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Editor Mark Nowak

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SOCIAL STUDIES

TABLE OF CONTENTS

New Criticism and the Civil Rights Movement : : Identity Politics and the Liberal Arts
Tyrone Williams [9]

Three Poems
Soham Patel [30]

Multiple Registers of Silence in M. NourbeSe Philip's Zong!
Kate Eichorn [33]

Sahagun's Encyclopedia
John-Michael Rivera [40]

from *How We Write: The Varieties of Writing Experience*
(w/ Renato Rosaldo, Diane Middlebrook, David Henry Hwang, and Larry Susskind)
Hilton Obenzinger [50]

1950 June 28: The Fall of Seoul
Don Mee Choi [59]

from *In Praise of the High Shadow*
Mahmoud Darwish (translated by Saifedean Ammous) [60]

Two Poems
Adrienne Rich [64]

"We Build a World": War Resistance Poetry in/as the First Person Plural
Philip Metres [68]

from *spreek*
Cara Benson [79]

Sit-in at Bullworth's
Aldon Lynn Nielsen [83]

lion woman
Arisa White [89]

The Military Band Organ at the Slater Park Carousel
Amish Trivedi [92]

the lion in wait
Jake Wilhelmsen [94]

Two Poems
Patricia Smith [103]

Forgotten Capital: Touring Berlin with John Yau and Bill Barrette
Timothy Yu [105]



BOOK REVIEWS

The Task of Cultural Critique
Teresa L. Ebert
[reviewed by Bruce Campbell : 119]

City: Bolshevik Super-Poem in Five Cantos
Manuel Maples Arce (trans. Brandon Holmquest)
[reviewed by Lindsey Freer : 124]

There's Always Work at the Post Office:
African American Postal Workers and the Fight for Jobs, Justice, and Equality
Philip F. Rubio
[reviewed by Peter Rachleff : 129]

*The Healing of America:
A Global Quest for Better, Cheaper, and Fairer Health Care*
T.R. Reid

&

Toward the Healthy City: People, Places, and the Politics of Urban Planning

Jason Corburn

[reviewed by Celina Su : 136]

B Jenkins

Fred Moten

&

The Black Automaton

Douglas Kearney

[reviewed by Maria Damon : 144]

A New Notion: Two Works by C.L.R. James

C.L.R. James (ed. and with an introduction by Noel Ignatiev)

[reviewed by Aldon Lynn Nielsen : 149]

Your Country is Great: Afghanistan—Guyana

Ara Shirinyan

[reviewed by Ellen Welcker : 154]

First as Tragedy, Then as Farce

Slavoj Žižek

[reviewed by Mark Soderstrom : 159]

NEW CRITICISM AND THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT : : IDENTITY POLITICS AND THE LIBERAL ARTS

Tyrone Williams

The question of identity haunts the pre-history and history of the United States of America. For example, both Garry Wills' rhetorical analysis of the Declaration of Independence and Pauline Maier's study of five "old revolutionaries" demonstrates how the ethics of loyalty and trust between discrete colonies and between individual men is called into question when the integrity (in every sense of the word) of each is at stake. For Wills, these concerns emanate from the colonies' distrust of one another vis-à-vis their loyalty to the Crown even if the economic abuses prosecuted by the latter were, in fact, reason enough for considering and, eventually, reluctantly, promoting independence from England. For Maier, these concerns are scaled down to five men, representatives of some of the different ethnic, social and economic classes that comprised the prerevolutionary period. Maier analyzes the moral, ethical and psychological struggles each went through as he reluctantly shed his "independence" in service to a nebulous, "larger" cause. Both Wills and Maier demonstrate how individual men within these colonies were often at odds with their communities over the question of independence. In short, the conflicts between the colonies and England were replicated in conflicts among the colonies, between the colonies and some of its constituents, and within individual members of the colonies.¹

Identity politics has thus played a central role in the emergence of our federation of states from separate colonies, in the subsequent debates and conflicts over the extent to which, if at all, federal law supervenes state law (e.g., the Civil War, *Roe v. Wade*), in the immigration-driven arguments over who is a "citizen" and, more important, what constitutes citizenship. In suggesting that these various facets of the history of the United States of America may be subsumed under the concept of identity politics, I mean to historicize and broaden our understanding of this term beyond its recent focus on the various modes of self-assertion among marginalized populations. At the same time we imperil our sense of political and cultural history by ignoring the matrix from which the concept, if not the term, emerged. Thus I want to provide at least some contexts, however problematic, for its genesis.

As an epithet used by some communists and socialists (but not, for example, anarchists) in the latter half of the 20th century, "identity politics" refers to the eclipse of economic- or class-based analyses and criticisms of historically marginalized subjects by a disproportionate—and, to some, invalid—at-

tention to their “accidental” features: for example, sex, sexual orientation, ethnicity and race.² However, the problem of biological features in relation to modernity in general, and capitalism in particular, can be found at least as early as the Frederick Douglass/Susan B. Anthony/Sojourner Truth debates over which group—black men, white women, white and black women—deserved to be the first “minority” to acquire the right to vote. However, I want to narrow the scope of this summary to the post-October Revolution (1917) period in the United States when communist agitation in black communities was at its historical apex. This agitation is marked in two of the most famous novels of the years before and after World War II: Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940) and Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952). By examining a section on Wright and Ellison in Harold Cruse’s *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, set against the backdrop of Cruse’s measured antipathy toward communism and integration, we can gauge the difficulty of weighing the relative heft of class, culture and race at any given historical moment.

The Russian, Mexican, Chinese and Cuban revolutions during the first sixty years of the 20th century all raised questions about the relationship between indigenous, ethnic traditions and communist ideologies as they materialized on the ground. The rise, suppression and eclipse of the Communist Party of the United States of America (hereafter CPUSA) during the first fifty or so years of the 20th century offers an instructive example of what happens when Marxist doctrine encounters not entrenched indigenous ethnic traditions (as in China or Russia) but ideas and customs barely a century old, barely a “tradition,” and, moreover, a *mélange* of imported and native mores.³ In fact, another way that identity politics plays itself out in U.S. history is the tensions between so-called American pragmatism and the very concept of the “American.” John Dewey’s emphasis on the instrumentality of experience in all spheres of human existence tends to undercut the calcification of experiences into a custom, a tradition, though Dewey himself sought to reconcile the all into the one by way of socialization (e.g., education).⁴ Yet, as Garry Wills points out in a chapter on The Fourth of July Celebration, once the 1787 Constitution was ratified, there was almost an immediate attempt to institutionalize July 4 as the “Day of Independence.”⁵ The rapidity with which national symbols and rites were institutionalized in this period was an index of how precarious the stability of the “nation” seemed from certain points of view, given the struggles to suppress the indigenous natives, the “threat” presented by the 1789 French Revolution and the ongoing conflicts with Spain which eventually resulted in the 1812 War. Thus, from “below,” as it were, individual and collective “experiences” were gradually transforming the English, Scotch, Dutch and Germans, for example, into “Americans” while, from “above,” federalist-cum-Enlightenment “ideas” were reinforcing a particular understanding and

meaning of those experiences. Of course, these citizens and colonies were not *tabula rasa* robots; they were interpreting and making sense of their own experiences. In the potential differences between these interpretations of experiences and ideas, we see the gaps we today understand as the borders of the enclosures we deem “identity politics.”

From the point of view of the CPUSA, “identity politics” is a synonym for “false consciousness” to the extent the interpretations of a specific group’s experiences remain circumscribed by, or confined to, the group. A total, if provisional, understanding of historical experiences is precisely what the CPUSA, among other leftist groups, was attempting to grasp. When the “provisional” qualifier was actually, or perceived to have been, jettisoned, the CPUSA came under criticism, which we can read refracted in the literature of the period.⁶

In *The Crisis*, Cruse’s overarching thesis is that economic and political development for blacks can only be achieved through—and thus, “after”—the development of the cultural sphere. We qualify “after” because sometimes Cruse argues that the development of the cultural sphere must precede that of the other spheres; at other times he argues for their simultaneous development. In giving priority or equal value to the cultural sphere, Cruse departs from “vulgar” Marxism that privileges class and economic determinants. As critics from the radical left (e.g., Gary Holcomb, and John McClendon) have consistently pointed out, Cruse’s version of black cultural nationalism, though distinct from the nascent black nationalisms under formation in the early Sixties (e.g., Black Arts Repertory Theater, the Nation of Islam and the Republic of New Africa), was, like all nationalisms, apolitical⁷. This explains why Cruse, in 1967, could call for a Marxist-esque “revolution” in *The Crisis* and, after the collapse of almost all modes of black nationalism in the 1970s, could, in 1987, endorse a more conservative call for “empowerment” in *Plural But Equal*. Still, the distinction between black *cultural* nationalism and black *nationalism* (which Cruse criticizes repeatedly) is significant: the former underlines the importance of culture while the latter does not valorize any particular sphere (economic, political or cultural) of black activity. Thus black nationalism is, for Cruse, a confused and confusing *mélange* of ideas, methods and concepts often at cross-purposes with one another, sometimes within the same organization (e.g., the Black Panthers). Underestimating the importance Cruse accords the cultural sphere—even when he claims he is not privileging it over and above the economic or political sphere—accounts, in part, for why radical critics have consistently reduced Cruse’s complex relation to Marxism as “anti-Marxism” when it might be more accurate to argue that Cruse is agnostic regarding Marxist but atheistic regarding the CPUSA. Historians have demonstrated that Cruse’s attacks on black

members of the Communist Party in the early part of the 20th century were largely inaccurate when not merely *ad hominem* and scurrilous. Historical inaccuracies and personal vendettas aside, however, Cruse's arguments demonstrate that even while he explicitly attacks all "foreign" ideologies and methods, be they European or African in origin, as useless for either black revolution (*The Crisis*) or black empowerment (*Plural But Equal*), he uses at least one Marxist structural principle consistently throughout both texts: the necessity of owning the means of production.

While Cruse insists at times that the political, economic and cultural spheres must be confronted simultaneously, the *Crisis* emphasizes the necessity of seizure of the cultural means of production while *Plural But Equal* emphasizes seizure of the political means of production. Though both strategies would of necessity have had an impact on the economic sphere, Cruse did not develop an adequate and sustained analysis of the economic sphere itself. For this lack alone Cruse, for some, would be disqualified as a Marxist, but of course he went out of his way to criticize the whole importation of Marxist ideas and methods into the analyses of what he maintained was an American problem even while he begrudgingly allowed for the possibility that a revised Marxism, cognizant of the specific developments and cultural conditions of the United States, might be useful.⁸

For example, even though Cruse is critical of Richard Wright's ambivalence re. black "folk" culture, an ambivalence Cruse blames on Wright's commitment to the strategies of the CPUSA, what we can observe in both authors is revisionist Marxism, a process that began at least as early as the formation of the Frankfurt School whose members recognized that Marx had to be "updated" and "completed" by paying attention to, among other things, culture-specific histories and formations and psychological dynamics of both groups and individuals within given nations. Because he believes he has shed more of his Marxist baggage than Wright ever did, Cruse is more critical of, if more sympathetic to, Wright's dilemmas than he is to Ellison's even though Ellison's cultural achievement is championed above Wright's. In order to observe the logic of this somewhat counter-intuitive difference in these evaluations, we can use Wright and Ellison to illuminate what is at stake for Cruse in *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*.

Cruse wants to demonstrate that, historically, the foil to cultural nationalism has been civil rights and integration. His "test" case is Harlem, and it goes without saying that this choice is not coincidental. Harlem, Cruse argues, was not only the prototype for black cultural nationalism but was also the tail that wagged the dog of black America in general. Thus Harlem, as the matrix of cultural nationalism, has a privileged status in black American history; it

is the site of both potential and, Cruse argues, wasted opportunity. Indeed, Cruse erects his argument upon the foundation of speculation, of what might have happened in black culture in particular and American culture in general, if certain judicial, legislative, economic, cultural and political decisions had, and had not, been made. Cruse's general thesis is that across the spectrum of American cultural life, whenever a choice between integration and segregation has been possible, the decision by blacks to argue in favor of integration has been short-sighted and destructive to "black power," both in its "conservative" capitalist mode and its "radical" socialist/communist modes. Consequently, Cruse argues, integration-oriented strategies have systematically undermined the development and aspirations of the black underclass as a group.

Though Wright and Ellison both lived "integrationist" lives, though both presumed that literature was not subsumed by politics, Wright's *Native Son* and Ellison's *Invisible Man* may be read as warnings regarding the perils of valorizing integration per se, a theme that may account for why both authors emerge relatively unscathed from Cruse's otherwise excoriating analyses. Both authors joined, and eventually became disenchanted with, the CPUSA. Both novels' protagonists wind up rejecting the CPUSA.⁹ After Max's passionate, CPUSA-framed denunciation of the social conditions that created Bigger Thomas, Bigger shocks Max by insisting that he must have killed for "something good" in him alone, something apart from anyone else or any other consideration. More pointedly, the CPUSA, thinly veiled as the powers behind *The Brotherhood* in Ellison's novel, is revealed as an opportunistic organization willing to sacrifice the lives of black people for the sake of "scientific socialism."

At the same time, the differences between Wright, Ellison and Cruse cannot be underestimated. Cruse is more critical of Wright than Ellison even though, from a strictly political point of view, Cruse had more in common with the "leftist" individualism of Wright than he did with the conservative individualism of Ellison. However, Wright's leftism remained bound to an integrationist ethos while Ellison's conservatism (as depicted in *Shadow and Act*, the only critical book of Ellison's available to Cruse at that time) was "closer" to Cruse's nationalist and, most important, intellectual biases. Thus Cruse defends the attack on Ellison by both the radical left and black nationalist camps precisely because neither is sufficiently attuned to, much less capable of, Ellison's aesthetic achievement: "We can now see that the Killens' group, in a precarious situation these days, cannot attack Ellison on craftsmanship, or even content any more...because none of them has written anything even remotely comparable to Ellison's achievements."¹⁰ Ellison's novel and essays are so significant as black cultural expressions

that Cruse has to find a way around Ellison's explicit rejection of any link between "race" and "literature": "However, even if Ellison did express the view that literature and art are not racial, as Clarke insists, the evidence remains that all of Ellison's work as exemplified in *Invisible Man* and *Shadow and Act* is definitely racial. I would rather believe that Ellison expressed this view in 1959, when he refused to attend the AMSAC conference, in order to avoid being involved with Killens whose Freedomways review of *Invisible Man* Ellison had every right to resent on more than political grounds."¹¹ The *terra firma* of "political grounds" is not sufficient for Cruse; the cultural grounding of Ellison's work trumps the latter's own politics. Or, in the parlance of today, identity politics, however conservative, trump a radicalism linked to integration.

Cruse's need to yoke Ellison to a literature-as-race cultural nationalism is driven by his inability to disregard Ellison's superior "craftsmanship" vis-à-vis Wright's and his desire to use "culture" as a stick to ward off inferior artists and politicians like Killens. The apparent conservatism of identity politics thus appears, in this context, incongruous with the liberal arts to the extent the latter trumpet the intrinsic superiority of transcendental aesthetics. Yet this particular aesthetic value is itself often criticized as a mode of cultural conservatism. Though the charges of conservatism may come from different, even opposing, cultural or social or political camps, this does not necessarily mean that they are different kinds of conservatism. It is possible to show that identity politics is not only analogous to aesthetic objectivism but that both terms reinforce one another.¹² In the Civil Rights Movement and New Criticism we have exemplary case studies of this dynamics, for their respective histories resemble a bell curve: both began as different modes of identity politics, both aspired to transcend those politics, and both collapsed back into identity politics after their institutionalization.

But why New Criticism and the Civil Rights Movement? Though we tend to associate both with Southern ideas that travelled "North" and there met with varying degrees of success, literary critics and social historians have complicated this understanding of both movements' origins and trajectories. Nonetheless, for all their relationship to Enlightenment values transmitted through, on the one hand, aesthetic values promoted by the universities at Cambridge and Oxford and, on the other, pre- and post-feudal economic values invested in new concepts of labor, their histories on U/S. soil replay some of the issues underlying the Civil War and Reconstruction, Allen Tate's quip that he had to become a man of letters because he was born too late to be a Confederate general notwithstanding.¹³ Their outsized impact on, and transformation of, the U.S. cultural, social, economic and political spheres make them two of the most significant "American" movements of

the 20th century, rivaled only by the industrialization and institutionalization of “youth culture,” cinema and popular music.¹⁴ Though New Criticism and the Civil Rights Movement appear to simply pass one another in the hallways of public educational institutions, their separate successes and failures were mutually reinforcing.¹⁵

As noted above, New Criticism and the Civil Rights Movement share philosophical assumptions which underpin the liberal arts and, more broadly, liberal education in the United States. These assumptions can be traced back to the Enlightenment, specifically in its Germanic, Italian, English and Scottish permutations. Collectively, these idealisms ground the 1776 Declaration of Independence, the 1787 and 1789 Constitutions, and all subsequent social, cultural and political movements for those oppressed by, marginalized in relation to, or excluded from, nominally humanist institutions within the United States of America.¹⁶ For both New Criticism and the Civil Rights Movement, the integrity of the aesthetic object and human being, respectively, derived, in part, from Kant’s concept of the beautiful, anchors the respective concepts of aesthetic distance and inalienable rights.¹⁷ Indeed, these concepts, under phenomenological reduction, are interchangeable as functions: New Criticism’s most ardent proponents defended the aesthetic object precisely on the basis of arguments that presupposed its “unalienable rights”¹⁸ while the proponents of civil rights for those of African descent insisted on the “astonishment” of aesthetic distance to counter the racism and racialism inaugurated by anthropology and ethnology.¹⁹

Structurally analogous, New Criticism and the Civil Rights Movement ground their tenets in a regional “moment” that responds to a call of “freedom” transmitted from delimited verities (the relative freedom of the poem and the relative freedom of a people vis-à-vis “history”). Nurtured in New England and the South at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, the Civil Rights Movement and New Criticism, respectively, passed each other as the former went south (Alabama and Mississippi) and the latter traveled north (Ohio and New Jersey) between the 1930s and 1960s.²⁰ The various social, economic and cultural crises in the decades between (e.g., the 1918 race riots, the Red Scare, the Great Depression) transformed each movement to such an extent that some of their progenitors—for example, W.E.B. DuBois and John Crowe Ransom—wound up distancing themselves, to varying degrees, from the “new” movements. Between the late 19th and early 20th century when both movements began to germinate and the mid-20th century when both began institutionalized as federal law (the Civil Rights Act of 1964) and academic pedagogy (in the 1960s and 1970s), the very function, if not meaning, of the “liberal” in the “liberal arts” underwent transformation. How critics in particular, and the

American educational system in general, would come to understand this “new” concept of “liberal” in relation to the “liberal arts” was encapsulated in the careers of several individual professors during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. None, however, may be more exemplary of this conceptual shift than Joel E. Spingarn. In Spingarn *New Criticism and the Civil Rights Movement* share a common paternal source. Spingarn became the president of the NAACP’s Board of Trustees a year after the termination of his position as professor of comparative literature at Columbia University.

As his biographer, Marshall Van Deusen, suggests, Spingarn was dismissed from Columbia not only because of his defense of a colleague who had been brought up on a “morals” charge but also because Spingarn was essentially unfit, as both an administrator and professor, for academia. A belated Romantic deist, literary theorist, and Crocean idealist, Spingarn found it difficult to deal with the mundane details of actual literary and academic practice. According to Gerald Graff, Spingarn was one of the first literature professors to argue for a scientific analysis of literary form irrespective of its “content.” He contended that ethical and moral interpretations of literature had little to do with the literary form of literature. Spingarn’s insistence on the relative autonomy of literature and literary criticism was designed to resist their annexation by an array of psychological, psychoanalytic, Marxist and liberal humanist critical formations.²¹ As Spingarn later conceded, he had to argue to extremes in the particular cultural and political milieu of the early 20th century in order to ward off what he saw as various efforts to minimize, if not eliminate, the literariness, the autonomous objectivity, of the literary work. The lecture in which he outlined his literary philosophy, entitled “The New Criticism,” was delivered in 1910, the same year he was fired by Columbia and, as it happens, the same year the NAACP was formed.

The argument for “criticism,” understood as the insistence on the relative autonomy of literature, was at least a generation old when Spingarn resurrected it.²² Throughout the late 19th century, John Fruit, Martin Wright Sampson and others had made similar, if sporadic, arguments for the autonomy of literature and, by extension, literary criticism, arguments that, intentionally or not, buttressed support for the division of the humanities into departments in the new research universities.²³ While the concomitant division of the physical sciences had been justified on the basis of the alleged “evolution,” and thus specialization, of scientific knowledge, the foundations of the separation of the so-called “human sciences” from the arts appeared less secure. Academic opportunism aside, what justified separating historical, social, religious, ethical, philosophical and moral concerns from literature, art and music?²⁴ The history of the development

of the modern research university constitutes a number of responses to this question. For example, traditional liberal arts colleges were retooled into makeshift universities; business, engineering and/or social science colleges were grafted onto the original arts and sciences colleges. The land-grant universities not only served to transform individual farmers into collective citizens of the “agriculture” industry but they also served as citizen-making factories for newly arriving immigrant populations. Of course, eventually these citizen-making responsibilities would be turned over to standardized primary and secondary educational institutions in the early 20th century. As Graff and others have pointed out, these social, political and institutional developments had a profound effect on the development of “criticism” as a means of understanding literature. The hostility to criticism as it unfolded in the poetics and practices of Eliot’s “objective correlative,” I.A. Richards’ “practical criticism” and Brooks’ and Warren’s pedagogical hermeneutics emanated from humanists on both the right and left sides of the political spectrum; both resisted the idea of the relative autonomy of the literary work of art.

Within the discipline of literary studies, Spingarn’s promotion of literature and literary criticism as the “analogues” to, and buffer against, scientific rationalism and capitalist materialism is an important predecessor of these progenitors of what would eventually be called New Criticism, the most influential mode of literary criticism in the United States during the first two-thirds of the 20th century.

How is it that these two movements—one social, one literary—with their origins in the North, came to be associated with the South? The Niagara Movement began not only as a response to Booker T. Washington but also as a counterattack to the Southern backlash against Reconstruction.²⁵ The reign of terror initiated by organizations like the Ku Klux Klan was accompanied by the stilted reinvigoration of medievalism as a model for social interactions. An important foundation for civic and social structures in the pre-Civil War South, medievalism, resurrected in the post-Civil War South, produced an uneven mixture of anti-industrial, anti-utilitarian, defensiveness and self-criticism, leading to two general trends, captured in the epigraphs “the South Will Rise Again” and “the New South.”²⁶ The former was the anthem of vigilante groups whose missions dovetailed with legal and quasi-legal measures designed to protect Southern “interests” against the various modes of Northern aggression. The latter was the anthem of Southerners and Northerners who worked, together and separately, to “modernize” the infrastructures of the South while maintaining, in part, its traditions and customs. As one example among several, the Northern-born marketing entrepreneur and railroad magnate, Commodore Cornelius Vanderbilt,

donated the money to build the first buildings of his eponymous university and oversaw appointments and the hiring of staff and faculty, much like other presidents of Northern liberal arts colleges in the early part of the 19th century. For Vanderbilt, medievalism, reconfigured as the culture of classical antiquity, could serve as a model for the South *and* North, doing what Christianity once had before the Renaissance: embody a common core of values for all citizens. Vanderbilt University quickly gained a reputation for its cultivation of a cosmopolitan perspective, one which echoed Spingarn's training and outlook, and accounts, in part, for the unease one of its alumni, John Crowe Ransom, always felt as a Fugitive Poet and, especially, a Southern Agrarian.²⁷ His move to Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio reflected his increasing interest in a mode of literary criticism unencumbered by social, economic and cultural movements. Ransom, who also attended Oxford and engaged in literary correspondences with English professors in New England and elsewhere, became too cosmopolitan to be satisfied with the parochialism of Southern agrarianism. By contrast, his colleague Allen Tate, who wound up at Princeton, and who was as cosmopolitan as Ransom and much more modern in his literary tastes, viewed criticism, poetics and agrarianism as complementary strategies allied against scientific rationalism and capitalist industrialism. Donald Davidson, a fellow Fugitive Poet and Agrarian, viewed both Ransom's and Tate's moves to the North and into academia as a betrayal of everything they had all once believed and defended.²⁸

While Southern medievalism presupposed social distinction as the source of cultural and political stability, Northern gentility presupposed social distinction united by a common "spirituality."²⁹ Spingarn was the foremost proponent of this concept, both in his literary theories and in his understanding of social and cultural spheres. Thus, he opposed both ethnic separatism and melting-pot assimilation, the former encapsulated in his disputes with W.E.B. DuBois who was becoming convinced that integration was not the panacea the NAACP imagined it was, and the latter embodied in his insistence on a kind of cultural pluralism that would later be taken up toward different ends by social critics like Randolph Bourne, Harold Cruse, and Christopher Lasch. In brief, Spingarn's social ideas—that each ethnic group in the United States was a separate, if not equal, participant in the "great experiment," itself understood as an evolutionary process driven by interminable self-criticism—were analogous to his literary ideas. The insistence on relative autonomy reinforced cultural pluralism in the social sphere and aesthetic objectification in the literary sphere.³⁰ For all the irreducible differences between Spingarn and R.P. Blackmur, Cleanth Brooks, Allen Tate, T.S. Eliot and John Crowe Ransom, to say nothing of their differences from one another, almost all the concepts we today associate with New Criticism

can be found in Spingarn's writings.³¹

Spingarn's political and literary theories, like those of Emerson and Arnold, were founded on the reformulation of the liberal arts as not only or primarily social acquisitions but as embodiments of a transcendental "spirit" once associated with, but now independent of and parallel to, Western Christianity. At the same time, once it was understood that the liberal arts, properly curtailed from within by its history of self-criticism, could reinforce religious orthodoxy, it was not long before they would be asked to do what the established religions had once done: reinforce social and cultural orthodoxy. Yet, the very nature of the liberal arts made them ill-suited to serve spheres outside their domains, in large part because of the way they tended to promote, if not reinforce, iconoclastic values.³²

For example, to the extent the liberal arts function as modes of release or relative freedom from labor (itself understood as the struggle for relative freedom from nature), they are intrinsically linked to the birth of a specific type of "individual." But for Plato, the iconoclast and the individual, as we understand the latter, were essentially synonymous. Thus poetry and drama were dangerous because they agitated (liberated) men's emotions from the cages of rationality. For Plato, unleashed emotions always threaten the rule of rationalism, and it isn't a great leap from this moralized aesthetics to a politicized ethics policing the figure of the iconoclast within the social structures of classical antiquity. Moreover, the usurping of rationalism is never simply a matter of individual pathology. The very existence of a "community" depends on the suppression of (individual and collective) disorder.³³

All this accounts, of course, for Aristotle's attempt to re-think the function of the arts. Aristotle concedes that the arts unleash passions, but these emissions have a form, a structure, and so they are never simply out of control.³⁴ This controlling structure is nothing other than ethics itself, which, not coincidentally, has institutional force. The very space and structure of the theater guarantees the orderly emission of emotion and it can be said that here, in *The Poetics*, are the seeds of the "liberal" arts.³⁵ Catharsis, thus, may be understood as an index of the institutionalization of the arts as "liberal" arts insofar as its site of privilege—Aristotle's example *par excellence*—is the theater. Moreover, the elevation of tragedy over comedy, pathos over bathos, brings the former closer to the "good" (the one, the rational, the beautiful, etc.). As it will throughout its history, "the theater" in general, "liberal" or not, not only establishes a general relationship between leisure and work, citizen and non-citizen, but also secures social distinction and taste within each social category. That is, the theater re-enacts the graduated divisions

and mores inherent within, and constitutive of, the social.³⁶ These divisions establish the cultural foundations for the eventual emergence of the modern (that is, post-medieval) individual, an emergence largely dependent on the general promulgation of literacy.

In the 18th and 19th centuries in the New World, this “individual” is imagined, variously, as the locus of opposition to both the modern “mass man” of Catholic and Anglican conformity, urban environs, factory labor and industrialized uniformity as well as the pre-modern “savage” free of the accoutrements of “culture.” The phantasmagoric aspects of these individuals and “mass” men are relevant here only to the extent they account for the philosophical, social, political and cultural conflicts among intellectuals, educators, and artists from the 18th century to the present. For example, within literary studies in the newly established research universities in the late 19th century, specialization and atomization described the same phenomenon perceived from opposing viewpoints: historical scholarship on the one hand, generalizing humanism on the other. Both perspectives shared the common assumption that, in the strictest sense, the liberal arts serve no utilitarian ends and thus, are crucial in the formation of non-utilitarian values.³⁷ This common assumption became, as we know, one of the pillars of an emerging “criticism” in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Criticism was a multiple-use tool; it sought to rescue aestheticism from mere impressionism, to defend it in from materialism in all its modes, and to offer itself as a mode of thinking rigorous enough to rival scientific rationalism.³⁸

Insofar as the Civil Rights Movement shares with the traditional liberal arts and New Criticism the pursuit of “freedom”³⁹ within the context of humanist ideals, it too presupposes a distinction between different types of individuals. Just as the development and institutionalization of the liberal arts and the rise of the individual are inextricable from one another, so too are the Civil Rights Movement and the Negro (to use the parlance of the time) citizen. However, the Civil Rights Movement began not as a struggle for the individualization of the former African slaves and their descendants but as a struggle for the full citizenship rights of a racial group whose ethnic diversity had been largely—though not totally—erased. Entrenched racism, *de facto* and *de jure*, aside, it is precisely this constitutional awkwardness—citizenship rights for a group as opposed to an individual⁴⁰—that explains the nearly one-hundred-year fight for civil rights for the Negro, to say nothing of the on-going battle over affirmative action programs. Although both conservatives and liberals argue that the Civil Rights Movement is defined by its attempt to liberate the individual from the group, this reading is based less on its constitutional foundations (e.g., the 14th and 15th amendments) than on the internal conflicts, contradictions and tensions

which beset it. For it is precisely the question of the citizen—not only how one weighs social obligations and responsibilities against the individual’s “pursuit of happiness” but also the presumed homology between individual human beings and citizens⁴¹—that grounds the orthodox positions of both liberal and conservative readings of Civil Rights history. Although Martin Luther King Jr. consistently extolled the power of the group to change the course of social history, it clearly was a group of like-minded—not racially akin—individual human beings that he had in mind.⁴² Aside from disagreements over the question of tactics (absolute non-violence or non-violence except when physically attacked), the movement leadership and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee broke ranks over the question of integration and cultural nationalism.⁴³ For SNNC, the demonstrated power of King’s like-minded individuals implied that a racial group could be as formidable as, to some, “historically necessary.”⁴⁴ For King and his followers, group power was a strategic resource; once Negroes were granted full citizenship rights they would no longer need to wield power as a group. For Stokely Carmichael and the members of SNCC, however, the course of American history suggested that group power would remain a permanent, necessary resource. Thus, while King viewed integration as an avenue to shared power, Carmichael viewed it as a form of racial romanticism. For King, the group was composed of individuals who chose to group themselves in order to “fully” become citizens. For Carmichael and SNNC, individuals had been grouped together by a history which would never permit its members full citizenship. It is this axis of “choice” (and thus “will”) that orients traditional liberal and conservative readings of the “meaning” of the Civil Rights Movement. Such readings, however, obscure a more complex relation between the two camps. For example, SNCC and other “black power” organizations explicitly rejected “victimhood” (however problematic their conception of the victim as feminine and feminized) and saw in the popular slogan “Say it loud! I’m black and proud!” an affirmation of the black individual outside the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. And King, an idealist and pragmatist, favored affirmative action as the second stage of the movement. Once the movement had secured full citizenship rights for the group, the Negro individual would still need assistance integrating other spheres of American life. King did not consign group power to post-Civil Rights irrelevance. After the debacle in Chicago when the limits of the Civil Rights Movement were made painfully clear, he was able to emerge from his crisis of faith and align himself with larger, even more diverse groups—e.g., the antiwar, pro- “human rights” brigades. Moreover, he began to concede moral ground to the radical black Islam of his chief rival as the charismatic leader of Negroes—Malcolm X. Group power appeared to be less provisional, less temporary, than he may have first imagined (or hoped). And so, to the extent that it thinks and presupposes the group,

the Civil Rights Movement is at odds with the traditional liberal arts that presuppose the individual citizen.⁴⁵

In short, just as the Civil Rights Movement can be understood as a movement from the group to the individual and, finally, from the individual to the citizen, so too New Criticism can be understood as a mode of investigation that presupposes the movement of the literary object from the humanities to “literature” and from literature to the individual poem⁴⁶—its citizenship in the pantheon of great literature a matter of how well it resists backsliding into history, politics, sociology, etc. The movement from nature to culture, from the group (tribal, humanistic, etc.) to the individual, is not only the function of the liberal arts but also, in the economic realm, the function of labor. But since necessity precipitates labor, labor is “lower” than the liberal arts even though they promulgate themselves on the back of labor.⁴⁷ And citizenship is a quality acquired via property, external (land) and internal (character). Moreover, these parallel movements are propelled by concepts that are functionally analogous: integration and ambiguity. Just as integration tends to minimize the value, if not development, of a relatively autonomous black public sphere, so too ambiguity stigmatizes didacticism as a pejorative feature of literature: “good” literary works, like “good” Negroes, foreground their forms, not their “messages.”⁴⁸ Ambiguity, like integration, serves to assert what is essentially a Spingarnian trope: America, as such, is a speculative spirit irreducible to its aesthetic and material antagonisms, the social, political, cultural, economic and geographical positions staked out by its authors and citizens. Both ambiguity and integration attempt to transcend history as they look toward a more or less utopian future in which only “form” and “character” “mean.” Because form and character are essentially feudal in structure, they reinforce certain hierarchies (aesthetic and ethical) while undermining other hierarchies (cultural and racial). Of course the counterargument is that the former values are transcendental and are thus, strictly speaking, non-hierarchical.

