.

**F.L.A.:** You infuse your novels, short stories, and poetry with what you've identified as the "choreopoem" technique where you use the improvised



rhythm and play of jazz musical form. Is the choreopoem a technique that you use in your performance art?

**N.S.:** Oh, absolutely. In the piece titled “Beneath the Necessity of Talking” that I performed at the National Black Theatre in Philadelphia, I used the choreopoem technique to reinvigorate my performance art. I still meet with resistance to the use of the choreopoem in my performances. Producers and audiences still act like it’s some big deal if dancers speak poetry. In my recent performance-adaptation of “Sparkle” at the Freedom Theater, I brought a vernacular spirit to the choreographing of this dance piece. However, I have to say that in the performance like “Sparkle” and “Beneath the Necessity of Talking” they’re ultimately dance pieces and not the choreopoem you might read in my written work.

**F.L.A.:** Can you talk about the work you’re doing now and how this spins out of your earlier so-called “choreopoem” poetry performances?

**N.S.:** As always, I’m constantly refining my choreopoem performance. I’m collaborating on a novel with my sister called *Some Sing, Some Cry* for St. Martin’s Press. In the novel we explore seven or so generations of a family and how within each generation one of the female characters is an exponent of the evolution of black music at that period in time. The book is not only a heart-wrenching family story, but a history of the development of African-American music in all its phases. I’m also working on a collection of personal essays as well as continuing to work on a number of children’s books. *Daddy Said*, for example, is for girls ten to twelve years old and is an adaptation of a one-act play of mine. I’ve also adapted the Uncle John stories—or as we call them, “The Trickster Tales”—for children. And I’ve finished a biography on Muhammad Ali before he took up the Golden Gloves. As far as the performances go, I’ve not only been creating new material, but I’ve been revitalizing tried and true material that I select from everything I’ve ever written and performed. I’ve also worked with my daughter, Savannah Shange Binion, in a performance titled “Ellington Is Not a Street” that we performed in Philadelphia at the Art Sanctuary. My new work is extremely exciting for me.

**F.L.A.:** Where you surprised that your daughter Savannah followed in your footsteps?

**N.S.:** She’s been going to theater school since she was seven, but that was her idea. I wanted her to be a dentist or a neurosurgeon or something. So I was quite surprised when she picked experimental theater. I said, “Why would you pick that after you see what Mommy goes through? Why would you do that?”

**F.L.A.:** Self-identified “poet of the people” June Jordan writes poems that aim to unite U.S. women of color with Third World women. Do you have the same goals with your choreopoems or performance art pieces?

**N.S.:** I began doing this kind of work at least 25 years ago. The first performance of “For Colored Girls” was black, Native American and Asian. Certainly, the idea of using performance art to unify women of color isn’t new to me.

**F.L.A.:** We live in a United Colors of Benetton climate where people, at least on the surface, seem more willing to cross racial lines. Yet, there’s still that deep residue of conservatism in American society. Might your novel *Lillian* be a response to these contradictory forces at work in our world? I say this only because you use a variety of storytelling techniques to paint a picture of racially mixed, polyglot women who experience difference as they travel across different territories.

**N.S.:** My business is to create this thing, and we make this thing, and we get it in the bookstore, and then I let the publishers deal with the rest.

**F.L.A.:** Can you speak about the turn in your artistic career to writing children’s books like *I Live in Music*?

**N.S.:** I didn’t have much to do with that book. I wrote the poem and the publisher added the Romare Bearden collages and watercolors. I actually didn’t think it should’ve been marketed as a children’s book. I think it’s more of a coffee table book. Right now, though, I’m working with a Cuban artist whose doing the watercolors for the Muhammad Ali story that I wrote for children. I just got prints in the mail. Really lush watercolors that I think would be really nice for the piece.

**F.L.A.:** There seems to be a strong Latin American and Caribbean influence in your work. Who have been the big influences on your work?

**N.S.:** Of course, *el Presidente* Gabriele García Márquez, Manuel Puig, and Mario Vargas Llosa—especially Llosa’s use of jump-cuts and his sense of narrative tempo. In the States, there’s the Puerto Rican poet Pedro Pietre and Filipina playwright Jessica Hagedorn who’ve been big influences on my work. As far as the African American writers, it’s easy to see that Zora Neale Hurston and the early Amiri Baraka have been central to my writing. Ishmael Reed’s humor and commitment to research have been inspiring. When I saw the bibliography at the end of Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo*, I said, “Yes! This is what I need to make a whole new career,” you know? This is perfect. I thought it was very generous of him to reveal his sources. I must say that in terms of what I want to write and the kind of fluidity and percussiveness that I want to project through characterization and language, most of my influences have been musical. I’m hearing music when I write.

**F.L.A.:** You mention B. B. King and Celia Cruz in *Liliane*. . .

**N.S.:** I was raised on Eddie Palmieri, Miles Davis, Art Blakey, Art Farmer, Herbie Hancock, Oscar Peterson, Bobby Timmons, Clifford Jordan, and Cecil Taylor. Taylor’s my center. I find solace in the density of the piano. So

whenever I start to go crazy, I just listen to Cecile Taylor and center myself.

**F.L.A:** Your prose style blends nicely the gritty realism we associate with the city and the warm pastoral glow we might associate with stories set in the country. . .

**N.S.:** Yeah, landscapes are very important to me. What it feels like when you touch and what they feel like. Like what does the dirt smell like. I really like dirt, and soil, and the freshness. The smell of freshly tilled soil really turns me on. I really love it. And cornfields in the morning are fabulous to walk through. Sugar cane in the late evening, you know, when you look at it, and the smells go all through the thing. I don't know where it comes in, and I think I would die if I had to live in the country, but some part of me just resonates with it.

**F.L.A:** In your novel *Sassafrass* you texture your character Sassafras as if she were a landscape. . .

**N.S.:** Right. I don't know where that comes from. I mean, I was raised in Saint Louis, Missouri, and then New Jersey where I went to high school. So this rural quality in *Sassafrass* must be one of my great aunts inhabiting my body. She inhabits my body, and these things come out. My ancestors are calling to black people to find some ways to mesh our ways we learned up north and what we learned from living in the South.

**F.L.A:** Dancing is clearly central to your performance pieces.

**N.S.:** Yes, I believe in something I call "carnal intellectuality." I think of this as that place, or what I call a "slit," where you can think passionately but in a rational way. In this slit, there's movement, and this movement is the same impulse one uses to dance. And this is how I work. I'm there in the moment when emotion, passion, and the neurological reflex mix and I dance it out. Then I transform this carnal intellectual moment from body to the page so that somebody else can dance it out. So that they can know the text, and they can start to take chances. They don't have to follow behind me word by word because they can sit inside the music and spread out.

**F.L.A:** Your performance art can be very violent—and also deeply sensual. Can you speak to this seeming contradiction in your work?

**N.S.:** See the problem is that the bodies of black females and males have been so maligned as sexual objects—the big black buck stereotype—or as buffoons—the long tradition of minstrel shows—that it's very important for me to create an alternative possibility of our reality. These stereotypes don't exist; they're a fantasy. So our reality of the lyricism in our own relationships really has to be made present for us. Especially now when so many have given up on looking for this lyricism, I have to write these things so women especially know this is possible. What you're feeling or yearning for is possible. Those sensations you're having are not insane.

Being touched gently is important. Being able to play sexually or sensually is important.

**F.L.A.:** In this era when black and brown peoples are being ravaged by diseases like AIDS, how does your so-called “sex-death” writing reflect this?

**N.S.:** It is dangerous—even spooky—to have love of one another today. My collection of poems, *The Love Space Demands*, responds to this sense of people not knowing how to behave in today’s society. If they couldn’t just fuck, then they didn’t know what to do. And that’s where I come in. That’s where sensuality and imagination come in. “Bump and grind” and “enter and exit” aren’t the only things to do for pleasure. It’s my job as a sexual heroine to come to the aid of my people and say, Look there are other things you can do: You can have fantasies. You can have, you know, rubbing. You can have massaging. You can have fun. All these things are possible without killing each other. And all these things are possible with the ability to say no to somebody without protection. It’s been such a drag on us to have this stigma of disease attached to us, so a lot of us have closed up. Also, the black community is very puritanical about sex. The Puritan aspect of my own culture, which is quite tenacious. As for black women, it’s also okay for them to want multiple partners. There’s nothing wrong with that. This doesn’t make these women whores. I’m trying to say there’s something besides a virgin and a whore dichotomy. This is my fight. I’m on the sexual crusade, the sensuality crusade to free the black people from Puritanism.

**F.L.A.:** You live in Houston today. Has this proved a vibrant community for your work?

**N.S.:** Houston’s been very good to me. When I returned to Houston after my daughter went to college and after the big oil bust in 1987, Texas became a very good place for me to create. I still go to rodeos; in fact that’s where a lot of my material for the children’s books comes from. Because we still don’t have a good sense of what a Southwestern child’s life is like in the black community. It’s very different to growing up back East. So by writing stories that include urban children who are also in some way rural, I’m broadening the horizons of children’s literature.

## **"PEACE ON EARTH?": JOHN TAGGART'S POEM IN CIRCULAR MOTION**

*Peter O'Leary*

John Taggart's poem "Peace on Earth" was first published in *Paper Air*, Gil Ott's literary magazine, in 1979, then published in a book with the same name, along with three other poems—"Slow Song for Mark Rothko," "Giant Steps," and "Inside Out"—by Turtle Island Press in 1981. This volume is a handsomely printed, squarish book that—nowadays—you have to go out of your way to find a copy of. All four of the poems in this volume show the nascence of what we've come to know as the "Taggart line": a long, rhythmical repetition of atomic phrases, built up, varied, and transformed. In terms of the compressed (sometimes cramped) poetics that marked his previous book *Dodeka*, with its geometric, condensed verses, *Peace on Earth* the book feels like a liberation, in which the poet decides "To breath and to stretch one's arms again," as in the "Slow Song for Mark Rothko." At the time, *Peace on Earth* perhaps represented a departure. Looking at this volume now, we understand it as the beginning of a different kind of work for Taggart; not only as the birth of his new line, but as the discovery of a new voice.

As important as the other poems in this volume are, none is more important than "Peace on Earth." Like *Dodeka* and *The Pyramid is a Pure Crystal* before it, "Peace on Earth" is a carefully constructed, formally engineered poem. Its design recalls, or perhaps echoes distantly, the stringent Pythagoreanism of *Dodeka*, with its counted syllables, strung plaits, and precision arrangements; and like the unison sections of *Dodeka*, the poem has a flexible verbal reach. But "Peace on Earth" lacks the constraints of its predecessors, even in its own careful design, in that it constantly transcends its patterns.

The poem consists of three sections, one of three, one of nine, and one of twenty-seven parts. Each part consists of a poem made up of three stanzas of eight, one, and four lines apiece. The one-line stanza remains the same in each section: section one: "Care touches the face, untwists the face"; section two: "Carry torches, carry each other"; and section three: "Carol heart's ease, ring of flower's thought," each of these lines beginning with the initial syllable of *caritas*, one of the words that characterizes the poem. The other two stanzas per poem work very slight variations on phrases, slowly introducing new material into the poem, usually from the bottom of the stanza up, as is the case with the material quoted from *The Winter Soldier Investigation: An Inquiry into American War Crimes by the Vietnam Veterans Against the War*, which is used throughout the second section. From poem to poem, the changes are incremental but the effect is cumulative. Not so much like a series of discarded phrases as an increasingly powerful pulsation or series of pulsations, which reverberate, amplify, harmonize, come into an accordance, into an unanticipated unison. This sense of a loosening of control throughout the poem distinguishes "Peace on Earth" most strikingly from Taggart's

earlier poems derived from musical structures, creating both a feeling of openness and an expression for the unexpected. As Taggart himself has commented, the effect of introducing these variations is to open up the voice, and thus the poem itself: “Moving across these contiguous vocabularies [in “Peace on Earth”], the cadence produces cross-rhythms within itself, and the voice is reopened. As the voice becomes larger, more open, the vision found in the poem may become larger.” (Songs, 77)

So what is the poem about? Later, I will argue it is about the soul’s circular motion in its transcendental aspirations. But for now, to state the obvious: it’s about Vietnam. Allow me to clarify: as much as its subject is Vietnam, its vocabulary is Vietnam. In this respect, Taggart quotes from *The Winter Soldier* not so much to give the poem its subject matter but to give the poem its language. The word “napalm” is used conspicuously—poetically—because it is a beautiful word. Furthermore, one might also say, “Peace on Earth” is one man’s poetic response to Vietnam, to its conflict internalized in a human citizen of These States. One might say again that the poem is a prayer of healing, the tip-off for which is the inclusion—a cycling-in—of a Tarahumara chant in the third, longest, section of the poem. The other tip-off would be the poem’s title, taken from a composition by John Coltrane, appearing on his “Live in Japan” lp, recorded July 22, 1966, released in 1973. Even in his title, Taggart strives for a sense of cosmic reach—a sense of Coltrane’s agonistic but optimistic vision.

When *Peace on Earth* was published by Turtle Island in 1981, it inspired only a few reviews or comments. Toby Olson proposed that though the poem begins in ironic relation to its title, by its end, it has become an actual wish, such that the poem speaks of the dead from the war “purified of anger and resentment.” “Like the best religious music,” says Olson, “it transforms those who give themselves to it” (Weinberger 146). Perhaps at the time readers and reviewers alike found it curious that the poem was written and published a number of years after the war had actually ended, such that Vietnam protest poetry had effectively ceased to have a presence on the scene. In some respects, the appearance of “Peace on Earth” at this time must have been startling. The poem is not so much a revisitiation but an assertion that the subject and the vocabulary of Vietnam remain essential to American poetry.

One of the other responses to “Peace on Earth” was written by Eliot Weinberger, in a review that appeared in *Sulfur*, in 1982. Weinberger’s piece is a rather savage attack on Taggart’s poem and by proxy Taggart himself. Weinberger’s review is not an unusual piece for him, at least in terms of the strategies of blame (rather than praise) it employs, but it is an unusual piece in terms of his reasons for criticizing Taggart’s poem. While my purpose here is not to rehearse Weinberger’s review, there are some instructive critical fallacies in his argument that demonstrate why he misunderstood Taggart’s poem. Weinberger’s misunderstanding leads to our own apprehension of the poem.

Weinberger's argument against "Peace on Earth" runs something like this: in the "old" days, war poetry was written by participants: either by combatants or by witnesses, whether Wilfred Owen, David Jones, or even Charles Reznikoff. With Vietnam came the great flowering of protest poetry in America: mainstream and experimental poets alike were united in their opposition to this war, though hardly any of them were either combatants in or witnesses of atrocities; at best, they were activists. Among the highlights of this poetry is Denise Levertov's poem "Advent 1966." Curiously enough, Weinberger never mentions Robert Duncan's "Passages: Of the War" in this review, nor any of Duncan's "Seventeenth Century Suite," portions of which had been appearing regularly throughout the 1970s. Weinberger approves of Vietnam protest poetry, for the most part, but he sees it as a distant cousin—at least in this review—to war poetry written by combatants or witnesses. In reading "Peace on Earth" in this context, he voices two main objections: first, he does not think the "minimalism" of the poem works, nor does he think Taggart works sufficient changes on the language to justify the length of the poem: "In a poem relying on sound alone, the reiteration of content... simply cannot be sustained for very long" (Weinberger 147). Second, "Taggart was not in the war, and has probably never seen Vietnam, a napalm victim, or even napalm itself" (147). Taggart's poem, he insists, has been made from books "he found... in the library." He goes on to categorize "Peace on Earth" as a latter-day variety of romantic protest poetry "manured by dead peasants and by our dead contemporaries who were too poor or too guileless to evade conscription" (148-9). Taggart's is a poem of privilege. Weinberger concludes his argument by insisting that a real Vietnam poetry will be written by "a veteran or one capable of living in a veteran's brain," one who could descend into that hell (149). I have called this an unusual piece for Weinberger, not for its mode of attack, which, again, is rather typical, but for his complaint: Fifteen years later in *The Voice Literary Supplement*, Weinberger would launch a different diatribe against the whole trend of a "poetry of witness" that dominates the publishers and the anthologies nowadays, a trend he finds repugnant, such that a poet's merits depend on her ethnicity or what atrocities she's seen. (I should note that this argument appears in the context of an exposé of the Yasusada controversy/hoax: the invented Japanese poet who survived Hiroshima to read and write like Jack Spicer [Karmic, 105-111]). In his review of "Peace on Earth," interestingly, he criticizes Taggart for not having witnessed the war, for writing a poem he is evidently unqualified to write, never having experienced that war. Weinberger's proprietary feelings about the war aside, we need to ask, why has he dismissed "Peace on Earth" so emphatically? Or, more pointedly, what has turned him against this poem, written, in his own words, by "one of the brightest of... poets"?

I suggest two reasons: either Weinberger was trying to make a point about war poetry and used Taggart as his example, such that he was not especially interested in reading Taggart's poem at any depth; or, Weinberger understood the context of Taggart's poem insufficiently. By this I mean Weinberger did not





everywhere living productive forms in the evolution of forms fail, weaken, or grow monstrous, destroying the terms of their existence... And in this drama of our own desperation we are drawn into a foreign desperation. For our defense has invaded an area of our selves that troubled us" (BB i). The alienating desperation of Vietnam repeats, for Duncan, the resolutely creative, Gnostic, and spiritually alienating crisis through which he wages his own war of art (and art of war). The outward reality of war disturbs the inward conflict of poetry: "The poem in which my heart beats speaks like to unlike, kind to unkind. The line of the poem itself confronts me where I must volunteer my love, and I saw, long before this war, wrath move in the music that troubles me" (BB iii). Poetry is the wrathful music of a war the poet wages in language.

Duncan's "A Seventeenth Century Suite in Homage to the Metaphysical Genius in English Poetry (1590-1690)" first appeared in *Maps #6*, edited by John Taggart, in 1974. In this suite, Duncan reprints Southwell's "Burning Babe" and follows it with his poem "'A pretty babe'—that burning Babe..." in which he announces a vision of his own:

From the broild flesh of these heretics,  
by napalm monstrously baptized  
in a new name, every delicate and  
sensitive curve of lip and eyelip  
blasted away, surviving...  
eyes? Can this horror be calld their  
*fate?* Our fate grows a mirroring face  
in the accusation beyond accusation  
of such eyes,  
  
a kind of hurt that drives into the root  
of understanding, their very lives  
burnd into us we live by. (GW 75-6)

Like Levertov, Duncan sees the burning babe doused in napalm. But unlike Levertov, who uses the image as a doorway to the horror that is war, Duncan understands even this child burned by napalm, like Southwell's, to be a revelatory image, to be a Gnostic mirror, to be a morbid sign of life. Nathaniel Mackey, writing about this poem, recognizes Duncan's intention to write not a commentary or an exposition of the war, but to see his poems as "intimations of apocalyptic change" and of "annihilation" (Discrepant 102-3). What Levertov fears, Duncan abides in.

"Peace on Earth," I submit, emerges out of this context. It is not a romantic protest poem—as Weinberger accuses it—but an engagement of war as essential to understanding apocalyptic change and annihilation, of both self and culture. Whether Taggart was consciously engaging the example of Duncan's poem when

he composed “Peace on Earth”—Taggart has suggested that the link with Duncan’s poem “exists in literary space, between the poems rather than personal influence or aspiration” (Taggart letter)—is less important than the readerly experience that the poem is firmly in its company (as well as that of Levertov’s poem), in that it uses Vietnam as an archetype, to constellate meaning and language. When Taggart included Duncan’s *Metaphysical Suite* in *Maps*, he encountered a model for engaging such material emerging “out of darkness.” Duncan insists: “Terror erodes its own events,/ shadows having no more touch in time/ than shadows, yet/ there’s no relief from that knowledge” (GW 80). “Peace on Earth” is a poem that accepts no relief comes from the knowledge it insists on. Like Duncan, Taggart is not a political poet per se. He understands politics, world-events, in the light of religious voice and vision.

