



curated by  
**AMARANTH BORSUK**

featuring  
Sarah Dowling  
Kate Durbin  
Craig Dworkin  
Ray Hsu  
Brian Reed  
Rachel Zolf

with an Afterword by  
Gregory Laynor



AFFECT & AUDIENCE  
IN THE DIGITAL AGE

CURATED BY  
AMARANTH BORSUK

ESSAY PRESS LISTENING TOUR



#14

## 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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## INTRODUCTION

—AMARANTH BORSUK

"I think a lot of people have gotten caught up in the question of 'Is reality TV real?' But to me, the most interesting question is 'which reality is the reality we really want? If I'm not seeing that reality on television or in my life, how can I construct it?'"

KATE DURBIN

"I often think that one of the most interesting things about a presentation or performance is the audience. As a performer, I don't necessarily think I'm the most important person in the room."

RAY HSU

"For me, imagining a staging of a Stein play is just an elaboration of the practice of reading her texts aloud, but in a group. So I want to involve composers and sound artists in this project to think about the role of intonation and sound in Stein's writing."

ADAM FRANK

"I simply see digital procedures as constitutive of whatever you want to call post-human subjectivity today. I don't see a need to set digital realities apart, even as prosthetic dildos—I mean devices."

RACHEL ZOLF

On October 18, 2013, Sarah Dowling (UW Bothell), Brian Reed (UW Seattle), Gregory Laynor (UW Seattle) and I convened an audience to compare the digital prostheses of contemporary poetics. From database aesthetics, to online communities, to crowd-sourced projects, our invited guests interrogated the relationship of their own work to our titular keywords: *Affect & Audience in the Digital Age*. This one-day symposium on "scholarly, pedagogical, curatorial, and creative practices that attend to the digitally mediated character of contemporary poetry" was an initial foray into what has become an ongoing collaborative workgroup exploring the intersection of poetry, performance and public scholarship. In preparation for the event, we asked Kate Durbin, Ray Hsu, Adam Frank and Rachel Zolf to reflect upon the ways the new realities of digital composition and distribution have influenced their work and their notions of authorship and creativity. Craig Dworkin served as interlocutor, offering his own perspective as a scholar and conceptual writer. We chose panelists whose work defies stereotypes of such data-driven or digitally mediated writing as authorless, emotionless and anti-lyrical. In their work, we sense the

“powerful feelings” upon which Wordsworth built his poetics, even if the source of these feelings is not the “emotion recollected in tranquility” with which such writing is traditionally associated.

We opened the day at UW Special Collections, with an exhibition of (and hands-on introduction to) artists’ books and small-press publications that utilize appropriation, crowd-sourcing, digital archives and other methodologies that interlink concept and form. The visit was intended to highlight the current overlap in interest among poets, artists and conceptual writers working with books. Gregory, Brian and I each presented works from our own collections that we felt spoke to the conference themes. Portland-based *Veneer Magazine*, Publication Studio poetry books, PDF chapbooks by Troll Thread, print-on-demand conceptual works and limited-edition book objects shared space in our display (a list of exhibited works is included here as an appendix). Aeron Bergman and Alejandra Salinas, Senior Artists-in-Residence at UW Bothell, showed a selection of artist publications donated by European publishers for the event. Sandra Kroupa, Curator of Book Arts and Rare Books at UW Seattle, then talked about a number of works in the library’s collections that rely on appropriation and citation for their artistic strategies, as well as several book objects that interrogate book form. After the presentations, visitors were invited to circulate,

handle the books and ask questions of the presenters.

After a lovely lunch and informal conversation, we settled in for a series of short presentations and a roundtable discussion with our guests, each of whom brought a different set of interests to bear on the day’s events. Kate Durbin opened the discussion with her transcriptive book *E! Entertainment*, a project that revels in reality television’s potential to reveal, as she says, “the many fictions that make up our reality.” Durbin’s projects relocate authorial creativity within popular culture such that the artist becomes, in her words, a “medium” channeling collective energies. Even her performances from the work require a cast of characters drawn from the audience in order to voice Heidi, Spencer and the rest of their reality show entourage. Durbin’s interests in audience and affect intersect in her “Women As Objects” Tumblr project, which delves into the world of teen girls’ self-representation online—an emotionally messy space in which the self is a work under perpetual re-authorship and re-animation through received images and texts.

