

# tr i p w i r e

a j o u r n a l o f p o e t i c s



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**Abstract**

tripwire



6

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## tripwire: a journal of poetics

issue 6 — Fall 2002

edited by Yedda Morrison & David Buuck  
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## Editors' Notes

This issue contains a selection of new writing from South Africa and Zimbabwe, as well as work from writers and artists from New York, Los Angeles, the San Francisco Bay Area, Tijuana, Berlin, Buffalo, Washington, D.C., Minneapolis, and Paris. We hope that the range of writers and forms further confirms the notion that there is no one standard of avant-gardism. "Innovation" and "experimentalism" are not fixed terms; they are constantly changing formal categories that depend at least in part on historical, political, and cultural contexts, whether those of the work's production or the conditions of a work's reception.

For help in preparation of this issue, our thanks to Robert Berold, Paul Wessels, Flora Veit-Wild, Ntone Edjabe, Eli Drabman, and all the contributors.

### TRIPWIRE 7: GLOBAL/LOCAL

*Whose* global? *Which* locals? Transnational/Translational. Cultural politics of globalization. Poetics of place/site-specific writing/locality. Routes/roots. Exile & diasporas. Borders, frontiers, maps & crossings.

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The deadline for Tripwire 7 is May 1, 2003.



## A selection of new writing from Southern Africa

For too long, African poetry has been read in the U.S. mainly through the interpretive prisms of ethnopoetics or the new postcolonial canon. While the work of ethnopoetics has been crucial in rescuing forms and traditions outside the blinders of Western literary history, as often as not it can fall prey to its own categories, re-trapping works and practices within an ethnographic framework, where fixed notions of race, culture, and authenticity make it difficult to see the historical transformations of literary practices in an increasingly hybrid cultural field. Postcolonial criticism, on the other hand, has often fallen into the habit of privileging those works that feature "other" contents within recognizably Western forms (such as the realist novel or the modern lyric), with just enough "local color" or linguistic exoticism to repackage for the global literary marketplace. Such reading habits, however well-intentioned, can only limit the kinds of work that enter onto the international stage, as well as the terms by which they can be understood, appreciated and heard.\* Contemporary African poetry can no longer be read only within such perspectives, as we hope the selection of Southern African writers presented here demonstrates.

While it may not yet be accurate to think of these writers' work as post-nationalist, this new generation is no longer concerned only with constructing unified national consciousness or celebrating "authentically African" traditions. Nor, in the post-apartheid era, are all South African writers content to withdraw into a polite, domesticated, nonracial poetics wherein politics need no longer be a concern for aesthetics. Many writers have helped shift the political terrain of poetry from anti-colonial and anti-apartheid struggles to a broader global perspective, whether it's in critiquing the IMF or interrogating the post-independence leaders of South Africa and Zimbabwe as they align themselves with transnational neoliberalism. Though the work presented in this issue is written almost exclusively in English, the politics of language likewise remains a crucial concern for these writers, for whom numerous indigenous languages (as well as Afrikaans) meet on an uneven literary terrain dominated by (an increasingly global) "Imperial English." The importance of performance poetics, with their roots in praise poetry and movement-based oral poetics (as well as international spoken word and dub scenes), also reflects the work of many writers with aesthetic concerns that can never be cleanly separated from the cultural politics of language and form.

We hope the modest selection of writing presented here can help expand the readership for such work and perhaps spark greater interest in new poetics outside the Euro-American ambit.\*\*

\* Similar double-binds confront African visual arts—primitivism or transnational biennialism?—and music—indigenous folk traditions or "world music"?

\*\*see p. 160 for further information on Southern African poetry presses & journals.

## Seitlhamo Motsapi

### Four Poems

#### moni

& so the new blacks arrive  
all scent & drape to their clamour  
head & heart the liquid odour  
of roads that defy oceans

from the fiery splash of pool  
pits they preach us redamp  
shun from the dust  
of the old ways

their kisses bite  
like the deep bellies of computers  
the gravy of their songs  
smells like the slow piss of calculatahs

& so  
the new blacks arrive  
& promise us life beyond the bleed  
of the common yell  
they promise us new spring  
for the slow limp  
of our heads

meanwhile  
the ladder finds the sky at last  
heart or herd slinks to the waters  
mbira grows into a synthesiser  
the songs ask for more sugar  
& my salt sets sail for babylon

## djeni

### 1—calabaas

i am the new man  
tall & cool  
calm like a spear  
tall like the sun—  
    seh the assnologists  
    lush & redded in the micro/scopegoat  
    of tyori

i am the new man  
cool & connected  
bones blk & rotting to riddim  
obeah they lacktrick me a jig  
jungle jingle me kush/in meroe  
or eden

i am the nude mad  
drums warring blur in the head  
loinskin mosquito google  
    friendli & fissical—  
    seh the amfropologists

i am the nu man, mad i chant  
loves song—gobbledigoon i mumble  
chant me michael jerksin the spepsi s/perm  
while they kwashiorkor me  
    they the world  
as sah geldof shuttles out  
of the sand of the tv crew  
in addis

### 2—bamako

O Lahd  
is this my people so  
this writhe in my I  
a reed so green machete is greed  
a sun a boulder for clouds to perch  
is this mah people so  
a weal on the kiss/a bleed inside  
fire eating the bridge ash in the granary  
the long knife of traitors cosy in the song  
i remember rains harvest feast God in the hut  
when love was the sky  
& remembered the fields with the first rains  
when hope was a sprout  
a fire that showed promise  
—wd spread far & high, the elders sd

i return to you now  
as the hills refuse to sing  
love was here, they seh  
but for me there is only  
the sure thud of a slow maul  
only the bleeding slit  
from the razor lips of snakes  
a pat on the back that is not pat

i ask for bread  
my brother feeds me stone  
i ask for the green sha/door of his hand  
he mumbles dollar blood  
see this dear Lawd  
the arrogant thunder  
that runs into my heart  
love in the mud  
a rend in the sky

### 3—dhiki

ninety two afiriki  
sun is not sun anymore  
song is not salt nor crop  
joy is not calabash  
yam is a fading memory  
herds slink into ash  
while the quick axe or ache  
of politricking spiders  
rags hope to a distant flutter  
the languid mumble of healers  
comes to rest in the sky  
feet fall into the long straggle  
of weary nomads  
home is the tarpaulin swamp  
where the razor harmattan is home  
hope is the hungry gruel  
at the glutted feet of the world  
that remembers me only  
in the clustered fly of the tv crew  
afiriki ninety two  
song is song no more  
but the long bleat of ends

### ityopia phase-in

"we have only come for the sphinx we do not desire war"

#### 1 prolude-Makuria

we bring news  
from a far country  
we bring you news  
from your forgotten brethren

the sun eats into the marrow  
of the manyatta  
they say  
ever so slowly water recedes  
from the wells  
& soon no more dung  
from the straggling camels  
for our huts

it all starts  
with the proselytising hordes  
crescent dawns riding blood  
into the village  
as salaam asphyxiated the shrines  
of our mud & copper defences

it all starts  
on the anxious red wave  
of the hell/metred mishinari  
who saw other purposes  
for my woman  
beside pounding yam

it all starts  
with babu acompong  
who clanked mah village into dungeon  
for a rusted musket

& didn't hear  
the venomous viper hiss  
that only came to bleed the lands  
into a backward crevice

into malarial swamp  
feeding theses  
of rising anthro pol ogists  
from oxbridge or makerere

now our suns have shrunk  
& the horizon twigs  
into the arid waistline  
of the sahara

& while my three piece straightjacketed son  
jives his ancestral integrity  
for more cowries at the IMF  
i ride the 5 to 9 matatu  
into bwana's sprawling fart

## 2 asante se dusk

so songhay fell

mali timbuctu ghana  
the constellation of mossi  
before you cd say Onyame  
the invading dust  
of the arab hordes  
had overwhelmed the land  
the clamorous rabble  
of our cities of stone  
melting into a whimper  
beneath the urgent hoofs  
of moor & mulatto

of sankore  
all that remains  
is the jagged scrawl of thin memories  
a precarious groove in the shifting sands  
of distant pasts

whether nkrabea or njia  
only the red in the niger can tell  
the despair of mansa musa's steel  
clanking against the approaching dusk  
ravenous voids taking over  
whole empires

## 3 makorokoto

we salute you  
al jahiz  
the prophet has returned  
peace & the first rains be upon him

so the barbarians in basra  
in their boiling fervour  
cd not subdue the pra-pra spue  
of your trumpet over the hudson  
across the limpopo  
& the bleeding hell of their white crocodiles  
beyond the thames & her fanged filth  
of colonial afterdreams

the village soothsayer remembers  
the melted soft staccato  
of your advancing truths  
despite the sugared skew  
of apostate & infadel  
the skies could not ignore you

see now what armies whirl the horizons  
into hasty embraces

& the poor suddenly remember  
the sanctuary of the rock  
refuge in the machete  
a rebirth in the scythe

## earth

to say bread  
we tamed mountains  
assaulted distances  
noses stuck out & up  
for the shallow odour  
of silver

we left homes  
herds hearts  
to spite the reckless hunger  
on the numeral horizon of lolly  
so the sun  
cd spare us her searing glance

but now you see me  
all earthscent & skewed skunk  
pulp in the rot to a fetter  
now you see me  
a bruising stagger  
hammered to hell  
& screwed to a grovel by a capital

while their gleam comes true  
suited greed to highrise paradise

pulsing oil & glitter through lure  
i fierce my furrowed eye to a  
boulder plowed in the face  
& as you wonder  
whether i bring smile or smite  
my furnace thinks of you

## Lesego Rampolokeng

### Two poems (& a play)

#### Habari Gani Africa Ranting

(eureka europe gathers the dust of a fallen berlin wall  
africa rolls in the mud of its tropical brain-fall)

habari gani africa  
so free & unconscious where you sit  
drowning in complacency's shit  
a national situation its universal station top of the pops  
pulled off the shelf when the rand drops  
it takes a self-exultation / struggle ticket to ride the train  
fortune-wheels in cranial rotation  
slaves of example now masters of spectacle  
hoarding seed crushed in loins labour broken  
his / her / its imperial majestic(k) token  
vacuum cleaning out a skull turning the brain cocaine  
spliffing powdered bone / membrane rolled up in a dollar bill  
terms of revolution's dictation not for negotiation

habari gani africa  
government's hammering & anvilling consent  
quoted out of pavlovian con-text  
self aggrandisement's god complex in torment  
self-eulogises til images of own creation believe the guise  
soulthiefblindbelief demonsermonmindrelief gnu consciousness  
in bloodstreams loo crass reflections of pork righteousness  
nation's birth's midwife's face upon currency  
wrath's head stamping the image-making of democracy  
historical revamping drumbeating politicking  
upon a slime bomb's ticking  
bent-backing for international mother fucking  
epiloguing your orifices puckering to nuclear waste puking

habari gani africa  
operation eradication death movement's in stealth  
declaration of good intention by tin-godly decree  
mortality a military spending spree of corpse-wealth  
morality's education for the living in health  
a spiritual fulfilment read the gospel of saint general

in the satan staple book-write of denial  
smiles of mirror practise / tv screen cosmetise flies on disease  
spotlights out on melting americanised scream / ice-cream expression  
& fatsweat's a sweet taste to thirst of emaciation  
dark incontinent orwellian sequence content in emancipation  
liesmacks soundtrack the powermonging in conference  
crack-polished-bone-mirages affluence & wretchedness confluence

habari gani africa  
for everything the media sells  
foul winds of small change fanning both flag waving & burning  
on both sides clogged-up brain-cells  
commerce's judas coins always spinning  
tails or heads of state turning  
& vanity before humanity only beasts beauty contesting & winning  
sankara-sermon-legacy's silent witness  
wash our marks of millennial cains in blood of self-sacrifice  
adam-father's sin-seed nakedness in the skin of his genes  
fallen smashed upon eartheaven's kilns to fashion artifices /  
edifices tegumental monuments luciferean at human genesis  
graveyard upheavals of self-revelations

habari gani africa  
dross rehearsal in cock-suction for intravenereal progression  
a grain of wheat away from maggot-fat down six feet  
land of sunshining on the aboveground in starleading roles  
cold deep inside butt-plugged holes where scarred souls sit  
scorncobwebbed for intestinceneration by nuclear excretion  
amputated arms held out for world rank alms of bob or two doles  
fake deliverance in providence's corruption  
bred on breadmoulded destitution  
not diarrhoea or constipation your innards revolution  
birth of the incubus bursting out of the umbilicus in eruption  
commerce acidsluiced out your intestines  
barrenstoned from lusty look of land-barons' medussa concubines

habari gani africa  
criminal-against-humanity-element become celebrant  
hour of the serpent's servant in power's fervent dance  
to the slashed drum's heartbeat in despotcardiac arrest  
king-poet-pus sings president sore's praises  
faeces on tongue's feet pound to the sound of a wound's abscess  
stagnation's ambition putrefaction's ad / ministration

arrived as implosion of oppression's child  
have you survived explosion of liberation gone wild  
nightfly hover above deceit heated under muckiness' cover  
new worldly empty embraces of darkness' lover  
black despair / regency shame borne coldfear's catarrh as trophy  
ignorance's arrogance destruction's slave-agent of catastrophe

habari gani africa  
bloodstains on morguesheet sweat of impotence  
born to die lie dead in the street the lie of omnipotence  
scarstripes on the soul sign of dementia / delusion  
look of drugged minds hidden behind illusion  
& outside the grenade-reality-cracked window the botched moment  
licemen of the west bearing gifts rearing rifts of torment  
come to perform reconciliation a land's abortion operation  
nuclear wasted to the world's acceptance / assimilation  
a disembowement your creation cursed to a braindeathblow  
manchildwomanimal NOWHERE left / right / middle / O ...  
sixfeetdownbelow  
glow longknifeflightsessionsplashed blooddroplets in the sewers  
fleshpieces from crossed Xs / axes of man-made-wood hewers

habari gani africa  
purification rite-sight / site unset for handheldfirstworld viewers  
no hard meat & bone news chewers  
parental guidance advised to toothless pensioners of civilisation  
radioactivation messages of rage beyond broadcast of the age  
riding gossamer telewaves of the royal educated savage  
thunder before morning conceived of night's ravage  
squash for wine the fleas on which you dine serpentine  
brine-soaken oaken to the druid broken barkbacked  
dried-up spinal fluid hangs a lifeline / capitalisticked sucked bloodmine  
mortality / age on mortgage steal-deal tables fangstacked

( eureka europe gathers the dust of a fallen berlin wall  
africa rolls in the mud of its tropical brainfall )



## The Fela Sermon

(for Thomas Bruckner)

(slave driver grave saliva  
soja come soja go what he bring come forever)

1

multi-kulti dressed in mufti fela kuti's beast of no nation  
rises to hold international station  
what it eats swells up where it sits spills out in the street  
army-arrangement-expensive-shirt  
human & cold on the pavement beyond martin luther king's highway  
illusion dies in a trail of grey  
pollution under the southern sky  
gives the beast an almighty high

2

politics a capital dance policy runs on finance  
profit on the rise the fall of conscience  
clean collar hearts dollar ride to sewer-side  
information more than the next person  
principal positon of intercourse  
read the gospel of saint karl marx  
the cliché is a clinch it clenches around the glitch  
life is a bitch yes disease & pestilence  
commerce dictates you fuck her in silence

3

colonization in revolution's disguise sows arms both sides of conflict reaps  
deadly harvests  
progress replaces the monstrous with its grandmother much worse  
it's a truth-taking mythmaking death of innocence's  
kiss & caress of class' cutlass  
necks & axes in commerce's congress

4

track of no foundation bellyful of radiation  
no enemy no friend we follow the global trend  
blade cutting mendicant hand  
socialism's said to fail we attach to capital's tail  
smell of hell when that tail is raised

a taste of nuclear waste  
radioactivity does not sate a health-thirst  
it pumps full of eternal rest in the mouth  
the perennial tale of the south

5

mattera called it a weapon no error thereupon  
stock up on the memory terror-hawk's got an armoury  
bloodstring puppetry skins&bones sing in harmony:  
what did we fight for strike up the light for  
bring the night for wreckers of the world ignite for  
who / why loot&shoot for dig down to root scream for  
reap the do / die fruit for?

"I have a dream" of war  
red like dread days of yore  
yours same as before

(slave driver grave saliva  
soja come soja go what he bring come forever& evermore AMEN)



## A play, this land is the stage

one character's only duty is to run around the stage shouting *amandla!* and other slogans throughout. that and the occasional stone throwing at anything that moves. that serves as a breathtaking device. we don't want him to die of sheer exhaustion before the main character—whom we'll meet in due battle course—gets to him. and of course the mandatory toyi-toyi. and then he'll also need an AK assault rifle.

this we'll have to march to the movement's nodding headquarters to demand. for this part i'll need a well pap fed soweto youth. ah here's our other main character. what? oh you will need a costume? of course! comprising of only a headband. okay okay you don't need to crack my head with that knobbed-kierie. a red one, significant of ...

i see. *okwe gazi el'ghuma li gwaz' inkanyezi ...* significant of blood. i see.

its letting of course. then he'll need quite a few assegais, shields and knobkierries, demanding therefore a physically fit hostel dweller who knows how to bash something—preferably human—on the head until long after it has stopped moving. he'll need a good voice to shout *usuthu!* at every war dance and head-bashing turn.

side by side with him to add colour to the occasion, i need a blue-clad policeman who won't have a lot to do either. just ride around the stage in an armoured van. shooting directly and incessantly at the youth and his immediate surroundings. then i need a few fire tongued older men to make hot speeches about traditional / cultural weapons. a few skulls with brains—children's preferably, or very weak and elderly people's—spilling out and police mongrels lapping these up will be of some american-award-winning significance. a number of dustbins overflowing with fresh corpses will be of great necessity.

the stage will have to be in ruins, burning, smoke everywhere.

the audience will have to make do as best they can. the audience be warned, the likelihood of their joining the cast is very high. throughout the play's run.

at this point i light a match and necklace a cigarette. the smell of burning human flesh is revolting. but i gulp it down none the less. it is part of the play. he wrinkles his nose at the smell. and lifts his glass to his lips. no! i scream and tear the blood-filled object out of his hand and smash it down on ... no, before that i look again and find no red inside, he looks at me, a jackboot-puzzled look on his face. after a while, "perhaps i better go home," he tells me. where is his home? i don't ask him but the thought jumps out of my stomach and

has me running to the toilet before anyone gets embarrassed and moves with the time of my dysentery.

two men, white from the look of them, are on an electric light civilised swear campaign.

"sea kaffir! boat barbarian pora."

"sout piel! one foot in england the other in south africa bleeding penis in the sea!"

we look at them and they turn on us. the rest is best left unwritten. suffice it to say, that i thank them here and now for breaking the bones of our monotony. my knuckles are still painful from the flesh encounter. such sweet pain, such painful pleasure.

at the next bar lines are drawn.

"ya the zulus are dam barbaric. all they are capable of is murder and they take that for the height of sophistication!"

"we shall not be led by the nose by compulsively lying kleptomaniac xhosas! *usuthu!*"

"shut up you mountain monkey mosotho, the only thing you people know is eating cats and horses."

"oh ya, when did you ndebele cannibals stop eating human beings?"

"as for you tswanas and your snake skinny pseudo-intellectual sour porridge drunk above the rabble closer to the queen's pink arselicking bullshit ..."

"stupid like your worm eating ancestors bundu headed shanaga ..."  
blacker than thou politics in a kaleidoscope country.

the ultra african comes out from under his grandfather's lice-infested loincloth and adjusts his tie, "shoo, it's getting hot in wonderland, switch on the air conditioner, alic."

i am also part of the cast, needing to die on the opening night. or day even. or even anytime during the play's run. the time is not set. the dying is, though. this is because i need to dip my finger in my grave wounds to write the script. so i might even have to die before its writing is done. in this event the cast will have to make do on their own. that will not be difficult since the script is written daily across the face of this land.

## The Botsotso Jesters

### Collective Poem

(Poetic script for different characters)

- ISABELLA: I am the light from the roof top  
revealing *fa ofa fi* in your bed<sup>1</sup>  
barometer oiling screw hinges loose
- SIPHIWE: Pensioner standing in a queue  
ragged animals in the zoo  
yawning toothless lions
- ALLAN: I am fire burning the shack  
smoking after the hostel attack  
divide and rule is a problem here
- IKE: Soul food binder stay free  
*silaphanje nge mum* for men<sup>2</sup>  
eat your heart and lungs out
- ANNA: Left over raped — sour grape  
cooks rot in a pot  
eats the whole damn lot
- ISABELLA: *Vumani bo siya vuma*  
*thatha khotla thatha phuzha thatha chatha*<sup>3</sup>  
we are the healers from the sea
- ALLAN: Stink of scam in the state  
bureaucrat shuffle while you wait  
nepotists scoop the honey
- ANNA: The only hole god made  
found my stomach today  
— babbelas — cold forks — ash graves —

SIPHIWE: Listen to my voice at the shop door  
listen as you walk to the sounds of war  
*umngena ndlini mama umngena ndlini baba*<sup>4</sup>

IKE: *Stripper lelohembe asidlali*  
*nkheteni ke wa ponto le sheleng*  
*sendela ngeno mujita ri vhanane*<sup>5</sup>

ISABELLA: *Senkquanang se nthola morwalo*  
*mpatile ka tiro tsame gotle butie*  
*O sege phefo ka nna legetleng*<sup>6</sup>

ALLAN: I'm the bull running the kraal  
don't pull my ring if you're skraal  
Sun City Extra

ANNA: The louse I'm serving tea to  
addresses only my husband — he just  
wants to speak to 'the Daddy of the House'

SIPHIWE: Shebeen tables black with booze  
girls caress beards of their fathers  
mothers bump and grind with their sons

IKE: Hout kop petty crime is a taboo  
shame on you *daaso a ni hemb*  
*guys ni hava nchumu* jokes aside<sup>7</sup>

ALLAN: Total Onslaught amnesty  
even Wit Wolf strolls out free  
forgive and forget history

ISABELLA: Don't be afraid say it loud  
come out strong and be yourself  
*ke monyako mpulele he*<sup>8</sup>

4. small gift for those at home

5. Take off that shirt, we're not joking cheap boaster  
about money, come closer, let's see each other

6. If you no longer love me, then you relieve me, if  
you want to find me, look for me in my works, cut  
the wind with me on your shoulders

7. shame on you there, I am not lying

I'm not lying, guys I have nothing

8. I'm at the door, open for me

1. revealing give and take in your bed

2. we are here with mum for men

3. "Do you agree?" "Yes I agree"

"Take this and lick, take this and drink"

- ANNA: I'm five years old, you're six foot tall  
teacher teacher tales of cancer  
beats my knuckles against the wall
- SIPHIWE: Darkness shadow in the slums  
pockets cold with a stainless knife  
pass the bucks or I'll take your life
- IKE: Ginger face butters no record to trace  
ready stomach digests sound of my words  
no bubble gum music in my verse

#### The Botsotso Jesters

Isabella Motadinyane  
Allan Kolski Horwitz  
Ike Mboneni Muila  
Anna Varney  
Siphiwe Ka Ngwenya

#### Ike Mbonene Wangu Muila

in no time

in no time  
spot on  
infidelity  
security injection  
buy and sell  
small small  
in any way  
you ought  
to be  
over quive  
current by now  
meet workman  
*who maita zwitoma*  
*tshinyakaila*  
*vhutsila ndi vhutoko*  
create friendship  
in any way  
in no time  
spot on  
grab *malaza*  
a piece job  
*madala* site  
deadly ghost  
weave  
inner my bones  
down the marrow  
to the core  
catch my tail  
worn out  
day in  
day out  
hand out  
deadlock  
*phashasha*  
in no time  
spot on  
*asimuboni ebafazini*  
*simubona emadodeni*  
*asimuboni emadodeni*  
*simubona ebafazini*  
rascal staring  
in your eyes  
heartache

(those who try)  
(haste)  
(cowdung is ability)

(leftovers)

(offsite)

(fix)

(we cannot see her amongst women)  
(we see her amongst men)  
(we cannot see him amongst men)  
(we see him amongst women)

attack	
handout	
deadlock	
<i>phashasha</i>	(fix)
in no time	
spot on	
when we cry	
work for all	
singing justice	
<i>mulalo</i>	(peace)
over the land	
inner bubbling	
pep talks	
<i>madzingandevhe</i>	(deaf)
fresh air quiver	
you play me	
<i>banyana ba ipatile</i>	(young girls are hiding)
hide and seek game	
coward flops	
<i>shlyzer madala site</i>	(runaway offsite)
<i>skop dry oorklappies</i>	(emptyheaded with blinkers)
steam roller over boss	
<i>baas</i> boy	
extra strong enzyme	
sharp one look	
sweep	
<i>phashasha</i>	(fix)
a crocodile smile	
smoke down <i>mzamo</i>	(effort)
our terms never alter	
you give us	
a break	
in no time	
spot on	
life sinking	
entirely from a hand	
to the mouth	
scales by	
and large	
scales by	
and large	
all assorted mess	
brake down	
on a climb	
emergency siren alight	
desist car loggerhead	
casualty desert	

ambulance flashlight	
back spinning	
hospital stain	
<i>garinja wangu</i>	(friend of mine)
<i>tshiguluzwana</i>	(small pig)
<i>matopeni</i>	(mud)
<i>udzula</i>	(to sit)
<i>hu naka</i>	(it's wonderful)
<i>u sea</i>	(laughing)
buddy soul	
in particular	
an island	
unholy surrounded	
in no time	
spot on	
a helicopter pest	
blue dock	
standing jacket on	
in a world	
trade centre	
mix vegetable	
green flies	
third force	
foul acid rattex	
vole yellow	
pandemonium	
graph choked throat	
bitterness never smoke	
<i>nwananga o taha</i>	(my child divert marriage)
hundred thousand	
dowry	
<i>u vhala</i>	(counting)
<i>ndi muala</i>	(is sacred)
<i>inyongo</i> ringers	(bile talk)
spitting words	
undiluted bile	
international	
minister	
of foreign affairs	
<i>emzansi</i> africa	(south africa)
a world	
in one country	
indeed	
you name it	
pungent chaff	
in no time	
spot on	

## Lesego Rampolokeng & Ike Mboneni Muila

Interviewed by Robert Berold

*When did you first encounter oral poetry? What effect did it have on you?*

LR: Oral poetry doesn't necessarily see itself as such. I came across it in the streets and in my home as well. For instance my grandmother, when she was in some kind of excited state, moved to anger or joy or whatever, would rattle out some lines that would put quite a number of people today going as poets to shame. That's why I've always gone out of my way to say, for me, my grandmother was the original rapper. She would rattle them out on the spot, what in the US they refer to as freestyling, meaning when you go out on stage without having written anything, creating extemporaneously as it were. But as I say, I did not recognise it as poetry itself. It was just the way in which my grandmother would express herself at certain times. This country's best poets will never be known, will never be recognised, because they do not even see themselves as poets, just as people putting words out there, in the street, mouth to ear, that kind of communication.

And then as a kid I used to listen to Radio Freedom. They would have a slot where they had poetry, I suppose just a means of mobilisation. And they introduced it by having these sounds of AKs going off to add some power to it. This rattling of guns and the static that's coming from your receiver, all these noises, this person reading poetry—it was electric, you know, that's what I think ignited that first spark.

