Forum

Voices in American Experimental Poetry

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Introduction

Stesichoros of Sicily had no choice
but to become a poet. One day as
he lay in his cradle a nightingale
flew down and lit on his lips. The
little baby began to sing at once.

(James Laughlin, "The Born Poet,"
A Commonplace Book of Pentastichs, 1998)

The secret of the poetic art lies in the keeping of time.... To keep time – designing or discovering lines of melodic coherence.... Counting the measures, marking them off, the whole intensified in the poet's sense of its limitation. One image may recall another, finding depth in the re-sounding.

(Robert Duncan, *The H.D. Book,* 1961,
in Susan Howe*, Blaney Lecture: The Whispered Rush, Telepathy of Archives*, 2012)

This Forum springs from the intention of bringing to the surface some of the internal forces that push experimental writing and foster the creative voice. This Forum also prompts conversations among the four authors included here and their interlocutors/readers about what constitutes the "experimental" texture and relevant commitment of contemporary American poets who choose the innovative track. The dialogue is built upon the exchange of ideas about their practices and theoretical stances. Is there a special challenge in the experimental way of writing? Is there any kind of existential urge behind their composition? Is there any need to be listened to by way of the disruption of forms through experimental rather than traditional modes?

In conversation with poet Kathleen Fraser at the Ducati Bar during one of our habitual, if not frequent, Roman get-togethers, a series of questions immediately germinated, and, without even realizing it, we started talk-

ing about these issues with more intensity than ever. New questions always arise from previous answers, in a never-ending circle of curiosity, interest, engagement. Passion, we could say. The truth is that, at one point, we felt the necessity to expand our debate and possibly ground it also in the experience of other experimental poets who were friends and shared the experimental ear. The choice was not simple. In the polyphonic score of innovative chords in American poetry today, we established a sort of implicit, silent, yet eloquent, accord with three more voices, somehow strictly linked among themselves in their individual differences and committed to similar values of experimentalism and research through poetry. Through their diverse and multiple approaches to experimental writing, either from the vantage point of 1) an acclaimed poet, 2) academician and critic, 3) landscape expert and artist, or 4) an editor and publisher, we heard a unison motif represented by the openness to innovative forms, sounds, juxtapositions, combinations, erasures, harmonies – even in dissonance – always to be discovered, deciphered, and sung.

We became attuned to their voices and opened a debate which focused on the following questions:

– What is it that identifies the difference between convention and experimentation?

– At which points does experimentation break away from convention?

– How does the notion of "canon" make its impact on innovative forms of writing?

– Should we redefine the status of experimental writing within the context of other contemporary art forms? Why – if so – does this come up as a "need"?

– Is the breaking of typographical norms enough to constitute a new tissue of experimental writing? – Can you describe one aspect of innovation that has become important to your own work?

– Who are your internal referents in your own experimental writing? Can you describe its genealogy?

– Might pronouncements such as Harryette Mullen's "standing between and asking questions" be considered as evolving identities by way of "dissonance and multiplicity"?

– Would you agree that "experimental" is also making "the unimaginable happen," creating a surprise to the author her/himself?

– What is the most vivid experience for you in your artistic development as a poet?

– How would you qualify your formal approach of innovative writing? - Is it more concentrated on linguistic / compositional aspects, or is it based more on free and unconventional thinking and unprecedented juxtapositions?

– Can you describe one significant compositional procedure that you often resource to in you writing?

– Do you share any useful correspondence with any other artists?

– Do the new technological media impact on your writing? How?

– What's missing in experimental writing nowadays?

– What are your projects for future writing?

– Is poetry a choice that you made consciously?

– Why poetry, then?

As you can see, we faced an orchestration of dilemmas, ranging from the personal to the public, from the practical to the theoretical, from the existential to the procedural, in a kind of free associative circularity without a predefined direction (we really wanted to investigate without confinements or prescribed path). We were determined to inscribe in the loop of questions an artistic authenticity and existential plenitude, a full voice, as if, like Stesichorus, they had no choice "but to become a poet."

So each participant decided to contribute an original piece where s/he expressed her/his view on some of the above issues, even introducing other relevant themes that have not been mapped by those questions, referring to other poets' works or sources of inspiration, also inserting excerpt of poems (published or unpublished).

The result was a resounding *texture* of lines, memoirs, remembrances, hopes, dreams, projects, pronouncements, illusions and allusions, an intriguingly new score.

We read from Susan Howe (*Telepathy of Archives*, 2012):

> The English definition for text and textile is taken from the Latin, "textus." from "textere" to weave, meaning that which is woven. In "Sentences" (1928) Gertrude Stein writes: "What is a sentence. A sentence is an imagined frontispiece. In looking up from her embroidery she looks up at me. It is partly. A sentence furnishes while they will draw…. What is the difference between

a sentence and a sewn … what is the difference between a sentence and a picture."… Poetry has no proof nor plan nor evidence by decree or in any other way. From somewhere in the twilight realm of sound a spirit of belief flares up at the point where meaning stops and the unreality of what seems most real floods over us.

KATHLEEN FRASER

PART 1: Framing the Situation of American Experimental Poetry

I sent a message to the fish,
I told them "This is what I wish."

The little fishes of the sea,
they sent an answer back to me.

The little fishes' answer was
"We cannot do it, Sir, because."
(from *Alice's Adventure's in Wonderland* [1865])

Twas brillig and the slithy toves
did gyre and gimble in the wave.
All mimsy were the borrogroves
and the mom raths outgrabe.
(from "*Jabbewocky*" [1858])

[two examples of "nonsense verse" by Lewis Carroll [1832-1898]

An earliest memory from my childhood stays with me – my father's voice reading to us from *A Child's Garden of Verses*, by the Scottish author Robert Louis Stevenson, a much requested book in our house as my father persisted in introducing the language of nonsense and musical repetition into my early language acquisition.