New Criticism and the Civil Rights Movement both sought to turn away from the aesthetic and social implications of capitalism and modernity. In so doing, both succumbed to the marketplace of professional education and economic mobility. These Southern movements succeeded precisely to the extent they shed their Southern skins, two effects of which may be read in the Bollingen controversy of 1948 and the Bakke decision of 1978.⁴⁹

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(Footnotes)

¹ See, en passim, Garry Wills, *Inventing America: Jefferson's Declaration of Independence* and Pauline Maier, *The Old Revolutionaries: Political Lives in the Age of Samuel Adams*.

² The reverse term, initially used by these marginalized groups and leftists to disparage "vulgar" Marxism, is political correctness. Of course, this term has been appropriated by a wide spectrum of naysayers as a general slur against the social, economic and cultural interests of these groups. In short, political correctness, as used today, has become a synonym for identity politics.

³ This is not to deny the obvious: indigenous and alien are relative placeholders. In general, the "native" is, strictly speaking, prehistoric, what lies beyond one's ability to map emigration and immigration patterns over a specific mass of land, be it an island, region, "country" or continent. Thus the necessity of transcendental values that go "beyond" history. See, for example, Philip Moran's "Leninism and the Enlightenment."

⁴ See, for example, John Dewey, *The Public and its Problems*.

⁵ Wills, "Part Five: National Symbol," in *Inventing America*, 323-62.

⁶ For example, Wright's treatment of the communists Jan and Max in *Native Son* is much more sympathetic than Ellison's treatment of The Brotherhood in general and Jack in particular in *Invisible Man*. Indeed, it is a frustrated Jack who, early in the novel, asks the narrator, "Why do you fellows always bring up race?" Here is an early paraphrase of what would become known as "identity politics." We may speculate that Ellison's hostility is related to the CPUSA's decision to fold its activities into the Popular Front between 1935 and 1939. This may well be the source of Harold Cruse's attacks on the CPUSA since one of the effects of its "turn" was the decision to support integration as a general strategy of empowerment for African Americans.

⁷ John H. McClendon, III, "Marxism in *Ebony* Contra Black Marxism: Categorical Implications," and Gary E. Holcomb, "New Negroes, Black Communists, and the New Pluralism."

⁸ This insistence on the American cultural context helps account for Cruse's deliberate use of Negro in his book's title and black in its subtitle. Even as early as 1967 black was beginning to acquire the Pan-African connotation it retains even today. Yet Negro, for Cruse, still retained important historical connotations.

⁹ Although Ellison famously claimed that if he meant for The Brotherhood to represent the CPUSA he would have said so, the similarities in strategy, outlook and organization between the two is, for this reader, too close to be coincidental.

¹⁰ Cruse, *The Crisis*, 508.

¹¹ Cruse, *The Crisis*, 509.

¹² As my opening remarks on the early colonial experiences suggest, I am not only col-

lapping the difference presumed between “individualism” and “identity politics,” between self- and group-reliance and affirmation to the extent both rely on internal coherence, but I am also suggesting that the aesthetic object in the cultural realm mirrors the citizen in the social and economic realm. What Donald Kartiganer says about Murray Krieger’s concept of the poem could, with minor changes, apply to the Enlightenment view of the citizen: “...poetry [is] radically organic: poetry [is] responsive solely to its own internal requirements, yet at the same time, [it is] an essential source of insight into the outside world.” For more on the concept of coherence see footnote 19.

¹³ That is, the man of letters and man of arms, a medieval conceit. Tate’s point is that the Enlightenment is compensation, however poor, for a grander, nobler, era. As will be seen below, a kind of neo-medievalism plays a large role in the organization of Southern culture in the 18th and 19th centuries.

¹⁴ One could argue that popular culture, developing at the same time as both New Criticism and the Civil Rights Movement, helped undercut the power of both to the extent the focus of both was institutional public education.

¹⁵ The career of Melvin B. Tolson is exemplary in this regard. His successes as a teacher and social activist remain unimpeachable. The career of his poetry is another matter. Compare, for example, the Allen Tate introduction to Tolson’s 1953 book *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia* with Karl Shapiro’s introduction to his 1965 book, *Harlem Gallery: Book One, The Curator*. While the entrance to the literary establishment is evident, the debate over these introductions parallel the intractable assumption on the part of some that entrance to other “white” institutions likewise demands a “whitening” of African Americans.

¹⁶ See Garry Wills above for the influence of Enlightenment values on the Declaration of Independence and the subsequent Constitutions. For the influence of Enlightenment values on modern revolutions in general, see Phillip Moran’s “Leninism and the Enlightenment.”

¹⁷ Aesthetic distance is disinterestedness. See Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, en passim, but especially section 6: “Since the delight is not based on any inclination of the subject (or any other deliberate interest), but the subject feels himself completely free in respect to the liking which he accords to the object, he can find as reason for his delight no personal conditions to which his own subjective self might alone be party. Hence he must regard it as resting on what he may also presuppose in every other person; and therefore he must believe that he has reason for demanding similar delight from every one.”

¹⁸ As footnote 17 implies, the link between “astonishment” and “distance” is also that between negrophilia and negrophobia; that is, astonishment or awe is neither love nor fear. In terms of King’s understanding of the Negro, then, one’s dignity is a function of one’s integrity, which can only be maintained in the absence of the other’s desire or revulsion. This is why King thought of his movement as a transformation of both blacks and whites. In terms of the New Critics, aesthetic distance is one of the barriers between institutionalized criticism and the partisan politics of the Agrarians. See Donald M. Kartiganer, “The Criticism of Murray Krieger: The Expansion of Contextualism” and, especially, Percy H. Houston, “The Modernism of Arnold” and Edward Pickering, “The Roots of

New Criticism.”

¹⁹ The value of “integrity” may be said to define not only the Enlightenment in general but even the Middle Ages and before. Christopher Herbert’s article, “The Conundrum of Coherence,” offers a summary of the consequences of assuming that objects of knowledge are intrinsically stable, coherent and knowable. However, as Herbert himself recognizes, the consequences of assuming incoherence is not only the “conundrum” of indeterminacy and uncertainty—hallmarks of postmodernity—but, ironically, theological—or as Derrida would have, onto-theological—faith.

²⁰ When Ransom’s *The New Criticism* was published in 1941 it inadvertently launched “the New Criticism,” though he’d been at Kenyon since 1937 and, more important, the book was actually an overview of the desultory modes of literary analysis striving toward “criticism.” Two years later, in 1943, Fred Folsom, an attorney with the Department of Justice, recommended using a little known statute to expand the category of “slave” from African Americans to any person of “low economic status” who was “forced to labor for a particular employer against their will.” This move expanded federal oversight of civil liberties and thus set precedence for the legal appeals from the leadership of the “short” Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. See Risa L. Goluboff, “The Thirteenth Amendment and the Lost Origins of Civil Rights.”

²¹ Graff, *Professing Literature*, 127.

²² Spingarn traces the history of criticism all the way back to the 16th century when the Italians developed “a unified body of poetic rules and theories” (483) which then infiltrated France, England and so on. Note, too, the dependence here on an essential coherence. See Spingarn, “The Origin of Criticism.”

²³ Graff, 123-24.

²⁴ As Spingarn notes, “...while Humanism might, during its progress emphasize this or that side of humanistic culture, it tended more and more to concern itself with the whole body of classical studies, and to consider them as forming a unity in themselves.” (484)

²⁵ See Booker T. Washington’s 1895 so-called “Atlanta compromise” speech and W.E. B. Du Bois’ response in *The Souls of Black Folk*. Washington’s biography, *Up from Slavery*, contextualizes the general thrust and strategy of the speech as well as his work at Tuskegee Institute.

²⁶ That these slogans did not necessarily exclude one another constitutes one of the major themes in almost all the novels of William Faulkner but a more sympathetic account of reconciling these sundry directions in Southern history can be found in Charles Chesnut’s little known novel, *The Colonel’s Dream*.

²⁷ Almost all the Fugitive Poets were at odds with the conservative, philological-oriented English Department, headed by Edwin Mims, precisely because of their interest in “criticism.” See George Core, “Vanderbilt English and the Rise of the New Criticism.”

²⁸ See Pickering, *en passim*.

²⁹ See Wills, for example, on how the 18th century Enlightenment propagator Thomas Jefferson could affirm the “equality” of Africans even as he disparaged their intellectual and social shortcomings.

³⁰ Like Spingarn, Rene Wellek and Cleanth Brooks, for example, posit the objectifica-

tion of the poem as a corrective to its annexation by non-literary interests. See Cleanth Brooks, "In Search of the New Criticism," and Rene Wellek, "The New Criticism: Pro and Contra."

³¹ That Spingarn was already considered to be one among many critics promoting a "new" approach to literature may be gauged by Irving Babbitt's retort to Spingarn, "The Modern Spirit of Dr. Spingarn."

³² See Houston on Matthew Arnold's noble efforts to forestall iconoclastic partisanship: "It is of the last importance that English criticism should clearly discern what rule for its course, in order to avail itself of the field now opening to it, and to produce fruit for the future, it ought to take. The rule may be summed up in one word—disinterestedness. And how is criticism to show disinterestedness? By keeping aloof from what is called 'the practical view of things,' by resolutely following the law of its own nature, which is to be a free play of the mind on all subjects which it touches." (192)

³³ Plato, *The Republic*, en passim.

³⁴ Eliot's belief that an emotion is a complex of feelings functions similarly: to safeguard the role of the passions at a specific moment in history and to "rank" poetries to the extent they impose form on the passions. See Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent."

³⁵ Nonetheless, insofar as the crowd invited by the theatrical space risks functioning to inspire uncontrolled passions, even violence, it was necessary to impose etiquette, a social ethos, on this space. Thus the theatre is defined as part of the "public" even as its structure replicates the enclosure of the "private." This tension between open public spaces and closed public spaces always threaten to undermine the private/public distinction.

³⁶ It is perhaps not coincidental that Cruse and the founders of the Black Arts Movement both privileged the theatre as the site where "black consciousness" would be forged and reinforced as fundamentally collective.

³⁷ For a recent iteration of this well-known value, see Dan Cottom's provocatively titled, *Why Education Is Useless*.

³⁸ Thus the line from Kant and Rousseau to Dewey and Lippmann—with many figures in between—suggests that the New Critics' rejection of the "old Brahmins" of Southern gentility and Northern instrumentality helped reinvigorate, however temporary, the liberal arts and belles lettres, even as it brought along reactionary politics via Eliot. See Kenneth Asher, "T.S. Eliot and the New Criticism."

³⁹ That is, freedom from regionalism and utility on the one hand and freedom from racism and racialism on the other.

⁴⁰ Thus the first three sentences from the President's Committee on Civil Rights, published in 1967: "The central theme of our national heritage is the importance of the individual person. From the earliest moment of our history we have believed that every human being has an essential dignity which must be respected and safeguarded. Moreover, we believe that the welfare of the individual is the final goal of group life."

⁴¹ For example, Thomas Jefferson was opposed to European immigrants to Virginia precisely because they lacked the "native qualities" necessary to become citizens. See Wills.

⁴² Barbara Allen, "Martin Luther King's Civil Disobedience and the American Covenant Tradition," *Publius*, 30:4 (Autumn 2000), 71—113.

⁴³ This ideological conflict within the “short” Civil Rights Movement was a reflection of ideological conflicts that beset the “long” movement—specifically, the early years of the NAACP. As Steve Valocchi points out, the NAACP was not always a promoter of integration as the best solution to racial discrimination against African Americans. See Valocchi’s article “The Emergence of the Integrationist Ideology in the Civil Rights Movement” and Beth Tompkins Bates, “A New Crowd Challenges the Agenda of the Old Guard of the NAACP, 1935-141.”

⁴⁴ This is precisely the theme of Harold Cruse’s *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*.

⁴⁵ This is why it has been virtually impossible for white Americans to criticize the group implications of affirmative action; they are not white as a group. The absence of all the social, political and cultural adjustments blacks have to make to fit in is explained on the basis of a transcendental idea or value. The origin of these ideas and values must also, for obvious reasons, also be transcendental. Which is to say—they cannot have originated as creations. They must have been dis-, un- or re-covered.

⁴⁶ It has not gone unnoticed that the New Critics’ privilege of poetry was inseparable from their valorization of coherence, integrity and objective structure. It also had the effect of a rearguard assault on prose fiction, already rivaling poetry for popular and critical acclaim. The exception, of course, was “poetic” prose fiction, which became one of the standard bearers of “high” modernism (as opposed to the “low” modernism of social realists—Faulkner and Joyce as opposed to Dos Passos and Dreiser).

⁴⁷ As Risa L. Goluboff demonstrates in “The Thirteenth Amendment and the Lost Origins of Civil Rights,” labor is also the legal matrix from which the “modern” or “short” civil rights movement emerged. Larry Isaac and Lars Christiansen argue for an ongoing relationship between labor and the civil rights movement in their article “How the Civil Rights Movement Revitalized Labor Militancy.”

⁴⁸ For the problematic, complex relationship between integration and the black public sphere, see Elsa Barkley Brown, “Negotiating and Transforming the Public Sphere: African American Political Life in the Transition from Slavery to Freedom,” in *The Black Public Sphere*. For an overview of the aesthetic and political value attributed to ambiguity, see Mark Walhout, “The New Criticism and the Crisis of American Liberalism: The Poetics of the Cold War.”

⁴⁹ On the Ezra Pound Bollingen Prize controversy as it relates to Kantian aesthetics and political judgments, see Wai Chee Dimock’s “Aesthetics at the Limits of the Nation: Kant, Pound and the Saturday Review.” For a defense of the Friends of Library of Congress’ deliberations over the prize, see Karen Leick’s “Ezra Pound v. The Saturday Review of Literature.” The ambiguity and consequences regarding the legal standing of affirmative action has been the subject of any number of legal challenges, decisions and articles within the courts and within law journals. As two examples, I cite John C. Jeffries, Jr. “Bakke Revisited” and Dawn Swink’s “Back to Bakke: Affirmative Action Revisited in Educational Diversity.”

VAMOOSE MUSIC:

Soham Patel

In a requiem for a house—affluence and immigrants get hidden in welfare states. Things can keep cool before cooking. Store in basements. Up in a bedroom : spit and lip skin dry on harmonica metal. A boy sings along about bodies and bottles of beer, smokes, some blond girl, about volume and righteousness. The lamp left on all night. There are enough eggs for fine and genuine bread puddings but there is no flour. No bread. All the reds burn thresholds down so much like the colors of hungry stomachs.

NOTES:

Soham Patel

Face every good boy doing fine. Eat a damn good breakfast everyday : scale portions. I keep a leaf in this notebook. You gave it to me. In every city, morning is the same : sun and something hot to drink. A king has been born in a tupelo but queens in the mid-east keep all land full of grace. In Santa Fe, a stranger gave me a necklace—in Chicago, a kiss. Driving too late one night in Summit County the headlights weren't bright enough to move a moose off the road—she looked up and looked me in the eyes and she grinned back. Hear vagrant harmony best when the music is turned up : all the way up to eleven if possible. *What have you ever done but wondered when you could go home.* : *Kazim Ali*. Brown flares warn dancers not to step on feet but just remember every suit is sequined. I wrote down what I couldn't say. Each word here has been lifted from a book. Before I get back on the bus—a woman at the filling station asks me where I am from. I pretend I can't hear her. Black shades, white belt, stowed drams, in the pocket : rolling papers and a flinted lighter, practiced out answers for interviews, comb, dust cloth, rose water, a corrugated map of America folded up.

THIS SPECTACLE OF DECIBEL REBELLION HAS BEEN PRODUCED TO ALWAYS BE COMING AT YOU:

Soham Patel

And then to reside in you—to push you out and pull you in. It makes anthems, some fake and some for real—depending on the level of belief and/or stamina of the consumer. A certain heard radio music from an idle car nearby lingers like the smell of cigarette smoke. It becomes a backdrop for many stories since the 1950s. Some would say the origins remain unknowable by design. Minus the margins—it makes it easier to take. Any existentiality of fame and the yearning towards it by way of becoming invincible or inexplicable proves difficult to carry around without gas money. That is to say the need for this phenomena underwrites any reason for it. If the kids want it, they'll get it. Machines have been geared for it now so that it could remain regardless of what any oppositional ideologies plead.

MULTIPLE REGISTERS OF SILENCE IN M. NOURBESE PHILIP'S ZONG!

Kate Eichorn

Zong! # 11

suppose the law

not is
not does
not would
not be
not

suppose the law not
—a crime
suppose the law a loss
suppose the law
suppose

(20)

Like all of the poems in *Zong!*, the eleventh poem is comprised of words culled from a single two-page legal decision—*Gregson vs. Gilbert*, the only extant public document related to the massacre of 150 slaves aboard the *Zong* in 1783. Locking herself inside *Gregson vs. Gilbert*, M. NourbeSe Philip, a poet who trained and once practiced as a lawyer, occupies the judicial system that made the *Zong* massacre possible. As she explains in an essay concluding this 182-page long poem, “My intent is to use the legal decision as a word store; to lock myself into this particular and peculiar discursive landscape in the belief that the story of these African men, women, and children thrown overboard in an attempt to collect insurance monies, the story that can only be told by not telling, is locked in this text” (191). In her confinement, Philip not only excavates the story of the *Zong*, described by historian James Walvin, author of *Black Ivory*, as the “most grotesquely bizarre of all slave cases heard in an English court” (as quoted by Philip, 189), but also raises a series of questions about the relation between regulatory discourses, liberty, testimony and silence.

In *States of Injury*, Wendy Brown emphasizes that in liberal discourses, liberty is understood as the opposite of will-lessness and/or constraint, but “A liberty whose conceptual and practical opposite is encumbrance cannot, by necessity, exist without it...some must be slaves so that others might be free” (156). When slavery is *not* cast as the opposite of liberty, we can more readily see how a state of immense subjugation may not necessarily signify a state of complete powerlessness nor silence. We can also more readily see how subjection and subject formation are linked, making subjection part of rather than opposed to the conditions under which one might exist, speak and be heard. This is part of the work carried out by Philip in *Zong!* Indeed, in *Zong!* constraints are precisely what enable the story that can only be told by not telling to be told, but *Zong!* by no means over-determines the liberatory potential of constraints. In contrast to Foucault’s nineteenth-century sexual aberrants who “were condemned... but...listened to” (39), in the history of slavery, such reformulations of subjection do not so easily follow. Africans forced into slavery had nothing to gain from being cast as slaves—to be enslaved is only to have one’s liberty violently taken away. After all, slavery was never a mere incitement to discourse. For this reason, any account of slavery, especially any account as grotesquely bizarre as the story of the Zong, requires one to pay even greater attention to silence, both as something discursively produced and as something that can and does function as speech or at least as an audible interruption.

Despite the fact that the reader may, at first glance, experience *Zong!* as an excessive text due not only to its length but the sheer density of words and signs that appear in its final sections, what marks *Zong!* most notably is its attentiveness to silence. Throughout *Zong!*, Philip challenges the assumption that the subjugated position lived out in silence is necessarily one marked by an absence of expression. She draws attention to the articulate nature of what she describes in *Looking for Livingstone* as the “hard kernels of silence” (8) that mark the history slavery. *Zong!*, arguably even more than her earlier works, is a text marked by multiple registers of silence. Focusing both on *Zong!*, the text, and on Philip’s performance of this text, the following discussion examines how Philip’s more recent work challenges readers and listeners to rethink the role of constraints and silence not only innovative poetics but the social world of their making.

The Zong was a slave ship that set sail for Jamaica from the West Coast of Africa in 1781 with a cargo of 470 slaves. Due to the captain’s navigational errors, a trip that should have taken six to nine weeks stretched to four months. Some of the “cargo” were lost due to illness. Other parts of the “cargo,” by order of the captain, were destroyed. As stated in the legal decision, the captain was “obliged to throw overboard 150 negroes” (Philip

189) The captain's rationale for destroying his "cargo" was simple: if the cargo perished of natural causes, he would be responsible, but if it they were destroyed to save the rest of the ship and minimize further losses, he will have acted in a responsible manner and hence, the cargo would be a loss of the underwriters (Philip 189). But how does anyone tell a story so horrifying? So unbelievable? So common? So rarely told?

There is only one choice and that is to tell the story that can't be told *through* its constraints. For nearly a decade, Philip would work to tell this story using only the words contained in the record of the *Gregson vs. Gilbert* decision and eventually, with words and names created by breaking open the words in this document.

On the one hand, Philip's constraint-based poetic practice can be understood as part of a long history. In Oulipo's preliminary manifesto, François Le Lionnais argued that writing is always already about constraint. As he maintained, there are simply different orders of constraint: a minimal level in which language is simply written; an intermediate level which is related to the regularly practices of genre, literary norms and so on; and a maximal level—this, of course, is the one that concerns Oulipo (11). Warren F. Motte describes Oulipo as an "*consciously* pre-elaborated and *voluntarily* imposed systems of artifice" (11). No writer can avoid the first two levels, but the third, for Lionnais and his colleagues, is the only level of constraint that writers may choose. Paradoxically, maximal levels of constraint become associated with freedom. There is a liberating potential located within formal constraints, and the potentiality of constraint is repeatedly emphasized in Oulipo's manifestos and writings. For all these reasons, it may be tempting to locate Philip's *Zong!* as a form of "postcolonial Oulipo," but such a reading is one that only dares to read the text as an impressive procedural work when, in fact, it is doing much more and comes into being as a text and performance under radically different conditions.

In a 2008 interview, in reference to *She Tries Her Tongue: Her Silence Softly Breaks* (1989), Philip explained:

...people talked about [*She Tries Her Tongue*] as being a postmodernist text, and I didn't have a problem with that, but many of those people didn't understand the Caribbean and the postcolonial aspects of the area and the text. They also didn't understand how the Caribbean was postmodern long before postmodernism. Because in terms of things like bricolage and competing discourses, they were already there, and that is where that text comes from—it comes out of the Caribbean.

What Philip suggests here is that many of the markers of postmodern writing—the disavowal of the author, the decentralization of the subject, the fragmentation of narrative and so on—are always already the conditions upon which any writer from the Caribbean writes. In this sense, a text like *Zong!* may be read as a constraint-based text that extends established innovative writing practices, but to read *Zong!* simply along such lines is to ignore the conditions under which the work took shape.

Thus, while Philip may not necessarily dispute Oulipo's claims that writing is *always* constraint-based, she also does not fully align herself with constraint-based poets who choose to embrace maximal constraints. Nevertheless, when I asked Philip if she would choose to write within a constraint-based poetic practice if she could choose not to, her response was by no means purely and simply one driven by a desire to reject constraints:

In a word, no, but I have always been interested in the idea of limitation and its potential resources. But was that interest a result of my own history? Who knows? What is more interesting to me, however, is an insight about limitations or constraints I gained from the process of writing *Zong!* One of our founding cultural myths in the West is that of freedom—we can do or say anything (within certain constraints, of course); we are free to go out and find our constraints, poach on other cultures and so on. What I began to understand is that even when we think we are freest, if we lift—I want to say that veil of freedom—underneath will be found many unspoken constraints.

Yet, as Philip emphasizes, just as constraints cannot be easily cast as the counterpoint of freedom, freedom too is deceptive.

Beyond the fact that Philip, unlike most constraint-based poets, has not necessarily chosen to work within maximal constraints (or perhaps, more accurately, has chosen to work within maximal constraints for very different reasons), *Zong!* is a text as deeply marked by its constraints as it is by their breakage. At some point in the long and draining process of writing *Zong!*, Philip chose to break her own constraints. Although she would never move outside the word store of *Gregson vs. Gilbert*, she eventually felt the necessity to “break and enter” the text on a deeper level. In a journal entry included in her essay on *Zong!*, she writes:

“The text has exploded into a universe of words.”

- have given in to the impulse to fragment the words of the text—us-

ing it as a sort of grand boggle game and set to trying to find words within words. The text... is a matrix... a mother document. I did not come to the decision easily—to break the words open. For a while I feel guilt, as if I have broken my own rules, but that is where the impulse leads—to explode the words to see what other words they may contain... As I put the dictionary together, little dramas appear to take place in the margins of the text and so the poem continues to write itself, giving up its stories and resulting in four subsequent movements or books—I think about these poems as the flesh—the earlier 26 poems are the bones. (200)

Notably, the new words appear both in English and in African languages. The African words include a roll call of names that runs along the bottom of each page in the first section of the book. Of course, there is no record of the actual names of the men, women and children who were on board the *Zong* so these names are merely evocative of the names these subjects may have held. As one might expect, the process of breaking open the stifling legal document that held Philip in its grip for several years was liberating. In our 2008 interview, she candidly explained that “when writing the last book of *Zong!*, as I was breaking those words open, I remember feeling, yes, finally, I am fucking with this language in a way I have wanted to do all my life!—my writing life, that is... I finally felt that for the first time I had my own language. True it’s fragmented and broken, but it is my own tongue. This totally ruptured, fragmented, dissonant language that is my mother tongue.” But the final section of the text—the section that Philip experienced as most liberating to compose and the section that contains the most words and signs—would ultimately also prove to be the section most profoundly marked by silence.

In the final section of *Zong!*, the text appears in gray scale and many of the words are superimposed. Here, paradoxically, it is an excess of words rather than their absence, an discursive explosion rather than a constraint, that reproduces the silence that marks the historical and judicial conditions of the *Zong*’s fatal passage. Silence is, in short, not a product of an absence, not even an absence of freedom, but rather silence appears as an unspeakable presence in the final section. Asked by a listener to read a poem from the final section of the book in spring 2009, I was not entirely surprised to hear Philip explain that she had not yet discovered a way to read the final section aloud nor to hear her admit that this section may simply be impossible to read aloud. Significantly, there was nothing to suggest that Philip saw the final section’s apparent refusal to be voiced as something she necessarily needed to overcome. Evidently, she also accepted this limitation as an integral part of the text.

Since *Zong!*'s publication in 2008, Philip has also incorporated another register of silence into the text or at least, into her performances of the text. When I first heard Philip read from *Zong!* in March 2005, her reading was, if anything, accelerated. At the time, her performance also included a short talk on the process of writing *Zong!* On occasion, Philip would even project images of the *Gregson vs. Gilbert* decision inscribed with her own marginalia in order to illustrate her ongoing process of attempting to break open the word store in which she was locked. Then, as *Zong!* was in press, Philip's performance underwent a drastic change. First, she eliminated any explanation of the work. Eventually, she began to honor the silences marking the text. By December 2008, only a few months after the book's publication, I attended a reading in which Philip read for nearly a half hour but only from four or five pages. Throughout the reading, there was a strained effort to remain as quiet, as motionless, as possible in the theater. Following the reading, the audience—in this case, primarily comprised of other writers, artists and literary critics—appeared polarized in their response. While some listeners felt unnecessarily “manipulated” by Philip's performance, other listeners deeply appreciated the performance as the *only* way to bring a text like *Zong!* off the page. After all, just as *Zong!*'s typography at times makes it impossible to fully enter the text, Philip's performance reminds the listener that this is not a story that can be told in its entirety or fully comprehended. There was, however, one other thing the audience was talking about on this particular occasion. It happened that as Philip read (or chose not to read), a snow storm was blowing in outside, so the long periods of apparent silence that marked her performance were in fact not silent at all but eerily filled by the sound of the wind howling just outside the theater where the reading was taking place. As more than one audience member and the author would later wonder, whose voices were screaming outside the building during that reading?

A few months earlier, Philip had given a similar performance of *Zong!*, albeit in a radically different location—at a historic site on a beach in Tobago. In this case, it was the voices of tourists on the beach that filled up the silences in her reading. But again, as she emphasized, this somehow seemed appropriate:

On the ship, while people were being thrown overboard, the life of the ship would have gone on.... Usually, when you are doing a reading and you hear other voices or sounds, it's distracting, and you think that they shouldn't be there. But it felt right somehow—those sounds—and they underscored how other people's lives continued as this horrific act was unfolding.

And perhaps, it is here that the multiple registers of silence that mark *Zong!* are most palpable. Philip's minimalist performance may lock her listeners into the text forcing them to endure, however briefly, some degree of constraint, but more importantly, the performance permits some of the dullness and banality that was the background to slavery to be part of the text as well.

In *Zong!*, then, constraints are not necessarily the counterpoint to freedom but neither is silence necessarily analogous with an absence of speech nor even an absence of words or signs. That the final section of the text—the section that marks a breaking of constraints—is also the section that remains least speakable and thereby, least audible is significant. Again, as Philip emphasizes, the story of the *Zong!* is ultimately a story that can only be told by not telling. So even in the sea of words that fill up the final pages of *Zong!*, the registers of silence that mark the text are resounding.

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SAHAGUN'S ENCYCLOPEDIA

John-Michael Rivera

This work is like a dragnet to bring to light all the words of this language with their exact and metaphorical meanings, and all the ways of speaking, and most of their ancient practices, the good and evil.

Bernardino de Sahagún, 1578

Scholia I

52 keys form the alphabet beneath my fingers, sequential punches illuminate the words hidden within the frame. An unnatural union made from head to inanimate touch marks this delicate relationship between my brown hand and lettered grey keys. Perfectly squared black pixels frame the outline of knowledge, information flows from mind, to plastic, to sand, to flesh, to paper, to another body, to another eye that gazes upon the page in a world made anew with every entry. The touch of knowledge looks cold. The desired result: an encyclopedia, in part. Finding its roots in the mind of Diderot, but first born in the New World Sahagún measured with amatl five hundred years before I set out to mark this journey, I begin cataloguing it today.