And then again I had the good fortune of being dragged by my cousin Vincent to not necessarily 'cultural' gatherings, people like Ingoapele Madingoane, Maishe Maponya and all the rest of them. I could recite "Africa my beginning" without batting an eyelid, you know, at the slightest provocation, because I thought it was one way of getting some attention. And I did get some attention, and that I suppose got me rolling. Unfortunately for me the first few times I tried to read my lines at these places they chased me away. It was just sad, these were people I idolised and I wanted to show them what I had picked up from them. I was only about 14 or so. It was '79, around there.

*Were you listening to any recorded oral poetry then?*

LR: I subsequently came across the work of people in the Diaspora who were doing pretty much the same thing as these guys were doing, putting the word to the sound of the drum, maybe with some-

one playing horns. I saw a definite connection between what they were doing and what people like Linton Kwesi Johnson was doing. The difference was that the dub poets tried to infuse drum and bass rhythms into the word itself, whereas these other people were not doing that. Dub poetry is a specific genre, a specific form of poetry. It comes out of reggae music, the instrumental side of reggae music, where the drum and bass get pulled out and brought back in. You take that and build it into the poetry itself. Only then does it become dub poetry. I read somewhere that Ike is the king of dub poetry although I doubt that Ike has ever written a dub poem in his life, let alone being king of one. He might be the king of whatever he is doing, but it's definitely not dub poetry.

Then there was the underground British scene as they called it, Mutabaruka, Jean Binta Breeze, Oku Onuora and Michael Smith in Jamaica, and in the Americas, The Last Poets and Gil Scott-Heron. And then there were those Africans in exile in England who came together and called themselves African Dawn, that was Ahmed Sheik and Merle Collins, who was from Grenada I think. There was a definite link between what all those people were doing and what people in the Black Consciousness movement were trying to do, and I suppose that's what set me off.

I'm one of those people who is tied by the word. But we are not necessarily doing the same thing. What I am doing is as different from what Ike is doing as it's different from Lemn Sissay, and it's worlds apart from what Benjamin Zephaniah is doing. You can put us all under the spoken word form, it's all the word in motion, the word moving from mouth to ear, the word lifted off the page.

*What about you, Ike, how did you meet oral poetry?*

IM: Long before understanding written poetry, I was used to poetry being chanted. It was like a way of life in our family. My mother used to say, maybe at times when she was happy, my son, can you sing the praise names of the Muila family? And then I'd start chanting my praise names... then maybe somebody would sing something, maybe someone takes a izgubo or a drum and starts playing, and then they'll be chanting. When I started coming to understanding what is praise poetry and how it's written and how it becomes formalised, it was then that I realised that, hey, people come from rich cultural backgrounds. It doesn't matter whether you're Mosotho or Muvenda because there is that thing in a family unit that one has got.

Before my father passed away he was like a Zionist and he would get possessed sometimes and speak in tongues, things that he himself



didn't understand. He was communicating with the gods and the gods were saying this and this and this.

I got into drama and studying, it was around 1987, under the Soyikwa Institute of African Theatre. They didn't want us to do scripted plays only—we had to workshop and write our own thing, we had to create characters, create our own music. That is how the interest got into me. When really something is happening to a person, you find yourself expressing yourself in your first mother language. I started by reading Venda poems and then mixing with the students of music. We performed in the library.

*Staying with your roots kept you going...*

IM: When you go back to your roots and feel the real stuff, it's then that the real artist in you develops. The artist which is not from a certain convention. It might be something like an avant-garde which doesn't have a head or a tail, it doesn't matter. It allows you to progress instead of retrogressing. But if you start distancing yourself from where you come from, it is then that the writing just becomes banal. This is what happens if I start distancing myself and displaying this kind of pride which is like shit across the street, which is never nice.

*Coming back to the 70s, it was clear that Madingoane took poetry to a place it hadn't quite been before.*

LR: "Africa my beginning" was it for me. I celebrated that piece, and I celebrate Ingoapele Madingoane today. I think that guy held spirit and injected spirit into the stagnation that had taken over. And also gave some direction, of course, to a whole lot of other people and influenced other people and inspired other people to do that. There was a real difference between the poetry of the 80s and that of the 70s. One wing of the poetry of the 80s was one wing of the liberation movement, created by people who specifically went out of their way to put into their poetry a line that sought to bring people in line with the UDF [United Democratic Front]. As opposed to the 'zimzims' as they were called—zimzims, the kids who were in AZASM, the Azanian Students' Movement, when I was a student. People who had embraced BC [Black Consciousness] at the time.

Ingoapele Madingoane's poems went across lines, they just sought to sound a wake-up call, to conscientize people across the board and get people to realise that they were not the slaves that they were made out to be. That was definitely it, in political lines for me. If you go into that whole *Staffrider* era, you come across the work of people like

the Allah Poets, Dashiki, Lefifi Tladi who were writing and reading pieces. Even Jaki Seroke, PAC [Pan-African Congress] now, he was putting some really good stuff down, I believe. I might have problems with them on other levels, but they were putting some lines through that had quite a lot going for them.

*What stopped the impetus of the late 70s poetry?*

LR: I suppose all the States of Emergency and people jumping and running and stuff. You had to go deep within yourself to be able to project whatever it is to grab the attention of people. What killed that flow we're talking about, for me especially, was that there came this new aesthetic that if you recite your lines in this tone of voice, that is poetry. It became a standard, it became the rule by which people had to recite their lines, you know, that's why hundreds of people started coming out and going blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. And that's why we stood a very sorry chance of becoming a nation of poets. Because anybody who could actually project their voice in a certain style could be classified as a poet.

The 80s situation had to be. It was essential. The bring-on-the-poet-to-lick-the-stage-clean-for-the-politicians thing. And then the comen who talk "possession by the spirits of the ancestors" hustle. Imagine having to negotiate with your forefathers to take possession of your tongue at exactly a quarter past eight, when you're due on stage. Those guys didn't have any watches, man! And judging time by sun and moon is not reliable. The 80s. Mzwakhe. It doesn't matter whether you liked his work or thought his stuff was 'work,' he opened a crack in the literary structure and occupied it. And for that he gets my respect. The old goats that gloat at him today are the ones who lifted him high yesterday. Bad roll of the dice. The mass democratic movement propped him up once, and then what? He dropped. So everyone runs around cackling away in their little farcicles. I say biggup to him, and flash my lighter in the direction of the dynamite up the wrinkled suits in Parliament.

*What were the aesthetic pressures in the 70s?*

LR: I did not like being beaten into form. Achmat Dangor and company gave us all those workshops, and tried to tell us what constitutes poetry, and this and that and the other thing, that you can use western forms, or whatever, as long as you threw this amount of politics into the poetry, then that was it. That also killed it off for me.

This country has killed off, across the political spectrum, a whole

lot of talent, to use that phrase. People killed off their art because they were busy fighting a cause, which was the thing to do. They were fighting a cause and it killed off whatever was within them, as the essence of their art, it did that.

*How does that affect people trying to do something new, new forms?*

LR: I don't think the history of this country has actually allowed for people to break from the norm. You either conform or you are out, that has been it from the beginning, and that's so sad. There is a racist element about attitudes to form as well. Some people who go as oral poets are buying into this idea of the black person as being a person of body and heart and not so much mind, and whatever it is they recite is from somewhere other than the brain, you know, it comes from elsewhere, they're just a medium for it. This is the aesthetic cross that black artists always had to bear.

*Ike, you write in tsotsitaal/isicamtho. How did you arrive at that?*

IM: Isicamtho is a rich kind of language. It's all over—in Louis Trichardt, you find that they use a different tsotsitaal, which is different from the one we're using in Mofolo, which is different from the one being used in Hillbrow, or in Cape Flats, you see. And each poet has got his own way of commanding the language. It's not just throwing in phrases and then it's finished and *klaar*. It's a cultural exchange, maybe that one from Giyani will make us feel the way they communicate around Elim. If I go from here and go to Elim, once I blom, it will be taken as it is, they won't show me their own way of blomming.

*Blomming?*

LR: Hanging out, at the street corner, at the shops or whatever. What is a blom, it is a flower. Basically what you're doing is setting your roots on there, and you're just flowering.

Isicamtho came spreading out of influx control laws. People came from all sorts of different corners, not only South Africa, but beyond, and they had to somehow find a way of breaking through and across language barriers, which was different from what was happening at the mines, that was a *buas* to boy situation. People had to find a way of merging the Zulu and the Sotho and the Tswana with Afrikaans and English and all sorts of things—they tried to create and breed a new some kind of communication, and that's what it came out of. You've got to find a way of saying whatever it is you want to say, articulating your concerns.

Siemon Allen

from "Pictures & Words"



all images courtesy of FUSEBOX, Washington, D.C.



I say, officer, you were at one of the road-blocks weren't you? So you should have seen strategies of every Freedom Fighter in the world.

Just let  
think...

me

No... why should I?... But wait a bit... Art, like its mentors war and religion, constitutes by definition the only legal forms of moral transgression.

And the others?... There were some others, I suppose?

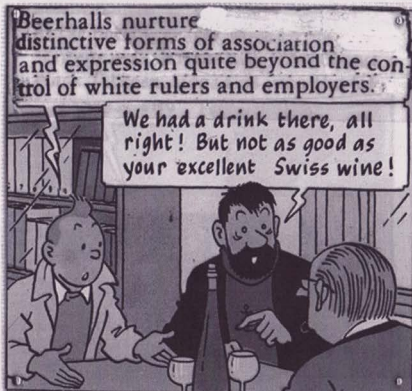
Yes, but Since the advent of Colonialism it is impossible to separate the mask from the ritual it was produced to be worn in, which was in turn an integral part of the social, political, economic and religious structures of the culture for whom it had meaning.

Good heavens, you're right! As a result we have become more adept at creating Revolutions and planting bombs than painting pretty pictures,

O there has been much throwing about of brains.

## Tonguing my Familiar

stain my eye  
with insolent truths  
like namaquablue daisies nestling  
sunstroked moonstruck  
in the groin of an unreason



*She* says that when you leave your house you dress up. Always. Not for p<sup>ovo</sup><sup>1</sup> articulated proprieties by grandmas and aunts who declaim clean panties are a necessity when you leave your home. 'What if you're in an accident? People will see your soiled underwear!' Defilement & dignity. Thula & thetha. Nippled sentries guarding the body of identity...

My mother had a pair. She grew up in the Karoo, walking to school in the frosted flight of ancestral footsteps. Returning each afternoon to wash her one pair of panties, playing bare-assed so that tomorrow she could journey again. In dignity. In standard 4 they took her. Took her out. & into the framed unfamiliar of French cuisine and another ironstone skin of subservience. White colonial kitchens. Trained her in the art of c/roonin & clowning & drowning in the collusion of clean. Clean underwear. Outer decencies.

*She*. She does not do underwear. She says that if you leave your house you dress over the body and keep the clitoris free and leave your house in style. It's a Q of power. But she does not say it. Black with a peroxide blonde korrelkop, the grapevine card above her bed coyly encodes: 'of course I'm a natural blonde.'

It's one of those innumerable noisy Sunday evening dinners at my Becker street house where we gather in stratified arrangements and sensibilities to eat and talk and drink and watch (or not watch) the weekly broadcast of TRC [Truth and Reconciliation Commission] Special Report. It is the kitchen scene preceding the TV lekgotla. I'm rapping with Palesa, a fine young film-maker with the phylest of dreads. In droll response to my comment on her cool style, she proclaims: 'of course it's my own hair, I bought it.'

Semiosis. What you see...

#

M drinks. Habit so bad she's gotta rehab. One of the wives of the generals: her finely-wrought mesh of crows eyes a mask. Comes

1. "the masses" [ed.]

from the strips & shadows of bush war and cannibal braais and unmentionable lusts. That time conserved in the bottle. Remembers the lions with their glossy coats but never talks about The General. Us smokers are the nocturnes. Exiled in the small sitting-room with its fucked TV reception and doilies and dried flowers (I start to gather fresh leaves every few days and eventually all flora assignations and philosophical phantasmas fall to me).

*enveloped in gerookte intimacies. @ 3 am. a raging joburg storm battering certitudes. we watch each other through the pores of spoke spirals.*

M, a woman who holds her tongue, yet every so often trips tipsily up or down the trench that brings her here. Right now on an upper. Pulls down her panties (don't recall why) and giggles wondrously that her pussyhair is turning grey.

Purdah-clad Z talks. A crack addict on verbal Benzedrine. So much that she says zero. Is not able to say: cannot say: I am middle-aged mother of four beautiful young men: staunch in my religion: crackhead: will not decode. Tales yes. Details of debasement. Hillbrow R60-a-night hotel rooms containing damaged domesticities—husband and wife crawl on squalid floor bickering whether the whitewall flakes are hits of rock.

After her weekend out for good behaviour (the one that assesses capacity for relapse) M, she of the streaked undergrowth, says: 'I will not return to the cloister of Christmas and community.' Chocs for Z. Nicotine for anyone who wants. Her family's banal good luck bunches of flowers come to me. For grave redistribution. The white proletarian woman from the Eastern Cape, the one who is not dressed in Milady's middle-class morés, whose burst red veins forever blush her shame and her class, gets a rose. Specially.

unname the rose  
tear at thorned centre  
fingerpleasure the wound  
proclaim the reign of bleeding petals

Blonde, blue eyes, soft rounded cheeks the colour of virgin red grapes on the vine. We trade Terry Pratchetts and good coffee and I hold her. Young, at school, monied. Hold her. Some man put his cock through her without her permission: you white bitch: how do you like it: hate you white bitch. On her street a man of colour raped her. Object lesson. Memory is the subsound of drained Vodka bottles beneath your bed when the black-out recedes.

I talk in formal sessions invite private consultations create collages with holes//manufacture montages with holes.

"here" she said  
here is me  
underground lady  
incubated by envy of birds and the  
night-time needs of women of colour  
I have a hole  
and live around it

Another Z. Connected to the clarity of AK47s. Not to base-ments of obscenity. Where ratty racisms fattened on both sides of the pigmentation faultline gnaw at resistant flesh and lucidities. The official story goes something like this: MK cell member, arrest, solitary confinement. The back story is this: all the black female prisoners were treated quite badly by their mainly white wardresses. She, a coloured woman who does not accept the appellation, refuses to fuck a fellow female detainee who is black and more powerful in the guer-rilla-force and prison hierarchies they both occupied. So, she got framed by her comrades and banished by her captors to an under-ground of uncertainty and envy. Uncertain identity. Bird envy. Basement truths.

#

A former colleague of mine confides a viewpoint: 'you don't work here anymore because you're not coloured enough.' Yet another former colleague lashes out: 'you coloured people did not suffer the way we did.'

#

So let's put it in rampster perspective. Initiate into dis-coloured realities. Stains. The above story fragments of South African females signify the bullshit myth of a sisterhood. That there is some inviolate space, maybe in the womb, where our biological DNA arrangement transforms us miraculously into a sameness. A source that makes us act in the same way, view the world in the same way, make love in the same way...Booolshite.

Females and males function in multiple power set-ups. If women (as socially constructed types) upset any given power arrangement, it's because they choose to. Problem with the enabling myth notion is that it is ultimately a pacifier. It serves the dominant power reps, freeing up space for continued econosociocultural contracts that disempower women and all other anthropologised marginals.

The pornography of the lens. This assiduous gaze into interi-ors, into hearts of darkness. Perhaps a Lacanian tic, this disavowed desire of power to go and come. To return endlessly to the alpha act of violence. To see, to dis-assemble, to re-arrange. And if right now

men rule with gaze into the pussy/asshole, fatly fingering the nuke-button and tonguing their lusts around pro-peace/anti-terror sophistries broadcast via stylized CNN visualbytes so that oil can flow; it's because they've successfully harnessed the hegemonic hood cowboy style.

drukkit duidelik  
\$ iv, ja Mbeki  
nou pomp jy  
jou vet piel  
soos 'n man met 'n mission  
you talk hard & dirty  
jy, disregard the g8  
daal's redherring tactics  
geconceive in die rockies  
soek die siel  
van jou nation  
in die kickboxing strategies  
van die global playstation

And like really, that's all there is to it. Hegemonies operate as societal constructs based on covert contracts and overt repressions and psychological confusions and a motherfucking huge arsenal of machinations (respect to Head, Gramsci, Fanon, Biko and the pantheon of thinkers who fought for the agency). But damn, this has been said. All of it. Even the tropes that trip off my tongue are western academic spawn. Tripped up.

Right now, far more interested in the unsaid and in the many ways of speaking otherwise. Unassume the missionary position. Other acts. Analyse the pattern of holes that trace an unwired tongue like the dotter ochre/calamine facial adornment of Bongo Maffin's female vocalist, Thandiswa 'Red'.

Umchokozo: beauty & rite of passage. Witness & testimony. Style & power. Strategy & tactics. Objective; engage the grand narrative shite with a couple tales of my own. & of those like me: female, coloyerd, black, bisexual, africanist, journalist, mother, daughter, globalist, perpetrator, victim, leftist, patriot, gatvol... And if that comes across as typical & woman incession, so what? The womb incubates many children. Stories, from my POV: terror diaspora, tear-gassed gaze, barbed-wire tongue, rat-poisoned body: a Post Africa Crkhdz production.

#

So, some thinking from the trenches. Zoom into home.

#

There is no sisterhood. And there certainly ain't a nationhood where I'm operating. There exists for us women, and us people of

colour, shared micro and macro oppressions. Within these we are victims, we are perpetrators, we create. Back in the day, I saw an organisation like UWCO (United Women's Congress) Western Cape as rhetorically and numerically black yet theoretically and technocratically white. Black mamas stuttered from mass rally platforms English-language feminist positions banged into computers by mostly white women (and let's face it, other isms produced by mainly men like subsuming non-sexist and leftist agendas into the non-racial nation paradigm). Rewind to the UWCO example: a power construct. OK in itself if viewed as a context-bound collaboration of experiences and skills to resist a common enemy. Below the line it was and still is insidiously destabilizing when these feminist and other isms disregard your histories, your cosmologies, your oratorical styles, your translations, your graciousness in assuming a tongue not your own to prose-lytize for a greater good.

This is all retrospective. At the core, I refused to join women's orgs because on a number of levels I could not relate to older black women, privileged white women, and very often my coterie of coloured peers. Something to do with being maverick and dressing funny and a personal disdain of all conservatism. But of course I related to the shared oppression of women in a masculinist society, and to the ugly violences I saw at home and in my community, that's what propelled me into struggle. I chose to decode and fight this on the terrain of media.

Still back in the day, we *laaities* used to go to Marxist-Leninist camps to be initiated into arcane and mundane knowledges. At one of these, we were let into the two-legged strategy, i.e. sex for short-range gain (usually our black brothers with our white sisters). We used to laugh. Our sin not in the sanction of this strategy [just war; means justify ends] but in cladding it in the haute couture of a vanguardist consciousness. What's so advanced about jungle fever? Who cares? Desire is a boundary-crosser.

During my abortive M.A. foray I got an absurdly high mark for a critique of Ellen Kuzwayo's autobiographical *Call Me Woman*. In fury, I confronted the white liberal female lecturer. I thought the mark was inflated. She had not critically engaged my argument. I demanded an informed re-marking. I was pissed off by the double-edged patronage: i.) that any black-on-black critique was automatically good and had to be rewarded; ii.) that she did not bother engage me in my pursuit of excellence. Fuckit, she got paid for it. In contrast, one the lecturers I came to respect fully & who often gave me rather embarrassing marks, was a yellow-skinned woman with wild hair and meticulous standards who left me with the lasting advice



that 'you can only be good as a black person and as a woman and as a poor person if you're 100%.' Thanx Zoey.

In retrospect, the aforementioned lecturer was actually just a weak teacher buttressed by her privilege. A type. The type who kept a deranged system intact. In retrospect I did Mama Kuzwayo a disservice 'cause the one thing I should've gotten I missed. Let's get on the case. She was talking of being a communal cipher, that much of who she was and had to say was integrated with where she came from. I only really got that code a few years later while interviewing Winnie Madikizela-Mandela. Doing the 4th estate thang, I kept on probing for a private sensibility. Dealing 'T' while she turned up 'We.' But whether by design or otherwise, she would only speak from a collective perch. In the black SA'n context, now more than ever, positive resurrection of the collective pronoun is urgent, but it also covers far too many shames. The betrayal that brands the body of Stompie Seipei's mother, Joyce, can not be veiled.

somewhere in the sitting room's  
punctilious design  
dried flowers & plump couches  
enfold the fracture of machiavelli

we know now  
men do not live by honour  
their searching fingers  
destabilize toys  
pound pc sound  
into holes of heart

we know. no.  
women do not live by honour  
she reaches  
& seizes the lie  
softly

#

Re-presenting signifies responsibilities. Our nation our sisterhood our brotherhood our humanity, will be built, brick by brick, not be divinely dispensed or be triumphantly imposed.

#

A literary case in point. If Antjie Krog's metaphorical country is the skull, a cranium of control, then let's get contiguous. Metonymic. *We will not speak of that which is haram*. Then the fissures that kriss-kross that landscape like plundered mine seams signify our country's other underexplored discourses, those that have been disrupted, suppressed, destroyed. A cartography of the depths of dislocation. OK lose the metaphors. Let's get down. Below the line. Even before the

Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) concluded and reported on its (albeit hugely circumscribed) examination of gross human rights violations across a 30-something year period (1960-1993), Krog produced her version of the process in a book titled *Country of My Skull*.

A remarkable rendition from her vantage point as a SABC radio journalist reporting on the proceedings, she employs faction to foreground some of the testimonies which, even though perpetrator and victim tales had by then taken on a generic/allegorical quality, were—for reasons politic, media headline imperatives and an ennuï engendered by repeated loops of terror/tragedy/trauma—not given much prominence. For instance, the Gugulethu 7 massacre almost inevitably locked down into a Le Carre type thriller narrative with all the heady elements of infiltration, murder and judicial machinations to ensure the cover-up. Krog though chooses to centralize the humbling poignant contribution of Cynthia Ngewu, mother of Christopher 'Rasta' Piet who appeals to her son's killers to—in paraphrase—use the opportunity of truth-telling to re-humanise so that SA'n society as a whole could regenerate morally and otherwise. From a feminist perspective, this surfacing of the different ways in which females, as a peripheral fraternity, speak, was a crucial intervention given the emphasis on white male perpetrator narratives. The latter confirmed some truths from the past, but many, many females and black people gave us insight into how to re-arrange the future—if only we could decide.

My first reading of *Skull* takes place in Time Square, Yeoville—that place of too many worlds and too many transgressive clever attitudes. Where we reacted in unison to the unlayering of our past with degenerate excesses and metaphysics floating on pharmaceutical highs and outrageous styles and dissident music & poetry...In the cacophony of the internal exile those of us who inhabited that space had embraced, my reaction to Krog's book was multilayered. Empathy with her decision to write and speak as a female. Anger at my own inability as female, as black and as fellow-journalist reporting on the TRC to speak what I thought of the process. Resentment that a white Afrikaner woman had pre-empted the process, had taken on the shame of her men and with this book, had redeemed her community—even before the rest of us could begin to deal with the fall-out amongst ourselves. Felt that the TRC had only managed to start the integration of the Afrikaner community. They perpetrated, they went mea culpa, they are forgiven. Much of this response had to do with being part of a TV team where the consensual approach to coverage and selection and emphasis was pretty much from a white (alterna-

rive) Afrikaner perspective. Stuff I did not have the tools to handle. Was falling apart because this public probing was collapsing all my worlds, ones kept separate for sanity's and struggle's sake. Huge angers at the fact that black people were not taking more ownership of the process, investing more, using it as a starting point to pry into our own complicities, culpabilities, shames. Our Buthelezi's, Mafemela's, Madikizela's. So that we could grow.

Then into OD. Breakdown.

Could read *Skull*. Could not read Zoe Wicomb's *David's Story* initially. Because my own tongue had not been unwired. Because Krog, in true imperial style had measured the skull, because Zoe was mapping the rivers and the mountains and the forests and the grasslands and the deserts; that ethnographic capture of the land had blinded us from seeing. And writing. And feeling. And freeing. Am getting there. We'll get there. We'll come home. In poetic style.

wicked  
\$vii. while you got  
literate  
enuff to say  
give back the land  
they took us from behind  
the frontline  
their tongue is digit  
borders designed postscript  
your revolution illegit  
in the wake of their  
technochem  
crackdown

Bottomline: whereas in the years past reporting on the TRC I'd felt like Defoe's dumb dorkie, you know the one with the severed tongue, I am now less bleak. Now it just feels like my tongue had been wired. Speech is possible. The missionary moment of mutilation morphs into the 21stC code of narcotized realities. Numb tongue. De-narcotize, unwire. Trace the holes of the unbarbed tongue. To speak, differently. Now I retreat not into silence, but into deciding whom I want to listen to and whom I want to talk to (but I'm a woman so I've gotta keep some secrets, so don't ask who is excluded).

from dambudzo's sunhungered house  
tongue of dumb dorkie  
stalks high high with bessie's head  
snarls it's a question of power.

## Khulile Nxumalo

### Two Poems (and a note)

#### Xstacy

count your nipples scissored  
or your patience raped  
by a kentucky fried chicken, that's what you  
win — false words and white sangomas.

when we waited, intestines nervous  
we waited throbbing heat  
in our broken heels  
from the distance that turns thin pulse of  
the little toe into a sting, but  
you could fart if you wanted and the mountains  
were smiling.

we cast the load back  
to the ballot box  
of debi demo-  
crazy.

canned frog toes in telkom wrappings were  
served to the newcomers we taught them how to  
vote they taught us how to wait  
in mamba long queues  
it rained glass and cadbury eclairs that year.

we and the roof could not stop singing  
bleeding still  
from the glass grains stuck  
between our toes.

## Emva kwelanga

*for bra Ndoza*

between my collection of charred tongues and  
a winding distance that has  
three roads: one lies very broadly, the other's  
joined violently to the mnyamathi tree, the other's  
not yet there.

i took my eyes out, dropped  
them plop in a green bottle of  
Indian Ocean water (turned very red).

so i had no eyes, when i  
returned from inside my helicopter  
without laws  
or dogs, KZN wars/funds.

the man the flounder  
approaches us step by step,  
with a photocopied bat through  
his chest  
he drives black  
driving engines —  
he's also renewed his eyes.

my eyes grew thorns in the water.

## Dear David & Yedda,

psycho-narration is a narrative form, whereby we can discard the idea that a speaker is speaking inside their own head only, as if there is a clear line of distinction between "the inside of their own head" and the "objective world" that receives or upon which the narration falls. it is a form that attracted me a lot when i started preferring the long poem format but not only that, a long poem format that is driven or rather sits on a conversational tone. in english of course, and my key influence here was Mongane Serote. the problem with being a black south african writer who writes primarily in english, and even has the confidence to call themselves a poet of the page, is that, as you might know, we as artists in south africa went through a period where there was a very vocal opinion that said one can clearly distinguish "art for art's sake" and art that contributes significantly to the social arena. and poets were not spared. i was young then, but by the time the whole ping-pong reached its height, i was already spending a lot of effort on this thing called poetry. high school at that time. i only discovered the theoretical term of what i thought would be a fresh way of taking forward the tradition of Mongane Serote when i went to academia. but if you look closely at poems in "tsetlo" and "no baby must weep" you cannot miss the jazz based rhythms, the amazing spaces where improvisation happens:

love vanishes  
like a cat chased by dogs now and then  
hatred rushes in like a domestic servant summoned by  
her master,  
lay the tables for time's meal  
hang on,  
let me tell this girl  
nobody wants to die as a domestic servant...  
don't smile at me  
everytime you smile at me and i look you in the eye i feel  
like putting my heart in the back pocket.