What is stunning about “Peace on Earth” is that the discovery of voice that it represents is also the generation of a new spiritual knowledge, a new theology or Word of God, centered on the sound rather than the lexical meaning of the word. As such, this makes for a language mysticism in Taggart’s poetry, something akin to the *via negativa* or *apophasis* of Christian mystics: Taggart uses the sound of words to erode or undermine their meaning, allowing the words to transcend into a hypostatic realm of Word, capitalized. By language mysticism, I mean that quality of language—its intuitive registers in thought—that exceeds logical meanings. In her book *Language Mysticism: The Negative Way of Language in Eliot, Beckett, and Celan*, Shira Wolosky, offers the following apropos meditation:

Mysticism’s point of view on language dramatizes its fundamental attitudes toward experience in this world of time and difference as against yearned-for unity. From this unity language is excluded. But excluded with it, no less, are time and the world. Language thus points beyond mysticism’s metaphysical structure of ascent, into its axiological judgments concerning life in the temporal, material world, which language consistently represents and which mysticism aspires to transcend. (3-4)

In this elaboration, what interests me in relation to “Peace on Earth” is the possibility that axiology is consequential with mystical language. The sense that the poem provides no adequate political solution to human suffering because Taggart understands that no such solution exists except in the realms of the banal informs the worth of his poem. Its value has not so much to do with a position in regards to Vietnam and its carnage, but rather with transcendent language. The performative language mysticism of “Peace on Earth” is what allows the poem to “revert-to-source,” to use Plotinus’s understanding of *epistrophe* (not to mention Monk’s!), an aspect of the poem that deserves some discussion.

We can hear Taggart creating the theology of a language mysticism most especially in the way he cycles new phrases into “Peace on Earth.” One powerful example of this circling in of phrases and ideas occurs in the second section—

which is nine poems long. A quotation from *The Winter Soldier Investigation* appears in the first stanza of the first poem of that section, which runs:

To delight to delight those who are friends to  
delight friends by turning by turning  
in an enclosed space *in*  
*nape, which is napalm, or*  
*which the military now likes to*  
*refer to as incinder jell, as if*  
*it were as harmless as Jello,*  
*an after-dinner desert. But it was napalm. (42)*

In the first stanza of the second poem of section two this quotation is repeated but condensed, and a new set of images is added: “jell after the fires burned down and/ there was an old man lying on a cot, burned/ to death with his hands stiff in rigor mortis” (43). In the course of introducing new material from *The Winter Soldier Investigation*, the unquoted material in the opening lines of the stanza shrinks, until by the ninth stanza, it has disappeared, so that the entire stanza consists of quoted material. Note how the original quote has been compressed into one line by this point:

*Napalm a forgiving old man napalm an*  
*old woman lying as if*  
*she had just been born an old man thirty dead children*  
*napalm thirty dead babies*  
*to look like they had just been sunburned*  
*their skins a ruddy pink or*  
*scarlet color napalm*  
*napalm other charred with their guts hanging out. (50)*

Here, then, is a snap shot of the compositional method of “Peace on Earth,” which is more often than not compared to the minimalist techniques of composers such as Steve Reich and Philip Glass. Fair enough, but through the words we recognize that repetition, pulsation, tranverse rhythms on the vocables are not the goal of the poem. Through careful introduction, cycling in, and variation, the goal is transformation: a transformation of quotation into transportative sound, a sonic agent of change.

Two other phrases—one of them a set of instructions and the other a prayer—enter into the poem, with similar roles. In section three, the last line of the first stanza of the first poem (recall that this section is 27 poems long) reads: “lift the head to sing sursum virga and sursum.” Sursum=higher; to lift up; virga=green twig or rod (it was used to describe the Caduceus). These words represent neums and clarifications of the neums on the manuscripts of Gregorian

chant, particularly those to be found on the Laon manuscript from the early 10<sup>th</sup> c. “Ninth & 10<sup>th</sup> c. musical notation was neumatic: forms traced in the air by the conductor’s hand were indicated in manuscript by written signs, called neums” (Blackley, liner notes). Thus “virga” represents one long note, higher than the note it follows (and its gestural neum is an upward stroke, a twig in the air). “Sursum” means “higher.” Thus Taggart’s “sursum virga” becomes “hold the note higher still.” Sursum virga echoes of the static line from the second section: “Carry torches, carry each other.” It also echoes the *sursum corda* in the Latin Mass (“we lift up our hearts”) that initiates the Preface of the Liturgy of the Eucharist. By the third poem of section three, these words have already cycled up to the fourth line: “sing sursum virga sursum.” By the seventh poem, we read: “To lift to lift up to lift without [this initial line remains constant throughout section three]/ effort to lift the head to sing sursum/ past the doorkeeper/ to sing virga sursum to lead bones in motion.” The dancing bones, their caps of ashes removed, recalls the “graves of air” in Celan’s “Todesfuge,” the poem that “Peace on Earth” most eerily resembles. By poem 11, “sursum” is replaced with “humiliter” (“effort to sing humiliter”), to which “podatus” is added in poem 15, later replaced by “tene” and then “tene and auge.” Humiliter is the opposite of “sursum”: thus, lower, and hinting at a submissiveness. Podatus is a neum shaped like a foot: thus, two short notes, ascending. Tene=to extend outwards or upwards, to stretch, to hold out; auge=to increase in quantity or size; to lengthen, to intensify, to magnify. Thus “humiliter podatus”=to sing two short notes, lower. Tene and auge: to hold and to magnify these low notes. As much as the Latin has a lexical meaning, it has sonic meaning and gestural meaning. In and of themselves, these words are not terribly illuminating. “Peace on Earth” is not “The Waste Land.” What is important with these words—sursum, virga, humiliter, podatus, tene, auge—is to watch and listen to their motion through the poem.

Meanwhile, beginning in the 12<sup>th</sup> poem of section three, Taggart has been cycling the words of a Tarahumara healing song into his poem, discovered in Antonin Artaud’s book *The Peyote Dance* which is about the Tarahumara, one word at a time, so that the last word of the 12<sup>th</sup> poem reads: “which sing back and forth singing *sana*.” By the 17<sup>th</sup> poem, the entire prayer appears in the last line: “advancing *sana tafan fana tanaf tamafts bai*” (67). But Taggart hasn’t merely cycled these words into the last line of each of the section’s poems. Once he has introduced a word from the Tarahumara prayer, it is free to cycle upward—to aspire—into the poem, like sparks of light upward through the Kabbalistic Tree of Life, so that the words of this prayer mingle with those of the Latin prayer, together undergoing the transformative, neumatic action that marks “Peace on Earth.” By the final page of “Peace on Earth,” these have all coalesced into a tintinnabulation:

To lift to lift up to lift without  
effort to sing high and low high and low

to hold and to lengthen the carol  
*sana tafan tana tamaf tamafits bai*  
sing  
*tamaf tamafits bai* to stand still in the shining  
dance in the lily-flower  
in the ring of flower's thought  
in the light of day.

Carol heart's ease, ring of flower's thought.

To lift up bones in light in curled leaves and petals  
to intend the greatest gifts  
to hold the shining  
ring that is an ardor and a blossoming. (77)

I have suggested "Peace on Earth" demonstrates a theology. Let me modify that thought to: "Peace on Earth" demonstrates a mystical theology, which is both an attitude toward knowledge of God and an abasement of that attitude in the form of actual praxis. What does this mean? The great mystery of the Judeo-Christian tradition is prophecy. Prophecy is not, according to its common implication, the telling of the future, but rather, it is powerful speech directed toward God or toward the people, having come from God. The mystery of prophecy is that this powerful speech is essential toward knowing this God who is transcendent; hence, unknowable, ineffable, removed beyond the known created cosmos. He exists as an unqualifiable Nothing beyond creation, indescribable but emanating—pulsating—into creation, in bolts of energy and strings of syllables and letters. This is why we speak of a God hidden and revealed in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The mystery of Judeo-Christian belief is the fear and trembling that go with faith in a God you cannot ever know.

Lacking this knowledge, the prophet, the poet, the hymnist, the mystic do not abandon the pursuit of it. By grouping these figures together, I am not equating them: a prophet is something very different from a mystic. Both, however, intermediate between the cosmos and the unknown God beyond through language. Impossible knowledge of God is replaced in the poet, the prophet and the mystic by motion which involves technique, aspiration, and a sense of the soul's circulation. A classic instruction on the movement of the soul is in "The Divine Names" of Pseudo-Dionysius:

The soul too has movement. First it moves in a circle, that is, it turns within itself and away from what is outside and there is an inner concentration of its intellectual powers. A sort of fixed revolution causes it to return from the multiplicity of externals, to gather in upon itself and then, in this undispersed condition, to join those who are themselves in a

powerful union. From there the revolution brings the soul to the Beautiful and the Good, which is beyond all things, is one and the same, and has neither beginning nor end. (Pseudo-Dionysius 78)

Dionysius goes on to say that any enlightenment that comes from this process arises because of the soul's circular motion rather than an insight or revelation. Motion generates knowledge, establishing harmony with the divine emanating pulsation. St. Gregory Palamas, elaborating on Dionysius's circular movement in a treatise on the prayer of stillness, comments that through such motion the intellect, which he defines as the noetic power of the spiritual imagination, "operates within itself, and so beholds itself" (Philokalia IV, 336). In this way, rhythm is self-reflexivity. Self-reflexivity is the path to the knowledge of the unknown God: there is no other way.

"Peace on Earth" is a prayer in that it is a spiritual exercise in circular breathing. Circular breathing was a technique of playing the saxophone advanced by Coltrane and others in which the player maintains a steady impulse of air moving through the horn, such that even as he gasps for an inbreath, sound keeps issuing from the bell of the horn in a constant, circular motion (This is something like playing the saxophone as if it were bagpipes). "Peace on Earth" is a poem in which a steady stream of sound issues from the bell of language. Its purpose is not a purgation and restoration of the most awful human experience—war and its atrocities—although the poem could not exist without these; nor is its purpose to hearken back to a form of romantic protest poetry, in hopes of announcing a kind of unity or collectivity of suffering. "Peace on Earth" is a poem whose mystery is that of prophecy, of the self-reflexive movement of a language mysticism, of an arduous discovery of voice and vision and the prolonged transformation of these into a poem of religious knowledge, for which war is both a subject and a vocabulary.

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These are the cars

Auburns and Cords and Duesenbergs

rare

machines of rare elegance

and this is back home in Indiana

rare

inexplicable

museum once showroom and factory headquarters

on a small town street like the streets

where I grew up run-away tramp and young rebel gentleman from Indiana

from small towns like this town

or from interruptions or from small interruptions in the fields

flatness of the fields

hadn't remembered this intolerable flatness.

Candy apple Auburn 852 Speedster  
the grille shield-shaped slightly tilted back not Achilles' shield  
tilted back into long level line of the hood  
chrome exhaust coils  
coming out each side  
of the hood  
room for only two behind the grille the hood the coils  
grape-colored Cord 810 Beverly Sedan  
headlights concealed  
in s-curve fenders sticking out  
from the raked body curved aerodynamic voluptuously aerodynamic  
black Duesenberg J Murphy Torpedo Convertible Coupe  
abrupt leaving  
least  
abrupt pointed stern  
black torpedo boat leaving last detectable wake  
in the open air.



Without memory there is no protection  
from the flatness of all the fields undeniable unanticipated  
intolerable  
no longer a boy or young man  
from somewhere else who had to go somewhere else had to and  
has to  
away from the fields

inexplicable not in a  
chapter in the glossy-paper chapters of arts and ideas

Indiana can be explained

the cars cannot  
perhaps elegance can never be explained  
boy or young man hadn't know the cars weren't on the streets then  
perhaps rebellion is the unknowing pursuit of elegance.

From "Indiana" to "Donna Lee"

to a woman change of the jazz musician

the chord changes don't change and

faster with more notes

the history of jazz is faster and faster with more notes on the changes

that don't change

faster with more notes becomes a blurring into

a woman

pure articulation of a woman

lonely woman

pure articulation of the blues which is pure loneliness

which don't change go faster go further go away oh so far as far away

end up lonely

James Dean ended up lonely from Indiana and ended up lonely

my hero

gone

in a car not one of the elegant cars.

# THE LITTLE MATCHGIRL

*Elizabeth Robinson*

The fingers were divorced from the hands

Now there is a glowing

around the numbness of the mouth

and that

light-ridden

painlessness is  
the hand

Hold the flame

up to the detached fingers

Sensation as pentimento, overlap

(Revoke her poverty)

Wish is a form of overlap,  
of articulation:

to unite by a joint or joints

Or the smooth-jointedness  
of x-ray vision

looks through walls  
from the empty belly  
to the feast

While this wan fist  
has no knuckles  
to penetrate  
coherence

Would a second wish  
lay on the bed of the first  
as if to put words to,  
or interpolate a blanket

Leaf back through definition  
and you will find her  
lying there

betrayed by those ghostly fingers  
who point

and ignited on the flint  
of the abandoned  
street

And distinctly  
unwarm in the gesture

Perhaps you are happy with yourself  
because you are familiar with a story  
like this, and you experience the wall, too, as transparent

Do you know the segments, the succession  
Perhaps experience the bare palm as an embarrassment

The disjointure,  
the disarticulation  
are not a muteness

Shame on the fingertips:  
Matchtips strewn with sulfur and phosphorous  
do not remediate a bitter cold

You have been eavesdropped upon  
when the image fell from the lips

She saw as a physical part of her heart  
the pulse to some extremity

Transparent or amputated:  
admitting the passage of light through interstices

What third vision spies  
back upon her  
hinges upon

the ability to move

while the false narrative of her  
contentment is frozen

The wicks of the fingers  
one from another so far

**GRAFTING AS COMPARATIVE LITERATURE:  
VIRGIL'S *GEORGICS* AND  
THERESA HAK KYUNG CHA'S *DICTÉE'***

*Kristina Chew*

“That sounds very interesting.” This was almost the only remark offered some years ago when I explained the topic of my dissertation, *Pears Bearing Apples: Virgil's Georgics—Plato's Phaedrus—Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's Dictée'*<sup>2</sup>—aside from “how can you do that?”

Well. “Glory be to God for dappled things—” begins Gerard Manley Hopkins’ “Pied Beauty.” Through grafting, I would answer now.

Grafting? *Meaning?* Virgil:

Grafting is one of the nine methods for the propagation of trees enumerated at the beginning of Book 2 of the *Georgics* (2.9-34, 2.47-82), and one of the six artificial methods (vs. those occurring *sua sponte*).<sup>3</sup>

*et saepe alterius ramos impune uidemus  
uertere in alterius, mutataque insita male  
ferre pirum et prunis lapidosa rubescere poma. (2.31-33)<sup>4</sup>*

[ And often do we see  
without danger of damage  
one type's branches turned into another's:  
So changed a *pear* bears **grafts** of *apples*,  
and the stone hard *cornel-cherry's* red with *plums*. ]

Grafting epitomizes the artificiality of the reproduction of plant-life by human beings. The word for grafting, *insita*, is from *insere*, a compound of *in* and *serere* (“to sow, plant”).<sup>5</sup> The two methods of grafting described are *budding* (the introduction of a bud into the knot or joint of a tree's branch (2.74-7) and *crown-grafting* (the insertion of a slip into a cut in a tree's trunk (2.78-80). Grafting requires human intervention in nature.

*Inseritur vero et fetu nucis arbutus horrida,  
et steriles platani malos gessere valentis;  
castaneae fagus, ornusque incanuit albo  
flore piri glandemque sues fregere sub ulmis.  
Nec modus inserere atque oculos imponere simplex.  
Nam qua se medio trudunt de cortice gemmae  
et tenuis rumpunt tunicas, angustus in ipso  
fit nodo sinus: huc aliena ex arbore germen  
includunt udoque docent inolescere libro.*



*Aut rursum enodes trunci resecantur et alte  
finditur in solidum cuneis via, deinde feraces  
plantae immittuntur: nec longum tempus, et ingens  
exiit ad caelum ramis felicibus arbos  
miraturque novas frondes et non sua poma.*(2.69-82)

[ In fact

**grafts** of the following sort occur:

the fiber-barked

*strawberry tree*

plus the *walnut's* scion,

and fruitless *plane* trees

have borne healthy *apples*,

*sweet chestnuts*

*beech* trees;

the *manna ash* beams white

with the *pear's* white bloom

and hogs crack acorns

under *elms*.

**Crown-grafting** and **Bud-Insertion**

are not straightforward *Methods*,

For where

- gem-like buds

push themselves out

from inside the bark and

- burst

the tissue-thin skin, right on

the branch-knot is made a narrow hollow.

At this spot they encase

- a sprout

from an unrelated tree and teach it to grow

into the sponge-damp cambium. Or rather

knotless trunks are cut back and

- a way

into the sturdy mass is split deep

within with wedges; next,

- slips

promising fruits are put in place. No time at all

and a huge tree of size unspecified

sprouts up to the sky with fruit-filled branches

marveling at a novelty of leaves and

- apples

not its own.]

Cutting (*resecantur, finditur in solidum cuneis uia*) and insertion (*oculos inserere, includunt, inolescere, immittuntur*) are violent acts, involving a painful intrusion into a living thing already a complete entity in itself.<sup>6</sup> Grafting epitomizes the artificial means of propagating trees and, further, the inherent artificiality of the reproduction of plants by human beings. Farming is itself a kind of grafting in which humans “insert” their techniques, their art, into and onto nature. By the end of the propagation section, the distinction between natural and artificial methods is lost, as human aid is seen as necessary for arboriculture and agriculture in general. Trees may come to life on their own, but they require human work, *labor*, for their continued growth and survival: *pomaque degenerant sucos oblita priores / et turpis auibus praedam fert uua racemos*, “the breed / of apples forgetful of its former powers declines / and bears booty for birds and measly branches” (2.59-60).

*Pears Bearing Apples* had began as a study of the idea of art, of *ars* and *techne*, in the *Georgics* and the *Phaedrus*, and especially of Virgil’s image of grafting in Book 2 as an exemplary example of the farmer’s art.<sup>7</sup> I delight as much as the next classicist in detecting Iliadic echoes in the *Aeneid* and Callimachean quotations masked inside *Eclogue* 6. I have liked the *Georgics*—a didactic poem in Latin hexameters written in the last century B.C—so much as to spend ten years and more translating it. Cha’s elusive *Dictée*, with its postmodern assemblage of poetry, prose, maps, photographs, French, English, Korean, and cavalier refashioning of Greek literature and mythology—a forgery of Sappho! a new Muse!—was too tempting to a classicist, an Asian American, in a Comparative Literature Department in the nineties. *Georgics, Dictée*; apples, pears. “All things counter, original, spare, strange,” as Hopkins writes. I would graft them one into the other.

Virgil’s description of grafting in the *Georgics* is more than an image suggestive of a poetics for the poem. First in my dissertation and in all my later work, grafting is the idea for my own literary praxis of reading texts from different cultures and times together. More than simply comparing texts in search of thematic and other similarities, applying Virgil’s idea of grafting to my reading of texts enables me to discuss highly disparate texts together on the basis of shared (and sometimes elusively defined) qualities such as voice. *Dictée* particularly enacts this idea of grafting, which can be read as a code word for “comparative literature” as it enacts the reading of literatures separated by language, culture, geography and time.

The *Georgics*, a “didactic poem” on farming, is equally a poem about poetry. Using technical knowledge acquired with difficulty, with pains (*curae*, 1.123), farmer and poet attempt the physical alteration of the world, with tools, with words. Grafting describes both the art of farming and an unarticulated art of writing.<sup>8</sup> The art of the *Georgics*, the poetics Virgil practices in composing the poem, occurs through the grafting of poetry onto farming. The “epyllion” of Aristaeus and Orpheus at the end of Book 4 exemplifies this idea of grafting, for

it is a narrative appended, grafted, onto what was supposed to be a didactic poem of technique and science. The interwoven stories of Aristaeus, the prototypical farmer, and Orpheus, the poet *par excellence*, illustrate the merging of these two figures in the person of the georgic poet, the writer of the *Georgics*.

The image of grafting reappears in regard to Virgil's own art in the *Georgics*, his self-described importation of Greek poetry into Latin:

*salve, magna parens frugum, Saturnia tellus,  
magna uirum: tibi res antiquae laudis et artem  
ingredior sanctos ausus recludere fontis,  
Ascraeumque cano Romana per oppida carmen.* (2.173-176)

[Greeting

Saturnia-land, mother great  
with earth's own fruits  
and grand in men. For you  
I introduce the very stuff and art

of an ancient song of praise;  
I've dared to bring  
to light their sacred font.

A Grecian song sing I through towns of Rome.]