Audience reception and collaborative authorship are central to Adam Frank’s large-scale critical sound project, *Radio Free Stein*. Frank pointed us to the multiple meanings of “render” that inhere in these collaborative performances: a simultaneous translation of text into

sound and a relinquishing of certain elements on the page that get lost in its change of state. His project invites contemporary composers trained in modernist musical strategies to create soundscapes that reveal the affective charge of Gertrude Stein's works, enlarging our understanding of her lesser-known plays in the process.

Like Frank, Ray Hsu described a large, collaborative digital project, but one whose aims are not pedagogical, but rather capitalistic. Situating himself outside of academia as an entrepreneur interested in "poetry in the context of tech capitalism," Hsu pitched an online writing think-tank to the assembled group—a new enterprise that extends his interest in using poetry and performance to critique the forms of labor valued in the University. Modeled on a tech accelerator/incubator, the project attempts to provide community and support for writers' works-in-progress and to help them envision other, perhaps more lucrative, forms of writerly work.

Rachel Zolf discussed her use of digital methodologies of appropriation and recombination to generate "mad affects" in the reader, drawing on Shoshanna Feldman. The mad text makes the reader angry, crazy or both, by resisting interpretation. Her work invites an affective response as a starting point for a consideration of the ethical and social issues it raises. *Janey's Arcadia* and the forthcoming *Nellie's Tar Patch*, works about

Canadian settler colonialism, eugenics and industrialism, use transcriptive errors in OCR scans of historic texts, relying on the glitch for its shock effects. These poems let the unruly or "contaminated" text challenge the reader to make meaning of untranslatable language. Through these digital methodologies, Zolf's texts surface repressed colonial narratives of race and power, designed to make readers uncomfortable in both their difficult-to-parse form and difficult-to-digest content. The work's appropriative format acknowledges the appropriative nature of colonialism, and reconfigures the poetics of witness by forging a digitally-inflected voice that is both individual and social.

Drawing together these knotty threads, Craig Dworkin led a wide-ranging conversation with our panelists about their work, touching on humiliation and catharsis, digital aesthetics, the affective capital of Facebook "likes," and performativity, all of which you can explore on the Essay Press Affect & Audience page, where you will find low-fi audio of the day's events. We concluded with an evening of performances at the Henry Art Gallery in which we participated, we were placated, we were shocked and shaken.

The day's events provided much fodder for conversation over meals, drinks and in transit. The conversations included in this chapbook grew out of the event—

rather than documenting it, they document the strains of thought that emerged from it. Craig Dworkin and Brian Reed occupied the UW English faculty lounge after the roundtable to think about the inner lives of computers. Sarah Dowling and Rachel Zolf chatted after absorbing the day's events, giving them time to formulate their thoughts about poetics and politics. Kate Durbin and Ray Hsu fittingly conducted their conversation after the symposium via GChat, drawing on their mutual engagement with social networks and digital identity-formation. And Gregory Laynor has provided an afterword that closes this chapbook while leaving the conversation open, chugging uphill through these interviews and curating a self through this thinking engine. You'll find Laynor's interview with Adam Frank about his new book *Transferential Poetics* in a future issue of [The Conversant](#). I hope readers will visit Frank's [Web site](#) to find Stein's delicious and densely textured text brought to life through performance and paratext.

The Affect & Audience in the Digital Age symposium that spurred these texts into being was made possible by a generous grant from the Simpson Center for the Humanities, and we are grateful for their continued support of the Affect & Audience Workgroup, which will host a series of events in the 2014-2015 academic year, continuing the conversation begun at this inaugural

event. For more about our project, please visit our page at the [Simpson Center Web site](#).

