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# PROJECT 1

## LABOR

## POETIC

## LABOR!

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**CURATED BY JILL MAGI**

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th your fellow-workers.

PLEASE READ THE OTHER SIDE.

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**PAULA AUSTIN**  
**PATRICK DURGIN**  
**PAOLO JAVIER**  
**TRINA MAGI**

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PROJECT 1:  
LABOR  
POETIC  
LABOR!

CURATED BY  
JILL MAGI

ESSAY PRESS LISTENING TOUR



#25

## ESSAY PRESS LISTENING TOUR

As the Essay Press website re-launches, we have commissioned some of our favorite conveners of public discussions to curate conversation-based chapbooks. Overhearing such dialogues among poets, prose writers, critics and artists, we hope to re-envision how Essay can emulate and expand upon recent developments in trans-disciplinary small-press cultures.

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"Understanding the meanings of work entails the position that it is at all points creative and—not merely productive—human activity."

(John Calagione and Daniel Nugent, "Workers' Expressions: Beyond Accommodation and Resistance on the Margins of Capitalism")

## No More Trudging Around in Heavy Boots: Introducing *Labor Poetic Labor!*

—Jill Magi

"So when it comes to my experience with labor the past 15 years, a good chunk of my adult life, it's inextricably bound to my own slippery identifications with/evasions of nationhood."

—Paolo Javier

"I want to put all the social-science frameworks aside and say: what if we look at lived experiences and ways of knowing without trying to prove either chaos or organization, whatever either of those mean? What if we just see that everyone produces knowledge! That everyone has a life of the mind! It may be simplistic or rudimentary, but we really only have intellectual histories of elite men, not even many elite women (as thinkers), fewer of black elites (men and women) and really none of poor and working-class African Americans."

—Paula Austin

"I wonder what happens when we go to the traditional domain of leisure, the entertainment industry (when we are reading, sitting in an auditorium or proscenium theater, church, school, Dr. Phil's studio, whatever), and then apply this sense of ambient, permanently mutable, total receptivity to the work. How is effort of audition redirected in/by a poem? How is it scripted?"

—Patrick Durgin

"The facts below are worth knowing because they show that the rejection and exploitation that many adjunct teachers experience constitute more than a personal, individual hardship. They are part of a collective experience resulting from a trend. Does knowing this make the hardship more or less easy to bear? I don't know."

—Trina Magi

**M**y purposes in putting this chapbook together were these: to make realities of economic struggle visible; to say that precarity impacts poets, citizens and aesthetics, and not necessarily in a negative way; and to assemble a document of resistance. Before I asked Paolo Javier, Paula Austin, Patrick Durgin and Trina Magi (the tripling of the sound of those names and then the familial doubling—so much excess and friendship, how

could I go wrong?) to contribute to this theme, here is some more of what I wished for:

I wished to understand individual economic struggle within a context, as Trina Magi's stat sheet does (look at the numbers she found; I want her research to proliferate; please send out and re-send, spread this word-and-number constellation)

So that when we are adjuncts, when we are workers without citizenship (a particular kind of precarity Paolo Javier lays bare, even as/because he will not stop making poems: the poet skating, looping across thin ice of circumstance, transnational identity, genre—a "crashingbringdown" moment as residual and persistent experience, a snippet of language from Ted Berrigan that Javier quotes to characterize the haunting memory of a father's struggle)

And when the sociologist knocks on our door to interview us because we are part of a cohort who is "at risk" (we know that we are not alone, and we are also not just that victim identity, structurally designed, into which we are slotted)

We are capable of making living texts of resistance (or, to use a term Paula Austin borrows from Walter Benjamin via historian Susan Cahn, we are capable of a document

that may come from and foster brand new “wish-images”; resistance aside, life is bound to flourish; there are unimagined futures ushering forth from archives and voices for whom an imagination so rich was not thought possible)

And I wished for an image of resilience through struggle and even resilience as spontaneous outcome. I wished for a poetics with enough courage to name the struggle. I attempted this in my 2014 book *LABOR*. And this newer project echoes, because—

Feeling done with that project, yet still filled with questions *LABOR* could not answer, I wished to further problematize my own belief in the poet and intellectual as heroine. All this resilience. Is she? Am I? Are we? Why do the women characters in *LABOR* end up together, triumphantly, in “the room no one knew we were building”? Why don’t I believe in this ending? And I am not a nihilist, either—

So I went to talk with others because I needed help in my search for an aesthetic that could forefront the multifarious meanings of “work” and even “change,” including the lean toward “total receptivity”—in reading, making, being. It is Patrick Durgin who suggests that this state of receptivity hinges on shedding the modernist

baggage of poet as “craftperson,” as expert in the economies of “versification.”

And so women on the job might not band together. A disgruntled worker may not write about work at all, and a skilled poet may make a boring text, and probably an official poet will evade writing the economic realities that press. But what if, at every turn, everyone writing releases our expectations of “good word work,” necessary texts, thesis and lyric, the push toward justice? What if we call none of this “necessary”? What then? Do we then stand a chance at finding real power? No wonder Durgin begins with a story about delirium and ends with a note on Jackson Mac Low’s term “pacificism.”

Finally, the title of this chapbook is not a misprint. I have doubled “labor” in order to call attention to its many meanings and tones, including overwhelm and release. And I have sandwiched “poetic” inside that overwhelm to signal “a poetics”—a way of making work and living life that entertains context, subtext. But as you follow these conversations, you will see that the very meaning of poetry and poetics is up for grabs. Work also? This project’s title ends in an exclamation mark, an upswing, toward flight, a register away from down, from trudging around in heavy boots.

The small, the lyrical, the sociological imagination, irony, the hermetic, fiction, the archive, cut up and whole. Beauty and disgust, ritual and cohort, lone wolf and collective. Jobs and UI. Contract and breech. Green card and index cards, currencies and values. Scripts and numbers, mergers and splits. "Tell a little story," Trina Magi reminds us, and work a little theory. Keep. Going. Relax. Labor, poetic labor!

On Re-vision, Livelihood, and  
"Because Pao-logos won't help  
with collage":

A Conversation with Paolo Javier

(January–April 2015)



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**Jill Magi:** One of the things I want to explore around “poetic labor” is verbal playfulness on the job. So I’m thinking of “labor” here in terms of the culture of work and the complexities of worker subjectivity—poetry as a feature of that. I’m thinking about those times when workers cut up in the lunchroom, back storeroom, reception desk (often when the boss is not around). Some hold court in those situations and tell great stories and really try to make others laugh. Those times are a feature of what I love about work and the workplace.

Paolo, you explore humor and word play in *The Feeling Is Actual*. I’m thinking of your piece on Filipino signs and your use, even, of Basquiat’s texts: Basquiat as art-world trickster. And some of your poems incorporate colloquialisms “gone wrong” in very funny ways (for example, in “Projection 2, Funny Love” there is “Your laugh is an infection / You are a blessing in the sky / You cut to the cheese”), and these lines present such vulnerability on one hand, and a spirit of lyrical adventure on the other. The speaker who hasn’t mastered the expression uses it anyway, and becomes

a poet as a result, incidentally. This reminds me of my rather bombastic, verbal Estonian grandfather who didn’t care about getting English 100% right, so he made many mistakes, and we made fun of him, we were embarrassed by him, and we loved him for his speech ways.

I wondered if you had anything more to say here about this. Can you connect word play, humor and power? But is the “power” angle a theoretical add-on that eclipses the fact of everyone’s (even “the workers’”) interiority? Robin D. G. Kelley explores some of this in *Race Rebels*—revealing the limited sightlines of mainstream “labor history,” which look for visible “resistance” instead of things like everyday humor. What are the poetics of this?

**Paolo Javier:** You know I’m so glad to hear you connect the humor in *The Feeling Is Actual* to your own wonderful memories of your grandfather. I actually know what it’s like to be on both ends of the “joke,” however “actual” it may be! And I suppose my book attempts to honor this, warts and all. There are different registers of funny throughout *TFIA*, a variety I was very conscious to explore in a book of interdisciplinary poems that I also hoped would challenge tired notions about immigrant literature, especially by Asian Americans.

While making the book, I was thinking an awful lot about how my worldview has been shaped by my experience



as an immigrant to/in North America. (I first moved to the U.S. in the '80s with my family, then to Canada in the '90s, then back to U.S. on my own in '99.) When I started to gather materials for *TFIA* sometime in late 2009/early 2010, I was in the midst of applying for a green card. Thus I was preoccupied by concerns about my legal status to work in this country. Even though I'd be obtaining my permanent residency through legit means (i.e., love), we were only a few years removed from the PATRIOT Act. It didn't matter that I was applying as a naturalized Canadian citizen, either. My origin country, the Philippines, has long been a target of the U.S. deportation agencies, well before September 11<sup>th</sup>. Fact: Pinoys back home, for as long as I can remember, have liked to use the term "TNT," or "tago ng tago," which translates to "always hiding," in reference to our own undocumented workers in the U.S. And I know about TNTs first-hand, having an aunt on my father's side who lived and worked as one in New York for many years in the '80s, and a late aunt on my mom's side who never got to visit the U.S., her lifelong dream, because the American Consulate in Manila denied her application for a tourist visa time and again on the grounds that they suspected she would go TNT on them upon her arrival to JFK (a ridiculous scenario, given her status as a housewife in Manila raising three young children, not to mention her happy marriage to a husband who held down a well-paying, steady job as a director at one of the

top ad agencies in the city). So yeah, I had good reason to be nervous about my green card application. Prior to submitting it, I made my living as an adjunct professor at various colleges and universities in the tri-state area through NAFTA's TN Visa, which I had to renew at the U.S.-Canada border before each term. To supplement my income, I would hustle for freelance gigs or teaching jobs (usually tutoring) under the table. Not surprisingly, I would have zero savings by the end of the academic year—and no work over the summer.

