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Emily Critchley

A selection of North American women writers from the Greenwich Cross-Genre Festival (July 2010), and some thoughts about their work

“I begin *e pluribus*” (Jean Day)¹

Because this selection is “the unit of measure of the present” (Lisa Robertson) I begin enthusiastically among the established echelons, in generational terms, of North American women writers² to record and describe a little of what took place at the Cross-Genre Festival this summer. For, to corrupt a line from a Barbara Guest essay on H.D., an Englishwoman—myself—could see in American women the beginning of a beginning;³ in their variousness and riskiness—from newness to defiance, not forgetting, as Daniel Kane put it in the paper he presented on Patti Smith, their “willingness to stir up gender trouble”.⁴

Of course, that willingness is nothing like straight-forward, as the following selection—spread over two issues of the CLR—reveals. From Vanessa Place’s unsettling of the canonic (male) word (e.g., Shakespeare and the *Qur’an*), to Jean Day’s careful depictions of the “lived perspective”,⁵ her phenomenological explorations amongst knitting and peanut butter, in writing that is nevertheless just as tough. From Rachel Blau DuPlessis’ playful interpellations of second wave, French feminist theory, her poetic espousals of diffusion and otherness, to Lisa Robertson’s observation about the present, that: “There is less and less and the body can disappear easily”...

Vanessa Place certainly has a Patti Smith-esque affinity for confrontation and theatrics—demonstrated, for example, by the entirely silent

The Cross-Genre Festival was a three day conference, organised by myself with support from Carol Watts. It took place at the University of Greenwich, in July 2010, thanks to funding by ICAS, the University of Greenwich and Birkbeck College, University of London.

three-minute reading she gave at the Festival (from *Gone With the Wind*, we're told) and her piece here: "The marble flesh the gold peacock the elect chair the blue curl". The title alone, repeated with slight alterations in the poem's first line, puns on the phallogocentric pretensions of American (and European) legal regalia: hard "flesh", valuable "peacock"—or am I reading too much Katy Perry into this?—"elect", a mere consonant away from "erect", all designed to impress upon us the singular and indivisible natures of truth and justice; the understanding that: "click-click / we run this". Yet through Place's puns and intertextual play, much of it humorous—"sans teeth, sans eyes, sans propre, sans papiers (*San Diego*)" and "bastard we're thr"—are serious points about the difficulty of judging truth from lies, history from fiction (the "big manly voice"⁶ of "justice", versus a stupid "brute"⁷), amongst the heap of possibilities that language allows. The real setting of Place's poem, behind the pomp and splendour of its *mise-en-scène*, is a drowned night ("Nuit noie") of legal hell, in which writing about rubs up against writing from real-life cases of murder, treason (in the case of the Dreyfus Affair) and rape: "The second degree murder crime dealt with the strangling death of appellant's estranged wife."

Place, as both practising us attorney for the accused of such crimes and writer, in using such material, challenges our sensitive notions of what poetry is, and what it is for, interrogating the search for what we might call legitimacy beneath or in language at the base of both our literary and legal traditions:

1 Jean Day, *Enthusiasm: Odes and Otium* (2006).

2 Lisa Robertson is Canadian, though she lives in the us.

3 Barbara Guest originally wrote "An American could see in Swinburne the beginning of a beginning" in 'H.D. and The Conflict of Imagism' (1996). I think the inversion of nationalities for a model of poetic rebellion in the twentieth century is apt.

4 Daniel Kane, 'Patti Smith and the problem with "poetry"', presented at the Greenwich Cross-Genre Festival (July, 2010). In this, Kane considered Patti Smith's deliberate cultivations of a rock'n'roll poetic persona—her figuring that "conventional femininity might not be the best way to be her to be her generation's Mick Jagger".

5 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Cézanne's Doubt' (1945).