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## Craig Dworkin and Brian Reed



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**Brian Reed:** Last night you mentioned that *Eclipse*, an online archive that you've been curating, had suddenly and unexpectedly gone down, and this fact made you sad. I wanted to ask: what about the disappearance of something online can make a person feel sad, as opposed to any other possible emotional reaction?

**Craig Dworkin:** I think part of that has to do with the paradox of having a digital archive at all, which is that archives are ostensibly about preserving material, whereas we know that all of the platforms and programs and protocols that digital media rely on are poignantly ephemeral. There's something about the online archive that is inevitably about loss—the sadness is just a version of that primal childhood sadness of irretrievable loss.

**BR:** Is that a holdover from the era of print? N. Katherine Hayles has said that print turns out to be awfully good for storage because it doesn't vaporize when somebody pulls out a plug. Are we going to move into a future with a different sense of loss and ownership, where, if 20 scans of a journal go poof, we just say "Oh well"?



**CD:** I think there is a range of implications (from what it means to people as readers, to what it means to people as writers, to what it means to scholars). Darren Wershler has an interesting co-authored essay that has just recently been posted on *Amodern* about trying to be a scholar of curated and non-curated literary artifacts. In this case, they're looking at scanners of comic books, of comic-book pirates essentially, who are distributing scans online. One of the things Darren points out is that if you wanted to study this phenomenon, you'd need to collect it, to record it in some way, before it disappears—that in the time-scale it takes a scholar to actually come up with a project, and to get around to writing an article, the subject could be entirely vaporized. You have to grab it all, and store it yourself. But this then leads to ethical questions: is it OK for scholars to violate all those copyrights? Is it OK for you to have a huge trove of pirated comic books just because in your defense you say, "Well, I'm going to write an essay about it someday"? That hard-drive doesn't look any different than the hard-drive of the worst offender of comic book piracy.

So I do think those are really practical questions, some of which are theoretical and technical as well. We were meeting with the Special Collections librarian at UW today, who was talking about acquiring certain work, especially digital work. If every iteration of that digital file

is technically a new edition, you face this infinite regress of collecting. I think it also goes all the way back to your observation that one of the things people wanted to do in the Special Collections room was touch the books, hold the books, handle things. You had printed out some of the pages from Holly Melgard's *Black Friday*, which is interesting because neither Holly nor I have been able to get Lulu to print a copy. It's ostensibly a work about the economics of on-demand printing, a field in which the price isn't calculated according to the amount of ink (though the amount of ink is the single most expensive cost for digitally printed books). Having the maximum number of entirely black pages is the lowest relative cost for the author because Lulu or Blurb, or whomever, charges you as much to do a blank book or a black book. A lengthy novel with lots of words or just a single-word Saroyan poem—their cost is the same. If you cover the pages entirely in this incredibly expensive printing ink, gallons of which costs thousands of dollars, you get the lowest possible cost for the poet and the maximum value for the reader. But not if you can't, in fact, actually order one to be printed. There is a point at which there are also these objects and ideas caught in between—that hold forth the promise of being tangible or palpable, but maybe actually can't be produced.

**BR:** In the case of Melgard's *Black Friday*, I was trying to print it out and discovered among other things that

as you try to print it out using a photocopier, which is our network printer for the department, each page is very different from the previous. Viewed on an iPad or elsewhere, the PDF version of *Black Friday* is solid black throughout, whereas viewed as a printout, it ends up being more complicated than an Ad Reinhardt black painting: with variations in shading, lines, accidental circles and other things that are ghosted in. But I wasn't able to print it all because it would take so much toner I would be in deep trouble. I would use up my entire photocopier quota for the year to print out that one book, so instead I printed just 30 pages. As I was leaving the Book Arts exhibition today, I talked to Sandra Kroupa, who's in charge of the Book Arts Collection for the University of Washington Library system, and she said she'd be happy to take the 30 pages and enter it into our catalogue, find an archival box to put those 30 pages in, even though there's an absent seven hundred pages. As far as she was concerned, you didn't need to have those pages. They were something of an et cetera. In other words, a failed partial printout will now be archived as a paper form of a digital artifact. The kinds of affective investment here are pretty peculiar. She wanted to do this same thing to Andy Sterling's *Supergroup*, even though two hundred pages were missing from that printout. Again, she said, "It appears that one doesn't need the rest of it for the purposes of the library." I think maybe on reflection she would

change her mind, but that's a very odd midway point between realization/non-realization, or the book as a unit of information/the book as a material substrate. I wasn't quite sure how to respond, actually.