Bernardino de Sahagún was a Franciscan missionary to the Aztec Nahua people of Mexico, best known as the compiler of the Florentine Codex, also known as Historia de las cosas de Nueva Espana (General History of the Things of New Spain); the actual date of Bernardino de Sahagún's birth and death is unknown, though some believe he was born in Sahagún in 1499 and died in what is now Mexico City in 1590. In this we believe. We do not know what he looked like, though there are thousands of pictures and hundreds of statues bearing his likeness; we are not even sure if he wrote the first encyclopedia of the New World, The Florentine Codex, the first book of knowledge that describes things Latino, things unknown to him, terra incognita, to us, then...

Tlaltelco, 1590: Sahagún died in 1590, but this was not the first time. Pus filled lungs, unable to move, his physicians tell him: *Your time has come.* Barely breathing, he writes his last commandment: *My hour has not yet arrived.* Like Saint Francis, he would prophetically know the moment when time stops.

A monument now remembers his life:

Leon Spain, 1966—Fray Bernardino De Sahagún, Sahagún 1499-1590
Missionary and educator of the people
The Father of Anthropology in the New World
Day of the Region of Leon
2 June 1966
The Province of Leon
To Fray Bernardino De Sahagún, Sahagún XI-VI MCMLXVI

He calls his disciples, young Nahuatl compilers (**see entry Aztec Children**) of *The Florentine Codex*, to his deathbed; they sing scolia, songs to conjure the corporeal body into an immortal ghost, a saint of New World knowledge. He looks at them—a failure—for his Codex is not quite complete. No longer in his possession, the codex is now an ornamental object for King Philip II, a gift to his nephew on his wedding day. Other scribes used the copies to wrap spices for the lovers of the Conquest. Others just burned it. Too much knowledge for its time. The first encyclopedia that would challenge the divinity of God, the idea of the Other, of terra incognita, is lost; the remains today now in Rome, a remnant of a relic (**see entry Laurantian Library**). In the last moments, a life unfulfilled, a work still incomplete, he still wonders: *Was it their Codex? Their hand? Was I able to explain away the unknown? Can I put my name above the pages, even now?*

He began his composition of the *Florentine Codex* in August, 1576, but really it found its first breath when His word could not explain the new world (**see entry Faith**). Never alone, then, he stares at the flesh stained Amatl drafts, slowly creating three columns, one in Nahuatl, the other Castilian Spanish and the other Latin scholia, factual marginalia that help elucidate the sometimes flowery prose and digressions of his hand and the hands of others that have now decayed within the dirt of terra incognita. Then, a great sickness, huey cocolitzli, infected all of them. The fevers were contagious, fiery, and continuous; all were pestilential and, in large measure, lethal. The tongue, black and dry. Intense thirst; the urine sea green, but now and again turning a pale color. Rapid and frequent pulse, but faint and weak, sometimes even null. The eyes and entire body, yellow. And the delirium and convulsions; boils behind one or both ears; a hard and painful tumor; pains in the heart, chest and abdomen; shaking and great anguish and dysentery. The blood flowing from cut vein was green and very pale, dry and without and serosity. The lips gangrenous, the pudenda and other region of the body, with putrefying members and hemorrhaging ears; many with hemorrhaging noses; those who fell ill hardly ever recovered. Many were saved by a bleeding from the nose (**see entry Body**). The rest perished. He did not. One would think this is irony, the birth of knowledge during the death of a people. For him, it is not. For him, knowledge finds

its breath in that last gasp, that quicksonic moment when life gives way to death. Sacred desires led him to his pages, to the pressed and scented amatl, to write what was fleeting and partial, an old world made anew through his hand. His experiences in this world, its birth, its death, inscribed through experiences material to his touch, smelt through his nose, seen through his eyes, alone now. Where does this leave his sacred devotion, his calling by God, heard first 3000 miles away in Ciudad de Sahagún? His Father, His God, left his mind years ago. Can he hear divinity, here in the New World, now whispers...echoes lost within calderas created within the batholiths hiding behind his eyes. Here he thinks he heard Him, his God, say, "guide My hand." He let His hand guide his, but never too long. Blasphemy to Him... not now. He cannot hear that now. Just whispers of judgment around him. His knowledge of a world that His language could never really grasp allows him to ponder a book, his life's work, his life, the Codex. His knowledge, My God. Old, feeble, near death, he realized his Codex is now gone, taken to a world where decoration subsumes their obligation to material experience. His last thought... *Who will read it, now (see entry Amatl)?*

Scholia II

Lankershim Blvd, CA, 1977: Manuel Martinez de Sahagún died in 1977. (No plaque was created, no tombstone found). I think he died on a Tuesday, but I know this was not the first time. Coal smoke filled his lungs in 1918, sucking the oxygen from his body. Somehow, the facts never clear to me, he died for ten minutes during a battle on a border between New and Old Mexico. In short bursts of memory, he told me the story the first time like this...

*In 1918 I was on a train, pushing coal into an engine to make steam fast enough so that we could get to Columbus, New Mexico; we were going to fight the US government, but that is a story for another time; weeks before, the coal man Francisco was shot in a bar in Juarez, so they put me up front. I was never that useful. Villa always had me filling in when someone died or did not want the work. I never really was part of the Villistas. My real job though was Pancho Villa's collector (**see entry Mexican Revolution**); Villa knew he was history; when the man from Hollywood, wait, this was before they called it Hollywood, I forgot the place name; but he came down to Mexico to film Villa's Battle of Olinaga in 1914; his name was Frank Thayer; a pretty decent guy, but no real understanding of Mexico, just its violence; Villa told me to watch Thayer and make sure he captured the real him. I learned a lot, mostly though that moving pictures never capture anything more than dust, smoke and death. Villa hated what he saw—he did not think that was the real him, so Villa kicked Frank out of Mexico; and I was left*

to burn the film reels; they are still looking for them you know; Thayer kept what he called the “hard edits,” but I kept a whole reel; it’s somewhere in this apartment; that was my last job as Villa’s archivist, to burn images; Sad but true. I have tried for years to write about this, but the words never seem to flow like time passed; our past time; after the battle was lost, I was left with no real work, no purpose, and somehow Villa associated me with Thayer; Villa did not think he should be captured on page or on film anymore; these were the last days, the hard days when death framed all of our actions; so he put me in the front of the train. I was never a strong man (I was sick as a child and my breathing always hard), so hauling coal was tough for me; Villa new this. I think he wanted me to leave, but like all of us, he gave me that choice; well, some of us; he did kill a few you know. I had been with him for years, and we both knew the same familia in Chihuahua when he was governor, so we had history. I wrote for the local paper and wrote about Villa; back then it was all good because his fight really was for the people; when the pobre needed money and the central government would not make jobs or help us out, Villa just printed it, money, made up so many thousands and handed it out like candy; that is another story though; ok, so this is how I died: while steaming to New Mexico to fight the pinche Americanos, me and Francisco’s boy, the man who got shot in a bar in Juarez, Miguel, were putting coal in the shoot as fast as we could—bullets were flying everywhere—if you are going to stop a train you always fire at the people who are fueling it—and Miguel was shot and when he was shot he flung back and somehow hit my head with his shovel (you should see those shovels as big as a wheel barrel) and I flew forward and then I burnt my hands—see here are the scars—and that was when I sucked up a big whiff of coal dust—I passed out and everyone said I died for 10 minutes; when I woke up Villa was standing over me laughing; “ride with me for now on so you don’t kill yourself doing a man’s work; your grandmother will kill me well before the government does if I let you die,” he said; a few things happened after that that don’t really matter anymore, and I can’t remember now, but maybe I will tell you later when I find the things around here that help me remember; what you need to know is that over the next week I realized that my time had passed in Mexico, and so I went to California. I never returned to Mexico; some long for their birthplace, I never have; still haven’t; Villa died a few years later. I was not there to write it down or see it, so I am not so sure if this is true or not. I have heard that he lived for another 50 years back in Chihuahua, living among the people he helped free. My grandmother said he came to her taqueria and asked for me. I believe this sometimes; hard to know what really happened back then; life went too fast to capture it all; now let’s go look for Thayer’s reel. I know its here somewhere (see entry **Bancroft Library**).

Sahagún Jr. lived in that Apartment for 20 years, the first tenant. A native of Chihuahua Mexico, Sahagún Jr. moved to California alone—Like us. We recently left Texas—a vacation still unfolding—Disneyland E-tickets

create a small apartment complex in North Hollywood, 100 yards from the 118, where we paid weekly—I called there home for the first years—the time between my mother’s men, my father and the others I recalled as (**see entry father**). Brown stucco, two stories high, we lived on the bottom floor—she managed to manage the place, collecting rent, collecting belongings from those left behind, of those dead. Sahagun’s apartment was laid out like ours—not allowed to enter at first—I picture him lying on the floor. Grey hair matted, skin blue, no signs of pain, just the smell of drying flesh, now the dust outlines where a body once lied. The smell of all his things, of skin, of dander, dust fills my lungs, sucks the oxygen from my body, dizziness—a fever develops from the history taken in through the nose. Things breakdown in the air, carrying traces of the fingers that once touched them—held by their own. Did it suffocate him, the touch, my gaze upon his things, his body.

I had been in his house over fifty times. I think. What I knew then was that he was a librarian at the Lankershim branch, and when he retired he had managed to create a library of things, an archive of himself and all things known as Mexican. He charged us kids 5 cents or a story to enter and look around. We could check things out overnight, but none of us ever did. I wrote stories to get in, but most of the time, he told me they were not worth five cents. *I’ll tell you a story*, he said, and told me to keep trying. *I’ll let you in today, but have your mom take 5 cents off my rent*. I never knew what to think, everything was story, everything was still untold, unknown.

Sahagun’s apartment: a spatial encyclopedia. He had managed the unthinkable: to collect things Latino in an apartment on Sepulveda. Most apartments were filled with trash, holding perhaps one gem that would freeze a child’s interest long enough to realize the moment and its significance—perhaps a TV to sell to the local pawnshop—usually only enough stuff found to pay the back rent owed, or to pay for the supplies needed to clean the dust the bodies left behind. Most things found never really mattered (Because they no longer mattered to them?). The ones who left parts of what no longer had meaning to them, things unfound, uncatalogued objects with no relationship to anyone’s past.

In front of me, he lined hundred of shelves along the walls—make-shift constructions; back-to-back they stood in the 500 sq. foot space. Shelves of books, maybe ten, five feet high, stacked three hundred per case. Cookbooks of all eras (All this Mexican cuisine.). Yearbooks from high schools never attended, the Mexican high schools in Boyle Heights, MacArthur Park. Menus from all the taquerias in the neighborhood, dating back to when they were still written in Spanish (**see Mexican restaurant**).

To the right of me, a collection of cookery, 30 or 40 molcajetes, five co-ales, boxes of spices for the kitchen sat in boxes. To the left, cacti from every region, maybe 50, some three feet tall, others three inches. At my feet, records and tapes, eight tracks, Little Joe, Jovita G. and local boot-leg tapes taken—by him?—at Mexican clubs on Sepulveda?

On the table in front of me, a large platter of perfectly placed pan dulce, a stacked monument made from the largest pan de huevo, a layer of cuernos, of empanadas, of bisochos, of elotes, of marranintos, of almohadas, topped with the smallest purro—built 100 years ago when Mexico meets France, pan dulce finds its flavor, its origin, one hundred years earlier (**see entry Panaderia**)—the pastry war of 1838—the moment when Napoleon's invasion in 1862 led to the reign of Maximilian. Maximilian would begin a campaign promoting la comida afrancesada (frenchified cooking). For years France affected the culture of Mexico. I now remember that my ancestor was a French Colonel in the pastry war (**See entry Colonel Pastel**). No one remembers the pastry war. Few encyclopedias in Mexico even acknowledge it anymore (**see entry Colonialism**).

And yet, our task—to dismantle it, to break down the life's work of a man who took it upon him self to catalogue things unknown, things still unknowable. Again we wonder: What goes first? What stays?

I kept only his stories.

*When I came to California in 1918 I was 24, and I tried to find Thayer but he moved to the East somewhere and was never heard from again; he was deemed a failure at capturing history too I suspect; he sold pieces of the battle though, for propaganda mostly, but never was able to work in Hollywood again; I found work cleaning at the Sepulveda library; I had no English, so I spent my nights readings kids books, and over the years I learned how to speak, read and write English better than most my age; I was 40 by the time they let me shelve books; I still cleaned at nights but once in a while someone would call in sick and they let me do the work of a librarian; By the time I was 50, I was the head librarian of the place; most of the old ladies had died, and I was the only one left knowing the place; the pinches still paid me what a janitor made, but I did all right; plus I had the place to myself; I must have read every book in the place, twice; I tried to get Spanish books, but the library board never let me—"We don't carry Spanish books; our patrons are English speakers and this is America after all" (**see English Only**); So I ordered every book you can find about Mexico and South America in English; I even ordered five books on Villa; all wrong; I should have written a book about our times together; maybe someday; One day though I will never forget: I was going through anthropology and history books about Mesoamerica and the Aztecs and that's when I found him, the father of anthropology and the inventor of the encyclopedia: Bernardino de Sahagún, a*

Sahagún of Sahagún and my long lost relative, I came to find out I knew I was related to him because when I left, my grandmother told me not to give up on writing; She told me I was meant to be a man of books because I was a Sahagún, a family with a long lineage of writers; she then went on to tell me about the ancestor who started it all, Bernardino de Sahagún; she said he was a Franciscan Friar who came to Mexico hundreds of years ago; I thought she was crazy because even then I knew men of the cloth did not have kids; well, I guess Sahagún had a brother who came over when he died, and he was a merchant/soldier for hire for King Philip and he stayed, married an Aztec woman and had bunches of kids; well, one of those kids was related to me and somehow a few hundred branches later you end up with me; well I guess Sahagún would be my great ... uncle of sorts—anyhow, from the moment, I read everything about Fray Sahagún and the Florentine Codex—You know he never finished it; This is the important part: I took it to myself to write my own encyclopedia of first the San Fernando Valley and then all things Mexican; well I found out that Sahagún collected everything at first, and so this is what I began to do at the age of 50, about the same age that Sahagún started his own encyclopedia of the New World; the valley may not be the new world but it is a place to start I suspect; I collected everything, which is what you see here in the rooms hijo—then about 10 years ago, I started writing my own encyclopedia; its here somewhere; but my arthritis makes it hard to write, and my eyes are killing me these days; I will get to it again though. Someday (see entry Sacrifice).

He showed the encyclopedia to me once before. In a bedroom framed by books one locked bookcase held a facsimile copy of *The Florentine Codex*. Sahagún kept it locked away with his family photos, very few of those, and his own index, the beginnings of an encyclopedia, to what was held in the apartment. He put on a pair of pristine white gloves, opened the case and polished the leather bindings. Published in limited numbers in 1956 by the Mexican government, his *Florentine Codex* was a massive four-volume tomb. It sold for over 200 dollars in 1956; how did he afford to buy it (see entry **Collecting**)?

Always handle the book careful hijo—use a book support and respect each page—never force the bindings or pages—let the book guide you.

I think two weeks later he died. It was then when I entered his archive again. I put on his gloves, too big to really fit well, and slowly took out each object and book from his cabinet. I looked at his encyclopedia first. Hand written in English and Spanish, each item in his apartment meticulously recorded, described and its origin fixed. I go to the letter

M:

Mariachi: a type of musical group, originally from Mexico. Folks based music that consists of one Mexican flamenco guitar, one vihuela, and one guitarron. They dress in folk wardrobe that respects the history of Colonial Mexico. First group to come to the Valley from Mexico, The Tijuana Trio. Recording of Las Manitas played at Las Manitas taqueria on Sepulveda in 1967. Tape on bottom shelf in second bedroom, by the closet. (I met my second wife at Las Manitas. She died in 1969.)

Nearly 200 items in his book. It was not complete; some entries were missing, descriptions half finished; pictures of objects and things, pastings and clippings filled each page. *The Florentine Codex* was not mentioned in his index. I am not sure why. Perhaps it was his model, an archive to exacting to catalogue; too removed from the Valley to transcribe. We tried to give the *Florentine Codex* to the library after cleaning the apartment and selling most of the items or giving them away. “We don’t carry Spanish books,” the librarian said (**see Prop 227-English Only**). So we kept it for years. I never once read it. Never understood it. I do not know what ever happened to it after we left our fourth apartment complex. No one remembers it now.

Scholia III

The encyclopedia salesman died in 2007. Throughout the Internet, a story about Scott “Willie” Lohman, a parodic play off of Arthur Miler’s Willie Lohman, traveled through cyberspace, nostalgically stating that he had taken his last steps for Encyclopedia Britannica. At this moment, perhaps America ended its fascination with print knowledge. Wikipedia’s wireless routes had finally solved one of the hardest mathematical conundrum—“the traveling salesman problem”—one of the most studied problems in computational mathematics. With the death of the last salesman, mathematicians now knew: there was no perfect profitable route for a salesman to disseminate knowledge: the best, most direct and shortest route found its solution in cyberspace, with its simulated space and digital knowledge. The solution finally published in Wikipedia. Willie’s death occurred despite both World Book Encyclopedia and Encyclopedia Britannica, the two largest employers of encyclopedia salesman, neither denying nor confirming that they had given up on its traveling sales division. For decades the encyclopedia salesman was the main vehicle in which portable knowledge circulated through the US. With book in hand, he traveled up to a 2,000 square mile area selling information to an emerging middle class. The birth of the encyclopedia salesman is not known, though his mercantile ancestors found their origins in the 1840s, when the American industrial revolution rose. The salesman was the hand that reached out to rural America, the first domestic

exporter/importer. By the 1930s there were over 300,000 salesmen, though some say the numbers were in the millions. But the encyclopedia salesman was a breed all in to himself. He did not peddle cosmetics, vacuums, snake oil, or other goods of capitalist desire that would help define the character of the American middle class. The encyclopedia salesman sold the promise of uplift through portable knowledge. Britannica's mission: to have a set of encyclopedia in every home in the US and eventually the world. By the early 1980s, 40 percent of American households found a spot in their homes for hundreds of pounds of books. There is no entry in the on-line Britannica or Wikipedia or World Book that covers the history of the encyclopedia salesman. They have become knowledge unknown, a footnote of print culture.

He wore a suit in August. He did not drive a car in public. The home base of a salesman. He parked it nearly a mile away. The car was meticulous, a brown Pinto, clean, ordered. Departing from his car, he took the same pattern daily. Every morning he grabbed four volumes of the World Book Encyclopedia, A, E, MN, and O and began his route, a journey he had now taken for 10 years. Every step perfectly planned out. The night before he entered a neighborhood, he mapped out the exact route, marking meticulously the shortest and most direct path. When first seeing him from a distance, it looked as if he was lost, confused and searching for a long lost memory or a home once called upon during his youth. He would not go door to door; rather he zigzagged through the streets, sometimes only visiting one house per block.

He came to our green stucco house when I was 10. Our first house. Our fifth rental that stood separate from a small apartment complex of people I never got to know. We did not have to clean or collect there. The management company hired out. When the salesman knocked, we knew who he was. I had seen him for over a week, weaving his way through the neighborhood, waving to every person who approached or drove by him. He passed our house four times before he knocked. Every time I was alone. The day my mother was home, he knocked. My mom answered the door, as if she had planned this day, her steps brisk and assured of his visit. She let him in. He did not begin selling the encyclopedia, but rather asking if I liked my school, Toluca Lake? Yes, I said, but... She interrupts, "he skipped a grade you know." He looks at her. He found his way in, the focus of his sales pitch in sight—Me. He continues to ask me questions about school, what I liked about it and the subjects I found interesting. With each answer he would refer to his books, highlight my knowledge with his meticulously documented

books. They were beautiful. Faux brown leather and gold leaf edges, thick paper that slid like plastic silk over my forefinger. Nothing like the books at school. My mother bought the full set and the supplemental volumes, which would come quarterly. To update knowledge he told us—a must for a young genius like you, he smiled. I cherished the pages for years—never creased the pages, never broke a binding. With each search, I remembered the lessons of Sahagún:

Always handle the book careful hijo—use a book support and respect each page—never force the bindings or pages—let the book guide you.

His rules framed my entrance into knowledge.

I cannot seem to find those encyclopedias now. Lost or thrown away. I could never find everything in it pages. Something was always missing, never quite complete, or whole. Recovered from what I think was their intention,

I begin to catalogue backwards now.

from **HOW WE WRITE:
THE VARIETIES OF WRITING EXPERIENCE**

Hilton Obenzinger

On September 26, 1996, Renato Rosaldo suffered a stroke. Within a couple of weeks, “Poems started coming to me,” he explained. “I was sitting there and these lines would start coming to me. I didn’t know exactly what they were and so I started writing them down because I thought I should do that.” Professor Rosaldo is one of the leading cultural anthropologists in the world, but he had never written poetry before.

His doctors told him that not only would he have to do physical therapy, he’d also have to do cognitive therapy, employing both hands and both sides of his brain. “And I thought, ‘Well, a poem, that’s something I’ve never done before.’” He had tried other creative pursuits before his stroke. “On my 40th birthday I started painting and drawing. And I remember my first class where they showed us a grapefruit and I drew a circle,” he laughed. “But I had loved to draw when I was a kid and I would just get completely absorbed in this. And so I worked at that for quite some time – since I was 40. But the last thing I expected to do was for poems to start coming to me.” He had no previous ambition to become a poet. “It was just something that happened to me,” he explained.

Renato Rosaldo began to write poems prodigiously, using his left hand as well as his right, drawing pictures alongside the poems. He grew up in Tucson in a bilingual family, so he also found himself writing these poems in both English and Spanish, sometimes with one hand, then the other. “Sometimes I write a Spanish version first and then translate it, and then work back and forth.” Writing took such a long time that he would often end up writing parallel poems. “Even if I did a complete version in Spanish and then translated it, I think of them as written bilingually. And sometimes I have found that I don’t want to get them to match, so I produce two versions because I feel that they are almost like two plants growing differently.”

He began to write in an entirely new way, with both hands and with both languages, sometimes at the same time. He described it as “almost like working two sides of a street.” The English would lead him to make some changes in the Spanish, then the other way around. “It is hard to tell which one is leading and which one is following. It gets very strange. That’s maybe because I grew up speaking Spanish with my father and English with my

mother at home; and then there was a period where I lost my Spanish and got it back when I was still young.” Working two sides of the street was not easy. “I guess that’s the theme: hard work, patience, attention.”

Despite the difficulty, he saw writing poetry as deeply healing, and it brightened his day. In fact, he became addicted to the practice of poetry, finding that he couldn’t stop. “When I don’t write, my day is grayer,” he explained. “The world just gets grayer.” As he began his healing by means of poetry, he thought he would end up writing a book of poems called *Healing Songs*. But, while the poems just came to him, he also had to learn how to make them work, craft them, take them seriously. He knew he had to revise his poems in the same way he would revise his scholarly writing, but he also realized he needed help. “I can rewrite prose. I’ve worked at it for a long time, but I don’t know how to even begin rewriting a poem. . . I lined up somebody to be my poetry tutor because I figured I wouldn’t try to play the violin without a teacher and it seemed like new terrain, so I knew I needed help.”

Still, needing help “was a very strange feeling,” Dr. Rosaldo confessed. After all, he was a professor, a seasoned scholar, not a novice, and he was famous in his field. But his new situation really struck him when he went to a reading of some well-known poets. “I went in and I realized I could walk freely in the room.” Nobody stopped him, no colleagues crowded around him. “I’m in a place where I’m a complete nobody. This is terrific! Look at how easy it is to walk around!” By contrast, when he’d go to anthropology meetings, he would be lionized. So many admirers would crowd around him that “it was just very hard to get from one room to another. It made me wonder how a centipede walks.”

In the poetry scene, he was alone, uncelebrated, which was refreshing; but he did need a community, people who would respond to his work, give him critical feedback. He joined a poetry workshop group that met every month in his neighborhood, and over the course of years of sharing his work, he did learn to write poems. He ended up publishing a book, although with a different title, with considerable success. *Prayer to Spider Woman/ Rezo a la mujer araña* received an American Book Award in 2004.

When Renato Rosaldo emerged from his stroke, poems suddenly came to him, a remarkable, happy revelation. But he also had to learn to write again, in a new way, returning to both languages of his childhood. He didn’t have to start with his ABC’s – thankfully, the stroke wasn’t that debilitating – but he did have to re-think what he did, how he gave particular words to feelings and ideas in two languages, how he shaped phrases and sentences.

His experience learning to write poetry was dramatic, and it underscores the ways writing is a complicated neurological act for each individual and at the same time a social process, even if it's done all alone in the privacy of our own heads. Even when we sit by ourselves with paper and pen or keyboard and monitor, we're in constant conversations with imagined readers; even if it's just a single word on a page, that word is crowded with a lot of people and their experiences.

Little kids learning their ABC's and middle-aged anthropologists suddenly beginning to write poetry, even in two languages simultaneously, are both involved in similar processes. Everyone who writes must learn how to write. That's obvious – the skill doesn't just sprout up like a wild flower, and it doesn't seem to come as a result of natural growth the way understanding and speaking a language comes from infancy on. There are sophisticated tools involved, alphabets, pencils, keyboards, vocabularies, grammars. Even skillful writers have to start with their ABC's, moving on to words, sentences, paragraphs, essays, arguments, styles, genres, and more. Mostly, we remember very little of how we learned the basics, our first scribbles, at a very early age – unless someone else remembers for us. Literary critic and biographer Arnold Rampersad grew up in the West Indies, and it was his sister who told him that he learned his ABC's by means of a Victorian teaching technique: he would trace letters in the air with his finger. I can see a lovely scene of his index finger looping around G or Q.

Often, the earliest writing experience most people remember is scrawling their name on walls or other forbidden places with crayons. "I've asked people for twenty years about their early memories of writing," said Andrea Lunsford, a scholar of rhetoric and composition. "The most frequent memory of writing people have is of writing their name." She can't remember the moment in her own life, but she's interviewed thousands of people "who can remember the moment when they could put their mark on the world, make letters that were both them and not them." She described that important moment as one of "differentiation, where you see yourself from a new perspective. You're taking on the beginnings of a self that is separate from your family, your mother, and that's a really important moment." A student remembers that her brother carved his name in a piece of furniture – and then, when busted, declared his innocence, which must have produced a memorable moment of differentiation.

As kids grow a little older, they are often prodded by some kind of desire that pushes them in the direction of words, and that can be something dramatic that gets chiseled into memory. Harry Elam, a stage director and scholar of August Wilson and other African American playwrights, was

drawn to the theater when he wrote a play in the third grade “to get a girl to kiss me.” It was a Christmas play, and he wrote it so he would be the lead playing opposite her. Shrewdly, he crafted one scene so that she had to kiss him. He realized that he could actually mold reality to his wishes by scripting it, and he got the kiss. The possibilities of writing for the theater opened up from there.

Young love is definitely a motivator. I wrote a poem for a girl I pined for in seventh grade. I drew a picture of her, bought a bouquet, and handed her several pages of a terrible poem – “Your lips are like cherries, your eyes are bright stars . . .” She showed it to her friends, they all giggled, I was humiliated. Most of all, it didn’t work. However, the other seventh-grade boys liked the idea, and I was hired to write love letters at 25 cents a crack: “Your lips are like sidewalks to the moon.” If you can’t get love, at least you can get money, and that little bit of incentive pushed me to keep writing.

Fred Turner is a communication professor who before becoming an academic was a journalist, and before that he also wrote poems. Here, too, love had its role to play, but blooming at a different stage in life:

I started writing poems very, very early, like in grammar school. And I wrote them all the way through college. My senior thesis in college was actually a collection of poems, which I dug up out of my wife’s files today because I hadn’t seen it in twenty years. I gave it to her when she was my girlfriend, and now we’re married – which is wild in its own right.

This is encouraging news for those handing over their verses to their heart’s desire.

Sometimes there’s an inexplicable attraction to writing itself. “When I was about ten,” recalled anthropologist Paula Ebron, “there were these little ads in magazines that you could be an artist or you could be a writer for some money. I guess it was a correspondence course.” For some reason, the ad did its job, and she sent in her coupon. “But they told me I needed to be a little older or have my parents sign at the end or something.” Literary critic and biographer Diane Middlebrook couldn’t remember a time when she *didn’t* write. “I just always did.” And she was even able, at a very early age, to get critical acclaim, and a lot of encouragement, as a result: “I had a poem in the *Spokane Daily Chronicle* on the cartoon page when I was eight years old,” she said. “It stays in my mind as a very thrilling experience.” She had written a great many books when we spoke, but she still glowed with pride at her childhood triumph.

For playwright David Henry Hwang, family history drew him at the age of ten to his very first writing project. “My fraternal grandmother fell ill and we all thought she was going to pass away,” he explained. “She was the one who kept all of the family history. So I remember thinking, if she died, it would be doubly tragic, because we would lose my grandmother, of course, but we would also lose all this history.” He was born and raised in Los Angeles, and his grandparents were living at that time in the Philippines. So he asked his mother if he could spend the summer with them, and his parents agreed. That summer he did “what we would now call oral histories,” getting his grandmother to tell the family stories and recording them all on tape. “Then when I returned to the states, I compiled them into a 90-page non-fiction novel, which got Xeroxed and distributed to my relatives.” And he laughed: “It got very good reviews.”

Hwang only began writing plays when he was an undergraduate at Stanford, and from his very first play, *FOB* (a term for recent immigrants: Fresh Off the Boat), he began to explore all the complexities of identity – Asian, American, Asian American, male, female, immigrant, and so forth – all of which resonate in his plays, such as *M Butterfly* and *Yellow Face*, the play he was developing at Stanford at the time we had our conversation. Looking back, he realized that “the one time I did engage the medium of writing, it was to try and understand my own identity in some larger context, to understand where I’d come from and to begin to put my existence here, in this country, in a kind of historical frame.”

Reading, of course, is the path to writing. Plus reading becomes the avenue to experience new realities and to explore (or escape) identities. Ramon Saldivar, literary and cultural critic, grew up bilingual in Brownsville, Texas. The whole city was a Mexican barrio, as he described it, and his family lived in the middle of that barrio. One day, when he was eight years old, he came home from school to see a strange sight: “There in the middle of the living room was a pile of beautiful white bound gilt edged books, and I was astonished. Where did these come from? What were they doing in my house?” His parents did not buy books. “As far as I can remember up to that moment there were only two books in the house. One was the Bible – but you don’t read the Bible in Mexican Catholic homes, it’s just there as a show piece – and the other was a text book on how to be a plumber. And my father was not a plumber.” Professor Saldivar speculates that his father must have come across the book at some point and considered learning to become a plumber, but he never did. “I didn’t read either of those books. And I’ve often regretted it,” he joked. “My life would have been richer if I knew something about the Bible and something about plumbing.”

But then, sitting in the middle of the combined living-room-den-dining-TV-room of his 4-room barrio home were “these beautiful books that, certainly, from the look of them, were much more expensive than we could afford; they must have amounted to 2 or 3 months worth of our grocery bill at least.” It turned out that the pile in the middle of the room was a set of the 1958 World Book Encyclopedia. That was his entry into reading and the larger universe beyond Brownsville. “From that moment, I had the sense that words come together in these complicated and interesting ways. In this set of books the words are arranged alphabetically from A to Z. And you can pick the B words and do lots of readings about brontosaurus and bronchi tubes and anything else having to do with B. The idea of the palpability of words,” Professor Saldivar explained, “organized in a certain way.” He marveled at the pleasure of that palpability: “I read the whole thing that summer from A to Z.”

That pile of encyclopedias allowed him to exult in language, which was really a big step. “That first step for me was the foundation for a shorter step, which would be trying out language in written form.” That step into reading was the bigger leap for someone from his working-class background. He described his social environment as one where “books are not part of our daily life, and to have access to that was a huge and important step.” Reading allowed him to imagine that “I could have a role in the construction of that entity,” the written word, the book. To Professor Saldivar there is an “exciting universality” communicated by the way the encyclopedia packages knowledge between the covers of a single book or set of books. “That’s why it was that enlightenment breakthrough. It gave us the impression that one can encapsulate and possess universal knowledge. That is the allure.”