So when it comes to my experience with labor the past 15 years, a good chunk of my adult life, that is experience inextricably bound to my own slippery identifications with nationhood. Looking back, I realize that *The Feeling Is Actual* was made while I tried (unsuccessfully) to recover the various classes I'd given up for a year-long visiting-associate professorship at the University of Miami in 2008/9, a year in which we not only saw our first non-white president get elected to office, but our economy free-fall in ways not seen since the crash of '29. I took the job in Miami to put myself in a position to apply for tenure-track jobs later in the year, and I made it as far as finalist for two assistant-professor positions, both of which, alas, ended up going to local candidates. Who knows how I would've fared if the economy hadn't tanked? (One of the chairs of the committees actually gave this as a reason for hiring the other candidate: go

figure.) Unfortunately for me, who felt real good about my chances of securing both jobs, I didn't bother with a backup plan, and never thought to reach out to the various department heads of the colleges I taught at in New York to recover my classes, until it was too late. When I returned to the city in the summer of 2009, I had zero teaching prospects for the fall and spring. I struggled to find work (any work, even a front-desk job) that year, and found myself on unemployment insurance until it ran out the following summer.

As for *TFIA*'s interest in humor and its various registers—I suppose it's some response to the hand I was dealt then. Bill Murray, one of my favorite actors, reminds us in the book's second poem: "he's got to be able to make you laugh. You need that."

But writing *TFIA* was no joke. In trying to bring such disparate forms (found poem, screenplay, collage, list poem, monologue, comic book, radio play, travel essay) together in (no, as) a cohesive book, *TFIA* could have easily ended up a hot mess. Hands down, it was my most exhausting experience working on a book, not least because it felt more like something I needed to *make* rather than write. I remember working on the first draft of *TFIA* every single day of the workweek over a three-month stretch. Serena would head off to work, and I'd dive right into it. Because I don't have a studio or a

separate writing room, I would clear out our living room to create floor space to lay out all the poems. This is how I worked on the individual drafts, and their sequence with one another. I relied on shamanic intelligence (my duende, faculty X—whatever you wanna call it), because Pao-logos won't help with collage. And then at some point the writing process became more like film editing. Rather than read through the manuscript, I would devote long hours to looking at each part before making any edits. Literally, a re-vision; I wonder if this is the leap I made from my previous book, *60 lv bo(e)mbs*, which was guided primarily by sound.

**JM:** What you relay here is really intense, Paolo.

And I am really happy to find out about your process putting together *The Feeling is Actual*. Anyone reading this might say you were living "a poetics of precarity"—that various unknowns underwrote your making, your person. Even spatially: the need to use the floor, that ancient demarcation of space as work zone, living zone, sleeping zone, play and eating zone, is powerful to me. That "lack" of space perhaps gave you a certain cinematic or aerial view on the work.

**PJ:** You are so right about that, Jill. Also, it makes sense for the author of a book that explicitly points to visual

artists and filmmakers to fold some aspect of their praxis into his own!

**JM:** So does precarity engender tenacity? In other words, is it productive? I waiver on this question in my own work—and am curious what you might say about “poetry” and this state/statelessness of being.

**PJ:** Where there’s a will, there’s a way. I credit my father’s work ethic and steely resolve for inspiring such... stubbornness. Papa never once showed us siblings any sign of stress or worry, even as the savings ran out, or when his dream business tanked. Papa remained optimistic no matter the setback, and never let our shitty situations, as there were several, bring him down. He is so tough, mentally. I also think it’s something a lot of immigrants come equipped with to the new country: this urgency to make the most of an opportunity, to look at everything half-full, and get things done no matter the challenge. In my case, I was always aware of my time in New York as borrowed, and this profoundly informed/affirmed how I moved through the city in poetry, and vice versa.

I started to make *The Feeling is Actual* in my early months of unemployment following my return from Miami, and worked on the book throughout that winter, continuing into the new year. I had all this free time. Hanging over

it, however, was this tremendous uncertainty about everything: my job prospects, my residency status. I was apart from Serena during our first year of marriage, and so for me to come back to her with such burdens...it was stressful.

As a poet, naturally, I felt the need to respond to my experience in writing. But rather than directly address my complicated situation, I wound up making a book of love poems for Serena that sense their way through our entire time together. All the poems point to our life: cinema, karaoke, art shows, FOBlish, film subtitles, post-it reminders. It was key for me not to write a book “about” domesticity, but to make one cut from its cloth. Hence *TFIA*’s foray into alchemical text: collage, comics, founds (Bern Porter). Serena and I have been legally married for almost six years now, but have been a couple for 12—quite the bewildering reality for this Filipino/Canadian/American’s dislocated soul.

But hey, we all create and work through our karma. How could I not feel dislocated, given the nature of my profession? Teaching part-time in a country I’m not even a citizen of? Then again, no one forced me to lead this kind of life: not my parents, not my close friends in B.C. I certainly could have remained in Vancouver, and kept on freelance writing and temping to make ends meet, while staying involved with the city’s poetry community.

When I moved to New York, I had just broken up with my girlfriend of four months, who knew better than to wait around for me. I definitely could have played it safe and remained with her to see that experience through, because we were old friends prior to dating. She also really loved me, and was ready to get serious. I could have remained with her in B.C., found a way to make ends meet, to write my poetry on the side. Ironically enough, when I left Vancouver in '99, things felt like they were looking up for me.

The truth is, Jill, that I despised that city, its people. I also deplored the weather. It gave me seasonal-affective disorder, and I battled depression every single day that I lived there. As new immigrants to Canada in the early '90s, my family went through hell trying to find our land legs in "beautiful British Columbia," which had sunk into a recession that every Vancouverite remained in denial about. My dad left his lucrative job at a multinational company, where, since the '70s, he had worked his way up to a regional CFO—for what? A "better life for the family" in a province that wouldn't even afford him a managerial post in a gas station planted in the boonies of South Surrey, half an hour from the Washington border? The class narrative might be reversed, but it's still your quintessential immigrant struggle. When my dad was finally able to secure a steady-paying job ten arduous years had passed, his credit card debt had

accrued due to his failed business, and the banks were after our house. This new job he took, fittingly enough, would draw him to Ontario, where we should have moved a decade before. (My mom has two sisters in Toronto, a city that is a half-day's drive to New York, where my dad's two sisters lived.) Our family survived this "crashingbringdown," to quote Ted Berrigan, but I'm certain my work ethic (creative and professional) has been profoundly shaped by it.

As you well know, I left academia back in 2013 to pursue public school teaching. And I made this decision for practical reasons: a better salary, awesome pension and health benefits, shorter tenure track, and membership in a formidable union. I was also sick and tired of working as an adjunct. Most important of all is that I decided to go for my Master's in Teaching shortly after Serena and I found out we were expecting Saya, our daughter, who is about to turn two this summer. Now I'm three-quarters of the way through my first year as a middle school ELA teacher, and I can't stress enough to you how exhausting, punishing the experience has been. I work for a corrupt principal (a charter-school wolf in DOE clothing) and co-founding staff in one of the worst districts in New York—East New York. But at no point since I began this job last September have I regretted my decision. Being a schoolteacher is a job that allows me to teach, which I love to do, but also gives me much-

needed separation from my role as a poet—quite the opposite of my experience in academia, wherein the prospect of securing a teaching post always seemed contingent on my creative practice and output. I’m actually surprised by how long I lasted in academia, given the kind of poetry I publish and like to champion. After all, most MFA programs that offer job security such as tenure to their faculty are conservative by nature, and typically anti-intellectual in their pedagogy. Poets like us deserve better, no?

**JM:** I hear you, Paolo, but I have honestly been trying, very hard, to remove myself from the idea of “deserve”—because that notion got me into a very damaging, heart-breaking cycle of expectation/disappointment/jealousy. Of course I can say this now that I have a job that, while it is not ideal and has little to do with MFA writing, really supports me. “Thank you Sheikh Mohammed” is basically all I have left in answer to the question about what I “deserve.” Who knew life would bring me here, and I’m pretty sure there are lots of us who walk around Abu Dhabi wondering this very same thing.

**PJ:** Thank you Sheikh Mohammed, indeed! It sounds like your new teaching post also makes it possible for you to explore other artistic practices, in addition to traveling a lot more. Talk about small door closing, massive window opening....

**JM:** Yes, true, and I’m grateful. Back to your work—and its working through location, connection, love.

I sometimes think us “experimental poets” are not supposed to write about love. And then *The Feeling is Actual* reminds me that being with another is not just a buffer against what life sends your way, but it is ultimately connective, it is the ultimate meeting over difference that we can possibly experience: perfect grounds for the poem! Like in the section “Heart as Arena,” in the poem “Batman That One,” you are obviously employing found text, but it’s so mediated through this voice that decides:

It all boils down to/decision of/white men/we are  
still/Goths/at their mercy/whiteface staring down  
midnight/youre alone/I cant rely on anyone/  
these days upside down/camera/moves upside  
down.