In composing the *Georgics* Virgil grafts Latin onto Greek poetry. *Romana per oppida* is placed between *Ascraeum* (invoking Ascra, Hesiod's birthplace) and *carmen*, just as, in grafting, the bud or slip is placed inside the branch of a tree-trunk. Rome is at the center of 2.176; it is the germinating seed for this poetry. Virgil's proclamation concludes the *laudes Italiae* which detail how Italy is superior to other lands. "Roman song" is thus created from elements both indigenous and foreign. Indeed, as the work of such scholars as Joseph Farrell and Richard Thomas on the heavily allusive and intertextual composition of the *Georgics* has shown, the poem is a constant interplay of quotations and thematic structures from the works of Homer, Hesiod, and Lucretius, among other authors.<sup>10</sup> It is a grafting of previous poems, Latin as well as Greek, onto Latin to create Virgil's own poetry.

Writing as grafting involves this taking of materials of various backgrounds and so involving them in each other that something new and utterly unimaginable before is created. Cha's *Dictée* is an exemplary example of the literary grafting described and enacted in the *Georgics*. By unhesitatingly combining Greek literature and mythology, the traditions of Roman Catholicism,<sup>11</sup> and Korean culture and history in *Dictée*, Cha represents the displaced person's experience by remaking Western culture into her own creation. *Dictée* stages the Asian American woman's labor to gain her own voice. The text is structured into

sections named after each of the nine Muses, quotes extensively from *L'histoire d'une âme*, the autobiography of St. Thérèse of Lisieux, and includes photographs of Cha's own mother and of Korean patriots being executed by the Japanese. *Dictée* compels us to read cross-culturally with its blatant grafting of traditions. It stages a return to the classics through the eyes of a subject situated in the latter half of the twentieth century, in the United States, and with a strong memory of Asia, of Korea.<sup>12</sup>

Cha represents the displaced person's experience by directly confronting two heavily influential forces of the Western tradition, Greek literature and mythology and Roman Catholicism.<sup>13</sup> *Dictée* is structured around the nine Muses, goddesses of song and of the arts. She gives new meaning to the Muses and to the genres of Western literature. The Muse herself is invoked at the beginning of *Dictée*, "O Muse, tell me the story / Of all these things, O Goddess, daughter of Zeus? Beginning wherever you wish, tell even us" (D 7); this is turned into a child's request of its parent, "Tell me the story / Of all these things. / Beginning wherever you wish, tell even us" (D 11). The second invocation deletes mention of the Muse, as if to suggest that the authority to speak does not reside in a divine source. Cha's play upon the Western tradition is exemplified in the Sappho "quote" that serves as *Dictée*'s epigraph: "May I write words more naked than flesh, / stronger than bone, more resilient than / sinew, sensitive than nerve."<sup>14</sup> *Dictée* makes the *dictée*, "dictation"—in which the writer passively writes another's words—an active process. The confession and formulaic responses of the Catholic mass are similarly toyed with:

I am making up the sins. For the guarantee of absolution. In the beginning again, at zero. Before Heaven, even. Before the Fall. (D 16)

*Q. WHO MADE THEE?*

*A. God made me.*

*To conspire in God's tongue. (D 17)*

The speaker's answers are rebellious and yet steeped in the rhythm of the ritual she argues against, converting phrases from "in His own likeness" to "In His Own Image in His Own Resemblance, in His Own Copy..." (D 17). She improvises on the age-old script. "The Word made flesh" is transformed into "the words made flesh"; the belief in Jesus as the incarnation of the Word of God is altered into the speaker's own wish expressed in the Sappho quote to write words more enduring than the body. The myth of Demeter and Persephone is a constantly lurking narrative in the broken story *Dictée* tells. It is directly evoked at the start of the section "ELITERE LYRIC POETRY." The motif of a child seeking to journey back to her mother recurs in each of *Dictée*'s sections. In the second section, "CALLIOPE EPIC POETRY," a young Korean woman, exiled from her homeland by the occupying Japanese, goes to another exile in Manchuria where

she is to be a teacher.<sup>15</sup> Homesick, she becomes physically ill and is tempted in scenes compared to Jesus' temptation by Satan in the desert.<sup>16</sup>

Cha's version of tradition is subversive in a quiet way. It is not a simple anger-laced rejection of Catholicism and of Western culture. She inserts her voice into these traditions; it is the bud engrafted into a tree branch's knob, from which it bleeds and veins its way into its host organism. The fifth section of *Dictée*, "ERATO LOVE POETRY," is centered around the nineteenth-century French saint, Thérèse of Lisieux. Quotes from her autobiography, *L'histoire d'une âme*, are placed across from an elliptical description of a woman whose husband is falling out of love with her. The women's sufferings in her broken marriage are blended into the "marriage" of a novitiate to Christ: St. Thérèse offers herself to Jesus as "VICTIM of your love" (D 111). Cha ingrafts herself into the figure of St. Thérèse and even that of Elitere, the Muse of lyric poetry. Theresa becomes Thérèse, and the vaguely Greek Elitere.<sup>17</sup> She is another of Cha's insertions of her voice into what looks like a part of Greek literature. The first syllable of Cha's name *Theresa* is echoed in *Elitere*. "Theresa" is derived from the Greek for "reaper," reaping an activity associated with the harvest and grain and thus the goddess Demeter. Another echo in *Elitere* is "elite," alluding to figures such as the young Korean patriot Yu Guan Soon and Joan of Arc, both of whom are described in "CLIO HISTORY"; they are "chosen" figures, "suprahistorical," and have the status of mythic beings and heroines in *Dictée*—they are *Dictée*'s own muses. And, the word *literature* sounds in *Elitere*, whom Cha has named the muse of *lyric* poetry, a genre which raises questions relevant to *Dictée*: Who is the speaker of a poem when it is written in the first person, as *Dictée* alternatively is and is not? What is the identity of the voice speaking *Dictée*?<sup>18</sup>

A first clue to the answer can be found in the closing section to the introduction of *Dictée*:

From A Far  
What nationality  
or what kindred and relation  
what blood relation  
what blood ties of blood  
what ancestry  
what race generation  
what house clan tribe stock strain  
what lineage extraction  
what breed sect gender denomination caste  
what stray ejection misplaced  
Tertium Quid neither one thing nor the other  
Tombe des nues de naturalized  
what transplant to dispel upon (D 20)

With its categorical listing of “what” is “From A Far,” the passage recalls the invocation of a god by enumerating her or his various names in a prayer. “Tertium Quid,” some (other) third thing, is a term to name that which is left over after definitions have been made. This would be the yet-unclassifiable hybrid creation of grafting. It is a thing “de naturalized” in being foreign to nature’s order and a “transplant to dispel upon” in that this migrant entity baffles in its difference and must be decoded—as a reader of *Dictée*, of any text, tries to do—to strip away its mystery, to say something about it. *Dictée* requires us to read cross-culturally, not forgetting tradition, wherever its point of origination; to read responsibly. *Dictée* demonstrates the struggle to live with the tradition of a “dominant culture” on its author’s own terms.<sup>19</sup>

A second clue returns to the somewhat instable notion of voice I have cited above as a starting point for grafting the *Georgics* and *Dictée*. A voice continually arises throughout *Dictée*, starting with the introductory section on the *disease*, Cha’s coinage for a speaker whose physical struggle to produce linguistically correct sounds begins *Dictée*:

She mimicks the speaking. That might resemble speech. (Anything at all.) Bared noise, groan, bits torn from words...

She allows others. In place of her. Admits others to make full. Make swarm. All barren cavities to make swollen. The others each occupying her. Tumorous layers, expel all excesses until in all cavities she is flesh...

*Inside her voids. It does not contain further. Rising from the empty below, pebble lumps of gas. Moisture. Begin to flood her. Dissolving her. Slow, slowed to deliberation. Slow and thick.*(D 3-5)

The voice in the *Georgics* occurs infrequently, breaking through descriptive passages on soil tests and livestock-rearing: the speaker fearing that his soil be “too nutrient-rich” (*nimum...fertilis*; 2.252-3), aware of the passing of time as the poem progresses (3.284-94) and remembering the old man of Corycus (4.116-148). It is only at the very end of the poem that a fuller hint of the voice in the *Georgics* surfaces.

With the epyllion (4.315-558), the *Georgics* steps out of its didactic mode and enters a world of myth and imagination. The reader’s surprise at encountering the epyllion is necessary, for it is a narrative grafted onto the didactic poem that is the rest of the *Georgics*.<sup>20</sup> The narrative of the epyllion contests the fixed truths of theory presented in the *Georgics*. It does not simply show *how* Aristaeus regains his bees, but also takes us back in time to reveal why he has suffered this loss, his pursuit of Eurydice. Aristaeus is an emblematic figure for the farmer in the *Georgics*, *uncique puer monstrator aratri*, “boy instructor of the hooked plow” (1.19). Both poet and farmer are concerned with knowing and ordering the world;

they share a common subject matter, the earth, the difference in the tools—plow or word—they work with.<sup>21</sup>

Orpheus, whom we encounter at the end of the *Georgics*, is the consummate practitioner of the art of poetry.<sup>22</sup> The farmer and the poet are connected by their desire for Eurydice: Aristaeus' pursuit of Eurydice, and her subsequent flight, leads to her death from the bite of a snake (4.457-9). Desiring his lost wife, Orpheus ventures down to Hades and almost regains her through the beauty of his music (4.467). But he fails because he is *immemor* of the law of Proserpina, that he not look at Eurydice until they have returned to the earth above (4.487). Orpheus "looked back" (*respexit*, 4.491) at Eurydice and loses her a second time. His now-permanent loss of Eurydice eventually leads to his death at the hands of the Thracian women (4.516-522), while the loss of Aristaeus—who had set this whole chain of events into motion by his pursuit of Eurydice—is solved by his learning of Orpheus' loss. The farmer learns his art thanks to the poet's loss.<sup>23</sup>

Virgil's descriptions of Orpheus' song suggest that this poet is directly connected to nature, unlike the farmer figure of Aristaeus and the poet of the *Georgics*, a poem about the hard work of farming and transforming nature to suit the needs of humans through grafting. Upon his loss of Eurydice, Orpheus solaces his sadness with his art of poetry: *ipse caua solans aegrum testudine amorem / te, dulcis coniunx, te solo in litore secum, / te ueniente die, te decedente canebat*, "with his lyre formed of hollow turtle's shell, he soothed his sickened love, / he sang you, sweet wife, you, alone by himself on the shore; / you, as day was rising, you, as day was falling" (4.464-466). Some hint of what Orpheus himself sang is suggested by *dulcis coniunx*, "sweet wife." After the second loss of Eurydice, Orpheus' song literally affects nature:

*septem illum totos perhibent ex ordine mensis  
rupe sub aëria deserti ad Strymonis undam  
flesse sibi, et gelidis haec euoluisse sub antris  
mulcentem tigris et agentem carmine quercus.* (4.507-510)

[a whole seven month  
by month he wept  
to himself they say  
beneath towering rocks near  
the empty waters of the Strymon he  
unleashed all this under  
the glacier caves charming soothing tigers  
setting trees in motion with his song]

We are told the effect of Orpheus' song, savage tigers gentled, oak trees walking. The wild things of nature are under the control of the poet's art, even as Death

itself was until Orpheus looked back. Orpheus' power over nature is absolute, unlike the farmer's everyday uncertainty as to whether some flash storm will flood his crop.

Nonetheless, Orpheus has known the irreparable pain of Eurydice twice lost in order to make song of such power. Aristaeus' loss and regaining of his bees through a sacrifice to appease the dead Eurydice and Orpheus is related by the epyllion. But Orpheus' sorrow and his song are inarticulable in any human medium. The feeling of his song is captured in a comparison to a nightingale singing for its lost nestlings, killed by a farmer (*arator*) as Aristaeus is responsible for the death of Eurydice:

*qualis populea maerens philomela sub umbra  
amissos queritur fetus, quos durus arator  
obseruans nido implumis detraxit; at illa  
flet noctem, ramoque sedens miserabile carmen  
integrat, et maestis late loca questibus implet. (4.511-515)*

[and so beneath the poplar's shadow sorrowing  
the nightingale laments her lost hatchlings  
pink and featherless in their nest  
the toughened plowman sees and yanks  
down perched upon a branch  
at night she weeps starting up her song of  
woe again she fills the earth's four corners  
with mourning]

The grieving, singing Orpheus is more and more absorbed into the world of nature, of the tigers, birds and trees. Birdsong is one of the few references given for the sound of Orpheus' song, which is not heard and not written out in Virgil's poem. This is what we read of it:

*... Eurydicen uox ipsa et frigida lingua,  
miseram Eurydicen! anima fugiente uocabat:  
Eurydicen toto referebant flumine ripae. (4.525-527)*

[up in the middle of the flood *Eurydice*  
its own voice and icy tongue o sad *Eurydice*  
called as his soul took flight *Eurydice*  
resounded all the waters and the shores]

The one thing we know Orpheus sang is "*Eurydice*."

But is Orpheus' the voice (*vox*) singing these words? It would be impossible to provide a representation of Orpheus' song, which can only be



described. Were it actually to be heard or produced, the trees would move and come to life. The division between the poem and the thing it is to represent would disappear, as if poem and tree, words or language and thing were one and the same.<sup>24</sup> The mythic world would come colliding into the real, workaday realm we know. There would be no need for the innovative, violent, and unnatural work that is grafting. Conversely, the poet of the *Georgics* directs human beings to do certain things to the world. The acts of plowing and breeding, watching the skies and fertilizing the fields, are all aspects of human artifice, impositions upon the world. Human beings are forced to perform them, as we are not nymphs or other divine figures whose relationship to the world is such that we can hear what a tree is thinking. Farming is a way of trying to know this world, to get a grasp on the experience that happens to us, and so is poetry, both arts of grafting.<sup>25</sup> Orpheus is a poet such as we who inhabit the world of nature portrayed in the *Georgics* will never know. He is the speaker of *Dictée* if she were unwilling to graft herself into the new country she finds herself in—if she were unwilling to try to speak the awkward sounds of another language.

Reading *Dictée* with the *Georgics* shows us how close the classics are to our experience today, and how far away they must be. The connections I am trying to forge are based on these texts' dense poetical quality and intent of teaching the reader a lesson, about farming, about speaking; about how to manage the daily tumult of work and pain and memory that humans live in. In an increasingly globalized, multilingual and hyper-technological world, grafting, which unflinchingly implants one text into another, is a way to “do” comparative literature, the work of writing and reading differently—it is a technique to teach us how to live in difference. Our eyes have yet to learn to see the strange fruit in our midst.

#### (Endnotes)

<sup>1</sup> A version of this essay was originally presented at the “Authenticities East and West” conference at Princeton University, 31 March, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Dictée* (New York: Tanam Press 1982; Berkeley: Third Woman Press 1993); abbreviated D.

<sup>3</sup> On Virgil's selectivity in choosing which methods of grafting to discuss, see R.A.B. Mynors, *Georgics*, ed. with commentary (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1990), pp. 110-11.

<sup>4</sup> All translations from Virgil's *Georgics* are from my translation of the poem, which is forthcoming from the Hackett Publishing Company (Cambridge, MA) in March 2002.

<sup>5</sup> Verbs compounded with *in* occur frequently in Virgil's description of grafting and underscore the image of putting one foreign body into another.

<sup>6</sup> Christine Perkell speaks of violence as inherent in the figure of the farmer, an “Iron Age” being, in *The Poet's Truth: A Study of the Poet in Virgil's Georgics* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1989), p. 33; see also David O. Ross,

*Virgil's Elements: Physics and Poetry in the Georgics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1987), pp. 78-83.

<sup>7</sup> More particularly, my dissertation began as a study of the idea of art, of *ars* and *techne*, in the *Georgics* and the *Phaedrus*. I particularly focused on two of the most literary and “artful” sections of each text, the concluding narrative of Aristaeus and Orpheus and the palinode in which the soul is described as a team of horses, black and white, and their charioteer. As I began to order ideas to write on these two very different ancient texts, I became increasingly aware that my understanding of issues of writing and voice had emerged from my reading of Cha’s *Dictée*—which was subsequently brought into the project. By examining such different texts according to the common denominators of the poetics of writing each performs, by asserting that actual literary echoes and allusions among the texts were non-existent, I focused directly on questions of literature and literariness, of how writers are ever grappling with language to make the written text give forth their voice.

<sup>8</sup> Ross uses the phrase “the art of grafting” for his discussion of grafting, pp. 104-109.

<sup>9</sup> On the “epyllion”—a modern coinage, here used for the sake of convenience—see Walter Allen, Jr., “The Epyllion: A Chapter in the History of Literary Criticism,” *TAPA* 71 (1940), pp. 1-26, and also F.T. Griffiths, “The Structure and Style of the ‘Short Epics’ of Catullus and Virgil,” *Studies in Latin Literature & Roman History, II*, ed. Carl Deroux, *Collection Latomus*, vol. 128 (1980), pp. 123-137).

<sup>10</sup> Joseph Farrell, *Virgil's Georgics and the Traditions of Ancient Epic: The Art of Allusion in Literary History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1991) and Richard Thomas’ commentary and introduction on the *Georgics*, volumes one and two (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1988). On intertextuality, see Gian Biagio Conte, *The Rhetoric of Imitation: Genre and Poetic Memory in Virgil and Other Latin Poets*, trans. Charles Segal (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1987).

<sup>11</sup> For a more extensive discussion of Catholic images and traditions in *Dictée*, see my entry on Cha in *Catholic Women Writers: A Bio-bibliographic Sourcebook*, ed. Mary Reichardt (Greenwood Publishers 2001).

<sup>12</sup> The carefully rebelling subject of *Dictée* is fully explored by Lisa Lowe in “Unfaithful to the Original: The Subject of *Dictée*” in *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press 1996), pp. 128-153; the chapter also appears in Elaine H. Kim and Norma Alarcón, ed., *Writing Self Writing Nation: Essays on Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's Dictée* (Berkeley: Third Woman Press 1994), pp. 35-69.

<sup>13</sup> For a more extensive discussion of some of the classical references and reworkings in *Dictée*, see my article “What does *E Pluribus Unum* Mean?: Reading the Classics and Multicultural Literature Together,” *The Classical Journal*, 93.1 (1997), pp. 62-66.

<sup>14</sup> Cha's "Sappho" somewhat recalls the third and fourth stanzas of poem 31 (LP): "but my tongue splits and now slight / over skin fire slips under and / my two eyes see not one sliver of sight, / buzz my ears go" (my translation).

<sup>15</sup> A note at the end of *Dictée* indicates that "biographical material in CALLIOPE EPIC POETRY is taken from the journals of Hyung Soon Huo," Cha's mother; the young woman in the photograph at the start of the section on p. 44 is of Cha's mother (Young-Nan Nancy Kim, *Memorable Losses: Writing in exile and the lessons of writing in Dictée* (B.A. Thesis, Princeton University: 1991), p. 73.

<sup>16</sup> Cha includes passages from Luke's gospel (4:1-11).

<sup>17</sup> The muse Elitere replaces is usually the similarly-named Euterpe, muse of the flute.

<sup>18</sup> The lyric speaker or "I" in Asian American poetry is addressed by Shelley Sunn Wong in "Unnaming the Same: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée*" in Kim and Alarcón 1994, pp. 117 ff., and in Lynn Keller and Cristanne Miller, *Feminist Measures: Sounds in Poetry & Theory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 1994) pp. 43-68; see also George Uba's discussion in "Versions of Identity in Post-Activist Asian American Poetry" in Shirley Geok-Lin Lim and Amy Ling, ed., *Reading the Literatures of Asian American* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press 1992), pp. 33-48.

<sup>19</sup> Werner Sollors' theory of "descent" and "consent" among immigrants to America captures this choice in constructing identity: "Descent relations are those defined by anthropologists as relations of 'substance' (blood or nature); consent relations describe those of law or marriage." See *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1986). With its cominglings of Greek myth, Catholic ritual, and Korean history into the voice of the *diseuse*, *Dictée* mixes attitudes of descent and consent. It thus poses another, and different, model for "ethnic writing"; see Sollors' discussion on pp. 241-247.

<sup>20</sup> The disjointedness of the epyllion from the rest of the *Georgics* has been a subject of scholarly dispute at least since the time of Servius, whose testimony ad. *Eclogues* 10.1 and *Georgics* 4.1 reported that the epyllion was appended to the original version of the poem in place of a section known as the *laudes Galli*, written in praise of Virgil's friend and fellow poet, C. Cornelius Gallus. A good overview of the arguments, ancient and modern, for and against the original inclusion of the epyllion, see Howard Jacobson, "Aristaeus, Orpheus, and the *laudes Galli*" (*AJP* 105, 1984).

<sup>21</sup> On Virgil's ambivalent to order (especially in comparison to Hesiod's, Aratus', and Lucretius' in their didactic poetry—all view order as inherently good), see Gretchen Kromer, "The Didactic Tradition in Virgil's *Georgics*, in *Virgil's Ascræan Song: Ramus Essays on the Georgics*, ed. A. J. Boyle (Australia: Aureal Publication 1979), pp. 7-21.