6 William Shakespeare, *As You Like It* (1599/1600).

The Supreme Court found error, noting that the crucial element in determining whether a statement is “spontaneous” is “have I broken your heart? the mental statement of the speaker. Although length of time between the startling event and the statement is not necessarily

There is an unnerving suggestion throughout Place’s poetry that our legal, religious, military and other foundational socio-political systems must then be supremely fallible, sharing, as they do, the unreliable nature of ‘creative writing’, resting so much on found text and the words, never mind the interpretations, of others. The clean divide between binaries, such as guilty / not-guilty, starts to look less impermeable, and we all begin to share in a culpability that is institutional as well as instrumental. Place does not exclude herself from this; indeed, Place places herself explicitly in the text: *Vanessa Place, under appointment by the Court of / Appeal, for Defendant and Appellant*. Her work foregrounds, then, what much contemporary, experimental poetry claims to: the very real political ramifications of the contingent and unreliable nature of language and, in performance, speech acts: these media we rely so much on, though the stakes in Place’s work become arguably higher once you know the sources of much of her found text.

Place’s provocative contributions to the Festival did not go unchallenged: her performances raised questions to do with issues of responsibility in authorship, the ethical dilemma of coopting the words, and real life suffering of others, into art, albeit to make points about the divide, though these were hardly resolved.⁷ Yet, to cite Place, perhaps we can “learn quite a bit by accepting this challenge and engaging in a heated debate”.

If Place’s undercuttings of linguistic centralizations of power come at us with all the “contingent singularity” (Place) of a hand grenade, Rachel

8 In an essay on Andrea Brady’s *Wildfire* (2010)—which Brady also read from at the Festival—Richard Owens makes an interesting comparison between this and Place’s trilogy-in-process (*Statement of Facts, Statement of the Case, Argument*), asking “how does one textually gesture toward suffering—or evidence of suffering or representations of suffering—in a meaningful way that does not betray that suffering and works instead to responsibly register and, if at all possible, stem or ameliorate it?” *Damn the Caesars* (June, 2010), damnthecaesars.blogspot.com/2010/06/working-notes-andrea-bradys-wildfire.html.

Blau DuPlessis' poetry is more celebratory of her position: "Writing from the center of, the centers of, otherness...";⁸ as characterized by the opening of 'Draft 102': "Happy birthday, Contingency". DuPlessis' repeated Cixousian rejections of linearity and teleology are comparable to Place's, but where Place uncovers suffering through error, DuPlessis finds *jouissance* in the limitlessness of possibilities it offers:

Error is obviously
the muse of this;
not Eros, not Erato, but
error compounding error
venturesome
and ecstatic
on a backdrop of enormous
fullness

The multiplicity at the heart of women's *jouissance*, as outlined by proponents of *écriture féminine*,⁹ is also reflected in DuPlessis' confusion of subject positions: "that other she was also, / he was, they were, and we", even when "writing herself" in(to) the text.¹⁰ So older Rachel comments on young Rachel, "That leggy girl-self" "Saw Rachel of the *longue durée* / she of the shadow poems / writing a name for a day / and writing of no name" in this poem that is "One-on-One" (and later, "One-on-one on one or another"): DuPlessis on DuPlessis, or DuPlessis on T. S. Eliot, or even an Irigarayan allusion to vaginal onanism: "a burning one-on-one, / the pleasure / that happens hap, with ruthless happiness"(Du Plessis) whenever these two lips speak. Compare Irigaray's

A women 'touches herself' constantly without anyone being

9 'Working Notes from Rachel Blau DuPlessis', *HOW(ever)*, 2:3 (May, 1985).

10 Because "woman has sex organs just about everywhere... feminine language is more diffusive than its 'masculine counterpart'. That is undoubtedly the reason... her language... goes off in all directions and... he is unable to discern the coherence." Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1977).