This British "nonsense" undermining the narrow seriousness of the grown-up world presented the intriguing sounds and propositions of a language that seemed comic, musical and entirely "foreign" to my American-leaning English vocabulary ... yet it somehow made perfect sense and kept me coming back for more. I could not have paraphrased it, but I loved to say it and to align myself with its refusal of the merely normal. It is, even now, an unfamiliar yet always delighting reward.

Nonsense verse delivered itself as an antidote and a musical treat. Clearly my growing self needed as much as I could get of it, in order to survive the narrow confines of almost any small town's version of appropriate childhood behavior. My British father had an endless willingness, in our various American communities, to read to us and to repeat *with us* these untranslatable poems, so that I had no problem committing them to memory as I instinctively sought out their codes, whose mysteries provoked an intrigue with language's great talent to reinvent itself ... given half a chance.

But all changed swiftly upon entering American "middle school," when we were assigned to memorize the four large pages of the very long-lined *Prelude to Evangeline* by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, considered as significant poetic material for 5th and 6th graders to learn "by heart."

What had happened to the mysterious "slithy toves" that had so intrigued me? I could feel a deadness enter into the unwelcome classroom challenge – an unwillingness in me that soon translated into a refusal, framing itself as the uncomfortable news, admitted to myself: "I cannot memorize this. I'm a failure, the least able person in the entire class to get it right."

In fact, I was kept after school for a week of afternoons, to face this unwanted burden of language so meaningless to me – feeling only resentment towards the "great poem" that was keeping me from playing after-school softball.

My negative reactions only served to push me further away from what I was being taught to regard suspiciously as "poetry." It felt unendingly ponderous, full of "significant" dark warnings and flowery abstract words that left me outside of the poem's supposed greatness, with no desire to carry around those worn-out, finger-shaking "truths" in an eager mind increasingly alert to its own observations of the physical world around me and the sheer delight of being surprised by words as I found them through my own listening.

Compare, below, "Evangeline's" well-behaved and overly familiar rhythms

This is the forest primeval, the murmuring pines and the hemlocks,
Bearded with moss and in garments green, indistinct in the twilight,
Stand like Druids of eld, with voices sad and prophetic,
Standing like harpers hoar, with beards that rest on their bosoms.

to the sheer energetic force of Lewis Carroll's earlier quoted "nonsense verse."

In neither case were we looking at contemporary 20th-21st century poetry; yet an ear that loves words is immediately alerted by Carroll's invitation to a heightened sense of play and the unexpected delivery of the provocative information that *his* "nonsense verse" continues to deliver.

His is a "modernist" gift, way ahead of its time. It refuses to allow a reader's availability to his word-on-word sound to be undercut by the tedium of worn-thin usage, invoking little but familiar melodrama and a yawn.

By the time 20th century poets, American modernist experimentalists Gertrude Stein, Marianne Moore, Mina Loy, Djuna Barnes and Barbara Guest had entered – or re/entered – the publicly acknowledged practice of the 20th century avant-garde, the shapes and projects for poets had expanded exponentially. Many had been reading Samuel Beckett, James Joyce, William Carlos Williams, e.e. cummings and T.S. Eliot, so that by the mid-Sixties the continuous shifts and claims of a full-on experimental practice were well on their way. What had once been a clearly identified formalist English-language inheritance – dominating American mainstream poetry from the London side of the Atlantic – was now making a significant shift to NYC and San Francisco.

On the East coast, The New York School poets were bound to parallel N.Y. School painters by their droll urban humor and a desire to replace the known with the unknown. Invention and unexpected erasure and the flagrant replacement of words were at a premium, led by the casual suggestions of Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery and Kenneth Koch, with Barbara Guest's "suspect" and mysterious female language *almost* allowed acknowledgement by Koch, on his all male "poets-to-be-watched" list passed on to TIME magazine in the mid-Sixties.

These were followed by legions of second generation poets – many encountering each other in nighttime classes at The New School (NYC).

Among these, Joseph Ceravolo stood out as one-of-a-kind – not so much the "follower" as a listener, intent on his own diction and originating path:

Hold me
till only, these are my
clothes I sit.
Give them more songs than
the flower
these are my clothes to a
boat streets
have no feeling
Clouds move.
(from *Spring in this World of Poor Mutts* [1968])

Hannah Weiner's collages of internal struggle – "receiving," in the clairvoyant sense – began to show up in the mid-Sixties after her father's death, when words appeared to her, projected onto walls of buildings on the lower east side (NYC) – also on others' bodies, emplacing a further curious strangeness within the community's perception of "the unexamined."

Weiner's *published* texts – once *un*remarkable – began to use FULL-page projections of her internal thought-life, typed in CAPITAL LETTERS that reproduced exercised verbal imagination, transferred from her visually dominant sensing of human connectedness:

NO
WATER well cup of FULL OF COURAGE peppermint MADAM FULL OF PEACE you
are looking YOU CAN EAT LOVE LOOK IN THE KITCHEN to see if the LOVE is on
Ghandi brings DON'T FORGET a tray from the HOLY YEAR with instructions on it
*(*from *Clairvoyant Journal* [1974])

Among West Coast poets emerging in the Fifties, Jack Spicer, Robert Duncan and Robin Blaser were unique in reshaping the lyric music of English poetry's history, through a heightened, sexually avid American

consciousness – each poet, passionate and politicized, brought his own riveting and entirely serious demands to his lyric pre-occupation. There were several women poets in this circle but their work tended – in that era – to be minimalized. In that context, they lacked a readership.

By now, questions of a smooth and received beauty were provisionally underlined with skepticism in all the arts. Painters were soon leading the way with their reorganization of the canvas, leaving the realism of image as only one possible path of investigation. American life had, by then, presented too many political questions and unsavory revelations to pass by without comment and poets were now often taking on this shifting reality as a major grid of doubt. The relevance of a single "right" music or voice or cadence had lost its power.