<sup>22</sup> On Virgil's presentation of the Orpheus myth and the opposition of Aristaeus and Orpheus, see Charles Segal, *Orpheus: The myth of the poet* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1989).

<sup>23</sup> On the “success” of Aristaeus versus the “loss” Orpheus—of the farmer’s art versus the poet’s—see Adam Parry, “The Idea of Art in Virgil’s *Georgics*,” *Arethusa*, vol. 5 (1972), pp. 35-53.

<sup>24</sup> Such a world is suggested in that of the Nymphs in which art and nature are coterminous. In Virgil’s description is literally, they live in a place of crystal clarity.

*at mater sonitum thalamo sub fluminis alti  
sensit. eam circum Milesia uellera Nymphae  
carpebant hyali saturo fucata colore,  
Drymoque Xanthoque Ligeaque Phyllodoceque,  
caesariem effusae nitidam per candida colla,  
Cydippe et flaua Lycorias, altera uirgo,  
altera tum primos Lucinae experta labores,  
Clioque et Beroe soror, Oceanitides ambae,  
ambae auro, pictis incinctae pellibus ambae,  
atque Ephyre atque Opis et Asia Deiopea  
et tandem positis uelox Arethusa sagittis.  
(4.333-344)*

[the mother sensed the sound of crying in her room  
underneath the river all around her  
nymphs carded wool dyed the color of glass  
Drymo Xantho Ligea Phyllodoce  
glittering hair spilling over gleaming necks  
Cydippe blond Lycorias one a virgin one  
newly knowing the pangs of a mother  
the goddess Lucina looks over  
Clio her sister Beroe both daughters of Ocean  
both made up with gold both with colored cloth  
Ephyre Opis Deiopea and last  
fleet Arethusa arrows laid aside]

The Nymphs are depicted as existing in an unmediated world. They are deities of water and natural phenomena, part of nature itself; think of the story of Dryope, the nymph who was turned into a tree. For them, art or culture and nature flow into each other, the boundaries indistinct. Perhaps in this pure world there are no borderlines. The nymphs live in clear, pure water that one can see through. We first see them carding wool “dyed the color of glass” (*hyali saturo fucata colore*, [4.335]), seated on glass chairs (*uitreis sedilibus* [4.350]). Theirs is a colorless world of white light. The nymphs Drymo, Xantho, Ligea, and Phyllodoce have “glittering hair spilling over gleaming necks,” *caesariem effusae nitidam per candida colla* (4.337); Lycoris and Arethusa are both “blond,” *flaua* (4.339, 352). Clio and Beroe are both adorned with “gold and colored cloth,” *ambae auro*,

*pictis incinctae pellibus ambae* (4.341). Gold can be seen as a mediating color, existing on the borderline between red and white, between color and the lack of it.

<sup>25</sup> See Perkell, p. 190.

## UNTITLED APPLES

*Bing He*

### I

Falling  
from the glistening white disc in the sky  
through the Black Hole,  
A red apple  
splashes the earth into an autumn harvest  
splendidly

Moon breaks  
Earth reborn

### II

An apple tree  
dancing upon my tomb  
knocks at the coffin  
with its round ripe thumps  
pump, pump...

I wake up from the reality  
entering into a red-scented dream

### III

Dropped from a branch,  
An absent minded apple  
pounds on wisdom's white head.  
Startled,  
    it flies away  
        higher &  
        higher  
on the sky of human's mind.

What a beautiful sunshine!

IV

*Adam*  
*Put his heart on a plate, slices it into*  
*Pieces for you to taste his sour*  
*Longing for*  
*Eden*

V

“You have an apple  
I have an apple  
If we exchange  
You and I have one each.

You have an idea  
I have an idea  
If we tell each other  
We both have two.”

“Which do you choose?” the teacher asks.  
“Idea!” the pupils exclaim.

But if you have an apple  
and an idea  
I will choose the apple  
instead

V

“Love apple,” Mom said,  
“it is good for you.”  
I gazed her skin red  
till it flushed into a tomato.

## LIKE A FISH IN A DUMPSTER

*Norma Cole*

Any further controversy would figure, figure hummingbirds in  
Manhattan then Charlie Parker

synapsoids beyond function  
when eyeless eyes are

smiling watching you in my  
sleep Should we show the exchange of papers? Was it  
successful? Too soon  
to see the facets, their moving images surprise the other  
two upon which were beings, projected time  
included – walked over

clap if you want by the new moon which causes things  
to grow long and thin, while the full moon  
causes growth that is short and  
wide

Mercy does not come from the sky



## THE THERMOS

Arthur Sze

Poppy seeds from a North Bennington garden  
rest in white envelopes on a *granero*  
in Jacona--*to travel far is to return.*  
I am not thinking about the glitter of snow

on top of Popocatepetl, but how beauty  
that is not beauty requires distance.  
I recall the green glow of glacier ice,  
bald eagles perched at the tip of Homer Spit.

When I brought home that turtle-shaped  
sandbox, we placed a giraffe, lion, and tiger  
at the edge. Sarah was happy to pour sand  
from her yellow shovel into a blue pail.

I poured sand into a funnel and watched it  
drain into the box. I do not know how  
an amethyst crystal begins to take shape;  
I do not know the nanoproperties of

silica or the origin of light, but I  
know the moment a seed bursts its husk.  
At work I pour tea out of a thermos,  
smell your hair and how we quicken each other.

## ICE LINE

*Arthur Sze*

No one has slowed down  
    and battered the mailboxes  
        by the stop sign;  
at 2 a.m. a cricket  
    steadily chirps  
        in a corner of the bathroom;  
earlier in the day,  
    a horsefly bit  
        into Sarah's back,  
and her cry  
    ululated in the air;  
        later she looked at rain  
in a Hiroshige print  
    where men in bamboo hats  
        leaned into  
the relentless, slanting drizzle  
    then pointed up at the skylight  
        where raindrops  
were pooled on glass;  
    each night is a brimming  
        pool of light,  
and the contours are as  
    intricate and shifting as  
        the ice line around Antarctica.

# REVIEWS





## MARACA: NEW AND SELECTED POEMS 1965-2000

Victor Hernández Cruz  
Coffee House Press, 2001

“[A] piano is trying to break a molecule,” Victor Hernández Cruz declares in his poem, “Latin & Soul.” And the music and molecules he interweaves throughout the poems in his magnificent collection, *Maraca*, are “seeds”: seeds of cultural dislocation, of emotional/physical boundary wars, of political and systemic oppression, of, even, spiritual and emotional connection, a backward-probing mysticism that steps through a rich ancestral past—delicately, sometimes brashly, yet always with great tenderness—to transform the grief of separation into the future of a more humane existence. What Cruz gives us throughout the 35 years of work collected in *Maraca* is the totemic image, methodology, and urge of an ancient instrument of incantation and evocation—sound gourd and sound *board* of ever-moving, vibrational *seeds*.

Stunningly, the “maraca” of *Maraca* is, true to the sometimes Surrealist interpenetration of landscapes in this book, not narrowly defined as the instrument itself. On one level, the maraca is indeed the “maraca”: spiritual tool, or, even, musical vehicle to expanded consciousness through instigation of sound. On another, the seeds are a metaphor for the potentially transformative possibilities of everyday materials and existence. “[T]he news that sails through the air,” Cruz describes in “Los New Yorks,” is “Like the shaking seeds of maracas.” On yet another level, the seeds with which he works are less poetically explicit, yet deep attentiveness to the implicit rhythms of his various “seed” sounds and images helps blur the boundary between self and other. That is, one looks up from the pages of *Maraca* from time to time, for instance, realizing one’s own molecular seeds are set a blossom with image and sound. That the body of the reader, like the body of the poet, is a sounding board for some larger incantatory hum stirred by the spiritual shift of word/phrase sung by Cruz into the waiting tongue. “[A] piano is trying to break a molecule”? Indeed. And the “piano” of Cruz’s poems reaches far back, paradoxically, into the possibility of *now*.

*Maraca* takes us on an epic journey which begins in the streets and subways of New York, where the poet grew up in the 1950s and 1960s. Here we encounter “beer cans in hands,” “Luchows,” “junkies [who] dance the / boogaloo,” even “Don Arturo,” apparently a local from Cruz’s old neighborhood who tells the story of “a man / who sold puppets and whistles / for a living.” With a sometimes humorous tone, Cruz sets cultural and emotional dislocation into dialogue with human desire, as in “Going Uptown to Visit Miriam,” where in the midst of his emotional distance from the more purposeful (perhaps wealthy) “ladies” on the train, the speaker—quite simply—wants “to kiss her [Miriam] / on the cheek” but at the same time hopes that he doesn’t “see sonia on the / street”).

From New York, we travel west. In “Berkeley/Over,” “California #2,” “Nebraska,” and “Interstate 80” we see a manifest destiny less deliberate and colonial than what’s often portrayed as natural in popular culture. At the same time, Cruz’s journey appears more powerful in its reinscription of what it means to be “American.” The opening stanza of “Interstate 80,” for instance, re-envisioned the concept of “inter”-state as intercourse not only between territorial states but between historical time and, even, between cultural discourses—in this case, between the machismo of colonizing the body of the globe and attentiveness to the gross physical form:

Boola got off  
in Salt Lake City  
to sink down to  
the town of Spanish Fork  
and look for a treasure  
left by a cousin of  
Montezuma way  
back when Columbus  
knelt in front of  
Isabel and sobbed  
tears all over  
her toenails

Then in later parts of this book we travel back to both New York and to Cruz’s native Puerto Rico, with an immersion in (and integration with) Caribbean, North African, Muslim, and African-American influence and culture.

A significant part of this journey is elemental, where universes collide. Cruz tells us in “African Things,” “you know / the traveling through many moons.” World views and discourses sometimes interpenetrate as a result of cultural integration, as they do earlier in this poem, where the speaker traces the roots of Puerto Rican music: “what was Puerto Rican all about. / all about the / indios & you better believe it the african things / black & shiny / grandmother speak to me & tell me of african things / how do latin / boo-ga-loo sound like you.”

This collection includes not only substantive selections from Cruz’s seven major books to date, but also from several uncollected and previously unpublished poem sequences, as well as from the difficult-to-find 1966 mimeographed booklet, *Papo Got His Gun*. The result is a 300-page *tour de force* culminating with perhaps Cruz’s most mature work, a previously unpublished section of poems entitled *Seeds* (1996-2000), in which he explores more explicitly than before the origins and nature of his mysticism and poetic influences. All but the final poem of *Seeds* carries as title the name of a person. We get North African and Muslim mysticism (which worked its way into Spain through the Moors) in poems honoring Muhyi-din Ibn’ Arabi and Jalalu’ d-Din Rumi; Spanish and Latin American literary

and artistic roots in poems for Federico García Lorca, Juan Rulfo, and Juan Gris; literary influences beyond the borders of Spanish culture, which include Nabokov, Mark Twain, Washington Irving, and Jack Kerouac; and even popular “seeds” which explore cultural icons as diverse as Frank Sinatra and Clarabel the Clown. This section (and the entire collection) ends with a powerful poem, “Moroccan Children”—the only poem in the section to forego using the name of a famous person as a title—which portrays Cruz’s travels in Marrakesh, in which the poet finds the source of truth as inscribed in his own body and the bodies of others. He tells us:

A lingering child comes  
into the room  
and gives me a hug  
says something  
I could only understand  
with my bones.

A bit later, he continues:

I am looking over a man  
who chisels a mandala  
upon a copper disc,  
I am in this bohío,  
I hear sound in Arawak,  
the man is speaking Arabic  
reading from a book,  
I make it out as Spanish  
print upon his forehead:  
“El hogar de uno es donde hay  
amor”

In this way, *Maraca* is a true cultural artifact of a poet who began offering his song in the mid-1960s and continued to refine his vision of culture and spirit as reciprocal and dynamic. Reading *Maraca* drove me, perhaps not surprisingly, to my shelf and my now-worn copy of *Snaps*, Cruz’s first published book-length collection (1969), whose sole back-cover statement by Allen Ginsberg helps, on some level, to create a context for this then-young voice. While Cruz’s early poems indeed share themes and forms synchronous with a Beat lineage (and may in fact draw from this influence), it would do his vision a disservice to interpret it within that context alone.

First, Cruz’s “anti-poetry” (where his line at times goes intentionally flat, and his vision of the mundane as—sometimes just that—*beautifully* mundane, as in several poems, including “Going Uptown to Visit Miriam”) has more in common

with the anti-poetry pioneered by Chileans Nicanor Parra and Enrique Lihn. Second, Cruz's vision is one that constantly challenges cultural boundaries and the "doubleness" of his Puerto Rican/American status; rather than interpreting his work as primarily influenced by North American avant-garde poetry, it becomes a richer experience to read his (at least early) work (where this connection is more evident) dialogically—that is, as written both *within* and *against* the lineage of the Beats. This dialogic is yet another example of Cruz's cross-culturality, as, say, an interrogation of both connection and dislocation of voice as one vehicle to explore the challenges one faces for articulation, place, authority, and cultural "belonging" that his poems address.

That said, what complicates Cruz's vision in a generative way is his reach beyond narrow cultural boundaries (even those of his own heritage) to set discourses into dialogue (Spanish words and phrases, for instance, often appear side by side with English, and he even presents one section of this collection entirely in Spanish, without English translation). There is something—perhaps not unexpectedly—of Whitman and Williams in his far-reaching vision that draws from them at the same instant that it draws from the anti-poetics of Parra and Lihn, even from the Latin and South American expansiveness of Rubén Darío's Modernism and Pablo Neruda's Surrealism. He even has a lovely poem paying homage to Williams' spontaneity, "An Essay on William Carlos Williams":

I love the quality of the  
spoken thought  
As it happens immediately  
uttered into the air  
Not held inside and rolled  
around for some properly  
schemed moment  
Not sent to circulate a cane  
field  
Or on a stroll that would include  
the desert and Mecca  
Spoken while it happens  
Direct and pure . . .

But Cruz's vision and voice are entirely his "own," at least an "own" that speaks uniquely from within and against a rich cultural and poetic past, while recognizing that it is precisely such contexts that shape and are shaped by the poet "self." A further dialogic in this collection, then, is that of personal and public. On one hand, Cruz's poems are often overtly political. Perhaps my favorite of these is "It's Miller Time," where Cruz's speaker tells the story of his CIA recruitment and infiltration of "the PR division / Of a beer company— / Because for U.S. 'Hispanics' / it was Miller Time." Cruz skillfully delineates layers of



racism, avoiding easy answers, pointing out racism toward “Hispanics” and even implicating his “Hispanic” speaker in some ways through mild stereotyping of the Anglo CIA agent, “Pete,” who does the recruiting. Humorously, he tells us:

I work for the CIA  
They pay me with cocaine  
and white Miami sports  
Jackets  
Free tickets to San Juan  
...

My contact, a guy named  
Pete, asks if I know other  
dialects of Spanish  
“Can you sound Salvadoran”  
.....  
They could bring it all  
at half price  
Tickets to rock and roll  
concerts  
Where they drug the people  
with lights.

At the same time, the poems in *Maraca* are deeply personal. There is something of Lorca’s *duende* permeating them, a deep sadness always present, even in times of humor. In “Discovery,” for instance, we get this simultaneity, as the speaker is “Watching a thousand smiles / that were full of sadness.” Central to Cruz’s grief are images of enclosure. In “Untitled,” he says, “So you keep your indian locked in a box / he is too near you complain / to the mirrors which stare at your face.” There is even a layer of pain within love in Cruz’s contemplation of the otherwise-redemptive isolation of art, as we see in part three of “The Sounds of Colors” (“painting #3”): “By the window / the owl sits in / yellow awareness / Filled with blackness / & love.”

Even more prominent are images of “rooms,” depicted throughout this collection as barriers through which people cannot pass, isolated areas that maintain emotional distance. In “Three Songs from the 50s,” the third and final “song” explores the emotional and psychological “weather” of these rooms, where the speaker is trapped between memory and desire, between past and present, between what is, what was, and what could be. This “song” merges the personal and the political so masterfully, I want to quote it in its entirety:

There was still no central heating  
in the tenements

We thought that the cold was  
the oldest thing on the planet earth  
We used to think about my Uncle Listo  
Who never left his hometown  
We'd picture him sitting around  
cooling himself with a fan  
In that imaginary place  
called Puerto Rico.

In the midst of political and personal isolation, there is a core of hope and redemption in Cruz's vision. This core—multilingual in a spiritual sense—is thus able to hold ambiguity in generative rather than debilitating ways. It nourishes and is nourished by the “seeds” of both pain and promise. While Cruz often presents seeds of dislocation (as in the mythic and wildly imaginative, “The Man Who Came to the Last Floor,” in which “a Puerto Rican man . . . / came to New York / . . . with a whole shopping bag / full of seeds strange to the big / city,” only to later discover an enormous mango tree growing from the top of his head, preventing him from leading a normal “American” life), the seeds of cultural uniqueness are the very thing, Cruz recognizes, that can redeem one. For this, he returns again and again to the ancient ways (even in a modern landscape) and to its methodology of implicit “seeds”: song and repetition, spontaneous rhythms, imaginative landscapes, and interpenetrating environments that not only demonstrate but also conjure a consciousness free of boundary and limitation.

*Maraca* is a richly expansive book, a 35-year chronology long overdue by one of our most loving poets. It *presents* the maraca, it *shakes* the maraca, and it asks us to regard our bodies, minds, and souls as an imaginative gourd for seeds of sound and image to spill against and make whatever sound it is that we allow, that will heal. To do so, Cruz demands, we must return to our imaginative and ancestral past, to the core of our own conjuring, to our mythic power to evoke the possibility of a more integrated *now*, noting that:

& as we sail we understand things better/the night of the buildings  
we overhead flying by/singing magic words  
of our ancestors. (“Megalopolis”)

**George Kalamaras**

## AT THE SKY'S EDGE: POEMS 1991-1996

Bei Dao (tr. by David Hinton, foreword by Michael Palmer)

New Directions, 2001

After the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989, poet Bei Dao suddenly found himself banned from his own country, and became a prominent political activist, traveling from country to country to give readings and lecture on Chinese contemporary poetry and the poets' struggle for creative and political freedom. Such an identity, like his exile, is not totally voluntary, as is indicated in his poem "Corridor": "that year I cut class, in movie houses/inside the endless corridor of screens/I suddenly found myself enlarged/that moment was a wheelchair/and the days to come pushed me through distant travels—."\* As he was entered "into their giant computer" by "the worlds' agents of freedom," he found himself nothing but "an alien voice sneaking into the dictionary/a dissident/perhaps a form of distance from the world" ("Corridor").

Such a sense of solitude, forced identity, and unspeakability of exiled life conditions the mindscapes of Bei Dao's poems in his new bilingual collection, *At the Sky's Edge*, which features his work written between 1991 and 1996. His fixation on language, on his mother tongue Chinese, permeates almost every poem: "I've made a disguise of misfortune/shelter from the mother tongue's solar blaze" ("Toxin"); "at the mother tongue's line of defense/a strange homesickness/a dying rose" ("Untitled"); "I float amid languages" ("February"); "when language was insane" ("Untitled").

His relationship with his mother tongue is very complex. On one hand, it is the tool, material, and source for his poetic creation and identity; on the other hand, he has to constantly fight against all the things that a mother tongue can represent: authority, convention, repression, etc.. From the very beginning of his writing career, he has been attacked by the government for his new way of using language, which emphasized expressing intimate thoughts and impressions of the individual. It differed greatly from the official language that Chinese had been forced to accept and use. Because of this, his poems, together with the other founders of the "misty" poetry, excited thousands of young people. Bei Dao's line "I do not believe" became the motto of many poetry enthusiasts as well as fighters for democracy, and the thorn of the authority. As the poet claims, "the greatest danger was a matter of language" (La Piana's interview with Bei Dao, *Journal of the International Institute*, Vol. 2, No. 1).