11 As per Hélène Cixous' suggestion: "Woman must write her self", 'The Laugh of the Medusa' (1975).

able to forbid her do so, for her sex is composed of two lips which embrace continually. Thus, with herself she is already two—but not divisible into ones—which stimulate each other.¹²

with DuPlessis’:

by any hold that flesh and light
could twist;
all found that they were
two ends
of the same rope,
wrestling with awe
at what they touched.
Themselves

Écriture féminine, with its chiasmic entwinings of female difference as sexual (physiological), as well as textual, and all its attendant pleasures, can be read, then, as the generative intellectual force, or, better, ‘fractalizing’ behind DuPlessis’ work. In ‘Draft 104: The Book’ she takes the (clitoral, but also originary, *Origine du Monde*) image of “one small dot / (if you can find it) / that contains everything / possible to know [...] but compacted into a single / explosive incipience” and presents it as *a* book, not *the* book, one book among many, subjecting it to similarly fractal (iterative and productive) treatment: “This sequence travels backward until the last thing visible is a dot. That dot is also a book.”

If DuPlessis’ poetry produces the Russian doll feel of infinite re-/progression, Robertson’s ‘Notes for a Cinema of the Present (handspan/fieldwork)’ attempts to record “This present” (note the deictic), all the while expressing frustration with the venture: “There have never been pens in this world. / We were never given the tools to do this thing” and “The problem with this model / is that the object does not await in limbo.” Hence the poem’s title: a draft, merely, for a different medium

12 *This Sex Which Is Not One.*

altogether. Yet the provisional quality of DuPlessis' 'Drafts', evoked, for instance, through their structural repetitions + variation, in Robertson's poem makes for a much darker atmosphere; it somehow serves only to underline the wrongness of the moment: "the information of our fear / is the present [...] the present / is sweating all night [...] the present is suffering [...] Now skepticism is the present, because the present is in the position of not believing".

'Notes for a Cinema of the Present' undoubtedly ruminates on the "invent[ed]" climate of "terror" that has subdued large populations into accepting war (hence the poem's military references). I read it too as a critique of the delusion we labour under that we have access to knowledge of, even proximity to the condition of others, as select representations of these (that we take for truths)¹³ get piped onto our screens, the "cinema", perhaps, of the poem's title?:

At night the students of the present would gather
to seek the dust of the present
in a selection of bizarre captions¹³
and the lateral access to phenomena.

Even the literature of the present, the poem seems to be suggesting, may be contributing to this desensitization, reducing our capacity for real empathy via its attachment to "discontinuit[ies]" and "non-convergence[s]" per se. Underlying the poem seems to be a call for an art that, conversely, does "More perceiving [...] into the *continuity* of relationships / into the thick flickering" (emphasis mine):

13 Again, the comparison with Brady's *Wildfire* is apt. Cf:
we have made our representations
besiege the represented and rep
resenters for honour
hey the task is serious: marathon irony
in which the man cradling his little son
is an instrument for a border

14 Robertson deleted this line in a later edit.

The present wants us to return to there being hunger in
aesthetics

[...]

What is has to do with sentences: neither repudiation nor
complicity need be entire.

[...]

Simultaneously an aesthetic of perception and an ethic of
conduct, these being inseparable.

In this way ‘Notes for a Cinema of the Present’ continues some of the highly political and philosophical threads of Robertson’s other writing: her interest in our relational, though problematic, phenomenology of being, the demands this makes on our “being-with-others”.¹⁴ For, despite the strong presence of the first person singular, the first pronoun to enter the poem is plural, and the overall atmosphere, communal. This is heightened by the primacy of the poem’s aphoristic-sounding statements, formed from the verb ‘to be’, which convey a desire for a collective thinking. Indeed, there is this phenomenological-existentialist tugging throughout the work, between finding ourselves ‘thrown’ (in both senses) in present conditions,¹⁵ and our potential and indeed duty to re-/construct the present, via the kind of ethics of perception Robertson is calling for.

That there are Wordsworthian traces in such “fieldwork” (the poem’s subtitle), is unsurprising, given her interest in Romanticism.¹⁶ These are

¹⁵ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (1927).