And the text is all askew, unaligned, signaling a voice trying very hard to stabilize things, to see “properly,” to locate the self and find comfort.

And I love the negotiating of this togetherness that comes through in *Goldfish Kisses* (the love poems for Serena), and I was really honored to publish that, Paolo. It’s a beautiful book, with Ernest Concepcion’s illustrations fused with your words, and it comes across

as “accessible” but it’s really such a private language. Is poetry that place for you: super specific references, minimalist landscapes, extreme privacy within public landscapes, and a near-total aloneness in language that, at times, almost ironically, signals deep connection? Have you ever thought about your work in terms of that push/pull? I think it’s one of the strengths of your work, but wondered how you might articulate those poetics.

**PJ:** Now you’re really making your brown friend blush here! I wrote the following about my poetics in a recent grant application:

The spirit of questing, innovation, and hybridization across genres and cultural boundaries runs throughout my work—a postcolonial echolalia sounded within the margins, from inside the hyphen’s generative and po(e)tential space. My work embraces twentieth and twenty-first century North (Asian) American and European avant-garde poetry and praxis; prosody; postcolonial and transnational studies; poets theater; comic books; sound art; and international cinema.

But I like your description way more!

What I find consistent about my writing practice is the value it places on emotion and intuition, improvisation and play—to generate and develop the poem. I also spend quite a long time inhabiting the poem (co-habiting, in the case of *TFIA*) before I send it off to editors. Thus I wonder if my poetry “signals deep connection,” as you generously describe, because of such intimacy with language that the reader can pick up on? Especially since my poems often show or point to the writer’s hand, even in their final, published versions.

**JM:** Yes, totally possible. Emotion is quite present in your work, but doesn’t obfuscate either. It’s not nostalgia or Romanticism. Its intensity becomes something else altogether—really admirable, to me. I think about Alice Notley’s tightrope of intensity when I read your work. And then I think of the laughter in a lot of ’90s Nuyorican poets also, like The Reverend Pedro Pietri who could critique an entire system, his people, himself, and poetry itself in one poem about how his shoes hurt his feet because he’s too cheap to buy good shoes.

Finally, will you tell us about a couple new things, such as your new book with Nightboat? And would you update us on what it’s like to be a “working poet” who is a public school teacher in New York City? Can you say what your job may do for your poems?

**PJ:** Wow, lots of ground to cover here. Let me try and answer your questions in reverse order....

I have a long essay on baby talk, private languages, demonic possession, the occult and sound poetry appearing soon in [Ear/Wave/Event](#), an online journal devoted to sound-art studies. Perhaps this essay serves as my initial response to being a new dad. It's also the first part of an ambitious new undertaking that spans the book, libretto, live performance and audio recording. Can't really tell you more than that, right now, but rest assured it's a project that's going to push my work in a whole new direction.

My new book, *Court of the Dragon*, is being published this month by Nightboat Books—also the publisher of your terrifically signifyin'icant *LABOR*. In the UPNE catalog, I put on my publicist hat to describe the new work as:

intimate and elusive, a simultaneity brought to the fore by the author's interest in the occult and intuitive processes, in oblique and plain spoken discourses. Politically and erotically charged, *Court of the Dragon* eludes programmatic ideology, packaged identity politics, and confessionalism in its interrogation of the praxes of everyday living. Written over the course of a

year, this striking new book conjures its future through intuition, improvisation, and magick.

*Court of the Dragon* marks my return to the long poem. But while *60 lv bo(e)mbs* engages the poetic fragment, my new book explores the longer line by way of automatism, chanting, sigil magick and incantation. The book's title references the second chapter of Max Ernst's *A Week of Kindness*, and Robert W. Chambers's story "In the Court of the Dragon" from *The King in Yellow*—his collection of interlinked weird tales that inspired HBO's first season of *True Detective*. (I began working on *CoD* well before that show came out, but I'm a huge fan, so lovely coincidence.)

I continue to work on my poems while holding down this new job as a middle school teacher. I love my students, but most are level-1 and -2 readers, with the majority of them bearing little to zero understanding of classroom norms and etiquette. A lot of my kids, in fact, operate at a kindergarten or first-grade attention level. They are that easily distracted. Hence much of my teaching is about managing student behavior, and hammering home to them how best to proceed in a successful learning environment. (Shameful fact about most graduate education programs: they won't give you the low-down on teaching a high-needs student population. No wonder 40% of new teachers leave the profession after their first year.)

And while I realize that my job as a public schoolteacher doesn't require much of my own literary background and experience, neither will it take away from the energy necessary to continue writing my poems—which is crucial for me right now. My main question when I decided to pursue this new profession was: how much will public school teaching affect my writing? Thankfully, what I face is primarily physical exhaustion, a problem I'll welcome any day over the far more debilitating intellectual and mental fatigue that results from adjuncting at three or four different colleges a semester in order to make ends meet in this expensive city. Ever since I began working for the DOE last September, I've found myself writing every day on the commute to and from my school. In spite of all my challenges as a first-year teacher, I've managed to embark on new projects, and to even see my new book of poems through to production. It's also a relief to be paid a regular salary for once, and to be provided with terrific health and dental benefits, a sweet pension plan.

However, I'm not completely dismissing the possibility of a return to academia, provided that the right opportunity presents itself. I'm so over adjuncting! Nevertheless, I can see the value and appeal of a 2-2 teaching load per semester with a tenure-track post, and I'd consider such an offer if it comes from a school and department that

respects what I do, what I am about, and what I can bring into the classroom.

**JM:** Paolo, students and colleagues would be lucky to have you. But it is also exciting to know that your writing is continuing, and that you have no regrets about your teaching, even though it sounds intensely difficult. Your East New York students are lucky. So if I may, I'd like to end this conversation by turning to the last page of *The Feeling Is Actual*, because this passage has been, for me, such a meditation on "staying put" as well as giving over to rapture—on letting a place (virtual or actual) "work" on a person, and via poetry:

the sea is warm  
and the horizon is soft  
like the phrase "ebb and flow"  
it likes to run toward the sea  
windward at sunset  
images those sounds  
smell and places  
shanghai? ive been there before  
it feels like being embraced  
by the deep blue sea  
i don't want to leave here

**PJ:** Thanks Jill.



“What if we just see that everyone produces knowledge!”:

## A Conversation with Paula Austin

(February 2015–April 2015)



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**Jill Magi:** Paula, I am so excited for this conversation, because I have two lines of questions for you: one on content and the other on process and form. Not that these two are separate, but, if I unbraid them to begin, I trust our conversation will approach the whole that has been your “labor” for some years now.

First, on content: will you recap your research for us? What archives have you been working in and what made you interested in the subjectivities you found (or didn’t “find”) there? Second, on process and form: what has your research and writing process looked like? What are the poetics—the ideas informing the form you chose for the writing? Did you find the form intuitively and then make a poetics after you were on your way? Or was there theory that told you the writing needed to be a certain way?

**Paula Austin:** First, it’s really great (and also a little daunting) to be asked to talk about this project I have been working on for the last six years. When I think back to the first two years or so, the project feels the same,

but it looks and is very different now from what it began as. I don't know that I was looking for a dissertation topic when I became interested in E. Franklin Frazier's *The Negro Family in the United States*. This book, published in 1939, is filled with excerpts from interviews he did while he was head of the sociology department at Howard University (and of course it is the book that Moynihan uses to support his pejorative report on poor black urban families in the late 1960s). I remember reading those excerpts and wondering about the people being interviewed. And somehow I made a decision to go to Howard's Moorland Spingarn Research Center to see Frazier's papers. When I began to go through them (rather haphazardly) I found interviews he had done for a book on black adolescent personality development, and I became more interested in the young people—how they were talking about themselves, their interests, their activities, their experiences, their motivations, their aspirations. I don't think I thought about any of it as "subjectivity" or as "interiority," which is what the project has evolved into, "Narratives of Interiority: Black Lives in the U.S. Capital, 1919–1942."

Because I found the interviews literally cut up—typewritten and handwritten transcripts were cut up by question/theme, and pasted onto large index cards that were coded with numbers and letters. So an individual's answers had to be reassembled into a whole interview,

with a flow, and I became interested in seeing how a person was answering or not answering questions, or how they were talking about things that they weren't specifically asked about—unsolicited (and many of these answers don't get used in the subsequent book and reports). So my process included reassemblage, and then reading, reading, reading the reassembled interview, then doing some other research to see if I could find this person in the census or in the city directory, to kind of track their movement since birth and then in D.C., to see about the kind of work they did, who their neighbors were, if other people refer to them in their interviews (which, for the young people, often happens—they're neighbors, classmates, friends, etc.). Then I started writing narratives for each person, and family stories. That was the best part of this project, writing those narratives. It got considerably harder when I then had to figure out how they fit in a chapter and how that chapter was going to function.