**CD:** No, and that's not how she would probably think about any number of nineteenth-century novels, which are also "et ceteras." You read 10 pages and basically you know what's going to happen....

**BR:** Or *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, where it was never finished.

**CD:** There's also a brilliant example from Danny Snelson, who is working on a new section for the *Eclipse* archive in which he is both purchasing and gathering free versions of born-digital PDFs, e-reader publications, et cetera, printing them out, and then scanning those artifacts back in to become new digital PDFs on *Eclipse*. There, it's going to come full circle: "never finished."

**BR:** Wow. In the book I've just published, in my chapter on Snelson's work, I talk about how central remastering is to his aesthetic, the movement of information from one medium to the other, how those different instantiations introduce all sorts of fascinating aesthetic effects (and otherwise), a kind of technological version of the old idea that "there is no original, only copies."

**CD:** Right, which goes against the portability of the PDF.

**BR:** Absolutely.

**CD:** It's supposed to look the same when you print it out, no matter what the device.

**BR:** Speaking of coding and remediation, I know that you're working on a new project where you're involving a dictionary as a kind of aspect of coding and recursion and transformation, or translation. Could you talk a bit about that?

**CD:** And an aspect of closed systems versus open systems as well....

**BR:** Yes.

**CD:** Let me say a little about it, and then bring this back to the "question of audience" that I've been thinking about since your question at the round-table earlier today. The project is an old Oulipian proposal, in which one takes a source sentence, and then replaces every word in that sentence with its dictionary definition. I'm then taking that second sentence, and replacing its words with *their* dictionary definition, then taking the resulting sentence and replacing all of those words with their dictionary definitions, and so on. Although part of it I'm doing longhand, with the old-fashioned multi-volume

*Oxford English Dictionary*, I think it nonetheless evinces the logic of the digital. That is, you can easily imagine a version of this project that was entirely automated. And so it brings up the question of audience, because I'm going to end up with something like a hundred-thousand-word non-narrative prose work that no one (except possibly you, who actually read *Parse!*) will ever read. (I'll have to be careful to never give you a copy, because you might possibly read it....) For everyone else, it will sit on their desk, unopened. There's a way in which the logic of the digital and the potentiality of potential literature opens onto the imagined horizon of an endless project, even though it's never actually going to be realized. I could just keep doing these sentences on my hard-drive. If I did automate it, it would just go until it filled up endless amounts of Cloudspace storage. There's that "potential," forward-looking part of Oulipo—at the same time that it's creating a work that may be read by only one person ever.

You had asked during the round-table a question (and I think you were thinking of the audience of young student-writers in the room) about audience and the ways in which digital networking changed how writers think of their audience. What I wanted to add is that the audience for anything online today, anything on a networked Web computer, is non-human. Most of the reading done, and in fact, most of the text generated

today, is generated by machines for machines, recursively for themselves or in the kind of protocol ways that they talk to other machines. On the one hand, these students (if they were still worried about having human readers) have a lot to worry about: the audience for any given book of poetry is miniscule; but if they could give that dream up and just worry about machine readers, they should all be happy. Any work they put online will be read by bots and spiders and all of the machines that are out there writing and reading ceaselessly, no matter how much work we do or how “good” it is. The question is no longer one of aesthetics, but of protocol.

**BR:** Is that akin to wandering around London and knowing that there are cameras everywhere observing you, that machines are watching? And that few or no humans are behind those cameras, that all this footage is being stored, processed and analyzed by computers? There’s this surveillance and we should be happy in our embeddedness in this network of objects talking to objects, machines talking to machines?