The encyclopedia stood out as a gift, as well. He never asked his mother how the encyclopedia set arrived, but he did imagine what had happened. The salesman was “probably an overly tired, exasperated, poor man. It had to be a man, since in 1958 walking in the Mexican barrio in South Texas, a woman couldn’t do that.” He contemplated the vision of this tired and frustrated man walking up to his house to

convince my mother that of all things in the world she needed to buy a set of encyclopedias. I value those books for that reason. Having it at home and having my mother bring them to me was important on a deep emotional level. She knew what I wanted. That’s how I felt at that moment and felt ever since. All those things come together.

It was the combination of the rare book and deep abiding maternal love. They provided the path to reading, and then to learning how to write.

Leonard Susskind *really was a plumber*. And that fact leads to a different story of how someone learns to write. Professor Susskind grew up in the South Bronx, and in 1961 he was a student “with a somewhat unorthodox academic record” at CCNY that worked as a plumber. He is an acclaimed physicist today, a “father of string theory,” although he insists he’s the father of his kids.

During our “How I Write” conversation, Professor Susskind read a sketch about his turning point in college, when he met John Wheeler, the famous Princeton professor who worked on the quantum theory of gravity in the 1960s and 1970s. One of his professors, “a cigar-chomping, cussing, CCNY professor from the same Jewish working class background that I came from, took me down to Princeton to meet Wheeler. The hope was that Wheeler would be impressed and that I would be admitted as a graduate student, despite my lack of an undergraduate degree.”

His mother thought he should dress properly for the meeting. For his mother, that meant he should show his solidarity with his working class roots and dress in his work clothes. “These days, my plumber in Palo Alto dresses about the same way that I do when I lecture at Stanford. But in 1961, plumbing in the South Bronx was a much rougher profession. My plumbing costume was the same as my father’s and of all of his roughneck plumber buddies: Li’l Abner bib overalls, a big flannel work shirt, heavy steel-tipped work shoes, and in my case I also sported a watch cap to keep the dirt and grind out of my hair.”

The cigar-chomping professor picked him up early to drive to Princeton, but when he saw the plumber in his outfit, “he did a double take.”

The big cigar fell out of his mouth and he told me to get back upstairs and change. He said that John Wheeler was not that kind of guy.

When I first walked into the great professor’s office, I saw what Harry meant. The only way I can describe the man who greeted me is to say that he looked Republican. What the hell was I doing in this wasps’ nest of a university?

Two hours later, I was completely enthralled. John was enthusiastically describing his vision of how space and time would become a wild, jittery, foaming world of quantum fluctuations when viewed through a tremendously-powered microscope. He told me

that the most profound and exciting problems of physics was to unify Einstein's two great theories, general relativity and quantum mechanics. He explained that only at the Planck distance would elementary particles reveal their true nature, and it would be all about geometry, quantum geometry. To a young aspiring physicist, the stuffy businessman exterior had morphed into the appearance of an idealistic visionary. I wanted more than anything to follow this man into battle.

Susskind never did become Wheeler's student, but the encounter did change his life, and he became a physicist. The whole story is startling, and he reads the funny tale he's written with flair.

Today Leonard Susskind is a leading scientist. He's also written many books and articles to make physics accessible to the educated public, becoming a gifted illuminator of highly abstract concepts. But as a young student, the plumber-turned-physicist couldn't write well. He came "from a neighborhood and a background where people spoke a very funny kind of English. It was called 'Bronx English.'" What's more, not everybody in his working-class family knew how to read and write. "But my father and mother knew how to read and write," he recalled. "I don't know why I was so challenged and unable to write." He goes on to tell his story of failure:

I always considered myself a seriously writing challenged person who had zero ability to be able to communicate with the written word. I was so bad at it, or other people thought I was so bad at it, that it was a disaster in school, and throughout school I was constantly in remedial English classes. I don't really know why. I could spell, my grammar was okay; my punctuation was okay, although I really have had a lifelong war with the semicolon, but other than the semicolon I was okay. I didn't know what was wrong with my writing. All I knew was that I couldn't get a decent grade in English. English teachers continuously considered me seriously challenged and put me in remedial classes.

This didn't seem to make sense to him, even back then. He knew he was a very good storyteller. He could tell jokes and was always good with words. He was a capable spontaneous speaker. "I don't know why I didn't bridge the gap."

Like Ramon Saldivar, reading brought him to writing – although no one brought a pile of encyclopedias. First he had to find the books, or they had to find him. He read his first book, *The Wind in the Willows*, when he was

twelve years old. “I was blown away.”

My aunt bought me *The Wind in the Willows* and I read it, and I just thought, “This is magic. This is something magical.” By the time I was fifteen, somebody else gave me another book called *Huckleberry Finn*, and I read that. Again, I loved it. Here I was, a kid in the South Bronx, mostly playing basketball, stickball, all these things that kids did in the South Bronx. My friends, believe it or not, were not readers, and I don’t know that anybody read. But again, when I was sixteen, somebody gave me a copy of, of all things, *Washington Square*. This is not the sort of thing that a sixteen-year old kid in the South Bronx was reading. I read it and I just loved it. I mean, I didn’t know there was a character called Henry James, didn’t know who he was, and I read it, and I loved it.

Finally, before going to college he read Franz Kafka. “Kafka just caught my imagination and I’ve been reading Kafka ever since. I read it over and over and over again, and I don’t know why.” Susskind called upon James, Twain, and Kafka to be his teachers, and he learned from his masters. He no longer needs to worry about being sent to remedial writing class.

1950 JUNE 28: THE FALL OF SEOUL

Don Mee Choi

I was cheerily cherrily red
and merely merrily washed my face in the yard and looked up at the stars
I decided to go alone as far as I could go south, do and do and to
I passed the narrow alley and came to a big road
Nevertheless Yak and Yak sounded fainter than last night
No one was on the road, I ran really readily red, are you really red?
The East Gate was still standing, but the police station was empty
The tracks shone under the stars but there were no trams to be seen
There were several ways to go south, do and do and to
It wasn't safe to take the South Gate route where the governmental buildings
and banks were, so I turned left do and do and to, to cross the stone bridge
across Ch'onggye Creek and as I did so I felt compelled to raise a question
most general in nature—Are you okay, R.O.K.?

It was partly history.
I say this as I watch the people pour out to the market to stock up on food,
an old habit from the colonial occupation, so I say it was partly history
as the ground trembled and a Russian-made tank crossed the bridge
and I froze and stared up at the red star of the tank,
which is also partly history
as the tank aimed and fired a shot to the mid point of Mount South
and everyone scattered like crickets.
I say it was partly history because in 1948
the year of liberation from Japan, a star of a different degree boasted that
if war ever broke out they would be able to push back the North Korean
People's Army and have breakfast in North Korea's city of Kyesong,
lunch in the capital, Pyongyang, and dinner in Shinuiju all in a single day.
So I say it was partly history
as I watch the red star pass by, shitting more stars from its behind.

from **PRAISE OF THE HIGH SHADOW**

Mahmoud Darwish

(translated by Saifedean Ammous)

Do not mention the dead, for they have died individually, or as capitals

I shall see you in my heart tomorrow; I will see you in my heart

And wail my language, my brother

A language that looks for its sons, its lands and its storytellers

It dies like all those in it, and is thrown in the dictionaries

It is the last of the frail palms, and the hour of desert

It is the last thing pointing to the remnants

They were! But you were alone

How alone you were belonging to my poem, and extending your arm

To turn it into ladders, or countries or rings

How alone you were, son of my mother

Son of more than a father, how alone you were

And now, as things are master, and this silence arrives at us in arrows

Do we realize the unknown in us?

Do we sing like we used to sing?

Oh, our blood the scandal, will you come at them as a cloud?

These are nations that pass and cook the flowers in our blood, and
increase in division

These are nations that look for their vacation from the decorated camels

This desert grows around us

Desert from all directions

The desert comes at us to devour our poem and our sword

Do we disappear in what explains us and resembles us?

And can we die in our dark birth?

Or...

Do we occupy a minaret to announce to the tribes that Yathreb¹ has rented its Quran out to the Jews of Khyber?

God is great!

These are our holy verses, Read...

Read in the name of the *fedai*² that created...

A horizon out of a shoe³

In the name of the *fedai* that travels from his time to his first calling

The first, first

We shall destroy the temple... we shall destroy the temple

In the name of the *fedai* who begins, Read...

Beirut is our image, Beirut is our verse

Beirut no

My back is walls in front of the sea, but no

I may lose the world, yes

I may lose the words

But I say now, No!

It is the last of the bullets, No!

It is what remains of the air of the earth, No!

It is what remains of the hymns of the soul, No!

Beirut, No!

Sleep a little, my daughter, sleep a little

The planes bite me, and bite what honey is in the heart

So sleep in the road of the bees, before I awake murdered

The planes fly from the nearby rooms into the bathroom

So lie on the rock stairs

And beware if the shrapnel comes near you

And tremble a little

Sleep a little

We used to love you my daughter,

We used to count on the fingers of your left hand our journey and we
subtract our departure

Sleep a little

The planes fly and the trees fall and the buildings bake their residents

So hide for my last song

Or my last bullet, my daughter

And use me as your pillow, whether I am coal or a palm

Sleep a little

(Footnotes)

¹ The original name for Medina, the second holiest city of Islam, to which Muhammad migrated from Mecca

² Fedai is a name for a guerilla fighter, usually used to refer to Palestinian guerilla fighters. Other words for it could be 'rebel', 'insurrectionary'. The term comes from the verb *fada* -- to sacrifice in order to protect.

³ This is a paraphrasing of the first verse of the Quran, which reads "Read, in the name of your God who created. Created man from a mere blood clot."

FOR THE YOUNG ANARCHISTS

Adrienne Rich

Whatever our appetites
we're not seagulls, to drop things
smash on the rocks hurtling beak-down
Think instead of the oysterman's
gauging eyes, torqued wrist
sliding the knife
into the bivalve with an astuteness
honed in generations of
intelligent living to extract
the wanted thing Drawn forth it can slip
from your fingers Kicked around in the sand, forget it
Only every so often will
diver rise up from stalking grounds
lifting this creature into daylight and
everyone standing around
shrinks or thinks they want some We've
been clumsy at this before trampled
in fury and hunger Begin there, yes
—only fury knowing its ground
has staying power—
Then go dead calm
remembering what this operation calls for—
eye, hand, mind Don't
listen to chatter, ignore all yells
of haphazard instruction And
when you taste it don't
get too elated There'll be grit to swallow Or spit out.

ACCOMPLICE

Adrienne Rich

i

The experience leads from skin
inward from flesh outward
lit-up skeins of membrane
hum mirage
flotillas burst in the blood

What you can't speak you'll go for
another way
strained limbs etched in exhausted sleep
a charcoaled laughing head thrown back
Capture or release
release and capture

Say it's a job for tendons nerves and what-
ever's meant by voice

You're in league now or never with
this instrument this strung high-tension beast
Bent into it arms knees chest and spine

Listening's not for quick
and easy resolution multiple-choice
click or check-off response
No one's adroit at this

So dare we call it, music?
that name we had for what we did?

iii

Eyes gaze
from syllables and chords
eyes that have to pierce
sight into seeing

the hand that set
the word that
sketched the limbs that
struck the chord that
took the heat and
kept the beat
dark deep and lit

to meet in time their true
accomplice

"WE BUILD A WORLD": WAR RESISTANCE POETRY IN/AS THE FIRST PERSON PLURAL

Philip Metres

Let us suppose that we had carried out production as human beings....I would have been for you the mediator between you and the species, and therefore would become recognised and felt by yourself as a completion of your own essential nature and as a necessary part of yourself, and consequently would know myself to be confirmed both in your thought and your love.... In the individual expression of my life I would have directly created your expression of your life, and therefore in my individual activity I would have directly confirmed and realised my true nature, my human nature, my communal nature.

—Karl Marx

"SOCIAL SCULPTURE—how we mold and shape the world in which we live: SCULPTURE AS AN EVOLUTIONARY PROCESS; EVERYONE AN ARTIST."

—Joseph Beuys

If everyone is indeed an artist, as avant-gardist Joseph Beuys once proposed, and our lives on some level are works of art, then socially active poets who engage in readings, teach workshops, and write books of poetry have another vital critical role: coaxing others who are not traditionally hailed to *realize* (in both senses, to become aware of and to actualize) their own labors of making as art—*poesis* being that great making)—and seeing how poetry itself changes when these "others" create it. In the process, the poet as mediator, as listener, as shaper, as chronicler, might realize her "true nature," as Marx puts it, her "communal nature."

I recently received an email from Alex Chambers, a poet and activist, thanking me for my Poetry Foundation piece on documentary poetry, "From Reznikoff to Public Enemy," noting that he included it in his prison poetry workshop. He noted that he found the piece quite interesting, and one particularly powerful poem emerged from the participants in response to the possibilities of documentary poetry. Overall, Chambers found that the prisoners were more drawn to the first person lyric than to the operations of documentary poetics—partly because of their received notions about what poetry is, and partly because the poetry of lyric provided the aura of agency and the technology of voice that the prisoners felt that they so lacked.

I am sure that Chambers must have felt a little disappointed, as documentary poetry offers possibilities that the expressivist lyric does not; anyone who has taught poetry has, from time to time, felt that acutely painful chasm between one's own pleasures in texts, and the students' pleasures. Yet if we poets are interested in poetry as a mode of social change, as an operation of social and symbolic action, and as a medium by which individuals and communities can dialogue with each other and the world, then we must be tensile in our approach as poet-facilitators to the needs and goals of the communities with which they work. This is not to say that we must abandon our principles and pleasures in poetry; on the contrary, since poetry is like bread to us, we must continue to eat, to live. But if we are to participate in the poetics of a community, we must find what will feed our fellow members. To pivot the metaphor slightly, we must be the ears of the movements in which we find ourselves, as much as the mouths.

I have proposed elsewhere the need for poets engaged in peace activism to bring poetry to the movement, and the movement to poetry. In the conclusion to *Behind the Lines: War Resistance Poetry on the American Homefront Since 1941*, I argued for the need for a poetry that would breathe outside of the confines of the book, and for us to see poetry freed into the third dimension of public spaces: "war resistance poems thus ask for our redeployment in multiple sites, returning poetry to where it thrives—at the local and in local resistance [i.e. "behind the lines" and beyond the page and into the public square]—as graffiti, in pamphlets, as performances, as songs, and in the classroom" (233).

In concert with the publication of *Behind the Lines* in 2007, I began a blog (<http://www.behindthelinespoetry.blogspot.com/>) which would update and extend the concerns of the book, since I was aware the heavily-academic discourse occasionally makes the prose difficult. When University of Iowa Press chose to publish the book only in hardcover edition (until, they promised, it sold out—that is, until hell freezes over), I began to feel as if my desire to dialogue with peace movement activists would be unfulfilled, and my call to liberate poems would be itself imprisoned in the libraries, perhaps even more hidden than the poems that I hoped to "liberate."

So when Larry and Ann Smith approached me to write an introduction to an anthology of peace poems, *Come Together: Imagine Peace* (2008), I readily accepted, and they graciously took me on as an editor of the project. In the introduction, I provided a taxonomy of peace poetry, but also staked a claim for peace poetry as an active ingredient of peace communities, rather than a distillation of peace ideas:

We hope that these poets and poems will be seen not only as food for the peace troops in moments of repose, but also as a script for future readings, demonstrations and other actions. Peace poems, after all, are often occasional endeavors, written by movement participants and delivered for the ear and heart. Gene Sharp's *Politics of Nonviolent Action* lists 198 nonviolent tactics that resisters have employed to resist illegitimate power and effect social change. Poems can take their place as part of the peace movement story and community building that is so central to peace movement labor. These poems invite us to join the local networks of the peace movement—which, lacking serious mass media attention and much of the nation, always needs more active participants—those who can bring a dish to a potluck discussion on the war in Iraq, those who can post flyers or canvass one's neighborhood, those who can write press releases and speeches. Poets have a pivotal role to play in the peace movement, because of our keen attention to language—not simply to excoriate its abuse by the dominant narrative, but also to construct alternative narratives that invite those who may be sympathetic but lack awareness of the movement, to learn, join and act. (19-20)

The Poetics of the Collective and The Collective Poem

In November 2009, the National War Tax Resistance Coordinating Committee held their annual meeting in a church in Cleveland. One of their members asked me to join and do a poetry reading, or something that might be a warm-up to the weekend program. Though I am not a war tax resister, I have long supported national legislation to create a Department of Peace, and to reduce war and “defense” spending. (For information on what war tax resistance is, please see www.nwtrcc.org)

Instead of doing a traditional poetry reading, which could have led easily to a static Poet as Authority and Audience as Passive Recipient, I had an opportunity to put my theory into action, and engage the praxis that I have been advocating for years. I came up with a writing exercise that would produce a co-authored “chorale,” a collective poem that would reflect both the diversity of experiences and viewpoints of the participants, as well as their unity in resisting war and working for a more just and peaceful world.

I began by reading two poems from the anthology *Come Together: Imagine Peace*: “The Story So Far” by Shara McCollum and “Jerusalem” by Naomi Shihab Nye. I chose them because I thought they had a relatively approachable

theme and use of language, and I noted to the participants the ways in which each poem offers us a particular vision of the world—its deserts of violence and its oases of peace. In “The Story So Far,” McCollum witnesses to the brutality of human beings toward one another, a world in which there is nothing that we have not done to each other.

The Story So Far

To choose a song for sacrifice
the war continues:

as four thousand years
Isaac and Ishmael still clamouring for God’s ear.

In the light of day’s end, in a warehouse in Rwanda,
a Hutu foreman hovers over one of his workers,

a pregnant Tutsi woman. This ordinary man
with a wife, children of his own,

will disembowel her. Not a stranger
but this woman he knows. To learn

as later, in his defense, he will confess—
what the inside of a Tutsi woman is like.

On the radio, a young woman recounts her tale
of the Cambodia killing fields:

rice paddies, thatched hut where she plays,
men coming for her father first,

her mother orphaning her so she might survive.
This child eating crickets and coal to stay alive.

Butterflies by the hundreds alight on her face,
cover each inch of skin, their furred wings

opening and closing
against her eyelids, lips and cheeks.

Told in any language—the parables of suffering,
the fractured syllables of loss,

the space in the back of a throat
still longing to sound the names of God. (51)

I noted briefly the horrible power of these particular images of violence, and how the poet's task is the human task of finding "the space in the back of the throat." The great ambiguity at the end of the poem does not resolve whether the "longing to sound the names of God" is a fundamentally transformative and humane act of reclamation, or one which is destined to into the same "story so far" (cf. the competition between Ishmael and Isaac "for God's ear").

In the second poem, "Jerusalem," Nye juxtaposes images of brokenness and pain with ones of transformative magic, art, and faith; in particular, I wanted to demonstrate the ways in which the poet shows us peace is as natural and human as violence may be. Here is the poem:

Jerusalem

*"Let's be the same wound if we must bleed.
Let's fight side by side, even if the enemy
is ourselves: I am yours, you are mine."
-Tommy Olofsson, Sweden*

I'm not interested in
who suffered the most.
I'm interested in
people getting over it.

Once when my father was a boy
a stone hit him on the head.
Hair would never grow there.
Our fingers found the tender spot
and its riddles: the boy who has fallen
stands up. A bucket of pears
in his mother's doorway welcomes him home.
The pears are not crying.
Lately his friend who threw the stone
says he was aiming at a bird.
And my father starts growing wings.

Each carries a tender spot:
something our lives forgot to give us.
A man builds a house and says,

“I am native now.”
A woman speaks to a tree in place
of her son. And olives come.
A child’s poem says,
“I don’t like wars,
they end up with monuments.”
He’s painting a bird with wings
wide enough to cover two roofs at once.

Why are we so monumentally slow?
Soldiers stalk a pharmacy:
big guns, little pills.
If you tilt your head just slightly
it’s ridiculous.

There’s a place in this brain
where hate won’t grow.
I touch its riddles: wind and seeds.
Something pokes us as we sleep.

It’s late but everything comes next. (97)

I then invited them to do two free-writes, in five-minute increments:

- 1) describe an image or moment of rupture or violence that you experienced or witnessed that has always stayed with you, that you carry with you, that motivates your war resistance;
- 2) describe an image or moment of resistance, reconciliation, peace-making, healing, courage that gives you hope in dark times.

My desire was to coax the participants into thinking about why they came, and what motivates their activism. It’s been a hunch of mine for some time that peace activists often come to be advocates as a result of crystallizing experiences of violence. As importantly, peace activists have had experiences that give them hope, that lead them to fight against injustice and oppression, and sharing those moments of hope could be a way to hold off the darkness.

Once they had done their writing, I prompted them with two refrains; the first, “For we have seen” would initiate each new image of violence, and the second, “we work to build a world” would begin the images of peacemaking and hope. I stood in the center of the room, searching for and calling on volunteers ready with their images and words scrawled at the moment.

The instant reading was quite powerful, in ways that the text below cannot dramatize, a testament to their individual experiences and collective labor. There was an audible crackle in the silence of the room between each participants' reading, that exchange of energy that Muriel Rukeyser proposes is the work of poetry. Here were a bunch of seasoned peace people, war resisters who were risking even what little they had to refuse money for wars, who knew the power of action, but not necessarily comfortable with poetry or even their own words; yet each brought their language to bear on the rather mysterious ways in which they had come together for this conference of war tax resistance.

Mindful of that gap (as poetry is almost always what's lost in translation), I share the vestige of that collective symbolic action. Because I did not make a recording of the proceedings, I took the pieces that I collected from the participants and built this version.

**“For We Have Seen/We Build a World”:
A War Tax Resisters Chorale**

by the National War Tax Resistance Coordinating
Committee meeting
Cleveland, Ohio
November 7, 2009

(note: the italicized refrains spoken by all)

1. For we have seen

For we have seen

The Guatemalan peasant shares the horrors of the massacre that left many buried, they know not where. Life goes on. The corn is planted; then the harvest. Yet sorrow remains entangled in its roots.

For we have seen

The father weeping inside holds his children
As their mother leaves for greener and richer fields.

For we have seen

A little joke, a play on words, expectation twinkling in her eyes
extinguished.

For we have seen

Their heads blown apart, crying, begging, but my hand came back from my face covered in blood. And for them I could do nothing.

For we have seen

She was deceived,
Then she was raped,
And the bond with her true love
Was not broken.
Now he lifts up her light
That others may discover
The truth about themselves
And pass on the light.

For we have seen

She struggled hard to live, her eyes closed slowly against the light,
and all was dark. What now?

For we have seen

Shots crack the stillness. Sirens scream, a sea of green 70s police units. It's a hideous colon and I don't feel safe. Shooter still at large. Time to walk to school. "You'll be fine," my mother says, and "don't be late."

For we have seen

It was the night of my seventh or eighth birthday, when he locked the front door, pushing me out of his way, to top the window to scream and call my mother a bitch.

For we have seen

Numbers pulled from a jar cleaved a room of young men—a lottery of death that is our job to rescramble.

For we have seen

The heat bore down the blood flowed out of her leg and watered the plants. She who was left there.

For we have seen

Dusty Indian village in evenings cool untouchable side of town, sari-clad woman approaches, lifts infant to me and says (in translation):
“take him to your county and give him a good life.”

2. We build a world...

We build a world

By what right, she the angry one
Do you impugn the sacrifice
Of our brave?
And why don't
You go back to
The country you came from
And the answer that came
I was here before your ancestors.
And my descendants shall carry on
When I am no more.

We build a world

The police officer, tired of her constant crawling through his legs,
lay fingers in her hair and clenched then into a fist, and dragged her
screaming across the Pentagon floor, twinkling eyes and all.

We build a world

From the knowing fear of dogs and baseball bats on Selma bridge to
the triumphal march as far as one could see, front and back.

We build a world

He makes sense. He speaks truth. What a gift to the world. So rare.
We build a world

Swimming with the outboard motor, set adrift, not wanting to drop
it and let it sink. Finally heave-ho aboard. Meanwhile, swim for your
dinghy, which you didn't secure to the main ship.

We build a world

It was when she was being dragged away and I, I was being pushed back, she was on the ground being choked and I was being detained when she pulled the cop down with her, and kicked him down. We escaped.

We build a world

Awaking to pre-dawn bomb and machinegun fire. It's thanksgiving in the U.S.A. No more hiding in Guatemalan jungles for 13 years. The call goes out to "illumine all the lamps!" and show the U.S.-issue helicopter gunships where we are: civilian farmers and human rights witnesses standing in the open clearing as targets of strength.

We build a world

A young boy caught a fish and could not get the hook out. It was dying, the spiny fins stuck his hands. An older boy, a teenager, came along and simply said, "hold the fin backwards hard, and pull out the hook," and calmly walked away, before the miracle of success.

We build a world

We exchanged war stories. Her ten years from age 12, insisting on being allowed a combatant role. Once so scared, she turned the gun with its last bullet toward herself until the danger passed. "So, how long were you there?" "Well," I say, "the usual tour was a year. But I was wounded and spent months in the hospital." She stopped short and gave a sigh and a look of sorrow. "You were only a tourist."

We build a world

Her eyes shining in the lungs of the world looked at us, in the Colombian rainforest, and said, I can't believe you came all the way here to see me.

Clearly, the language varies from the propagandistic to the imagistic, and much of it on the page lacks the felt tonalities articulated by the authors of those lines. But the lines themselves demonstrate the great diversity of experiences that bring together war resisters—from childhood experiences of domestic violence, to adult encounters of global war, both as soldier and as activist—as well as the moments of communion and empowerment that encourage and sustain peace activists and war resisters. Most importantly, the group became, in the ceremonial telling of this poem, a momentary and

provisional collectivity—a critical experience for conscientious objectors, whose resistance is often solitary and often sustainable due to the steely intransigence and hard-fought independence of the objector. Finally, I would be remiss if I did not also mention how poetry became alive again not only for them, but also for me, who felt the dilatory magic of words broken and shared, the meal after the meal we had eaten together.

“A lie told often enough becomes truth.”

V.I. Lenin

A truth told often enough becomes a lie.

A lie tells itself the truth. That name is a pig.

Then the bovine becomes agri-present. To milk the truth.

Enough truth and one will feel woozy.

As in, “woozy with truth.”

As in, wobbly.

As in, airport, with bullhorn.

Tendered speech on a platform.

These three words.

Advertisement in the back of a lit mag.

For another lit mag.

As in, simulacrum.

As in, becoming something else.

Dissolved on the tongue.

Sibilance.

In the back of the room, whispering.

There is talk, also, at the lectern.

What will be communicated, refracted.

Dissemination through. How to get through.

Interlocutionary boxes replicated in repetition.

At the hour. At the top of the hour.

In a minute. Your news.

Wherever a screen glows.

Wherever a word crawls.

The reach of the head.

Split tongue dialectic.

No synthesis.

Stutttterer's ccccccumulative

occlusion.

“You show me a capitalist, and I’ll show you a bloodsucker.”

El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz

What is disclosure?

What is an incarcerated market?

What of rhetoric?

A tell, a dead giveaway.

Gimme. Get your.

Job. The noun and the noun.

Person is noun.

Book is noun.

A job is a thing and a character.

A person with character has a thing.

Action.

Direct action.

Upon.

After the fall comes work.

No effort in the garden?

No jive in yo’ jump?

Dead giveaway. Shibboleth.

The thing and the thing and the doing the thing.

Which Job?

Which Book?

Which Burqa?

SIT-IN AT BULLWORTH'S

Aldon Lynn Nielsen

From a letter to the *San Francisco Chronicle*:

Gentlemen:

Arriving back in San Francisco to be greeted by a blacklist and eviction, I am writing these lines to the responsible non-people. One thing is certain I am not white. Thank God for that. It makes everything else bearable.

Bob Kaufman, Poet

Oct. 5th, 1963 (96-97)

Gwendolyn Brooks writes, "The word Black / has geographic power / pulls everybody in." "Oh mighty Drop," she sings; "One Drop / maketh a brand new black" (9). Thus have the boundaries of blackness been historically drawn. It would seem a simple thing, and yet such boundaries must be in a state of continual reconstitution in order for them to be seen as ordering at all. We know when we are about to cross a national boundary because we find ourselves compelled to identify ourselves, asked by a representative of the nation to declare ourselves as non-contraband, to present bona fides of our affiliations. Yet even barriers such as these have been known to move. Citizens of Mexico, living where I now sit to write as a citizen of California, found that just as they had once been subjects of Spain, and then citizens of Mexico, they were now redrawn within the boundaries of the United States. The first constitution of California was a bilingual document, acknowledging with its doubled tongue its polyglot peoples in the act of bespeaking itself. Are we the same people within these boundaries today, following upon the officious imposition of mandatory monolingualism in our *curricula vitae*?

Similarly, we encounter the boundaries of race always as subjects subject to question. Do I have the right to be where I already am? Do I have the right to declare myself? To whom do I show my passport? Do I have the right to differ within the boundaries chosen for me? Can I be constitutional as I am presently constituted, or must I bespeak myself differently?

It might seem a simple thing, essentially black, this boundary we would here redraw. Senghor writes of a *negritude* that is "neither racialism nor self-negation. Yet it is not just affirmation; it is rooting oneself in oneself" (27). In the end, for Senghor *negritude* is "the sum of the cultural values of the black world" (28). "Where," one might well ask, "is that world to be found?" "Wherever," one might well answer, "any black person is." As with national boundaries,

then, the boundaries of black literature and culture are imaginative delineations of contiguity, subject to rapid migratory movements, porous as the boundaries between Rome and the Vatican, an imagined frontier wherein we remark our entrances and exits as we pass back and forth, honoring our borders in constant acts of transgression.

One needn't look far to find how broadly blackness has been defined by people who have been defined as black. For Stephen Henderson, in *Understanding the New Black Poetry*, black speech means "the speech of the majority of Black people in this country" (31), which would seemingly constitute the linguistic study of the spoken English of black people as among the most far-reaching researches known to humanity. In Henderson's view, black poetry is "chiefly," and note the inviting elasticity of that qualifier, chiefly "Any poetry by any person or groups of persons of known Black ancestry, whether the poetry is designated Black or not." Further, Henderson includes within the scope of his definitions "Poetry which is somehow [another remarkably elastic qualifier] *structurally* Black, irrespective of authorship" (7). Subsequent criticism of Henderson's schemata, in concentrating upon the seeming impossibility of finally locating and anatomizing an essential structural blackness, has tended to overlook the fuller significance of his definitions' claims upon nearly the entirety of the poetic realm. If all the poetry of any persons of known black ancestry, as well as poetry by persons somehow known to be non-black that is none-the-less structurally black, can find a home in blackness, what is left for white people to do save to cultivate the suddenly much smaller garden of poetry that is somehow "structurally" white? Here is a question whiteness studies has yet to address. It is crucial to note that Henderson's definitions were propounded at the high-water mark of the Black Arts, as black nationalisms received public attention on a scale not seen in decades. In the definitive moments of nationalist consciousness, Henderson, like Senghor, defines black literature and culture by boundaries that are as far-reaching as could be imagined.