**JM:** It is interesting to see that sociologists, in order to forward a particular narrative and ideology, cut up and arranged interview answers into narratives that were "functional" for their goals. It's a good reminder that compositional practices are usually at the service of an ideology—whether stated or not! So your project's goal, would you say, is to "re-read" or "revision" those subjectivities in light of a reading that does

not take black poor and working-class subjects as pathological? I'm asking here if you can provide us with a bit more context (the Moynihan legacy, and so on), the historiography against which or toward which you are writing? And then process: can you describe how it feels to write these (are you channeling them, remaking them, honoring them?)? What pronoun do you use—are the narratives in the third person? And would you elaborate on the “fitting in” you had to do as chapters grew?

**PA:** The narratives are written in the third person. I think the reason I loved writing them so much is because it was very reminiscent of my fiction-writing undergraduate (and then post-undergraduate) life. And even now, when journaling doesn't quite work (therapeutically), I often resort, although that is not the right word, maybe just turn, to fiction writing, to writing about myself and my experiences in the third person. It helps to put things in a larger perspective, which I think is what I did with the narratives—contextualizing individuals' lives and experiences within 1930s Washington, D.C., within the larger social-scientific project of understanding black migration and urbanization, and the larger urban history context of the impact of Jim Crow's racial-segregationist system on African American (and specifically poor African Americans') lives. In this way D.C. is special, in that it is trying to make itself the national (and international) symbol of democracy, but has this restrictive system in place

(that has a race, class and gender geography attached to it). And I think yes, I wanted to re-see black urban lives as if they had never been deemed pathological (if that is possible), or black urban lives portrayed as on the road to adaptation and assimilation (which is what social scientists of the early-twentieth century thought about both black migrants and white ethnic immigrants—that these new modern urban spaces caused them to become collectively disorganized, and so they were on a natural progression towards modernity). So you can see that Moynihan, who is a trained sociologist, and who writes about the culture of poverty, is late to this idea of a culturally pathological urban resident. Others lay the groundwork for him, including black sociologists who are trying to show the ways in which these “cultures” are the results of structural flaws that require policy changes (at the level of the federal government—which I suppose is what Moynihan is also arguing). It's just that they take for granted a particular notion of what is an “organized” and “functional” family. OK, enough about that! Sorry, I can go on.

**JM:** Actually, I would love it if we paused here. The consideration of these two words makes me think of your poetics, if I can call it that: your method of seeing or recognizing intentions that may have been good, but digging deeper into the rhetoric, into the words, to see how limiting “organized” and “functional” end

up being. I keep bringing up poetics and “word work” because it seems like a poetics of resistance works with language itself—and it’s not detached semiotics, nor is it a proposal for a particular policy change. (I don’t know if “resistance” is the right word. What do you use? “Revision”? “Resistance” always, annoyingly, sets up our work on the service-return end, which is always defensive, if I can use a tennis metaphor!) I think you are suggesting that we should look at the very words we use and what we mean when we use them. So can I ask you to unpack how you have come to read “organized” and “functional” in the context of your work with this archive, these subjects of history? What about the impact on the contemporary situation when we recast these words? What light might your work shed on the present, and do you believe history studies can shed new light?

**PA:** Jill, thanks for this question. Importantly I think I am interested in putting these frameworks for looking at black poor urban families aside—this categorization of “functional” and “organized.” This framing had a very particular meaning, grounded in somewhat Victorian notions of gender roles. And of course it was supported by structures that made it seem as if these notions were natural: fathers as breadwinners and disciplinarians was supported by the fact that men made more money than women, the “family wage”; (white middle class) women were only just beginning to enter the workforce, and

couldn’t stay in the workforce once they married, etc. But, I want to put this framework aside. I want to put all the social-science frameworks aside and say: what if we look at lived experiences and ways of knowing without trying to prove either chaos or organization, whatever either of those mean? What if we just see that everyone produces knowledge! That everyone has a life of the mind! It may be simplistic or rudimentary, but we really only have intellectual histories of elite men, not even many elite women (as thinkers), fewer of black elites (men and women) and really none of poor and working-class African Americans.

I think these social-science frames still exist today (newer ones) about urban poverty, etc. We conflate culture with behavior, and still seem unable to make real structural changes (or acknowledge the full impact of histories of structural inequality). I was surer when I started this project of the potential contemporary significance. Honestly, this week I don’t quite know. I think I thought that if we could hear the voices of poor and working people themselves, and could hear the analytic frames they had developed and mobilized in their everyday lives, it could give us a more complex picture of life, and could somehow inform different approaches to structural inequalities (or more real approaches to structural inequality). But truthfully, our economic (and social) systems are based on the

existence of structural inequality, so it is unlikely that these kinds of fundamental changes can occur.

What is interesting though in thinking about the notion of contingency (especially when looking back at a moment in history), what has been kind of amazing to me is thinking about these young people—poor, living in poor communities, who seem to have a real sense that adolescence is a developmental stage, and who think about, craft, dream about their futures. If we think about the material realities of their lives (Jim Crow segregation, racial discrimination, economic disparity, political disfranchisement because they live in D.C. but not solely because they live in D.C.), then we should say their “wish-images” (to use Walter Benjamin’s term) are just fantastical. But they aren’t. And I suppose none of our wish-images are necessarily fantastical.

**JM:** Can you say more about this? That if we think that “imagination” is contingent upon a reality that can deliver one’s wishes, we have it wrong—that, in a way, the “wish-image” is not contingent upon “reality,” and that we can have a good idea of what’s possible, but/and wish for something else? And that this “crafting,” as you put it, is a way of life, is a way of being, regardless of any particular fruition of wish? Did I follow you correctly?

**PA:** Actually, women’s historian Susan Cahn, in her examination of how race and class shaped girlhood in the American South in the first half of the twentieth century, repurposed Benjamin’s term in a way that I find particularly useful. Cahn’s 2007 book *Sexual Reckoning* uses similar archives to mine, those produced in large part by social scientists. Cahn says that researchers found young people’s “stated expectations” “disconcertingly improbable,” and she posits that instead these expectations were like Benjamin’s wish-images—“imagined futures” that represented young people’s understandings of their own capacities for achievement, and suggested their “entitlement to having more.” So, in their way, young people were claiming the power to shape their lives with these imagined futures. For me, this is also evidence of introspection, of consciousness. So I think wish-images speak more to our capacities to see the possibilities of going beyond proscribed limitations. And maybe we won’t quite know just how hard and fast those limits are, and that we actually cannot get around them, over them, through them, but it means we are committed to asserting (compelled to assert maybe) our capabilities in spite of the structures. If we believe in any of the seeming hooey about envisioning or visualization of the things we want, wish-images sort of function in that way, I think. But I think they are also saying: I am aware of my current realities, and yet I think this other thing is

possible (a better life, more money, love, community, justice, etc.).

**JM:** What is it like to sit with and “rework” quotes from subjects in history? What kind of relationship do you have with these subjects—which is a way for me to ask: how have you been impacted by the relationship you have established with “them” or “their” words?

**PA:** I have both excitement and discomfort about this question. When I talk about the individuals for whom I have crafted narratives, I get very animated. I have taken responses they gave to a social scientist and tried to reframe these from a less invasive position. I have tried to render the experiences they related as plainly human, instead of as for scientific categorization. That said, what I have rendered is not more authentic (in terms of an individual’s voice) than what E. Franklin Frazier rendered. We have different projects, Frazier and I. Both are politically sound projects, and I need to remember that. If I am saying that historians of the past who have argued for agency and resistance by oppressed people have had, at the base of their argument, the assumption that individuals were not agents, and this is not accurate (because everyone always has agency even if that agency is confined, constrained, etc.), then I don’t also want to be saying that I am “giving voice to the voiceless” (which

sometimes I think I am saying). Rather, I would like to call for listening to the archives differently.

Certainly I have developed “relationships” with some of the voices. There are a few who stand out—mostly because they come from the fuller, longer interviews, so I get to spend more time with the person’s voice. There is just so much more to read/hear them say. I get a fuller picture of their lives and how/what they are thinking. And yes, I come away thinking I know them, and that I can then tell someone else about them. And of course that is not true. I want to make sure I present this project in the right context. Not only because at some point, before this becomes a book, I want to find and be in touch with descendants of as many of these individuals as possible, but also because I want to find a way to both present their lives (or these snapshots of their lives) and still be very clear that we do not know any of them really. First they were framed by sociological methodology, now by me.

**JM:** And this “not knowing” is a valid outcome for a historian’s practice? How amazing—how very much like poetry! Can you let us know how that stance is received in your field? Is this an outlier practice to some degree?

**PA:** Yes. I think American Studies folks who do historical studies are better at this—because they use theoretical

frameworks in ways historians often do not. I think there is a cohort of historians, doing slavery studies mostly, including my advisor Herman Bennett and folks like Stephanie Smallwood, Jim Sweet, Jennifer Morgan, intellectual historian and Africanist Jessica Krug, Michele Mitchell (who does gender and sexuality history), who understand about working with sources that were not actually meant to illuminate certain people's lives. These writers are immersed in the unknowingness even as they craft a narrative around and through the silences. I think archive work *is* about finding out, but it is important to remember that if we don't want to do what the archives have already done to some folks, which is make them invisible or silent (because archives are about relationships of power, emerge as a result of a relationship of power), we then have to engage with archives in a particular way. There is no real objectivity, only subjectivity. The archives themselves are subjective, so part of what we're finding when we are in there is about the parameters, characteristics of the subjectivity of that particular archive.