¹⁶ I.e., inseparable from, or woven into, the present, and also at a loss. Cf. Heidegger’s concept of *Geworfenheit* in *Being and Time*.

¹⁷ Robertson spent her time as the Judith E Wilson fellow of poetry at Cambridge University undertaking intense research into “the rhetorical structure of English meteorological description”, for which, she explains, “Wordsworth’s *Prelude* served as a guidebook for the rustic.” The poetic result was *The Weather* (2001), the epigraph for which, from Walter Benjamin’s *The Arcades Project*, resonates in the context of Robertson’s poetics generally: “Architecture, fashion—yes, even the weather—are, in the interior of the collective, what the sensoria of organs, the feeling of sickness or health, are in the individual... They stand in the cycle of the eternally selfsame, until the collective seizes upon them in politics and history emerges”.

manifested, for instance, in her poetry's search for an art of "moral relations" (Wordsworth), one which attempts to underline the "the present state" and simultaneously calls for an alternative:¹⁷ a "revolution [...] under the influence of a windharp"? There is something *Lyrical Ballads*-esque, too, in the poem's "image of the bent woman gathering / snails at dawn beside a dim field." Though this poem is not as concerned with gender as some of Robertson's work, its foregrounding of a sense that the present originates with a poor working woman is noteworthy. Later this same ignorant woman—"She does not yet know bout the abandoned quince tree"—gathers mushrooms.¹⁸ We are told "This is the economy" in a Benjaminian move from individual suffering to a collective politics, i.e., the plight of the working woman, at the mercy of society's lack of "equilibrium".

This urge toward the collective, in a poetic phenomenology of the present, makes Robertson and Jean Day comparable also. Though if Robertson's poem is cinematic / anti-cinematic, with its awareness that "the object does not await in limbo"—the end of the poem, for instance, has the effect of a film reel running down—Day's has more the 'feel' of a set of highly textured tableaux vivants, in which the imminence of objects is caught, poised, via the blurred edges of the poem's delineations, to fall or

fl[y]
 In the face
 Of the thing
 Of all things
 Gathered in a net

In another paper from the Festival, Corina Copp described Day's writing as "physical stuff that looks like notation or sketches, from time to

¹⁸ William Wordsworth: "at the present day [...] a multitude of causes, unknown to former times, are now acting with a combined force to blunt the discriminating powers of the mind, and unfitting it for all voluntary exertion to reduce it to a state of almost savage torpor." 'Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*' (1802).

¹⁹ Robertson later changed "bout" to "about".

time, that will then pitch its ‘muscularity’, as [Ron] Silliman has called it, at your head”.¹⁹ Indeed, Day’s visual and textual attentiveness to the detailed matter of the lived perspective, in a poetry of distinctly short lines, calls to mind Merleau-Ponty’s famous essay on Cézanne’s painting, how he produced the “impression of solidity and material substance” by “depict[ing] matter as it takes on form”.

We are invited, at the start of Day’s poem, not just to read its depiction of evening, but to be “into” it, as if into something solid—the preposition is American slang, of course, but also contains the suggestion of movement, as does the forward momentum created by the verticality of such brief lines—which then “Falls upon its hands”, and then *becomes* “you”, in the second section, “Up to your hands / And knees”, which the “I” of the poem then “fall[s...] into” in the third section, and so on. This emphasis on the perceptibility of objects and their movement, via a pattern of prepositions and distortions, their “light” and “lines”, is as if from a desire not just to represent objects, but to find them again, via their movement, behind the atmosphere of the poem, *à la* Cézanne, and for us to find them too.²⁰ Lines are always multiple, contours never exact; things get

Dressed up to look
Like your beautiful dream
Of matter

On the limb
Of light
Into late²¹

20 Corina Copp, ‘ATARAXIA: Freedom from Disturbance on the Work of Jean Day’, from the Greenwich Cross-Genre Festival (July, 2010).