Far too far-reaching, it would seem, for an America about to embark upon decades of backlash politics, politics so profoundly weird that we reached a point where public spokespersons dubbed President William Jefferson Clinton the first "black" President, displacing such earlier first black Presidents as Abraham Lincoln and Warren G. Harding and setting what must seem a powerfully strange precedent for the election of Barack Obama. We do not find the criticism of Stephen Henderson on many syllabi today. We do not find many of the poets encompassed in Henderson's panoramic survey on many syllabi today. And where once a Henderson could define the scope of black language study as encompassing all black people, with some white folk thrown in for good poetic measure, by the last decade of

the twentieth century we had reached such a redrawn boundary of public race discourse that the majority of editorialists and television's sputtering heads (not having time, apparently, to read the Oakland school system's Ebonics proposal and locate its actual local oddities) could openly belittle the very idea that public school teachers might endeavor to engage in the scientific study of the language as their students speak it.

The very idea . . . White America seems loathe to leave something as important as the definition of blackness in black hands. There is a considerable emotional investment in our nation's history of racial definition, witness the fulminations resulting in the public whitening of Sally Hemmings and her progeny under the prodding of revelations of genetic evidence. (The "Ebonics" proposals contained a certain "genetic" element as well, a term widely employed in linguistics though much misunderstood by journalists so inclined to racialized misunderstanding that they couldn't be bothered to read their dictionaries.) "Oh mighty Drop." Throughout most of my lifetime, historians and journalists tended to put a black face on claims that Jefferson might in reality have committed miscegenation with his half-sister-in-law. Despite the accounts of her contemporaries, who uniformly describe Hemmings as nearly-white in appearance, she was portrayed through most of the past four decades as unmistakably black; those of her descendants who were seen on television asserting a genetic link to Jefferson were usually visibly black; historians and novelists who argued that Jefferson had fathered black children were commonly depicted as attempting to blacken his name. What a difference some DNA makes. In the days that followed release of the news, more than one white journalist was heard to tell more than one "white" descendent of Jefferson and Hemmings that they looked white, not the least little bit black. Jefferson, who left us no evidence that he ever felt any visceral conflict between his own attraction to Hemmings and his earlier declarations in *Notes on the State of Virginia* regarding the reputed affinity between the orangotang and the African female, may have engaged in similar white-washing of his human property. In one census of Monticello, Hemmings was listed as white (Smith A17). Jefferson's friend, the engineer Thaddeus Kosciuszko, who had not slept with Sally Hemmings, left provisions in his will to emancipate and educate some of the Monticello slaves. Jefferson, of course, had quite other ideas about the dispensation of his estate, particularly of its movable, sexual properties.

He also appears to have had an intriguing theory about the boundaries of blackness and their possible displacements. "Let 'h' and 'e' cohabit," Jefferson wrote to an acquaintance, and while the possible cohabitation of "h" and "e" may not hold quite the salacious historical interest for us that Jefferson's cohabitations with Hemmings might exercise, their cohabitation

might lead eventually, by Jefferson's calculations, to social and intellectual improvements. "The half of the blood of each will be $q/2$," Jefferson figures; "+ $e/2 + a/8 + A/8 . . .$ " and lo and behold at long last the progeny will be washed in the blood of the land and pronounced white on television, if DNA evidence is available. But don't try this at home. What can be clearer in the murky politics of race in America than that far more important than the sanctity of the one drop rule or the elasticity of Jefferson's self-interested racial calculus is the power to define the race. Few challenged any of Jefferson's expostulations on race in his time, and while an Alan Sokal will step forward to expose the abuses of pseudo-science in the human sciences today, it is incalculably more difficult to gain the ear of the national media for an exposé of the Jeffersonian pseudo-science of a Richard Herrnstein, whose *Bell Curve* was underwritten at both production and distribution stages by some of the same organizations that were bent upon the impeachment of Jefferson's partial namesake, William Jefferson Clinton.

American culture remains a terrain of suddenly withdrawn boundary definitions, a territory in which white culture constantly rewrites its cultural past. It seems characteristic, for example, that Susan Gubar's book *Racechanges* enacts a strikingly odd racechange of its own in the course of its tour of the cultural legacies of minstrelsy and passing. While discussing Fannie Hurst's novel *Imitation of Life*, Gubar mentions parenthetically that "Claudette Colbert played the passer in one of the movies" (24). Colbert, of course, did nothing of the sort. In John Stahl's 1934 film version of the novel, Colbert plays the part of the white woman who turns Delilah's pancakes into a wildly successful capitalist empire, *not* Delilah's daughter, described by Gubar as "a prototypical tragic mulatto" (24). Now, one purpose of peer review is to preserve us from such telling inadvertence. (My own most embarrassing such episode, as yet undetected by any reviewer, occurred when I typed the name of Willard Gibbs where I had intended to type the name of Josiah Gibbs.) Still, this is more than a matter of the kind of factual error that might easily have been avoided by assigning the manuscript review to somebody who had a passing acquaintance with the material; it's a mistake that redoubles the tragedy of the stereotypical tragic mulatto of Hurst's imagining, for by displacing Colbert into the role of the passing daughter, Gubar represses the stunning performance of the African-American actress Fredi Washington, who *did* play the role in the 1934 version. Gubar's mistake is a kind of retroactive prolepsis as well. In Douglas Sirk's 1959 remake of *Imitation of Life*, Delilah's daughter was indeed imitated by a white actress. While in 1959, as in 1934, one could still see white people performing in blackface in America, as if white people really did make the best black people, it now seemed, and the film *Pinky* is another example of this, that Hollywood had determined that only white people should play

black people playing white people. Gubar's act of substitution erases a history of black acting. Her book, meant to reopen important questions about the cultural effects of racial boundary crossings, in at least this one instance has the effect of closing the border, of requiring black agency to pass once more as secret agent.

Similar acts of reconstructive historical surgery are all about us. In 1984, Stony Browder Jr. and the remaining members of Dr. Buzzard's Savannah Band released a compelling and truly danceable recording titled *Calling All Beatniks!* The collection's title was far more than just the latest in a series of popular appeals to the popular appeal of a commodified nostalgia for the glory days of an imagined Beat past, it was also a way of reasserting the centrality of black culture to the artistic milieu of the Beat arts. What would Jack Kerouac's novels have looked like without their reliance on timely appearances by Charlie Parker and Slim Gaillard? Why was it precisely that kind of question that was elided in popular culture's assimilation of a dumbed down Beat product in the form of television programming like *Dobie Gillis* and *Route 66*? Why was it that when Kerouac's novel *The Subterraneans* was translated to the screen its female lead underwent a sea change, a deracination, as the mixed-race figure Mardou Fox reappeared as a purely white character, played by Leslie Caron, with not a hint of the racial anxieties that propel Kerouac's prose? Stony Browder's call to all beatniks is made as an internationalist appeal to bohemian rebellion accented with sly sophistication. The cover art shows the musicians, elegantly attired in faux fifties party clothes, playing to a mixed-race crowd of dancers frolicking before a picture of the United Nations and a map of the world. The global emergency call issued through what Browder used to term his band's "mulatto music" also reasserts the major role of black artists within Beat history, artists such as San Francisco's Bob Kaufman, who, working with Allen Ginsberg, founded the quintessentially Beat publication *Beatitude*.

The music of Dr. Buzzard's Savannah Band is an intriguing mix of jump blues and swing-era orchestration, a sort of Louis Jordan meets Billy Strayhorn long-form dance mix. This recombinant musical phenomenon should sound familiar to you, particularly if you've viewed any of the many popular music awards programs on television in past years. Bohemian Stance, jump blues, costumes out of the forties and fifties, this is the standard recipe for a late-ninties "swing" band and has spelled commercial success for at least fifteen major acts. From the Brian Setzer Orchestra to the Squirrel Nut Zippers, from the musical breeding ground of the post-punk club scene to appearances by Big Bad VooDoo Daddy on Regis and Kathy Lee, the pattern has been set and copied nation-wide. But you won't see Stony Browder Jr. in that Swing movie, even in the director's cut at your video store, nor will

we see Dr. Buzzard's Savannah Band playing a reunion gig with the Cherry Poppin Daddies. For if there is one thing that the nineties-era swing revival shared with its thirties namesake, it was the white face that it displayed to the music buying market. Like the Dorsey Brothers band, like the movie version of *Beat life in The Subterraneans*, our most recent swing craze (which must have been about finished when Regis and Kathy Lee got hold of it), announced to the world that it's a white thing, you understand?

Thoughtful black critics (or, following Stephen Henderson's careful definitions, perhaps I should say critics known without benefit of DNA testing to be of African ancestry) have tended to construe blackness broadly, as an ever growing, ever moving repertoire of practices and epistemologies, which is one reason they are so seldom seen among the ranks of resident experts and holders of opinions on almost everything who fill our television screens with their televisual screeds. (And why, we might ask in the always-up-for-grabs first person plural, since we are being rhetorical anyway, why is it that the nominators of the "new black public intellectuals" displayed for us in our newspapers and on the guest lists of public policy talk shows, are so assiduous in ignoring the faculty of our black colleges and universities, public places noted for the convening of black intellectuals?) American culture finds the breadth of blackness defined by writers like Senghor, Brooks and Henderson breath-taking even today, finds it deeply troubling even in our putatively "post-racial" age, as if the worst crime any American might commit were thinking while black. And so, America reserves the right to shout "You go, girl," while disdaining those who would study the linguistic acts of black speaking subjects. And so, Laura Ingrahm, in her coverage of the Impeachment Hearings for a major cable network, derided Congresswoman Sheila Jackson-Lee's pronunciation of the word "censure" while studiously ignoring the peculiar institution of Congressman Lindsey Graham's syntax. (My own favorite was Representative Graham's discussion of what two of the witnesses before him "have did.") And so, you still can't buy a copy of William Melvin Kelley's marvelous (but shamefully out-of-print) novel *Dunford's Travels Everywhere*, and you won't find anybody discussing Amiri Baraka's early essay on "Technology and Ethos" over at the hypertext panel (it seems we'd rather see Baraka haunting the back alleys of *Bullworth*), and we're still waiting for Lincoln Center to host that Sun Ra retrospective, and Jayne Cortez still isn't the Poet Laureate of these United States, and the studios still haven't gotten back in touch about C. L. R. James's proposal for a filmed version of *Black Jacobins*, and we impeached the third of our first black Presidents. (Which is, I suppose, something of an improvement --We shot the first one.) "Oh mighty Drop." Gwendolyn Brooks is right. The word "black" has geographic power. It surely must; just look at the disturbance in the field of whiteness.

LION WOMAN

Arisa White

she saves the sky,
lets the birds live
as they are, carries
the dust to settle,
fetches spring
and sprigs, she can
put her foot in it
then stumble
into your folds.

A pioneer, she's
generous with sugar
peas. The girls
in bright dresses
stand around, letting
her smell their wrists.
Takes mayo on rye,
cucumbers in sidecars,
maté and horseradish

to taste. She feeds
you roar.

Her boat
is smooth, her boxes
arranged by birth,
her unicorn horn
kept with bobbypins
and twice a day
she pets the fish,
shakes her skull
for flies; she fades
her jeans at the knees,
listens to mallards
sneeze. She frees you
with a sip, still you
applaud like chains.

A five-luck clover,
hot ticket, wax q-tipper,
she inspects beetle butts.
She makes herself
easy to love. Says

to me the other day:
It's all disguise; this is
all pi. Then matches
her toenails to zebras.

She reaps
the quantum field,
graces her food
before digging it,
and thanks the workers
for taut sails—
She's got a gadget
for reaching.

THE MILITARY BAND ORGAN AT THE SLATER PARK CAROUSEL

Amish Trivedi

This is my
beautiful crime. I
cannot seem to make
the water in the pot
boil and we've gone
underground for it.
This is the first time
I noted some stray marks
at the edge of the page
become the entire
picture and
can't stand the scene
anymore. We've stopped
depending on the little rotations
that make up these sights:
I saw a stranger who became
a firefly. Promise we're going
to stop speaking in colors now
and concentrate in scans.
The best meat is built in flames
and I'm dying to touch
the hot plate. I've been bombing
about, tagging and untagging my name
from the walls under bridges and over
playgrounds. I skip the beats
I'm afraid of least, my flagellant morsel.
I never understood how my
slight gestures became
the moments of hot contention,
but I see now where I'm repressing. There
were too many furious seconds to speak of
that we never planned to speak
anymore. These words that used to
be everywhere are in the pockets
and dirty rags I've been dreaming of. Every
stroke is suggestive to someone but not
on my fingers anymore. Smacking my
electronic hands, I make
the cymbals dance and the notes

jolt around like skinny snakes
leaping from branch to branch. Please
let me paint in
the dark spaces.

THE LION IN WAIT

Jake Wilhelmsen

and the green posts
and the orange rack crosspieces
and the gray concrete
and then the warehouse
and then the shrink wrap
and then the pallets
and then the boxes
and boxes
and they each hold four rolls of shrink wrap
and they're in white boxes but they're small
and each roll is a foot
and a third wide
and the shrink wrap is thin but the layers of it around the really hard
 cardboard tube
and they're about an inch thick on a new roll
and the tube is three inches across its diameter
and the opening is three inches
and the tube its ring is maybe seventeen inches
and so there's a half inch of the tube sticking out on the inside past the
 edge of the layers of the shrink wrap
and the machine that automatically shrink wraps pallets is on vacations

and it was someone writing in english who doesn't always
and would rather not
and jesus holds the tube one hand on the top and one on the bottom
and he likes to put his thumbs in the holes in the top and the bottom
and not his four fingers on each of his hands in the holes
and holds it vertically
and he's gotta start at the bottom of the stack of boxes
and try to wad up a few feet of the shrink wrap
and try to get the clump to wedge in a chink in the wood of the pallet
and try to get it to stay while he turns the first corner of the boxes
and try to get the friction of the shrink wrap on the cardboard to take
 some of the stress off the wad of plastic stuck in the negative
 space of the corner of the two pieces of wood of the joint of the
 horizontal slats and the lengthwise rib of the pallet
and try to tie a little overhand knot with the plastic around one of the
 slats if that doesn't work

and try to wrap the base of the stack of boxes really well
and the joints
and the battery acid spills
and the floor near the chargers
and the three gray walkies ding dong cadillac
and bali bali
and the two red ones spooner
and the other one

and don't hold the roll of shrink wrap so the corner of the cylinder of
shrink wrap spins against your hand instead of the tube of hard
cardboard spinning against your hand or it will burn your hand
and the people who ship bikes
and the people who ship equipment
and the people who ship bikes talk about the people who ship equipment
in english
and the people who ship equipment speak spanish about the people who
ship bikes so only jesus catches what they say some of the time
and jesus likes to be called zeus
and jesus spells zeus zues
and the battery acid smeared like whitewash under the wheels of the
walkie
and the wheels of the walkie are four inches wide
and the wheels of the walkie have a small diameter
and the wheels of the walkie are four inch white stripes
and the wheels go backward
and left forward
and right
and the wheels make a horrible rattle when you drive over the electrical
outlet holes cut in the concrete on aisle a, c
and e
and the wheels on the forks of the walkie rattle without a load unless you
raise them
and the pallets of bikes spill
and the spilling pallets of bikes spill around corners
and the spilling pallets of bikes will be returned to the warehouse after
they get to their bike shop
and the bikes that get returned will be sold at the blem sale
and the bikes will be sold to employees
and the bikes that don't sell will be crushed in the compacter
and the door to the compacter pulled down broke off the key in the lock
in the track of the door of the compacter
and it happened again

and you get fired if you put frames to be destroyed in a big garbage cart
and cover them with shrink wrap
and pretend to throw them away but put them by the side of the trash
 compactor
and drive your truck around the building after work
and pick them up
and there's a camera
and rob shaved his mustache
and rob built a wall out of plywood
and studs
and fixed it to the metal brackets that are military green but a little more
 teal of the rack around quality control because it looked messy
 there
and now it doesn't
and rob wears crocs
and you wouldn't expect him to
and he wore his crocs
and he had a shopping cart
and maybe nobody knows why
and he whistles like the warning horn of a forklift
and he whistled as he walked behind the empty shopping cart
and he walked slowly
and he had a mustache then
and the red horizontal bar shot by the scanner
and the red bar
and it's side to side
and it reads
and it chirps
and it chirps high low bee boop
and it chirps high low bee boop
and it chirps low boop
and it loads and drops the order
and it loads and drops another
and if you get the wrong bike you have to cut the strap
and if you get the wrong bike it gets an x
and if you get the wrong bike it goes in the mispicks
and if you get the wrong bike you get in trouble
and if you can you put the right bike in its place on the pallet
and it takes some doing
and carlos and mel came over to help but jojo caught them talking
and then jesus caught them talking
and jesus talked to jojo
and jesus said they're going to get in trouble

and carlos and mel are forty
and jesus said i'm not putting up with that shit
and jesus said i tell brenda but she doesn't do anything
and jesus said so i guess i'll have to tell someone that will do something
 i'ma tell krystal or rick or something
and the straps are one half of one inch wide
and twenty five feet long
and yellow
and plastic
and you fold the end over slip the loop through the buckle fold the little
 white bar on the buckle over underneath the loop let the loop
 cinch it tight
and if the loop is through the front it won't cinch so you gotta make
 sure it's not only folded back against the natural curl but stuck
 through the back of the buckle too
and you think how you generally humor people's complaints
and if there's a bike in a box that's wider than normal
and if the pallet is narrower than normal pallets
and you try to get your five bikes in the bottom layer the one right on the
 pallet sometimes the fifth bike will only have a thin strip of pallet
 so it won't balance so you have to hold it while you stick the
 buckle in the handle hole in the box
and run the strap around the boxes and the walkie til you've walked a full
 circuit
and you find yourself back at the buckle
and then you cinch it which takes a few days to learn to do without
 messing up
and if the buckle comes out of the hole or the strap slips out of your
 hand the coil pulls it all the way to the other side of the pallet
and you start over
and that song plays when krystal gets the radio about rain corn whiskey
 and frisky
and jesus practices dancing when he gets the radio

and you slow down around corners
and you get anxious when you don't use the button with the rabbit on it
 because you deep down would like to pull bikes as fast as jesus
and you wear the same clothes most days
and you rotate two pairs of pants
and you wear your filth if you don't do your laundry every weekend
and permanent marker
and your box cutter
and dust imported from china

and taiwan
and nobody likes matt
and the roof is corrugated metal
and a pallet of rolls of cardboard colored butcher paper wrapped in
shrink wrap
and a pallet of boxes of rolls of shrink wrap wrapped in shrink wrap
and temporary workers brenda gets first pick
and jesus says brenda's so fucked up man
and pushing rattling wire rack carts
and mark in quality got marisa in equipment pregnant
and unlocking rolling doors in the wall
and unlocking rolling semi trailer doors behind them
and raising the pneumatic ramp until the bridge swings out
and then letting go of the green button
and it settles over the gap between the dock
and the trailer
and the air in certain sectors smells like electricity
and the air inside the ground trailer smells like garbage
and the air in certain sectors smells like antiperspirant
and the air behind oreste as he cruises on his walkie smells like your
second grade teacher
and the air inside kyrstal's one yard sector is mint
and cigarettes
and mark's married
and sticking mailing labels in the correct place
and you're trying to keep quiet more
and replacing labels
and replacing rolls of printing film
and replacing stacks of paper in tray three
and replacing 9302-3104 FSRXC EXPERT BLK L in 3AD09A01
and replacing 9302-3204 FSRXC EXPERT GOLD FLAKE L in
3BD20A02
and replacing 9285-1056 SIRRUS PRO 56 BLU in 3AB45B01
and replacing 9195-4247 SIRRUS ELITE SIL XS in 3AE08A03
and replacing 9296-4145 VIENNA 4 GUN 45 in 3AB46A02
and replacing the cap on your magic marker
and replacing it in your pocket tip side up so it will last longer
and when rick went home last night the aisles were a mess
and if you empty a box cut it down
and put it on the pallet
and if you cut a strap pick it up
and you guys have got to clean your shit up

and to show you how serious he is your bonuses if you earn them this
year are going to depend on it
and bumping the steel post holding one corner of the table at the
shipping computer with a walkie
and floor cleaner like a small zamboni
and applying
and changing
and changing new ringtones again at lunch
and the bald headed twenty-six-year-old temp who has been there longer
than you who probably has a felony on his record or he'd be
hired full-time who sits with the middle-aged women during
breaks
and krystal rolled the pallet jack over the outside of her foot now purple
bruise
and eight hours for presidents' day but not added to your hours
accumulating toward overtime
and battery acid
and over two hundred pounds means an equipment order is a truck
and less is ground
and rob is the facilities manager
and his upper lip was irritated red after he shaved his mustache
and mary took it over to a place in west valley had a sign forty-nine
ninety-five fixes any computer now she doesn't know what
nationality the guy was but he was saying something completely
different so she said nope i'm going somewhere else
and she had defender x or whatever it is on there
and her friend told her if you let your subscription to those places run
out they go on and mess up your computer
and seams in concrete ten feet by ten feet
and jesus goes out for lunch
and speaks functional spanish
and serial numbers stamped in metal underneath bikes between chain
stay and down tube
and scan in part number
and serial number
and if you pull a box without a serial number sticker you get in trouble
and you have to pull it off the pallet
and take the bike out
and flip it over
and enter the serial number in the gun by hand
and replace the bike
and staple it shut with the giant green stapler that staples giant brass
staples

and you proposed flipping the box and opening the bottom instead of
pulling it all the way out the top
and flipping the bike
and you impressed them
and saved time
and cardboard cuts
and serrated edge cut in cardboard prevents cardboard cuts
and some edges aren't serrated
and you run your hands down them when the box is tipping as you pull it
off the shelf or the stack
and you feel stinging
and a cardboard cut
and dry
and cardboard wicking oil from hands
and lines in knuckles become cracks that bleed
and dry and recrack
and deepen
and clean the walkie with clorox wipes
and fluid deposits wiped dirt into new cracks in lateral side of index
fingers new cracks from wrapping loose end of strap around
fingers to cinch
and trying to figure out a way to cinch faster
and improve bikes pulled per hour ratio
and if clorox gets into cuts hallucinating
and you are a valuable part of rick's team
and del taco for lunch
and pizza hut for dinner
and del taco for dinner
and subway for dinner
and pizza hut lasagna for dinner
and del taco for dinner
and cut straps with box cutter when bike to be pulled is strapped
and strap five bikes on a pallet
and strap bikes on top layer of pallet even if there are fewer than five on
freight and national
and you don't need to strap top layer on ground unless for balance
and jesus is always afraid a lion is going to jump out of the ground trailer
when he opens it he thinks that every time
and load the ground pallets in the trailer one at a time
and on busy days you'll need two trailers
and at least one person from cuba
and mexico
and taylorville

and magna
and salt lake city
and el salvador
and bountiful
and argentina
and west valley
and uruguay
and krystal's like you gotta give her a fuckin part number you know she
 doesn't know bikes she knows boxes
and carlos shows you how to seal equipment boxes for shipping
and battery acid
and krystal's kid saberhagen
and she calls him saber
and a picture pinned to the metal
and cloth walls that form two
and two halves walls of an office in front of door sixty-nine on the dock
 with saber holding a fish with white block letters printed at the
 bottom say sabers catfish but white spot on saber's t shirt fills in
 gap between ends of c in catfish so sabers oatfish
and the cardboard baler
and photograph of shayla says shayla
and mommy forward slash twins forward slash and cornrows
and you won't be allowed to take a month off in the future but oreste can
 because he's already planned it just not in the future the limit will
 be two weeks
and the people in receiving
and the people in warranty
and the people in quality control
and the people in human resources
and the people in reception
and the people in inventory
and the people in fedex uniforms
and the people in equipment
and the people in equipment who scan
and the people in football uniforms
and the people in bikes
and the people in bikes who ship
and they help each other
and you shave six minutes off your commute each way
and you get a dollar each way if you ride your bike or carpool
and you have light patches in the front of your jeans over your keys and
 your cell phone from bike boxes sliding down your legs
and dust

and please check the water level before installing a battery in a lift
and if it is low fill it up
and you are a valuable part of rick's team

FOR MY MOTHER

Patricia Smith

I can't see what you say inside your head.
Behind your eyes, I can't hear what you mean.
And through your throats, I can't touch threads of me.
I can't begin to fathom who you are
now that you're not the you I thought you were.
You speak in single words that struggle from
a voice that isn't yours, and you describe
a past that clearly harbors none of you
and none of me. I can't reach what you've lost
and all of what you've lost is what I need
to hold, to say and say and say again
until that match head glitters just behind
the two of us, just long enough for us
to see a touch, and we won't need our names
or yesterdays, just that—a chance to say
goodbye, goodbye, in words, from throats we know.

STRAIGHTENING THE KINK

Patricia Smith

Johannesburg, 1994

In the nurturing motherland I imagined,
spiced smoke wafts from brass pots,
impossibly-hipped women carry homes
on their heads. I expect blessed snakes
of braid, sculpted knots, dripping dreads.
But shelves in almost every store tout
concoctions that promise to *render hair*
free of curl and kink! And what are we to make
of the skull and crossbones on the boxes?

Giggling thick-breasted teens are safely snapped
into snug Ts touting the lightning-kissed logos
of American soft drink companies, their feet
wailing in fake hoop shoes sporting pumps,
pistons and flashing lights. The indicted mugs
of Cali rappers glare from the front of knockoff
Champion sweats. And every cream everywhere
is the best, the very best, at whitening the skin.

My anxious brown sisters wobble in heels
and rush to burn the hair from their heads
because there'll soon be a new man to woo.
Democracy's sad cousin is flying in from the
States, lounging smugly in first class.
Nothing can keep him from grinning in his sleep.

FORGOTTEN CAPITAL: TOURING BERLIN WITH JOHN YAU AND BILL BARRETTE

Timothy Yu

In the summer of 2006, I spent a week in Berlin with a rather unusual guidebook: *Berlin Diptychon*, a collaboration between the poet John Yau and the photographer Bill Barrette. Barrette and Yau visited Berlin in 1992 and 1993, just a few years after the fall of the Berlin Wall. But what they recorded in *Berlin Diptychon* was not a city alive with the heady energy of reunification. Barrette's stark, black-and-white, sometimes grainy photographs forego Berlin's landmarks in favor of railroad overpasses, travel agencies, pet cemeteries, and adult video stores. Human figures in these photographs are more likely to be wax mannequins or mummies than live people. As for Yau's poems, they depict a cluttered and disorienting landscape of "children's masks," "adult skulls," "dilapidated colors," and "rancid steam machines."

Hardly an appealing prospect for the aspiring Berlin visitor. But having seen Berlin only briefly, once before, and faced with the daunting task of exploring the city on my own, I decided to take Yau and Barrette as my guides. Since most of Barrette's photos were labeled with their locations, I set myself the task of retracing Barrette's steps across the city. Armed with my digital camera, I sought to recreate (in amateur fashion) as many of Barrette's shots as I could. In part, my goal was to see how the cityscape had changed in the decade since the book's publication. International media depicted the "new" Berlin as buzzing with commerce and culture, finally blossoming after years of painful post-unification adjustment. Would Barrette's desolate landscapes now be filled with life? And how would this walking tour illuminate Yau's grotesque, compelling poems?

I started with one of Barrette's easier-to-find locations: Alexanderplatz. In Barrette's photo it looks much as it probably did as the heart of East Berlin: gloomy and desolate, surrounded by blocky architecture, with a few figures scurrying across it after a passing rain shower. Here, my recreation of Barrette's photo showed precisely the kinds of changes one might expect of the new Berlin.



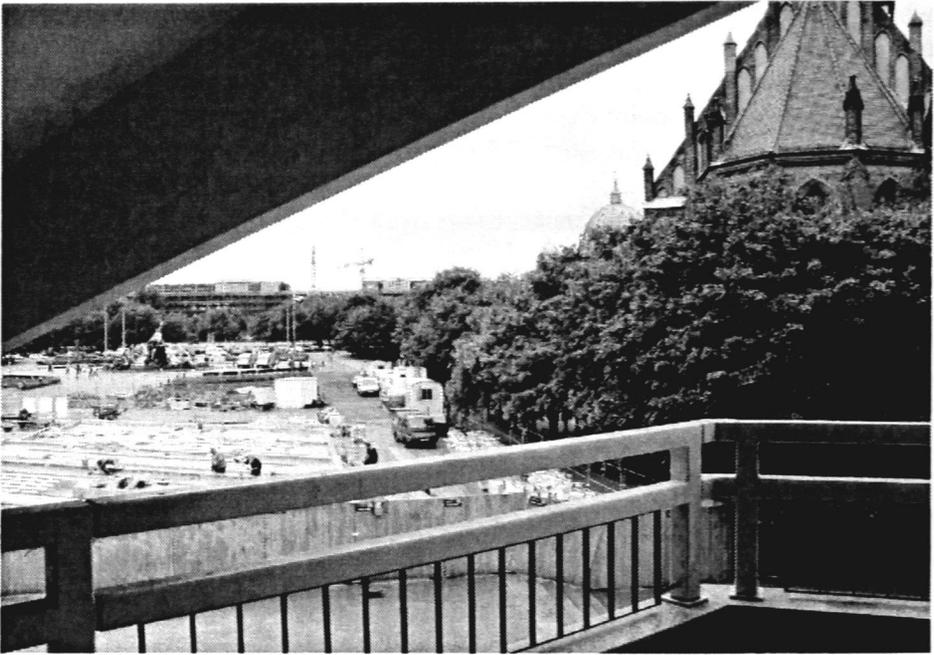
The previously barren square was getting a makeover, sprouting commercial signboards. Barrette's photo was taken while perched on a set of stairs, peering over the railing as if spying apprehensively on the scene. I found that I could no longer reproduce the precise angle of the shot because the location was now behind the glass wall of a mall.

Barrette's other image labeled "Alexanderplatz," which adorns the book's cover, was a bit harder to identify. The top half of the photo is filled by what looks like a sloping, ridged roof, shadowing a nondescript brick plaza and a couple of silhouetted figures. The image seems pointedly featureless, designed to defeat identification. But after wandering around Alexanderplatz for a while, I finally discovered the subject of Barrette's photo: the Fernsehturm, the TV tower that is East Berlin's most prominent landmark. But Barrette's Fernsehturm is not the icon featured on Berlin postcards. Instead, Barrette shot the Fernsehturm from the underside, looking down along one of the curving beams that supports the structure:

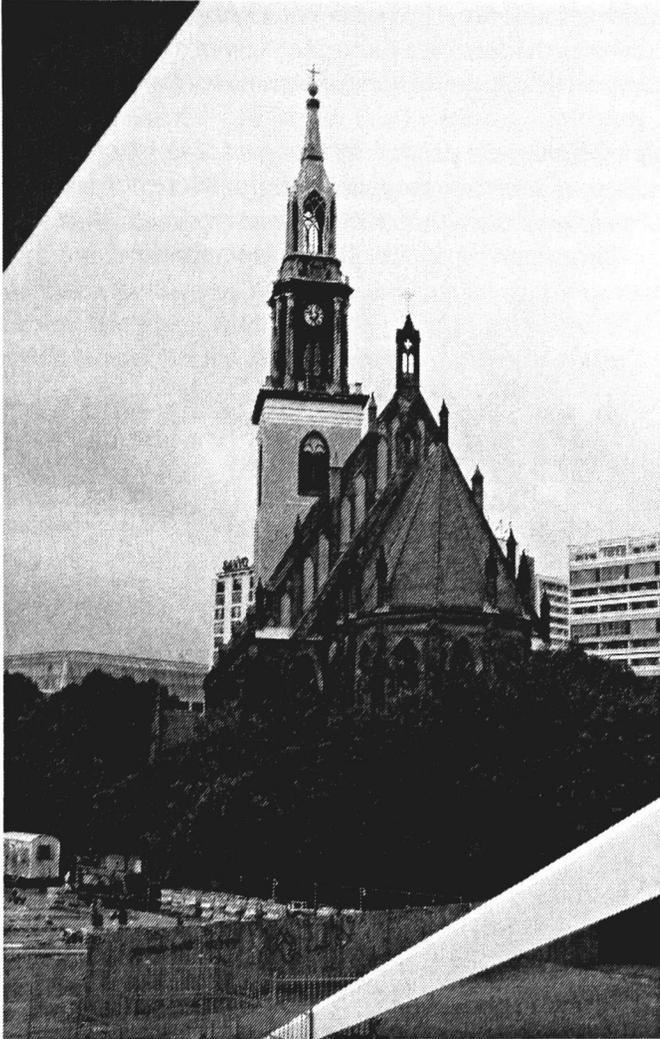


Recreating the shot required a degree of ingenuity that I would soon find to be typical of Barrette's camera angles: I had to find my way to a little-used walkway and lean out over the railing, drawing curious glances from passing tourists who wondered why I was apparently taking a picture of nothing.