**JM:** And you do this by reading around the intentions of the one who first made the archive? If so, what an important note on the value of studying context!

**PA:** Yes, I think so. We really try to understand the project of the archive: the makers' political, social, economic,

legal (etc.) agenda. We try to understand the moment in which the archive was being made, under what circumstances—how did they decide what was going to be in it and for what reasons? What were their frames of reference, their analytic categories, their epistemologies? Otherwise we run the risk of reading the archives as objective, as whole, as inherently generous, as somehow having a good intention, and I'm not here saying that there is inherent malice, but there is an inherent power relation: the power to make the archive, to produce these materials in this particular moment in the way that they were being produced. (And honestly, this I learned from my advisor's work using Inquisition records to identify colonial Afro-Latin@ enslaved subjectivity, family formations, religious cosmologies, intellectual practices, cultures, etc.).

**JM:** To switch gears a bit, and contemplate another meaning of "subjectivity" (that is, of identitarian discourses, so important when we are talking about power and history and injustice), just today I was re-reading Elizabeth Grosz's *Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections on Life, Politics, and Art*. In order to move toward futures and the new, Grosz proposes that feminism relinquish some of its concern with subjectivities and "practical questions of social amelioration," and concentrate on "a more philosophical and less practical concern, of difference as potential, virtuality, or the

possibility of being otherwise.” She goes on to say it’s not necessarily utopian, this kind of work, but that it is about ensuring that the future looks brand new, or that subject position has no guarantee of a particular outcome.

So I think it’s quite amazing that you, as a historian, are dealing with subjectivities and the archive’s power, but if you truly focus on difference (and Grosz says this is what philosophy and the arts can do: make difference proliferate, constantly show that someone/something brand new is possible) then you are relinquishing subjects from any pre-conceived track or outcome into a vast field of possibility. Does this resound with you?

**PA:** I think there is also the notion of the “liberal subject,” coming out of The Enlightenment and with which we still grapple. It is a very individualistic rendering of subjectivity and includes rationality. My idea of subjectivity is more interested in consciousness and interiority, both of which are elemental to human life. There are still some people in our world, our global community, if you will, who are rendered as, believed to be without (the capacity for) inner life, intellectuality, etc. This is the kind of subjectivity that I am thinking about in terms of the folks being interviewed by E. Franklin Frazier in interwar Washington, D.C. Kevin Quashie writes about this in his *The Sovereignty of Quiet*. It’s

this quiet space, which we all cultivate, where we all go to make sense of the world around us, where we develop our own intellectual frameworks, out from which come our ideas about future possibilities. The idea of “something brand new” being possible seems like the biggest pitfall, however. So at the same time that I want to hold sacred in some way this quiet inner space and the thinking and knowing that happen within it (and here I am not saying “sacred” in either a religious or spiritual way, but rather as special and yet very, very mundane), I also think we work with what we’ve got around us—and that includes structures. And structures are about power. I think until we stop thinking about difference as on a hierarchy (and I have little faith in this possibility, honestly), and then fully dismantle oppressive structures, we’re nowhere near brand new.

**JM:** Good point about structures. While I agree, I still hope, and maybe this is my poetry training, that very small utterances “work” against structures all the time, and even without struggle, possibly even via beauty. (And here I admit that “beauty” is quite subjective—so maybe I mean “intensity without instrumentality.”) But maybe that’s another round of conversation to come: big histories and small beauties! Or is that a little of what your re-writing in the archive is doing? Restoring something of the individual, the small, the not-a-trend subject?



Thanks for mentioning this Quashie text and this beautiful notion of quiet space as something we all have. In the humanities, I have noticed lately some talk of post-humanism (new materialism, and so on) and I find it intriguing, perhaps even politically important, but I hope that we don't "go on" before working hard from this belief in interiority for all humans!

Lastly, and this also gets to your livelihood, Paula, and I might be making a jump here, but can you talk not only about research in this light, but also about teaching? You and I have known each other for nearly a decade and a half as friends, but we met as teachers and I have always seen you as an incredibly thoughtful educator. Is pedagogy related to this project of futures for you?

**PA:** Well, as you know, I haven't fully been engaged in reading and talking about the kinds of education and pedagogy that we came up in. I would really like to think about this, now that I will have a full-time job and won't just be adjuncting all over town. As an adjunct, it was very difficult for me to take my teaching approach/practices too seriously, and by that I mean: of course I was/am very interested in facilitating successful learning in a learner-centered classroom, where I take into consideration who my students are and what they bring, but I haven't had the time (the paid time) to really hone my pedagogy and/or practices, except on the fly. My

new job will allow for some of that. Because they value teaching, I will be able to think through and research and experiment with my teaching as part of my work towards tenure, which is an important part of why I took the job. This semester in particular I have been very challenged. I had a fellowship for which I taught an African American history survey course and was faced with students who were, for the most part, very disengaged in their learning. They came into the classroom expecting to be lectured to, and expecting to be able to zone out during class. I was really discouraged, angry at times, but mostly I am trying to take it as an opportunity to develop (and really to dig into my past tool belt) strategies to encourage engagement and critical reflection. Some strategies were more prescribed and others felt punitive, but in the end I hope I am conveying the kind of responsibility for their own learning that they should have.

So I'm not sure about the relationship between my research and teaching. I know that the classroom has been an important place for me to work out my ideas. And my research has really informed my teaching in terms of content. I have also wanted to facilitate engagement with archival materials for my students, because analyzing and interpreting primary documents is so interesting I think. This semester has made it clear that I have been lucky so far to have had students who were absolutely cultivating their inner intellectual

selves, who were interested in thinking, and thought of themselves (or through their experiences with me, came to think of themselves) as thinkers. It's true that everyone has interiority (that everyone thinks!), but there is the work of cultivation and that work of cultivation, that understanding of oneself as a thinker, is not related to social position—as was made clear this semester working with students from relatively privileged backgrounds, who simultaneously are underprepared for college and disengaged from themselves as learners. For all my cynicism, I very much like your idea of the possibilities of chipping away at structures, the work of small beauties. I want to believe that my research and my teaching might be the work of small beauties. Thanks Jill for that!

## From Punk & Delirium to the Ambient, Permanently Mutable to “Pacifism”:

A Conversation  
with Patrick Durgin

(January–April 2015)



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**Jill Magi:** The other day Jonny pulled Kathy Acker's *Don Quixote* off my shelf and a Fugazi postcard, sent to me by my friend Matt Stang, fell out of the book. Jonny said, "Hey, doesn't Patrick Durgin write about them both?" I was never particularly "into" the punk scene in D.C. I was a bystander, really, with appreciation, but also with a bit of a skeptic's stance toward the politics of it. There was a good deal of middle-class privilege around that scene and I didn't really know the codes though I liked a lot of the music. So now let's get right to it: what might your research interests into punk have to do with our topic, "poetic labor"?

**Patrick Durgin:** Honestly, I harbored a good deal of skepticism about the politics of punk—and for me, Fugazi is post-punk, which is an honorific term having to do with the way those who followed the initial waves ("punk" proper) in the U.S. and Britain got smart about appropriating pop-culture circuitry. (Jerry Dammers concocting a label to sign to the industry, instead of his band The Specials, is a great example of working-class infiltration and multicultural resistance in Thatcher's England.)

Fugazi is among the smartest post-punk groups, in my opinion, because they instrumentalized the dialectic between autonomy and popular appeal, which is right next door to resolving the antinomy between political efficacy and aesthetic quality.

**JM:** Patrick, I'm interrupting you here because I want to fully understand. So you are saying that "autonomy," for a band, or for artists, is the freedom to not have to be "commercial"? Or dialectical thinking here would have us believe that we swing between autonomy (making the aesthetic decisions we want) and appealing to the masses? That those territories don't overlap? And Fugazi, in this case, secured their own autonomy, so that they didn't have to worry about getting radio airtime, finding a label that would exploit them, and so on? And another articulation: do you believe, or are you saying that some of us believe, that political efficacy and aesthetic quality are in opposition? For whom does that opposition, or idea of an opposition, "work"? What, if any, application may this articulation have for poetry?

**PD:** Maybe all of the above. Pop circuitry is commerce. There's no escape. At the time, many of us were hyper-aware of Fugazi and Ian Mackaye's Dischord Records' tandem decisions, political decisions, to, for example, not produce merchandise like concert T-shirts, not to grant interviews or permit press coverage in organs

that accepted advertising from tobacco and alcohol companies. The refrain of Fugazi's song "Merchandise" ("You are not what you own") was subsequently printed up on bootleg T-shirts. No concert lighting, just house lights. All-ages, no booze, \$5 tickets, record cost printed as part of the cover artwork to preempt markup, in-house distribution. They minimized their take at the outset, such that they needed a fan base, and the demand for their music would accurately gauge the success of their politics. That's what I mean by instrumentalizing the dialectic between the idiom and the terms of exchange. The T-shirt thing was inevitable pop detritus. It's hard to commodify sound, and one presumes you can't have heard the song until you procure a souvenir. By withholding much of that stultifying impediment to the intangible experience of a time-based art like music, Fugazi was able to clear the way for some angular, thoughtful work within a genre that wasn't really terribly diverse. They could then explore some aesthetic options with real ramifications (including the attack on pop and conventional punk-rock song structure), and play meaningful variations on these, too—as opposed to the bland eclecticism of many post-punk artists.