(Mongane Serote, *No Baby Must Weep*, 1975)

and then i was dealing with a much more dynamic political reality—or objective world if you want to call it, where protagonists can become the ones spoken too, and the narrator can become a liar, as according to the uprising of other voices that were not even there. At least as far as the reader can see. So in the poem "Into the whistles



nostril's:

what is fate  
if i have one eye  
who dons the blame (that cap one size  
fits all...

and waking life is demanding it's  
its own answers and the strange  
children begin searching for the central question

something said during a short break—Motherfly must be proud  
to have escaped the untunings of the water's  
helix  
when the spoon snaked into the cup, gasp  
everything does  
so it seems

i hope this illustrates the notion better. but also to add, one can think  
of psycho-narration as a multi-vocal way of writing or telling stories  
that happens not so much like free style talking/writing/making  
poems. but as a less authoritative voice, democracy in the poem or  
whatever, in so far as inside our own psychology, if we let go or are  
able to get beyond the trenchant of rational thought or even this idea  
that rational thought, is a kind of reflection of reality—then anything  
can happen.

thanks again for the interest in my work and i hope i have explained  
the notion of psycho-narration as i engaged with it as a both stylistic  
concern in my work and as one of the ways i would want to make a  
contribution to the long tradition of english poetry written by blacks  
in south africa. there are a lot of exciting things happening with  
younger performance poets around here. but some other time for  
that.

greetings and salutations  
bright spark, and rounded corners

khulile

## Jeremy Cronin

### End of the century — which is why wipers

"Let's leave pessimism for better times"  
— *spray-painted on a wall in Bogota*

#### 1.

With windscreen wipers  
(Unlike drive-belts  
Or footwear, or chameleons' tongues)  
Low adhesion is advised.

But for this end of century  
Wipers should be given  
Some additional stickiness  
Some adhesive stubbornness to turn  
Grand vision into rhythm  
Light into rubber  
Narrative into epigram

These being more useful inclinations, I think,  
At this end of a bad millennium

#### 2.

Some time after the revolution, Soviet libraries adopted the Dewey Decimal  
System

With one rectification — the two hundreds: Religion

All the way from 201, 202, skip a few, 214 Theodicy, 216 Good & Evil, 229  
Apocrypha & pseudo-epigraphs, down to 299 Other religion —  
this great textual body of human wisdom, confusion,  
folly and aspiration was reduced by the Soviets to a bald:

Dewey Decimal 200: Atheism

This was not (not by far) the worst sin of Stalinism

But it was its most typical

This should be remembered of the 20th century

3.

I decline to name my windscreen wipers  
"Easy Come" and "Easy Go",  
I think of them, rather, as  
"Quote" and "Unquote"

Between them  
Reality  
Lies in parenthesis

4.

Clandestine communist cells were organised  
Right inside of the Nazi death camps  
(Each one a parenthesis)

Cell members used cigarettes to bribe camp officials, to get messages  
out, obtain medicine in, or to get space to perform this or that other  
small task of solidarity and survival

A condition for secret Party membership was the payment of a weekly sub —  
one cigarette

Somehow to be stolen from the guards

How many militants were summarily executed?

How many were caught trying to meet the brave challenge of stealing the week's  
levy?

This, too, should not be forgotten of our century

5.

I name my wipers:

"On the One Hand", and  
"On the Other Hand"

6.

Those who lost the Cold War  
Did not deserve to win in the end

Those who won the Cold War  
Were (and are) entirely  
Unworthy of their triumph

7.

I am very much worried, ma-comrades, I mean if we get  
retrenched, or contracted out, or sent to i-casualised ward, is because why?

Soren-so says for economic growth we have to via global  
competitiveness, by so saying

i-Management says, workers, the ball's in your court

We have given you, they say

A good package

(Which is almost the same phrase Kgalema had just used with irony, thirty  
minutes before, as we waited for this very meeting with FAWU shop-stewards)

(Which meeting eventually started two hours late)

(Which is why we'd been watching soccer on TV in a breakaway room, and I  
was distractedly trying also to write a poem about the end of the century, while  
Steve Lekoelea looped in a weak cross that was easily cut out by Chief's defence)

And Kgalema said — "No,

"It was a good pass

"Just to the wrong team"

And I thought: That's it!

That could be the poem about the end of the 20th century

8.

In the shadow of the big banks    a stokvel  
Home-brew    in the backyard

In a thump of rubber    with the foot  
To wake up your ancestors    in a mine-compound  
With a gumboot dance

For most of this century  
People's cultures have retreated to the secret  
Thaba Bosius of the soul

Forced to stratagems of non-hegemony —  
Rhythm, syncretism, exhibition for the tourist, slant-wise to reality

But what went up to the high plateaux as wedding song, or hunting chant  
Came down, sooner or later, transformed

In a factory choir, or toyi-toyi on the street  
And is even now an incalculable resource to go, bravely  
Slant-wise, into this next imperial century

9.

With all the ambivalence of a car in the city

Being of the street and

Not of it, just passing through

Down Tudhope, wipers at work, rubber-thump, rubber-thump, taking the bend  
in the shadow of the tower blocks, then, where the next bend sweeps left

Just there

One day    it's an inner city father walking his 4-year old kid to creche

One day    a kerb-side telephone hawker ("Howzit?", "No, grand") with her  
extension cord looping up to a jack in a third floor flat

One day    it's a bucket with "For Sale" (cooked sheep's trotters) "Johnny  
Walkers", they're called

One day    it's the crash-in-transit Toyota that I see first

Then the polaroid photographer, then the taxi-driver himself

Posing, door open, left elbow on bonnet, tossing away a cigarette butt (one  
week's sub?), for a snap-shot to be sent to someone, somewhere (rural?), no  
doubt, else

This tenderness, make-do, wit, role-reversal, job-pride, all in the midst of a  
crumbling, an urban, end of century, something else

10.

The wisdom of windscreen wipers  
Is velocity's blink  
Hesitation in onward rush  
An ironic side-swipe on the hypothetical free-way N1 North

In this end of millennium downpour

Where we've become habitual, edgy, typical, turned to a split-second *bi*

One of the genus: desperate whisk, squeezegee, scull-oar, either/or

Wavering with intent

In this global, totalitarian, homogenized deluge, where parents, patients,  
dependants, lovers, learners, supporters, congregants, citizens (if we  
still exist) are zombified into one thing all — clients

And public (if *they* still exist) institutions are made, the leaner the meaner the  
better, contractual service providers

Where managerialism is the ism to make all isms wasms, the new 200 Dewey  
Decimal, the delirium of our age

Which is why wipers

With their cantilevered, elegant, frenetic, rubber-thump, rubber-thump

Activism want to insist

Clarity of vision  
Forward progress  
Proceeding wisely to the point  
Involve  
A certain

On the one hand  
On the other hand  
Prevarication  
As into  
Another millennium  
With its own impending  
Miscellany, theodicy, good & evil, apocrypha  
You/We  
Either way, now  
Slant-wise  
Ironically  
Plunge

## Clement Chihota

### Shipwreck

The government, on its mission to lead the nation into the 21st century, was cruising at a very low altitude. Other senior governments, flying high on the Northern and Western horizons, sent urgent messages to the almost grounded ship, whose captain-president sweated at the controls as he tried to lift the sinking machine a bit higher before it hit the sharp rocks below.

"Jettison all unnecessary weight from your ship. Dump all garbage and excess baggage. Dump all waste and obsolete equipment. Dump them before you hit the rocks below."

The president consulted briefly with his cabinet. Indeed, the ship was sinking and there were ingots of truth in all this verbiage that had crackled out of the radio. Workers were ordered to sweep the decks of the ship clean, remove dirt, dust, old rags, empty cans, cobwebs—everything; collect it in dust bins and throw it overboard. The ship rose by a few metres but turbulent winds still threatened to dash it against the rocks below.

"You have not taken our full advice," the radio crackled into life again. "We told you to dump obsolete equipment including that old malfunctioning compass which you use."

"But how can we remove the compass?" asked the president, in one of his rare replies to the high-flyers. "How shall we guide the ship without the compass?"

"Remove that old instrument," came back the terse reply. "We shall offer you guidance. You don't have to chart your own course. All you have to do is follow our ships. We know the direction to the 21st Century."

The president consulted with his cabinet again. Their debate was short and vicious. Harsh voices zipped and zapped and swished and swashed. Querulous old voices vibrated and thudded into silence against high walls of resolution which had been erected. In the end, the compass, the radar, the altimeter, the freedometer and the joystick were prised out of their fastenings and thrown overboard. The ship rose by a few more metres but because it no longer had a radar, it was shaken from side to side and it yo-yoed up and down, sometimes missing the ground by just a few inches.

"That's better!" crackled the garrulous radio. "Your rise is going to be slow and almost imperceptible, but rise you shall. Now, to give impetus to your upward trend, remove all heavy thoughts from your brains. We can detect primitive and archaic impulses within your

brains. Erase from your minds all anachronistic and superstitious ideas. Delete African traditionalism and mysticism. Most importantly, cast down that heavy stone bird<sup>1</sup> which you consider to be the symbol of your nationhood. It is nothing but a dead weight which tilts the prow of your ship downwards. And be silent forever about gays and lesbians. An expert psychiatrist is going to be sent over to your ship to help you unburden your minds."

Hardly had the radio crackled into silence than an F46 interconnector docked against the side of the African ship. A fat, well-fed doctor stepped out and immediately went to work unloading his goods—Western books, films, pornographic videos, drugs, spirituous drinks, musical tapes and a bale of condoms. A party that was to last forty days and forty nights immediately began aboard the ship. At the end of it, the president was the only one who was sober enough to answer the radio, which crackled a rather strange message:

"The doctor has been donated to you. He will stay among you forever. Take good care of him and—congratulations for dumping that ugly old stone bird. You have gained ten metres of valuable altitude."

As if to verify this statement, the president went to peer over the side of the ship. As he stared at the ground, he noticed with satisfaction that indeed, the ship had gained extra clearance. The sharp, dangerous rocks were at least 15 metres below. Even as he stared, the ship crossed a brightly painted time mark emblazoned 1996. The 21st century was approaching. It was when he looked ahead in the direction in which the ship was flying that the president panicked. White gleaming peaks loomed like the rough rims of a bowl whose edges the ship was rapidly approaching. Behind the cruel and dazzling peaks, the 21st century glowed and shimmered like a pulsar, trying to communicate a mysterious message.

"Help! Help!" screamed the president, running for the radio. It crackled into life before the even reached it.

"Do not panic," it said. "I repeat, do not panic. Those snow white peaks you see ahead are called the ESAP<sup>2</sup> heights. You have been in ESAP territory all this time—in fact, since the 1988 time mark. The ESAP heights are the final hurdle which you will have to surmount before you reach the millennium time mark."

"But how shall we climb over them—they loom so whitely above us."

"Did you say whitely? I thought you were trained that in English, everything evil or threatening is supposed to be black. I expected you to say they loom darkly or blackly above you. Anyway, never mind. We will overlook that as a terminological inexactitude attributable to mother tongue interference. What you have to mind carefully now are the following instructions. Among your passengers are old, weak and infirm persons who are denying you a great deal of valuable altitude. There is also a large number of parasitical elements who are crowding your ship and yet contributing absolutely nothing to your progress. Such elements should be professionally and systematically weeded out. They are to walk the plank—if you understand this English marine idiom."

The president gasped when he heard this.

"I don't think I fully understand the idiom," he replied.

"To put it bluntly, they are to be retrenched. Retrenchment is a simple ballast technique in time aviation where burdensome elements are each given a parachute then asked to leave the ship. They won't dash against the rocks. Rather, they will sail gently to the bottom. If they are clever, they can even combine their parachutes into co-parachute vehicles which, with lucky winds, could even sail across the ESAP heights and land in the safe lands beyond."

The president summoned his cabinet and explained this new development. The whole ship would crash against the quickly approaching barriers unless urgent ballasting of human beings was effected. Ministers of the cabinet wailed and wept, but they quickly became quiet when they learnt that they themselves and their wives and children would not be jettisoned off the ship. After all, they did contribute to national progress and their wives and children indirectly contributed by providing them with balanced home backgrounds. Did the Westerners themselves throw some of their own people overboard in order to achieve their present altitudes, asked one astute minister, whose brain appeared to have resisted the cordials brought by the donated doctor. A long debate followed.

Historians and economists were invited to answer the minister's questions. Many of them confirmed that even in those high flying ships, there were many human beings who were incarcerated in the bottom decks and who were regularly thrown out without any parachutes to soften their descent. Even as facts and opinions were expressed, one practical minister pointed out that the white peaks were drawing nearer every second, and if this dilly-dallying and shilly-shallying continued, the whole ship would become history.

In the end, it was decided that there was no option but to bail out excess people before disaster struck. The old, the weak and the

1. The national symbol of Zimbabwe [ed.]

2. Economic Structural Adjustment Program, the IMF-styled program adopted by Zimbabwe [ed.]

infirm were systematically identified with the help of experts who arrived in an inter-connector from the North. As the first few people were made to "walk the plank," the radio crackled in excited life,

"Congratulations! You are learning fast. Hasten the rate of balancing and make sure the exercise is complete before the 1998 time mark. Now, here are the next instructions ..."

## Phillip Zhuwao

### Three Poems

#### my blue resignation conclude

In their short lives  
Poets live longer

Disabled tongues snap red  
Smack lips red lips blood  
again

Causing shortsighted hiccups  
talking  
asking

Do I longer plead  
O love

Farm after farm Squatter  
Permanence  
Why?

Tell me  
Threnodies of threat only beginning  
And end no middle of  
this snapping  
Wire sound of  
spattering faeces

Raging moon blue bolts leap  
roasting on the bones of my fire  
We swallowed whole chunks  
Of unpronounced vocabularies

To look forth back  
agasp  
Lot's girl  
freaked

I turned word with no Sense  
Why spite yourself then  
to me rot my heart in flames of rust



Curse of thirteen splash of flood's fountain  
genius

Cloud of dust fast rodeo on horizons  
Cataclysm orgasm on Galatea's rigid  
She  
Turn  
turn!

And then when we meet  
A thousand times no more  
Will you see me again?

The cherubic face contorted  
of boil's Point

Pouting macho after macho  
of tequila roasting penises  
with assadoes of burning wire

Slightly around my Scrotum

We never Sing knew Song  
but plot and press electric hot  
irons over...

## harare

a fallacy of God's dirty soil  
low and high  
Rising a haze of brown life without destiny  
July August September  
October will come, will it rain?  
A homogeneity of crafts rafts bon voyage to doom  
With devils aboard seeking the sea. Here?

## i want out!

the dancer is you in the Savanna rains  
When you ask the bus to go on forever  
and  
the looking glass is you when  
definitely

Yu ask my buttocks of images in paraffin  
roaring burning black in haephestus' furnace  
the days are calabashes of dead palm wine  
that blossom into red blood in the black ambulance  
yu say your life is my presence  
turned into destitute vocabulary

but I forget  
Joan of Arc was White  
Very White the paper of hell's menus blistered  
and scalded my Steve Biko fingertips  
When I looked back  
the wayward bus was right in front of me  
Its single tyre Cyclop's smarting eye

When they began talking of digris

She looked at me at my empty silence  
but you write write poems  
how come you got no degrees?

the stamps in this detention mind  
turn livid like a charon capsizing in Urine  
the smudges on my face is debating faeces  
the wormz these my fingers are typewriter keys  
the Cry in the raining nyt trying  
trying  
to mangle the english language

I  
forget  
my deadline is close  
I have taken my poems  
I'll get the books when I  
bring your money  
the typewriter was neva mine



When this becomes so real  
 and the poem refuses to end  
 enslaving to write all hours  
 I  
 know longer have tears to cry  
 remember  
 when I insisted on paying the bill  
 and yu knew I had no monies  
 and stared as I ate piles and miles of  
 spaghetti bread yu didnt know  
 that was my first meal in 4 days I  
 never said fasting was voluntary  
 Out the Savanna music kinged  
     for appearance's sake  
     lets hold hands

between pages of blazing gasps  
 your thighs when they crush me are delirium bantustans  
 and the flags  
 words from Senghor silence the Wind!

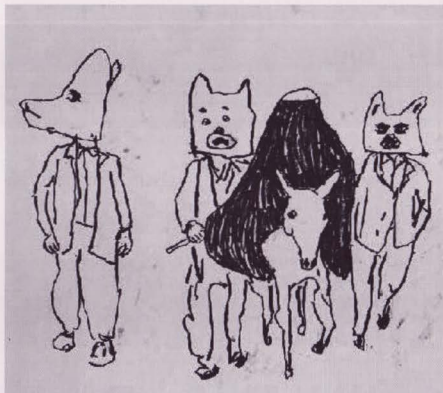
The Winter moon imprisons girls  
     poetessez with thighs like akhmatova  
     and  
     !

blood red blobs drop on this poem  
 Im not trying to emphaSIZE!  
 the blooddrops in my plate  
 Scarlet a red soup of gritty tears  
 gravel of brain sawdust  
 on the drill of time(s)  
 answer  
 What race was scipio africanus

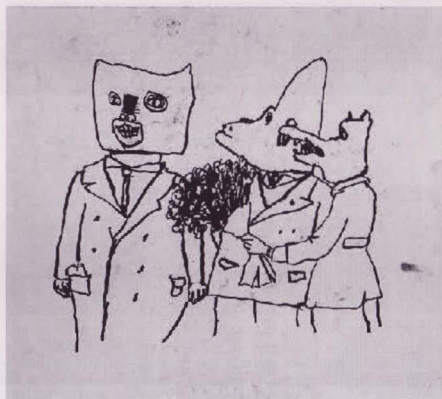
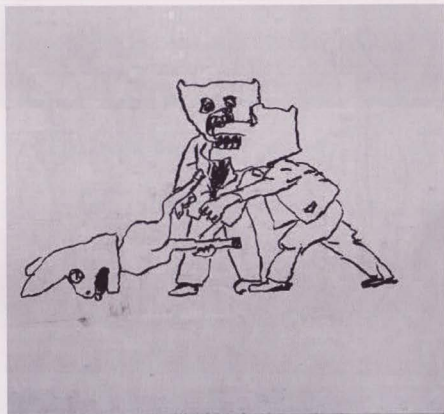
the rains in the Savanna dance you  
 definitely.

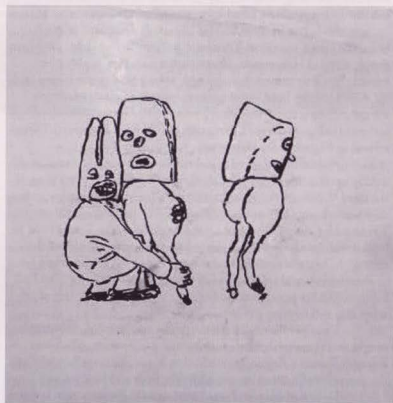
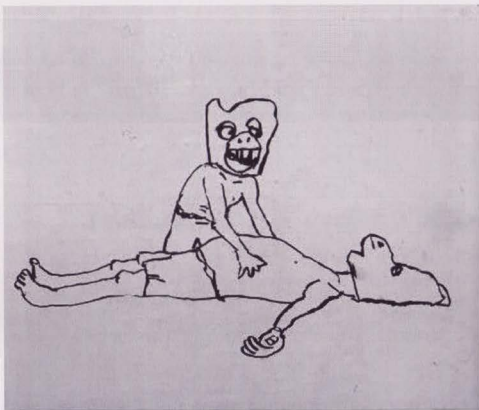
Kathleen Henderson

Five drawings



All images courtesy Stephen Wirtz Gallery, San Francisco.





## Letter to Tripwire

What happened? What happened? That question circled the world. A world made even smaller by the simultaneity of the information. It reminded me of Kennedy's death: people stopping, and talking, and asking, and hoping they were dreaming and that the "news" will be false.

Then, all the T.V. screens remained lit. All of the faces glued to them. It lasted for days. CNN in Paris, in Berlin, in Tokyo. Millions of people were in disarray. It happened that I was in Paris, on my way back to San Francisco. I didn't come back, though, immediately. I delayed my trip. Like that. Just delayed it, and things happening one after the other, I delayed it for 4 months. Four full months. The energy displaced by the shock, in my mind, had to exhaust its momentum. I had to wait.

Now, let's be clear, let's be honest. As I was in Europe, I heard European reactions. They were sorry, at first: nobody could see people trapped in towers and burning "in real time" and not be moved. Not only moved, but stunned. I was going to say: disoriented.

Little by little, conversations moved on, changed. People started remembering wars, "their" wars. Some German friends of mine started to evoke the destruction of Berlin, of Frankfurt. They started feeling sorry for *themselves*.

A close friend of mine, a French woman in her sixties, was utterly upset, at the beginning. And then, she heard the counting of the dead in New York, she read it in the papers, and sometime, when they were about 4800 or so, she remembered the city of Le Havre in 1944 and how it was bombed by the Americans who were getting to land, and how about 4000 civilians had then died; I could see the turmoil in her, she couldn't blame Americans *now*, in this tragic hour of their history, and still she was starting to blame them for what had happened in her youth, and to her country, under the assault of an army that was coming to liberate them.

I was perplexed, all the time. The enormity of the situation caught us ill prepared. The enormity and the newness. The event resembled science-fiction so much, that it was the more so scary. Did the monsters of human imagination take flesh and land on us?

I was divided too. I was listening to those who were looking back, among the hundreds of opinions I was facing day after day. I thought of Lebanon: 15 years of civil war destroyed a whole little nation. In fact, the Lebanese were the most cynical: "We have seen

worse!" was their response. Of course, countries did have worse, much worse experiences of war, and they survived, and they are around, some more prosperous than ever.

So what was it that had us all disturbed, profoundly disturbed, unsettled, some of us on the brink of collapsing? Why were people so worried, whole nations were worried, even those who were not going to be in the line of America's concerns?

One day I thought I found an answer. By its richness, its omnipotence, its presence all over the planet, America is to the modern world the perfect father-image. The Father had been hit! American power, even when hated, or challenged, was a kind of stabilizing image. It was the rock on which some rested, and which provided a stable and (secretly believed) immovable target. It was the father from whom everybody expected help, and who was hated because he either did give help and favors, or refused to give them. A country who almost runs the world and has never been reached by outside enemy forces does represent something ominous, almost superhuman. Now, some of us thought that America had become what all nations are: vulnerable, but probably the stronger for that.

Then, the reactions, the responses, started to fuse. The declarations. The actual war in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan is a tragic country. It has been meddled with by the British by no fault of its own: imperialistic greed made England destroy that country: its people, the equilibrium between its tribes.

Afghanistan is a country that we loved because it was also more recently destroyed by Soviet greed, by the ills, the evil of Soviet expansionism. Afghanistan resisted, and fought, lost 1 million of its people, a man in each family, a child maimed in each family. And now, for whatever reasons, the curse of war was falling anew upon it.

So our emotions were changing at great speed. American sorrow turned into American anger, and that anger is thunderous indeed.

Where from the thunder? From the guts of American power, a power that if totally unleashed can destroy the earth. Many times. But it won't be many, once will be enough. The rest will be written in the storybooks of the fish.

So, where are we now? We are in a restless, fluid, unpredictable situation. A dangerous time which makes innocent pleasures quite impossible. Plans for the future? Forget it! We live in permanent anguish. The precariousness of life is our constant companion.

What do you think, today? I have to emphasize that I ask "Today?" because anything can happen in the middle of the coming night; like what? like a country disappeared under an atom bomb.

Nothing short of that.

All this leads me to a decision that I kept postponing these last years. I will go to my room, and as soon as my writing to you is finished, I will pick up my paperback copy of *Moby-Dick*, and I will start to read again, my favorite American book.

Is "*Moby Dick*" a book? *Moby-Dick* is a being that accompanied my life for, soon to be, half a century. A friend. More than a friend. Neither a god nor a human nor an animal.

*Moby-Dick* is the gospel of the American soul. It says it all. It ought to be read in churches all over America, in schools, in homes. It is the core of the psyche of a nation built on a double baptismal font: the genocide of the Indians, on one hand, and a civilized, admirable constitution, on the other.

America today is in the position of Ahab. It is fighting a mobile, omnipresent, hard-to-catch white whale.

Ahab has a technological edge on the whale. In fact, he wants to, and he can, annihilate that oceanic being.

Ahab is monomaniacal in his anger and his desire for revenge. He is surrounded by people greater in their complexity than he is. He is a towering figure, a monument of revengeful desires. He is going to break his crew, and his ship, on the bones of his whale; there's no dialogue, let alone mercy, in his state of mind, in his universe. I am going to stop here, and look at the recent del Tredici illustrations of *Moby-Dick*, and then take out the "*Moby Dick*" silently waiting on my shelf, and delve into Ishmael's meditations, because I feel that I am, that we are, on an ocean, in a very long night, a night longer than night, a time-span in darkness, and we need to listen to Ishmael's voice, to hear Queequeg speak, to look at the starry night while reading, or having someone read aloud, near us, Melville's American masterpiece, to hear the soul of that continent express itself in its grandeur, and its misery, in those pages where this strange duel between Ahab and *Moby-Dick* is being renewed, while we are watching from the boat. In the storm.

Leslie Scalapino

## Air Pal Mal (the frame)

A woman here saying pleasure is liberating, pain is *only* depersonalizing. is removing ego from one who is not having but is amidst them who *are* having pleasure? Or, the reverse of the same barrier in its instant — her gesture is to remove ego from *them* who *are* suffering? Oar.

The instant of their separate beings — is feeling itself?

A man here from his window sees people jump from the high windows of the towers, crumbling beside him in the air, as they're crashed by the hijacked planes. Says he would like to see *people here advocate crushing bombing the Taliban that way* (they who are not the terrorists in the planes — not the same — nor are the people there).

expansion of (no) justice. Nothing to change him breaks into his saying this, whatever is said by others alongside him later — his speech still doesn't change. *He has to take it.*

Grace sits alone outside at a café. M and another, the man-who-wants-faceless-motherslaves (P), are encountered in public after so long. They come up and seat themselves at a nearby table, with them a dowdy young woman who's soaking the sunken-flowered man with sympathy. The city is a savanna.

Evening is beginning and then the savanna is gold swaying. P suckles, but vicious, the conventions of motherhood so dead that it is only a slave. Sympathy is a type of flattery (that's to be *of him*).

He has no curiosity. Grace thinks.

The dowdy young woman has no friends, and no talent! she says to herself seated outside. Then, recognizing that this is true she is ashamed of her own cruelty in noting this.

In the U.S., there appears to be only *actions* that are outside. Yet one/(the inside) isn't mechanistic. Or, interior change isn't.