As I maneuvered to get my shot, I caught a glimpse of another building that was hidden from my view by the beam:

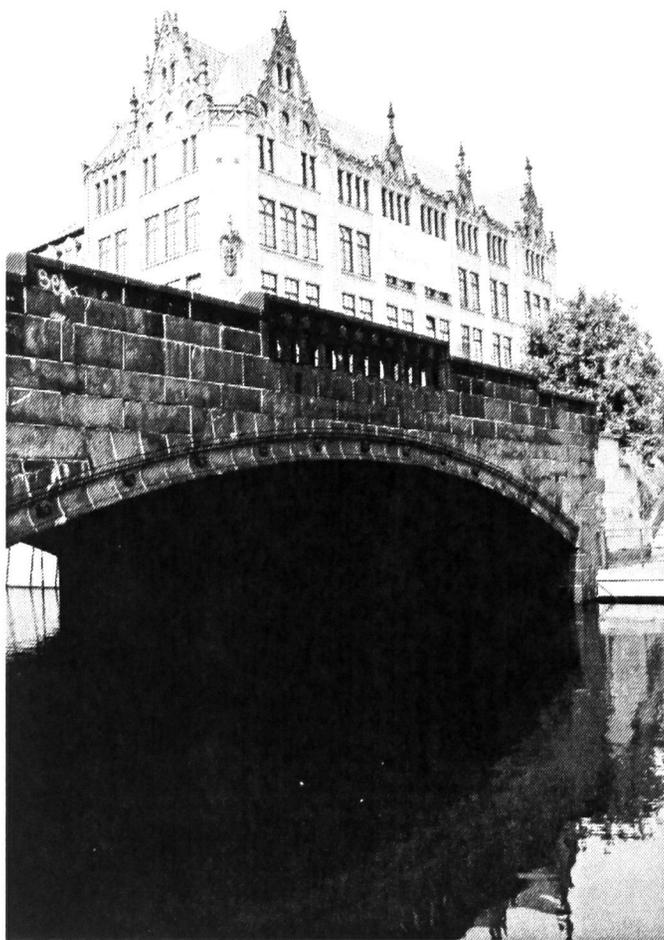


It turned out that directly behind the beam was one of Berlin's oldest churches, the Marienkirche.



I gradually realized that Barrette was quite consciously averting his gaze from Berlin's panoramas and landmarks, but in a way that suggested their invisible presence. He represented the Fernsehturm not through its towering exterior but through its featureless underside. And he rejected the opportunity the TV tower provided for a panoptic view of the city, creating instead an obstructed view that hides historical structures behind a blank wall.

Other images of Barrette's proved no less puzzling or challenging to recreate. His image of Gertraudenbrücke required a shot leaning out from another underused walkway, this one along a riverbank, to capture a photo dominated by the underside of a bridge and its shadow:



Yet in keeping with his aesthetic, Barrette includes not a single picture of the Wall itself. The only explicit reference to the Wall is an image of the former “death strip” between the two sections of the Wall, in which those attempting to escape to the West risked being shot by East German border guards. In Barrette’s photo, no trace of the Wall remains, and the “death strip” is instead filled with trash.

Barrette’s tour of Berlin, then, is a highly organized one, but its structure remains pointedly obscured from view, its landmarks hidden or absent. Far from “wandering along the periphery of the city,” as the back-cover blurb has it, Barrette is moving through Berlin’s very heart; but at the center of this city is the absence created and then left behind by the Wall. The cultural detritus featured in Barrette’s photographs seems to have rushed in to fill the vacuum, much as the death strip has become a dumping ground.

This idea of the artwork as a collection of objects that conceals, or evokes in negative, the deep structure beneath is the bridge from Barrette's photographs to John Yau's poetry. Collaborations between visual artists and poets often feel unsatisfying when the poems appear to be merely a description of or response to the images. Yau's poems succeed by offering a linguistic parallel to the methods underlying Barrette's work. Without describing the Cold War reality of Berlin directly, Yau shows how its persistent structures, its "zones" and "sectors," shape the very language of the city.

Yau's "First Diptych" most explicitly evokes Cold War Berlin, with its allusion to "The sector in which citizens are sequestered." But Yau quickly moves this political division into the linguistic realm; these "citizens" are "waiting for the language they use / to reform its pronouns." Thus the fall of the physical barrier of the Wall is something of an anticlimax, with "the 'us' and 'them' divisions // replaced by dumping grounds / muddy benches where old lists // accumulate a cadmium sheen." This "dumping ground" is precisely what Barrette depicts in his photos of post-Wall Berlin, and Yau echoes this vision by evoking Berlin as linguistic junkyard. One poem simply offers an alphabetized list of what seem to be Berlin businesses that (absurdly) reference foreign locales, from "Flori-Da Bistro Bar" to "Tex-Ass Rumausstalter."

Barrette's interest in obscure museums suggests one approach to the Berlin junkyard: that of the collector sorting through the trash. Yau, too, alludes to the idea of the museum as "a temple large enough // in which to reassemble / and display other temples." But Yau is perhaps even more incisive in his insistence that collection cannot be an exercise in nostalgia or preservation. In one devastating couplet, he reminds us that "Vanished cultures" are nearly always "Cultures made to vanish," whether through human destruction or conscious erasure from the historical record. The seemingly empty spaces of post-Wall Berlin are in fact records of erasure, haunted by history: "Graves dug up / bones removed // names erased." The new money transforming Berlin may be part of this destructive force, flowing as it does from "semiautomatic tellers."

Yau seems unwilling to yield to the conventional logic of the museum, which is "divided into tribes // Submerged by others / Excavated and numbered." This imposed order and reconstruction results in "A city...locked inside a city," a place of stasis "in which you cannot / become someone else." Instead, as he does in much of his other work, Yau proposes to use the linguistic junk of Berlin—these found words—as raw material for a new creation. "After grinding language's edifice // into different layers / of colored powders," he writes, "the painter begins adjusting the light." The metaphor is apt: like Barrette, Yau does not place his faith in objects, but instead relies on angles and arrangements to bring his poems to life. Even the dead can be revived, but only if they consent to become material: "Egyptian mummies make the best undercoating." It's language that trumps the physical, as "Harsh gutturals pierce the cartilage."

I observed earlier that Barrette's photos are often devoid of human life, depicting instead the body as copied (wax figures), represented (wanted posters and snapshots), or preserved (mummies). Yau's poems take the next step by animating these static figures—not returning them to some nostalgic humanity, but infusing them with a new, artificial, and yet visceral life: "Objects extend / their facial creations." The results of Yau's animations may be grotesque at times, creating a gallery of "Stump twiddlers" and "fin legged pedestrians." But they also give rise, remarkably enough, to something that looks like a subjectivity. The voice that emerges, haltingly, from Yau's "postcards" gropes its way towards self-definition by picking up metaphors from Berlin's linguistic junk pile: "I am an optician / who bleeds owls...I sewed shut / heads of my ancestors...I am a fossil insert / a spotted plod." What results is an agonized music of "Songs expelled / from mouths." Yet somehow, Yau suggests, the raw material of life arises as if from compost, "A larva pile / signaling a tower / with the sound / for fire."

What I discovered in following John Yau and Bill Barrette through Berlin, then, was that the forgotten capital they had unearthed would not fade with the dismantling of the Wall, nor would it be superseded by a wave of redevelopment. Both Barrette and Yau avert their gazes from these most obvious symbols of Berlin's progress. As a result, Barrette's photos often seem blank and featureless, but what they are really doing is giving us an obstructed view of Berlin's history. The task then falls to Yau, not of clearing away the obstruction—that way lies the museum—but of seeing what can be made of the stuff that has accumulated in the empty spaces Barrette depicts. The grotesque, yet moving, life that results may be the only way this lost Berlin can still speak, its "runt ganglia / growing through // the walls of / logic's crust."

REVIEWS

THE TASK OF CULTURAL CRITIQUE

Teresa L. Ebert
University of Illinois Press, 2009

Anyone who has read Raymond Williams' *Keywords* (1976) or Alfred Kroeber's and Clyde Kluckhohn's *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions* (1952) is familiar with the myriad definitions of the term "culture." To catalogue and contextualize the historically shifting valences of this heavily-laden term meant also to facilitate a more comprehensive and practical definition of "culture" as object of cultural analysis and critique in the latter half of the 20th century. Contextualizing "culture" moved cultural analysis to dispense with the 19th century notions of civilization and of elite taste that had governed cultural instruction and scholarship for generations. The objective of becoming a "cultured" individual could be replaced in the critic's relationship to the cultural field by the goal of understanding and educating others about the relationship between the production of meaning and the re-production or transformation of the social order.

But this same operation upon the concept of culture occurred against the backdrop of the continued development and expansion of the cultural industries – the mass production-for-profit, diffusion, and consumption of cultural forms and practices in capitalist societies. The experiential re-definition of culture by corporate enterprise has out-stripped cultural critique in more ways than one. Culture, in virtually any sense of the term, has been industrialized to such an extent by global capitalism that the critical notion of a field of meanings and sensibilities organized by a historically-specific political economy – which is to say, the concept of culture upon which cultural studies rested in the wake of the Birmingham School – has largely given way to culture as endless array of consumptive practices and semiotic ephemera.

Consequently, the practice of ideology critique has receded from contemporary cultural criticism, since the "inside" of the cultural subject (the mind, consciousness) has been crowded out of the analytical picture by the hyper-saturated and constantly mutating "surfaces" of the cultural environment (media, texts, networks). Thought has been replaced by sensation, the socio-economic class subject by localized resistant practices, organic solidarity by mechanical affinities, organized political projects by a fluid positioning of identities, social reality by Reality TV. The online Harry Potter Alliance becomes an eminently visible social movement in this cultural landscape, while organized labor and working class solidarities fade out of view.

Teresa Ebert's argument in the *Task of Cultural Critique* is fundamentally this: that contemporary cultural criticism has devolved, under the influence of the poststructuralist canon (she cites every major theorist in this vein from Fredrick Jameson to Jacques Derrida, from Michel Foucault to Judith Butler, and Jean-Francois Lyotard), into a kind of *apologia* for the logic of capital. The concrete and the immediate are celebrated in the critical discourse of cultural theorists, but with the same emphasis on the fragmentary and solipsistic as one expects from commodity culture. As a result, argues Ebert, the prevailing critical discourse serves to disrupt, undermine, and forestall any organized consciousness of social totality, and of the social transformation that such social consciousness makes possible. An historical and social understanding of what culture is and does is thus impossible; the relationship between discrete cultural materials and the contradictions of the capitalist order is rendered occult. Conveniently so for the status quo, Ebert reiterates throughout the book. The capitalist political economy is more readily legitimated in the absence of talk about the unresolved conflict between the interests of capital and the interests of labor.

Her critical appraisal of contemporary cultural criticism draws heavily on the Marxism of the founders, and extends to the classroom as well. There, she observes an "affective pedagogy" at work. Instead of theorizing and evaluating the social body, materiality is mystified and distanced from rational understanding by a metaphysics of individual embodiment and desire. "[D]esire in contemporary critique is the trope-concept by which the materialist world is translated into cultural spiritualism through such terms as *flows*, *lines of flights*, *body without organs*, and *gaze*." (74) Ebert's focus in the classroom is on what she terms "ludic feminism," which is to say a feminism that "has rearticulated politics almost exclusively as a cultural politics of desire and signs." (70) The collapsing of all politics into the politics of representation and signification reveals a social class bias in that it inclines toward market logic, inverting the relation between production (labor) and exchange (capital). She observes that a Foucaultian politics of resignification ("the appropriation of a vocabulary turned against those who had once used it" in Foucault's definition) has displaced materialist critique, thereby impoverishing critical practice and the possibility of a transformative politics.

Ebert herself is not averse to a politics of representation. She makes use of semiotic equivalences in order to construct a frame around her ideological opponents. Derrida and others in the canon of the concrete are recycling market values. "Ludic feminism" sides with capital against labor. Most amusingly, in a chapter on romance novels Ebert's argument weaves together all of these cultural signs in her characterization of romantic fantasies as

“active and activating texts that secure the relations of pleasure and consumption that capitalism deploys to represent the existing world not as the only way things are but as the only way things can be.” (99) In other words, Deleuze and Guattari are romance novelists, at least as far as critique is concerned. The point of her textual maneuvers, however, is always to remind the reader of the outside of the text.

Ebert’s main target is the idealism implicit in much current cultural critique, idealism evident in the governing principle that there is no outside of the text. The stakes are easily recognizable to readers of Marx’s *The German Ideology*, one of the Marxist texts Ebert cites frequently in support of her positions. That is, the difference between what Marx termed “philosophic liberation” (think romance novels) and “real liberation.” The realm of ideas can only mistakenly be ascribed the kind of agency that would allow the individual to think herself free, because, in fact, the material world and its machinations and impositions are always busily conditioning and structuring the real and lived limits of freedom. (Ask any neuroscientist about the primary direction of causation in the relationship between ideation and brain physiognomy. Physical existence is something of a pre-requisite for thinking at all.) Idealism is ideological because the insistence on treating ideas as the principal terrain of the struggle for social liberation has the effect of directing thought away from its material circumstances – and of replicating a social hierarchy based on labor exploitation while celebrating the intellectual products that very exploited labor makes possible.

Idealism is ideological also in that it is a kind of thinking that reflects the taken-for-granted material circumstances of the professional philosopher (and thus, for Marx, of the conservative middle class), but is then projected as universal truth for everyone, regardless of their material circumstances or interests. The ideological grotesquerie of idealism consists in asking those whose lives are dominated and circumscribed by the logic of the economic order to accept the idea of freedom (instead of real, lived freedom) as sufficient improvement of their difficult circumstances. “Freedom is waiting for you at 7-11” as the advertisement would have it. Freedom in this sense is an abstraction of the market: You are “free” to buy what you want, and to sell your labor. (Of course, you can only buy what you can afford, and if you don’t sell your labor you will die.)

The first of these two related arguments – that idealism is an error – is motivated by the materialist sensibilities of Marxism, which originate in the Enlightenment-era materialism of Francis Bacon, de la Mettrie, and later Marx’s contemporary Feuerbach. Ebert persuasively argues that the contemporary poststructuralist tendency continues the Enlightenment *philosophie’s*

use of the concrete – an “appeal to the experiential, the sensuous, and the everyday empirical” (p.9) – as an ideological weapon against abstraction. But, Ebert notes, this materialist lineage has shifted in historical valence from transformative to conservative. Whereas the bourgeois philosopher of the 17th and 18th century wielded the concrete against the *ancien regime*, tearing down the mystifications of the Church and the aristocracy, the theoretical concrete of the latter day cultural critic is wielded in an unrelenting “war on totality” that renders impossible the articulation of a comprehensive critique of social reality. Instead, the superficial materialist affinities of the contemporary cultural critic mask an idealism – textualism, to be precise – that insists on culture as an autonomous realm of freedom, play, and agency.

The second Marxist insight regarding idealism – i.e., that idealism is a form of ideology and therefore linked to social domination – contains the dialectical tendency that aims at redeeming the agency of thought from the function of reflecting and supporting the interests of the dominant class. In other words, in Marx’s critique thought is not simply dismissed categorically as reflex cognitive behavior that mechanically results from physical reality – a cloud of neurotransmitters responding to physical stimuli. Rather, when consciousness occupies itself deliberately with its real historical circumstances – but only then – it can participate in a transformation of those circumstances such that ideals like “freedom” and “the individual” might in fact become lived social truths. It is the transformation of material conditions that ultimately liberates thought. The dialectical role of Marxist critique is to redeem thought, so that thought can matter. Ebert positions herself here in relation to her appraisal of the contemporary philosophical attachment to the concrete: “My critique of the concrete is not a call to abandon it but a call to abandon the conditions that require the illusions that the concrete is used to manufacture.” (8)

Marx aims his critique at ideology, not at culture. But the presence in his work of anthropological terminology like “commodity fetishism” indicates a preoccupation with capitalist modernity as a cultural condition. Ebert operates in similar manner upon the work of late twentieth and early twenty-first century cultural theory and critique. She evaluates them as symbolic practices coincident with the social order in which they reside. Their affinity for surfaces and fragments, details and description, texts and representations, difference and play, finds a practical reflection in the logic of a capitalist social order centered on consumption and atomistic individual experience as opposed to production, utility and solidarity. Her approach in this sense is unapologetically reductive.

Her attempt to overthrow the post-modernization of transformative projects will be understandably well received by many critics who view culture as an important dimension of social change, and social change as an objective discarded and forgotten by much contemporary theorizing. But Ebert's apparent effort to return Marxism's relationship to the cultural field to its 19th century footing is of more questionable value. Is the Marxism of the 19th century founders perfectly adequate to the task of understanding the mechanics and media of the 21st century globalized cultural field as this relates to capitalism, to social reproduction, to gender and class relations? Is there nothing in post-structuralism that marks an analytical advance?

These are not rhetorical questions, beginning and ending with the text; these are practical questions about the relationship between the text and the social order. In light of the radically different character of cultural mediations of social reality some six generations after Marx, one is left thinking whether it is not possible, even necessary, to redeem something of the technical apparatus of post-structuralism – the theoretical concrete – for a real politics of liberation. Ebert's book opens the debate.

Bruce Campbell

CITY: BOLSHEVIK SUPER-POEM IN FIVE CANTOS

Manuel Maples Arce (trans. Brandon Holmquest)
Ugly Duckling Presse, 2009

In 1921, following close on the heels of the decade-long Mexican Revolution, poet, law student, and future diplomat Manuel Maples Arce pasted copies of a broadsheet, *Actual N°1*, across Mexico City. Announcing the tenets of a new literary movement, *estridentismo* (Stridentism), *Actual N°1* championed consciously avant-garde writing and art and sought to extend the political goals of Mexico's revolutionaries into the cultural sphere. Emerging just as the nation embarked on a dazzlingly massive modernization effort, and responding to the rapid growth of Mexico City and other urban centers, Maples Arce and his fellow *estridentistas* sought to present an emotionally-driven response to twentieth-century industry—one which captured the shock of the present moment through formal and linguistic innovation.

Three years later, the movement announced in Maples Arce's initial broadsheet had solidified into a politically aware and aesthetically energetic collective of writers and visual artists, busily producing materials which reflected not only the dizzying rate of change apparent in the daily life of Mexico's capital, but the emerging distance between revolutionary ideologies and post-Revolution sociopolitical reality. Initially published in 1924 as an illustrated chapbook, Maples Arce's *Urbe: Super-poema bolchevique en cinco cantos* captured a critical moment in time in Mexican literary and cultural history, embodying *estridentismo's* intense desire for cultural and technological progress—as well as its fear of such movement's as-yet-unknown consequences.

First translated by John Dos Passos—who titled it *Metropolis*, and had his version privately published in New York in 1929—the initial English-language version of Maples Arce's poem was a rare item to begin with, and it fell into further obscurity almost immediately following its publication. While Rubén Gallo reprinted this translation as an appendix to a 2007 article on Dos Passos, it has not reemerged beyond the academic sphere. A recent resurgence of interest in the *estridentistas* and their works, however, has not only resulted in the production of several innovative pieces of literary scholarship (including books by Gallo and Elissa Rashkin), but has also spurred publishers and curators to once again make these works available to a global audience. A comprehensive retrospective of the work of photographer Tina Modotti, a Maples Arce contemporary, went on view in Vienna in July 2010—and *Urbe* itself has recently been reintroduced to an English-language audience. Reprinted in a bilingual edition as part of

Ugly Duckling Presse's "Lost Literature" series, and featuring a fresh and witty new translation from Brandon Holmquest, this latest production of *Urbe*—titled *City: Bolshevik Super-Poem in Five Cantos*—seeks to reinvigorate Maples Arce's poem, bringing the passion and shock of *estridentismo* to twenty-first century readers.

As a conscious attempt to produce an *ur*-text for a modernizing Mexico, Maples Arce's "super-poema" is a poem of extremes, a poem which openly attempts to extend the limits of literary form—even as poem's subject matter remains decidedly quotidian. Dedicated to "the workers of Mexico," the five cantos of the poem follow city life over the course of a single emblematic day, from early in the morning to late at night. The first canto of *City*, the lengthiest of the five, not only describes a post-revolutionary reality, but declaims, in dramatic manifesto style, the nature of Maples Arce's project. As the poet walks the streets of the city in the early morning—wandering from left to right and back again across and down the page—he observes with joy the emerging power of the "many-minded" (*multánime*) cosmopolis, fueled from below by workers of industry and growing above into a panoramic landscape which rejects the remnants of a fin-de-siècle bourgeoisie culture in favor of a more current collectivist vision. In the clear light of the early hours of the day, the working class of the new city seems a source of romance and delight, many voices coalescing into a singularly attractive proletarian muse. Repeatedly announcing, "here is my poem" (*he aquí mi poema*), and then rhapsodically listing the industrial artifacts which now define the cityscape, it isn't until the very end of the opening canto that the poet begins to articulate the hope that, should something happen to undermine the fire of the now-energized proletariat, his encomium to urbanity might outlast the physical reality of the present moment.

The second and third cantos, which shift away from the wide-eyed optimism of the new morning towards the more nuanced perspective of midday, are a series of instances of tension and suspension. Despite the desire to hold on to the hope of *City*'s opening lines, anxieties about social decay and political manipulation begin to emerge. Moving from the outward exploration of those initial stanzas into an inward exploration of the role of the artist in the new landscape, the second canto of the poem fleshes out the image of city-as-muse, exploring how that narrative strategy shapes the poetic mind. While the poet reasserts the need to stay in the imagery and language of the now, the fiery energy of the first half of the day begins to fizzle by the conclusion of the second canto, which bears witness to a "dead scene" (*panorama muerto*), an industrial landscape bereft of human intervention. The third canto takes up this image as something of a call to arms, bemoaning the loss of the proletariat's "marvelous youth" (*juventud*

maravillosa) and warning of its susceptibility to disingenuous politics. As the city ages, becomes better known to its inhabitants and a more established physical space, it also becomes more vulnerable to those who would spout ideology without working towards practical change.

The last two cantos of the poem, which take place as the sun sets over the city and night falls, present a bleak picture of the possible results of sociopolitical stagnancy before reasserting the poet's faith in the working people to whom the poem is dedicated. Bodies of water dominating the fourth canto initially fail to flow, reflecting only death and disillusionment in their murky stillness. And as the sky darkens, every aspect of the city seems destructive—even the trees are “rabble-rousing” agents of potential violence (*los árboles agitadores*), as are the frustrated masses themselves. The poet fears that a few fragments are all that will be left of his city/muse, but the final canto diagnoses and treats the underlying structural weaknesses that have generated the people's desperation, determining that aggressive, mechanized silence could destroy the new city. The hum of industry must be complemented by human voices and experiences if the urban landscape is to prosper. The final stanza of *City* heralds the dawn of the next day, seeing a hopeful return of progressive energy in the return of the sun. Defined throughout by both natural light and manufactured power, Maples Arce's poem charts the establishment, doubt, and reentrenchment of socialist ideals—even as such a cycle emerges in post-revolutionary Mexican politics and culture.

Reading *City* was always intended to be both an aural and visual experience. And Ugly Duckling has paid careful attention to replicating the feel of the initial chapbook, utilizing a similar color palette, printing Maples Arce's name on the cover in the same quasi-pictographic “v”-formation, and including one of the Jean Charlot woodcut prints which appeared in the original 1924 edition. Given an explicit textual acknowledgement of the importance of the visual—the lush imagery of both Whitman's verse and Turner's landscape paintings are mentioned as poetic influences early in the body of the poem itself—the careful printing properly resituates *City* as a multi-sensory encounter with the new.

Furthermore, Brendan Holmquest's translation is a significant improvement—as well as a decided departure—from the Dos Passos translation. The latter suffers from a literalism that limits the intensity of the poem, muddling the imagery of key stanzas and diminishing the aural shock that the text delivered in its original language. The former, however, generated with an eye towards “considerations of voice and tone” rather than complete “textual accuracy,” largely succeeds in its goal to present a sensory-driven English-language Maples Arce. Working via a William Carlos Williams-

inspired poetics. Holmquest's undoubtedly sincere desire to make "Maples visible/audible to English-language readers" is largely achieved through adherence to this holistic translation model. The poet has far more agency in Holmquest's translation, often presenting opinions where the Dos Passos version retreats into general statements. And while Dos Passos partially obscures the idea of city-as-muse—occasionally removing gendered individual pronouns in favor of a "they," and thus conflating landscape and proletariat—Holmquest's translation uses female pronouns in a restoration of the muse imagery, preserving the distinction Maples Arce chose to make between the lure of the physical city and the power of the social situation occurring within its confines. Finally, the new translation restores a bit of the saltiness that was missing in the earlier English version, translating the poet's insult towards a rival group of writers with the full force of its original sexual imagery.

If there is a weakness to this translation, it is that despite its commitment to vivid imagery and emotion, it does not fully capture some of the panoramic aspects of the original *Urbe*. While Holmquest has avoided many of Dos Passos' more obvious errors (the poem, for example, is no longer rendered entirely in italics, as if it were abstractly detached from the urban landscape Maples Arce has gone to such pains to make real), in his effort to maintain a comparable level of aural roughness and shock he occasionally obscures the multiplicity of meanings present in Maples Arce's vocabulary. The final lines of the poem, for example, contain a Spanish verb meant to conjure both a fluttering flag and a burst of flame or bright light; while Dos Passos translates this as "...the new / flag / that flares / over the city," thus capturing the renewal of energy that emerges with the return of the sun, Holmquest's translation is more prosaic, reading "...the new flag / that flies / over the city." In addition, where Maples Arce uses "el panorama," Holmquest repeatedly writes, "the scene," a version that perhaps has more energy but omits the broad perspective the poet is seeking in the original Spanish. Given the sensitivity to image that Holmquest has deployed throughout his translation, the choice to employ such pedestrian language in these instances generates a contrast that distracts from the experience of the poem.

It may well be, however, that the avant-garde nature of the original *Urbe* consciously resists unified translation. Maples Arce's literary career begins with the intentionally provocative genre of the manifesto, and that sharp resistance to the status quo certainly informs the imagery of *Urbe*, purposefully making it a poem which remains insubordinate, no matter the language. Holmquest's style certainly better captures the passion behind *estridentismo*, and in so doing better positions Maples Arce's poem as one of the core texts of that movement in the eyes of an English-language audience. But texts

such as *Urbe*, with an absolute commitment to the ramifications of the present (and concomitant use of neologisms, doubled imagery, and idiomatic expressions) perhaps cannot retain their “edgy” nature in translation unless some particulars are lost. As a result, however, such translations too-often remain “edgy”—that is to say, ephemeral—and are too easily put aside. Holmquest’s valiant effort to “find” a piece of “lost” literature comes as close as anyone can to overcoming this central paradox. But with a limited print run of 450 copies, the new *City* has the potential to become, in some respects at least, another all-too-brief moment of visibility for a literary movement otherwise lost to English-language readers. The hope is that this thoughtful and sensitive translation of one of the critical pieces of *estridentismo* will therefore spur further brave efforts to better disseminate the complete works of the early twentieth century Mexican avant-garde.

Lindsey M. Freer

THERE'S ALWAYS WORK AT THE POST OFFICE: AFRICAN AMERICAN POSTAL WORKERS AND THE FIGHT FOR JOBS, JUSTICE, AND EQUALITY

Philip F. Rubio
University of North Carolina Press, 2010

The “American” (more accurately, “United Statesian”) version of capitalism has been unique in the world. Its evolution has rested on a complex intersection of race and class which has provoked heated debates among scholar/activists. Was slavery feudal or capitalist? Did the slaves’ struggles for emancipation inscribe a position within capitalism or beyond it? Did Reconstruction offer workers, white as well as black, an opportunity to challenge the very foundations of U.S. capitalism? Were black workers central to – or marginal to – the burst of U.S. industrialization in the 20th century? In the late 20th century, as the U.S. economy shifted from Fordism to neoliberalism, did African American workers become superfluous to further rounds of accumulation? Have African American workers’ relationships with other black workers within and across the Atlantic and Caribbean diaspora given them the opportunity to see – and act – beyond U.S. nationalism? These huge questions have been engaged – but not resolved – by brilliant, dedicated scholar/activists.¹

Some labor historians/activists have constructed fruitful perspectives from which to explore these sweeping questions through research on African American workers, particularly on their location at the crossroads of race and class. The rhythms of black working-class activism, its structures, scope, and dynamics, have all provided clues to the intersections of race and class. Students of slave resistance have found that while artisans, house servants, and field hands all shared a common condition of servitude, their specific modes of resistance were often quite distinct. In my research on the evolution of the Richmond, Virginia, working-class during Reconstruction, I found that white workers’ activism ebbed and flowed with economic cycles, but black workers’ activism in the workplace surged when civil rights activism peaked and receded when white supremacy tightened its grasp over political and social life. In his close investigations of African American workers in Norfolk, Virginia, in the first half of the 20th century, Earl Lewis found their activism moving back and forth from aggressive assertiveness of rights to a community-focussed development of the “home sphere.” Other labor historians, examining African American working-class life in the urban North as well as the South have reached similar findings.²

While the internal and intersectional workings of both race and class have changed over the past two hundred-plus years, they have always provided the structure and context for African American workers' experiences, organizations, and struggles. (They have likewise for white workers, but this review is not the place to explore this set of experiences.) The nature and dynamics of black labor organization have been shaped by the jobs that have been available to black workers, the access African Americans have to housing, education, and public resources, the political voice and civil rights they command, and the extent to which white workers have been open to collaborative organizing. Of great importance has been the larger context of African American political, social, and economic organization; the social spaces created by black institutions such as churches and fraternal orders; and the support provided by African American professionals, newspapers, and political leaders. While African American labor organization has changed from historical era to historical era, it has always had to grapple with the challenges posed by the deep intersections of race and class.³

Phil Rubio has made a major contribution to these discussions with his first book, *There's Always Work at the Post Office*. Given the importance of the Post Office to the employment prospects and experiences of African American workers, it is hard to believe that this is the first scholarly monograph devoted to this subject. But it is. And Phil Rubio seems particularly suited to the task. Before beginning the graduate studies that would lead to this project, Rubio worked twenty years in the Post Office, mostly as a letter carrier, first in Colorado and later in Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina, a center for the Black Workers for Justice, which has had a presence among postal workers. Although Rubio is not African American himself, he has been an activist for racial justice in the Post Office, postal workers' unions, and the community at large. He has also listened to his African American fellow workers and their predecessors in the Post Office. While *There's Always Work at the Post Office* rests on the extensive and careful archival work that earned Rubio a Ph.D. at Duke University, it also incorporates the stories and voices of black workers that an activist history must include.

Twenty years ago I began a talk to an African American community group in Saint Paul, Minnesota, by telling the story of a 1922 Rocky Mountains train crash in which the remains of a black porter had been identified by his Dartmouth College Phi Beta Kappa key. An older gentleman in the audience raised his hand and informed me that, when he worked in the Minneapolis Post Office in the post-WWII years, local African Americans called it "The University." "Why?" I asked. "Well," he replied, "I was one of the six black Ph.D.'s working there." That was when I began to realize how significant – and fascinating – a space the Post Office had provided

for African Americans.