I think many believe that aesthetic quality derives from specifically non-utilitarian values, that beauty is useless and ugliness is artistic failure (or, conversely, that political efficacy has to sound a certain way). There is compromise

and there is collusion, but nothing between the two. Robert Duncan's falling out with Denise Levertov can be read along these lines, with both of them trying to nuance an already obsolete and fairly crude opposition between aesthetic quality and political efficacy. That's simply Romanticism abstracted from its historical context, in which it was one of two badass forms of resistance to industrial capitalism's blunt sidelining of cultural production.

To me there is an obvious and self-conscious thread of historical materialism running through the Adorno-Benjamin-Bloch-Brecht-Lukács debate; the Black Arts Repertory Theater's reinvention of agit-prop; early Language Poetry's ambitions to rematerialize a signifier in thrall to bourgeoisie lyricism, and so forth. So the opposition is merely perceived, but that perception at times seems ubiquitous. The message is always the same: desire and its investments contradict each other on the level of "taste."

I associate Fugazi with delirium, too. Two anecdotes—these are the Fugazi stories I always tell. I saw them perform on the Midwestern tour when they brought along a hypnotist as support. So much of their work is about auto-suggestion and creating a pop idiom that obviates the specific interests feeding into and out of pop culture. It made good sense to me, so I volunteered

to be hypnotized and went up on stage. You know I have next to zero tolerance for hocus-pocus, “spirituality,” etc. But to my amazement, hypnosis worked and I went under. My older brother was in the crowd, freaked out, and shouted my name as he made his way to the stage and shook me back to reality. During Fugazi’s set I decided to enter the dance floor, which was a flailing mass of bodies. I always hang back at shows and observe, so I was again amazed to find that (so far as I could sense) my feet never touched the floor and I just travelled magically between the bodies from one side of the room to the next. I remember it as euphoric but also somehow euphemistic. Retreating to the balcony, I found my brother was bleeding and close to tears. He’d been ripped up in the mosh pit.

I come from a working-class family with middle-class aspirations, and the latter fell short as the clan got along since immigrating to the U.S. a couple of generations ago. I saw middle-class entitlement catalyzed toward better ends by some of the post-punk enterprises of my youth. I saw it become something else, a kind of revolutionary desire that then catalyzed delirium. And just because you’ve exposed class mobility as a pernicious hoax doesn’t mean you’ve integrated your desires. We don’t all get along, then. Delirium becomes an important state of mutual non-interference that can

lead to a better reality—and delirium is fully real in itself, of course, a part of experience.

I had my first sense of “labor” at this time, and gradually read a lot in “scientific socialism.” Later, when I became aware of postfordist theories of labor, I thought I saw an historical trigger for the failure of neo-liberal “aspirational” politics that raised me, and replaced this with what I called “speculative politics” (part of the subtitle of a special issue of *Kenning* in 1998, co-edited with Renee Gladman, Jen Hofer and Rod Smith).

**JM:** So, you’re saying that neo-liberalism gets it wrong because of a “buy-in” to the notion of “productivity” and rational-only ideas of labor? I like to think of labor as a whole field of exchange: workplace culture, the “working it” idea of getting over on the system, and so on. My friend John Calagione, an anthropologist, edited a book in the ‘90s that turned away from labor history’s hegemonies, and explored work and workers as producers of culture (we erase so many subjectivities by thinking in terms of “production”). Would this be something like the path you were traveling down? And can you articulate a little further here what this line of thinking has to do with poetry—your editing project with the illustrious Gladman, Hofer and Smith trio?

**PD:** Yes. But it's all production, cultural production and a culture of productivity. Only the prolific survive. I think the idea behind that issue of *Kenning* (full title was *Cunning: A Descriptive Checklist of Tentative Politics*) was very open-ended. But for me the key term was "tentative." Maybe I perceived a need to revive the capacity for utopian thought (for politics with grand, emancipatory ambitions) indirectly, through cunning rather than the insurgent tactics of first-wave punk, for example. And these politics were there but seemed nascent because I felt things had splintered, in hindsight, and a variety of practices, locations, players, needed to be described all at once. It was a pre-social-media version of an aggregator, I guess, hence dispersing the editorial duties to people I knew had mutual interests but not necessarily a lot of mutual friends. It wasn't going to be a coterie affair. In hindsight, we all knew each other fairly well, though. And Rod's section was a folio of writers from D.C.

"Industry" itself had been redefined about the time I was born, when Nixon took the U.S. dollar off the gold standard and made it the ubiquitous sign of hegemonic, global capitalism. My favorite books the last couple of years include Gerald Raunig's *A Thousand Machines*, and two by Franco "Bifo" Berardi: *After the Future* and *The Uprising*. In these books, I see the most concise and problematic iterations of the theory of

semio-capitalism, and how it leads to the condition called "precarity." Paolo Virno's *A Grammar of the Multitude* is the foundational text for the concept of the "general intellect"—a generalized state of decentered and atemporal production and consumption. Raunig summarizes the argument nicely:

in postfordism, the raw material and means of production of living labor is the capacity for thinking, learning, communicating, imagining and inventing, which is expressed through language. The general intellect no longer presents itself only in the knowledge contained and enclosed in the system of technical machines, but rather in the immeasurable and boundless cooperation of cognitive and affective workers.

The erosion of expertise that wiki culture seems to represent is of a piece with the erosion of reliable livelihoods. So labor is "precarious." The "semio" prefix indicates a condition of infinite interpretive errancy and intangibility. And Berardi argues that the Western root of this gorgeous instability was Romantic/Symbolist poetics—Anglo-American "indeterminacy" *avant la lettre*.

**JM:** Interesting! And so we come to poetry, "experimental" poetry, in fact!

**PD:** Exactly. And for the discourse around contemporary Anglo-American experimentalism, be it Place and Fitterman or the Clover-Nealon-Spaher line, these people were trained by a generation of poets whose work was used to exemplify the “poetics of indeterminacy,” of an ambivalence that went beyond the two-part trope of ambiguity (New Criticism), all the way to infinite potentiality and pure negativity (Perloff, *American Deconstruction*). I was trained that way, too. But our elders were politicized differently.

Punk specifically heralded an era that had to devise a form of activism without relying on the “future,” which to me (and to Berardi, a close friend of Felix Guattari back in the day) sounds a Deleuzian note. Desire in itself, without lending any particular value to the results, is revolutionary.

**JM:** Yes. I’ve said something like this before: I love that I can’t measure the change a poem may make. And I used to be a sociologist-in-training! Back to you.

**PD:** It seems unbelievable, but it’s true: when I wrote “Fiat Currency,” a poem that is recited by one of the quasi-characters in *PQRS*, I was unaware of Berardi’s argument regarding Symbolism. When I read his reference to Rimbaud and the gold standard, I was thankful plagiarism had been occluded by conceptualism.

Because imbricating “Drunken Boat” and the article “U.S. Dollar Hegemony Has Got to Go” to make “Fiat Currency” (circa winter 2007) seemed to tow the line slavishly.

**JM:** Let’s look a little more closely at that poem. Importantly, to me, it follows a kind of introduction by “quasi-character” S., who is explaining the economies of contemporary poetry—the proprietary aspects of the creative writing “business.” S. points out, before Q. begins the poem: “U.S. dollar hegemony...coincides with the entrepreneurial spirit of versification, which is the new interiority (again the French show the way).” When I read *PQRS* I couldn’t help but feel a bit entrapped by its claims, believing, as I do, in a positive role for poets in the academy. I sometimes wonder if it is naive to believe this. *PQRS* makes me admit that yes, to some extent “the arts,” institutionalized, function as a release valve for certain hegemonies; expression, interiority via “versification,” offer structure to make us feel that maybe nothing is wrong, that we are still alive. Then Q.’s poem comforts me, in a way, articulating that we are all tossed around (the poem begins with “As I was going down impassive rivers”—implying a stream of force, an involvement and movement that’s not possible to avoid or wade through) in the words “produce” and “circulation” and “currency.” What to do? Keep on with this awareness? That’s what I’m trying to do.

**PD:** You're right, and that's my own quasi-characteristic cantankerousness bleeding through, perhaps. Despite my temper, I believe that often, nearly always, the most important form of protest I can effect is through my role as an educator. And almost a third of that is in the discipline of creative writing. "Fiat Currency" had a life before it was inserted into the script, too, and I think it read quite differently, unless you were among those who would recognize the source text, the Rimbaud. And then you were automatically culpable. I also wanted those moments when someone holds forth to be especially arrogant, a kind of upstaging that would be observable in the script. Hence the overwrought and inept lead-ins.

**JM:** Let's get back to your point about predicting Berardi's argument: Patrick, without being egotistical, don't you think that poets predict theories? Aren't we supposed to have our ear to the ground in this way? It's not possible to argue this sitting around a table at a faculty meeting in the hyper-rational zone of "higher" education, even if it's art school, but I believe it is true and we can say it to each other.

**PD:** It works the other way around, too, though. Just as I felt it was troubling that "punk" music or "language-oriented" writing needed to have certain aesthetic traits, tended to sound or read one way, I get impatient with the theory/practice split that makes it possible for

literature to predict theory (even literary theory). To me, it is all just writing.