One/(as inside) can't *be* those outside motions at all. Terror arises in one then that 'there are no actions in the present moment or ever' (even while these occur).

The savanna moves. Through the gold grass move others. Some at tables, a purse slung on a chair. A roar of overpass traffic fills the space.

P in aging, surrounds himself with flattery, accepts it from the lonely starved for affection, who, led by him, gratefully trashes others. As does M. No mercy appears in them. They trash Grace also, who sits 'by herself', their teeth part as she listens.



Head turned away. In the stillness. In the past, friends — they'd taken her apart for having anger. May be she's unacceptable when speaking (speaking), which they can't recognize; would accept in a man. Or, looked down upon for concentrating on being in present time.

Whereas for them, the present is trivial. Not lush hierarchy. Led? — though they react to him not being flattered enough. sensation. they want lies. as if that were tradition.

a babyish image of a hyenadon, *our leader*, isn't custom, it is canned *as motions*

that are killing others. never pictured. (yet evening is not either pleasure or pain — *evening is pleasure*). as far as M is concerned, is evening trivial? (present. she's not a materialist)

Is thinking the present? Sometimes? It's slow and minute.

Grace doesn't harbor the gold savanna. (an action). the evening so still is in the gold savanna.

The evening doesn't harbor the gold savanna also — feeling hurt bound by elegant M and the-man-who-wants-faceless-mother-slaves isn't *in evening* (an emotion is *after* its origin, only, but *there* is no time except 'its' [possession] — evening is in the motion?)

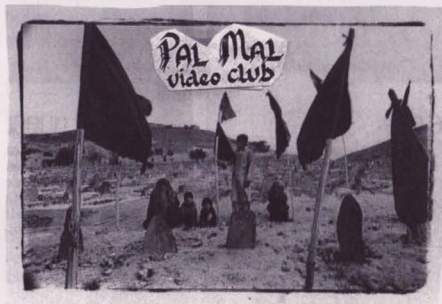
M who criticizing blighting the inner nature of another (one after another) who're then inside-out and coming to her pleading with her *to speak with to come to meet* them looking, she turns a cold shoulder to them, leaving them holding that pain themselves in prison which she reproduces ones — sitting outside, Grace begins to sing to try to locate Richard-the-Lion-Hearted in prison, he'll hear the song — but M butts in (she wants 'conceptual' / *interior*-status) snarling (when Grace had blurted fear — when our leader began bombing the innocent populace whom he will conquer, on the pretext that that is defense against a terrorist act here) *Innocent!* M says Doesn't it make you want to weep for the innocent people (jumping from the towers and crushed killed) *here!* Forces weeping. Is she maintaining hierarchy and no time as it?

A spring. They changed the laws to allow unchecked infinite clandestine war. open. quash speaking here. compared (our hyenadon-leader/man-who-wants-faceless-motherslaves/evening/others) silent on 'either' side(s) — they do not crack or burst the repetition. or mirror. crack that inured. one. they're. outside.

alleviate.

without placating anyone, the scene — the leader *placed on the same space* as the ordinary man-who-wants-faceless-motherslaves ours banding with their former warlords holds their people in helpless poverty while ours fleece them — separate from the city that is a

savanna waving touching one evening. the evenings are hardly separate. or *not* separate.



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unexploded cluster  
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by cluster bombs fo  
packets -- which ar  
Save the Children t  
Thursday.

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news conference TI  
food packets would  
Friday a Pentagon s  
said blue had been  
connotations among

"... that form in the  
dark, with tears?

What shapeless lump  
is that, bent,  
crouch'd there on the  
sand?

U.S. p  
language  
food packets and the bomblets, but leaflets  
probably would not be dropped before Saturday.

"... (the shadow which is the weakest, created by distancing  
oneself from the light) ... becomes red. ..."

dropped more than a million

since the start

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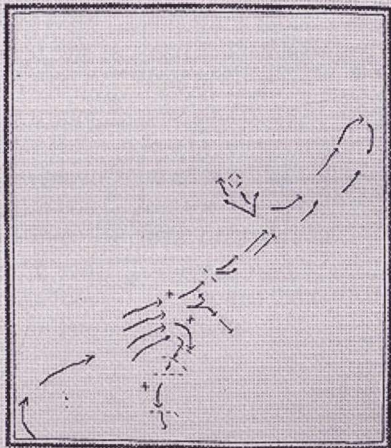
Stephanie Syjuco

## Pacific Theater of Operations (1941-45)

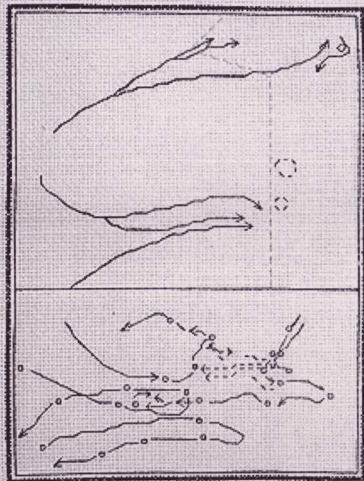
*from a series of ten cross-stitch panels*

My grandfather, a Filipino citizen, fought on the side of the Americans in WWII and was subsequently granted entry into the United States, along with his children. Years after these events, I studied the WWII maps that depicted the battles which had become so significant to my family. I was fascinated at how, via the process of mapping, the abstract depiction of the lines and arrows could stand in for such major movement. Suddenly, only a limited palette—specific actions, events, and contestations—represent a particular place and how we choose to view it (in this case, the Philippine islands). Individual and collective histories become reduced to dotted lines and arrows marking movements, most noticeably in the depiction of how territories shift and churn on a battlefield.

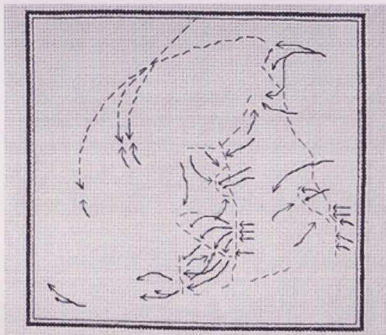
The work consists of a total of ten cross-stitch embroidery panels. I am constantly forgetting their individual titles, and for me, this is yet another way that I recognize my own removal from these significant events. They could almost be a depiction of any war, at any place, in any time.



"Pacific Theater of Operations: Reconquest of the Philippines"  
cross-stitch panel, 8" x 9".

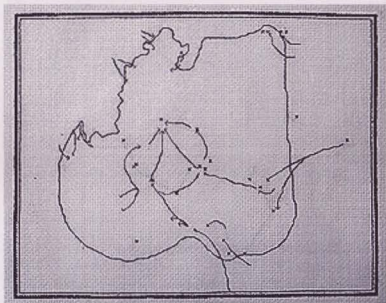


"Pacific Theater of Operations: Battle of Midway"  
cross-stitch panel, 9" x 11".



above: "Pacific Theater of Operations: Bataan and Corregidor"  
cross-stitch panel, 8" x 11".

below: "Pacific Theater of Operations 1941-45"  
cross-stitch panel, 12" x 16".



## Jimmie Durham

### Rolling Stones and the Art Balls

Next I want to ask for your help again: I want to make a film, and I want to free some stones.

For the past couple of years in Europe I have been investigating this dictatorial power of architecture, and the investigations have led to further research into the concepts which support and weigh upon stone.

Some materials, innocent in themselves, have been overly scripted—given roles that are too dense. Iron has that problem; I bet Richard Serra believes everything he's ever been told about iron. He probably thinks it's **HARD**. **IRON!** **STEEL!** An art critic in New York wrote about a new Serra work that "It shows us new things about Cor-ten steel." In the first place, what the hell is "Cor-ten steel"? In the second place, what does a New York art critic know about it? In the third and fourth places why would we want or care anything about "Cor-ten steel"? Cast iron is very brittle, and it is also subject to quick deterioration by rust. But cast iron mixed with glass, called "Du-iron," is not subject to rust and not so brittle. There now, I've taught you something new about cast-iron, gimme some money!

All that heavy, leaden metaphor!

You needn't think of swords *or* ploughshares; you can think of steel cable three millimetres thick and three kilometres long, soft and subtle. Or you could think of magnets. You may not believe this, but the center of the earth is molten iron. Yet only part of it is liquid! Under our oceans is an ocean of liquid iron, with currents and tides. In the middle of that ocean floats a large ball of iron, molten, but solid all the same, because of the weight of all the other iron.

I spoke about the English coming to Virginia, but 50 years before that, the Spanish had already come—as missionaries. They taught us how to make steel, and from that time on Cherokees have been famous knife-makers. We taught ourselves, though, to find fallen meteors; for the best pure iron. We used to make star patterns in the knife-blades, to celebrate that our knives came from the sky. (Steel is petrified stars.)

(Indians of the Andes called gold "Sun shit.")

Stone suffers from architectural weight, the weight of metaphor, and the weight of history. (I must make another interruption here, to tell you a story so absurd you won't believe it, but I swear to you it's true: In the middle of the Plains of North America, quite close to the geographic center of that continent, there is a small forested mountain



formation called the Paha Sapa. It is a truly sacred place for all of the Plains Indians. As our brave new Triumphantist century began, someone made an astounding conjuncture of Art [don't worry, *most* art is bad art. Architecture and self-justification: It shows us new things about mountains!] — it is the heads of four Indian-killers, carved gigantically into the mountain itself Almost as large as a mountain, staring down across the plains and missile silos. It is appropriately named Mount Rush More. (Look it up in the Atlas if you don't believe me!)

Last year in Sweden I came across nine pieces of granite that are the perfect illustration of the problems of stone. They were intended to be part of Hitler's over-sized "Arch of Peace" (see, he didn't say "Triumph"; he was already using "newspeak") in Berlin. Hitler himself made the original plans and drawings, and Speer polished it up and located quarries and carvers in Sweden and Norway. Speer had commissioned the work on the granite stones that I saw. They are beautifully carved, and absolutely massive, quietly waiting for history. I want to free them; make them light.

There are some similar carved stones, for the same project, in Norway. The quarry master there will not give them up—wants them to be a monument to what? How? And some others, from other Swedish quarries, actually arrived in Berlin, during the war. Those stones were liberated into new slavery by the Soviets, and are now part of the monstrous Monument to the Soviet Dead Soldiers at Treptower Park. What's to keep some idiot neo-Nazis from re-claiming them at some future time?

The film will *not* be a documentary, although it will kind of "document" itself. It will be a feature-length film (about 90 minutes) of high artistic merit, and therefore "commercial" in some sense; even if not a "summer blockbuster." We'll get one of those barges that have no engine, and after taking the stones by truck through the forests to the harbor, load the stones onto the barge and tow them across the Baltic in the direction of Ruegen Island and Berlin. Then we'll sink them, barge and all, in the Baltic Sea. (forming a useful artificial deep-water reef to support a variety of marine life.) The stones will be free—and *light*, because they will have been transformed into light and celluloid. (the film.) But they'll be eternal, too, as carved granite cannot be, because they will be art, and art is eternal, people say. So here's the help I need: a film producer and/or hot shot art curator. A film director and crew. A lot of bucks, to get the producer started, etc. A barge that will float and sink.

Write to me care of the publisher, please. Now then, won't you feel

good, and kind of historical, if you've already given substantial help before this book is published, and our film is already underway? I mean, I'm certainly not relying on this book exclusively, only to note what's going on at a certain time in my new life far away from Virginia. I've got a lot of irons in the fire, as cowboys say. Or, you'll feel really good if you read this and sign on as a film director. The book will itself become slightly outside of time for you.

Why not write me a note right now? Please, ..... Please, ... Please?

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Katha Pollitt, or Barbara Ehrenreich, or Barbara Kruger or someone, said that if our century, and Modernism, was the time of the phallus, (please don't show this to Richard Serra, but I'm suddenly reminded of another story. In the early 1980's I lived in New York with my sweetheart, Maria Thereza Alves. Maria Thereza is Brazilian and the immigration department had misplaced her green card, making her an illegal alien. Every morning at 8 o'clock she had to stand in a long line at the immigration office, next to City Hall in Manhattan. Sometimes it would be late in the afternoon before she got to a desk with some rude person behind it, only to be treated badly and questioned suspiciously. Then as she and dozens of other tired strangers left the building through the back door they were confronted by a monster. A giant piece of Cor-ten steel named "Tilted Arc" [by Richard Serra]. It seems to be trying to herd up the aliens and push them back into the labyrinth of frustration. Stupid right-wing government people also didn't like "Tilted Arc"; they wanted an art piece more like Mt. Rushmore in looks, and petitioned to have the piece removed, and won. Artists in the city were in an uproar. Maria Thereza and I were the only artists who supported the removal.) If our century is the age of the phallus, of penetrations and thrusts and rockets and fast cars and skyscrapers, the coming age should be seen as the age of the gonad. The age of stored information, she said, of containers and containment.

She made her observations before the Guggenheim Bilbao was built, but it is as though Frank Gehry, the architect, must've listened to her. Isn't that museum the perfect example of her thesis? A large scrotum, heavily protecting The Most Important Art Truth, the best genes to withhold the future.

Most pleasing, or most useful, might always be "other stuff." Suppose you build yourself a nice simple little house and you like the way it looks. To me, as a stranger passing by it looks like nothing much but *your* house. If I come back later, though, maybe banal life

and random crazy-ness will have changed it. Maybe you later build a wood shed. Maybe a tree grows. Maybe your neighbor makes a garbage dump close by, and he also constructs a wood shed. Your car breaks down and you just leave it in back, where it begins to rust. What started as a path made by taking a short cut to the tavern becomes a road and the guy across the road builds a strange fence and someone else uses the fence to post some advertisement signs. It begins to look interesting to me. The uncontrolled complexity has much meaning, much beauty. No single, dead-end narrative.

#### A True Story

In 1985 a young British sculptor named Nicholas Fairplay had been brought to Manhattan Island to carve stone for the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. The intention for the Cathedral is that upon completion it would be the World's Largest Cathedral, and we may assume that at peak production it will have an ever-changing billboard our front which will read, "Over One Million Souls Saved." St. John's Cathedral was begun by Andrew Carnegie so that he would have a fitting place to worship. It is built on top of Morningside Cliff, facing away from the spectacular view of Harlem in the valley below. Beside the cliff there is a high fence and a private police force separating Morningside Heights from Harlem, and a statue of Carl Schurz. Nick Fairplay didn't understand. He inadvertently fell in with bad companions — Indians.

#### Document A

On April 15, 1985 Nicholas Fairplay, a British alien claiming to be a sculptor, attended a secret meeting at an apartment on Amsterdam Avenue. Also at this meeting were the following people: Maria Thereza Alves, a Brazilian alien who also claims to be an artist; Flavio Garciandia, a Cuban alien who also claims to be an artist; and Jimmie Durham, a Cherokee who is an active member of the terrorist organization, A.I.M. Fairplay left certain documents at the apartment and departed at 12:06 a.m.

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Leonard Peltier is an Indian man who is in prison for two life sentences, after having been convicted of killing two FBI agents on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in 1975.

#### Another True Story

Leonard Peltier is innocent.

#### Another True Story

Nicholas Fairplay carved a perfect likeness of Leonard Peltier on a stone section of the front of the Cathedral, and has also carved American Indian and African heads on other parts of the Cathedral.

#### Still Another True Story

Nick Fairplay told us that when medieval buildings in England are destroyed it is often discovered that workers had placed oyster shells between the stone blocks to level them. The oyster shells have faces carved on them, or sometimes messages insulting royalty or the boss.

#### A recipe for quick and easy biscuits

##### Ingredients:

- 2 cups of flour
- 1 cup of yogurt
- 1 teaspoon of bicarbonate of soda

Mix all three ingredients with your hands and form into a ball. Pinch the ball in half, then pinch those two in half, then pinch those four in half, then pinch those eight in half; make smaller balls with your hands each time. You might use a bit of olive oil on your hands. Place the sixteen biscuits in an iron (Cor-ten steel is the best) pan about 3 centimetres apart from each other, and bake in a pre-heated medium hot oven for about 20 minutes. Raisins, chopped nuts, aniseeds or bits of dried chili peppers and hard cheese can be added to the dough.

#### How to make gravy

After you have fried any kind of meat in a skillet, add a little bacon grease or sunflower oil to the residue that remains in the skillet. Sprinkle about a half of a cup of flour into this oil and fry it until it is dark brown, stirring constantly with a fork to keep it separated. Then add two cups of water slowly, continuing to stir until it looks like gravy. At the last moment add a pinch of black pepper and a dash of Worcestershire sauce. To make "cream gravy," do not brown the flour quite so much, and add milk instead of water. Serve with mashed potatoes and black-eyed peas, with pork chops, veal or beefsteak, fried rabbit or squirrel.

#### How to make lye (potassium carbonate) for hominy or soap

Lye is the strong caustic chemical used for making soap. In Germany it was also used for turning cabbage into Sauerkraut, I think. It is not an acid, but is instead on the opposite end of the Ph scale. It is obtained by filtering water through wood ash. The best wood to use

is White Oak, but Hickory, Ash, Elder or any of the oaks will work. Use the scrap wood of the tree, and even the leaves and twigs. Burn the wood in an open, hot fire so that there is not much charcoal. This ash, finely powdered, can then be used for cooking; add a bit of it to maize meal for making cornbread or corn mush. Good for rabbit stew or rabbit roasted in ashes.

For lye, fill a large bucket or barrel in which you've made some sieve-like holes in the bottom, with the ashes, and drip water through it slowly (a couple or three days). Catch the liquid in another bucket and transfer it to bottles. Hominy is maize kernels that have been soaked in lye to soften the shell of the kernel and make the maize more digestible. Use whole dried maize kernels. "Grits," or "hominy grits," are made by re-drying the hominy kernels and grinding them into a coarse meal. This is then boiled, preferably with the addition of some ground hickory nuts.

The Museum of Contemporary Art in Pori, Finland, invited me to do something there in 1997. I got a truck-load of rocks the size of fists or potatoes and put them all over the floor of the museum, even in the offices, toilets, and the gift shop. I also put these rocks outside the building, on the sidewalk and into the street. They were not so densely placed that they made a covering; spaced from 50 cm to 100 cm apart. I was trying, with these "free" stones to see if I could free up the architecture itself, and its agenda for the museum. (Not to fight or attack—the building is quite beautiful and well-suited to be an art museum.)

The result was pleasing to me. The building *did* look as though it were getting ready for motion. And the interior, especially the reception desk area and the toilets, could no longer act so serious and separate. And what I liked the best, the effect was not theatrical. There was nothing for you to Believe or to pretend to believe.

On a wall inside there was a large map of the world, with a hand-drawn "suggested route" for attempting to kick a stone, not *to* Chalm, the Center of The World in Mexico, but *toward* Chalm; from Finland across Northern Russia to Siberia.

A text explained that Indians in Mexico make pilgrimages to the sacred tree in Chalm. Those who give up and try to stop and turn back become stones, so people are encouraged to kick stones along the way toward the direction of Chalm. *Perhaps* one of these stones is a person, and *perhaps* that person will live again upon reaching the sacred tree.

I'm telling you this partly because a function for this book is that it

will act as another "progress report" on what I call my "Eurasia Project." This is a self-cancelling "project" because it has no goal and no end. (I might die someday, but that's completely different.) I moved to Europe four years ago, from Mexico where I'd lived almost eight years.

It is clearly obvious that Europe is a political entity, not in the least a geographical entity. That Europe has no geography was already obvious to me in the Americas, because the Americas are so obviously the best (that is, the worst) part of Europe. (The most *successful* elements of those factors of culture called "Europe," the most triumphant, the biggest.) But living here on this continent called Eurasia, which few seem to know or care *is* a continent instead of two or three or four contiguous continents, makes Eurasia and "Europe" acutely "here" for me, and I therefore feel more free of the "Europe"-ness. I might now be enabled for the first time to "account for myself," and there might possibly be someone here—like my friend Ken Vos who is half Japanese and half Dutch and says he dislikes those two countries immensely; or my friend Nikita in Yakutsk, maybe—that I feel responsible to account to.

The other reason I'm telling about my work in Pori is to introduce the work of a German architect named Thilo Folkerts. His specialty is landscapes in cities. He has a moveable rock garden that is a mound of gravel (of mass equaling about four normal human bodies, I guess). It does not really look like rocks, nor yet sand, but more fluid than either. Thilo places this mound wherever seems suitable to him and when he has time shapes and textures it with a rake, after the fashion of Japanese rock gardens. It can change shape and mood in minutes.

He has a collection of sand piles and rock piles. But just the photos of them, as he discovers them on his perambulations through Berlin. His "favorite sand piles," he calls them. These are often crowded or "leaning" next to the wall of a building; sometimes, also, on the curb of a street, spilling onto the sidewalk and into the street. No boundaries, no shape, but undeniable, and accidentally charming non-objects.

I love the work, but I also like that he perceives it as a garden and not (or not necessarily) art. Oh, I wish I had thought of these gravel mounds! But I would want to bring the gravel pile specifically into art, into the "art spaces." If I made a large pile of very clean, and aesthetically pleasing gravel stones that partially covered the reception desk and chair, or the catalogues table of a museum, wouldn't that look good? And the small stones would be inadvertently scattered by

clumsy feet. One stone might come to rest next to Mario Merz's igloo, one might go PING! against some giant steel sculpture and lie there awaiting its next collaborative move.

Having written the word "collaborative," I see there may be a possibility that Thilo would do a collaborative work with me. Or I could maybe rent one of his gardens.

I might at the same time try making some anti-Thilo Folkerts.

Suppose I mixed the gravel with cement and poured it into a mound partially covering the reception desk and table? I could call it "Thilo's Petrified Garden."

Do you know what the American theorist Rosalind Krauss said about her show called "*L'informe*" at the Centre Pompidou in Paris? She said her first criterion for choosing individual works by artists in the show was size. She said that large work proved that the artist was serious, and committed. Yeah, really!

## Heriberto Yépez

### What About the Mexican Poetry Scene?

When I went to New York to read in the Double Happiness Series, James Sherry asked me, "What about the Mexican Poetry Scene?" I thought about my answer a few seconds, but then I knew there was no way to respond to that question with a beer in hand and in just a few minutes. So I simply said to him: "It's really different from the American poetry scene... in general, REALLY different" [Is there *an* American poetry scene? No]. I have written these notes to have a second chance to explain what is happening right now in Mexico in terms of discourse building and poetry communities.

#### *Peace is over. Life after Octavio Paz*

The first thing one has to know to understand the situation of post-modern literature in Mexico (and in many ways in the whole Latin American literary circle) is that after Octavio Paz died in 1998 everything changed<sup>1</sup>. Paz was the center of Mexican poetry for almost half a century. I don't think there is an equivalent in America, where no one has become so huge and influential to the point of becoming an obstacle for newer developments in literary discussions. When Paz was alive, making poetic discourse without reference to him was impossible. Here we need to remember, Paz wasn't just a poet but also an important translator, historian, anthropologist, art critic, strong polemicist, literary commentator of every genre, philosopher, and TV intellectual. He was the head of the Mexican "Republic of Letters" (sic). To have an idea of this position in Mexico and Latin America please combine figures like Jerome Rothenberg, Allen Ginsberg, E. H. Grombrich, and William F. Buckley into one: the result of this bizarre mixture is Octavio Paz.

As the PRI<sup>2</sup> did in politics, Paz represented intellectual monopoly in Mexico for too many decades. But once Paz died his ideological monopoly started to collapse and is still corroding. His *Vuelta* magazine disappeared and was divided into two new journals

1. After Paz died in 1998, José Luis Martínez—one of Mexico's foremost respected critics—ridiculously declared that the years left until the end of the century were going to be *nemontemi* days—a prehispanic calendar notion in which the *nemontemi* days are counted as invalid, and whatever happens during them has no significance. The sense of loss of center and direction in "Mexican Letters" has been repeatedly commented upon since Paz's death.

2. The "Revolutionary Institutional Party," which was in power for more than seventy years—the most successful political party in Modernity anywhere!



(*Letras Libres* and *Paréntesis*), which not only represent two different factions of Paz followers, but also constitute the center of literary discussion and creation in Mexico)<sup>3</sup>.

So, I see two paradigms which are going to change in the upcoming years:

1. We are going to destroy the idea of a "national" literature. We are now seeing that we don't want to survive in a "small" context. Even Paz knew that Mexican literature was closing its door to the outside (he wrote a letter intended to be published after his death saying his young collaborators weren't giving signals of being interested in the poetics from abroad). For example, we are going to come into greater and more active contact with the American scene(s)—a goal increasingly under discussion. For Paz, American poetry was protagonized by Robert Frost and Elizabeth Bishop, so you can imagine how American poetry is perceived by the great majority of his followers (who still control Mexican literature), but that's something which is going to be modified. We are even going to see Mexican writers using English or getting into the U.S. in order to have parallel literary careers or serve as bridges in the postmodern condition, and in general, future poetry in Mexico is going to be constructed as part of a much bigger series of references.
2. The idea of avant-garde and radical innovation is finally returning. Octavio Paz established the idea that after surrealism no avant-garde could be possible again. Doing something in an "avant-garde" context during the Paz period was even taken as a joke. (That's a key idea of his whole history of modern literature and his poetics). So, now that his ideas are being scrutinized as never before, the idea of radical experimentalism and new avant-gardes is returning. Paz believed there could be no more drastic rupture with tradition—but guess what, Octavio?
3. There are other national magazines, like *Nexus* (mostly politics, but with novelists like Carlos Fuentes and Hector Aguilar Camín as spokespersons); *La Tempestad* (cultural in general with an increasing emphasis on new poetry from abroad); *Alforja* (a journal that represents the opposition to Paz, but still hasn't received enough attention or strength); *Moho* and *Complot* (mostly prose, and considered the place where the underground young writers publish). There are other mediums, of course, run by universities or little groups, but none can be considered as influential as these. There's a lack of independent and marginal reviews or journals; one of the reasons that they haven't spread is that they should be that a decade ago the government implemented a State run program called "Tierra Adentro" which publishes young writers from all over the country in its extensive book series and in the quarterly it supports. The preoccupation of young writers to be included in, and benefit from, this program, I think, has slowed down the emergence of truly independent mediums and little presses. But still, there is a growing tendency to change that.

### Politics / Poetics Mexican Style

The essential relationship between poetics and politics in Mexico is going to survive Paz's death not only in terms of content in texts but also in terms of real social influence. Poets in Mexico are respected and can become popular, as in Russia, or have influence on public affairs, as in France. Mexican writers immediately become public intellectuals. In the United States, writers and artists don't play a part in the major Media, but in Mexico that's really different. In Mexico (before and after Paz) a linguistic creator has always played important roles in the making of national discourse and daily political issues. Intellectuals helped to invent post-revolutionary Mexican Identity (*mestizaje* as the basis of our *Volksgeist*). Let me give you an example. If September 11 had happened in Mexico, we would have had a panel of writers/poets discussing the significance of that event in the main nightly news. The opinions and views of poets are part of the socio-political equation; this role is mainly played on national TV and Mexico City newspapers. (That's how the left has become so important in Mexico, but that's also how many poets have become puppets or instruments of the government...)