In these years, a slow but passionate split began to register both awkwardly and powerfully in the American poetry scene, particularly among younger poets who were increasingly expanding the poem's "canvass" – learning not only from their peers but from working poets now teaching in university graduate writing programs scattered across the country. By the early Seventies, there were at least "sixteen ways of looking at a blackbird" and Wallace Stevens had turned the concept of a classic, pure singularity into the pursuit of multiple voices and inventions that many writers found far more challenging to engage.

As the worn paths of inherited verse forms from the Fifties began to shift tentatively away from their comfort zone of solidly recognizable verse, the newer poetry came from testing "the known" with intentionally disruptive rhythms and odd line breaks resembling marks of uncertainty and instability registered in the inherited cut-&-splice technology of film editing, and the many harsh instrumental demands coming from new music and jazz performance. It wasn't as simple as one artistic family copying another, but rather the cumulative effects of post-war anxiety and the huge push forward into new informational fields being explored and referenced.

American urban poets were claiming new turf. By the early 2000s, the central issues of gender & sexual identity were fully claiming their own re-invented voices. "Women's poetry," instead of getting stuck in an oversimplified category, swiftly began to assert a writing culture of innovation and complexity, via new publications such as the ground-breaking journal

H0W(ever) and its present on-line extension *H0W2*, choosing to share Editor responsibilities with women poets & scholars in other English-speaking countries.

Fine-tuned differences among subject/object narratives began to be illuminated in the bold and complex writings of gay, lesbian and transsexual poets. Instead of "one" misunderstood and over-simplified voice, voices began to publish numerous experiments with mixed language sources and stylistic preferences.

The empowering presence of racial difference – its complicated and undeniable claims for space to be read and heard – became not just a ground and source for political acceptance and social change but was assumed with variant linguistic detours and musical performance styles.

In this fermenting era, the liquid beauty and reassurance of lyric refinement would continue as one stable esthetic within the American mainstream practice. But the difficult burden of truth-telling has insisted on making its demands, even there.

Beauty, itself, is seldom enough for American poetry currently making its way; its terms have been radically displaced by human urgency on a grand scale. More often, our poetry has found itself face-to-face with an unfamiliar terrain, the complicated and imminent claims of change. Listening to how this change unfolds, and recording its moves in language, has become a primary preoccupation.

PART 2: My Own Practice, as a Poet

Is the breaking from typographical norms enough to constitute a new tissue of experimental writing? Can you describe one aspect of innovation that has become important to your own work?

Breaking from typographical norms can be one surprising way to alert or lure a reader's attention away from the unexamined poetic cliché, a kind of intentional side-tracking of language that leads one into a new investigation of a subject – and its possible shifts – *if* the person writing is willing

to allow that jump into the unplanned moment. Great poetry has always liked that jump.

But what does "error" mean in this context? Is there something "wrong" here, worth stopping for? Is it worth denying the "norm" – to break from a long practiced and revered "rule" of language use, for the sake of taking on the unnamed / unintended? At the least, my attention has been flagged and my fingers momentarily stopped at the key-board, in an attempt to get everything down swiftly – now made alert to the possibility of a re-combinant event of words that may beckon the poet to follow a new path, intrigued by the odd enjambment of its sound.

I may, in such a moment, be immediately provoked to an act of resistance *precisely* because a particular "error" has visually pleased me or, at the least, has caught me off-guard and made me laugh. Perhaps error has led me, at such a moment, into the neglected perception of a "blind alley."

A rule expressing a particular "correctness" in any given artistic norm is *not* necessarily an attractive *fait accompli* for me, except in the sense that it may push me towards an "incorrect" way of thinking aaboutt the next project. Leaving the misspelled word **un**corrected in the above sentence *may* indicate something I'll want to pay attention to.

In the provocation of a shift of font or enlarged **A** or **B**, for example, the brain may stumble upon a visual bump that leads it on a detour. In the paragraph, above, my unsought pleasure arrived with the new word "aaboutt." I've stumbled through other misspellings, and have learned to pursue the adventure that awaits me, although it may not lead to something I finally decide to keep as part of a finished work.

A story

In the mid-Seventies. I was teaching in a graduate writing program at San Francisco State University where the class load was four courses per semester. Anyone who has attempted this will tell you that 4, in this context, is a number to be avoided, particularly if you have any hope of continuing to be a writer. But I was raising a child alone and needed the regular pay-check which covered medical insurance for both of us.

The thing that suffered neglect, in an otherwise meaningful life, was my writing. I loved my young son *and* deeply enjoyed my teaching, thus found myself juggling student manuscripts & the preparation of class materials in the evenings once my son's daily need for hanging-out, good

food and our reading together ended at his bedtime. Sunday was my only day apart from this schedule and I was often mentally separated from my internal life such that the thought of working on a new piece of writing felt like a mirage.

One Sunday, having no idea of what I wanted or needed to write about but feeling the desperate need to work on *something*, I sat alone at the kitchen table and decided, with a kind of detachment, to begin with the words **red**, **yellow** and **blue –** holding & then returning each color-word in a kind of "call and response" pattern that I'd listened to jazz musicians using as a way of propelling their improvisations forward. I wasn't working in stanzas or conscious sound patterns, but let my eyes rest on whatever object I saw near me, noting its color (possibly its function) and listening for what came back to me. By the time I finished, I'd filled two pages of "paragraphs" made up of call & response notation driven, first, by the primary colors – and soon after branching out to existing and invented permutations of red, yellow and blue.

These phrases were steeped in unintentional sound/music that came directly from the observed materials – each image, each newly invented color-name separated by commas to keep the momentum going.

When I finished, I needed a title and looked back through the text to find something that might work. in the fourth paragraph I found this phrase:

> "the year of breaking thread around the boundayr,"….