**CD:** Yes. Or the most interesting sites are probably the ones where those overlap uneasily. When you go through the new microwave scanners at airports, they reassure you that the image that the TSA person sees has been sufficiently redacted. The machine can still read for what it needs to see, but not so well that a

person doesn’t need to check it. The person checking it isn’t going to see what people would want to see if they wanted to snoop at your naked body. The machine can’t quite do it. It needs a person. The person can’t quite look at what a person would want to look at. The person looks at what the machine wants the person to look at. It’s very complicated.

**BR:** N. Katherine Hayles considers the human and machine integrated in “feedforward” and “feedback loops,” in what she calls a “dynamic heterarchy” (because it’s not a hierarchy—one’s not above the other). Heterarchy is separate things, different things, involved dynamically, and that’s one model of post-humanism. Is this a poetics of post-humanism? Is that fair?

**CD:** In some instances, yeah. I think of Nick Thurston’s book *Of the Subcontract*, in which he sub-contracted all of the poems via Amazon’s Mechanical Turk platform, which has that uneasy relationship. It’s clearly conducted online, on a platform designed solely for people doing digital labor, but also only for labor that cannot itself be done entirely by a machine. So the project is machine-like in the sense of its drudgery, its mindlessness, but it is unperformable by machines alone. It’s a classic deconstructive relationship—the project is essentially and inherently automated, but it can’t relinquish a hold on the human either, and hence is

fundamentally *non-machinic* as well. So that does sound like a fair characterization: it's not quite hierarchized, but enmeshed in some way.

**BR:** If machines read each other's texts, do they listen to each other sing? Is there a lyricism of the machine?

**CD:** I'd hope so.

**BR:** Would it be within the spectrum of the audible, for humans?

**CD:** Right. I think of something like Seth Kim-Cohen's sense of non-cochlear music. Or as Rachel Zolf was both performing and talking about in her round-table presentation today—the glitch might be that moment. If we take the Russian Futurist definition of poetry as “language oriented away from the communicative function”: that must happen for machines, too.

**BR:** The 404 Error (“address not returned”) is the machine cry of longing and helplessness? The moment of lyric isolation?

**CD:** I love that.

**BR:** I like the idea, but it's probably a little...

**CD:** Well, it's a step behind that. That's still for us to see. It might be the endlessly spinning rainbow wheel.

The machine is singing to itself, and maybe we get to eavesdrop a bit.

**BR:** Hart Crane in “Cape Hatteras” and *The Bridge*, way back in modernism, talked about a machine singing to itself, “The bearings glint[ing]... In oilrinsed circles of blind ecstasy,” or “stropped to the slap of belts on booming spools,” and all these noises of the factory. There's certainly been a long history of aestheticized machine noise, but what would be aestheticized computer noise? We used to have modem signal. Now that would date us—the sound of the old analog modems.

**CD:** And there certainly are people (and I list some of these in the last chapter of *No Medium*, though I'm not going to remember their names off the cuff) who amplify the ambient noises of computers and machines that are either not audible to us normally, or are so much now a part of our environment that we don't even hear them anymore: the whirl of cooling fans or the clicks of diodes doing their “on” and “off” switching.

**BR:** Is that a Duchampian idea, the music of *The Large Glass*, somehow?

**CD:** His *Erratum Musical*, or error music, would be exactly one way to go with that.

**BR:** If we have a poetics of total systemization, the recursive project that could go on forever (that is, human miming machine or conjoining with machine), we also have a music of the glitch or the interruption or the variation. Is that a restaging of the Oulipian idea that we have the system and then we have the necessary clinamen within it?

**CD:** Exactly.

**BR:** The idea would be that all systems have a swerve, which is why something like a poetics of large systems is not necessarily determinist or obviating the possibility of any agency. It's just relocating agency in a different space, or form of action.