To continue making awkward comparisons let me make this one: in Mexico, Charles Bernstein and Rae Armantrout would have to (would even be pressed to) periodically speak on current issues on the Mexican equivalent of NBC's evening news or *Nightline*. In Mexico, writers (from every genre and aesthetic tendency) have real power and use it up front. They are highly respected (or used) as opinion makers—even when they use humor or are "eccentric" as Carlos Monsiváis, the great (and now old) writer, cat lover and marxist-satiric commentator of popular and high culture who appears on TV making wordplay in the best Latin American tradition and who is both a Media trickster and a Man of Letters<sup>4</sup>. That's something, I think, nobody wants to lose. On the contrary, with the opening up of the democratic system, it is something which is going to become even bigger.

Writers can die or make points in the political arena. When the Zapatista army announced itself at the beginning of the nineties, and Paz basically condemned them a few hours later on the most important nightly news program, one knew he was on the downside. Paz's reactionary position on the Zapatistas killed him as a role model

4. Before Monsiváis, Mexico had Salvador Novo, another gay writer (a very openly and "scandalous" one) taking on the character of a cruel and intelligent political commentator while at the same time being part of our start-of-the-century modernist (*vanguardia*) movement in poetry and prose.



for the younger generation. The same happened with Jaime Sabines, our (now dead) second "national" poet (Sabines is a mixture of Joyce Carol Oates and Maya Angelou), who lost his credibility as a poet for the masses and the elites when he reacted negatively to the Sub-comandante Marcos figure<sup>5</sup>.

This is also why in Mexico poets (regardless of their literary ideas) become our country's ambassadors and diplomats *par excellence*. If they were Mexican, Lyn Hejinian or Bruce Andrews would be our ambassadors to England, Italy or France.

### *Mainstream / Alternative Cultures*

The defining socio-political role that a Mexican poet acquires (from whatever aesthetic position he takes) is what makes it impossible for even a radical poet to stay marginal for too long. If you become important in a literary group, you are pushed into the "mainstream." We need here to understand there is no "mainstream" in Mexico in the American sense of that notion. (We are a marginal culture, so how can we talk of a mainstream?)

Mexican writers understand poetic innovation and experimentalism in a way that resembles the self-understanding of black innovative tradition<sup>6</sup>. As a culture fundamentally constructed to resist imperialism and alienation (and now globalization) we can't help but be a counter-proposal to Western literature. Mexican writers are always looking for a border place to have different discourses co-exist, such that they can participate in different language-systems and groups, even if they are totally opposed. From the beginning of Mexican modernism (like the neodada *estridentista* group in Mexico at the

beginning of the 20th Century), there have been groups (not hegemonic for the most part) that have searched for a way to be contemporary to the rest of the world while at the same time adapting international experimentalism into our own cultural agenda<sup>7</sup>.

That's why every experimental writer needs at the same time to invent new forms but also (and this is crucial) to deal with the conventional forms—that's why a postmodern Mexican writer like Gerardo Deniz plays with traditional forms; radicalism in Latin America is mainly a transformational *interplay* with traditional rhetorics—this is a move as old as our avant-garde: when J. J. Tablada made visual poems using Chinese themes and contexts (a few years before the publication of Apollinaire's *calligrammes*) he at the same time was using traditional constraints to write lyrical poetry<sup>8</sup>.

One can see this interplay between the traditional and the highly experimental both in novels and in poems. This is something we as readers we need to understand, because I have the feeling that outsiders often misunderstand this: they look into new Latin American writing and only see a continuation of the "old" when in fact they could find an open (or hidden or coded!) breakthrough in linguistic use. Rather than a rejection, Latin American literature and art constitutes a *reconstruction* of the "mainstream" popular culture and tradition. (We do this because we are in the periphery and we find playing with the Western mainstream useful for our own purposes and cultural codes). That's also why a figure such as Borges, in order to destroy Western Literature, had to appear as a "normal" or "classical" part of it, when in fact he developed something radically new, which can very easily be misread as a classical literature because of his strong engagement with traditional European, Latin American or North American authors and tendencies. Latin American modernism

5. Even Marcos' strong relationship with literature is a sign of the crucial relevance of poetry in Mexican politics. Marcos is considered a writer, an increasingly good one. He knows perfectly that in order to gain *authority*, support, and have an image as somebody who can lead Mexico to a better way, he has to be seen as an intellectual, a writer by himself, a short story teller and an accomplished verbal artist, even in a "postmodern" way.

6. Here I have to recognize the great help *Tripwire 5* was in helping me to better understand not only continuity and change in African-American writing but also to redefine in this light our own tradition of rupture and tradition in Latin America. When Lorenzo Thomas writes, "What may be particularly noteworthy about African-American artistic movements in the 20th Century, however, is that they were interested (and highly successful) in creating models that quickly became mass culture," this is an exact description of Latin American experimentalism. (I can also very easily see how concepts such as Harryette Mullen's "vernacular innovation" can be of great insight in Mexican criticism). I think we have more things in common with the African-American idea of innovation than with the "white" one.

7. The *estridentistas*, for example, became our version of dadaism but with a nationalistic—and even provincial—turn! But before conceiving this as a strange twist to the European avant-garde let's remember that Marinetti and Khlebnikov also inscribed their experimentalism into a nationalistic discourse. So, instead of seeing the Mexican avant-garde as a mere and simplistic copy of an European tendency (as it has been considered in dominant Mexican criticism), we can see it as a legitimate part of a pattern of revolt through language all over the world at the beginning of the 20th Century.

8. I find an increasing possibility of dialogue between the "hybrid" experimentation techniques in Mexican poetics (mixing traditions, genres and forms with new purposes and perspectives) and the more recent American poets. A piece such as Mark Wallace's "On the Lyric as Experimental Possibility" (<http://wings.buffalo.edu/epc/authors/wallace/lyric.html>) reflects (unwittingly) the way experimentalism in Latin American has worked in the last decades: not as a denial of lyricism (and other traditional categories of writing) but as a way of transforming them radically.

(*vanguardia*) hasn't really been understood in the U.S.—nor in Mexico for that matter. So we need to be really careful not to take as symbolism, naturalism or pre-concrete writing what is not—when it is simply another way to challenge the same values and conventions that the English-based avant-garde is challenging with its post-structuralist methodology and canon<sup>9</sup>.

Also we must not forget that there is no hard mainstream in Latin America (as in the U.S.) simply because in Latin America the avant-garde won. The Mexican equivalent of the *New Yorker* (the official verse culture's frontline) is going to be much more open to new possibilities. So even our conservative mainstream accepts the foundations proposed by our modernism and the international avant-garde. This is also one of the complex reasons why in Mexico even if you're an extremist you have to interact with the more conservative national context. In the U.S. there are many reading circles and journals in which a post-language writer (to give an example) can have a place far from the mainstream anthologies, circles and magazines. In Mexico we don't have that (and maybe we don't want it. Do we want to loose our chaos and mixtures, do we want to have ways in which we can ignore one another?).

Our mainstream is really underground and our underground is really mainstream. We don't want to ignore each other. We want to have face-to-face battles. This is something that hasn't happened in the U.S., where, to my great surprise, most American academics do not take seriously a movement as important as Language Poetry—they in fact can ignore it in their journals and reviews as if it didn't exist! In Mexico, because of the chaos collision scene, this would never happen—I hope.

#### *Language, voice and body*

To continue enlisting differences between the American scene(s) and Mexican poetics in general, one can mention a very crucial one: voice and performance have been protagonists of American counterpoetics

9. Let me give just one example. In Mexico *free verse* was destroyed not through complex or abstract writing (as in the Jackson Mac Low tradition) as in the U.S. but through, for example, the rather humoristic experiments with slang and street puns by Efraín Huerta's *poemínimos* (minimal poems) and their characteristic vertical and fragmented antipoetical structure. This is a very different way to achieve the same: Whitman never again. But, of course, to a simplistic eye, Efraín Huerta can pass as another comical traditional (or populist) poet, who 'claims' and 'uses' his authority in traditional ways, when in fact his *poemínimos* are exactly the opposite. After Huerta, Mexican poetry can no longer be a lyrical rendering of the poet's feeling, but the fragmentation of language used to show how language itself determines meaning and plays with 'intimate' and 'public' discourse.

from the Harlem Renaissance and the Beats to today's San Francisco and New York poetry scenes. In Mexico this is not the case. We are wed to a text-based composition, where voice and body aren't even close to being as important as the written page.

In Mexico, we neither have a postmodern language-based performance nor something similar to the populist slam or spoken word poetry. Voice is simply not an issue. We consider the other-reader as the *only* true "authority" to make poetry outside the page. If a Mexican poet becomes the fundamental reader of his work, he is going to become the subject of suspicion and is going to be accused (for sure) of getting in the way of the text. At the same time we might have a big change on this matter in the coming years. Mexican poetry is now looking into ways of getting the body and the voice into the substantial presentation of poetry. The younger generations don't want to read in the same boring way Paz read. We want performance. We feel we need it. In this change of paradigms, the American performance tradition is becoming our definitive role model.

I find this very interesting, because while the contemporary American avant-garde is insisting (very positively of course) on destroying the authority of the poetic subject, its tradition of highly developed oral presentation can also be contrary to this purpose. Many American texts are undoubtedly composed for performance and that reinstalls the authority and *presence* of the poetic subject. Introducing chance operations, multimedia, experimenting with syntax, non-finished writing, etc.—American poets since the seventies emphasized the role of the reader and diminished the paradigm of an individualized poetic subject-genius behind-and-after the text, but at the same time continue to have a strong (and necessary, even!) presence of the poet at the moment of the unfolding of the text, because *without* him/her the text loses its purpose or greatest achievement. Isn't this paradoxical? In the upcoming development of performance-text dialects in Mexico, I am sure we are going to deal with these contradictions in ways still not predictable at all.

#### *P.S.*

After the crackdown of Mexican Modern poetics and a new era (more open to a new possibility of post-Octavio Paz rupture, postmodernism as our context, etc.) we are now witnessing a formation of different (even isolated) groups which are destroying the idea of an unitary discourse formation in Mexico. Since the nineties, a group of bilingual Indian poets has begun to form. Also a group of visual poets developed away from what they perceived as the "mainstream." Indian bilingual writers and visual poets aren't participating or being invited

in the dominating or underground magazines, so for the first time in recent Mexican history we are now seeing a fragmentation of literary construction, where one group can develop without taking the others into account, such as it has happened in the U.S., where the Chicano/as, Nuyoricans, Black writers, the academic poets, gay-lesbian poets, the Pulitzer Prize poets (to give them a name) and the Language writers can basically ignore each other without any damage to their scope of readers and interests.

Is this fragmentation (exemplified by Indian bilingual writers and visual experimental creators) going to be a characteristic of the new arenas in Mexican poetic discourse? Or are we going to find a way to again recover a problematic symposium of the whole such as we have managed relatively to do until now? How are we going to handle Chicano discourse in our idea of postmodern literature in Latin America<sup>10</sup>? And also, a new generation of young women writers seems to be appearing all over the country; this is going to be a major breakthrough for sure. They could potentially be the real revolutionaries against male dominated literary discourse in Mexico<sup>11</sup>.

Up to this point, poetics hasn't been divided or isolated from the other genres (this is again a point in which we differ greatly from the U.S.). Fiction (experimental and popular) and poetry are seen as one language. The same happens with criticism. So in Mexico when an avant-garde takes place it is developed both in prose fiction and in verse. Novelists and poets aren't in totally separated arenas of verbal transformation. So if somebody wants to follow the changes in post-modern poetics in Latin America, she or he needs to go into novels as much as into poetry books.

Another big difference is that current American poets are more domestic than we are. They can feed each other. In Mexico, for example, there is now a growing discussion on using English and getting in touch with contemporary American poetics (experimental and mainstream). Is that the case in the United States? Are American

poets feeling the need to write, translate or read in Portuguese or Spanish? I don't think so. I think Latin American poets have a big advantage here. We have it because we have been always under the demand of becoming hybrid and *eating up* Western Literature<sup>12</sup>. And also because a Mexican poet never writes as just a 'Mexican' writer but creates her/his work under and for a bigger context than American writers: Latin Americans work with the assumption that they belong to a larger cross-cultural tradition that travels from Argentina to Cuba to Mexico. We are used to thinking of ourselves as transnational discourse-designers. The radicalization of that feature is going to be a key instrument in Latin American poetics in the next decades.

10. This may sound strange to American ears—I mean this preoccupation with a subdivision of literary discourse. I know that in the U.S. nobody is going to worry because Science Fiction and Raymond Carver aren't seen as part of one unitarian or combined circle, but in Mexico we are now looking for broader critical systems to have our increasing boom in science fiction and underground urban-dirty realism (*realismo sucio*) narrative movements coordinated with other currents in prose fiction. We don't want to have isolated discourse areas. Are we being obsessive?

11. This situation, by the way, has in the past had American connections. And in the present we are waiting to see Jen Hofer's bilingual anthology of Mexican Women Contemporary poetics. That anthology might reveal some new tendencies in what is going to become the next generation of poetry in Mexico.

12. This kind of hybrid experimentalism is, according to early Brazilian modernist Oswald de Andrade, a counter-conquest based on devouring the European culture by the "evil savage" (not Rousseau's "noble savage"). In his "Pau Brasil Poetry Manifesto" of 1924 (the same year Breton's Manifesto appeared), De Andrade called this strategy "anthropophagy," a cannibalistic way of eating the Other (European Tradition) to transform it and take advantage of it from a resistance position. (Haroldo de Campos thought De Andrade's anthropophagy was a kind of Nietzschean transvaluation of all values). In De Andrade's anthropophagical philosophy we can again understand how Latin American experimentalism tends to cannibalize traditional forms for its own purposes of advancement. This assimilation, as I said before, can sometimes be wrongly viewed by outsiders as a mere repetition of tradition, when it is just a good way to deal with more artificial forms (in an Oulipian sense), a challenging way to work from and against "constraint."

from "miliband."

for Jules Boykoff

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## Creeping It Real: Brian Kim Stefans' "Invisible Congress" and the Notion of Community

Brian Kim Stefans' article "When Lilacs Last in the Door: Notes on New Poetry," published on Steve Evans' Third Factory website<sup>1</sup>, was originally slated for a column in *Poets & Writers*, but was finally rejected (for being too weird, one gathers). In this article, Stefans offers "Creep Poetry" (after Radiohead's "Creep") as a defining label for an emergent tendency among younger experimental poets. It's significant that the term is borrowed from the trendy domain of alternative rock: Stefans points out that the Creep Poets "wonder why the poetry world is not as interested in the 'edge' as the art and music worlds" in which figures like Cindy Sherman and Ornette Coleman enjoy a relatively greater amount of popular exposure and acceptance. The nature of this "edge," of course, is the main question, and the necessity of scare quotes points to the problematic that informs Stefans' discussion. "Edgy," like "alternative," "innovative," "independent," "organic" or "non-toxic," is one of a rapidly increasing number of unreliable adjectives subject to use by various loosely-corporate agencies who really mean by them "extremely marketable." It might be argued that most experimental poets have nothing to worry about, as their work will never be mistaken for marketable in any possible world; but in a culture where discursive nuance is continually taken for a microcosmic index of a more tangible network of material struggle, little things like this seem to matter a great deal. Especially suspect are labels that threaten to pigeonhole a style or movement as indebted (or indentured) to some predecessor or other, such as "Postlanguage" or "7th Generation New York" or "Post-neo-pre-Raphaelitism." One of the appeals of a term like "Creep" is its bratty indifference to literary genealogizing. The Radiohead song, obviously, is about not fitting in: about the pathos—and power—of orphanhood.

I won't spend a lot of time on some specific questions that bug me about Creep, such as why Stefans makes some of the cut-off points he does. (Why, for example, are Lisa Jarnot and Rodrigo Toscano Creeps but Sianne Ngai and Lytle Shaw not, as he claims?

1. Accessible via a link on Stefans' wonderful website *Arras*, at <http://www.arras.net/stefans.htm>. I suspect that I'm not supposed to quote from, allude to, or otherwise acknowledge the existence of anything on the Third Factory site, according to a warning label thereto attached (does the warning itself count?), but oh well, if I go to jail, I go to jail.

Can over-40 writers like Michael Gizzi or Bruce Andrews be considered Creeps?) I want instead to isolate a couple of his broader observations about the tendency, and then spin off from there. Stefans observes that

all the Creeps share ... a surprising tendency to communicate, to perform, to create social *interactivity*, and to expand beyond the small communities that have been their inherited legacy from previous American avant-gardes. They are often experimentalists, but have no interest in experiment for its own sake, at least if the results are not something like a public, often very entertaining, form of poetry, a sort of deviant form of street theater itself. The Creeps are almost universally very funny, though why there has been such a turn to humor in their poetry is matter for debate.

The eyebrow-raising element here is the claim that Creeps want to break out of the community model of experimental writing, a model that has held indomitable sway for decades, notably reinforced and codified in Ron Silliman's passionate introduction to *In the American Tree*. Even though I question the universal applicability of this claim to all the writers Stefans names, and even more whether it's really a good idea, it's refreshing just to see the thought given shape in print. The move outward to a public rather than a neighborhood arena, Stefans is quick to point out, does not mean that the Creeps are "simply assimilating experimental techniques into the mainstream" (as one might argue is the case with, say, the "Ellipticists," whom Stefans mentions politely but critically a couple of times). Although Stefans doesn't quite say it in this way, it's more the other way around: many writers (ones, I think, he might consider Creeps) are attempting to transport mainstream ingredients into experimental poetry, albeit in a radically messed-up form. Most significantly, Creeps often use the first-person pronoun in ways that challenge both traditional liberal humanist demands for unmediated presence and postmodern maledictions against lyric bourgeois subjectivity. Stefans uses Jennifer Moxley's "Wrong Life" as an example, pointing out that

like many Creep poems, hers is an extended apostrophe, a discourse aimed at an imaginary audience, an audience of the future perhaps but one that, in the scope of the poem, is not there. Several Creep poets ... will assume this mode of apostrophe, a stating-of-the-case before an invisible congress. Thus the "I" assumes a rhetorical function; not the "not-I" of common postmodern parlance, and yet not the "I" of the common lyric.

What these comments bring to my mind, oddly enough, is John Stuart Mill's "What Is Poetry?" with its famous distinction between poetry and oratory: "Oratory is heard; poetry is overheard." Stefans' "invisible congress" adds a neat metaphysical twist to this equation. In Mill's account, it is taken for granted not only that the speaker, whether poet or orator, is a unified subject, but that the reader / listener is equally unified. The postmodern turn has been to question the solidity of the addresser, but even in language-centered poetics, there has been relatively little consideration of the different possible spaces imagined (either by poet or reader) for the addressee. Stefans' account baffles Mill's overly rigid separation of poetry from public speech, but manages to retain the stimulating implications of "overhearing." The "imaginary audience" for the Creep Poet is itself overheard, or hypothesized in a way that approximates the absent engagement of overhearing. Take the impenetrable yet aggressively public scene of communication described in a poem like Stefans' own "Christopher Smart's America" from *Angry Penguins* (Harry Tankoos Books, 2000):

And when the sick man says "love me," a cloud crashes into a church.  
Believe in the nineteenth century, and supine enactments of power.  
What depths in the cellars of the odes? Am I simply trying to fool you?  
The mind drifts every so often, as the sparks suggest new arenas. We  
became friends at the dolphin show. That's bathos. When will they  
recognize my struggle to attain the plain?

At once numbly prosaic and spasmodically excessive, Stefans' work, here as elsewhere, forces a reevaluation of the ways in which language can be ornamental, a reevaluation that makes the reader ask not only "who could be saying this?" but "who could be listening?" Looked at from this angle, the poem's strangeness starts to seem motivated, as opposed to arbitrary or capricious.

Stefans says that the "I" of Creep Poetry "is often situated beneath the economic stratum of increased commercial activity that digital technology has brought on." True enough, and perhaps more importantly, so is the "you." The "desire to communicate" that he sees in Creep, the quest "for the sensation of constant exchange," is a heroic one, because it happens in a space filled with hegemonic interference and corporate molestation. Exchange in a context like this is bound to be conducted cryptically, like exchanges in wartime, in occupied territory. Not to say that Creep is inaccessible except to a few in-the-know freedom fighters, however; its garbled surface announces itself as contraband, as though it *wants* to be arrested. At the base of all this is a faith in communication itself, no matter how

deformed the means of transmission. And it is this that sets Creep (at least in the way I have appropriated the term) apart from the Ellipticists, for example, who seem more interested in the obstacles to expression, as aesthetic points of fascination in themselves, than in who put the obstacles there or whether they might explode in someone's face.

So how does Creep constitute a turn away from a community-based poetics? Only to the extent that it rejects the notion of a safe enclave, a privileged brotherhood of artistry in which the problems of the outside world are after all, *outside*, and at least there's that. It does this by raising the quixotic possibility of intercourse between experimental poetry and mainstream culture (mainstream, that is, in the sense of TV and Wal-Mart and international politics, not in the sense of "mainstream poetry," which is no more mainstream than geodesic domes or bow ties). The oratorical overhearing that transpires in Creep is like party-crashing, or sneaking into someone else's convention and willfully mistranslating the speeches. Its logic, that is, is homophonic, and this may be why so much Creep Poetry has the quality of seeming like homophonic or homolingistic translation, even when it's not. For example, these lines from Stefans' "The Cupcake Diaries" (also in *Angry Penguins*):

Style up drop kick, suffer invisible  
intentionality dago (day ol)  
a piss fervent contra-naturam  
staple blister lists rearward stank of the  
civilian next door burning contracts....

Or these lines from "lolabell" by Elizabeth Treadwell, a poet Stefans does not name, but who seems to me to fit the Creep description (I mean that in a *nice* way):

thought a boy apartment, taxi-cab, no early evening gum necessarily pleasant historians all night long, give cloister crooked muddy, protect her from almost kitchen stars. (*Isxmay* 6, 2001)

Passages like these take the staunch unswingingness of classical Language-centered poetics and subject it to the aesthetic of an ever more commodified, appropriated, and soundbitten landscape, in order to point up the fine line between swinging and unswinging—or more accurately, they demonstrate that the line is imaginary, that what is unswinging according to one habit of hearing may be so because it has caught the rhythm of a new wavelength being broadcast on a hitherto untunable station. It is the self-appointed task of

these poets to conjure up not only the DJs and playlists but the *listeners* of such stations: an "invisible congress" of Creeps. The thing about radio is that practically everything on it is controlled by someone or something you don't trust, and yet you always seem to manage to hear something interesting that maybe wasn't supposed to get on in the first place. As Cocteau and Spicer knew, that's where poetry comes from, so it makes sense that Stefans' modern-rock analogy leads us to the most commercial of metaphors. The more moderated, the more preprogrammed the medium, the more public fantasies and private fetishes will emerge in the static, like those supposed voices of the dead recorded by paranormal researchers. Radio, then, is for Creeps. Radio is available for perverse listening in a way that TV resists or absorbs. On the radio, one can hear what one wants to hear—the buzz and whir of production, if wished, rather than the air-brushed, crystalline, cabled-in crispness of the post-produced, already-consumed final commodity.

This is the old familiar concept of defamiliarization, but a very specific version of it: not just verbal estrangement with an eye to making new, which, at least ideally, is what all poetry does, but a bigger socio-discursive estrangement in which it is no longer enough merely to make it new (since global capitalism has cornered the market on that trick): it must be made spectacularly unusable. Photography and music, to name just a couple of the other arts, are always usable, no matter how transgressive or experimental, inasmuch as they operate directly on the senses. Any physical perception, whether sight or sound or touch or taste or smell, can be commodified by virtue of its sheer material immediacy, regardless of "content" or "form." Novels can't help being potential movies, and thus arguably are more directly sensorial; poetry, on the other hand, always starts as an intellectual activity. Sensual response is made the responsibility of the reader, and thus too unpredictable to manipulate into a larger institutional purpose<sup>2</sup>. Any teacher who has ever stood dumb before a student's unaccountable, academically unassimilable emotions in response to a poem knows this. Note that we're talking mainly about "experimental" poetry here—one reason there is even such a category as "mainstream" poetry is that it at least can be read as arranged prose, and thus more uniformly visualized or "translated." Its immediate effect as sound or image is negligible, except as carefully schematized euphony or

decoratively inert strophes.

Other features of Creep that Stefans points to are "run-on pacing that seems to take everything in," "off-beat humor that often strays just a little bit into solipsism," a "skating above sincere, often radical ideological concerns," and "a concern with sensation of language *unhinged*, not entirely beyond something someone could possibly say, but still coasting on every possibility open to language from within a performative aspect." The keynote here is one of failure or error: "run-on," "off-beat," "skating above," "unhinged." The various dead metaphors here are all related to mechanisms malfunctioning or agents miscalculating in some way. Stefans himself says that his "hope is that the name [Creep] will be rejected," and that he has himself "tried to reject it" but for various reasons, well, failed. Here too is the trope of getting it wrong, in this case knowingly and before the fact, which seems to be a major Creep stunt (Pee Wee Herman voice: "I *meant* to do that"). Even as a hedge against cooptation, this ploy is conspicuously redundant; as Stefans remarks, "There is obviously nothing marketable about the Creeps," and this is nowhere more true than in their flaunting their own inadequacy. Of course, even refusal and abjection can be (and are) co-opted these days, so there's no call to get complacent, but for the time being the Creeps take the approach of dismantling every known cultural apparatus (very inefficiently of course) and forcing a unilateral wipe. As Stefans writes:

If their tactic is to go over-the-top with lexical plenitude, neologisms, about-face turns to somewhat antique meters, rhythms that are either too fast or too slow to digest, then again reversals into the slipstream of paratactics and high technology, it is because they believe, like Rimbaud, that all values have to be reinvented.

As opposed to say, lo-fi, punk, or grunge strategies, Creeps adopt the most grotesque extremes of progressive kitsch: arpeggiated squeals of Moog fanfare without justification or apology. This could be seen as just an indulgence in guilty pleasure, or as an assault on value, or both. Again from Stefans' *Angry Penguins*, an excerpt from "Poems I Will Never Publish" (which begins "I've seen the best minds of my generation / go baroque"):

Pronouncements belying sideways palming its sweat while the peanut glandulars *ooh* and *ahh* to no sufficient facticity, spoiled as they've been by the effervescence of day's rashes. Can a slogan be more than a grump? they don't ask, and I don't argue with the rococo exchanges.

2. Of course, poetry is read aloud too. But I always think of spoken poetry, even when spoken by the author, as a specific *interpretation* of the poem that rules out other interpretations, whereas silent reading offers the possibility of multiple interpretations simultaneously, and with that much simultaneity going on, there's no room for sense-experience. If it's working correctly.

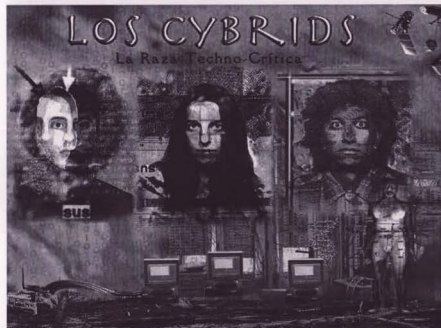


Amid the riot of this glossolalia, one can only focus on so much at a time, but what stands out here is the invocation of discourse as a barrage of flourishes, "rococo exchanges" against which the speaker puts up no fight. Indeed, he is the rococo ringmaster, magisterially ushering a series of unlikely chimeras through his hoop. The applause he earns may not necessarily be ours (though it is certainly mine), but the poem arranges that we imagine the applause nonetheless. In Stefans' Big Top, the Creepshow is the main attraction, and the qualities he sees as Creepy in his contemporaries are qualities that render them recognizable as denizens of his own brain's sinister, Bradburian tent folds.