To further complicate the situation, his exile to the sky's edge, the traditional Chinese metaphor for the world's end, has cut him off from the living environment of his language. As "someone fired by his country" ("Creation," my tr.), he became a traveler without a passport, a citizen without a nation, a plant pulled out of the soil, and forced to re-root in a foreign land. The result in his poems is a flux of fragmented, jarring juxtapositions and stunning, restless shifts

in perspective. Images tumble from interior to exterior, private to public, sky to ocean, this object to the other with a dizzying speed and unconventional logic. Yet no matter how the poet travels, he always leads us to the battleground of language. Since his “mother tongue’s line of defense” (“Untitled”) has blurred, even disappeared, the poet becomes “a dying rose,” “the archer of freedom” who has been disarmed and can only “listen to history’s wind” from foreign lands (“Another”). The unspeakable pain drives the poet mad, singing at midnight with dishevelled hair, like a crazed ghost: “revealing midnight in the end/wild song/flurried head of hair” (“Untitled”). In the end, the only voice he can utter is “a woeful cry” (ibid, my tr.).

“I’m careful very careful/there is an abyss beneath every word” (“As Far as I know”). “I drift amid languages/musical instruments of death/filled with ice” (“February,” my tr.). The poet warns us over and over again of the impossibility of language and the danger of treading on its thin crust. Yet to speak or not to speak, this is not a choice. Under the immense pressure, “writing is the thing that sustains me and keeps me going... a form of self-preservation”) (La Piana’s interview with Bei Dao, *Journal of the International Institute*, Vol. 2, No. 1). Language is not only his weapon for survival as a poet and person, but also for continuing the course he and his friends launched in the late 1970s with their “Misty School” poetry, i.e., the freedom of speech and creativity. As long as there are still “brothers redeeming their crimes” “in the hard ice of language” (“Borders”), we have no choice but to “struggle on” (ibid.). Bei Dao may perceive his creativity with words as an act of “sowing seeds across marble floor” (“Sower”), a seemingly desperate, fruitless, perhaps even crazy effort. But as long as the poets continue to write, there is hope. If the “dying rose” cannot bring out “water,” it will at least bring out some “dawn light” (“Untitled”).

It is hard to pinpoint the exact meaning of Bei Dao’s poetry, since it has so many doors that require different keys, different perspectives. But if we keep our eyes on the art of his language, and try to read him not as a dissident but as a poet, as Bei Dao would recommend, it will help us walk through the maze of his most intimate landscape, and feel the vibration of a defiant soul’s call.

\* All the quotes of translation are by David Hinton unless otherwise indicated.

**Wang Ping**

## THE PRICE OF DISSENT: TESTIMONIES TO POLITICAL REPRESSION IN AMERICA

Bud Schultz and Ruth Schultz, eds.  
University of California Press, 2001

The folks at the University of California Press know their business and their audience. The press release that comes with *The Price of Dissent* is filled with glowing admiration from lefty icons: Ed Asner, Howard Zinn, Julian Bond, Dave Dellinger, and Nadine Strosser, among others. Each of these endorsements essentially says the same thing: “this book is a must-read for all Americans.” The book is a follow up to Schultz and Schultz’s previous work, *It Did Happen Here*. Like its predecessor, *The Price of Dissent* is a collection of oral histories, heartwarming tales of persistence in the face of adversity. It features some national heavy hitters—Kwame Ture, John Lewis, and Daniel Ellsberg—but is comprised primarily of stories from activists who are more well-known on their local scenes. The canon presented here is rather conventional and advances a time-honored progression: labor activism contributed to the struggle for civil rights, which in turn nurtured the movement against the war in Vietnam. I do find this version of events compelling, and the stories themselves have much to recommend them; however, after a deluge of recent scholarship in this area I want a more complex story than the one I am presented here. I look at this collection and while I enjoy what is there, I am disturbed by what is missing.

First and foremost, the interviews in this book were wonderful. These are the stories that brought me into left politics, that provided my early inspiration. John Lewis provides an excellent civil rights overview, a moving case that it was the blood and shoe leather of activists, and not government largesse, that brought us the Voter Rights Act of 1965. I will use it to teach the freedom rides, SNCC, and the March on Washington. Kwame Ture’s interview on Black Power is another I will use in class, a valuable illustration of how different visions spawned internal divisions of the movement. Ture clearly addresses the conflicts between himself and Bob Moses, and between Black Power and SNCC, in terms that show that the conflict was not one of right vs. wrong but rather a conflict in goals between revolution and reform. Throughout these interviews wonderful anecdotes encapsulate a style of subversive humor that has become part and parcel of modern American resistance. Anne Braden tells of a prisoner finding his defense lawyer jailed alongside him. Jackie Goldberg relates a song from the Free Speech Movement that is a parody of the opening song of the quintessentially American musical ‘Oklahoma.’ All of these people fought the good fight, and as such can often seem dauntingly remote; the personal nature of these anecdotes restores the heroes’ humanity.

My favorite interview in the collection is Abbie Hoffman’s, in part because I think he comes closest to applicable lessons for the current struggle against

globalization. Hoffman insists that the struggle against the greater power of state institutions is reliant on creativity and 'symbolic warfare': "When you're up against forces of superior financial and military power, superior numbers, you play a game of destroying the symbols of authority, of making authority overreact to look foolish." From running a pig for president to showing up to his own trial in judge's robes Hoffman demonstrates how to deny power. He represents a viewpoint that continues to resonate in our more cynical times. Hoffman insists that protest should be fun, and that by fostering fun in protest you deny those in power the ability to foster fear.

The interview is also powerful for its insight into Yippie tactics: "The strategy was to put yourself in a situation where the opposition, no matter what it did, lost. But... you're going to have to pay some. You might have to go to jail—you might get beat up...." Yet Hoffman goes on to reveal ways in which Yippies were canny with their strategy, working to minimize actual losses while still making their point:

For all of us to have backed down, for us to have said, "There's not going to be any demonstrations," would have been unthinkable. Of course, within the context of what we were doing, we kept backing down. We made a symbolic stand that we would stay in the park, that we had a right to be there. But... we knew the cops were coming in with tear gas and clubs. So every night we asked people to leave the park after the eleven o'clock curfew.

Details like these enliven all the interviews, elucidating both the obstacles facing informants during their struggles, and also the ingenuity and determination with which they faced those obstacles. They are what I like most about this book, and why I will use parts of it as a teaching resource.. But Hoffman's interview also provides examples of what bothers me about the methodology.

I struggle whether to call these interviews, testimonies, oral histories, stories, or assisted autobiographies. While the last is the most awkward I also believe that it is the most accurate. (For this reason I think that the best title for Schultz and Schultz is author/editors.) The collection suffers from a lack of basic oral interview protocols. While the author/editors tell us that they interviewed more than one hundred people for their two books, and that they then edited those interviews into short versions (even combining separate interviews with different individuals into single presentations), they never tell us when or where or under what context these interviews took place. Ignorance of the context of the interviews is occasionally frustrating. For instance, Abbie Hoffman committed suicide in 1989, but there is no indication of when this interview occurred, so I am unable to fit it into the arc of his life. The closest I can come to any date from the information provided is by trying to figure his age from the accompanying photograph.

Additionally, the author/editors provide no explanation of how their editorial choices were guided, leaving me to wonder about whose voice is coming through

the words on the page. They do not reveal their own role in the interview process: all interview questions have been culled. All this might have been more acceptable fifteen years ago, but there has been a lot of work in the field of oral history since then, and unfortunately this collection does not reflect the better trends of current scholarship in that regard. There has also been a great deal of work lately in understanding the phenomenon of memory and how informants construct themselves in an interview. These stories plainly do not just recount what happened: the words are political themselves and are the building planks of how these people view themselves and their world. Again, this sensitivity is lacking in Hoffman's interview, in which a sense of when this interview occurred and a more transparent methodology would enable a reader to understand how Hoffman's words might have been colored by factors like hindsight, regret, or his impending suicide.

I grasped the explanation for these deficits by carefully examining the notes. Schultz and Schultz rely on mostly the same secondary sources that were available for their first book. The basic secondary sources that substantiate the author/editors' interpretations were written between 1968 and 1988 (there are some sources from the 1990s but only a few from after 1993). This is perhaps the base for other problems.

There has been a great deal written on labor, civil rights, and the peace movement in the last decade and this collection has not kept up. Aspects of this work leave me wondering where Schultz and Schultz have been for the last 15 years. Although this book was published in 2001, by its lights dissent seems to have ended by the early seventies, with just a trickle of Hormel strikers and Central American activists hanging on into the mid-eighties. Where is the American Indian Movement, or the Brown Berets? In terms of gender, where are any feminists, where is Stonewall, the Gay Liberation Front or Act Up? In terms of current labor work, where are the sweatshop activists, Janitors for Justice or deported HERE organizers? And in terms of the *new* new left and anti-globalism, where are the veterans of Seattle, Washington D. C. and Genoa? Not to say that this or any book must cover every conceivable faction, but in a volume that purports to detail the 'price of dissent,' which is after all still being paid, groups like the ones I mention are conspicuous by their absence. Even as the book's stories do move me, I recognize an element of nostalgia, taking comfort in well-established paradigms of protest that are sufficiently remote to be repackaged with moral certainty.

A good example of the new spin put on old activists has to do with the Red question. While almost every interview engages the issue of Communism and its proponents, they are always 'some guys,' or acquaintances of informants: although a great many were red-baited, not one informant personally cops to being an actual Communist, or even a former Communist. The closest we get is an I.W.W. member, two anti-Communist Trotskyists, and some implication that other interviewees might be Communists: "you had people saying: Maybe you shouldn't be so identified with... the Lawyers Guild... [or work with] Anne Braden and people

like her.” But Braden herself never admits to a thing. Through the labor section in particular, I kept wondering, ‘if *these* people weren’t Party members, who *was* going to all those meetings?’

The lack of ‘out’ Communists in the book raises serious questions. It appears that the necrotic hand of McCarthy continues even now to force red scare collusion, casting a pall on ‘out’ activists’ moral rectitude, as if their involvement in the party somehow would be more likely to warrant the sort of repression detailed in the book. This makes the mechanism of exclusion impossible to determine: did the authors just not know any bona fide reds (who were by all accounts extremely active in these movements, after all)? Do the informants themselves just wish to excise any pinkness from their personal narratives? Or is the overall cultural remnant of McCarthy still so chilling that the authors deliberately excluded Communists from the record? Since Communism is at issue in almost every personal story included in the collection, I feel that the author/editors should have included at least one voice from the party itself, and not just evasions and code words like having been involved with the ‘unemployed councils’ and the ‘Civil Rights Congress’ or having come from a ‘socialist family.’ Of course, had the interviews been less processed, readers might perceive subtleties like this more clearly and not be forced to speculate.

There isn’t really anything new here. At times I felt like I was perusing the cuttings that were good but didn’t fit into Schultz and Schultz’s first book, recollected from the edit room floor and pasted back together. Yet in spite of all of this I truly did enjoy reading this book. With all its flaws it still has powerful accounts that are moving and interesting and accessible to a wide audience. The best part is the convenience of having these stories put into print and usefully assembled together into one volume. And that it is all to the good, to promote more of this knowledge throughout more of society. It is about time that people recognize the debt we owe to the red scare survivors and clearly understand the interactions of the civil rights and anti-war movements. And in post-September 11<sup>th</sup> America, it is vital to remind people of what our government has been capable of when left to its own devices. *The Price of Dissent* serves as an important support to the voices of sanity warning us of the dangers of letting the government loose to ‘fight terrorism’ and ‘protect our way of life.’ This book reminds us that all too often the unwatched governmental agency is watching us.

**Mark Soderstrom**



## **IN THE COLD OF THE MALECÓN**

Antonio José Ponte

Translated by Cola Franzen and Dick Cluster

City Lights Books, 2000

## **THREE MASTERPIECES OF CUBAN DRAMA: PLAYS BY JULIO MATAS, CARLOS FELIPE, AND VIRGILIO PIÑERA**

Translated and Edited with an Introduction by Luis F. González-Cruz

and Ann Waggoner Aken

Green Integer Press, 2000

## **LA DETENCIÓN DEL TIEMPO/TIME'S ARREST**

Reina María Rodríguez

Translated by Kristin Dykstra

Factory School, 2001

Two important writers working in Havana today, Antonio José Ponte and Reina María Rodríguez, are part of a group of intellectuals and writers that Reina has gathered about her in her tiny rooftop apartment, her *azotea*, regularly holding literary salons and providing a hospitable setting for many years. Both relatively young, Reina born in 1952 and Ponte in 1964, they place in the generation that has benefited from university education and that has encountered local, European, and world literatures and philosophical traditions. Determined and steadfast, they have experienced the worst of economic shortages after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and, like other Cubans who have not become rafters, or *balseiros*, they have hung on with grit and with a sense of grief for those who have left the island. In my understanding, literary and political debates have created a faultline between those who claim a lineage through José Lezama Lima and those, like Reina's *azotea* group, who associate with the aesthetic roots of Virgilio Piñera.

Three California publishers have brought out important translations of this literary constellation. Ponte's *In the Cold of the Malecón* is a collection of short stories with a haunting edginess encoded through the problem of limits of knowledge. In "Coming" the story presents an end of an era for the city and for the protagonist who has returned from study abroad to the Soviet Union. His language teacher in Havana is retiring, appropriate for her age, she says, but the young are pitched into retirement of sorts, of foreclosed possibility reminiscent of Hamlin Garland's stories. The themes of how memory works, how identity, or misidentification, works, the ideological and human relation to constructions of the past, present, and future, and the secret life of everyday things run throughout the collection.

The intriguing title story, "In the Cold of the Malecón" shows us both how much and how little we can know about ourselves and each other through an

overheard conversation. The brothers in “A Throw of the Book of Changes” move furniture, play chess, swim, bicycle, cut hair as ways to articulate change, ways to overthrow confining sameness. The story seems to ask how does finding our way to newness happen in the dark and what can be found there?

Several stories feature trains or train stations as places where people wait, seem to have a destination, but ultimately may not have more than a gesture toward destination. In “Station H” the story comments on age, and the railroad station takes on associations of pastness meeting deferred futures as we continue to read the story. It’s where chess masters meet, embodied in the old generation fumbling with the emergent child chess master. Also set in a train, the story “This Life” shows several characters “bound for no place in particular” who are compelled to travel and stay in motion. The settings show decline and disfunction: a train with a broken engine, a dining car with no food, and love is consummated on a grave and does not redeem.

The final story, “Heart of Skitalietz,” places Scorpio, an out of work historian, in an odd romantic anti-quest with Veranda, an astrologer. Here, Ponte writes settings that have an intensified barrenness oddly overwrought with significance reminiscent both of Kafka’s stories and the upside-down, but highly ordered, world of Peter Weiss’s plays. In and out of “spas” for treatment, our historian is the insane person in a sane world, a maker of meaning from scraps of paper blown about the streets ultimately summarizing summary and nothingness, making love to cancer, overly aware and self-conscious without a state or purpose larger than self-consciousness.

A dark vision that won’t relent into glib happiness or complacent conclusions, Ponte’s stories are memorable for their stark images and characters who flatten expression and refuse to grin and reassure the reader.

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In the title poem, “Time’s Arrest,” Rodríguez touches on several philosophical questions on time and existence: Zeno’s paradox, Virginia Woolf’s *Waves* as a version of being, Descartes’ *cogito*, and movement into Einsteinian perceptions of the universe. To ask questions of eternity, “is it true that between Einstein and you time can be stopped? ...” is to desire exploration and inconclusiveness. While many lyric poets are criticized by experimental poets

for creating a stable “self” and an oh-so-authentic, transcendental voice, Rodríguez’s poetry constructs a shifting, de-stablized self as a test or simulacrum of authenticity. Indeed, throughout her work she plays through the shifting theme of representation, the problematics of subjectivity, the cultural clutter with which language is deeply colored.

In “Vincent Van Gogh painted sailboats too” the artist’s work is a gesture toward lived life, and those who float away on makeshift rafts must know “the crossing will be long//and the song of the zithers could drown us//before we arrive//at a stationary beacon.” Rodríguez’s “I” is the static place and fixed person who can grieve with and for others who are left behind. We hear a moral voice, too. The poem entitled “The fragile spies” chides former friends who snitched and exposed the speaker in the poem: “figuring out that I am me.” Far outside from “saving” the “transplant of essential things,” the poem asks “how can I relate//your search to me, without being for sale?” and concludes with the painful contradiction of betrayal: “the way they commit their crimes offends me//they were so smart at the beginning!” From my interviews with Rodríguez, I understand that she is clearly rooted in Havana with no intention to live elsewhere— indeed, she is a recognized figure, a sort of cultural center outside institutions. From that precarious but independent position, she comments both positively and negatively on poetics and social practices that emerge from the context of her time and place.

Rodríguez’s philosophical positioning takes on an existential cast in “someone discovers a city” wherein the speaker of the poem addresses someone “out spying//behind the hills and trees,//where the blue shepherd, with his dog, searches for the labyrinth of pastures.” While deeply encoded, the poem becomes dangerous and shifts toward the dream, or truth-effect, that hides self-destruction/other-destruction, in a “city that doesn’t exist” wherein the discoverer:

with the wisdom of the nocturnal bee  
profaning the food of its own honeycomb,  
with the patience of those who see like the blind  
in the dream about touch  
a distant corner,  
a city that doesn’t exist.

And, of course, mirrors. In her poem with that title, Rodríguez writes “I’ve lost myself in the labyrinth of the reality of mirrors” and, later, “in the diabolic mind of the mirror—,//are all of the previous bodies, rushing around, missing” where the speaker of the poem sifts through fractured images of the devil, birth, accident, unstable selves. Here the poet is reminiscent of Rosmarie Waldrop in *Reluctant Gravities* who explores what flickers between meaning and unreadability, the flip between the duck-rabbit puzzle that Wittgenstein studied after his picture-theory of language, the ambiguity of experience and representation as the underlying condition for love—the verge on meaning or completion.

overheard conversation. The brothers in “A Throw of the Book of Changes” move furniture, play chess, swim, bicycle, cut hair as ways to articulate change, ways to overthrow confining sameness. The story seems to ask how does finding our way to newness happen in the dark and what can be found there?

Several stories feature trains or train stations as places where people wait, seem to have a destination, but ultimately may not have more than a gesture toward destination. In “Station H” the story comments on age, and the railroad station takes on associations of pastness meeting deferred futures as we continue to read the story. It’s where chess masters meet, embodied in the old generation fumbling with the emergent child chess master. Also set in a train, the story “This Life” shows several characters “bound for no place in particular” who are compelled to travel and stay in motion. The settings show decline and disfunction: a train with a broken engine, a dining car with no food, and love is consummated on a grave and does not redeem.

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contradictorily both well-published in Cuba and Spain as well as living in fear and feeling ostracized. We learn that after his death in 1979, his unpublished papers were placed in the National Library, and through the efforts of critics and writer friends, several of the works were granted permission to be published in 1986. Additionally, an early version of *An Empty Shoe Box* was clandestinely sent to the editor, Luis F. González-Cruz, who saw its publication, in 1986, by Ediciones Universal.

The play draws on theatre of the absurd conventions in its study of how cruelty is experienced, propagated, or resisted. The protagonist, Carlos, kicks a shoe box in the opening scene that, at first, seems a thin gesture until repeated kicks and expressions of domination personify the cardboard box to a frightening level of familiarity. Like his other plays that show hierarchical life as filled with ever-replaceable standbys that will perpetuate the institutional structures even if they have no meaning other than their own hierarchy, Piñera in *An Empty Shoe Box* offers a way out. By the end, Carlos is “reborn” between the legs of Bertha through his descent into madness. Again, the insane in a sane, Beckett-inflected world articulate the endurance of the weak or weakened. The introduction, wisely I think, points out that we would be erring to read Piñera’s plays as directed either toward the pre-Revolutionary social realities or those that come after the revolution:

The Revolution did not change Piñera’s essential themes nor the deepest meaning of his works—it is evident that his general world view could not be of any interest to the new regime. He also chose to remain uncommitted to any dogma or program, and his literature was never directed as an assault of the “old” reality of the island, and even less so to encourage the emergence of the “new man,” as Castro had requested from Cuban writers ...

Coming shortly before the “rebirth” of Carlos in the final scene is this absurdist dialog with his torturer, Angelito, and with Bertha, alternately the torturer’s assistant and Carlos’ savior:

BERTHA: [*Rejecting him.*] One can do nothing for the dead, Carlos.

CARLOS: You can do something for me. I know, I know you can save me.

BERTHA: All I can do for you now is bury you. Do you want me to do that?

and later:

CARLOS: [*Standing up.*] Have the living shut up, kill them ... There are millions of living. Leave me alone. Let me be in charge of my own corpse.

ANGELITO: Well, if that amuses you ... [*He sits again.*]

CARLOS: Yes, let me be in charge. I must keep alive the living man who’s within the dead one. I have to kill the dead man who’s within myself.