**CD:** Yeah, and reminding ourselves that there is so much of the rhetoric of the digital (the metaphoric uses, the ideological uses). We put something like the digital or the Internet towards imagined seamlessness and flawlessness and uniformity and universality, yet those glitches and clinamenatic swerves are inherent parts of these very systems. In the same way we imagine that computers are operating as pure string of ones and zeros, of clear ons and offs, though if you go down far enough into the machine, it has to convert analog signals into those clean digital signals. There's always error there. Or take the example of the two different ways in which floating-point calculations are made,

each of which renders uncertainty and approximation through what are fundamentally, theoretically, radically incompatible different mathematical systems—which is all very abstract, but has very concrete results: this is why old programs won't run on my Intel Mac. There is a point at which theoretical issues have very real-world consequences.

**BR:** There's also the difference between how computers treat error and how humans do. From the point of view of a computer, a program is functioning properly as long as it does what its code prescribes. The computer is indifferent to results or outcomes. It's only from a human point of view that we determine whether a given action or output constitutes an error. And so, what we might consider a glitch is, from a computer's perspective, just business as usual, a consequence of following an algorithm. Here we move back to the idea that the machine always has grit, that the machine is inherently that which, as an entropic structure, is eventually going to break down, to fail to do what we expect when we expect it.

**CD:** Nick Montfort has a really interesting poem that is algorithmic and seems to conform to many of the more familiar protocols of computer-generated poetry, but what might be most interesting about it is that it will perform this repetitive function and essentially write

the same poem again and again until your computer processor cannot handle the accumulated errors and the heat-generating labor simply of making these calculations. So, theoretically, the poem will eventually crash your computer—the only way in which the poem is over, and simultaneously, the only way in which, to some extent, the poem has fulfilled its role, is by failing.

**BR:** The poem is like a denial of service attack, overwhelming the processing power of the computer. So one takes what could be in one context terroristic, or not just simply error but violation, and turns it around and makes that into the aesthetic of the moment your computer crashes. Or is this just procedural—an end point? Or is it aesthetic if we are then asked to turn away from the computer, in a Cageian manner, and note that the cat is under the desk desperately trying to get our attention?

**CD:** Right. Or Jasper Johns's idea that Cage picks up on, that you do one thing, you do it over, and you do it over, until you do something else.

**BR:** Well, it wouldn't take too many times of running a program that crashed my computer before I would download another program.

**CD:** You'd do something else.

**BR:** There was William Gibson's e-poem *Agrippa (A Book of the Dead)* that, as you read it, self-destructed. The question becomes (we're back to the idea of curation or preservation, back to the beginning of our conversation), how in the world do you, then, store that in book arts? Or any kind of library context?

**CD:** You never let anyone read it.

**BR:** Well, then, how about Steve McCaffery's *Carnival*? To create it you have to cut it out. Once you cut it up it's no longer the book. That one is a pre-digital example, but these questions of the relation between work and composition and material realization are old questions. This would be an interesting place to imagine our conversation ending, the idea of taking scissors to paper and the idea of crashing a computer. Works that, in their realization, malfunction, destroy.

**CD:** Perfect.

## Sarah Dowling and Rachel Zolf



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**Sarah Dowling:** It's nice to have the occasion to talk to you.

**Rachel Zolf:** You too.

**SD:** I guess we haven't really spoken that much since we last saw each other at the Affect & Audience symposium at the University of Washington, but I have been thinking a lot about the paper that you presented there. I thought that might be an interesting place to begin our conversation, because it's just such a rich text and there are so many interesting ideas—one of which is the way you frame digital procedures as being constitutive of the poetic subjectivity that we think of as being characteristic of our moment right now. And one thing I really liked about your piece is how you talk about those digital methodologies as having affects of their own. I don't know if you'd like to begin by saying something about that?