The forms evoked by signs like "poetry" or "philosophy" don't thrive by being respected. It's not like creative writing is less decisive when philosophy or criticism rehearse its findings. Anyway, I have trouble finding a foreground (whether it be generic or temporal), so it seems counterintuitive to say that there is prediction and *then* decision.

In *PQRS*, for example, I found pretending to be a playwright created a repository—a script—for a great deal of assorted materials that did not fit elsewhere. But the script came out unstageable. So its scriptness, if you will, becomes the thing. Generically, it's a play; it's drama. But it prohibits acting, for example. It's reading material. And it's awful to listen to at a poetry reading. I've never just read from it. I've been asked to do this and have written something new, some reflections on the piece that inject passages from it, and just read that instead.

**JM:** Let me interject here by saying I would be very interested in hearing you read precisely from it. I don't mean to be difficult, but I think whatever tensions might arise in your voice as you read and think, *This isn't*



*working*, might be exactly the “performance” that the text calls for.

**PD:** Except that the delivery is often precisely scripted. I once performed a scene at a reading by using recorded interjections and other defamiliarizations, including lines overdubbed in Hangeul—the native tongue of a friend who partly inspired “S.” This was while the book was in process, and I thought it was mainly about failed bilingualism. Soon thereafter, I took on the script’s imperviousness to “acting” as a structuring principle. To demonstrate it doesn’t work that way would be redundant.

**JM:** Got it. Now back to your discussion about the “it’s all writing” idea of texts and of art and theory.

**PD:** Rather than predicting the future, I think artists are often still held to a modernist standard of being contemporary, seeing clearly what is too close to notice and relaying a legible and affective sense of that *in situ*. This would lubricate the works, enhance productivity. Stein saw this predicament very clearly, I think, and worked it out in her lectures.

The presupposition that artists have an innate capacity to do this (to be good content providers), and that this capability derives from privileged access to eternal

verities, is a residual, pre-enlightenment legend we’ve been chipping away at since at least Baudelaire, in so many ways. The problem is that so much work goes into this project, so much effort expended. And those who really need what we do can simply ignore it. Maybe what’s more presumptuous is to say anyone needs what poets do. That kind of arrogance is something we left behind along with high-modernist bravura. We’re more likely to bemoan the fact that few know what poets *have* done. And that’s what acknowledging a prediction would be: verifying something after the fact.

I’m really interested in the affective economy of semio-capitalism and its structural similarities to aesthetics. Though I don’t agree with everything Berardi says about poetry (that it is the “language of the mother”: a kind of defanged Kristeva-esque account), I’d say the least developed aspect of his argument is a new approach to irony. I think it’s happening. Irony is being radicalized or something. Community is being finally and usefully subtended by a disruptive, tasteless discourse that might do for a truly global, “world” literature, or literariness—something that comes after taste and temperament, such that some screaming white middle-class bald dude with a guitar turned up to 11 can’t offend.

On September 18 of last year, the E-Commerce corporation Ali Baba, which is huge in China (the

"emerging economy" that owns our debt, i.e., profits from the false promises we make to ourselves), had its initial public offering. Ali Baba represents the largest tech IPO ever (over \$20 billion U.S. were made), and this made its founder and CEO, a former English teacher, very rich. Jack Ma is his name. His statement to the press was: "Today what we got is not money. What we got is the trust from the people." Today I heard that Yahoo is spinning off from its only profitable company, which is a holding company, holding, precisely, Ali Baba stock. Which it has sold as of now. Piggybacking, posturing—it's all just broadcasting, like in the prescient Kraftwerk song: "Radioactivity, it's in the air for you and me." That's irony without an excluded character. Everyone knew there was nothing to it. Just decisions, no goods. In other words, a conclusion disguised as a forecast. Everyone is in on it, and yet it is ironic.

What this means for poetic labor is hard to say, exactly. For my part, I wonder what happens when we go to the traditional domain of leisure, the entertainment industry (when we are reading, sitting in an auditorium or proscenium theater, church, school, Dr. Phil's studio, whatever), and then apply this sense of ambient, permanently mutable, total receptivity to the work. How is effort of audition redirected in/by a poem? How is it scripted?

I want to revisit the genres and/or the generalized roles of producer and consumer of cultural effects, without the late-modernist trappings of "unacknowledged legislator" or innovative craftperson. I think a lot of writers feel similarly, though they may be doing work that is very different, in terms of its aesthetic qualities, its specific textures and methods—Tan Lin, Trisha Low, a few others who write nothing like each other or like me, seem to be after something similar. This idea of revisiting aesthetics by softening the calcified organs of cultural production is one way of seeing Low's resuscitation of Confessionalism, and Lin's fascination with relaxation as a critical value for poetry. For my part, I have a renewed interest in visual prosody, an interest that is not essentially "literary," but takes prosody as a hermeneutic that can apply to literature but also to images.

**JM:** Can you elaborate here? Please feel free to reference your stunning posts for *Jacket2* concerning "visual prosody." What does viscosity do for you that "strict" book/poetry culture does not?

I keep thinking about Jesse Seldess and his beautiful book you published. Those pages are visual, too. The lines punctuate that open field, and if you did not "read" the words, you would still receive that lilting sense by looking, simply, at the layout.

And I might mention, or confess, that I followed your syllabus on text and image at the SAIC a couple years ago, even though I was not in your class. And getting info from that class secondhand helped me realize that W. J. T. Mitchell's *Picture Theory* gave me the framework that both semiotics and art criticism couldn't—that the senses are totally interbraided and pictures look back. There is social life, power and the agency of the one who is viewed, framed, and we are not duped by images any more than we may be duped by words: these elements are invoked by Mitchell's "imagetext." Semiotics and the narrow canons of art history don't satisfy, according to Mitchell, and I agree.

**PD:** It's a nice coincidence that you are writing *Jacket2* commentaries on textile poetics and I've just finished my set of commentaries, *Witness*. I hope you'll reply with a précis! Is Mitchell involved there, too? One early draft of the syllabus had like five of his essays on it, a veritable unit! Seriously, if I can say what I mean by visual prosody here, a little, maybe you can offer what you mean by textile poetics by way of comparison, and we can indulge each other as much as you've already indulged me. I wouldn't worry about going off topic—how could we?

Prosody presumes that the composition of the page, as a visual field, modulates the semantic value of discrete

words, phrases, clauses, lines, sentences, stanzas, sections, and entire works. Scansion forcibly standardizes pronunciation even in silent reading (scansion is not done too well by reciting verse—it is less performative than analytical). The modulation and standardization coexist, paradoxically, with a statement. Something's being said while all of this is going on, and all of this is going on within and to delineate the statement. It's a cruel clusterfuck of sense and sensibility.

The image is a word. My take on prosody was a ruse. I wanted an excuse to use what I knew (but distrusted) to write about some stuff I don't really have the competence to address on its own terms (to pretend to do some "art writing" but also draw altered attention to poetry). I should have brought up Jesse Seldess in this connection—you're right. His books are scrolls, so typesetting is really a matter of eyeballing things. Jesse calls for adjustments not based on quantity of space between lines but the quality of the space, accounting in some brilliant but unknown (to me, at least) way for the intrusive page breaks you get in a book. But I think he writes word-processing documents that just go and go, top to bottom. Anyway, it's another method of accountability, where anything's available and equally plausible, until specific motivations force us to opt for one thing rather than another. That, to me, is keeping it real.

**JM:** To talk about a “textile poetics,” I could replace your “real” of this last line with “material.” Let me explain a little, as you’ve requested, and then bring it back to “labor.”

It wasn’t until I started studying and making textiles that I began to “get” the idea of “language as material.” Specifically, textiles are helping me understand Leslie Scalapino, or I should say helping me “perform” her texts as events of reverberations from events—so that they become something brand new (her texts as making, on the spot). I believe her entire worldview enabled her texts and was enabled by them. How the evidence of this event of re-making does not look like doubt or revision, though, is the genius of her work. So much confidence! And her steady, steady voice, reading. I will never forget it. The precise trying, the sure-footed repetition seems a way to live life. For texts to be alive, maybe she would say or has said in her essays, there is a distillation of that trying. But it’s not wishy-washy or imprecise. It is also not so narrative as my last book *LABOR*, the most narrative thing I have written, and which I keep thinking of as “my last book.”

And then we come to another aspect of labor and textiles: the repetitive acts involved in nearly all textile arts (something about focusing while not needing to, stitch after stitch, or sending the shuttle across and across, or

the systematic way I watched silk dyers dip skeins of silk in India, the rhythm of that work). Maybe I am learning, via textiles, my way out of traditional “producer and consumer” and special “craftperson” dynamics you’ve mentioned, and moving toward that “sense of ambient, permanently mutable, total receptivity to the work”—one of my favorite things you’ve said here, Patrick. Textile “work” means you must tune in but you need not be tense or expectant.

Then is there no call to “labor poetic labor”? Can this “ambient receptivity” show us the way to a practice (recursive, coming in and out of expertise) or to a text of “no work”?

**PD:** Those are reciprocal aspects, right? The eventual reverberation is repetition with a difference, a difference made by the quality of attention that seems proper to a *métier* but is closer to, in precarious times, a specific medium (with the caveat, as Rosalind Krauss would say, that anything can serve as a medium)—allowing us to “tune in” without entrenchment.