There's Always Work at the Post Office demonstrates not only how significant and fascinating a black space the Post Office provided for African American workers, but how much those workers made of it. Rubio documents that African American struggles for citizenship in the 19th century, in the North during the ante-bellum era and in the South during Reconstruction and Jim Crow, included not only the right to vote, the right to serve on juries, but also the right to work for the Post Office. As some African Americans gained a foothold there, they sought to create more opportunities for their fellow community members. They fought not only to get hired into the Post Office, but also to be treated equally on the job, including opportunities to climb the Post Office's internal hierarchy. While they built their own organizations to support their efforts, they also challenged Jim Crow in the emerging postal unions. And they used their unions to support community-based campaigns for equality and justice. Jobs in the Post Office were not an end in themselves; black postal workers made them a foundation for further struggles to challenge the ways the dominant society continued to use race and class as resources to maintain existing structures of inequality. Economically, politically, and socially, African American postal workers participated in struggles to change U.S. society.

The late 19th and early 20th centuries were difficult for African Americans. Jim Crow solidified in the South and spread to the North and the U.S. Supreme Court made it acceptable nationally in the *Plessy vs. Ferguson* decision. Lynchings grew as political expressions, and the Ku Klux Klan not only revived but found a base in the North. Black disenfranchisement swept from one southern state to another. Cultural symbols marginalized African Americans, from the celebration of a "Memorial Day" holiday that united white southern and northern veterans while erasing the history of slavery and the roles played by black troops, to the circulation of "Birth of a Nation," the film that propagated humiliating images of African Americans and heroic images of the KKK. President Woodrow Wilson, who, while president of Princeton University, had banned a young Paul Robeson from admission, took his cabinet across an NAACP picket line to see the film, which he praised as "writing history with lightning." He also encouraged the downgrading and lay-off of African American postal employees. One scholar/ activist, Rayford Logan, referred to this period as the "nadir," the low point, of the black experience in the U.S.⁴

Yet, African Americans were hardly passive. In this period the great black migration to the North began, and both the W.E.B. DuBois-led NAACP (1909) and Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association

(1914) were established. In 1913, African American postal workers organized the National Alliance of Postal Employees. Its first concerns were the growing national pressures to exclude African Americans from the Railway Mail Service and the unwillingness of the union known as the Railway Mail Association to welcome black workers. The “National Alliance,” as it was first known, had a highly educated leadership, including law school graduates, and it adopted the kinds of ritual practices already popular among the more educated African Americans who had joined the Prince Hall Masons. But it also practiced an impressive inclusiveness. It announced from its outset that its ranks were open to white as well as black postal workers. In 1922 it initiated its first women members, and in 1923 it began to organize black postal workers outside of the Railway Mail Service.

The National Alliance continued to be an unusual organization, which, I would argue, reflected the impact of the intersection of race and class in the experience of African American postal workers. From its origins, particularly within specific communities, the National Alliance demonstrated its commitment to fighting not just for black postal workers’ rights, but for civil rights more generally. While the Washington, D.C., and New York City locals would be the most visible over the next two decades, the National Alliance would organize locals in cities across the North and the South, becoming one of the few black organizations with a national network. This made it, along with the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, a major source of sharing and disseminating ideas within black communities, playing the kind of role that few, if any, unions with predominantly white memberships ever played. The National Alliance also differed from its postal union counterparts in important ways. These unions were craft-based, while the National Alliance was “industrial,” or, perhaps, “general” in its structure. While these other unions sought collective bargaining status to negotiate wages and benefits, the National Alliance never ventured into this territory. It did pressure postal management to promote African American workers into local postmaster and other managerial positions, and it challenged as discriminatory the tests and uses of photographs which were being employed to control workers’ movement through the postal hierarchy. The Alliance allowed its members who had achieved promotion into management to remain members, a practice which was decried by the other unions. In all these ways, then, the National Alliance expressed the experiences of African American postal workers, experiences shaped by the intersection of the forces of race and class, rather than adhering to the conventional models of U.S. trade unionism.

African American postal workers, especially in the South, used the National Alliance to promote the cause of civil rights. Union conventions passed resolutions opposing Jim Crow in the military, supported anti-lynching legislation, praised black-owned insurance companies for providing employment and capital for the black community, and thanked postmasters in general for honoring seniority and merit in promotions and assignments. The Alliance also lobbied for civil rights legislation, especially in the area of fair employment. In some Southern cities, the Alliance local was a significant partner in the civil rights movement, and in some Northern cities, it circulated information about the movement and helped raise funds to support campaigns and projects. Rubio contends that the National Alliance deserves to be seen as a practitioner of “civil rights unionism,” and he provides considerable historical evidence to support this idea.⁵

Although the National Alliance was central to the efforts of African American postal workers to improve their lives, it was not the only union vehicle they employed. Many chose also to join the craft unions for their particular trade, such as the National Federation of Postal Clerks or the National Association of Letter Carriers. The workers knew that these unions, even before they had achieved formal collective bargaining status, played key roles in negotiating the wages, benefits, work rules, and working conditions of postal employees on the job. Interestingly, Rubio shows, even as African American workers joined these unions, they were skeptical that the existing union organizations, structures, and practices would serve their interests. They were primarily concerned with the persistence of Jim Crow locals, especially in the South. Beginning in the 1940s, African American members of such unions sought to end the Jim Crow practices and consolidate locals where all members would be equal. They agitated at the local level, but they also brought their concerns to national conventions, where they sought white allies. They found a critical mass of such allies from two sources – white progressives and leftists, who objected to Jim Crow on principle, and northern big city local members, who found that the unions’ national representational structures privileged small locals. African American activists helped raise the broader issue of “democracy,” particularly the lack of it in the unions’ national structures, whether it was the systematic under-representation of big city locals or the second class status of black locals. By the late 1950s and early 1960s, this call for “democracy” led to major upheavals within the national organizations and the northern big city locals, bringing about new union organizations, constitutions, and practices, which integrated African American members in ways that they had never before experienced. Black postal workers successfully fought Jim Crow on the job, in the postal unions, and throughout U.S. society.

Rubio also argues, again with considerable evidence, that these experiences prepared African American postal workers to play leading roles in the great wildcat strike of 1970, the strike which transformed the postal service, labor relations, and the very lives of postal workers. From its origins in New York City to its spread to other metropolitan areas and even some smaller communities, the postal strike depended on communications among workers who belonged to several craft locals (clerks, letter carriers, motor vehicle, mailhandlers, etc.). No workers had more experience in such cross-craft communications – and solidarity – than African Americans, largely because of the history of the National Alliance. They were also strategically located in the major metropolitan locals, New York and Washington, D.C., to be sure, but also Chicago, Detroit, and other key cities. African American workers also had more experience organizing, demonstrating, challenging the law (the wildcat strike was illegal, after all), and standing up for what they thought was right. They had also had a range of experiences, in the civil rights movement, in the postal craft unions, and the like, where they had taken stands which had proven effective. In short, they had experienced empowerment and a strong sense that they could indeed, through organization, solidarity, and action, improve their lives. This was just the sort of ingredient that postal workers and their unions needed in 1970 to transform their widespread frustration and sense of injustice into taking action.

Even though the period since the strike would see African Americans play leadership roles in postal unions beyond the norms of most other unions, Rubio is quite hesitant about declaring success and announcing “game over.” He details the ways that collective bargaining, bureaucratic structures, and government power have combined to limit the power exercised by black, white, Latino, and Asian-American postal workers. Despite the dynamic history we learn in *There’s Always Work at the Post Office*, today we find postal unions divided among themselves, a postal management which seeks to reduce its workforce through automation and contracting out, and communities which value unionized work and postal services far too little.

Learning this history, it seems to me, is a critical first step in re-engaging the challenges posed by the ways that race and class have been interwoven in the development of U.S. capitalism. African American workers are unemployed at far higher rates than whites, African American families are losing their homes at faster rates, and African Americans are disproportionately filling U.S. prisons. As white workers face increased economic insecurity, driven by neoliberalism on the one hand and the Great Recession on the other, they are being encouraged by the media

and politicians to scapegoat “Illegal” immigrants and distance themselves from “criminal” African Americans. The intersections of race and class continue to shape the experiences of U.S. workers and circumscribe their responses to the challenges they face. We would do well to study the lives and struggles of African American postal workers and try to learn from their experiences. Perhaps precisely because there is no longer a guarantee, for any of us, that there will be work at the Post Office, *There’s Always Work at the Post Office* is an important place for us to begin our studies.

(Footnotes)

¹ Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); W.E.B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America* (NY: Free Press, 1998); Eugene Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery* (Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan University Press, 1988); C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins* (NY: Vintage, 1989); Hal Baron, *The Demand for Black Labor* (Boston: New England Free Press, 1971); George Padmore, *Pan-Africanism or Communism?* (NY: Doubleday, 1971); Sidney Wilhelm, *Who Needs the Negro?* (NY: Schenkman, 1970); Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black is a Country* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).

² Gerald Mullin, *Flight and Rebellion: Slave Resistance in 18th Century Virginia* (NY: Oxford, 1974); Douglas Egerton, *Gabriel’s Rebellion: The Virginia Slave Conspiracies of 1800 and 1802* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993); Peter Rachleff, *Black Labor in Richmond, Virginia, 1865-1890* (Champaign/Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989); Earl Lewis, *In Their Own Interests* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Michael Honey, *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights* (Champaign/Urbana: University of Illinois Press,); Joe W. Trotter, Jr., *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat* (Champaign/Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006); August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007); Ruth Needleman, *Black Freedom Fighters in Steel* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003).

³ The best framework for analyzing how race and class have changed over time within U.S. capitalism is provided by Michael Omi and Howard Winant, in their *Racial Formation in United States History* (NY: Routledge, 1994). The scholar-par-excellence for understanding the experiences of white workers is David Roediger. See, for instance, his *The Wages of Whiteness* (NY: Verso, 2007) and *Working Towards Whiteness* (NY: Basic Books, 2006). On the organizational foundation for activism, see Harry Boyte and Sara Evans, *Free Spaces: The Social Bases for Democracy in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

⁴ Rayford Logan, *The Betrayal of the Negro: From Reconstruction to Woodrow Wilson* (NY: Collier Books, 1954).

⁵ The notion of “civil rights unionism” was best articulated by Robert Korstad in his *Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003)

Peter Rachleff

THE HEALING OF AMERICA: A GLOBAL QUEST FOR BETTER, CHEAPER, AND FAIRER HEALTH CARE

T.R. Reid
Penguin Press, 2009

and

TOWARD THE HEALTHY CITY: PEOPLE, PLACES, AND THE POLITICS OF URBAN PLANNING

Jason Corburn
MIT Press, 2009

Approximately 47 million Americans live without health insurance, and many more are underinsured—living with some health insurance, but not enough to cover most basic expenses and more serious medical bills. Indeed, around 60% of personal bankruptcies in the US are at least in part associated with unpaid medical bills.¹ Obama's reform should help an estimated 32 million Americans become insured. Nevertheless, the reform is akin to a new, big patch in a larger patchwork quilt healthcare system that, in essence, remains unchanged.

The US spends twice as much on healthcare as the next most expensive country, Switzerland, but we rank 38th in life expectancy (despite a per capita income of \$46,716). It is perhaps not surprising that Sweden and Japan are ahead of us, but Chile (ranked 35th, per capita income \$14,465)? Every once in a while, a student of mine just cannot believe the United Nations and World Bank statistics. Maybe I'd made them up?

Disclaimer: I believe in healthcare reform, but I am not sure of the exact form our new system should take. Besides, healthcare *is* complicated. My public health colleagues often joke, *How many of us does it take to pick out an insurance plan?*

How could the US be paying so much for so little? And how could other industrialized nations be paying less for more (especially in terms of universal coverage, which we Americans are the only ones without)? Something has got to give. We're familiar with the standard responses: Those people must have long waiting times for basic services. They have no choice in healthcare. Their treatment must not just be sub par, but awful. And my friend's brother-in-law, a doctor, told me that he would leave the US if we adopt

socialized medicine! (I wonder: Where would this doctor go?)

The supposed paradox, this apparent impossibility, of getting more for less drives the duality in popular American sentiments towards healthcare reform—a deep desire for change, alongside fear of change, especially among those in the precariously insured, if-it-ain't-broke-for-me-right-at-this-moment-then-don't-you-freaking-dare-fix-it category.

Kuro-kuro-kuro-kuro!

Veteran *Washington Post* foreign correspondent T.R. Reid traveled to ten countries in attempts to treat his chronic shoulder pain, the result of an injury in the Navy years before. In *The Healing of America*, he focuses on five countries that, like the US, have industrialized, market economies—Canada, France, Great Britain, Germany, and Japan.

Although analyzing entire healthcare systems via the lens of a patient with shoulder pain is a bit gimmicky, the focus ensures that Reid engages readers in a systematic analysis, rather than a hodgepodge of convenient anecdotes. Along the way, we learn that indeed, the UK government will not cover his shoulder arthroplasty, which would have cost him \$40,000 in the US. (He was free to go buy private coverage if he wanted to, and negotiate the price with the insurance company.) His doctor in France thought that Reid's shoulder pain was occasional enough, and his injury different enough, that he would not be a good candidate for shoulder arthroplasty. The doctor then admitted that since Reid could go to another orthopedist in France, he could eventually find one to agree to the arthroplasty for him. If he did that, the surgery and 5-day hospital stay would cost around 5,000 euros, or \$7,000, but his sickness funds would pay for them. In Japan, Reid's prestigious doctor offered him a wide assortment of treatments to choose from, from injections to acupuncture to surgery. The price control system ensured that the total shoulder arthroplasty, also including five nights at a hospital, would cost \$10,000. Scheduling it for “[t]omorrow might be a little difficult,” he was told. But the “next week would probably work.”

In the US, Reid's treatment was primarily based on his insurance status and ability to pay. In the other countries he visited, his choice of treatments was primarily based on need, and choices were more likely to be affordable. Some came with waiting times, but it turns out that when everyone has healthcare, one is more likely to plan ahead for surgeries. Someone whose shoulder is beginning to wear out, then, will probably be placed on a waiting list long before the surgery is actually needed.

The most striking aspects of healthcare in the rest of the industrialized world lie in (1) their emphasis on preventative care, (2) their streamlined administration, and (3) their emphasis on doctors as civil servants. First, in many countries, doctors get bonuses for patient satisfaction, payments for patients even if they don't get sick (thus placing value on the patient's wellness rather than sickness and overuse of care), and for preventative measures like flu vaccines. Second, with universal systems, there are no columns or piles of paper charts, no repeated lab tests, no inaccessible records, no coterie of receptionists and staff members asking about the patients' latest insurance plans, haggling with insurers, or checking formularies in the offices. Meanwhile, *excluding* insurance industry personnel, administration accounts for 31% of American healthcare costs.² Third, doctors do make quite a bit less than they do in the US, but they seem to still be able to afford Audis and golf holidays. This is partly because medical training is free or nearly free, and malpractice insurance fees are negligible. Practicing medicine has just as much prestige as in the US.

This is not to say that universal healthcare inherently leads to "socialized" healthcare. On one end of the spectrum, doctors in the UK's National Health Service are tax-financed. Toward the middle (Canada, South Korea, and Taiwan), patients use government-run insurance to attend private doctors and hospitals. On the other end of the spectrum (in Japan, Switzerland, and several other European nations), private insurers use payroll deductions to finance private healthcare providers. These private insurers are regulated so that they don't arbitrarily drop patients from their rolls, but, despite the problems with medical markets, there is some competition. Japanese doctors are entrepreneurial enough to blanket Tokyo public transit with posters advertising cures to sweaty palms and balding hair. (Shout-out to New Yorkers: Dr. Zizmor would fit right in.) In a popular TV commercial, "comely" nurses in short white uniforms chime a clinic's phone number 09-696-9696, pronounced "kuro-kuro-kuro-kuro." ("Kuro" is also Japanese for "thick black hair.") In all of these healthcare systems, even socialized ones like the UK's or Norway's, patients with financial means are free to buy supplemental or private health insurance, so that they can always get private hospital rooms, for instance. It's just that relatively few folks opt to do so. Further, no one is relegated to the emergency room as a gateway to care.

In touring other industrialized healthcare systems, readers also experience glimmers of recognition, noting some similarities to our own. In corporatist welfare states such as Germany and Japan, patients choose between plans based on the occupation and union, and the government pays for the unemployed. Further, around 80 million Americans are already covered by "socialized" systems like Veterans' Affairs, Medicare (despite protests to

“keep government hands off Medicare”), Medicaid, and the Department of Indian Affairs. Indeed, these programs regularly score higher patient satisfaction marks than “regular” health insurance.

The book is sometimes quite funny, and although it never talks down to the reader, it also avoids high-falutin’ language. It is strongest at bringing to life the patient’s (and not a technocrat’s) point-of-view. Alongside Reid, we observe what each doctor’s office feels like, and we note waiting times and whether receptionists, nurses, and doctors treat Reid reverentially or brusquely. Indeed, the book is charming because it does not read like a polemic, and we see how other healthcare systems, while performing better than ours, are struggling with rising costs as well. This helps readers to get beyond abstract myths, to overcome a lack of imagination about what other healthcare systems really look like, and to begin to glean potential lessons for ours.

A bike path a day keeps the doctor away

Health insurance status highlights many of the disparities in the US today, especially between those who have some sense of security in life, and those who are an accident away from bankruptcy or foreclosure. It does not, however, help to adequately account for the massive health disparities according to race, income, and region in the US. For example, the gap between the life expectancy of African-American males in high-risk urban areas and Asian-American females was 20.7 years in 2001. Asian-American women in the northeast live to an average of 91 years, while Native American men in the Dakotas live to an average of 58 years—a 33-year gap in life expectancy. These differences largely persist after holding constant health insurance status and excluding HIV and homicide. Further, the 10 leading risk factors (smoking, obesity, high blood pressure, illicit drug use, unsafe sex, etc.) cumulatively only account for 30% of disease among men.³ What else is going on?

Jason Corburn’s *Toward the Healthy City* goes far toward explaining the ways in which public transit, housing, economic development legislation, zoning, and even policy fields outside the typical purview of “traditional” city planning—education, childcare, segregation, and employment—help to determine how, and how long, residents live. Together, these areas of public policy constitute non-medical determinants of health that shape the root causes of a person’s everyday behavior, level of stress, social networks and coping mechanisms, and access to resources. Corburn makes a cogent, urgent case for city planning as health policy. He presents a clear synthesis of the academic literature on the fundamental causes of American health

disparities, and how policies such as Bloomberg's in New York City, often aimed at doctors to help their individual patients quit smoking or stop engaging in risky behaviors, are well-meaning but comparatively unhelpful. At worst, such policies fetishize doctors and individual patients, perpetuating a system where doctors bandage or chastise patients, only to send them back out into the environments that helped to foster many of their ailments in the first place.

The book is most compelling at two points where the author tackles the topics at hand with depth and context. First, Corburn reviews the evolving missions of urban planning throughout the 20th century (casting a legacy-beneficiary-descendant Frederick Law Olmstead Jr., son of the famous landscape architect, as a misguided, if not villainous, adversary to critical planners). W.E.B. DuBois, among others, challenged the biomedical perspective on racial health disparities early on, documenting how substandard social conditions, and not genetics or a backwards culture, were to blame for sickness. Environmental and health science have been interwoven with political governance practices over the years, and perspectives on disease are continuously laden with assumptions on how certain groups of people “deserve” to be treated, reformed, assimilated, removed, or left alone in disparate ways.

Second, the book draws upon ethnographic fieldwork to recount several local campaigns where residents attempted to get local housing developers and government agencies—all in the San Francisco Bay Area—to incorporate *their* concerns into new developments and zoning changes. Especially instructive was Corburn's analysis of the ways in which community groups slowly learned the ropes and usefulness of Health Impact Assessments (which operate like Environmental Impact Assessments), and how these groups then worked with the Department of Public Health (DPH) to make a recalcitrant and defensive Planning Department take heed of their concerns.

On a larger scale, the case studies demonstrate how communities can hold governments accountable, to make social policies more efficient and just. As the DPH Director wrote, the Health Impact Assessment is “not about more administrative burdens or another bureaucratic hurdle for private developers... but the way planning must move to create a healthy economic, social, and physical climate for all.” A housing activist recalled how,

We always talked about our work as defending ‘human needs’... by making explicit the connections of our work and health, we have not only seen... elected officials... paying more attention, but... expand[ed] our organizing base.

Corburn describes efforts by regional health alliances to institutionalize this process in a substantive way, via legal interpretations of state statutes and policies that set the Health Impact Assessments as essential elements of economic development reviews. He also analyzes some of the weaknesses of and challenges to successful community participation, especially in balancing the types of data-gathering and scientific expertise required in campaigns, sustaining enthusiasm among activists, navigating governmental agencies, and balancing sometimes irreconcilable public policy goals. Sometimes, community groups could not resolve disputes they had among themselves; in such cases, it was essential that they could accept the outcomes of what they had deemed a fair process, even if it was not what they had been rooting for.

Still, to me, it was unclear exactly who Corburn had in mind as the audience for his book. Its appeal reaches beyond an academic audience, but bits of academic and technocratic jargon are left unexplained. More substantively, Corburn seems to devote more space justifying his attention to social determinants of health, and highlighting their importance, than in illuminating the nitty-gritty details of *how* change happens. I yearned for more “thick description”—testimonies and details of political battles, changes in thinking by activists or politicians, and narratives of on-the-ground work—in place of chapters that read like think tank or research foundation policy reports. Further, “air quality,” “pedestrian injuries and activity,” “education and child care,” “racial housing segregation,” “open space, parks, and recreation,” “employment and economic opportunities,” and “goods, and services and health care” were given equal space, and treated as comparable units of analysis. Aren’t some of these social determinants much more fundamental than others?

These are small quibbles in a book that puts healthcare in its rightful (more modest) place in health policy and comprehensively reviews the incredibly complex “web of social causation” that makes or breaks one’s health. Indeed, public health researchers continue to furiously debate the ultimate fundamental cause of good health—especially education or income, although the two tend to go together. (For the overeducated, underpaid writers and teachers among us, education does seem to trump income overall in determining life expectancy. Further, American high school graduates live about 9.2 years longer than high school drop-outs. Much of this increase in life expectancy is due to increases in the skills and cognitive abilities conferred by education, as well as preventive care, income, occupational safety, and access to health insurance.⁴)

Herd immunity

Neither book fully grapples with the moral or democratic dimensions of health policy. Even though we can't *all* be above average, American social policy is often shaped in ways to encourage each and everyone of us to aspire to be the Big Kahuna. And Corburn's book, which certainly moves beyond individuals as units of analysis, emphasizes the ways in which city planning will help to address health disparities and raise the life expectancies of the less powerful in our society. Yet, wealth seems to explain health status within industrialized countries, but not between them. Thus, high-income white Americans tend to live a lot longer than low-income African Americans, but on average, American whites still live *shorter* lives than low-income English folks.⁵ It turns out that even Big Kahunas stress out too much when teetering atop towering social totem poles. Plus, epidemics like H1N1 remind us that whether you get sick affects me, too. Researchers like Ichiro Kawachi, Richard Wilkinson, and Kate Pritchett, then, argue that more just societies overall bring more social cohesion, solidarity, better governance, interdependence, and, in the end, lower stress, more happiness, and longer, healthier lives.

These different points of focus—our healthcare system, our city planning, and our overall orientation towards equality in the United States—are mutually reinforcing. Through Reid's tour of healthcare systems around the industrialized world, *The Healing of America* helps ordinary Americans to recognize our nation's capacity for meaningful change. Corburn's *Toward the Healthy City* lays the groundwork for Americans to realize this change. If more folks take their work seriously, we may even create a virtuous cycle—one that finally levels the playing field, makes it inclusive, and renders the game a whole lot more pleasant for everyone.

Footnotes

¹ Himmelstein, D., Thorne, D., Warren, E., & Woolhandler, S. (2009). Medical bankruptcy in the United States, 2007: results of a national study. *The American Journal of Medicine*, 122(8), 741-746.

² Woolhandler, S., Campbell, T., & Himmelstein, D. (2003). Costs of health care administration in the United States and Canada. *The New England Journal of Medicine*, 349(8), 768-775.

³ Murray, C., Kulkarni, S., Michaud, C., Tomijima, N., Bulzacchelli, M., Iandiorio, T., et al. (2006). Eight Americas: investigating mortality disparities across races, counties, and race-counties in the United States. *PLoS Med*, 3(9), 1513-1524.

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Celina Su

B JENKINS

Fred Moten
Duke University Press, 2010

and

THE BLACK AUTOMATON

Douglas Kearney
Fence Books, 2009

the terror of enjoyment is *too* goddamn good.
Fred Moten, "Arthur Jafa and Greg Tate"

Fred Moten can't stop won't stop blurring genres, modes, lexical registers, disciplines and the whole damn phenomenal world, in an ecstasy of creative permission so liberating that it verges on the terrifying; this book is almost too beautiful to read. The title of his critical book, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, announced his over-arching concerns: interruption and defamiliarization, aesthetic inquiry and experience, historical continuities and discontinuities, and radical-intellectually adventurous, out (in the Amiri Baraka sense), *engagé*-thinking, living, acting, writing and intuiting: all of these not as disparate elements of inquiry, but as a unified pursuit, a unified style characterized by fuzz, permeability, disunity. It featured "special ghost soloists Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx" among other wild characters doing things that, of course, they do but no one but Fred Moten has the moxie to point it out in writing that so gleefully disregards protocolish "correctness" to such great effect. His disciplinary-stylistic transgressions are undertaken in the service of a realer grasp of what figures like Marx, Freud and these others actually meant/thought/wrote, and/or what they *could* mean in a world where thinking was free and, because free, powerful.

B Jenkins, Moten's protracted love song/elegy to his mother, who joined the "special ghost" chorus in 2000, finds Moten in what I suspect is his preferred mode, poetry, doing the same thing as he did in *In the Break* but swinging it even more. One might think, "Sure, the stock in trade of poetry, i.e. line-breaks, repetition, obliquity, allows for more swing than do the conventions of prose." But when I went to my favorite examples to cite instances of this use of poetic conventions, I realized that these passages did not depend on the such tricks of the trade for their rhythm, and for the first time I, who have basically staked my career on poetry's social considerations, was in-

terested in *craft*, of all things. How does he *do* that? Like free jazz (“ancient back to the future”) Moten’s poetry depends on a history of tradition to take off from; the tricks of the poetics are not obvious in individual poems but rather lie buried deep in their histories, in their memories, and their relations to other poems in the book. Moten does something beyond verse, something that takes full advantage of the freedom to be *potential* (*potens* as in power rather than *potential* as in half-baked, so that *potential* describes a higher rather than less evolved condition) upper-limit music:

the bridge is a tilted arc on tilted song.
like authenticity is an asymptotic relation.
like dance is a natural object.
like blackness move the human to impossible end.
like madness of the work is blue present in this mad unformed.
like knowledge of the instrument along a more than singular register.
 (“Curtis Mayfield”)

The anaphoric “like,” the mildly asyntactical torque (combined with ambitious semantic content) of “blackness move the human to impossible end” and “madness of the work is blue present in this mad unformed” against the simple unarguability of an observation like “dance is a natural object” and the complexity of “knowledge of the instrument along a more than singular register” (singular as in unusual? as in single, i.e. “in a plural register”? as in “of or by the singer”?) places this poem in that poetic utopia of dream-certainty, faith, and/or soul conviction; the reader hovers in that wonderful space between “always knew this” and “oh my God we’re deep in uncharted waters.” This is “right” in its embrace of error and errancy. Here’s another instance in which the lines swing without such clear generic conventions as strategically placed line-breaks, repetition of individual words (how does he *do* that?):

Walter Benjamin
is fear of intricate weaving on a table playing body and soul with john
searle who’s background transcribing a head arrangement. funhouse
implicature, the city is a passage through the woods, hard row. on the
track of things in fragments like a polish logician. shall we dance we will
is shall we will a borderland. ...

(“Walter Benjamin”)

Or

...sewing

music in the air, sown air in clothes and jewels for sacramental running,
for the soulfeast, for shift and stonefruit...

...folded head bows down. we mime and trade in the everyday line, for the
accident to hold down unreal chances, to stop running and staying away
inside, once and for all, 'cause it's all right to have a good time. we were

thinking on the open lines and found a work we hid to start this new
system of lines for you. will you and yours come see how much is hid in
us? then you will have to follow me away from you, come to yourself for

following the thing that's deep in you...

I want you to have this running away from you so you'll remember me

sometimes and love the way you let me get to you so I'm gon' really try

to make it good...

("elizabeth cotton/nahum chandler")

Even on the page, this is sonically rhythmic in spite of its prose-paragraph structure. Using a vocabulary as simple as a twelve-note scale or a button of Steinian tenderness, language urgent, loving, direct and oblique all at once, Moten bends the note/words into different shapes, different placements within the sentences, different relations between the "she," the "I" and the "you" to move the reader into a new self-recognition "along these lines."

The book is an intimate and wide-ranging intertext; each poem in it is a piece of sacred, evanescent music surrounded by a humming hush of space. Each poem is named after an inspiring figure: a family member, colleague, friend, musician, writer, s/hero. Each is a portrait, or maybe not: maybe the person whose name serves as title of the poem, or maybe the name alone, ("henry dumas," "chrisshonna grant," "eric dolphy") is simply a point of departure for the riff that follows. Sometimes two names, sometimes of two seemingly disparate figures ("billie holiday/roland barthes") open the poem as its title ("arthur jafa and greg tate") and sometimes they work both ends against the middle: the poems' two titles, names of the dedicatees (a poem will start off as walter benjamin and end up julian boyd, or move from johnny cash to rosetta tharp), appear at the top and bottom (beginning and end) of the poem. This, unless there's something I don't know, is a formal invention on Moten's part, but, though compelling in that "why hasn't anyone else done this before" kind of way, it's only one of the book's many signs and wonders. The series of portraits/love poems says: "What they bring/ is rigorous and marvelous" ("John Work"). Not only are these the people who are important to the author but these are the people who have

co-created him, they are who he is. Also, one senses that this roll-call could be infinitely expanded, deconstructed, re-combined; this life/mind/soul is always on the move, always incorporating more, always in flux. In spite of its insistence on and performance of community across time, space, and elective and/or kin affinities, the book's most haunting refrain, "It's a little alone," reminds that there is always some unintegrated, leftover (differand) element of "experience" or (un)sayability: the *outside* that makes possible whatever perceptions and utterances fill the space we call a book, a person, a subjectivity. This outside can be poetry; it's to Duke University Press's credit that, through their Refiguring American Music series, they have wandered into poetry, an area they've been wary of. Let's hope they return often.

Another of the book's virtues is its performance of mourning and grief as productive, generative processes of (self-)discovery. It is a gift to Moten's mother that *is* his mother undone and refolded into a new present; she is given herself back posthumously and simultaneously given to the reader as the conduit of all this intelligent passion. In the warmth of her smile in the cover photograph, in the elegance with which her right hand holds her cigarette, the question can be for anyone:

Will you be surprised again at who you are?
("elizabeth cotten/nahum chandler")

I was. Surprised, scared of so much beauty, and grateful.