CHORUS: [*In crescendo.*] Kill him! Kill him!

and at this moment, the “live one” is called out from the live burial that patriarchy, in theatre traditions as far back as *Antigone*, demands. The reversed self, the problem, as Derrida famously explored, of de-stablized subjectivity collides with a sort of anti-resurrection.

Readers may look forward to more translations of the works of Antonio José Ponte, Reina María Rodríguez, and the canonical works of Cuban poets, playwrights, and novelists. I understand that Kristin Dykstra and Nancy Gates Madsen have completed translations of Rodríguez, that there is interest in translating the short stories of Reina’s partner, Jorge Miralles, and that Roberto Tejada is seeking a publisher for his completed translations of the poetry of José Lezama Lima. I also recently learned that City Lights is publishing Ponte's new story collection, *Tales from All Corners of the Empire*, in September. Altogether this exciting outburst can enrich our bookshelves and literary lives by providing context and collections necessary for a deep appreciation.

**Deborah Meadows**

## DISOBEDIENCE

Alice Notley  
Penguin, 2001

Alice Notley writes into a conundrum: how to be completely honest to the internal voice while still being “readable.” Notley identifies herself as part of the small but dynamic camp of writers who will turn their back on neither question. Throughout her books she is relentless at trying different approaches and forms, but always with a searching quest: how to reach the reader—not a theoretical reader, but a real one—one who is at the bookstore right now trying to decide between *the Lord of the Rings*, Jack Kerouac, or the latest novel from Oprah’s book club.

I have a  
double a self I can’t stand

I was discovered by primordial Columbus  
and became his land?  
Cliché says Hardwood

Her latest book tackles head-on the writer’s refusal to “belong” to any group or structure of power—to remain committedly “disobedient.” *Disobedience* takes form as a series of notations—just as frequently “prosaic” as “poetic,” certainly always grounded in real-word material experiences. The book-length work organizes itself not thematically, nor narratively, but rather in time: 13 months—the months in the year of the woman-centered, lunar calendar. It takes as its concern the survival of the “disobedient” individual in the midst of a society which depends on obedience—an obedience that automatically implies of source of Power in whose direction that obedience is offered.

One needs to examine one’s own relationships to the structures and forms of power if one is to be truly *disobedient*. Notley’s poem tackles this problem head-on, engaging many political events current to France at the time of the writing (1995-96), including a student strike over state funding for higher education, increasing Muslim fundamentalism, and beautifully—and somewhat viciously—the politics of the literary world. The sass and anger of the book are not theoretical—they are fastened—but rather grow out of a materially real narrator who is existing at a real and material place and moment in history.

I don’t want to create any meaning;  
I want to kill it...  
You made meaning; I’m  
trying to make life stand still,

long enough so I can exist.  
I, truly, am speaking.

This work seems more like an eavesdropping. The audient nature of *Alette* was made explicit by the author in her “Note” explaining the use of the quotations marks, but in *Disobedience*, the reader is left with the unfolding internal dialogue of the narrator and her foil—sometimes called Harwood, Hardwood, Mitch-ham, etc.—but it’s unclear whether this figure is supposed to be an alter ego, represent some male figure in the poet’s life, or simply be an element of the poet’s psyche—a masculine element against which she, ultimately, must also be disobedient.)—or purely imaginary.

A resistant reader might feel challenged—as Hardwood is, sometimes—to try to find links or structures between the series and the strange titles they are given—for example, “the Longest Vampiric History Vs. the Soul,” “Will Die and Die in So Many Ways, as Professional and Cultural Identity,” “An Impeccable Sexism I Mean an Elegant Idea or Procedure Haunts the Stars”—it finally proves as difficult as trying to function within any kind of civilized society as a true dissenter.

in the antediluvian island  
in the primordial swamp  
Hardwood was already my friend

The book is split into five sections, each section made up of the titled pieces, none of which, really, have a traditional narrative arc. I imagine that the titled pieces follow that pattern set by the book as a whole: organized by “time,”—“subject,” in some deeper sense than we have thought of it—rather than “place.” Ultimately, the table of contents reads as its own kind of poem, setting the tone for the raucous, untidy riot of a book that follows.

Notley has sometimes been thought of as a “writer’s writer.” For writers, the book is an amazing, visceral examination of how the thinking, generative, creative person functions in a profit-driven society—the matrix of power, like the “Tyrant” of *Alette*—is everywhere, and equally interested in strangle free expression, love, and individuality.

No I want real and dreamed to be fused into the real  
rip off this shroud of division of my poem from my life

I’m tempted to suggest that Notley is writing a “new” “epic”—not one which depends on the masculine ideals of conquest and self-triumph over surrounding circumstance (though the classics of that field have a notable habit of unwinding themselves at the end), nor one which seeks, through ironic use of the *form* to critique the epic’s ambition—but the Notley of *Disobedience* is too much of a



*bad-ass*, too resolutely rebellious to attempt anything that would smack so much of respectability, or even have the veneer of it.

Rather this anti-epic privileges what had been called “mundane.” The *disobedient* narrator has no fear of being interrupted by the gentleman from Porlock—she doesn’t stay locked in her room, sleeping and having visions—rather she sleepwalks—she dissolves the imposed difference between various states of mind which require semantic distinction between “wakefulness,” “dream-states,” or “day-dreams.” What then is the relationship of “intrusion” to the “poem”?

This embracing nature adds to the deep, surreal quality of the book that seems willing to accept all forms of personal expression, including beautiful and righteous anger, without trying to censor the feeling or subordinate the individual lyric moments to some larger “epic” or “narrative” intention. In places the language, thus let loose, whips itself into a sonic frenzy, reminiscent of the sonic lyrics of Susan Howe:

I’m sort of hysterical  
the E is it for hope, cutting  
the E might be for Hope  
Nope  
...  
E is my middle name  
...  
face form feral familiar flush  
...  
Stop trying to make something

In other passages, Notley and Hardwood’s adventures seem out of some strange comic book: in one, Notley’s “soulcore” escapes into the desert, and Hardwood tries to perform some mysterious “rite” to lure it back. In another fleeting moment, from the piece entitled “MEET ME AT LA CHAPELLE FOR MORE SALAMI,” Notley reluctantly participates in a Mafia hit. In still another “Bob Doll” and “Mrs. Bob Doll” discuss why she can’t be president.

Anna Akhmatova, Marguerite Yourcenar, Bill Gates, Newt Gingrich, *Baywatch*, and “Sabrina” from *Charlie’s Angels* are among the public figures that make their appearances in the poem’s shifting examination. After the second or third appearance of Gingrich, Notley fretfully returns to her original conundrum:

(will that name survive much longer? should  
I keep naming him?)

The true joy of the book *is* this life in the quotidian. As radical as *Alette* was, it sought a place in an ancient mythic *topos*. This epic turns away from the heroine’s

journey through a subterranean world, and instead includes and embraces the above-ground, external, pop-media-culture infested world, not as a metaphor or locus of critique, but rather as an accepted, dramatic part of the personal landscape.

my name is Alice Elizabeth, so am I  
Allie Sheedy of the movie Short Circuits thus angry  
or Elizabeth McGovern self-controlled?

...  
I am Allie and I will continue to rant.

Where the poem begins to concern itself with the political concerns of the millenium's end, there is neither irony, nor an attempt to *use* the experience of the lived life as a *ground* for discovering some kind of unifying or systematizing epiphany. Rather, the work is just *experiential*. And always for Notley, wry and dry, it's the *material* concern that takes primacy over any sense of "literariness."

The subject in France is work: will there  
be a shorter workweek  
in twenty years' time...  
...  
(what subject's more important...)

Beautifully one encounters this book as a direct line of thought from the writer. Though figures and events appear and reappear, there is no narrative structure to colonize the experience. Notley's titles open riddles onto riddles, sassy and scathing. One title reads: "AND STILL NO STORY, HOW WILL YOU KNOW WHEN IT'S OVER?"

Readers new to Notley will discover her savage control of the language down to the level of a single word or series of words—

...Winternet, the sadness of River  
of No Return  
technological river...

—and her sharp tongued pieces like:

Where did the first matter come from  
a thought or extrusion from else where, but

what  
shit it free...

and:

“The Laws of the Universe must be Elegant”

Push a baby out of your snatch then see if you believe that

Notley’s extreme critical intelligence has room to move around in this super-sized 284-page book. The rhythms of the thoughts carry the reader in a profound way—Notley has achieved an envious state: a book which neither compromises rigor nor accessibility.

Though its section titles and piece titles might falsely offer a sense of hierarchical organization, I think they more serve to undermine an easy assimilation, and suggest a different sense of coalescence. The book resists systems and rather exists beyond “tidiness” or “organization”—it makes for itself new definitions, new ways of thinking and reading. Disparate sections of the book sometimes echoed and flew together in my memory as I read:

We’re on strike again today in France  
we’re living in a political past  
that probably hasn’t ever quite existed.  
It’s vaguely familiar though, the way  
some imagined American past  
flickers through the “works” of Dole and Gingrich  
or as in poetry a policied reality flickers  
across the face of Your poem text experiment.

...

Spent all my dream time last night washing dishes  
while the Glasgow poet babbled to me.  
This morning I read about the “privileging  
by hegemonic positivistic anthropologists  
of ocular metaphors for knowledge, refusing to accept  
the evidence of historical ‘silences’.”

...

Soulcore’s silence screams at the author  
she is much of me, Alice, in no  
way that You have systematized

...

(this is like LSD twenty-six years ago)

...

very far down in earth, below the rooms  
of previous dreams...  
there is a small roundish chamber

...

This isn’t right; I struggle up and claw at my  
grave like a she-ghoul



# THE UNFINISHED SYSTEM OF NONKNOWLEDGE

Georges Bataille

University of Minnesota Press, 2001

*I find a glistening worm between two graves.*

*In the night, I place it in my hand.*

*The worm looks at me, penetrates even my shame.*

*And we lose one another in its gleam: we commingle, one with the other in the light.*

*The wonder-struck worm laughs at me and at the dead and I marvel equally, laughing at being divined by a worm and by the dead.*

—from *Meditation II*

This translation of Bataille's writing by Stuart and Michele Kendall joins a growing body of the author's literature in English. Georges Bataille, the philosopher, art critic, poet, sociologist, the erotic novelist, the librarian by day and *débauché* at night, is, as this display of roles suggests, a man who has had within himself and his writing the sufficient amount of ambiguity as to warrant readership in many circles. While he is best known for his influence in the literary sphere, the direction of his thought, the very human condition, and the instability of such a condition can be said not only to touch upon all fields, but also to subvert them on contact.

As his writings, gathered most completely under the title *Œuvres complètes* (Gallimard, 1971-1988), become available, editors have had the playful task of reassembling selections from his manuscript collections in pieces, passages, and quotations, to support one claim or another. The difference here lies in editor Stuart Kendall's assertion that this text is the phantom book envisioned by Bataille, the fifth book in his *La Somme Athéologique*, Bataille's most strategic deposition of his philosophic aims. Modeled after Saint Thomas Aquinas' *Somma theologica*, Bataille's work sets about providing a Post-Nietzschean understanding of mysticism and the sacred, one which severs its connections with the single authority of God.

According to the editor's examination of Bataille's paratextual notes and letters *La Somme Athéologique* was to be comprised of five volumes. Of the five, only the first three were actually prepared and published, *Expérience intérieure*, in English as *Inner experience*, translated and by Leslie Anne Boldt (State University of New York Press, 1988), *Coupable*, translated by Bruce Boone as *Guilty* (Lapis Press, 1988) and *Sur Nietzsche*, also translated by Bruce Boone as *On Nietzsche* (Paragon House, 1992.) The last two, *Pure Happiness* or *Le Pur Bonheur*, and the present volume's name sake, *Le Système inachevé du non-savoir* were incomplete at the time of Bataille's death in 1962. Scholars of Bataille have

debated the reasons why these volumes were left ‘in process’ for years. Some have suggested it is fitting that for Bataille, *Pure Happiness* could never be achieved in life, and that *The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge* remained unfinished. They cite them as impossible projects, devoured by the philosopher’s autophagous thought, whose prescience of an emergent postmodern condition subsumed identity and conclusion. In his introduction Stuart Kendall acknowledges as much by prefacing, “What follows is not a book, certainly not *one* book. It is book collected against itself, and against the other volumes of *La Somme. The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge* is a supplement to *La Somme Athéologique*, but one that incompletes the work rather than completes it.” Knowing this, Kendall endeavors to assemble this book with as little interference as possible.

His composition of the remains of the final two volumes is laid out here, with kid gloves across an operating table, exposing the texts—a posthumous gathering of conversational debate, essay, outlines, notes, and disembodied aphorism—to the unnatural light of translation. Kendall provides little commentary for our autopsy, restricting his remarks to the editor’s introduction where he largely side steps the controversy over the appropriations of Bataille. This decision gives the English Language readership the opportunity to digest the words unfettered by Post-structuralist literary critics, or sociologists and anthropologists who have sought to accommodate Bataille within the arguments they espouse.

Instead, Stuart highlights the evidential record of Bataille’s thought in pursuit of the effects of Nonknowledge. Readers of this volume are afforded a fresh look at Bataille, and namely his anguish and joy as he ventured into the impossible task of describing the indiscernible nature of the human condition. It is a portrait of a philosopher at wit’s end, who uses a myriad of rhetorical devices to escape the determinism of knowledge and language. It is ultimately a “dramatization of immense failing, a tragedy,” but this failing is not Bataille’s alone. It is a shared tragedy. And although Bataille’s voice is speaking beyond the grave, and through the filter of English, the Kendalls’ translation retains its emotive tones. It is difficult not to become ensnared in his eschatological struggle.

Bataille has often been characterized as a philosopher of excess, one who sought to focus our attention on the aberrations of life and death, rather than exorcising them. The writings displayed in this volume also look to sin, expenditure, ecstasy, laughter, and *jouissance* as the objects of philosophic inquiry, but instead of seeking to understand them, as they exist in experience, they are instead discussed as portals to, and the effects of, the irrepressible forces of Nonknowledge. Far from the notion of a zone of ignorance, Bataille relates Nonknowledge as fundamental to reality, a force that cannot be explained, captured, stabilized or avoided. It is conceptualized as the end result of knowing, and like the nature of excess, it defies quantification in language. It is cognized as secondary to what is utilitarian and known, and yet is indispensable (both necessary and inexhaustible).

Furthermore, Nonknowledge, as it is conjured by Bataille through

protracted meditation, Socratic inquiry or traced through its eruptions into the rational world, serves to destabilize civilization and the underpinnings of civilization, institutions, religion, and ideology. But Bataille's forces of Nonknowledge do not stop there. They erode tradition, nostalgic senses of community and self, logic, and even sanity. Bataille's Nonknowledge cannot be known; instead he positions it as that which exudes the forces of disintegration. The seemingly enduring paradox of Bataille's thought is that this disintegration is necessary for communication, community and society. It is this breakdown that makes it possible for us to have any knowledge of the other. For Bataille, "Communication happens only between two beings at risk," in the sacrifice of values. Bataille's ability to philosophize and to relate experience is predicated on the fact his character is wounded. To be intact is to be rendered silent, a state only achievable in death. For Bataille, as with Nietzsche, disintegration is related to renewal. This is not formulated in dialectical terms, but rather joined as a kind of eternal syzygy.

While most of the texts gathered here employ the parlance of painful self-reflection in the wake of Nonknowledge, the inward focus can readily be projected outward. For Bataille, there is no clear division between the self and the world. In the chapter "Discussion On Sin," the author leads an audience of priests, philosophers and fellow travelers to the paradox of communication, disintegration, and community, through an expository description of the use-value of sin as opposed to morality in the maintenance of the spiritual. Contrary to common speculation, Bataille was not seeking an anti-Christianity, but rather sought to develop a community of souls who would be "the heirs of meditation and of Christian penetration... to go beyond all Christianity by means of a *hyper-Christianity* [*Überchristliches*] and without contenting" itself "with giving Christianity up." The God of rules and morality is taken as an effect of Nonknowledge, and hence servile to those forces and to any sovereign operation, which are the real yet unattainable matters of his inquiry.

By addressing the problems raised by morality, Bataille sought to confront religion or any semblance of community as immanent. Salvation, or community, was not a work to be produced, nor a state to achieve. These fallacies of immanence are considered attempts to project a static quality to the unknowable. Pre-formed closed systems, such as religious doctrine, are instead described as obstacles to the sacred, and to the forces that in the end make sacred experience possible. In turn, by predetermining the state of community, one only guarantees its ultimate disintegration. For Bataille, an authoritative morality and a totalitarian state bring about the same result: the logic of its own suicide. To renew society, spirituality, love, and even the self, the being must not only admit, but also support its own continual contamination.

The spiritual, like community and society, is to be cognized as action, in motion, always being set forth or backwards by a multiplicity of sovereign forces. It is headless. This is why Bataille studies laughter, intoxication, sexual desire,

and even yoga, not to escape the responsibility of community and self, but rather to find openings into their essential operations, to understand the forces of disintegration and renewal. Laughter, tears... these outbursts result from some sovereign power, one that gives gratuitously and continuously, one of endless perplexity, which circulates like a vast sea beneath a hairline surface. To find this, to evoke this and observe, it is necessary for Bataille to move beyond the demands of logic and seriousness. He finds such demands not only stifling and ineffectual, but also irresponsible. For all the noise in the world, he continuously returns to the necessity of posing questions and paradoxes that go to the end of the possibility of knowing. At each step the constraints of community, of morality, and of work are juxtaposed with the freedom of play. "Seriousness has only *one meaning*: the game, that is no longer a game, is serious only insofar as 'the absence of meaning is also meaning,' but always lost in the night of indifferent nonsense." And there is playfulness to the thought presented here, but it is not play of gamesmanship or sport. Although seriousness is dismissed, these meditations are not exercises. Philosophy is a means of escape, not escapism. For Bataille these dialogues are invoked to enlighten practical questions about how we live our lives.

Perhaps while confronting the weight of thought encased in the libraries in which he was employed, he wrote:

Asking the unlimited question, the essential question is impossible. The impossibility of moving from analytic interrogation to this essential question. Might responses to the analytic interrogation be given, and if so, what essential truth do these responses reveal? What do these responses lead to? And why am I before this paper, writing, *in search of a key*? I imagine: *there is no key*, these innumerable truths, which science populated the universe, mean nothing to me, if not the measure of my desire to solve a particular problem. The key would give me the meaning of *my truth*, of a dominant truth, in the crowd where it is lost. Who am I? If not this terminal question (the terminal question) sinking with me into the night.

*The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge* takes the reader on a nocturnal journey through Bataille's performative self-consciousness, and spares us neither his anguish, desperation, nor his fantastic *éclats*.

**David Michalski**



## GLOBALIZATION

Arjun Appadurai, editor  
Duke University Press, 2001

Despite the generic title, the anthology *Globalization* provides a wide range of the effects and forces of globalization, but the collection also pushes particular positions regarding the spatiality and temporality of globalization. The 18 essays (four of which are photographic) and editor Arjun Appadurai's introduction usefully define and expand upon existing axes in the study and theorization of globalization — the economic, the cultural, and the spatial, and puts emphasis on the temporal. As globalism has become an increasingly prominent (and popular) frame through which to understand the current shape of the world, studies of globalization have expanded along these axes to include all cultural, social and economic production and formations and have tended to fold in other frames of meaning which once were held up as tools of social critique. The study of globalism can tend, negatively, toward collapsing former frames of understanding and conceptualization (nationalism, transnationalism, feminism, post-colonialism, critical multiculturalism, cultural studies, world systems theory etc.) into an undifferentiated study of forces and flows that point simultaneously to the complex connectivity of everything and the complex specificity of everything. A conceptualization of the world that can emerge is one cluttered evenly with effects and movements, yet with few causes being identified and analyzed. Ironically, this emergent criticism of globalization theory (particularly its cultural wing) is similar to the critique of the less-thorough forms of cultural studies where innumerable disarticulated cultural effects were celebrated as synchronic and momentary counter-hegemonic meaning production. Gayatri Spivak's comment that a symptom of cultural studies is that "Everything is being made 'cultural'" can be up-graded to globalism, that a symptom of the emphasis on globalism is that everything is being made *global*.