I saw that in typing the phrase, I'd made a typo. Instead of "bound**ary**," the word I'd intended to type for "the year of breaking thread around the boundary," I'd made an error – switching the final two letters – "**ry**" – to "yr," thus changing "boundary" to "bound**ayr**." I said the unintended word aloud to myself, alone in the kitchen, and realized that it sounded like two words – "bound" and "air," pushed together. I was amused by my brain, for I realized that these two words named the emotional condition in which I currently found myself. I'd been given a gift – a misspelled word that required attention. Its "error" had to be somehow allowed into the poem's truth.

I decided that the unintended word would become the poem's intended title: **b o u n d a y r**. I'd written the poem on a Sunday afternoon and decided, at the last minute, to throw it into my satchel the following weekend, to try reading it aloud at an out-of-town performance in Southern California. After the reading, a woman came up to speak with me, mentioning how much she liked this poem. She wondered if there was any way she might get a copy of it. I was pleased, of course, and told her I'd send her a copy in the mail.

Soon after this exchange, I picked up my telephone one morning to hear the voice of Sam Francis, a very well-known American painter whose work but person I did not know. At his request, his assistant had brought him a copy of my poem. He wanted to know if I might be interested in collaborating on an Artist Book with him, using my new poem as the text – its lines spread sequentially over a number of large pages, with his aquatints appearing here and there throughout the book.

I said Yes.

After two years of deliberation, the cover and book design were achieved and the book placed into a large box covered with marine blue linen. Inside it, large sheets of very heavy white paper had been folded to make the simplest possible book cover, whose title pressed its *intaglio* "bite," leaving a word without ink*:*

b o u n d a y r

I see typography as a fluid and flexible property of printed language, a visual presence for the activity of linguistic invention that has always Intrigued me. Its immediate capacity to evoke change and to be the bearer of a particular and immediate "eventfulness" is, for me, the gift.

I also like the word "tissue" embedded in this question. It makes me think of layers of fine silk, causing a shimmer of surface in the materials themselves – or the expanded stitches of a closely knit yarn through which light pushes and re/gathers in new patterns, wherever it falls. There is an opening, an unexpectedness of meaning, rather than only one possible place where the light will land. Thus one is continually breaking away

from "the known," as each new layer of tissue reveals its suggested pattern and how that shifts – depending upon what has preceded it and what follows.

If one begins composing a poem, it may help to start with a known mathematical structure – as in the prescribed number of syllables per line and the number of lines per stanza, dictated by a Shakespearean or Petrarchan sonnet. The formulaic "demand" provides the language with its own magnifying glass and the achievement of such an historic pattern, or form, has its gratification and surprise – that you have met a "goal" often achieved by poets known before you for a particular kind of wit or brilliance. In my early learning of "craft," an "assigned" or known pattern – already in place – proved satisfying and instructive.

But as I continued to write "poetry," it came to resemble more closely an investigation of the possible, the mysteries that *might* emerge if I paid attention to what fell into the margins and didn't fit.

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footnote, on "font"

During my high school and college years, I worked in various after-school editorial positions that led to editing the school's weekly newspapers. As a result, I spent hours every week in pressrooms with "the old guys" (all of them, sweethearts), learning how to hand set type of varying sizes and "faces" for headlines preceding news stories and features. These rituals of "type face" – what we more often call "font" – became the living material that carried the meanings and histories of words. If one had a visual inclination, the selection of fonts became a surprising part of communicating that meaning.

I discovered in this telegraphic necessity a fondness for the design and character of alphabet families and particular letters. This began to carry over as a pleasurable and specifically visual aspect of my poetry writing. I began to insert hand-written words and, in some cases, small drawings into machine-set texts. This visually intriguing practice gave me access to another layer of the complexity of what I wanted to call attention to in the visible world. Living in Rome for substantial parts of thirty years, I became intrigued by cultures preceding the Romans and began to explore the hand-scrawled writings on Etruscan burial stones or pressed into the

few clay slabs carrying their long-inscrutable alphabet. The visualizing of this lost writing presence marked their passage profoundly.

[December, 2014, San Francisco].

ALDON LYNN NIELSEN

There are few ways more sure to start an argument at either an academic or a creative writing conference in the United States than to use such terms as "avant garde," "innovative" or "experimental" in announcing the subject to be addressed by a forum on poetry and poetics. Inevitably someone in the audience will object that there is currently no avant garde, that the last avant garde collapsed beneath the gathering weight of modernism, that the disappearance of the avant garde was a good thing in light of the elitism and obscurity associated with it, that any effort in the direction of an avant garde in late capitalist society is doomed before it starts to commodification, co-optation, or simply irrelevance, or that the term "avant garde" itself, arising from a military context, is objectionable when speaking of the poetic. "Innovation" is just as likely to meet with objection, usually taking the form of an observation that every phenomenon under discussion can be found in some earlier literature and thus cannot be seen as innovative. And "experimental"? We are certain to hear that none of the poetry being examined is truly conducting any sort of experiment. The author is testing no hypothesis and there is certainly no control.

All of which is misdirected in one way or another. It seems clear to most that these terms always appear within invisible scare quotes, under erasure. Calling poetry "innovative," "avant garde" or "experimental" in 2014 is more often than not simply a short-hand way of signaling that the poetry being read participates in a revolutionary tradition (if I might rely on such an oxymoronic phrase) with its roots in the Modernist ruptures that begin in the late nineteenth century and reach an explosive intensity in the early twentieth, a tradition of experiment that encompasses Gertrude Stein, William Carlos Williams, Langston Hughes, Marianne Moore, e.e. cummings, Melvin B. Tolson, and that's just a small sampling of the Americans. We are speaking of poetries that have been informed by Futurism,

Precisionism, Constructivism, Surrealism, black American jazz aesthetics, Imagism, Vorticism, Negritude, Negrismo, the list is seemingly endless; it is a poetry in our time opposed formally and ideologically to what Ron Silliman terms "the school of quietude," opposed to a poetry rooted in traditional views of subjectivity, self-present lyric voice, and communication school models of language and meaning.