This could be a version of this new order of irony chez Berardi. The Jack Ma thing suggests this, also. Irony is the semiotic of global finance. When a widest possible range of misconstrual is the aim of deliberate gestures, you do have something like faith in community, an

*invested* audience. You disavow Truth. Art's got to serve somebody. And we know it serves finance and community, but never both in the same way or same movement. Which is more dignified? Which will sustain you?

Ambient receptivity as postfordist irony literalizes distrust, rather than suspending disbelief. We're all aesthetic partisans, just as political theses negate or are non-compossible with others. Say, like me, you believe neoliberalism is best counteracted not from the financial side (sabotage or "compassionate capitalism"), but with a politics of pacifism.

No one talks much these days about peace as a social agent, and that's something I'm now working on, as a motivating factor (with several projects on my desk—I need a way to prioritize). So many of us are too bashful about our pacifism right now, because it has been stigmatized by a history of flimsy consensus, evasion and collusion. "I must not think bad thoughts!" Pacifism has to be neither passive-ism nor actionable (corruptible, "non-violence").

Jackson Mac Low reportedly once claimed that if we adopt the term "pacificism," the connotation of passivity would evaporate. This funny suggestion might have serious resonance with the way workers willfully

generalize the "common" intellect and so only enjoy agency—as workers—when they are cultivating their own precarity. Artists are doubly implicated, because they work, but then they also have their "work" to do. Once labor is ontologically contingent, it becomes "virtuosic," as Virno put it, like a performance, a case of method acting. Mac Low's work totally displaced the role of virtuosity in both the production and audition of a text. He would know. Maybe you're right and he saw it coming.

## Afterword: “Adjunct” Teachers and Higher Education in the United States: Facts Worth Knowing

—Trina Magi

As a reference librarian, my strong tendency when faced with a question or problem is to dig up some facts. (Or perhaps I’ve always had this strong tendency, and that’s why I became a reference librarian.) My meditation practice especially has helped me appreciate that there are other ways of knowing things, and I am well aware that telling a story with numbers and data is telling a story, nonetheless. But I do like data. I think sometimes they can be helpful.

In this fact sheet about the people who labor in institutions of higher learning under the label “adjunct,” I am telling a little story about the mismatch between labels and reality—how an increasing number of people

find themselves in a position of seemingly permanent impermanence, and how many of them wish for a different situation. I have seen the frustration of friends, colleagues, family members. They have obtained their degrees and collected excellent teaching evaluations. They have labored at much unpaid work to demonstrate their proficiency and commitment. They have attended conferences, and they have applied again and again and again for positions that would pay a livable wage and allow them to show up to work at one place each week instead of four. But it doesn’t seem to matter.

The facts below are worth knowing because they show that the rejection and exploitation that many adjunct teachers experience constitute more than a personal, individual hardship. They are part of a collective experience resulting from a trend. Does knowing this make the hardship more or less easy to bear? I don’t know.

As an organizer of and advocate for my own faculty union, and as a librarian advocate for intellectual freedom, I am troubled by the trend away from a tenured faculty. As Joe Berry says:

Historically the special case for academic tenure has been that the freedom to search for and speak the truth as one sees it (academic freedom) is not

possible except under conditions of tenure-like job security. If one is afraid of being fired, one will, naturally, tend to watch one's tongue. Since it is not in the public interest to have students taught by people who are afraid to speak the truth as they see it, tenure has been seen as a public good.

## **Names (and Misnomers?)**

adjunct, contract, contingent, clinical, casual, part-time, temporary, permatep, instructor, lecturer, teaching assistant, unranked, non-line, non-ladder, non-standard, nontraditional, nonvoting, non-tenure-track, flexible labor, unit of flexibility

(Berry xi; Backlin 7)

The word "adjunct," defined:

"something joined or added to another thing but not essentially a part of it,"

and:

"attached in a subordinate or temporary capacity to a staff"

("Adjunct")

"As a group, we are often called adjuncts, but since we are now the majority, that term seems less accurate. I will refer to the entire group as contingents, since what mainly separates us from our full-time tenured and tenure track (FTTT) colleagues is our permanent lack of permanence."

(Berry 4)

<b>Length of time teaching as contingent faculty</b> [From a 2010 survey of 20,920 contingent faculty members (self-selected sample)]	
Percent who have taught as contingent faculty members at least three years	81.2
Percent who have taught as contingent faculty members at least six years	56.5
Percent who have taught as contingent faculty members at least 10 years	32.3

"These figures suggest that most respondents to the survey see teaching as a long-term, professional commitment rather than as something 'adjunct' to another career. In fact, 73.3% of respondents indicated that they considered teaching in higher education their primary employment."

(Coalition on the Academic Workforce 9, 25)

## Numbers

<b>Total fall enrollment in degree-granting postsecondary institutions</b>	
<b>Fall 1975</b>	<b>Fall 2011</b>
11,184,859	20,994,113 (an 88% increase)

(National Center for Education Statistics)

<b>Trends in instructional staff employment status</b>		
<b>Status</b>	<b>Percent (and number) of instructional staff, Fall 1975 or Fall 1976 *</b>	<b>Percent (and number) of instructional staff, Fall 2011</b>
Full-time, tenured faculty	28.6 (227,381)	16.6 (303,103)
Full-time, tenure-track faculty	15.9 (126,300)	6.9 (128,199)
Contingent instructional staff	55.4 (440,108)	76.4 (1,415,922)

\* Figures for full-time faculty are for 1975 and are estimated; all other figures are for 1976.

(Curtis 2)



<b>Change in number of employees in higher-education institutions 1975/1976 * to 2011</b>	
<b>Type of Employee</b>	<b>Change, 1975/1976 * to 2011</b>
Full-time non-faculty professionals	increased 369%
Part-time faculty	increased 286%
Full-time, non-tenure-track faculty	increased 259%
Full-time executives	increased 141%
Graduate-student employees	increased 123%
Full-time tenured and tenure-track faculty	increased 23%
Full-time nonprofessionals	increased 19%

\* Figures for full-time faculty are for 1975 and are estimated; all other figures are for 1976.

(Curtis and Thornton 7)

<b>Desire for full-time, tenure-track employment</b> [From a 2010 survey of 20,920 contingent faculty members (self-selected sample)]	
Percent who prefer a part-time, non-tenure-track position over a full-time, tenure-track position	24.3
Percent currently seeking a full-time, tenure-track position	29.6
Percent intending to seek a full-time, tenure-track position	20.1
Percent who have sought a full-time tenure-track position in the past	26

"These responses suggest a significant desire on the part of part-time faculty respondents to move into full-time tenure-track positions."

(Coalition on the Academic Workforce 9, 27)

<b>Average faculty personal income from ALL sources</b>	
Part-time faculty	\$52,500 (\$12,100 from teaching)
Full-time faculty	\$81,200 (\$72,400 from their institution)

(Berry 7)

**Median pay per course: \$2,700**

[From a 2010 survey of 20,920 contingent faculty members (self-selected sample)]

(Coalition on the Academic Workforce 32)

**Percent of respondents who had access to health benefits through their academic employer: 22.6**

[From a 2010 survey of 20,920 contingent faculty members (self-selected sample)]

(Coalition on the Academic Workforce 13)

<b>Percent of respondents receiving various forms of workplace support</b> [From a 2010 survey of 20,920 contingent faculty members (self-selected sample)]	
Paid office hours	7.8
Private office space	8.7
Shared office space	59
Paid attendance at department meetings	6.6
Payment for class cancellation	12.2
Job security/seniority	9.3
Regular salary increases	18.8
Priority for tenure-track openings	1.8
Single-user computer access	11.8
Telephone access in office	52.2
Department-supported photocopying	73.8
Library privileges	71.3
Secretarial assistance	35.5

(Coalition on the Academic Workforce 48)

**Percent of faculty represented by a union**

Full-time faculty	37
Part-time faculty	29

(Berry 7)

## A Conclusion

Robert W. Fuller, former president of Oberlin College:  
No one takes exception to cost-cutting, but forcing one group to subsidize another that's doing comparable work, while maintaining working conditions that signal second-class status, is what the world now rejects as Apartheid. That Academia has fallen into a practice that warrants the ignoble label 'apartheid' is inconsistent with both academic and American values. By working for a pittance, adjunct faculty are serving as involuntary benefactors of other faculty, administrators, and students.

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**Patrick Durgin's** books include *PQRS*, *Imitation Poems* (Atticus/Finch, 2006), *The Route* (with Jen Hofer), and the artist's books *Daughter* and *Singles*. His recent criticism includes a series of commentaries for *Jacket2* entitled *Witness*. He is now writing a critical biography of Jackson Mac Low and Hannah Weiner. Durgin teaches literature, writing and critical theory at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and runs the press Kenning Editions.

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**Jill Magi** is an artist, critic and educator who works in text, image and textile. Her books include *LABOR*, *SLOT*, *Cadastral Map*, *Torchwood* and *Threads*. *Pageviews/Innervisions* was recently published by Moving Furniture Press/Rattapallax. From February–April 2015, Magi wrote weekly commentaries for Jacket2 on “*A Textile Poetics*.” After nearly two decades piecing together part-time teaching gigs, Magi joined the faculty at New York University Abu Dhabi, where she teaches poetry and writing through textiles to students from all over the world, and where she is learning the intricacies of global labor flows, structured inequality and the transnational movement of capital.

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