Analysis of globalization is at its strongest when it moves through the cultural, social, and economic structures and causes that give particular texture to the effects of globalism, when articulations are made across the uneven spatial development and the temporal manipulations of globalism to reveal it as a structured set of processes and not the inevitable shape of the world. What is particularly productive about this grouping of essays is that it does not collapse the spatial scale of globalization, nor does it propose a homogenous time in which globalism develops. In the process of making the global the local, and the local the global that is recited in globalization theory, the spatial scale is reduced through a seamless articulation of these opposite ends and the influential and constitutive spaces of the region and the nation are withdrawn. Already this rearrangement and interaction of the spatial scale is being usefully challenged as more *particular* theorizations of the processes of globalization are developed. Appadurai has earlier

argued for the neighbourhood as a constitutive site, Saskia Sassen has emphasized the role of cities as engines of globalism, Neil Smith recently argued for a new globalism and a new urbanism, and David Harvey has used as a basis the concept that capitalism does not merely annihilate space by time (as Marx wrote), but reorganizes a geographical landscape appropriate to the logics of accumulation at a particular moment only to reform a spatial hegemony again based on new dynamics of accumulation.

The spatial logics of globalism are analyzed at a number of levels in this anthology. At the urban level, Néstor García Canclini traces the effects of both national and extra-national forces on Mexico City. Moving from a supranational function in the colonial period, Mexico City was the site of the solidification of a national culture by the state; yet as the state has subsequently ceded its role as the dominant cultural agent, the shape, texture and meaning of urban life has been transformed by private financial and commercial megacenters and upscale residential developments. The weakening of a centralized national culture has resulted in an unevenly distributed transnational cultural and thus a shift from (national) cultural production to (transnational) cultural consumption. Yet, the media circuits that have replaced urban space as the site of congregation produce “new modalities of encounters and recognition”; Canclini asks for a more diverse spatial relation where the urban texture is made of both media circuits and the public spaces of national culture.

At the regional and national level in Africa, Achille Mbembe proposes that discourses of historical territorial boundaries that privilege the role of colonialism, or the “from below” formation of regions, obscure the pluralities of spatial dynamics and the role of power. Rather, “current boundaries thus reflect commercial, religious, and military realities, the rivalries, power relations, and alliances that prevailed among the various imperial powers and between them and Africans through centuries preceding colonialization proper.” Mbembe, however, does not merely pluralize the spatial and temporal dynamics of Africa, he carefully argues that spatial disputes are struggles for the control of resources and not solely ethnocultural and state clashes. Further, in these struggles for resources, “the value of things generally surpass[es] that of people. That is one of the reasons why the resulting forms of violence have as their chief goal the physical destruction of people (massacres of civilians, genocides, various kinds of killings) and the primary exploitation of things.” By foregrounding the economic forces rather than the cultural processes of the spatial dynamic of globalization, Mbembe links globalization’s ideology of accumulation and expansion to the cause of violence in Africa.

In a detailed and nuanced essay, Anna Tsing uses a study of the Bre-X mining scandal in Indonesia (that has significant parallels to the unfolding Enron fiasco) to illustrate how speculative financial enterprises conjure not only dreams of unlimited accumulation at a regional and national level, but that they must also conjure spatial scales themselves in order to articulate a form of globality that can

allow the enterprise to succeed. The Canadian gold-mining mining project in Suharto's Indonesia during the late nineties that erupted a stock speculation frenzy based on a find, by a Filipino, of the world's largest gold deposit — a find that turns out to be based on rigged samples and causes a stock plummet that cost some individuals and whole communities their savings as well as making millions for others in quick stock flips. In this global play, Tsing proposes that “three scale making projects come together...: the globe-making aspirations of finance capital, the nation-making coercions of franchise cronyism, and the region-making claims of frontier culture.” Tsing twines together the economic and cultural effects that helped produce this drama of “spectacular accumulation” — one that involves a social scale from former president Bush and former Canadian prime minister Mulroney who pressured the Suharto government in favour of a rival mining company of Bre-X, to small stock-buyers who operated on the internet. In doing so, Tsing does not collapse the cultural into the economic, as many theorists of globalization do, but traces the specific effects of both of these fields as they coerce transnational corporations, national governments and localized investors into believing in a particular spatial scale of accumulation. Along with Leo Ching's essay on “globalizing the regional, regionalizing the global” in Asia, Tsing's illustration of the *uses* of locality in the “macronarrative” of globalization (rather than opposing the global and the local culturally or converging them spatially) invigorates the discussion of the management of spatial scales in globalization.

But it is also in the analysis of the role of temporality in globalization that this anthology aims to broaden current debates. Just as struggles over space are instigated by shifts within globalism, shifts in the temporalities of globalism set up struggles for the present and, as this anthology emphasizes, for the shape of the future. Taking the quickening of time that speculative finance and “just in time” production promote, Jérôme Bindé defines a “logic of emergency” that has become an “exclusive value of our societies.” This emphasis on the present, Bindé argues, mortgages the future as no long-term solutions are sought for global problems. Instead of this “reactive passivity,” he proposes “the emergency of the long term” as an international policy alternative. Emphasizing the opposite temporal scale, Andreas Huyssen argues that the marketing of memory is so prevalent that “memory has become a cultural obsession of monumental proportions across the globe.” Unfortunately, Huyssen's metanarrative of memory's function in culture tends to feel as if it has been “made” global. By opposing a “time consciousness of (high) modernity,” which aimed at constructing a future, to a late twentieth-century impulse of “taking responsibility for the past,” Huyssen smooths out the uneven development of both modernity and globalization which then blunts the distinctions between different temporal and cultural deployments of memory — and of the use of memory as a political tactic to shape the future. While Huyssen, in a useful way, points to “a slow but palpable transformation of temporality in our lives, centrally brought on by the complex intersections of technological change, mass media, and new patterns of consumption, work, and

global mobility,” the forces that drive this temporal change do not create the same temporality in “our” lives or in globalism. Globalization is more the management of different temporal regimes (and spatial regimes) that manipulate the shape of the present by banishing certain regions of the world to the past (and therefore as sites for destruction or reinvestment – as is the case with the current bombing of Afghanistan) and promoting other regions as the shape of the future (for instance in the construction of the U.S. model of the neoliberal state as the inevitable form of the state worldwide).

In a more particular analysis of the construction of temporality as an agent of social and cultural change, Zhang Zhen focuses on China as it enters into the global market. A “cultural anxiety about temporality” is created as “the structures of time are being recast by the rapid transition from socialism to a market economy and by the change of focus from production to consumption.” Zhen analyzes the relationship of the category of “youth” and youth culture, the entertainment industry, sexuality, and the experience of daily life and urban space as the sites of this transformation. Like Tsing’s unraveling of the Bre-X affair, Zhen is able to articulate effects to cultural and economic causes even as these effects circulate through different levels of the social. In this methodology, particulars do not remain instances of particularity nor are they pumped up to the global level, but, through a series of articulations and shifts, globalization is shown to construct a temporality and a spatiality useful to its dynamics of accumulation.

The established conceptualizations of globalization, such as its time-space compression, its expansionism, the mobility of people, commodities and ideas, the fixity of capital, and its redefinition of the nation-state, provide a ground for these more particular mappings of the formation of globalism. Temporally, this ground also has provided a means to understand the present.

However, this anthology is at its most compelling in its insistence on the future. This emphasis on how the dynamic of globalization will materialize has been demonstrated, I think, most successfully within urbanism, particularly in the work of David Harvey and Neil Smith who trace the effects of global capital on the texture of urban life and contestations for space within the city in such a way that it is possible to predict and possibly intervene in the process. What Appadurai does in the introduction to this volume – and what Bindé and Saskia Sassen also initiate in their contributions – is to identify research and speculation as tools that can not only identify what form globalism may take, but also as discourses that could have a constitutive effect on globalization. By entering this ideological space of globalization, Appadurai again proposes a “new role for the imagination in social life.”

Given this emphasis, *Globalization* – while strong on the spatial and temporal dynamic of globalization – does not advance existing paradigms for culture within globalism. Emphasis remains on cultural consumption (how particular meanings are generated) rather than on a role for speculative cultural production, which – like research – looks to and imagines a future outside of the

continuous neoliberal present. Perhaps this reimagining of the cultural is mired in theories of globalization which emphasize the shift from production to consumption in particular sites. A shift to the production side of culture could be a turn toward the future.

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**Jeff Derksen**

**AMIRI BARAKA:  
THE POLITICS AND ART OF A BLACK INTELLECTUAL**

Jerry Gafio Watts  
New York University Press, 2001

What does it tell us about the current state of scholarly publishing in America that this book appears from a reputable university press, presumably peer-reviewed, accompanied by words of praise from a number of truly distinguished writers?

There are the minor annoyances that should have been caught before the book was released: the inadvertently political typo (repeated on the very next page) that has “traditional black intellectuals in a unique vice”; the constant confusion of “adverse” with “averse”; the comment that Hoyt Fuller’s “most important task was to illegitimate white critics of black literature”; the seemingly inverse mixed metaphor of “lenses that have been filtered through racist images”; the bizarre reference to “the Cannibal Adderly Quintet” (That’s not a typo; look at your keyboard. Watts really thinks that Julian “Cannonball” Adderly’s nickname is “Cannibal”). A decent job of copy editing might have saved this author from his own weaknesses as a writer, but where were the peer-reviewers when Watts was writing of the birth of a non-existent son to Baraka and Diane Di Prima? Oddly enough, the sources that Watts cites for this include my own book *Writing between the Lines* and Baraka’s *Autobiography*, neither of which at any point claims that Baraka and Di Prima gave birth to a son. As it happens, their *daughter* has become quite an accomplished broadcast personality, currently working with Steve Harvey on radio, and remains unmistakably female.

Such carelessness and speculation typify the author’s use of his sources throughout. In a note to his introduction, Watts observes that the *LeRoi Jones / Amiri Baraka Reader*, ably edited by William J. Harris, contains no excerpts from the book *Raise Race Rays Raze*, adding: “It is as if Baraka were ashamed of those essays.” Never before have I encountered a critic who assumes that the absence of a work from a selected volume edited by somebody else is an indication of an author’s shame at having written the work.

As badly as Watts does by his acknowledged sources, however, far worse is his unwillingness to do his homework. Coming to Baraka’s criticisms in *Home* of Peter Abrahams and James Baldwin, Watts writes: “Being unfamiliar with Peter Abrahams’s writing, I cannot verify the validity of Jones’s criticisms of him.” Watts tells readers in his acknowledgments that this volume, like his earlier book on Ellison, had its origins in his dissertation. I have a pretty good idea how my dissertation adviser would have responded to such a comment. He would have pointed me in the direction of the nearest library and told me to come back when I had become familiar with Abrahams (a major novelist, most would agree).

Similarly, when addressing the short career of the Black Arts Repertory Theater, Watts asks, and answers:

What did typical black residents of Harlem think about BART? Did they even know about it? I cannot imagine many Harlemites being intensely attuned to the plays and concerts of BART . . .

Of course, this is not at all the sort of question that needs to be answered in the imagination. It would not be all that difficult, indeed it would be expected of most dissertation researchers raising such a question, to engage in the kind of reception studies that have become common in recent years, or at least to examine the popular press of the day. Watts confesses, "I have not surveyed the opinions and remembrances of black Harlemites concerning BART and Jones," going on to posit that "We cannot accept at face value Jones's claim that the black masses of Harlem were captivated by the offerings of BART." Nowhere does Watts address the most obvious issue raised by this discussion. If we are not to accept at face value the judgements of Baraka, who was, after all, there, why should we accept at face value the suppositions of a critic who has not bothered to do the most basic forms of investigation on the very question that he raises?

These are merely samples drawn at random from a poorly-written and barely researched volume of weighty scholarship. When I first picked up this book and felt its heft, I looked forward to a thorough critique of Baraka's politics and art (which does seem to be what is promised in the subtitle), a book that would match in scholarship and thought the admirable work done by Komosi Woodard in *A Nation within a Nation* examining the cultural politics of Baraka's career. The length of Watts's book, it turns out sadly for readers, is explained by the stultifying summaries of Baraka's works, including individual lyric poems, that take the place of sustained critical inquiry in this volume. The formula for Watts's work appears to be two parts condescension and one part ad hominem. In a note to chapter fourteen, Watts comments that "Literary critics like Harris can be excused for being unfamiliar with Marxist and economic thought." I am not at all sure why a literary critic would be excused for unfamiliarity with the political philosophy of his subject (and I do not believe the charge is fairly applied to Harris in any event). But Watts goes on to argue that "there remained little justification for an American literary critic not to be familiar with Walter Benjamin, Raymond Williams, Fredric Jameson, Terry Eagleton, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Georg Lukacs, as well as other significant Marxist literary intellectuals." There are, obviously, some rather significant names missing from this reading assignment, and one finally has to wonder what to make of such an observation in a book whose works cited include no references whatsoever to the works of Cedric Robinson, George Padmore or C.L.R. James. It is not, evidently, sufficient for Watts to condescend to other critics and to the subject of his study, he must also engage in the most reprehensible mingling of ad hominem and presumption. In

his tenth chapter, Watts accuses Baraka of a “broader strategy to bury his own homosexual past” because he “knew that popular knowledge of his homosexuality would have undermined the credibility of his militant voice.” I had thought that this sort of thing had joined McCarthyism on the junk heap of history’s appeals to homophobia. What are we to make of the argument that any homophobia in the works of Baraka’s cultural nationalist period is attributable to an attempt to “defuse any claims that might surface linking him with a homosexual past”? This is the stuff of Fifties-era Hollywood movies, in which homophobes were invariably “latent” homosexuals. (Come to think of *American Beauty*, maybe Watts isn’t the only one clinging to this myth.)

It is not that Baraka is beyond criticism, though oddly enough Watts seems peculiarly unmoved by Baraka’s own many efforts at self-criticism, but surely an author of Baraka’s stature and complexity deserves better than this. Watts warns us in his preface of his propensity for inference, cautioning that he “may mistake an involuntary blink of the eyelid for a wink.” Still, as a practicing professor and critic who works often with the academic press, I’d like to think that most editors, being led to a blind horse, would insist that a nod is not as good as a wink. I know of all too many brilliant young scholars who have had to battle mightily with peer reviewers ill-equipped to take the measure of their innovative research and criticism. I know of too many worthy books that have circulated for years before finding publication. I have to wonder how it is that such an unmitigatedly bad book could appear, to such proud fanfare, from a seemingly reputable press. I suspect that being well-connected helps. Watts mentions in passing his “buddies Skip Gates and John Blassingame.” One of those “buddies,” I can’t help remembering, wrote a scathing review of Baraka’s *Autobiography* for the *New York Times*, describing Baraka’s poetic evolution as a tumble from “imitating” Yeats, Eliot, Pound, Williams and Olson to “agitprop.” It is probably significant that Gates, in writing that review, did not list any black poets among those the young Baraka “imitated.” Had Watts read Baraka’s body of work a bit more carefully, he might not have been so quick to claim that Baraka’s “early artistic influences show that he was located . . . outside of a black poetic tradition.” One of the most profoundly moving memories recorded in Baraka’s poetry is found in “Why Didn’t He Tell Me the Whole Truth,” where he recalls his grandfather urging him to commit James Weldon Johnson’s “The Creation” to memory, to learn it by heart. This is the same grandfather named so powerfully near the close of “Black Dada Nihilismus,” the same man memorialized so effectively in *The System of Dante’s Hell* (which Watts dismisses as a narcissistic novel) and in the early short story “Suppose Sorrow Was a Time Machine.” Baraka’s grandfather moved with the tradition of African American verse in his very bones, and the way that he lived this poetry marked Amiri Baraka ineradicably. To pretend that this is not the case is simple mendacity.

**Aldon Nielsen**



## THE HABITABLE WORLD

Beth Anderson  
Instance Press, 2001

What is habit? As Wordsworth qualifies it: “habit rules the unreflecting herd,” implying that under its sway one lives a blinded docility, exchanged for a surround of safety, at least until slaughter. Both “habit” and “habitable” come from the Latin “habere,” meaning ‘to have’, suggesting the idea of possession and the function of English’s present perfect tense, which bridges past to present. Indeed, though we rankle at the thought of numbing repetition, we are adverse to abjuring our habits. We believe that in them we possess the concentrated results of those past understandings which make our present life habitable—that we have steeped life’s strangeness to a taste we deem drinkable.

But it is exactly the terrain of disruption that exists between such beliefs about experience and the immediacy of actual experience—in all its irruptive strangeness—that Anderson inhabits with her poetic practice. Entering such a de-normalized landscape involves the reader in a dynamic relationship outside the habit of typical reading experience. In line after line, we find a sudden refractivity exits in the hegemonic confines we have inherited in speech; we see a shimmer of insolidity in the knowledge we use to compose a reality. The startle of such brief, bright agitation ignites an active involvement between reader and text, which engages them, as Pablo Freire suggests, “not only in the task of unveiling that reality... but of recreating that knowledge.” Though Freire is discussing here the work of “teachers and students (leadership and people), co-intent on reality,” his statement reflects some of what opens between reader and writing in this poet’s text—the possibility of expanding the ideational capacity of our consciousness. With Anderson, we begin even with the title—her use of the adjective “habitable,” when preceded by the article “the,” subtly presents the reader with the possibility that there is not only the world that habit engenders, but also other worlds beyond one thus described.

Such appreciation for the shocks, complications, and disruptive open-endedness inherent in even the simplest language constructions is the pulse within all of this poet’s predilections: “A solution terrifies the surface / on which writing rests...” But Anderson relishes language, even as she exposes its inherent duplicities; and she is candid enough to acknowledge, even as she undermines, our desire for a world made habitable by our various means of systemic representation—whether semantic or ideological. Her poetic strategies reflect not only a deep recognition for Ron Silliman’s now seminal discussions of the “new sentence,” but also a Roland Barthesian “amorous feeling” for discourse, a lover’s intimacy, which of course gives her an even greater capacity to count its flaws.

With a straight face the claim was made that language exists  
in order that Earth may be regarded as garden rather than war zone.  
How is another story altogether. And thus the teller transmogrified

into tale. When it was all recorded and sealed in a lavender envelope  
we argued about the percentage of pink the color contained.

*Beige* and *rose* were tossed about like weaponry, caught by their handles

and swamped in death. Numerous truisms thrived in our community,  
drawing folks from one another into studies of layout.

Both reveling in and ridiculing the “numerous truisms” with which we attempt to qualify appearances, Anderson situates us in the startle of de-situated contextual meaning—yet her diction is straightforward and direct. Like Dorothy and Toto, as their house lifts into the tornado, we find ourselves being carried by the familiarity of her language out beyond what we deemed possible, frameable as experience.

As preface to these poems, Anderson quotes from two sources: a line from Strabo, the ancient Greek geographer who traversed the Roman empire: “The habitable world forms a complete circle, itself meeting itself”; and stanzas from Barbara Guest’s “An Emphasis Falls on Reality,” which include the lines: “The necessary idealizing of you reality / is part of the search...”

Like Strabo, Anderson is willing to travel enormous distance—albeit intellectual distance—to document the expanse of habitable experience. But she infuses her interest with a twenty-first century savvy regarding the pertinacity of this expanse’s self-limiting boundaries, and curiosity regarding what lies beyond them.

Like Guest, Anderson creates a sonically lucid lyricism that critiques the intellectual lucidity of all forms of idealization, all reproductions of the real—including the lyric’s. And, like Guest, Anderson has developed a unique, recognizable approach to raising such post-modernist issues as language’s authorship, or modernist issues of artistic inspiration, often infusing her process with playfulness and humor. Anderson observes: “As if expecting a lamp to be lit by someone else, I await guests. / Await inexactitude.” Barbara Guest explains in her essay, “Poetry as True Fiction”: “The fiction of the poet is part of the restless twentieth century perception based upon the discovery that reality is a variable, and is open-ended in form and matter.” Here is Anderson, engaged in that variability, which must of course subsume subjectivity as well: “When I came to understand myself as able, I sent word to the island / and nearly made it around before ownership changed and / distracted me into misrepresentation.”

Anderson renders such “distract[ions]” and “misrepresentation[s]” in all their odd and intricate musicality, while repeatedly disrupting our expectations regarding

what syntax can incubate. By emptying syntax of expected sequence, she has made space for it to gestate an immediacy that each reader can bring to life.

The time laid aside for further mulling has healed  
into rope and twisted on itself while we idled nearby  
in a game. Now that we have learned all this  
an application can be sought, undone, a glistening lake.

In the epistemology of her language, “an application can be sought,” but what is revealed is the ontological “undo[ing]” of preconceived structure. Upon each “glistening lake” we see a surface tension arrested in the midst of its serene construing of false permanence and rearranged, providing instead the luminous oscillations of a shifting conversation with what representation ignores.