Douglas Kearney's *Black Automaton* engages the visual poetry of pseudo-flowcharts, hiphop references, urban critique and pen-and-ink drawings of factoriescapes, smokestacks unleashing and unfurling evocative angry ghostfaces and ghostfists raised aloft, cityscapes with neat and decorously unpeopled blocks. The flow-charts especially, playing on the irreducibility of Black (or any social subjective) experience to diagrammatic logic, propose the adventures of "IT" (the Black Automaton) through investigations of words-tags—such as NEGRO, NIGGER, and REFUGEE, and existential conditions such as "de despair ub existence," etc., through analyses that reminds one of bpNichols's "Probable Systems" series and Chomskyan send-ups. Invented to "optimize" "efficiency" in "industrial engineering," flow-charts do anything but flow: they direct activity through processes of elimination, they narrow ones options in responding to given situations, they dictate linear and binary thinking, and otherwise misrepresent anything as complex as social phenomena, even when experienced by an automaton; Kearney's satirical wordplay, by contrast, multiplies rather than reduces meaning ("IT knows the N is near^{ly here}_{-er to thee}"). Other visual poems are mimetic of water-life: "Floodsong 1: Canal Rats' Chantey" shows a swarm

of boldfaced, large-font words superimposed on each other like a swarm of vermin eddying in shallow water, with thin lines of the same words in regular smaller font streaming out in chaotic directions: “fuck that” “damn you” “saw that want that,” etc. Similar to Moten but even more dramatically, the stripped-down lexicon is juxtaposed upon/against itself in multiple iterations, accruing meaning not only in quantitative accumulation (how’s that for the language of efficiency and productivity?) but in aesthetic impact through relational charge. The arrangement creates movement, a squirming riot of discontent and dispossession.

Likewise, “Swim-Chant for Nigger Mer-folk (An Aquaboogie Set in Lapis)” scatters in Susan-Howe-style odd angles horror-encoded phrase-fragments (“grate white jaw/AW! great white/ jaw-jaw juju/ gnaw gnaw NO! NO...”) across a two-page spread; this diagonal sinking is cruelly framed top and bottom by further reference to the graver atrocities of Middle Passage memory sharply focused by brilliantly incongruous doggerel:

ATTENTION: NIGGER MERMAIDS, MERMEN & MERNINNIES
CHAINED LIKE HOOKED & SINKED SARDINNIES:
DO NOT BLEED IN THE SEA. THE STAINS WON’T WASH OUT. WE
AIN’T’NT RESPONSIBLE FOR YOUR MESS.
MUCH OBILGED, THEE MANAGEMENT

A series of “Floodsongs” gets to some Katrina blues; city-themed poems most closely approximate contemporary first-person lyric, but with that disoriented, surrealist touch of reality: “Yesterday, I woke and believed I was a city, a green one...” that overtakes a speaking, feeling automaton, cousin to the zombie, the slave, the junkie and the mighty John Henry.

A final few pages reveals this text to be every bit the palimpsest of intertextual revelry that *B Jenkins* is, though other than a glancing (scathing) invocation of TSE (“so sang a pair of raggit claws/ scuttlin cross the flo of silent seas”) and a debt to anime, most of the references listed in the “Notes” comprise a quick encyclopedia of hiphop, funk, doowop and other black urban musics). This hip vispo hides in plain sight the know of now, the urban angles of sardonic angels, and wise/cracked asphalt turf that reveals Baraka’s “railroad made of human bones” that comprises the times and spaces of US history.

Maria Damon

A NEW NOTION: TWO WORKS BY C.L.R. JAMES

C.L.R. James (edited and with an introduction by Noel Ignatiev)
PM Press, 2010

A little over a decade ago, Grant Farred observed that C.L.R. James had not yet achieved “quotability,” which was to say that James’s legacy had not yet become sufficiently familiar among a large number of readers as to lend itself to ready allusion. Last year, Michael Bérubé titled a section of his new book “Beyond a Boundary,” without feeling any apparent need to explain the reference to his readers or even to mention C.L.R. James’s connection to that title. I suspect, though, that even among American readers conversant with trends in cultural studies there may not be wide-spread recognition of this invocation of one of James’s most influential and important late works. It seems that even two decades after James’s death, his work requires constant re-introduction to American readers. We can refer to the “talented tenth” or simply use the word “veil” in the context of race with no need to supply any context at all; indeed, most would think ill of an intellectual who did not immediately recognize those terms, and yet the work of James, now as when Farred first registered his observation, remains barely “quotable.” This is in large part due to the continuing unavailability of James’s publications. *Black Jacobins* has remained in print since its second edition; *Beyond a Boundary* is no longer hard to find; *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways* is now back in print in its unabridged form. Still, such major works as *Notes on Dialectics*, *American Civilization*, *World Revolution* and *Nkrumah and the Ghana Revolution* are currently out of print. There has never been a time when all of the central works of James’s long and productive career have been simultaneously available in the United States. Even the *C.L.R. James Reader* has been allowed to go out of print, making teaching courses that deal with James in depth exceedingly difficult. Against this background any appearance of work by James is cause for celebration. And while I might have wished PM Press had done a better job with the preparation of the volume *A New Notion*, I have to be grateful that they have returned to print two crucial statements growing out of James’s long period of political activism in America.

In his introduction to the new volume, Noel Ignatiev explains the book’s title, James remaining beyond the boundaries of quotability even now. In the collection of writings published by the University Press of Mississippi under the title *Notes on Organization*, Ignatiev summarizes, James held that “when you have developed a new notion, it is as if you have lifted yourself to a plateau from which you can look at things from a different angle.” This

language is typical of James's dialectical approach to things, and the two works presented in this book, *Every Cook Can Govern* and *The Invading Socialist Society*, show us James and his political group thinking their way through the theoretical issues of their day towards a comprehensive understanding of the myriad ways in which working class self-activity showed the way of revolution in today's world. James's group, known as the "Johnson-Forest Tendency" (the name derived from the pseudonyms of James and Raya Dunayevskaya), were working their way through the fuller implications of their anti-vanguardist politics and the State Capitalism thesis, but their primary mode was always to keep their eye on the masses of the people; to follow the radical social transformations visible in the day-to-day relations of workers to their employment and to their comrades as a way towards seeing "the future in the present." This inevitably brought them into conflict with the political organizations they had joined, which viewed themselves as the workers' vanguard, and these two works were major statements of the Johnson-Forest view of the revolutionary situation of the mid-twentieth century.

The term "anti-communist Marxist" may have lost some of its cogency in our post-Cold War world, but many of today's neoconservatives can with some embarrassment trace their origins to that movement, and among those on the anti-communist left who put the temptations of vanguardist thinking behind them a body of theory grew that foresaw with amazing perspicuity the forces that would eventually topple the Stalinist regimes that others sadly insisted on referring to as "actually existing socialism." In James's preface to the second edition of *The Invading Socialist Society* he remarks that "for those who wish to understand the developments among the anti-Stalinist political Marxists, this is the place to begin." That remains true all these years later, especially as we inhabit a media universe that still insists that Ronald Reagan, rather than the people who made a revolution against Stalinism, owns the credit for ending the Cold War. This work's title is drawn from the somewhat more quotable *Engels's Socialism, Scientific and Utopian* and the book is a major statement of the Johnson-Forest group's rejection of Trotskyist adherence to the illusion that the Soviet Union was a degenerated workers' state, as well as their careful examination of the revolutionary motions within their contemporary society. The group's argument arises from the straight-forward assessment that "Proletarian democracy is not the result of socialism. Socialism is the result of proletarian democracy." The book proceeds through a spectacular analysis of current social forces to ground their argument that the contemporary revolt is "against value production itself." This was startling in 1947 (much of the book details the Johnson-Forest arguments against their opponents in the Trotskyist Fourth International), and it remains startling today, reason enough to read this

book in light of the subsequent evolution of capital, production and world systems of exchange and domination. In the end, the argument of James and his colleagues against the vanguardism of their opposition boils down to the simplest of rhetorical questions: “How is it possible in the face of all this evil to tell the workers about the slow but sure preparation of the revolution. They are then slowly but surely to starve and shiver without houses, without clothes, and without fuel.”

In the present volume, that text is followed by James’s pamphlet *Every Cook Can Govern*, which remains among the most eloquent statements urging the principles of direct democracy. The text draws its title and inspiration from a comment Lenin makes in *The State and Revolution*, and the bulk of the writing is given over to a meditation on direct democracy in ancient Greece and what it might mean for us, now as well as in 1956 when the work was first published and circulated. James acknowledges that historians and philosophers had long questioned the status of ancient democracy (as later writers have on occasion taken James to task for his own views of the Greeks), but for James the root of those objections was that previous political writers were “bewildered by those Greeks who when they said equality meant it.” For James and his American activist colleagues, “the larger the modern community, the more imperative it is for it to govern itself by the principle of direct democracy.” That was the impulse behind the work in *The Invading Socialist Society* ten years earlier, as it was the guiding imperative of James’s later work on the student movement in Soweto, the Solidarity Movement and other similar phenomena. In each instance, James was intent on discovering the emerging mechanisms of new democratic relations among the masses of the people. For James, an historian to the last, it was when the “leadership” substituted its judgement for the movement of the masses of the people that tragedy became inevitable. Sound familiar?

That these two works have been influential among generations of radical thinkers is in no small part due to the efforts of the late Marty Glaberman, a member of the Johnson-Forest tendency through all its splits and reincarnations. It was Glaberman who kept the texts available through the Facing Reality group after the final demise of the organization first formed by James with Dunayevskaya and Grace Lee Boggs, and then through his own Bewick Editions after the last dissolution of the “Johnsonites.” (Bewick Editions took its name from the street in Detroit Glaberman lived on at the time, which gave him the fun of publishing the books over the sign “Bewick/ed.”) In his last years, Glaberman wanted to assure that these works would remain available, and so he made arrangements with the venerable leftist publisher Charles H. Kerr editions to take on the remaining copies of the books and print new ones. This led in 2006 to a fresh edition of *Facing*

Reality with a new introduction by John H. Bracey, and it has now brought us the PM Press *A New Notion*, authorized by Kerr. While this new edition will serve as a revelation to readers not yet familiar with the work James did in America during the long period of his illegal residence in the country, I fear it will foster any number of misunderstandings. The new introduction by Noel Ignatiev repeats the incorrect information that James was deported in the early 1950s. It is true that he was arrested, confined on Ellis Island and forced into court, but, as George Lamming insisted to the gathered audience at the James centennial conference in Trinidad, James eventually departed before being deported, thinking no doubt of his potential return (which happened in the late 1960s). This, like Donald Pease's mistaken awarding of a college degree to James that James never had (Federal City College made up the difference with an honorary doctorate when he was in his late 70s), creates a trail of mythology around James that will be difficult to untangle until we get a fuller biography than those that have appeared to date. The current edition also sows confusion around questions of authorship. Earlier editions of *The Invading Socialist Society* identified the authors as James, Dunayevskaya and Boggs (though some early editions bear their pseudonyms). Ignatiev's introduction duly identifies the three authors and supplies their pseudonyms, but then a turn of the page brings us to a title page that bears the names of James and Dunayevskaya alone. James is correctly identified as the author of the preface to the second edition reproduced here, but no effort is made to clarify the mysterious signature at the end of the text's appendix, "J.R.J." A clue is evident on the same page in a footnote referencing *Production for Production's Sake* by one J.R. Johnson, who is not only the "J.R.J." of the appendix but is James himself, the "Johnson" of "Johnson-Forest." Similarly, the authorship of the Introduction to *Every Cook Can Govern* is left unclear. We know that it wasn't James, because it is dated 1992, well after James's death.

While I harbored no expectation that such an edition would be a full-on scholarly text, I remain puzzled by the casual attitude towards rather basic matters of information. Ignatiev predicts that "some readers will be put off by the unfamiliar names and *context*," and the edition then renders this a self-fulfilling prophecy by stinting on context and refusing to identify the names. Contemporary readers need not be deeply versed in the sectarian debates of the Tortsyist left to prophet mightily from a reading of these works, but they might glean a great deal more with only a modicum of assistance. For one telling example, the chief debating opponent of the Johnson-Forest authors in *The Invading Socialist Society* is identified solely by his pseudonym, "Germain." "Germain" was none other than the prominent Marxist writer Ernest Mandel, whose work on the cultural dominant is one of the major influences in Jameson's *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*.

This is but one of the more recent sets of debates that have their roots in the discussions found in *A New Notion* and the current edition could have done a great deal more to make such legacies clearer for new readers.

None-the-less, it is crucial that these texts, so long circulated on the Left in pamphlet form, be made available to new generations of readers and activists. PM Press and Noel Ignatiev, though they might well have done an even greater service, are to be thanked for this.

Aldon Lynn Nielsen

YOUR COUNTRY IS GREAT: AFGHANISTAN-GUYANA

Ara Shirinyan
Future Poem Books, 2008

Add Ara Shirinyan's newest book, *Your Country is Great: Afghanistan—Guyana*, to the list of reasons why the internet is endlessly fascinating/the biggest time suck ever invented. But I suspect anyone intrigued by the multiplicity of language will find themselves engrossed by the craftsmanship and possibility contained in this collection. Shirinyan's poems exist in a kind of parallel universe to that strangely passive-aggressive, oxygen-free atmosphere that is the internet: where interaction *exists*, where dialogue *happens*, but where everyone, every word, every blog and blurb and blast is ultimately alone. Fortunately, Shirinyan isn't daunted by the sheer mass or quantity contained on the world wide web. Like a theremin player who makes music out of a couple of antennae and some amps, Shirinyan borrows language from seemingly dismissible internet postings. Using constraints and reframing, he shapes this appropriated language into poems that are at once weirdly flat and deeply layered—poems that say something (many things) about language, globalization, internet culture and geopolitics.

In the pages of *Your Country is Great*, Shirinyan crafts poems from found language (including incorrect spelling & grammar) taken from internet searches of “[insert country here] is great.” These maddeningly recognizable phrases point at each one of us who has uttered these words about a book or a bar or a city or country, and simultaneously to all that is left unsaid. ‘Great’ becomes meaningless with repetition and lack of elucidation. Even as we can differentiate between great = large and great = fantastic, we still feel empty about it. Or, not quite empty so much as aware of the vastness of what remains unsaid, and the consequences of the superficiality of sweepingly broad stanzas like the following, from “Brazil is Great”:

Brazil is great. Despite acts of cruelty and discrimination
primarily against indigenous and black communities
and all the inequalities and pain

Brazilian football is the most entertaining football to watch
Brazil woman are beautiful unlike the ugly
fat American woman.....
Brazil is great (43)

Shirinyan has commented on cruelty, discrimination, class, race, soccer, sex,

gender and stereotypes all within eight lines, two of which are the shape-shifting mantra, “Brazil is great.”

‘Great,’ of course, is just the most obvious of the banalities—these poems are chock full of generic and dangerous secondary words and phrases. People are gorgeous/friendly/nice; beaches are the best/beautiful/perfect; the future is bright and business is booming/promising/bound to be profitable soon. Football is brought up a lot.

In the same breath, in the same cheerful tone, even: “Australia is great, / but nothing I did while working / was valued” (18); “Unemployment is Colombia is great,” (65); “Gibraltar is great, but / from time to time / I want to change some parts” (114). One of my favorite stanzas is the following:

To summarize: Cambodia is great,
people wonderful, activities
adventurous and unsafe (52).

It is as if by saying everything, we can say nothing at all, and be satisfied by this. This complacency on the part of a voice that says everything is great and an ear that accepts this news feeds into the very ignorance-is-bliss mentality that some argue allows for the continuation of genocides, environmental devastation, financial ruin, and etcetera.

At the same time, there are many voices in Shirinyan’s poems arguing the opposite, that X or Y is *not* great, to varying degrees of reasonableness. For example:

Nobody said in this PR discussion
that Brunei is great.
“god’s gift to the world”?
What the hell are you talking about? (45)

And, back in “Brazil”:

The degree of poverty in Brazil is great.
Many of the poor
perceive themselves to be of little value and thus
have a profound ignorance (43).

The most frightening examples come in the form of blank space beneath a title such as “Equatorial Guinea is Great” (95). Shirinyan informs us in a note preceding the dedication that nothing came up under such searches,

and the reader feels the vacuum. Should we assume Equatorial Guinea is not great? Or that it is, in the eyes of those whose opinions matter (in this case, web commentators), simply *not*? Is Equatorial Guinea the Disappeared of this strange, prattling list? I find these few blank pages chilling, even as I become somewhat numb to the crowing greatness of countries whose pages surrounded them.

Similarly, certain passages feel strangely co-opted by those with ulterior motives. It is difficult not to be suspect of the ‘we’ in this stanza:

The gospel of Jesus Christ, and the edification
of the body of Christ in Cameroon, is great
and we do not want
CAMEROON FOR JESUS
to only be a slogan (54).

And of course, China, infamous for its internet policing, finds its stanzas similarly interjected with the all-caps indicator of zealous and questionable opinion:

All that matters is
CHINA MADE IT
and therefore
CHINA IS GREAT,
PRAISE CHINA,
HEIL MAO ZEDONG! (63)

This multiplicity, this dangerous power of language is what electrifies in Shirinyan’s work: the notion that if we repeat something often enough, it loses any strength it might possess while simultaneously brainwashing us of its potential meaning. Platitudes like those within these pages are not so far linguistically from euphemisms that keep the masses from recognizing or being forced to recognize what “collateral damage” and “pacification” mean in terms of war or what “outgassing” and “runoff” mean in terms of industrial pollution. The reader is forced to ask herself, what does “adventurous and unsafe” refer to with regard to Cambodia’s activities? What “parts” might the speaker be wanting to alter in Gibraltar? And are the women of Brazil beautiful *because* they are not fat Americans? Or because the speaker felt comfortable ogling/groping/having sex with them due in part to an unspoken class discrepancy or arranged sexual commerce—or something else left between the lines?

Shirinyan, of course, says it best, in the form of allowing silences to speak for themselves, of not really saying whatever *it* is. Whatever *it* is, it’s in the

unsaid, the line breaks, the ellipses: “Colombia is great, but deffinetly dangerous.....and safe” (65). Shirinyan uses line breaks the way the theremin player makes music without touching the instrument: it’s the hands-off approach that gives the lines weight and musicality. These poems could be read as nonsensical, jingle-like abstractions but for the skill with which Shirinyan plays the rests as well as the notes. Take this example, from “Estonia is Great,” which begins:

The reality is
living in Estonia is great for expats who can
understand the larger context
and Estonia has a bright future,
except for the approaching dark

and ends:

Estonia was one of the countries
that got the Independence
after the fall of Soviet Union and
were
are
building up (97)

The line breaks subtly tell us what reality is: it’s great if you’re an expat who *can* (i.e. an expat with money), if you’re an expat who understands the *larger context* (i.e. the power that comes with being an expat with money living in Estonia). Estonia’s future is indeed bright if you belong to this exclusive club. If you are someone else, an Other of some sort, or an Estonian perhaps, still trying to find firm ground after decades of political and cultural turmoil (not to mention the fact that Estonia was the second hardest hit member of the European Union during the economic crisis of 2008-9), your bright future may still seem a bit far off. The weight of the pause following “the Independence” gives the ‘getting’ of it a kind of a plaguelike quality, rather than that of the American assumption of freedom—I’m reminded of the smallpox epidemic European settlers brought to Native Americans under the flag of independence. Similarly, the musical subtlety of the line break approaches downright heartbreaking with the Freudian slip-like “were / are / building up.” Because of the natural emphases inherent in the rhythms of these enjambed lines, Shirinyan never has to break character to provide commentary in these poems.

Though a large dose of humor is sprinkled herein, these aren’t funny poems. In fact, it’s glibly thrown phrases like, “the water pressure and supply

in Dominica / is great” (84), “they have a party bus / for bar hopping” (16), “i don’t recall seeing robbers and such” (52), and “Guatemala is great value” (120) that drive home an awareness of how far our euphemisms have strayed from meaning in the English language, and how great a distance we have yet to travel in finding a common humanity as opposed to a cheap getaway, a real estate deal, a sexcapade, a party destination.

Indeed, it is post-colonial colonialism at its most insipient: this notion of getting online to see what people say about a place—to find out if it is ‘worth it’—worth *my* time and *my* dollars; will *I* be entertained, will the food be both delicious *and* cheap? These aren’t the English-speaking world’s most powerful at work here, but regular folk—folks with everyday concerns like safety and getting a bang for the proverbial buck. It’s the racism, sexism and imperialism inherent in these concerns which goes to show how deeply rooted is this colonial mentality, to be treated like royalty by other human beings, to ‘experience’ exoticism without leaving our comfort zones.

It is uncomfortable, reading these poems, and it should be. In my own work, I often write by the constraint that if I am going to write about something, I have to write everything about that something. I have to challenge myself to include all aspects of my subject: the beautiful and the grotesque, the mundane as well as the fascinating. I consider it part of my job as a poet to represent all of *it*, whatever it might be. So it must be noted that *Your Country is Great* stops at Guyana, and leaves a host of countries, possibly yours, out of this collection. Would it be a little much to read of H through Z’s greatness? Probably. But I am reminded of Inger Christensen’s *alphabet*, in that when she stops at ‘n’, ‘n’ contains all the possibility of the mathematical integer as well as the possibility of nothingness, of no more, that is the silent and ever present threat underlying nuclear power. In the aforementioned note preceding the book’s dedication, Shirinyan indicates that this book comprises roughly the first third of a larger project, which one would assume addresses the remaining countries of the world. Still, it is complete in its incompleteness, and the blank page after “Guyana” is its own kind of poem.

The questions bubble in that blank page, now that Shirinyan has made us (either for the first time or once again) aware of the consequences of using language and of our actions as travelers abroad. What do we do with this information? Perhaps in Book Two....

Ellen Welcker

FIRST AS TRAGEDY, THEN AS FARCE

Slavoj Zizek
Verso, 2009

Sometimes as true leftist philosophers, we must recognize not only the times we should be in the streets, but also the times we should be in our armchairs. In his book *First As Tragedy, Then As Farce*, Slavoj Zizek exhorts us to do both. As he says in his March 9, 2009 lecture at Queen Elizabeth Hall, “The task of philosophy is not to provide answers but to show how the way we perceive a problem can be part of the problem.” Probably the only philosopher whose fans have a Facebook page urging Saturday Night Live to take him as a host, Zizek writes prolifically about current phenomena from *Avatar* to the Icelandic volcano eruption, successfully tying such disparate subjects back to a left critique of ideology and current situations, both economic and ecological.

While working on this review, I spoke about it with a friend of mine, a published rhetorician and communications PhD, who complained to me that Zizek is difficult to read and comprehend. This is not a rare response. Zizek’s work, especially his more esoteric work in Lacanian theory, can be famously obscure. My suggestion for any would-be Zizek reader who finds his structure daunting is to watch several of his lectures. With the help of nonverbal and voice cues, it is easier to perceive the way that Zizek moves from serious analysis to ironic commentary and back again. His text then becomes more accessible. While preparing this review I viewed a number of lectures easily available online that I would recommend to any aspiring Zizek reader: a lecture at the University of Athens from October 4, 2007, “The Liberal Utopia,” and the aforementioned address at Queen Elizabeth Hall (both available through YouTube); and the book tour lecture for “First As Tragedy Then As Farce,” available on Democracy Now’s website and delivered on November 6, 2009.

The book, which reads as a collection of loosely connected vignettes, combines a wealth of quick comparisons (such as São Paulo with the film *The Fifth Element*, or Berlusconi to *Kung Fu Panda*), with an analysis of the rise of state authoritarian capitalism in China and a call for a reinvigorated communist defense of the commons. In this work Zizek is at his most polemical. His open frankness about his revolutionary agenda is appealing to readers who are eager for leftist critique and analysis that is unashamedly and proudly in a Marxist (and Leninist) tradition. His analysis is not mired in dogma, though, being dexterous enough to combine Lenin with Kierkegaard

to explain Žižek's position that universal truth is only accessible to those committed and engaged to a particular position or struggle—i.e., far from making one subjective, commitment carries the key to universalism.

Žižek's book uses Marx's famous reinterpretation of Hegel's axiom as a frame to establish the historical and cultural context of this work. He draws parallels between two major events that bracket the 21st century's first decade: the tragic terrorist attacks on 9/11 that opened the decade, and the contemptible financial collapse that closed the decade. The response to each of these events has shown that the real force in our lives is capital and that the real commitments of our society are to the preservation of capitalism and distinctions of wealth. Žižek is immensely critical of the failure of the left to respond coherently or convincingly to the second crisis in particular. He posits that the inability of the left to provide a non-capitalist plan out of the financial crisis shows the depth of the left's defeat.

Žižek warns that in the same way that the crisis of 9/11 opened up potential for the dominance of the ideology of the right, the collapse of capitalism in the latest crisis might also serve as a right-wing tool, in contradiction to what would seem apparent common sense. He points to international capital's priorities, comparing the relative paucity of responses to crises such as the environment, AIDS, and global poverty, with the immediacy and scope of the bank bailout in 2008. Žižek argues that the bailout shows what we consider to be a true emergency (the failure of the banks) as opposed to a minor emergency (the collapse of the environment). In another demonstration of priorities, instead of the unified emergency response that the banks received, many advocated the bankruptcy of General Motors on the grounds that it would allow the corporation to break its union contracts. While the banks received unquestioning national support, the life of one of the last powerful unions with a strong contract was up for prolonged social debate.

Žižek thereby identifies the potential of the crisis as shock therapy: the bailout of the banks was a national emergency situation, whereas the incomes, security, and lives of GM's workers were openly debated, thus paving the way for greater neoliberal financial discipline of the working classes. In a parallel fashion, Žižek suggests that the Chinese Cultural Revolution is another shock therapy, this time paving the way for the neoliberal capitalization initiated by Deng Xiopeng. According to David Harvey, this process has transformed China from a poor egalitarian country into one of the richest, most stratified nations in the world. The banking collapse has also revealed capitalism's paradoxical structure: socialism for those at the top and capitalism for the rest of us below. The "risk society," whose formulation Žižek ruthlessly critiques, creates a social safety net for those

at the top with the power to choose, while offloading public liability for any risky choices on those below who lack the agency to choose for themselves. In a typical rhetorical juxtaposition, he poses the counterintuitive legacy of that arrangement: populism has a justified resistance to oligarchy, but unfortunately at this point the oligarchy is so entrenched that challenging it head on would only damage those at the bottom. In our current system there can be no healthy Main Street without a healthy Wall Street even though the reverse is easily possible.

The book is divided into two sections: “It’s Ideology, Stupid!” and “The Communist Hypothesis.” Roughly, the first section grimly details the depth of the current defeat of the left while the second analyzes the possibility of renewing an intellectual frame for a movement forward. Through the first half of the book, Zizek works to unmask the ideology that covers and naturalizes new formations of capitalism such that, despite the current economic crises, the end of capitalism as the dominant economic system seems inconceivable to many people in Western Europe and the U. S. One possible response to such crises is already on the scene: Zizek warns of new dangers from state authoritarian capitalism, such as that in Singapore or China, which is proving itself to be more dynamic and vital than capitalism in the West. In the light of these dangers and pressures, Zizek calls for a new defense of the commons—and a reformulation of a new communism beyond its 20th century focus on the state and property. For Zizek the good in liberalism will not survive without a renewed leftwing struggle for justice and the common weal.

Zizek’s conclusion in the first section is that the market has failed to deliver the greater general good. Necessary products and services are too important to be left to the mechanics of market distribution. These services include food, “water, energy, the environment as such, culture, education, and health.” (85) This conflict forms the pivot point of the book; Zizek opens the second chapter with a more detailed analysis of the “four antagonisms” of current capitalism that spell its impending systemic failure: ecology and looming environmental catastrophe; the privatization of intellectual property through copyright and restrictive access to education and communication; the privatization of biological property such as the human genome; and new social movements of organized exclusion in new walls, ghettos, and new forms of Apartheid. The first three are problems of the commons, and as such Zizek claims that only communism is the appropriate vehicle to ensure access for all. The final antagonism is an antifascist issue, and again only communism has the internationalist and egalitarian commitments to overcome the process of ghettoization. The book concludes in an urgent rush with dark optimism, welcoming those who are returning to communist

thought after “dallying” with other ideologies, and exhorting the reader in the words of Samuel Beckett to “Try again, fail again, fail better.” (125)

Especially in the second half, Žižek saves special ire for the failures of the protests of 1968. According to him, 1968’s attack on the three pillars of capitalism—the factory, the school, and the family—has paved the way for even greater market penetration of the social life of the state. In this way, Žižek sees 1968 as its own form of early shock therapy, resulting in new paradigms of flexible work (without unions or benefits), flexible education (which is privatized), and new market cooptation of variegated family forms. He believes that the global class protest of 1968 was bought off cheaply by social permissions (not rights) to personal liberties and a superficial critique of consumption. The result has been an atomized focus on individual action and enjoyment, and a refined cultural capitalism in which consumption packages and sells its own critique.

Žižek’s critique of 1968 can be difficult to accept fully. His occasional ignorance of queer issues, disability issues, and feminist issues in his formulation of “the permissive society” can lead him to undervalue the importance of 1968’s attack on social institutions. Žižek can also be deliberately insulting. One of his strengths is his ability to provoke the reader into new perspectives, but it is closely tied to one of his weaknesses—an apparent desire to shock the reader, sometimes for its own sake. Žižek’s stark language can be productive (for example, his rejection of the ideology of tolerance for the sake of tolerance) but at times his desire to distance himself from political correctness can lead him into inappropriate buffoonery. Despite his proclaimed personal friendship with Judith Butler, his sexual and gender analyses are often essentialist and reductionist. Even as Žižek’s philosophy can be read as friendly to revolutionaries, it is sometimes difficult on the reader to read past the normative and sometimes crude misfires. He also treats “the left” as though it is a single monolithic entity (perhaps centered in Europe and the Americas), which has the ironic effect of sometimes erasing the kind of efforts he promotes. As a work, this is a call to a very particular audience; unfortunately it’s difficult to discern exactly who does and does not belong to that intended audience.

Those considerable faults aside, Žižek is a brave writer. He is not afraid to analyze the depth of leftist defeat even as he frames the analysis in a polemical call to action. Žižek poignantly observes that in the face of the collapse of capitalism the left lacks the power, energy, or vision to even propose a viable alternative. It is a damning statement that has demonstrated the depth of the left’s defeat. Ironically, he targets a left of which there is not much left, at least in the U. S. He looks to a constituency that is both antifascist and

anticapitalist. Zizek calls for revolutionary discipline and exhorts the left to stop fearing the responsibility of power; while he might praise the actions of anarchist protesters of the IMF and World Bank, it is unlikely that they would feel fully included.

In light of billionaire libertarians' recent announcements that they are constructing tax-free stateless yacht-cities for themselves (Mark Ames, "The Really Creepy People Behind the Libertarian-Inspired Billionaire Sea Castles," June 2, 2010. http://www.alternet.org/economy/147058/the_really_creepy_people_behind_the_libertarian-inspired_billionaire_sea_castles/), Zizek points out that in spite of the promises of the end of history with the fall of the Berlin Wall, there is not an alignment between the vision of a liberal democratic community and the developing dystopian vision of global market capitalism. As in Rodrik's trilemma (Dani Rodrik, "How far will international economic integration go?" (*The Journal of Economic Perspectives* 14:1), we can have any two of the following: international economic integration, the nation state, and robust democracy— but we cannot have all three. Zizek argues that we are opting for the first two. And as we do so, the global super rich are removing themselves from our world to build their own. His examples run from China to New York to Brazil, where the rich travel by helicopter, creating a literal two-tiered society of those above and those below.

As much as this book is a call to action, Zizek does not advocate action solely for its own sake—attacking the tyranny of action over reflection, Zizek calls on us to resist the pressure of "Don't just talk, do something." Instead, he demonstrates that we sometimes do things to avoid thinking and talking about them. He suggests that this is such a strong compulsion that we have collectively thrown 700 billion dollars at the global banking problem in preference to talking about how the situation came about. Wallace Stevens once wrote that poetry should make "The visible a little hard / To see"; in that way reading Slavoj Zizek's politics and analysis is a bit like reading poetry. In the process of revealing the political ideologies that cloud our vision and understanding, Zizek decenters the visible surfaces of everyday political life and shows us a different reality at work.

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