Objections to such terms are also misdirected for the simple reason that they are so often ill informed regarding the history and compass of the terms themselves. While the rise of the scientific method in the natural sciences of the seventeenth century coincides with increasing use of the word "experimental" in English writing, the idea of the experimental was never restricted to the sense of scientific testing. Shakespeare writes in *Much Ado about Nothing*: "Trust not my reading, nor my observations. Which with experimental seale doth warrant the tenure of my booke." The word "experimental" used as an adjective has always carried the idea of experience, of having actual experience of something. The Puritan divines of early America used to speak of an "experimental knowledge of Christ," much as Reginald Pecock is cited by the *Oxford English Dictionary* for his fifteenth century usage of the term when he writes of: "The same hool noumbre of homeli and experimental witnessers of Cristis deedis." When I say of a poetry that it is experimental, what I mean is that it is in itself a mode of experience, that the language itself is an event, not a transparent screen passing us through to some ideal realm of epiphanic experiences the poet has had on our behalf, that the reading of the text, the deep interaction with the language, is an experience in the sense meant way back in the 1960s, when Jimi Hendrix asked listeners, "but first, are you experienced?"

Amiri Baraka used to complain of a poetry dedicated to presenting meanings that were "already catered to," poems that simply satisfied some ideational checklist the audience keeps in mind, ticking off points of predigested agreement. A fervent reader himself, Baraka did not believe that poetry was simply the fervent statement of things we find agreeable. A poetry of use was a poetry that was in itself an action (which is in part why so many mid-century poets were turning to "action painting" as an analogue for what they were after). "Hunting Is Not Those Heads On The Wall,"

was how Baraka titled one of his essays on poetics. "How You Sound" was another. Jazz improvisation was at the heart of Baraka's conception, as it came to be at the heart of Kerouac's. Not to say that every line was pulled out of thinnest air, but that after a long period of "wood shedding" practice, the artist is able to engage in the continuous generation of new form out of the accumulated vocabulary and repertoire.

And Baraka was my own point of entry into these modes of thought and composition. As a very young person, I saved what money I could and bought a copy of *The Dead Lecturer*, by one LeRoi Jones. Looking at the dedications in the book then, I had no more idea who Ed Dorn was than Robert Williams. Coming to a poem titled *"Duncan spoke of a process*," I at first had no clue who this Duncan was or what process he may have addressed, but the poem itself was, I saw, a process. It was not a poem that asked me to salute a prior meaning as I rushed past the words on the page; it was a poem that asked me, there in the field, to make meaning, to engage with the language as it entered me:

> I am where there
> is nothing, save myself. And go out to
> what is most beautiful. What some noncombatant Greek
> or soft Italian prince
> would sing, "Noble Friends."
> Noble Selves. And which one
> is truly
> to rule here?
> And what country is this?

This ending is characteristic of Baraka, whose first book included a poem ending with the question, "which of the masks / is cool?"

I have never been one to correspond with other poets, or with other people, truth be told, but I corresponded with this poem, which was the start of a sort of correspondence course in poetics for the younger me. I soon enough knew who Dorn and Duncan were, Olson and Spellman, Kaufman and Kerouac and Cortez; I came to know Joans and to follow Jones becoming Imamu becoming just Amiri. This constellation of names schooled me in what had come to be known as the New American Poetry, in many

ways opposed to the New Criticism, a New American Poetry evolving out of many of the same questions that gave onto post-structuralism and its close kin, the post-modern. As it happened, I did go to school with Amiri Baraka many years later. He turned up briefly at George Washington University during my graduate student years and I took his course in African American literature, continuing the studies of the subject I had commenced prior to my commencement from Federal City College. My own poem "In a Class with Baraka" proceeds from the experimentalism I had found in his earlier texts. "In the end then to a room / Half hangs outside" – My lines are built around sounds, a signifying solo – "English beats against the glass / Shadowing through the panes" - I write here of a "flight that exclaims," and of a poetry that transpires "In essential / Popular air."

Like many of my generation, what I turned against in the New American poetry was a faith in presence, most often signaled by a privileging of the poet's voice and of the breath as a unit of measure. I had no patience with the bardic stance adopted by some among even the most aesthetically radical of poets. When Olson, cautioning even Duncan, published "Against Wisdom As Such," that answered to so many of my visceral objections to a certain tone in poetry of both mainstream and margins, a privileging of the person of the poet. (Think of Bly's bardic intoning accompanied by dulcimers, of that annoying "poetry voice" so many adopt in public performance, of sanctimonious appeals to the supposedly heightened sensibilities of the poetic persona, as if a poet were a finely tuned device for the detection of spiritual emanations.) When I say that a poem is experimental, I mean that the act of improvisation that is a poem will never come to a resting place, though there may be rests in the music of the poem. Olson and Creeley asked how we could know what a poem was till it was *there*, under the writing hand, entering the reading eye.

I am not particularly a poet of place, though I go places and my work takes place. I am not an identity-based poet, though both my poems and I wear our identities on our shirt sleeves. For me the poem is not an end, it is rather, in the radical tradition of open field poetics:

The sprawling map I read
Against the road
In the changeling night

All art rests upon conventions, but art that is conventional is of little interest to me. Miles Davis used to say that to be a jazz musician you had to know a lot of clichés. By this he did not mean that a musician's playing should be clichéd, but that an artist needed to have mastered the vocabulary of the instrument. Typographical disruptions can in themselves hold a visual and intellectual interest, but they will not by themselves save a writing that is otherwise a banal checklist of the oft thought and usually better expressed. The standard mode of poetry writing in the American university workshop is a plain song with pretensions. The poem will so often begin with an observation of the natural world, move to a personal reminiscence, and culminate with an epiphany, at which moment the audience is to sigh with recognition and appreciation, gratitude for the sensitive poet's willingness to have braved the world of emotions and brought back a report for the seemingly less adept audience. Something along the lines of:

FACING MOUNT NITTANY
The clouds were low that day
As I followed my father up the slope
The rain had held and would hold
As we stepped one after the other
Mounting those same steps we had raised before
My father climbed above his heart that day
And I, I followed cloudlike close behind
And as we walked, we rose.