21 Cf. Merleau-Ponty: “Doing away with exact contours in certain cases [...] The object [in Cézanne’s work] is no longer covered by reflections and lost in its relationships to the atmosphere and other objects: it seems subtly illuminated from within, light emanates from it”.

22 “Every thing / A parliament of lines / Queerly gathered / At the Water / Table / ‘It may have been a dream [or drain]’”.

Hence the feeling I described before of vibrational imminence.²³ Rebounding among the various descriptions of people and things, the dividing lines between which are rarely distinct in Day's highly enjambed work,²³ one has the impression both of having "something thrown at you" and also a "dawning" (Copp), of newness and surprise. "But what makes any word relevant is its ability to go and come back," Day writes in her prologue to *The Literal World*, to be a "thing about to happen to anyone".²⁴ Or as Copp put it so aptly in her paper on Day:

words are in suspense, waiting to be snagged, and when placed on the page, a physical act, they wait for relation, or the impropriety of appropriation.

[...]

The anxiety of suspension is met with the event of, albeit irregular, becoming.

Such an anxiety of suspension, compounded by Day's regular second person addresses: "you alone are author / I could tell you weren't into it", whether to us or to the poem's personae or to Day, either way the gap is full of expectancy, highlights the participatory nature of the poem. It also registers a kind of artistic 'doubt'; not the frenetic anxiousness of Cézanne—to be sure, there is too much warmth and poise, "Ataraxia" as Copp characterized it, in Day's work—but the kind I have written about elsewhere as an important, ethical artistic positioning,²⁵ e.g. "when

23 Barbara Guest, in 'Invisible Architecture', wrote that a poem should "quiver" slightly, as Edmund Hardy explored in his paper 'Barbara Guest's LITTLE GHOST: Notes on Colour, Politics and the Infinite', presented at the Greenwich Cross-Genre Festival (July, 2010).

24 E.g. "For the fruit / As soon as it moves / Becomes a line a / Knot as in cat".

24 Jean Day, *The Literal World* (1998).

26 Cf. Emily Critchley, "Dilemmatic boundaries: constructing a poetics of thinking", *Intercapillary/Space*, 1:4 (November, 2006); "[D]oubts, Complications and Distractions': Rethinking the Role of Women in Language Poetry", *Hot Gun!*, 1 (Summer, 2009); Leslie Scalapino's "alternative ways of seeing", *Delirious Hem*, (September, 2010) and 'Lyn Hejinian's "Faustienne Beings-With"', *Stress Fractures* (2010).

[wo/]man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts".²⁶ This is evident too in the poem's title, with its simultaneous sense of subordination and underlying depth,²⁷ and the feeling of belatedness,²⁸ even regret, that pervades the poem:

so we weren't
Revolutionaries
After all
But shit
For brains

An undersong of regret might also be read into the poem's questions: "Why indeed / Have I brought you here?" and "What shall I say so / Particularly?" Though, if regret is one of the shades in Day's palette, here, many of the same lines, such as the ones just cited, can be read as, conversely, worked through with humourous toughness, via the surprise juxtapositions of poetic language with slang that Day loves so much (and the inherent toughness of that slang, phonically as well as semantically):

Night fell.
Clouds exact their toll
A set number of smackers
Roll of fuzzy dice
Over steaming plate of rice

Always, the sensuous, mercurial surfaces of the poem save it from melancholy, and produce instead an impression of "fortunate confusion", as William Empson put it;²⁹ an atmosphere that buzzes, not with insecurity, but with unfixable and thus resilient potential.

26 From John Keats' definition of "negative capability" (1817).

28 *Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary* defines an 'undersong' as "1. The burden of a song; the chorus; the refrain" and "2. Accompanying strain; subordinate and underlying meaning; accompaniment; undertone."

29 The poem comes from a collection-in-progress called *Late Human*.

30 In his paper on Guest, Edmund Hardy wrote: "Poetry is the art of colour without fixity [...] of the infinite" and provides us with "fortunate confusion".

Author Info

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