All of this could sound like a negative critique, an indictment on the grounds of insularity. But this is exactly what I find attractive about Stefans' Creep (anti-)aesthetic: it's a movement that is formed within the mind of the reader, not the designs of a self-articulated community. Stefans' apprehension of Creepiness comes from his own Creepy imagination, his own desire to oversee a troupe of invisible, flea-like verbal acrobats. That the poets he names are readily conformable to such a desire says something about their shared use of certain techniques and their common concerns as postmodern artists, but more about a simultaneous resistance and porousness in their work that encourages progressive (but diverse) notions of community to be constructed from the margins outward (inward?)—there is no Creep manifesto, only an ever-growing passenger manifest, the names on which can be shuffled according to the needs of an equally various and multiple collective of readerly sensibilities.

## Los Cybrids

### Cybridnetics: an *Ese* from the Other Side of the Digital Divide



- i. Cybrid Manifesto
- ii. Webopticon Convergence
- iii. a foto *ese*



## I. CYBRID MANIFESTO

WARNING: This is not a self-indulgent exercise comparing the conveniences/inconveniences of digital technology for the PC user. This is not an encounter with technocratic fantasies, utopian visions nor renderings of maleficent technological dystopia. *No names.*

ATTENTION: This is a tactical assault on the cryptoreligious myths accompanying technological invention. It is a counteroffensive against the milli-corp monoculture that evolves and promotes Information Technology to stifle critical voices. ¡Eso!

BEWARE: We are not tech-optimists, digi-pushers, nor cyber-fanáticos. We are not neo-Luddites or Chicano hippies. We are *criticones*, techno-informants of the 'other' kind. We are . . .

*LOS CYBRIDS: La Raza Techno-Critica.*

*Los Cybrids: La Raza Techno-Critica* is a junta of three poly-ethnic cultural diggers of the Latino sort dedicated to the critique of cyber-cultural negotiation via techno-artístico activity. *Los Cybrids* ascribe to the increasingly widening liminal spaces of culture, hybridity and decentered identities reinforced by the new electronic technologies. As "Latino" artists working with digital technologies, we represent a demographic disproportionately underrepresented in the frenzied race to be connected. Our work employs performance, *burla* and high-tech art to undermine the passive acceptance and unacknowledged overarching social, cultural and environmental consequences of Information Technologies (IT).

The proliferation of IT through the mind-spinning matrix of dot-coms, 'e-business,' portals, virtual communities, the global village, and e-life intensifies the power structure of the global capitalist military complex. The marriage between world-governmental agencies, transnational corporations and global military forces dominates and controls the proliferation of IT for short-term profits. The celebrated freedom to access limitless information masks the meta-surveillance system of the Global Information Infrastructure.

*Los Cybrids* read "cyberspace" as a cultural artifact and archetype for access/desire, body/space, culture/globalization, and surveillance/ freedom. We resist the idea that cyberspace provides a "level playing field" on which cultural difference is immaterial. Underlying notions of cyberspace include the idea that all people can or should gain access to "white male middle-class culture." The promoters of the "Digital Divide" feed into this inequity by creating an imperative for 'marginalized' people in and outside of the US to ascribe to and strive for access to the white male middle-class ideology of a cultural geography without difference, friction-free capitalism and unfettered cultural harmony. *Los Cybrids* obliterate this false ideal of *equal-access-to-all*, suggesting that power inequalities are perpetuated, not solved, in the new geography of cyberspace.

*Los Cybrids* incite our extended communities to a radical diálogo by challenging them to digital duels and virtual violence around stereotypical renderings of culture, economics, surveillance and human forms. It is from the center of the Silicon Empire that *Los Cybrids* upload Ideological Bacteria (IB) on the information laden messianic chants of the new technology gods! *Los Cybrids* launch through the world this incendiary manifesto of ours, because we want to free this land from the gangrene of e-CEO's, e-business, and e-Gates. For too long have Latinos, communities of color and, artists been dealers in second-hand software and tech manufacturing. They need to be freed from the numberless "virtual," non-profit do-gooders, and corporate whores that cover them like so many second hand ponchos. To those who claim that every effort must be made to extend Internet access, *Los Cybrids* say ERROR! It is the *business world's* purpose to facilitate, promote and enhance the cyber-experience, it is *our* purpose to subvert it. *Onale, adelante.*

## II. WEBOPTICON CONVERGENCE

The world wide web is transforming us into 24 hour / 7 day a week colocated information transfer points. Technology producers, having succeeded in promoting a cosmological shift into information dominant culture world wide are now sneaking electronic tentacles into all areas of our lives. As the web moves into a more mobile "evernet" phenomenon of non-stop wireless connectivity for information transfer, further systems of tracking and surveillance are brought online. It's the Webopticon, the policing device of the international e-con order, the latest weapon in the continuing war on the poor and communities of color.

Racial profiling assures that people of color are subject to an incredibly sophisticated array of technological investigation equipment to identify, segregate and target them, and facilitate a smoother transfer into the prison system. Simultaneously, the privatization of prisons, enactment of three strikes laws, and condemnation of youth to adult prisons all converge to make sure the poor and people of color will stay in jail.

In the barrio, digital red-lining by the police is being perfected, as people are tracked before any crime is committed. Not to be left behind in the information age, cops brag about their mobile computing/wireless data services units. Beloved computers, cellular phones, PDAs, and the world wide web provide the mechanism and network for the collection and transfer of tracking data such as fingerprints, DNA prints, information from local, state and national police databases, information from FBI and international agency databases, location tracking and more. Fingerprints, which used to take weeks to confirm, can now be checked roadside. Immigrants can now be checked through the INS' biometric computer system IDENT, which has 227 terminals around the country that currently contain fingerprints and pictures of nearly two million people for instant digital identification.

Even more intrusive, DNA databases are being developed as the FBI and each of the 50 states build interlinked, computerized databases of blood and tissue samples. In the US, Germany and Canada, DNA collection has expanded from people convicted of violent crimes, to people arrested for violent crimes, to all individuals arrested for any offense—as many as 15 million people a year in the US alone. In the United Kingdom, Australia, and the U.S., police have been successful



*El Webopticon: Sistema de Vigilancia  
Watchate!*

in demanding that all individuals in a particular area voluntarily provide DNA samples or face being considered a suspect—a profound invasion of privacy. Amnesty International tells us that "incarceration has become one of the fastest growing businesses in the U.S.A., generating large profits..." Privately owned prisons must be kept full, to the tune of a 90 to 95 per cent capacity needed to guarantee profitable rates of return. A recent National Criminal Justice Commission report estimated that at the current rate of change in the prison population, by the year 2020, six out of every ten black men will be behind bars.

And the democratizing and liberating world wide web? Eighteen states in the US operate web sites that list the names, pictures, criminal records and sentences for current inmates and those on parole for public view. The website that the Florida prison system maintains with inmate and parolee data recorded more than 2.2 million hits in December of 2000. Maricopa County, Arizona offers 24 hour access to its "jail cam," where a person browsing the web can actually view people being booked, searched, processed and detained in county holding cells. More and more states are promising to get these systems online.

The concept of "do your time" is being eradicated as criminal records become so commonly accessible. Youth in communities of color are condemned to new forms of injustice by this new digital convergence of surveillance, tracking and communications technologies. It turns

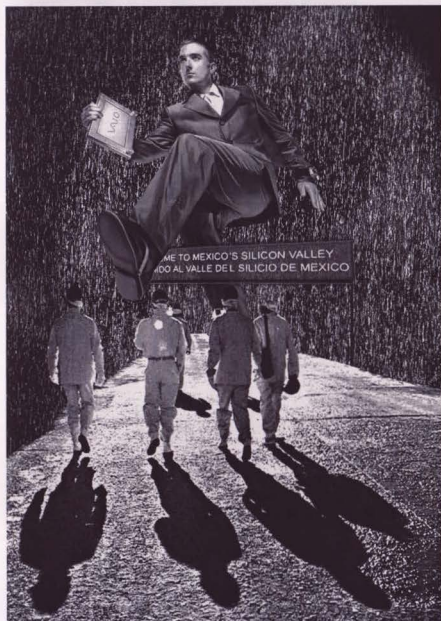
into racial "webfiling" when, as the US Department of Justice acknowledged in August of 1999, black men and women were at least 6 times more likely than whites to have been in prison at year end in 1997.

Meanwhile, surveillance cameras are all over public space, and are not only set up to recognize people's faces in the street, but to spot "abnormal" behavior, such as moving too fast or too slow, or lingering in a place for too long, and thereby "predict" when a crime is about to be committed. We are constantly being watched: on the street, at work, on public transit, in schools, in government offices and online. And it's gonna get worse: The US Patriot Act insures that we'll be targets of new forms of integrated technological harassment through further surveillance, biometrics and screening. The Enhanced Border Security and Visa Entry Reform Act of 2002 requires all Visas and travel and entry documents use biometric identifiers by October of 2004.

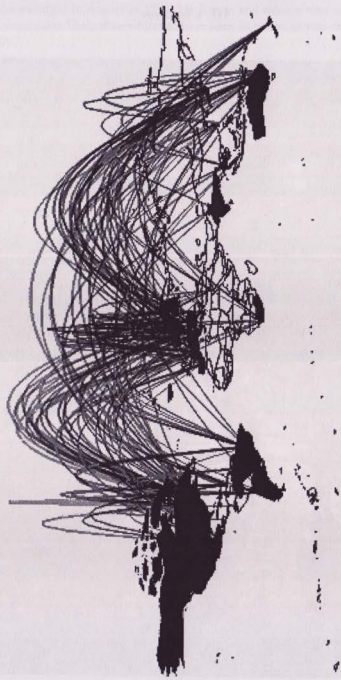
As the Pan Capitalist Judeo Christian Military Industrial Entertainment Prison Complex greedily ratchets up the latest phase of its Perpetual War, we watch the acceleration of militarization, regimentation and the denigration of democracy as covert US operations become overt, sanctioned and institutionalized. Yes, the United States is the only country condemned for international terrorism by the World Court. Yes, the United States alone vetoed a United Nations Security Council resolution calling on all states to observe international law. Yes the United States opposes the International Criminal Court. Perhaps more surveillance of the Secretary of State, Attorney General, FBI, CIA and other inept and repressive elements in our midst should be called for, rather than increased persecution at US borders with Mexico.

The current constellation of computer systems, the e-economy's propaganda system, and world wide web networking and connectivity promote the Webopticon. The Bad news is: you do not need to be connected, to be affected. With such advancements in technologies proven ineffective in deterring terrorism but vastly effective in promoting racial injustice and controlling domestic populations, we need much broader talk about the racial divide online and digital convergence offline.

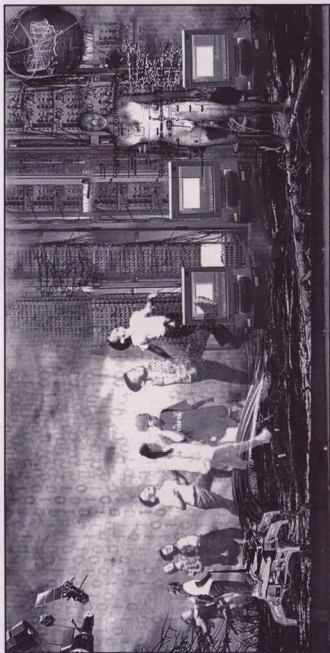
### III. a foto ese



*High Sweat Tech Shop—the e-economy at the cutting edge of capitalism.*



*The Pinche Global Information Infrastructure*



*¿Somos Digital?  
Pues, the last one to cross the digital divide is a rotten egg!*

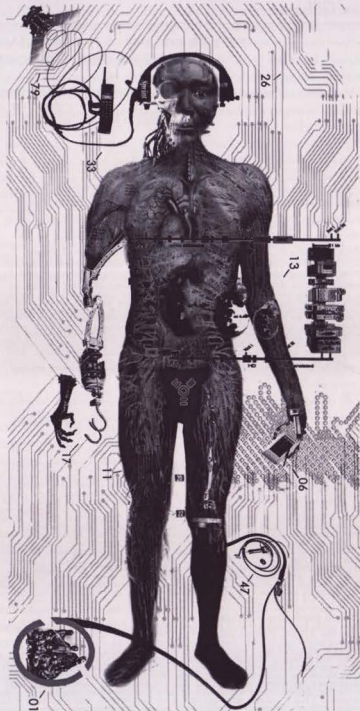




*Techno-Promesas: Putografía Virtual*  
(Installation Detail)



*Las Cybrids Milico-Urban Invasion*  
(Performance Photo)



*The Humaquina: Manifest Tech-Destiny*



## re:Reading the Active Reader Theory

"a Mars a day makes your teeth rot away."

—Anne, age 10

(quoted in Buckingham 1993: 259)

There's a particularly offensive advertisement currently being displayed in various subway stations around New York City. The ad is for King Cobra Premium Malt Liquor, and features a slim, well-tanned, apparently naked brunette covered from just below the shoulders to a little above the knees with a superimposed King Cobra bottle label. The accompanying text reads: "THERE MIGHT BE SOMETHING FOR YOU BEHIND MY LABEL," and, more ambiguously: "THIRTY MINUTES PASSES SO FAST!" (Is this a reference to the time it takes the average imbibor of King Cobra to polish off a 40 ounce? Is it a reference to some kind of sexual act? Is it a reference to how long one might be "pleasured" by this ad if the subway is delayed?) The smiling woman in the ad stands against a wavy metallic background that approximates stacked beer kegs, and she stands fairly comfortably for someone who for whatever reason has only one leg.

At my local subway station, various people have written comments on the ad in black marker and ballpoint pen. The most prominent intervention reads: "WOMEN ARE WORTH MORE THAN THIS." Another says: "Stop Rape Culture," although someone else has crossed-out "Rape" and substituted "ONE LEGGED CULTURE." Another person has written: "STOP Sexism" and drawn an "unhappy face" next to the phrase. Yet another respondent wrote in pen on the woman's forehead: "I had a King cobra in my mouth last night," and beneath this has written: "by the way, this ad sucks." Another person has written off to the side: "I got one of these" (I'm not sure what the "one" refers to); the same person may have written: "go *Cobra*." Clearly, the ad has initiated a great deal of active engagement and dialogue with its rather crudely and conventionally formulated—using sex to sell product—message.

In the 1970s, British scholars affiliated with the University of Birmingham cultural studies program (specifically, the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies [CCCS]) began conducting research on audience responses to popular culture and mass media, especially television. This research was undertaken partly as a reaction to 1950s

and 60s Frankfurt School-inspired dismissals of most mass media and consumer culture as brainwashing and stupor inducing. The research was also presented as an alternative to mass communications media effect theories which attempted to prove by using empirical, quantitative research that in general people passively absorb the mainstream media's dominant political and economic messages. However, within media effects studies there began to arise a certain degree of dissatisfaction with the rigidity of this approach, and some media effects scholars began to propose a "uses and gratifications" model in which people took from the media what they wanted and needed. This entailed a more active role for media consumers, but left them isolated in their use of media for private satisfaction or achieving personal objectives.

Research undertaken by the Birmingham School and CCCS sought to disprove claims made by mass communications media effects scholars that the media overwhelmingly determines audience responses to it; at the same time, it challenged the notion of the isolated and de-contextualized media consumer as posited in the "uses and gratifications" approach. Instead, British cultural studies focused on the idea that audiences actively, and very often critically, engage with media products (later, this idea of interaction was extended to consumer products, as utilized by subcultures such as punks and working-class teenage girls). British cultural studies also situated audience members within various relations of power, i.e., their socio-economic subject positions; the relation of the consciousness informed by these subject positions to the concrete information and imagined environments presented by the media; the ways in which domestic power relations between men and women and parents and children influence how, what, and when media is consumed in the home; and, to a lesser extent, who controls access to the media in the first place.

British cultural studies endeavored to prove with its own brand of empirical, ethnographic, interview-reliant research that an audience member's social, economic, cultural, and political background plays a significant role in how she or he engages with the media. The other important contribution British cultural studies made to audience research was in demonstrating—again, empirically—that audience members are not, in fact, passive dupes of the media, and that audiences actively engage in varying degrees with the "texts" presented to them. As cultural studies evolved, and particularly around the time it was being imported to North America and Australia, the focus on active audiences was retained and increasingly emphasized, while many of the accompanying social and cultural frameworks for audience

responses—frameworks that had their origins in Marxist theory—were left back in Birmingham.

There is a similar, though not directly related, version of audience response theory called the “active reader theory,” which has become the dominant mode of understanding how contemporary experimental poetry is read in North America. In this argument, experimental texts activate and liberate a reader because of their formal openness (i.e., narrative disjunctiveness) and semantic ambiguity (i.e., indeterminacy and play), thereby making the production of meaning a collaborative effort between author and reader. In her essay “The Rejection of Closure,” Lyn Hejinian offers a textbook definition of the activating potential of the “open text” (2000). Hejinian notes that the distinction she makes between open texts and closed texts is indebted to the one described by Umberto Eco in *The Role of the Reader* (1979: 47–66); it also bears a strong resemblance to the difference between “the writerly” and “the readerly” as outlined in Roland Barthes’ *S/Z* (1974: 4–5). In other words, this isn’t an idea limited to the domain of experimental poetry—or literature, for that matter, since it also has its place within the visual art world, though much less so. But Hejinian’s definition is useful because of the succinctness and clarity of its formulation:

The “open text,” by definition, is open to the world and particularly to the reader. It invites participation, rejects the authority of the writer over the reader and thus, by analogy, the authority implicit in other (social, economic, cultural) hierarchies. It speaks for writing that is generative rather than directive. The writer relinquishes total control and challenges authority as a principle and control as a motive. (2000: 43)

This is in opposition to the “closed text,” which is said to impose its meaning on the reader via a one-way channel of communication from author to audience: “We can say that a ‘closed text’ is one in which all the elements of the work are directed toward a single reading of it. Each element confirms that reading and delivers the text from any lurking ambiguity” (Hejinian 2000: 42–43). Like a King Cobra malt liquor ad.

It’s not my intention here to prove or disprove these claims for the “open text” (though the notion that with the “open text” the “writer relinquishes total control” [my emphasis] seems exaggerated). In the case of certain open texts, I’d tend to agree with Hejinian. In the case of others, their one-dimensional pursuit of formalist aesthetic effects and their dogged disruption of conventional modes of communication negate dialogue and re-assert more forcefully than ever an

author’s authority and dominance over the reader. Because if the “open text” must perform in a certain way to have certain effects, isn’t the reader ultimately rendered passive in the process, or at least subordinate? And more crucially for the argument I’m trying to make: If the “open text” is so open, then why does it appear to always function in the same way for all readers, however different their backgrounds? As British cultural studies audience response research reiterates over and over again, different audiences respond differently to different cultural products; they even respond differently to the same cultural products at different times.

This has as much, if not more, to do with an audience member’s social, economic, cultural, political, and geographical situation as it does with the properties—formal or otherwise—of cultural products: “[H]ow people read television will necessarily be based on their own experiences—what kind of jobs they have, where they live, their educational backgrounds, memberships in unions or political parties, as well as gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and class” (Seiter 1999: 15). By making a reader’s response dependent upon how a text performs its formal techniques, the active reader theory posits an isolated, ideal, and undifferentiated consumer of the avant-garde text who makes meaning in a social vacuum. Ultimately, difference is inscribed in this reading subject by the experimental text, not the other way around. The most successful experimental texts make the inscription of difference a collaborative process between reader and text; but, again, this is not to say that the formally innovative text is the only one capable of doing this.

Thus, my goal here is to rescue—for now, in a cursory way—the reader from her or his state of uncritical passivity during those periods of time in her or his life when she or he is not in contact with open texts or approved forms of closed texts (Hejinian mentions “detective fiction” [2000: 41])—that is, during most of her or his life. Claims for experimental texts become elitist and supercilious when it’s assumed that readers are only activated when they come into contact with the formal devices employed by the avant-garde text. While no proponent of the active reader theory would ever declare this outright, it is, in many ways, the unstated assumption at the base of the active reader theory as it exists in contemporary experimental poetry (and fiction, and hypertext, and visual art, and . . .). This doesn’t even begin to address the fact that the active/passive binary is woefully insufficient for understanding how a reader reads *any* text—open or closed. Neither does it take into consideration Ien Ang’s crucial insight that “active” does not necessarily equal “powerful”: “In other words, audiences may be active in a myriad of ways in using and

interpreting media, but it would be utterly out of perspective to cheerfully equate 'active' with 'powerful', in the sense of 'taking control' at an enduring structural or institutional level" (1996: 139-140). In comparison with this "taking control" at an enduring structural or institutional level, "the meaning-making collaboration between writer and reader is secondary.

Personally, I'm usually much more sympathetic to open forms as opposed to closed ones, but this doesn't mean I'm convinced open forms function in the way active reader theorists say they do, or that they are valuable because of the neat-looking—and sounding—formal tricks they perform, or that I can't think of an equal number of liberatory closed forms. Again, there are very few forms as closed and unidirectional as catchy candy bar slogans and sexist malt liquor ads, but that doesn't mean they don't, as Hejninian comments in the quote above, "invite participation, reject the authority of the writer over the reader and thus, by analogy, the authority implicit in other (social, economic, cultural) hierarchies." They most certainly do, and maybe even more immediately and directly than many open forms.

Unlike the audience response research of British cultural studies, the active reader theory in experimental poetry isn't all that interested in a reader's subject position outside of her or his encounter with the text, and has never presented a single piece of empirical evidence that what it proposes is true in reality, or in comparison with texts that don't share the same set of experimental techniques and methods. Some form of empirical research would need to be undertaken before declarations of an open text's *a priori* liberatory effect could be asserted as fact. As David Morley writes: "The demonstration that theoretically 'anything goes,' in terms of the potential polysemey of any text, is very different from the demonstration that empirically 'just anything' happens when it comes to the actual reading of television texts" (1989: 39). But as my examples at the beginning of this essay of children subverting product slogans and commuters critically engaging with manipulative advertisements hopefully show, readers and audiences are active with all kinds of texts. On the other hand, the avant-garde's active reader theory would seem to propose that until a reader comes into contact with the formally experimental text, she or he is simply a passive receptacle of the culture around her or him. Otherwise, why all the attention paid to a text's formal devices?

British and American cultural studies have published a wide range of materials on audience interaction with day-time and prime-time soap operas, primarily because it's a genre that's scoffed at by television critics and large sections of the general public, is considered structurally formulaic, is mostly watched by women, and is viewed at

home where women's work has traditionally taken place. In almost every instance, these studies prove that different women from different backgrounds watch different programs in different ways. It's not simply a matter of whether or not they would be *more* liberated if they were reading Gertrude Stein instead of watching *Days of Our Lives*; numerous detailed studies of actual—as opposed to theoretical—audience responses would need to take place before one could convincingly make this argument. And in any case, to argue for a particular kind of text is to impose the very authority and hierarchies the "open text" is supposed to subvert. But more importantly, it's to ignore the social and historical conditions in which the act of reading—including watching TV—occurs.

The primary danger that accompanies both the British cultural studies theory of audience response and the avant-garde's active reader theory is overestimating the political power of reading (which, of course, is not the same as literacy). In her book *Seeing Through the Eighties: Television and Reaganism*, Jane Feuer makes the ridiculous claim that: "Perhaps those of us who spent the eighties watching TV could claim to have been the true radicals of the decade . . ." (1995: 16). Tell that to ACT UP, the anti-nuclear movement, the coalition to stop US support of the Contras in Central America, the air traffic controllers' union and striking Hormel meatpackers, homelessness activists, etc. There's a similar danger lurking within the active reader theory and its narrow focus on the personally liberatory potential of a text's formal devices. Henry Giroux writes:

Reading texts becomes a hermetic process removed from larger social and political contexts, and questions of power are engaged exclusively within a politics of representation. Such readings largely function to celebrate a textuality that has been diminished to a bloodless formalism and the nonthreatening, if not accommodating, affirmation of indeterminacy as a transgressive aesthetic. (2000: 69)

In responding to this critique, active reader theorists might find it useful to familiarize themselves with the "ethnography of reading" that has informed much of British cultural studies audience response theory (Morley 1992: 130). And both theories of audience interactivity shouldn't neglect the political economy and "field of cultural production" within which mass media and cultural products are produced amid a struggle over resources and capital, both symbolic and economic (Bourdieu 1993: 30, 183).

Because as television scholars occasionally point out, audience response research sometimes elides the fact that audiences might not

necessarily be satisfied with standard television fare: "What we find, very frequently, in audience data is that the audience is making the best of a bad job" (Brunsdon 1997: 123). This is where experimental texts come in: by providing alternatives (except when they become "a bad job" audiences are "making the best of"). But this is as much a question of alternative content as it is one of open forms, perhaps more so: "Ideology is less a matter of the inherent linguistic properties of a pronouncement than a question of who is saying what to whom for what purposes" (Eagleton 1991: 9). Within contemporary poetry, it should be clear that as the Iowaization of the avant-garde proceeds unabated, no amount of disjunctive formal techniques can disguise—or render "cool" or "weird"—mostly conventional sentiments expressed in mostly conventional diction. Thus, there might be more of a need for alternative contents, alternative ideologies, and an "ethnography of reading" than there is for active readers experiencing the aesthetic effects of experimental forms via a de-contextualized relationship of reader to text.

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#### Mark Nowak

from 1916: *The Mesabi Miners' Strike Against U.S. Steel*

26 MAY 1916

*Of course  
almost  
all labor  
struggles*

*begin as  
particularistic.  
One miner,  
John Zutke,*

*30 years of age,  
married, is  
"killed";  
"Short Strike"*

*is the headline  
in one newspaper  
(The Ely Miner).  
One miner*

*is crushed to death  
by a cave-in  
"at the Genea mine of  
the Oliver Mining company."*

*The newspaper  
recounts that  
"the day shift at  
the North Chandler mine*

*refused to go to work  
Monday morning  
and the night shift that  
evening followed suit."*

*The miners,  
The Ely Miner states,  
"were of the opinion  
that their pay*



was not up to the standard  
paid by other companies  
for the same class of work  
and hence the strike."

There is one strike  
against you already:  
*People recognize  
some condition*

*and problem they have  
in common, and  
make the effort  
to work together*

*to change or solve it.*  
Prior to our coming here  
(There is one strike  
against you:)

there was that civil strife  
in Finland. We lived  
in poverty and hunger,  
eating mostly silakka (Finnish sprat).

My husband, Nilo,  
and his brother  
were involved in that struggle, too.  
It was the White Guard

against the Red.  
It was a class war—  
poor against the rich.  
John Zitke was buried

under a slide of more  
than 50 feet of ore and dirt;  
it took co-workers  
12 hours to find his body.