Of course, this poem has never appeared in print, and presumably never will again, but the pages of our literary journals are filled to overflowing with just such verses. To my reading, even such oppositional poetries as our latter day conceptual poetry, pale offspring of its late twentieth-century precursor, is still mired in uneventful language, determinedly so in most instances.

A far cry from cummings's "My father moved through dooms of love" as saccharine as that can be. Farther still from Baraka's "Something in the way of things / Something that will quit and cant start / Something you know but cant stand cant know / But get along with." Or, from my own *Stepping Razor*, in anticipation of Baraka's late volumes organized under the rubric *RAZOR:*

Listen to this
Things that cannot be compared
Streaming in before we've prepared
Adequate answer

As it happens, this is an experimental poem based on an experiment ("The Very Large Array"), an experiment that is still in progress, in process, like the poem happening here on the page and in the ear.

Hazel White

I write poetry for the experience of surprise, when strange electric words fall out on to the page and release a shock of arrival. The moment demands, with frightening authority, that the new emerged thing be given habitat, lodged in the work so that it breathes, an act that Andrew Joron calls "the translation of emergency" (*The Cry at Zero,* Counterpath Press). He writes, "Poetry forces language to fail, to fall out of itself, to become something other than itself – ."

My entry into poetry began with such a physical experience many years ago. I turned the page of a landscape architecture magazine and saw a photograph of a garden that made me shiver – and know, with physical certainty, I must stand in that garden. I did visit the garden, many visits over many years. Now it is in ruins, but I drive 700 miles and trespass to stand in it, and eat the figs on the familiar, now-neglected trees. I write experimental poetry because I cannot translate these physical experiences of sudden emergency into linear prose or conventional poems. I have to be able to write:

I lost my brisket, I mean basket.

I went to California College of the Arts to do an MFA in Writing to write about the garden, having failed to find a way to write about it satisfactorily, though I was a professional writer and had written of it often. I arrived in Kathleen Fraser's hybrid writing class. I remember the assignment: go to an art exhibition, look at an image, recall a moment in your

life, write a brief piece, write ten pieces in two pages. I liked writing fragments; they seemed honest; Kathleen called them poems.

* * *

My mother recited Wordsworth to me and named the wildflowers in the English lanes near the farm cottages where we lived. My summer jobs at college were working in hotels in the Quantock Hills, where Wordsworth and Coleridge had walked and written poetry. I walked the hills every afternoon, reading Wordsworth's *Prelude.* I didn't write poems then. I studied philosophy and literature and landscape. At age 30, I moved to California, and as poet and publisher Rosmarie Waldrop says of her arrival in the United States, from Germany, "the feeling of SPACE, of relatively wild space ... was overwhelming to me" (conjunctions.com./webcon/cooperman.htm).

Later, writing poems, or a hybrid of poetry and prose, at California College of the Arts, my teachers were well-known West Coast experimental poets, including Leslie Scalapino and Denise Newman. In a review of *Peril as Architectural Enrichment* (Hand + Star, London), poet Jaime Robles wrote: "To write poetry in the Bay Area is to be engaged in the experimental process; it's a subtle, pervasive aspect of the writing locale.... And if there is one thing that experimental poetry allows, especially poetry practiced by women, it's the broken utterance, an intersection of silence and speech that takes form as fragments or as sudden shifts between sentences or the ideas within sentences. This type of poetic speech rebels against the continuity of logic, and moves most often within the domain of emotion that has as yet not been uncovered by formalities of language."

Broken utterance – I didn't choose it as an obligation to be innovative; it was central to my experience as an immigrant, lost in the uncertainties of this different English and different culture and drought-prone landscape. I was drawn particularly to the work of Bhanu Kapil, a poet at Naropa University, Colorado, who grew up in London, and writes of migration as trauma. But it wasn't until I read the book jacket review of *Peril* by Bhanu that I realized I had written perhaps after all an English book. She wrote: "I put this book down and wept.... It is the first book of experimental writing I have read that is set in the place I am from."

Another poet who has influenced me is Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, also an immigrant. As I began writing poetry, I practiced writing long lines like

hers, trying to make sense, trying out shifts and slants to hold complexity far out into explorative space, needing a large space for that, until it broke. As Waldrop says of this country and its large spaces, "it's a natural site for a poetics of metonymy, of horizontal expansion." *Peril* is one long sequence of poems; one of its themes is horizontality; the reach breaks in a section called "Gravity Ignobly." And continues only in this way, by botanical synthesis:

> What plants do: in crisis, they change systems – take the greener future back just/ when – and then, intensely interior, thickening rather than reaching: they: seed.

* * *

In terms of form, I'm particularly interested in series. Like *Peril,* my newest manuscript of poems, *Vigilance Is No Orchard,* is also a poem sequence, and I'm experimenting, in work that is written for performance, with a "sonnet" form. Three years ago, for the Natural Discourses symposium at the University of California Botanical Garden, for an audience of scientists, artists, gardeners, museum curators, and architects, I composed and read a set of 14 linked, multispectival fragments written over 14 days and responding to that time and the place of the symposium. It allowed me to conflate language and landscape as experience, in a mischievous way that I felt sure then would not suit literary journals.