Around the mobile scenery a system of activity could be  
a precedent overturning itself or could be a box containing emergency tools  
suddenly unsealed, leaving us idle among feverish abandoned rakes  
and clippers.

Anderson’s language rescues from the habitual a surprising particularity of experience—“a box containing emergency tools / suddenly unsealed,” though she does not suggest that such rescue will do more than leave us “idle among the feverish abandoned rakes and clippers.” She shows how our habitual structures only occlude the world we would capture with them, as effectively as she exposes our abiding desire for the simplicity of that occlusion: “wished again for another alphabet / larger than the boy on the stoop.”

She engages, even as she undermines, the mind’s attraction to any given plan, structure, or ideological system. As Simone Weil suggests: “Man [sic] always devotes himself to an *order*.... we humiliate ourselves before false gods.” Repeatedly, we are seized by the desire to align with yet another system, fallible as it may be. Yet, how soon, “[o]ur plan became irrelevant / like music discharged from a window or the gesture made / in response.” Anderson is a poet who expresses the complexity of our desire for system, for order, while never allowing her poems to be taken captive by it.

Similarly, Anderson proffers neither a belief in the relevance of constructing a coherent subject who recounts experience, nor an absolutist’s repudiation of voice. Rather, these poems provide an emotively rich attention to the failure of all system, including narrative function.

I am longing for structure  
for your recounting to illuminate mine  
Attempts at description linger  
alongside heaps of snow

and rules clouded by  
directionless cries recalled  
Some lines cut across, depict  
while others provide a surface  
for circuitous behavior

One might say that Anderson's language speaks into and then through itself; phrases emerge from the pulse of each phrase's previous conviction to exceed the limits of explication. Still, she does not ignore the desire—she is simply not limited to the attempt—to transcribe event, translate it into text. Reading Anderson means experiencing a flood of presence that overflows the narrow of all manner of reader expectation.

Though disembodied may feel like  
a familiar passage it must be observed that singing does echo  
both from one mythology of a large rumbling storm and from  
a morning opening into a crowded room.

For this poet, the potential immediacy and surprise of any instance is always balanced against the “mythology” we would construct of it, of any experience. Anderson deftly engages the habitual—our abstracted systems long distanced from sensory impression—with language that becomes a site of rapprochement between experience and possibility. She disrupts the idealizations that we use to make a habitable haven, finding in that disarray a better salvation than safety. “The expulsion from paradise has acted with authority and saved me.”

**Rusty Morrison**

## CHICAGO PEOPLE

Richard Younker  
University of Illinois Press, 2001

The author's note to Richard Younker's new book of photographs, *Chicago People*, states that Younker has been employed variously as "a mailman, sixth-grade teacher, encyclopedia salesman, public aid caseworker, employment counselor, actor, and singer." The tone and diverse scope of this book of photographs attests to the experiences and viewpoints of a man who's experienced Whitmanesque ramblings; and a man who has had as many different jobs as Whitman had may be ideally suited to recognize the amazing diversity of life and experience that teems Chicago's streets—the jobs, the forms of despair, the blacks, the whites, Hispanics, Poles, and steelworkers, the rail workers, gamblers, drunks, dancers, and athletes, the young, the old, those who hope.

Opening the book at its beginning and slowly paging through, peering at the monologues and photographs, put me in mind of *Leaves of Grass* and specifically of a passage that I always felt captures the necessary spirit of whoever would make art of the American soul: "Sauntering the pavement or crossing the ceaseless ferry, here then are faces;/ I see them and complain not and am content with all." Younker, in these photographs of Chicago people spanning over three decades, captures and celebrates the miraculous striving, thriving, and bustling plurality of America's quintessential city with tremendous ambition and humanity. His photographs depict the life of work, family, play, despair and simple *being* that speaks to both the specific of Chicago as well as the universal of any city anywhere.

The book presents 85 black-and-white photographs and brief monologues. Forty-one of the photographs appeared in Younker's first book of photographs, *Our Chicago, Faces and Voices of the City*, published in 1987, and 44 are new photographs and monologues. In regards to the newer photographs, Younker writes in his introduction, "my mood had lightened by the late 1980s, and it was reflected in some of my subjects' faces. I went back through my files and found pictures with wider perspectives to compliment the tighter, often grim street portraits of *Our Chicago*." Only a few of the photographs have dates, and so it's not always possible to tell—apart from styles of clothing, clues in context and detail—which of the photographs date from *Our Chicago* and which date from the 1970s through the 1990s.

These are some of the things that you see and read when you page through the book:

The peculiar beauty of "Boy in the arms of a statue," a photograph that shows a black boy leaning forward into the arms of a statue like a child in a mother's protective embrace. The tones of this photograph are masterful, the boy's smooth skin stands in remarkable contrast to the statue's rougher, pock-marked

surface. It's often said that Americans don't know their own history very well, and this photograph seems to wink at this notion with a bemused eye, as if to say that we may in fact be too young to understand that, like children, we stand in the protective embrace of our nation's history.

"Carnival worker near Clark and Addison, May 1974," shows a white teenage boy with a busted arm in a worn cast leaning across the counter of a carnival booth. Stuffed dogs in an eerie watchful row look over him and a basketball net and backboard hang from the wall behind him. The boy looks at the camera inscrutably, and you find yourself wondering what he's thinking. Is he happy to be there? Is he bummed out maybe that he has to spend a spring day behind a counter with a busted wing? Is there a game across the street in Wrigley Field that he would rather be watching? Or is he simply bewildered to suddenly find himself the subject of a photographer's momentary interest? We'll never know, but it's a testament to the quality of Younker's photographs that we are beguiled enough to wonder.

In the monologue "Miss-Oh-So-Tired" a woman recounts (Younker notes in the introduction that some of the monologues are spoken by someone other than the person in the accompanying photograph) the backbreaking work of harvesting wheat straw from "can see" dusk to "can't" see night in the boiling hot Mississippi of her youth. She recounts telling her mother, "Momma, one day I'm gonna leave Mississippi," and obviously she made it to Chicago. A veteran of the Great Migration, she voices disappointment with the work ethic of a generation that hasn't known her generation's almost Biblical labors. Her daughter, she notes, sits in an office "six or seven hours" and when asked to accompany her mother to church on Sunday mornings responds "Oh, Momma, I'm so tired." The photograph that accompanies this monologue is gorgeous. A black girl with bemused, almost mischievous eyes, leans smiling out of an open window with a half-eaten banana in her hand. Further back, a boy, perhaps her younger brother, hangs from a doorway. There's no doubt of the mischief in his eyes. These children are at play, at leisure, and the juxtaposition of this leisurely-summertime-at-play photograph with the old woman's monologue recounting back-breaking field labor encapsulates perfectly the irony of migration—that one generation should labor so hard and struggle, so that another might know and enjoy a better life.

Two facing untitled photographs stand in stark relief to each other. On the left side is a photo that invokes a world as strange to me as the rural (for our barbershops are, like our churches and many of our schools, as segregated as any of our daily institutions). A middle-aged white man sits reading the *Chicago Tribune* as a woman with bottle-blond hair shaves him with a straight razor. Opposite, on the right page, is a photograph that hit me with the grin-inducing shock of the utterly familiar. It shows a packed black barbershop. It must be a Saturday, because the barbershops in the Philadelphia of my own youth were also packed just so. Everything in the picture provokes my feelings, my memories of walls crammed with hair-product ads, price lists for different style haircuts, photos

of celebrities, actors, the icons of the Civil Rights movement. (Above the mirror panel that lines the back wall you can see, if you look closely enough, if you are interested enough in the details, the famous photograph of Malcolm X that shows him brandishing a rifle to protect his family.) Three men sit in the barbers' chairs getting their hair cut as men and boys wait in a row alongside huge glass windows streamed through by street- and sunlight. (Is it possible that it was just so in Chicago as it was in the Philadelphia that I grew up in?) The placement of the two photographs across from each other is a brilliant move. Each tells a little bit about the other. Whereas the photograph of the black barbershop evokes a sense of the communal, the facing picture evokes isolation. The woman shaves the man—an act of great care and intimacy, especially with a straight razor—but she's on the phone while doing it, and the man reading the paper seems as oblivious to the razor passing above his ear as if he were only sitting on a park bench or a train.

Photographs of men at work, like the one opposite the monologue titled "Local 1" and the ones titled "Industrial truck cleaner, 1400 North Magnolia, July 1978" and "Gandy dancer, Randolph and Canal, November 1973" or the one across from the monologue titled "Yardmaster" put me in mind of the city's mythic work ethic, of the abandoned factories and rail yards that spot the city and the vast industrial ruins that sprawl across the south side and along Lake Michigan's southern crescent into northern Indiana. These images depict the faces of hardworking men. The yardmaster in the monologue says, "You know I just can't understand people that don't like their work. How can someone get out of bed every morning and go to something they hate? Because I get a bang out of this job. Mmmhmm," and he seems to speak for all of them. In the photograph adjacent the "Yardmaster" monologue, an older black man peers with a critical eye at something we can't see in the middle of a rail yard. Beside him stands a younger man and behind these two stand two others. There's a lot going on in the photograph, but it's the expression on the face of the older man that captivates us—the air of mastery and appraisal evident in his eyes. They are the eyes of a man who knows his job, just like the eyes of the man in "Local 1" and just like the eyes of the younger man in "Industrial truck cleaner," from whose oil-stained-handsome face sharp, proud eyes peer like a hawk's.

People play in this book too. One photograph that stood out especially shows the apprehensive faces of a crowd of black and white and Hispanic men staring up at racetrack monitors. The monologue adjacent pairs with the photograph perfectly:

Okay, their starting . . . look in front . . . you see  
my pony's forelegs hit the ground together . . . that's  
an athlete . . . money in the bank if he  
holds stride . . . let me touch your for luck, babe.

and the hopefulness of that last request, that desire for luck seems to glaze the faces and eyes of all the men in the picture. In the photograph “Polonez dancers perform at 5835 West Diversey, April 1989” pairs of men and women wearing traditional Polonez dancing dress in a dance hall kick their legs high in a captured moment of choreographed syncopation. In “Polish wedding, 4808 South Archer, April 1989” two men and three women sit laughing at a wedding banquet table littered with open wine bottles and half-empty glasses.

There are lost men too, in these pages, and men who may even be insane. In photographs like the ones adjacent to the monologues “A Jug and a Pack of Smokes,” “Scavenger” or “Street Talk” winos stare out with befuddled or mellow gazes. The speaker of the monologue in “Street Talk,” describing the racial harmony that rules over the world of alcoholics, says, “Don’t nobody care about color. Only color we think about’s the color of the wine.”

Politicos, union men, boxers, (a photograph of a white trainer whispering in the ear of a dead-tired black boxer sprawled on his stool in the corner of a ring, and the photograph that follows, of rows of middle-age white men peering up at an unseen boxing ring in fine grey suits and ties stand out like the best of great sports photography), cops, punks, family men and women—Yunker captures them all in *Chicago People*. His photographs attest to an eye that seeks out every experience of the great Midwestern city, its every nuance and emotion, its soul. The photographs convey his unflagging appetite for Chicago life. No subject that lives, bustles, or labors in the city seems to escape his curiosity. Like Whitman, Yunker is mesmerized with and made content by people’s faces, by the character perceptible in their eyes and the intricacies and arcana of the lives they lead. He finds in Chicago’s streets everything that he might want, every universal type and emotion captured in fleeting moments that seem to say everything and yet maintain their own elusive mystery.

**Patrick Lohier**



Xcp

cross cultural poetics

**Bruce Campbell** is an assistant professor in the Department of Modern and Classical Languages and Literatures at St. John's University in Minnesota.

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**Jeffery Renard Allen** is an Associate Professor of English at Queens College-CUNY and an instructor in the graduate writing program at The New School. He has authored two books to date, the novel *Rails Under My Back*, and *Harbors and Spirits*, a collection of poems.

**Amiri Baraka** is a renowned poet, dramatist, activist and essayist whose books include *Blues People*, *Dutchman*, *Transbluesency*, and *Wise Why's Y's*. A new website dedicated to his work has recently gone on-line at <<http://www.amiribaraka.com>>.

**Edwin Torres's** most recent book is *The All-Union Day Of The Shock Worker* (Roof Books). He is co-editor of the forthcoming *Cities of Chance: An Anthology of Innovative Poetry from America and Brazil* from Rattapallax Press.

**Craig Dworkin** teaches at Princeton University. His book *Reading The Illegible* is just out from Northwestern University Press.

**Ulf Cronquist**, Ph.D., works as a lecturer at the English Department, Göteborg University, Sweden. He has published a full-length study on John Hawkes: *Erotographic Metafiction: Aesthetic Strategies and Ethical Statements in John Hawkes's 'Sex Trilogy'*.

**Rosmarie Waldrop's** recent books of poems are *Reluctant Gravities* (New Directions), *Split Infinities* (Singing Horse Press), and *Another Language* (Talisman House). Northwestern has reprinted her two novels, *The Hanky of Pippin's Daughter* and *A Form/ of Taking/It All*, in one paperback.

**Frederick Luis Aldama** teaches U.S. Ethnic literature and film at University of Colorado, Boulder. He is the author of the forthcoming *Dancing With Ghosts: A Critical Biography of Arturo Islas* (University of California Press) and *Hybridity and Mimesis: Magicorealism and the Postethnic Novel and Film* (University of Texas Press).

**Peter O'Leary's** *Watchfulness* was published last September by Spuyten Duyvil. His critical study, *Gnostic Contagion: Robert Duncan & the Poetry of Illness*, will be published this spring by Wesleyan.

**John Taggart's** books include *Loop* (Sun & Moon), *When The Saints* (Talisman House), *Songs of Degrees* (U. Alabama), and *Remaining in the Light* (SUNY Press).

**Elizabeth Robinson's** most recent books are *Harrow* (Omnidawn, 2001) and *House Made of Silver* (Kelsey St. Press, 2000). She lives in Berkeley.

**Kristina Chew** teaches writing at Princeton University and Seton Hall University. Her translation of Virgil's *Georgics* will be published by the Hackett Publishing Company (Cambridge, MA) in 2002.

**Bing He** was born and raised in Beijing, China, and moved to Canada in 1992. Her essays and prose have appeared in various Chinese journals and major newspapers in China. This is her first poem written in English.

**Norma Cole**'s most recent collection of poetry is *Spinoza In Her Youth* (Omnidawn, 2002). Her translation of Fouad Gabriel Naffah's *The Spirit God and the Properties of Nitrogen* is forthcoming from Post-Apollo Press.

**Arthur Sze**'s latest works are *The Silk Dragon: Translations from the Chinese* (Copper Canyon, 2001) and *The Redshifting Web: Poems 1970-1998* (Copper Canyon, 1998).

**George Kalamaras**'s poetry collection, *The Theory and Function of Mangoes*, was published by Four Way Books in 2000. His recent chapbook, *The Transformation of Salt*, appears online at *The Drunken Boat* ([www.thedrunkenboat.com](http://www.thedrunkenboat.com)). He lives and teaches in Fort Wayne, Indiana.

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**Kazim Ali**'s poetry and essays have recently been published in *Marlboro Review*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Five Fingers Review*, and *Washington Square*. He teaches at the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, NY.

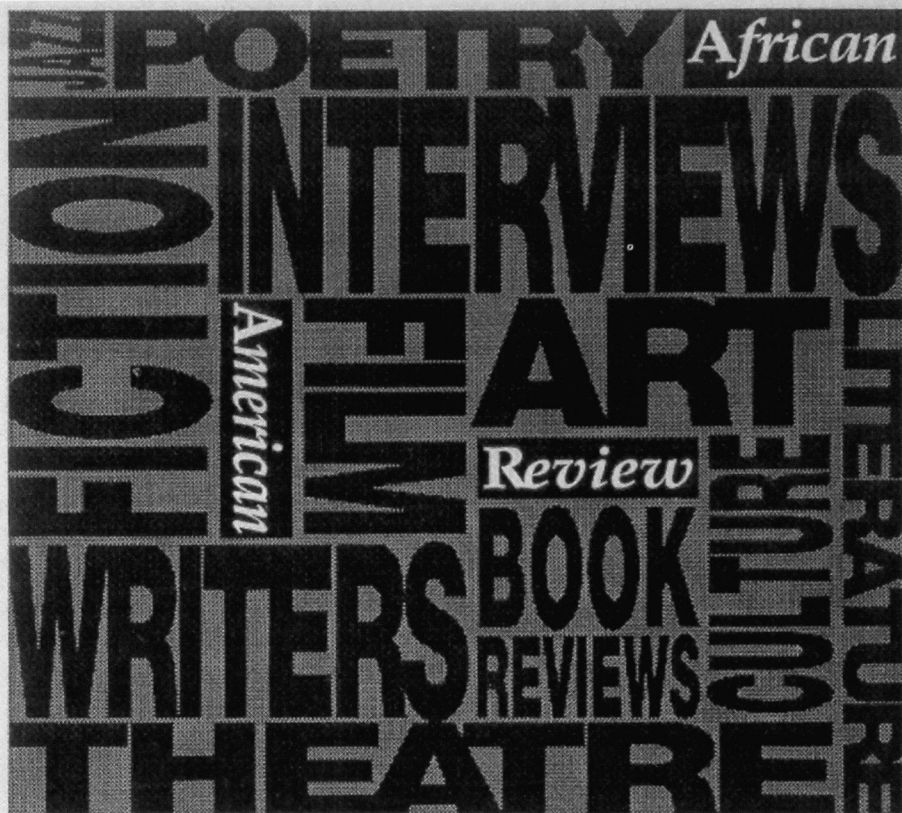
**David Michalski** is the Behavioral Sciences Librarian at the University of California at Davis. His latest essay, "The Bibliographic Imagination: The 19th Century Origins of the Internet," will be presented to the Archives, Museums, and Libraries Section of the Popular Culture Association in Toronto. He is also the editor of the *Xcp* Website, and the online exhibition *Xcp: Streetnotes* (<http://bfm.org/~xcp>).

**Jeff Derksen** is a writer currently living in New York where he is affiliated with the Center for Place, Culture and Politics (CUNY Graduate Center) thanks to a SSHRC of Canada Fellowship. The second part of his global poetic diptych, *Transnational Muscle Cars*, is due out this fall.

**Aldon Lynn Nielsen** is the Kelly Professor of American Literature at Penn State University. His most recent edited volume is *Reading Race in American Poetry: "An Area of ACT"*. His books of poetry include *Vext*, *Evacuation Routes*, *Stepping Razor* and *Heat Strings*. Critical volumes include *Black Chant*, *Writing between the Lines*, *C.L.R. James: A Critical Introduction* and *Reading Race: White American Poets and the Racial Discourse in the Twentieth Century*.

**Rusty Morrison**'s poems have been, or will be in *VOLT*, *First Intensity*, *Five Fingers Review*, and her reviews in *Colorado Review*, *Electronic Poetry Review*, *Rain Taxi*. She's a contributing editor for *Poetry Flash* and teaches at Saint Mary's College.

**Patrick Lohier** lives in Chicago. His book reviews, articles, and fiction have appeared in *NewCity Chicago*, the *Chicago Reader*, and the Chicago-area literary magazine *LVNG*. He is currently working on his first novel.



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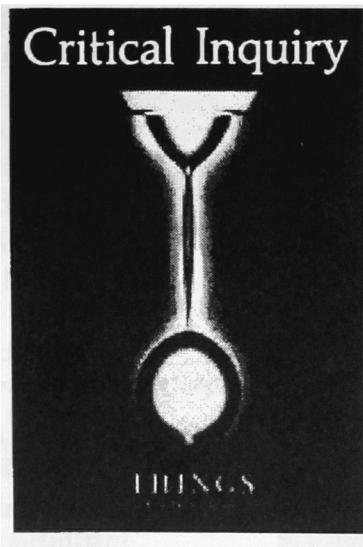
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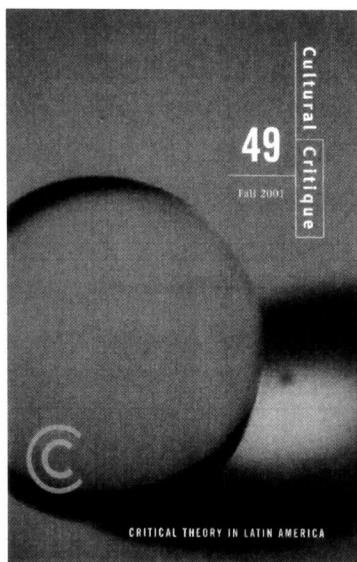
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