There / is / one / strike:  
*The unique and extraordinary  
character of working-class  
self-organization*

*has been that it has  
tried to connect  
particular struggles  
to a general struggle*

*in one quite special way.*  
It has set out,  
as a movement,  
to make real what is

*at first sight  
the extraordinary claim  
that the defense  
and advancement*

*of certain particular interests,  
properly brought together,  
are in fact in the general interest.*  
Even my sister,

who had food and money,  
no children, refused to give us anything,  
although she knew we had nothing.  
So one time we considered it no sin

when we stole a few potatoes  
from her big field.  
The accident occurred at  
about 2 o'clock this morning.

The *Duluth News Tribune*  
ended with these words:  
"Deceased is survived  
by his wife and two children."

One Strike? *And this moment  
comes not once and for all  
but many times; is lost  
and is found again;*

*has to be affirmed  
and developed,  
continually,  
if it is to stay real.*



28 MAY 1916

"strike" "robberies"  
"swindle" This man was  
supposed to pay  
at the rate of \$2 a day.

*It is, however,  
somewhat surprising  
that the bourgeoisie  
should remain*

*so complacent  
in the face "theft"  
of the thunderclouds  
"burglary"*

*which are gathering  
overhead and  
"suicide" "theft"  
grow daily more*

*threatening.  
"theft"  
"infringement"  
"theft"*

Tony Marzante and  
John Arigoro,  
charged with stealing  
brass and iron

from the Shenango  
Furnace company  
in the town  
of Great Scott,

"theft"  
"strike"  
"brawl"  
"assault"

"beaten" I worked  
12 days, and it became  
so unendurable it was  
impossible to work.

"brawls" "attack"  
"sacrilege" It was  
35 below zero,  
and we worked

over 16 hours a day.  
"wages" "theft"  
While moving steam shovels  
in water like this (Indicating),

to your shoulders almost.  
"swindle" "brawl"  
"wifebeating" *How can  
the middle classes*

*read about these  
things in the newspapers  
every day  
without showing*

*some anxiety as  
to the consequences  
who  
were held*

to the district court  
by Justice  
of the Peace  
J.W. McCleary

of this place  
"theft"  
and a streetfight"  
My hands and my feet

used to freeze  
and I couldn't sleep.  
"theft"  
"sacrilege"

I would go home,  
lay down and rest,  
and in the morning  
I would go back

and slave on the rails—  
carrying rails.  
*Do they not see that  
was sentenced to pay*

finer of \$10 each yesterday  
by judge Martin Hughes  
in district court at Virginia.  
*the individual crimes*

*of which they read*  
"swindles, thefts,  
robberies with violence,  
and serious family quarrels"

*will one day*  
*culminate*  
*in universal*  
*revolution?*

Many a time  
my fellow workers  
and myself fell down  
under the rails.

"robbery"  
"a [fatal] attack  
on a policeman"  
"a bastardy order"

The fines were suspended  
and the two young men,  
neither of whom had previously been  
in trouble, were dismissed.

*Meanwhile national affairs*  
*take their course,*  
*"abandonment"*  
*whether the middle class*

*realise*  
*what is*  
*happening*

*or not,*

*and one fine day*  
*the property-holding class*  
*"poisoning"*  
*will be overwhelmed*

*by events far beyond*  
*their comprehension*  
*and quite outside*  
*their expectations.*

## The Gordon Matta-Clark Memorial Park Project

Despite the recent economic slowdown, the real estate market in the San Francisco Bay Area has yet to fully recover from the years of frenzied speculation that accompanied the so-called New Economy boom of the late 90s and early 00s. At its peak, housing vacancy rates in San Francisco were down to less than one percent, and rents skyrocketed. Property owners cashed in, while tens of thousands of low income families were squeezed out. At the same time, new office construction, often subsidized by municipal and state programs, took off, and the city began to become littered with a series of "live-work" loft buildings, designed to take advantage of tax loopholes and lure high income dot-com companies and e-commuters.

Meanwhile, activist groups staged protests and art actions, often articulated around issues of neighborhood cohesion and the protection of public space. One such action, apparently still ongoing, is the "reclaiming" of unused or cast-off property, in order to establish the Gordon Matta-Clark Memorial Parks. The first such park is situated on an oddly-shaped bit of land in the Noe Valley District, squeezed between a public dog-run and the back-ends of a row of private properties.



Gordon Matta-Clark Memorial Park, Southern & Northern views, respectively.



The plot of land reclaimed by the as yet unknown activist(s) is inaccessible, surrounded by fences and locked at either entrance. By naming this park after Gordon Matta-Clark, there is a clear reference to Matta-Clark's "Fake Estates" project in the early 70s, where the artist purchased a number of "surplus land" sites through New York City auctions, turning the "useless" plots of leftover property into a kind of found architecture, at once banal and profoundly social.

Here, the San Francisco "parks" bearing his name take Matta-Clark's project further, aiming to "liberate" private space from the logics of ownership and usurious ground rent and thus create a commons by an act of what must be thought of as a kind of conceptual squatting. By all accounts, these plots of land have not been purchased, but simply labelled and thus reframed. Indeed, the locks that keep the parks inaccessible to the public only become "visible" when placed under the sign of the "public park." Only then do the logics of private property—wherein even unused, "surplus" space needs to be mapped, fenced, and kept off limits—become manifest, especially in the context of an urban geopolitics suffering from an affordable housing crisis and an ever diminishing sense of collective access to the city one lives and works in. The Gordon Matta-Clark Memorial Park project produces not only bizarre new conceptual mappings of what the Situationists used to call "psychogeography," but has also begun to take the property reclamation process of "tagging" to a three-dimensional realm.

Rob Halpern

## Narrating Class: Reading Camille Roy's *Craquer*

*Craquer, an essay on class struggle*

Camille Roy

2nd Story Books, 2002

IN ITS MODEST 37 PAGES, CAMILLE ROY'S RECENT *TOUR DE FORCE* OUTFLANKS EVEN THE THICKEST *BILDUNGS-ROMAN* IN THE CANON! CLASS STRUGGLE IS NOT A CASUALTY OF POSTMODERNISM! NEW NARRATIVE STILL PACKS A CRITICAL PUNCH IN ROY'S NEW WORK!

While reading Camille Roy's *Craquer*, I found myself conjuring sentences like these. And though the book merits the exclamatory remarks, it closes with a meditation on storytelling that distills the essence of the work better than any of my headlines:

Lately I've been thinking that I am a wave, and all the stories in the world are the water. I'm among stories just like all the other waves. Which part of the water belongs to which wave doesn't matter. It doesn't apply. Personally, this means I can't fall apart without changing into something else, other stories, different ones. This finds a solution in dissolution. Somehow it relaxes me.

Every convergence of material and economic forces enables the telling of countless stories. But such forces—as they pressure and delimit "all the stories in the world"—are themselves forever migrating or mutating, rendering those stories ephemeral, and the forms in which they appear volatile. Material volatility is not the same as subjective flux, however; and the material in the telling will never relax because it only exists in tension with those forces. Roy's way of imagining "a solution in dissolution," then, suggests a dialectical process that cannot yield a permanent *resolution*. Despite the appearance of a relaxing conclusion, this tension won't acquiesce comfortably, not even in the utopian water image of never-ending change. For this image is, perhaps unwittingly, also an image of stasis and, even as it appears to resolve the narrative, it remains a mystified ideal, one that belies the unlivable and unsustainable network of social conditions in which we find ourselves—call it postmodernity, or the global market, or whatever. And so, the image with which the book closes marks the limit beyond

which those conditions can no longer be narrated, whether because of the class position performed by the writing, or the social constraints to which the writing refers.<sup>1</sup>

But *Craquer* does not presume to transcend the contradictions that implicate it; nor does it pretend to resolve the problems to which it critically responds. Instead, the work mediates those contradictions *otherwise* by making explicit some of the tools and strategies by which the narrative is constructed. Here lay the politics of the work. In *Craquer*, the means of production—economic and ideological—are indissolubly linked to narrative; and Roy intervenes to make the narrative hardware *seizable*. As part of that process of rendering, the work provokes an engaging series of questions: Can one be whoever one wants simply by telling an *other* story? Are social positions democratically distributed and equally available for everybody's occupation? Is narrative transformation an indeterminate process or a historical one? And, further, does the phrase "all the stories in the world" refer to a bad infinity in which equivalent narratives float independent of the material conditions that determine them?

Art often draws attention to the social contradictions within which it is caught today by way of ironic tropes and techniques ruled by cold-detachment. Roy's method offers a salutary corrective to this tendency as her work implicates its own position while acceding to something rather unfashionable, something *like* truth. I put the slant on *like* because *Craquer* performs historical truth—together with the self—narratively as something that can never quite equal itself. *Likening* displaces *being*. The truth to which the writing accedes involves a process whereby stories are forever vanishing into other stories. This endless process of vanishing, rather than depending upon the dissolution of the narrator, requires her appearance together with the laying bare of the techniques productive of that appearance. The critical environment thereby generated is one of dis-equilibrium in which

*Craquer* stunningly undoes the terrible ruse of self-identity, effectively undermining the assumptions of autobiography and good subject-hood alike. Most remarkably, it does all this without relying on cynical device, and, what's more, without undermining something *like* belief.

But what could my case possibly be, given that the prospect of verifying any of these family stories is unbearable, as well as irritating? I've given up. That's my "case". I don't care what the truth is—not enough to pursue it, anyway.

Paradoxically, it is by negating such a pursuit that Roy is able to further it *otherwise*. In fact, when one reckons one's own practice into the dynamics of narrative dissolution—when one makes one's tools and methods explicit—the recognition of truth's vanishing moments fosters the emergence of two critical qualities: honesty and accuracy. Roy's *Craquer* offers a model performance of just such a reckoning. While "truth" is always a fiction, honesty and accuracy—like the "sincerity" of the Objectivists—are ethical standards that inform a practice. Key to such a practice is not the veracity of content, but rather the encounter with the limits of form; and this encounter is always social, always political.

As if auspiciously born under the signs of Blanche DuBois and Georg Lukács, *Craquer's* narrator "Camille" intervenes in the construction of her own "case" by telling "dubious stories" (and "craquer," we are told, perhaps dubiously, was a word commonly used during the French Revolution to mean "to tell dubious stories") stories inseparable from her synopacted metacommentary on the practice of telling itself. Briefly, the work narrates, by way of anecdote and apocrypha, the history of Camille who emerges in the snag—or the class divide—between two houses: the house of Ethel, whose family lent its name to too many large monuments in Chicago to recall; and the house of the stalwart Mabel Margaret, whose family lent its name to nothing. It is the mothers whose character matters here, the fathers seemingly reduced to wraith-like shadows, characterless, haunting the margins of context. And it is the snag—a site defined by class and remarked by women—that generates the terms against which that social thing called "self" will be measured.

"All the stories in the world" can never be apprehended *in truth*. This

1. Reading *Craquer* beside Lukács's 1926 defense of *History and Class Consciousness* (Talisman and the Dialectic, Verso: 2000) generates some rich associations. "Of course this relationship must be conceived as a relationship between permanently moving moments, as a process. (I hope that the dialectical meaning of the word 'process' has already been adequately explained so that there is no more room for the tailist suppression of evidence). This means that economic being, and, with it proletarian class consciousness and its organizational forms, find themselves transformed uninterruptedly" (77).



is the only fact about storytelling that matters here, and it motivates Camille's need to find a more honest, more accurate, and ultimately more critical, narrative form. Critical narrative is never proper. And in *Craquer*, the relation between Camille and her story is not a proprietary one: a narrative is not a property of the self, nor is it something one owns for one's own sake. On the contrary, the self is an effect of narrative and narrative, as *Craquer* performs it, is a function of something we can call "class struggle." The story belongs to everyone, though it can only have been told by *this* one. At stake in the narrative performance, then, is not the writer's "own" story at all, but rather a relation to the all the others that can't be grasped.

In these most cynical of times—this "post communist era"—when standing behind one's stories is like disavowing one's lies, Roy's small book packs a breathtaking punch because it performs its storytelling as transformative work. Dare one say *praxis*? Sure. But what do *praxis* and post-communism have to do with one another here? Roy's subtitle offers a sound point of departure. *Craquer* purports to be "an essay on class struggle." If such a thing can still be said to exist, then surely the answer lies there. But is this an ironic provocation, or is it sincere? If the apposition appears to be a dubious one, it can't be so simply dismissed, for it is precisely into the recesses of the dubious that the honest and the accurate have migrated today.

Remember the class struggle? I do...It's what this essay is supposed to be about. In truth I'm slouching ever so slowly into that conversation. We're in the post communist era now. All that was reddish has fallen into a pit of silence—which is not particularly new or different. Pretty much everything falls there.

From narrative to essay—as from silence to conversation—genre slips. The slippage occurs in a rich space of contestation between truth-producing discourse and truth-defying story, and it is in this "space between" that *Craquer* situates itself. But what about class struggle? Is it alive, or just a fossil of a bygone era? Although classically understood to be the motor of history and the final referent for all historical interpretation, class struggle, as "post-marxist" theory would have it, has fallen into desuetude, be it as part of an outdated historiographic method, as a constellation of narratives certain people told about themselves at a certain time, or as too reductive a figure to refer usefully to current fights for social justice. But theory here ought to be treated as yet another dubious story.

\* \* \*  
... back to the story of Pearl [that's Camille's mother]. How do we get from Nevada to anywhere else, ideologically speaking? It must come down to character. Picture this: Pearl, radiant and shining (but in a dumb way), as she stumbles down the center of a deserted road...She's fifty miles out in the desert with only a thermos of Bloody Marys. It doesn't look good.

*Craquer* is such a constellation, but it is also much more; and "more" here just might come down to something like "character." While bearing witness to the contemporary fate of class struggle, Roy's narrative supercedes that fate by rewriting "class struggle" once again as an aggregate of forces and practices out of which class conscious character emerges, not as healthy moral fiber nor as "true" historical consciousness, but this time rather as an insurgent agent wielding dubious stories. Short of demoting Camille to the status of a compromised subject, this is what enables her, "ideologically speaking," to map the finite spaces between the narratives we tell—or the stories we are—and their social ground.

As *Craquer* would appear to argue, class struggle has a lot to do with telling stories about class struggle. In Camille's "case," the classed character of social struggle emerges not as a self-identical subject clinging to its predicates like personal flotation devices, but rather as a *dramatis persona* on a Brechtian stage, a character armed with an array of estrangement devices permitting a more expansive vision, one capable of intimating the ungraspable totality of related stories for which the "private" scene of family living stands in as an allegorical microcosm. This is how Camille demystifies her own story. What is most personal in it can only emerge through its apparent opposite, the depersonalization of character; similarly, the self emerges through practices of self-expropriation.

And like that wave in the sea, the individual's story cannot be separated from the material forces that structure it.

\* \* \*  
Given the alternatives of silence or fantasy, ruthlessness becomes the middle way, inescapable if not always truthful. What do you think? Where would you draw the line? What part of your life belongs to you, and what part belongs to me, should I happen to find out about it?



As a concept, class struggle—not unlike history—signifies the social process through which it is conceptualized. But class struggle also refers to the methods and practices by which that process is engaged. Because it is a process, class struggle must change over time; and so it follows that those methods and practices must change as well. Distortion is inevitable here—as are static, feedback, blur—and “the alternatives of silence and fantasy” will appear as a terminal set of choices unless these interference phenomena are themselves recognized as a critical part of the process.

The relation between class struggle and narrative is charged with critical energies. Rather than a stable referent or foundational content, class struggle appears in *Craquer* as a potentially ruthless practice determined *not* to reproduce the narratological conditions of ownership and private property hard-wired to the stories we tell. But just as race, gender, and sexuality—while discursively produced and reproduced—cannot be reduced to mere discourse; class struggle too, while inseparable from narrative, cannot be reduced to the narrative performance alone. Although overshadowed by claims that essentialize the primacy of these discursive identities in struggles for social justice today, class is arguably the historical phenomenon silently productive of the identity claims that eclipse it.

Still, I have to insist on my argument. Can we stop piling blur on top of blur? As a goal, people. Of course I've never told a story straight in my life (and in this essay, I haven't tried). This is not hypocrisy, because consistency is not my point. I'm a seamstress of blur, performing nips and tucks on the empty center. But I need to know where it is. Is that just personal taste, like clean underwear?

The argument here is about class as it is refracted and challenged, stabilized and maintained, through silence and fantasy, narrative and gossip<sup>2</sup>. The work of telling and composing is the work of explaining and locating; interpretations reflect interpretations, just as narratives infect other narratives. The blur that results from the accumulation informs and troubles the meaning of class struggle. This isn't just an amnesiac's alibi; it is, rather, the recognition that class struggle, like

2. Like gossip—often dubious and ruthless—silence and fantasy “measure our common assumptions,” and remark, conspiratorially, the limits between what can and can't be said. See Robert Glöck, “When Bruce Was 36 (Gossip and Scandal)” in *Elements of a Coffee Service*. Four Seasons Foundation, San Francisco: 1982.

history, is only accessible to us through the blur it generates. And the form such distortion assumes is narrative.

The critical thing, as Camille points out, is to locate that blur, and to situate it in relation to our own positions, practices and activities. Far from a small consolation, this is the foundation for whatever oppositional strategies we might devise. In my reading, this is what *Craquer* is all about.

One of the many arguments Roy's work essays is that class struggle can only be accessed by way of its prior narrations; and we are each, in our own histories, introduced to that struggle through the stories told by and about those before whom we are formatively positioned as narratees: the members of our family.

*Sam we come from a long line of sluts of both sexes. But that's pushing it and it's not even what I meant. I wanted to point to the heart of the story, a quality of perishing, or making another perish, for a romantic idea. Those painful yet pleasing sacrifices... A family pattern. Then, by the same gesture, we live perpetually in the melancholy aftermath, the empty house.*

The nuclear family is a perverse social model and an ideologically charged site where personal and political forces collect and crystallize. In *Craquer*, the family is a force field charged by communist party affiliations, on one side, and big money industrialists, on the other. This is where Roy's writing goes to work like a solvent. At one moment Camille puts it brilliantly this way:

Families are nuclear, and nuclei are smashed together. Do you know the difference between the weak forces and the strong forces? The strong one is the massive force of the universe, binding quarks of opposite charge. It's only exercised across tiny distances, such as families. Everything else is weakness.

The formulation is luminous, and epigrammatic precision like this scintillates through the entire work. Force is everything here—social forces described in terms of physical forces, quarks and waves. Narratives structure social space in which the individual story is the contact point of forces that assume collective shapes and make demanding claims on us, as do family ghosts.

Families trail off like ghosts to whom we are all connected. They don't have a bottom. And it's not only ancestors, but other ungraspable relations which shadow me—from my father's silence to mother's dreamy milk. That's a sweet one.

Now I think the link can finally be made between Camille's effort to locate the blur, and the specter haunting the matter here: ideology<sup>3</sup>.

The totality of social relations that connect us all is indeed ungraspable, and ideology, as a constellation of collective fantasies, enables whatever representations of that totality<sup>4</sup>. In one such fantasy, the family allegorizes the social. Its spaces—though treacherous—are comparatively manageable: they can be mapped, narrated, transformed. And as those narratives themselves feed back into the ungraspable relations that condition the family's ground, the social is paradoxically rendered intelligible, if only for one of those vanishing moments, precisely by way of the distortion.

Pearl's stories pulsed with desire, fantasy and dread. They became me. Then they blurred, disappeared. I live in the aftermath. The snag, its lingering disturbance, feels muscular. It resides there, as I shove one foot ahead of the other, in all the sites of pleasure and aggression, intact as my confidence.

The notion that there is a self-centered and stable space—a space curiously homologous to that of the sanctified family recessed in its private niche, a space impervious to ideology and from which our stories are said to emerge like authentic properties in whatever truth-bearing struggle—is, of course, one of the most insidious of all ideological effects. Countering this profound distortion, *Craquer* perseveres critically not by claiming access to a more prodigious social truth, but

rather by exploring ideology's own narrative techniques, and by making use of them to dismantle the power of all truth claims, including its own. This is one of the ways "Camille" practices class struggle.

Just as the economy and all the destructive forces it unleashes depends upon that very real though intractable fiction called money, so do class positions and forces depend upon ideology and narrative. By way of Roy's tactics, a more honest and accurate narrative emerges out of the cloud or blur that occupies the center where Camille is "registering something more vague." This "something" has everything to do with the tensions that obtain between the reproduction of dominant class dynamics and the critical work of telling stories.

There's inescapable falsity in my condition. If you believe what I write, watch your back. I can't stand behind my stories because I don't think that way. The power is in the filter—whatever my brain dishes up as the next thought, well, it feels like me, but it's not.

In our ahistorical and identity-obsessed era, Roy's assault on the self's truth claims is part of a larger effort to mobilize an oppositional writing practice historically. If New Narrative has taught us one thing above all others regarding history—about our being subjects of history—it is that to be both reader and writer of the stories we live and make is to be an active interpreter of our interpretations<sup>5</sup>. There is an imperative that emerges from Camille Roy's *Craquer*: in addition to narrating our stories, we must also narrativize the process of narration while linking that secondary narrative to the always larger processes that collectively narrate us. This is the imperative to reckon into the work of telling the social machinations that inform the narrative apparatus within which we are always productively caught. Paradoxically, this is

3. Fredric Jameson discusses ideology as the necessarily distorted medium of all such locating in his talk/essay, "Cognitive Mapping": "Whatever its defects and problems, this positive conception of ideology as a necessary function in any form of social life has the great merit of stressing the gap between the local positioning of the individual subject and the totality of class structures in which he or she is situated..." *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Grossberg and Nelson, eds., Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988, p. 253.

4. Sources informing my use of "ideology" here include Louis Althusser's "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" in *Lenin and philosophy, and other essays*, London: New Left Books, 1971; and Slavoj Žižek's "How did Marx Invent the Symptom?" in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, London: Verso, 1989.

5. "New Narrative" refers to work by Robert Glück, Steve Abbott, Dodie Bellamy, Kevin Killian, Bruce Boone, and Kathy Acker, among others. For a remarkable reading of some of this work, see Earl Jackson, Jr., *Strategies of Deviance*, Bloomington: U of Indiana Press, 1995. For a brief history of New Narrative, see Robert Glück's, "Long Note on New Narrative," *Narrativity: a critical journal of innovative narrative*. ([http://www.sfsu.edu/~newlit/narrativity/issue\\_one/gluck.html](http://www.sfsu.edu/~newlit/narrativity/issue_one/gluck.html)) An expanded form of this essay, one that would articulate "class struggle" with a range of current experimental forms related to New Narrative, would include additional readings, among them: Renee Gladman, *Juice* (Kelsey Street, 2000); Taylor Brady, *Microclimates* (Krupskaya, 2001); Eileen Myles, *Cool for You* (Soft Skull Press, 2000); and Mike Amnasan, *Beyond the Safety of Dreams* (Krupskaya, 2000).

a way to persevere uncynically in something like belief.

Class struggle, then, can never be divorced from the stories we tell about class struggle. What is at stake here is not only the relatedness of so many forces, but the link between the work of narrative and the construction of those relations. In performing that link, *Craquer* contributes to a larger collective project committed to reconstructing our historical relations *otherwise*.

\* \* \*

Silence is one way of negotiating the unacceptable. Transgressive romantic fantasy is another. They're tools for managing the survival of self—the first maintaining it, the second an act of invention. But you can't separate the tools from their context, in personal necessity, social power and class.

This is only one of the directives *Craquer* offers regarding its method of construction. Just as one can't romanticize silence as the recessed preserve of a true self, one can't romanticize the transgressive fantasy either without conceding the fateful separation of tools and context that reproduces a grosser and more dangerous distortion. Both Roy and her narrator Camille know what they're up against here: the sanctioned fantasy of dominant ideology that reigns over silence and transgression alike. This is a fantasy that functions simultaneously as truth and as the flight from truth. It ensures against the insurgency of critical invention by promising the eternal return of the same unlivable conditions. Without either of these romantic pretenses—and without being entirely ruthless either because, as Camille finally tells us, “that also is imbalanced”—*Craquer* disrupts the apparatus that reproduces ideology's dominant assumptions. But this doesn't mean leaving the reader stranded with nothing to believe. Not at all. Roy's *Craquer* rather enables the reader to believe in something *other*, if only a method that affirms narrative's potential as social *praxis*. Perhaps this is something *like* truth, only different.

“The urge to aestheticize, to edit and invent, is my urge to think,” writes Camille. To tell our stories otherwise is to think otherwise. And who would want to believe in something else, who would *need* to construct and nurture oppositional fantasies and insurgent methods, except those committed to weaving *other* tapestries out of the snags and blurs of class struggle?

\* \* \*

Within any ensemble of social forces, every position that enables a narrative is a classed position. Far from being unpredictable and substitutable, these positions—together with the stories they condition—are generated not by too few but by *too many* determinants. *Craquer* offers a remarkable exploration of the overdetermination of one's stories. Like one's narratives, one's experience is never one's own; but neither is it anyone else's. So while it can be argued that Camille's “relaxing” narrative solution must contain its own blind spot, Roy's method nevertheless argues against the indeterminate disintegration and voluntaristic reintegration of stories<sup>6</sup>. The beautiful, and perhaps fundamental, contradiction animated here is the seemingly timeless one of subject (the individual, or agent) and object (“the totality of class structures” or “all the stories in the world”). And while there is no resolution for it, *Craquer* performs the contradiction with rare deftness, at once graceful in its narrative play and forceful in the counter it creates against the trained incapacity that is our ahistorical state.

*Thanks to Earl Jackson, Jr., Jocelyn Saidenberg, and Camille Roy for their attentive readings and rich responses to this piece.*

6. As Nicos Poulantzas reminds us, “Class determination must not be reduced, in a voluntarist fashion, to class position.” In other words, positions do not accurately reflect the forces that determine them. While positional alignments may be willfully constructed, determinations cannot be arbitrarily construed. *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism*. London: NLB, 1974, p.14.

## Coins of a Realm: Sides of a Shared Future

### *Busted*

By Nancy Shaw and Catriona Strang  
Coach House Books, 2001

A recent discussion on a listserv I belong to centered on the book *Fugitive Days*, a somewhat sensationalist account of Bill Ayers' involvement with the Weathermen during the late sixties and early seventies written by the controversial leader himself. Posts ranged from mildly sardonic observations about the commodification of a once-so-radical figure, to more critical and extensive discussions on revolutionary violence in general, the Weathermen's tactics specifically, and of course, how race, class, and gender (exploited by COINTELPRO policies) contributed to the disintegration of what-could-have-been: an alliance of white and black, middle class and urban 'guerrilla' dissident groups in the U.S. Some posts came from former Weathermen describing what they saw to be the destructive (if not megalomaniacal) growing personal ambition behind Ayers' calls for war against the capitalist establishment, now apparently confirmed by the release of his chatty, acritical, if not self-aggrandizing, memoirs. Others argued that the emphasis on armed revolution helped shift focus from the positive independent organizational infrastructures (laid out initially by the Panthers to provided badly needed social services, somewhat like the community boards now forming in Argentina) and onto the "scary" but "powerful" personas of the leaders of such threatening groups themselves.