That was the start of my working off the page. The next sonnet was a response (outdoor presentation) to a land installation by artist Mie Preckler in Connecticut, and it in some way reckoned with colonialism; I grew up 45 miles from Bristol, England; the land installation was 47 miles from Bristol, Connecticut. Since then I have performed time- and site-responsive sonnets as public walks at the Headlands Center for the Arts, where I have been an affiliate artist/writer for the last two years, and at the Ecopoetics conference at UC Berkeley as part of the Groundwork event with other poets and a landscape architect (ecopoeticsgroundwork.blogspot.com), and most recently at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, a museum in downtown San Francisco, in response to Nathan Lynch's sculptures "Dead Reckoning," during the time of the Ferguson protests. This last sonnet

was published in the literary journal OmniVerse (omniverse.us/hazel-white-sonnet-to-dead-reckoning/) with images and web links to some of the fragments (on race, and war).

Is this work poetry? It's received at the site as "poetic" (ha!), but the language is crafted differently now it is off the page and in performance to a diverse audience, often of mostly nonpoets. The language is accessible and maybe only experimental now in its location of speaking, its pressing on hybrid form to create animation in public space, and its address of contemporary topics that are usually avoided.

I was influenced years ago by an interview of Myung Mi Kim (another well-known immigrant poet) by Yedda Morrison, titled "Generosity as Method" (epc.buffalo.edu/authors/kim/generosity.html). There, Kim talks about her idea "to work out as many different models of where poetry can exist, where poetry can be inserted, can be read, experienced, performed." Like many experimental poets, I worry about what experimental poetry is doing, what use is it, in this terrible time we are in, in regards to the continuing wars, racism, poverty, and environmental damage.

* * *

New media has drawn my writing off the page. Although I am still writing experimental page poems that are being published in literary journals, I am also exploring social media. My studio at Headlands Center for the Arts overlooks the Pacific Ocean and also a Nike missile site. Several afternoons each week, as part of the popular public tours, a siren sounds, and the bunker doors drop down, and through them rises a 1970s Nike missile, which once had a nuclear load. All over the hills here are military batteries from World War I and World War II. Six months ago, I chose Battery 129, which overlooks the Golden Gate Bridge, as the site for a Facebook project (facebook.com/Battery129MarinHeadlands). I visit the site and post twice a week. It has led me to writing about war, because I've met veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan there.

I'm beginning a transmedia project with poet Denise Newman at the UC Botanic Garden at Berkeley. We received a grant to make seasonal interactive installations along the creek, with a concurrent social media project written for diverse audiences. We quoted poet Brenda Hillman in our proposal: Speaking to Angela Hume about the complexities of our

relationship to the environment, she said, "The problem for the poet is always how to present these things in a nondidactic and imaginative way. For me, the situation calls for both an intense, unpredictable poetry and an imaginative activism, as writers and as citizens" (isle.oxfordjournals.org/content/19/4/751.extract).

In that essay, Hume describes the change that has taken place in "nature" poetry: "nature has long been aestheticized and idealized in verse," she writes, "But today, ... many poets are engaging with their environments and with the question of human environmental impact in increasingly critical ways." Ecopoetry is mostly defined loosely, as addressing the human within an ecological framework, for example. Beauty has become suspect. Land stewardship also. One theme in *Peril* was human behavior in place, in habitat, engaging in survival advantageous processes such as seeking view and shelter and finding voice. I read landscape theory, philosophy, and neuroscience. I'm interested in complex systems, generosity, the self-organization of poems and particles, incompletion, turbulence, and I track my thinking against my experience in landscape. I agree with Jonathan Skinner, quoted in the Hume essay, that ecological crisis is not a useful definition of what the new poetry is addressing; like him, I'm interested in "a practice of emergency," and what it includes: "the emergence of new forms of life."

Stephen Motika

The land made me a poet, or I should say the landscape of Western North America, a place of passage and return, exile and arrival, of settling and unsettling. I remember the difficult climb up over Emigrant Pass into the Panamint Range of Eastern California. As a child, I was fascinated by the word emigrant, a word much less common than immigrant, which floods the American language. We expect people to arrive here, not to leave.

We climbed up to Wildrose Canyon, where Chinese immigrants built kilns to support the upstart mining operations. They were used for a few short years before being abandoned in 1877. The miners were there one day and gone the next, evidence of this continent's cycle of arrival and departure. The immigrants in turn emigrants.

The word Panamint, the name for a division of the Shoshonean Indians of this desert region, means "water person." In this land of upside-down rivers, water is rare. In recent years, I've thought of these water people, wanting to know more about their language, their words. When the writer Mary Austin was here just over a century ago, native people still populated the region; she wrote of them in her books. Where now is their language?

Our time in the desert is often brief and we miss its poetic possibilities. It is best understood in the context of great duration, the long line of cloudless days, a rainless period that can last months, if not years, and the undulating basin and range topography dotted with the world's oldest living organisms. To live here requires a careful managing of resources, of water. It is also, I think, a key to living a long time. What kind of water people lived here? How should we live here? How might it be the key to our species' future?

The desert tests our somatic limits. Pushing the body, and as such, it pushes our language. People run from Badwater in Death Valley to the top of Mount Whitney, the lowest and highest spots in the contiguous 48 states, just 135 miles apart. These places, often, record the hottest and coldest temperatures. Extremes of elevation, extremes of temperature.

I didn't make that run, but found it on my map. I pinned the Eastern Sierra map up on my board and made lines that extended off the map. The orange crayon led to a new place, to my modernist dream of a desert museum. This was the first landscape of my poem, the first places where language adhered to the texture of the paper, mapping the language of my mind, creating a key. This was the extension to the nameless streets and cities I'd plotted as a young child, a growing rhizome of links and possibilities, a bridge from one type of mark-making to another.

Confronted with the museum of the mind, I focused on the site, or perhaps in the end, a "non-site." I saw this museum, this desert gathering, as a place to hold paper, a place with little humidity, a place where the light might be blocked. In the passing years, the paper museum in my mind has given way to a place of collections and concatenations; a place where objects, rocks, wood, plastic armature, and porcelain sinks coexist. I want to say that art and nature coexist in language; I want to say that the collection ultimately resides in words.