Ultimately, as we know, most of those involved ended up serving prison terms or, particularly those of color, were hunted, harassed, framed, or murdered on the streets or in prison. This invited disquisitions about why those early calls for violence had been so attractive to so many relatively privileged white kids in sub-urban colleges in the first place. One thing was sure, from this distance: they had gotten themselves into a muddle from which no amount of rhetorical skill, proper intention or representational two-step could get them out, though it was now possible, and this was the point, to fashion current lessons out of that overdetermined (past) present. Certain coordinates of this scenario undoubtedly sound familiar: the power-monger, the turn-coats, the opportunists, the unwitting slide into ineffectual gestural resistance, the aporia after a failed revolutionary

attempt, the back-slide into oblivion, the banalization of the radical, the well-meaning fools, and above it all, the capitalist class in its superb organization waiting to take advantage of all that is "botched or barked."

From Nancy Shaw and Catriona Strang's book *Busted*, recently out from Coach House:

### Bulletin 2: Government

Given the demographic, he could escape enemies, followers and himself. Not simply a platform nor mere dismountable membrane. Spelled destiny. Tabulated freedom. By innocuous phrase floated value, droust protocol, joined a disciplinary utopia. The smart money. The glad hour. Their world an agenda. Thus I was conducted, mimicked and applauded...

Treating the specific national scenario I mention earlier as a dynamic logic, as a recurring if overdetermined historical phenomenon, instead of as a singular diachronic historical moment, might produce something along the lines of the 'Bulletins' that punctuate this book. In fact, despite their aversion to the violence of generalizations, Shaw and Strang open the historical aperture so far that we're looking straight into the eye of Danton: "Because I don't have a history," and "It was in 1789 when we first took notice of this dim precinct." Though Shaw and Strang hail from Canada (and treat some of its institutional rhetorics here), they are gesturing toward a post-national critical-aesthetic, where the national, and the national literature along with it, will not become "a substitute for revelation." All the world's an airy attempt we can see in this wide frame.

So, *Busted*, yes. And just *how* should we proceed after this long lament over reification, the twentieth century?

If this writing finds its precursor in textual politics (and no doubt in part it does) it does not proceed towards a politic of textual liberation. *Busted* (the ironic subtitle is *Never Stop Singing for Liberty*) conspicuously avoids euphoric jolts and libidinal eruptions (though its bolts may jolt) as much as it avoids any repetition of particular 'chosen' textual operations allegedly infused with inherent oppositionality.

The book begins with the first of many 'bulletins,' this one being 'Bulletin I: History,' a masterfully written dramatic mono(duo)logue of sorts ('masterfully' authored by two people) that questions historical agency, causal certainty, utopic goals, our ability to make our way through the dark and, ultimately, the situatedness we might feel in near-total black-out. There are other 'Bulletins' too,



on 'Government,' 'Culture,' 'Allegiance,' and 'Home Ownership,' and there are also returning 'Credos,' densely bricolaged alibi-trap de-cloakers, 'Gripes,' subtle declamatory scene-juicers, and 'Shuffles,' listy CD-like song titles that indeed post for shuffling the discourse of our assumptions about our knowledges, along with numerous other singular pieces. Yet any description or categorization of these mixed-up sections is destined to fail, because what's really at stake is the war on certainty, or false certainty, which are taken to be one and the same.

We are "haunted—no, constituted—by a legacy of purges and upheavals."

But despite this malaise, the book, if somewhat obliquely, seems to suggest that this is not cause for complete political abjection, because what haunts (or constitutes) is, by definition, made. It suggests a space for the constitutive ability of language as/and history. In "The Idea File of Contingency," published in the "Disgust & Overdetermination" issue of *Open Letter* edited by Jeff Derkson, Shaw and Strang write that "It is impossible to compose clearly oppositional stances" because "The world has [in the meantime] moved on" but that "Nevertheless, history is formative." This "permanent contingency" is, accordingly, a response to the production of "static answers," "fixed meaning" and "unquestioned authority" from, and here is the guts of it, logocentricity of print media. Here, the revolutionary, the poet, the mainstream national politician and the corporate executive are all alike—they continually reproduce the conditions of their epistemological limits.

If this sounds rather like the familiar Marxist tenet that we cannot ultimately act beyond the limits of our time, Shaw and Strang set out to show that new technology, if defined after Williams as a set of practices rather than as mechanical objects, might enable us to "bypass, or at least post for negotiation, the self-evident mechanisms of systemic regulation," of language and thought stabilized by the limiting factors of the printed text. The constitutive dimension of language, then, is not treated as a privileged arena for the construction of new resistant subjectivities, but rather as the negative of this, as a most-wanted list of logocentric authorities (that lodge in places we least expect) for which the writing is a necessary cork-board posting newly espied anachronistic, oppressive or hegemonic logic-locks. Credo 3, for example: moved to rescind / the tidy affirmation / thick exemplification swap / and subsequently tether / staged with charity. A lumbering diligence—this is *defense*—"posting" the mediating residue of legal discourse.

This is quite different from, but not entirely unrelated to,

the various cyber poetics laid out in *Object 10* guest-edited by Kenny Goldsmith. The essayists in this issue share Shaw and Strang's desire to explode the weighty and limiting authority of the page, to move beyond an all-too-human subjectivity, and look towards digital technology to enable that. Yet many (not all) seem to base the "futurity" of their practice on the gambit that strictly formal investigations of new mediums will lead us forward towards new (post-social?) possibilities. They, nevertheless, beg the question of Shaw and Strang: *is* there a contradiction in the attempt to subvert the logocentric authority of the printed word by foregrounding a textual practice? And what is the relationship between a particular technology and the "set of practices" that we live?

Conversely, Shaw and Strang's negativity, a reverse relief to the utopic techno-futurist "progress" model, might pose several questions in return. If technology viewed as machine-object is created under the current complex or mode of production, how or to what extent do market imperatives influence what aspects of those new technologies will be made and made available? Do these forms have an authority all their own? And though algorithmic programs create super-texts that destabilize notions of poetic voice as much as they outperform certain exercises in deconstruction, isn't it also true that such a reliance on a Saussurean view of linguistics overlooks a primary aspect of language use—that which Voloshinov called the exchange of multi-accental signifying elements, that wrangled-over shared code in which what is (and will be) is contested?

And to return to the U.S. context in which this essay started, *even though* history, in the meantime, has moved on, need these contradictions relegate us to a kind of preventative anxiousness on the one hand, or a productivist hyper-conviction on the other? How do specific national historical contexts and institutions influence the creation of a "post-national" poetics?



## The Disparities

Rodrigo Toscano  
Green Integer, 2002.

reviewed by Rosa Alcalá

*Lo mismo que aplasto el hierro  
pa' jacerlo filigrana,  
quiero aplastá tu queré  
de la noche a la mañana*

*Just as I work the iron  
Into a filigree,  
I want to forge your love  
From morning to night*

—A Martinete (traditional flamenco work song)

*Now lady I ain 't no mill man  
Just the mill man 's son  
But I can do your grinding  
Till the mill man comes*

—“An early American HooDoo song,”  
quoted in Ishmael Reed’s *Conjure*

Marjorie Perloff insists in *Radical Artifice* that the performance of John Cage’s “Lecture on the Weather” is “not about weather, it is weather.” In Rodrigo Toscano’s *The Disparities*, something similar occurs: I cannot speak simply about the poet’s *work* but about the poems themselves *working*—working it out, working you over, working for the man, working the crowd—to depict the incongruities that authority, authenticity, reality, and identity produce. In this book-length work song (and at times, love song), he offers his product in various stages of refinement, and (DING!) down goes the hammer, puts a few dents in it, walks always, eyes the overseer (DING!), throws down his hammer again in the form of a question mark or maybe an ellipses (DINK!), gives it an elbow-polish, addresses the buyer, then walks away again. The sheer muscle Toscano demonstrates in these poems is so seductive, I hardly notice whether there’s any “use-value” to what’s left on the anvil—perhaps because what’s left are poems flexing, with each reading, manifold possibilities.

Some signs forged there? No. But with raw urge, knew  
(from “Circular No.6”)

Although written before his previously published book *Partisans* (O Books), *The Disparities* continues the project of “wordworking,” as both the method and madness of delivering and dismantling government-sanctioned “transnational imagery.” And like *Partisans*’ verb tenses, language construction performs the tensions between being, making, and naming, often resulting in a kind of stammer, a layering

of thought fragments, evident in “O Sacrum Convivium”:

I did this/that, for x-cause, which (hmmm) affected...  
Which eventually...it can be said (no?) that...look  
The Zolphi Gorge, next to the Rheita Valley, where  
I was (no?) part...wait, I was part, a part of, look  
The Zagut Fissure, Prol Plateau, et cetera  
Eventually...well, the word crises even sounds

By foregrounding process, the poems become translations of transition, existing between “Land/ a story” and “ax/ a memory” (from “non-confidential memos”).

The book’s title suggests the failure to represent, through language, the exchange between an evolving existence and variously perceived realities (“*La distancia entre mi y estas calles*” [The distance between me and these streets]). The titles of the poems, however, hint at our failure to fail completely—our need to keep punching the clock and provide at least *some* product or documentation, as seen in “Circular No. 6,” “Premise No. 1” (as well as “No. 2” and “No. 3”). Too, the titles “Journal” or “non-confidential memos,” suggest a desire to make public the construction of self and realities, our “hyperpublic aloneness.”

Realities being those fantasies that control your immediate span of life. Usually they are not your own fantasies, i.e., they belong to governments, traditions, etc., which it must be clear by now, can make for conflict with the singular human life all ways. The fantasy of America might hurt you, but it is what should be meant when one talks of ‘reality.’

—Amiri Baraka, from *Home: Social Essays*

Certainly, Green Integer’s custom of placing the author’s photo on the cover is testament to that. And despite the feeling that his poems are built on a strong theoretical foundation, Toscano’s black and white smirk urges me to not easily replace the idiosyncratic with the ideological. But any critical approach is also a failure: “Biographical. To be spoken for. To know/ This much, this long: new uninhabitabilities” (from “Premise No. 3”).

Unmistakably informed by  $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$  poetry, there’s a certain “old school” feel about much of the book (in the sense of a hybridization of past forms of address), especially the second part, beginning with the poem “Journal.” The groupings of “thing-objects” in “Corollary A” and “Corollary B” are driven—like many of the poems—by the musical and emotional intensity found in the lyrical/mystical tradition. And like the nomadic ghazal, rendering a world

in motion necessarily combines corporeality with memory; and inquiry is spiritual (though I can hear Toscano thundering at that designation!), material, as well as inconclusive. Toscano writes, "Myself an Item to boot, subtractive author! Unboarding, now goes,—This far; where from? which force,/ acts?/ Threatening questions, as doves swoop below the mailbox." And I am reminded of Rumi's "A Voice Through the Door": "Lift your foot;/ cross over; move into the emptiness/ of question and answer and question."

This questioning is especially noticeable in Toscano's performance of the poems, as witnessed in a recent reading at University at Buffalo's Wednesdays at Four Series. The inflection of interrogatives, as the title poem ("Anything? Plans, newstands. Are things not done on pace? / Time. A gap. As 'to close the gap,' between what?) or as in "Four or Five Estimations" ("I feel misplaced, a non-self spoke—estimations?") insist on participation, argumentation, not the acquiescence rhetorical devices require. His performance of the work also demonstrates the difficult relationship between the individual and the collective necessary to "wordworking." Toscano writes, "You know, formations repel as well, and why not?" later suggesting we "become intimate with what's alien."

After his reading, I asked Toscano if this use of the interrogative comes out of the tendency Spanish-speakers have of punctuating a statement with a rhetorical question: *¿Sí o no?* (Yes or No?) *¿Verdad que sí?* (Isn't it true?) *¿O no?* (Right?) *Entiendes?* (Get it?). He says, "yes," but also he's goading the public (by way of "the public" having already been goaded into a system of mutual receptivity)

*Es un retablo...es...un puzzle americano, ¿comprendes? El poema empieza como un crepúsculo inmóvil [It is an altarpiece...it's...an American puzzle. Understand? The poem begins like a motionless dusk]*

—letter from Federico García Lorca to Adolfo Salazar, 1 Jan. 1922

In "4 or 5 Estimations," Toscano writes, "Subsidized lyrics as in your puffy schools, pray! What does take mean, docks unloading, who inspects what? / I'm a doormat talking as if I'm a kingpin." And in "Premise No. 1": "Like a recent rap says—what's yo' name foo', I signed the line, compelled, a signature, keeps track of ...ding." I'm not so much concerned as to whether the references actually point to hip hop artist/actor Sean "P Diddy" Combs, who recently changed his name from "Puff Daddy" and raps in "Bad Boy for Life":

*How we twist shit, what changed but the name?  
We still here, you rockin wit the best  
Don't worry if I write rhymes — I write checks (babi)  
Who's the boss? Dudes is lost*

I'm interested in how Toscano, in even his most economic poems, can produce a multiplicity of references and "twist shit" like records at the hands of a mixmaster: layered but seamless, pulsating its invitation yet opaque. Toscano aims at reminding the reader throughout his work of the industry of these "sampled" realities, of our personal work in sustaining, circulating, or altering them.

Re-state: mores as in mores of the State  
Craft, not as in corn basket weaving craft  
Urgencies, mothered geometry, when?  
Locus, where? You want assurance, *choke*.  
[...]  
Cock, for example, late subject of this...  
Untangling it, as far as boy's poems go  
[...]  
Made meaning-*pan* [cornspeak it] not Corsairs  
But later [rivetspeak it] sealed cockpits  
(*"Circular No. 6"*)

From corn basket to cornspeak, from cock to cockpits, from cornspeak to Corsair, from re-state to rivetspeak, from pre-industrial craft to post-industrial craftiness, specificity is challenged by a network (a "circular") of suggestions. This network argues for diversity by demonstrating diversity, and argues against globalization by demonstrating diverse forms of manipulation, concealment, and framing.

## Commons

Myung Mi Kim

University of California Press, 2002.

reviewed by Sarah Anne Cox

The only thing that bugged me about *Commons* was the blurb on the back cover, which minimized the scope of this beautiful and moving book. While I am certain that Myung Mi Kim is "haunted" by history and while this work is intensely personal and emotional (for what work isn't) it is mostly something else. What stands out about *Commons* is the reach of the images therein. If the images each correspond to an actual event they also correspond to hundreds of other events from East Timor to Korea to Auschwitz to Wyoming (cf.: "The heavy chains were taken off and they walked to the place of execution. One boy's shoe fell off and he reached down to put it back on, taking a long time to do it."). So much of this is at once history and current event.

*Commons* seems like a compilation of investigations: of survival; of deaths; of botany. They are all intimately related to each other and all equally mysterious. The "scientific" sections of anatomy are just as unclear as the historical records demonstrating the shortcomings of "The central organizing myth of comprehensive knowledge." In so many ways the body is taken apart and examined and yields nothing.

All that we have seen could also be otherwise  
All that we could describe could also be otherwise  
The thing seen is the thing seen together with the whole space

There is some kind of foundational solace here. The images are brutal, painful to read. Famine is weaved through everything, frogs pile up on the roadway but it is in service of something larger. To determine and identify the cost of nation, of land, of survival, of hope one must lay all the pieces of the world on the table and attempt to name them.

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—Nathaniel Tarn

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## Contributors' Notes

Etel Adnan's many books of prose and poetry include *Of Cities & Women* (*Letters to Fawwaz*), *Sitt Marie Rose*, *The Arab Apocalypse*, and *From A to Z*. Etel Adnan: *Critical Essays on the Arab-American Writer and Artist*, edited by Lisa Suhair Majaj and Amal Amireh (McFarland & Company, 2002), is now available.

Rosa Alcalá has translated *El Templo* (Situations Press, 2001), *Cloud-net* (Art in General, 1999), and *Word & Thread* (Morning Star Publications, 1996), all books of poetry by Cecilia Vicuña. Her own poems have recently appeared in *Chain and The World*. She is currently pursuing a PhD in English at SUNY-Buffalo, where she co-curates *fi: poesía, crítica, y arte*, a non-unilingual series.

Simon Allen is a South African artist who has lived and worked in Washington, DC, New York City and Richmond, VA. He was a founding member of the FLAT gallery in Durban, South Africa. His work was included in "Graft" at the National Gallery in Cape Town as part of the 2nd Johannesburg Biennale. His most recent project, *Newspapers*, can be seen at FUSEBOX in Washington, DC.

Robert Berold was born in Johannesburg in 1948 and moved to the Eastern Cape in 1981. He was editor of *New Coin* for several years and has edited the collection of contemporary South African poetry *It All Begins* (2002). Poetry collections include *The Door to the River* (Bateleur, 1984), *The Fires of the Dead* (Carrefour, 1989) and *Rain Across a Paper Field* (Gecko Poetry, 1999).

The Botsotso Jesters are a poetry and performance group based in Johannesburg. Its members are Siphiwe Ka Ngawenya, Isabella Motadinyane, Allan Koski Horwitz, Ike Mboneni Mula, and Anna Varney. Their collections include *We Jive Like This* (Botsotso Publishing, 1996) and *Dirty Washing* (Botsotso Publishing, 2000).

Clement Chihota lives in Harare, Zimbabwe, and teaches at the Zimbabwe Open University National Centre. Books include *Before the Next Song* and *No More Plastic Balls and Other Stories* (co-edited with Robert Muponde, College Press, 2000).

Sarah Anne Cox is the author of *Arrival* (Krupskaya 2002). She has various and sundry pastimes.



**Jeremy Cronin** was born in Durban, South Africa, in 1949 and grew up in Simonstown. In 1976, he was arrested under the Terrorism Act, and jailed for seven years. He is currently the deputy general secretary of the SA Communist Party, and a member of parliament for the African National Congress. His books include *Inside* (Ravan Press, 1984), *Even the Dead* (David Philip/Mayibuye Books, 1997), and *Inside and Out* (David Philip, 1999).

**Los Cybrids** ([www.cybrids.com](http://www.cybrids.com)) are a Bay Area-based artist and activist collective, consisting of **John Leños**, **Monica Praba Pilar**, and **René García**. **John Leños** was born and raised in Los Angeles in a Mexican-Italian-American family. He received his Master's of Art in Photography from San Francisco State University in June of 2000. Mr. Leños is presently curating the Digital Mural Project at the Galería de la Raza in San Francisco. A New York/Colombian multi-disciplinary artist, **Monica Praba Pilar** has worked on multiple projects in the public sphere through site installations, public art, performances, and websites. As part of her ongoing investigation of art/activism, in 1998 she founded the biotech interventionist performing group "The Hexterminators: SuperHeroes of the Genetix Devolution." She is currently completing a public art commission focused on community history for the City of Oakland. **René García** is a Mexican born in California who utilizes performance and digitally interactive multi-media to explore themes of stereotyping, racial dynamics and the convergence of body and electronic technologies. He is co-founder (with John Leños) of the San Francisco Historical Circle of the Displaced, a not for profit organization exploring historical displacement in San Francisco. He is a co-recipient of a Potrero Nuevo Fund grant (2001), Creative Work Fund grant (2000) and a Market Street art in Transit commission from the San Francisco Art Commission (1999).

**Jimmie Durham** is an internationally exhibited artist, writer, and activist currently residing in Berlin. His numerous books include *A Certain Lack of Coherence: Writings on Art and Cultural Politics* (Kaya, 1993), *On Becoming Authentic* (Prickly Pear, 1996) and *Jimmie Durham* (Phaidon Press, 1995).

**Laura Elrick** lives in New York City. Her poetry has recently appeared in *How2*, *Tripwire*, *Combo*, *The Tangent*, *Booglit* and *Kenning*. Essays on her work will be appearing in the next issue of *Quid* (UK).

**Alan Gilbert's** writings on poetry, art, culture, and politics have appeared in a variety of publications, as have his poems. He lives in Brooklyn, NY.

**Rob Halpern** lives in San Francisco.

**Kathleen Henderson** works in Canyon, California, where she lives with her husband and two small boys. She has shown in Boston, New York, and Los Angeles. Her work is available upon request at the Stephen Wirtz Gallery in San Francisco.

**P. Inman's** most recent books are "*at least*." (Krupskaya) & "*amounts*. *ta*." (Potes & Poets). His work has been used as a sound source for several recent compositions by Thomas DeLio, which can be found on *MusicText* & *MusicText 2* (Capstone Records).

**K. Silem Mohammad** lives and teaches in Santa Cruz. He has recent or forthcoming work in *Cello Entry*, *Antennae*, *The San Jose Manual of Style*, *580 Split*, *Tinfish*, and *Vert*.

**Seithamo Motsapi** was born in 1966 in Bela Bela, Limpopo Province. He lectured for some years at the University of the North, and now works as an editor for the South African Bureau of Standards. His first collection is *earthstepper/the ocean is very shallow* (Deep South/ISEA, 1995).

**Ike Mboneni Mula** was born in Soweto in 1957, and grew up in Venda, Limpopo Province, returning to live in Soweto in the 1980s. He is an actor and performance poet, a member of the Botsotso Jesters performance group and on the editorial committee of Botsotso Publishing. He writes in English, Venda, and isicamtho. Publications include *We Live Like This* (Botsotso Publishing, 1996) and *Dirty Washing* (Botsotso Publishing, 2000).

**Mark Nowak** is the author of *Revenants* (Coffee House Press) and the editor of *Xcp: Cross Cultural Poetics* <<http://bfm.org/~xcp>>. An essay on gothic-industrial music will appear in *Goth: Undead Subculture* (Duke, 2003).

**Victor Khulile Nxumalo** was born in Diepkloof, Soweto, in 1971. He lives in Johannesburg, where he works in television as a writer, researcher and director. He has published poems in literary magazines in South Africa, Canada, UK, and the US. His book *ten flapping elbows, mama* is forthcoming in 2003.

**Lesego Rampolokeng** was born in Orlando West, Soweto, in 1965. He is a full time writer and performance poet who has performed in many countries, both solo and with musicians such as Soulemame Toure, Louis Mhlanga, and Gunther Sommer. His books and CDs include *Horns for Hondo* (COSAW, 1990), *Talking Rain* (COSAW, 1993), *End Beginnings* (German translations, Marino, 1998), *The Bavino Sermons* (Gecko Poetry, 1999), and *Ranthology* (CD with various musicians, 2002).



Gael Reagon is a journalist and poet who lives in Cape Town, South Africa.

"Air Pal Mal (the frame)" is one of the Pal Mal comic books in Leslie Scalapino's novel, *Dahlia's Iris — Secret Autobiography and Fiction*, which will be published by FC2 next year. Her recent books include *It's go in quiet illumined grass land* (Post-Apollo), *The Tango* (Granary Books), a reprint of the novel *De foe* by Green Integer, and *Orchid Jetsum*, a poem mystery novel (Tuumba).

Stephanie Syjuco was born in the Philippines in 1974. She has shown nationally and internationally, most recently in San Francisco at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, the Asian Art Museum, Southern Exposure, at The Drawing Center in NYC, and solo shows at John Berggruen Gallery and Haines Gallery, San Francisco. She is represented by Haines Gallery, San Francisco, and James Harris Gallery, Seattle.

Diane Ward lives and works in Santa Monica, California. She has work forthcoming in the final issue of *Ribot*, edited by Paul Vangelisti, and is the co-editor (with Phyllis Rosenzweig) of *Primary Writing*.

Heriberto Yépez (Tijuana, 1974) has published three books of essays and one collection of poetry in Mexico. In the U.S. he has work published or forthcoming in *Chain*, *Shark* and *XCP*. His latest book in Mexico is an award-winning study of American counterpoetics. He is also experimenting with English. His email is: hyepeze@hotmail.com

Phillip Zhuwao was born in Zimbabwe in 1971, and spent his childhood moving with his family, who were evicted from several farms, finally settling in Kuwadzana, Harare. His book of poems, *Sunrise Poison*, and his two novellas, *See the Barbarous Lands* and *Iron Fleece*, are to be published in 2003 by Deep South. He died in Harare in 1997.

## tripwire ordering information

tripwire 1: sold out.

### tripwire 2: Writing as Activism

Rodrigo Toscano, Kristin Prevelat, Steve Farmer, Danielle Collobert, Noah de Lissoy, Rob Fitterman, Brian Kim Stefans, Rod Smith, Sarah Anne Cox & Elizabeth Treadwell, Ben Friedlander, Brenda Iijima, Jack Hirschman, Dodie Bellamy, Juliana Spahr, Pam Lu, Chris Chen, Lawless Crow, & more. 180 pp.

### tripwire 3: Gender

Diane Ward, Stefani Barber, Jocelyn Sainenberg, Linda Russo, Brian Lennon, Leona Christie, Claude Cahun, Sarah Anne Cox, Norma Cole, Erin Tribble, Rob Halpern, Kevin Killian, Carla Harryman & Lyn Hejinian, Jen Hofer & Summi Kaipa, Roberto Tejada, Hung Q. Tu, & more. 160 pp.

### tripwire 4: Work

Eileen Myles, Rodrigo Toscano, Laura Elrick, Steve Farmer, Bruce Andrews, Rosmarie Waldrop, Carole Maso & C.D. Wright, Jeff Derksen, Bobbie West, Catherine Daly, Camille Roy, Alan Gilbert, Pye Banbou, France Therot, Karen Brodine, Olga Cabral, Heriberto Yépez, Ramez Querishi, & more. 190 pp.

### tripwire 5: Expanding the Repertoire:

#### Innovation and Change in African-American Writing

Will Alexander, Wanda Coleman, C.S. Giscombe, Renee Gladman, Erica Hunt, Nate Mackey, Mark Morris, Harryette Mullen, Julie Patton, Giovanni Singleton, Lorenzo Thomas, & Arnold J. Kemp. 200 pp.

### tripwire 7: Global/Local

forthcoming 2003.

Back issues are \$8 each (\$15 for two).  
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### *A partial list of Southern African journals and presses*

Several journals and small presses, such as *New Coin*, *Donga*, *Bleksem*, *Gecko*, *Deep South*, and the new (and dynamic) *Chimurenga* are carrying on in the tradition of *Drum* and *Staffrider* to produce engaged poetry, prose, and cultural journalism in South Africa, while Zimbabwean writers such as Yvonne Vera and Chenjerai Hove are beginning to reach international audiences despite increased political repression at home. Still, publishers are in constant search of support to promote non-mainstream work and to get it out into the world. Robert Berold's important anthology *It All Begins*, now out from Gecko Press, is in need of international distributors, while Deep South is in search of financial support to put out a posthumous collection of Phillip Zhuwao's writing. Interested parties can contact us at *Tripwire* for more information, or search out the following presses and journals directly:

*bleksem*: PO Box 621, Honeydew, 2040, RSA

Botsoto Publications: PO Box 23910, Joubert Park 2044, RSA

*Chimurenga*: [www.chimurenga.co.za](http://www.chimurenga.co.za)

College Press: PO Box 3041, Harare, Zimbabwe

*Donga*: <http://www.donga.co.za> (check out the archives for audio files)

Deep South: [www.deepsouth.co.za](http://www.deepsouth.co.za)

Gecko Books: 21 Hereward Rd., Umbilo, Durban 4001, RSA

*New Coin*: ISEA, Rhodes Univ., PO Box 94, Grahamstown 6140, RSA

<http://www.ru.ac.za/institutes/isea/newcoin/COIN.htm>

*New Contrast*: PO Box 3841, Cape Town, 8000, RSA

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