I came to composer Harry Partch, the desert troubadour, the way I arrived at Gertrude Stein, with a mixture of relief and wonder, and frustration. The instruments, our instruments, led us to these places. Arrogance can result in the erotic shifting of form, a shift of voice. Although she was old enough to be his mother, I think of them as being from the same generation, the same place.

In my mind, there are three modernists from Oakland: Stein, Partch, and Robert Duncan. I arrived here much later, to make sense of what their generation(s) contributed. To make sense of their unique way of articulating a new path for language, sound.

Recently, walking in Oakland, I felt the metal rail tracks under my shoes. A train passed through; it was both real and ghosted, its presence suggesting another time altogether. The old station is long gone, but the rails, nearly buried in asphalt, move goods, people. Arrivals, here. The 175,000 Chinese passing through Angel Island in San Francisco Bay in the early twentieth century, many of them imprisoned for extended periods of time. African-Americans arrived in Oakland during and after World War II. More recently, people have arrived from Asia and Latin America.

At age 12, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha migrated with her family from Korea to Northern California. In her life she stripped the language bare, shucking the letters from the branches of language. She wrote in *Dictee* about empire, language, translation, and the body. Although she talks of Korean lives, her languages here are French and English. She writes: "Words cast each by each to weather/avowed indisputably, to time./ If it should impress, make fossil trace of word,/ residue of word, stand as a ruin stands,/simply, as mark/having relinquished itself to time to distance" – a stopless end to the penultimate page of her book.

What words are asserted beyond the temporal so that all that remains are residue? When do words become vacated of their meaning? What force relinquished them? Through war, disease, and migration, the globe's diversity of language has become precarious, the multitudes winnowed down to the few. I understood the act of rediscovering work by twentieth century poets lost to a change in taste or the stigma of death by AIDS, but I'm only now beginning to grasp the expanse of languages that remain with us in ruins, as ruin.

What does a city do? How does it make meaning for us? Oakland has exhibited tensions of the last few decades, from Black Panther activism to the recent Occupy encampment and protests. How will the sweep of gentrification alter this fertile, if volatile, mix? How will we understand the power of language, written and spoken, when facing discrimination along racial, class and gender lines? I think of Claudia Rankine, who recently commented, "Imagining is an instrument for othering other people." How are we, as poets, implicated in the matrix of this statement? How do we, how can we work to trouble this instrument?

On my walk in the East Bay, I didn't find lost words on the streets. I thought to say, by way of an Ed Dorn book I saw in a bookstore, "Hello, Oakland," a performative greeting to this quintessential city. There was something erotic in Dorn's ludicrous hate of the "perverted"; it made me mad with excitement. I thought of the dry grass lining the hills like fur, the fine fur on men's legs. Everything deliciously dry, waiting to be soaked by rain or saliva.

The walk suggests the breath, which measures my actions, my words. I don't think it suggests any one line, but rather many lines, set on an uneven floor. That is also the space on the page: a place to understand language outside, beyond, the container of the poem. Can I say, in the words of Harryette Mullen, that I was "standing between and asking questions"?

I have struggled to like "poetry," with Marianne Moore's words "I too dislike it," running through my head. Viewing the glass flowers at Harvard many years ago was the first time I thought about the physicalization of poetry, although I often suspect that it's the Art's major achievement in the last hundred years, from concrete poetry to conceptual art. But poetry, or language, also describes the work of the body, and in this sense, Moore's likening "it" to "a place for the genuine" also speaks to me. Authenticity and sincerity couldn't be less interesting in our culture, and yet that notion of body and place has always mattered to me.

I resisted learning the poetic canon. An advisor gave me a packet of poems to memorize when I was in high school. I tucked them into a drawer. The great iambic poems slipped by me, like helium balloons I watched as they arced off into the blue California sky. I want to say that English

prosody was never my music, but then the music of poetry is never any one thing. Melopoeia as necessity.

Many poets wish to read and understand the history of poetry; I always wanted to study and understand the history of art. So that was the focus of my education, and today I feel comfortable walking through any western museum, able to identify many of the paintings. I don't have this ease of identification with poetry, so I feel distant from the poetic canon, freed to work in a space that's not beholden to any traditional form. This doesn't mean I don't also feel like an imposter.

Was Coyote an imposter? If you trick yourself, is that the same thing as tricking others? The Native populations of Southern California fell into two linguistic groups: *tuktum* (Wildcats) and *'istam* (Coyotes). Two moieties that create a language. Were some people both Wildcats and Coyotes, like the two spirit people of the Chumash? How might we span the definitions of our categories?

When I was younger, I dreamed of writing the great feminist American novel, something that would match Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*. I wrote a handful of pages, then nothing more, but it remained alive in my imagination for years. The project's fictional borders broke down, morphing into something fragmented, poetic. I won't say that I feel incapable of completing an extended project, but my plans for poems of long efforts disappear in the process of writing them. Often a poem I conceive of being extended ends up being a few pages. There is compression and extraction in the process of mark-making. The duration of the work requires that it spin out of an orbit, into another space of possibility, its very rules collapsing en route.

Thinking of durational work returns me to the desert, to the sculpture park of Noah Purifoy, who moved to the Joshua Tree and created his own extended sculpture project in retirement. But how many of us can count on that time, energy, or inclination in our seventies and eighties, to produce something definitive? More than that, produce something that calls for an extended, serial form? How many of us have a late style that realizes so many of our dreams, our hopes?

I grew up near the University of California, Los Angeles, and spent time in many of its various collections, from books and art, to the slides

in its botany collection, an archive all its own. I combed through the slide collection, carefully selecting an array of several dozen slides for a show at my school. The work was physical; I combed through hundreds of drawers, lost in Latin names and striking vintage photographs. I remember the vibrant colors of those mid-century slides, the collection I created shaped by a visual-poetic sensibility, the images and identification in some new conversation. Sometimes we must create our own version of things to find our way forward, no matter what people around us say, no matter if it involves language or not. Either way, there is poetry in it.