**RZ:** Well, I was joking a bit in the paper about the specific questions the symposium asked about poetic affective and digital materialities as somehow consciously



linked. For me it's obvious that digital procedures are constitutive of our prosthetic identities in the twenty-first century, and not just for "digital natives," itself a problematic term, but that's another conversation. I'm more interested in how affect is generated through the "event" of poetry. When I'm asked how to name what I do in poetry, I say it has its own kind of ugliness and is not the kind of work that you're meant to fall in love with. But I struggle with notions of intentionality and even talking about my work at all sometimes. I find that I'll write something about my work or answer a question and then think about it later and think that's such a narrow or privileged position. For example, in that symposium paper, I keep going back to montage shock effects. I'm influenced by all that early-twentieth-century Russian formalist thinking, and how Walter Benjamin and others have taken it up in terms of art's relation to the class struggle. But there's a limit inherent in speaking that from a bourgeois artist stance. I mean most, but not all, artist folks are bourgeois at least in terms of cultural capital, and often in terms of means of access.

**SD:** Right. And given that position, it seems especially important to push back against this aesthetic where it's the artist's or the writer's job to awaken the slumbering masses.

**RZ:** Right, I'm shifting away from this idea of waking people up through "mad affect" or ecstasy, shifted to a place outside yourself, etc. I recently read Jacques Rancière's *The Emancipated Spectator*, and realize that what I've said on spectatorship could be interpreted as a kind of haughty stance. Rancière says that the spectator is always already emancipated, is always already smart enough and doesn't need to be woken up by montage shock effects or whatever. It's not as if our not-so-new modernist sensibilities of smashing the system are so smart and interesting. So I feel that language tends to fail when trying to describe my work, just as language fails in the work. Right now, I'm interested in creating events in language (including visual and sonic events), and readers/spectators/listeners experience those events however they wish. I guess it's kind of a Deleuzian shift for me away from authorial intention (however interpreted) to the impersonal event. What's coming up for me is related to what you wrote in your initial note to your book *DOWN*, where you said you wanted to not talk down to the materials you're using. In my mind, I extrapolate this to the reader too. What do you think about that?

**SD:** Yeah definitely. One thing that was really resonating with me when you were speaking just now was this idea that you're using a lot of ugly materials—partly in content, but also partly in the way that there's a kind of

rebuff to the reader. The reader probably doesn't ever feel seduced by the text, or drawn in. This seems like one kind of difference between what you're doing and some of those modernist shock effects, where you are supposed to be shocked and dramatically vaulted into a different consciousness, but you're also supposed to be carried along at the same time, like that text is going to teach you and bring you into the fold in a certain way.

One key difference I feel in your work is that those moments of shock don't try to make you agree with the text. Sometimes it's almost the opposite effect, where they're trying to bring you up against the text. The reader does maintain that sense of autonomy, because the shock isn't accompanied by this need to convince. That's something that I've found very helpful in reading your work for my own because, as you mentioned in that note at the end of *DOWN*, I talked about not wanting to use the popular materials that I'm drawing on (like song lyrics or things that I've found on various blogs or newspaper materials) to correct or suggest a better perspective, or to suggest some kind of position of superiority or hauteur—where you can separate yourself from the processes that you're noticing in such languages.

For me, I think what's more interesting is our messy complicity in these languages. I see this in your book

*Janey's Arcadia* as well, where you're cycling through all these texts that are trying to justify and solidify and grip the ability to actually colonize Canada and Western Canada specifically. As much as we might look at those texts and find everything they're saying incredibly objectionable, we're also beneficiaries of that logic and our lives participate in it whether we like that or not. It doesn't seem very helpful to just say, "Oh, this is bad—look at how bad this is. I'm going to create these juxtapositions that will teach everyone that it's bad because I'm the artist and I can see that and you can't." For me it's much more interesting to find ways of creating these moments formally, where there might be that feeling of rebuff but it's not one that's supposed to indoctrinate the reader into the text's perspective or draw the reader in as a kind of second stage after that moment of shock. I think for me, and possibly for you too, a lot of that is coming through the humor in the text, where you might be able to laugh at what you're seeing but there's still this sense of distance or separation. I feel as though when I want to play with familiar materials it's not to get people to agree with me.

**RZ:** To continue that line, what about the language that you use? It's "a completely poignant and completely flattened language that I did not yet speak" (and that's partly an appropriation from Frank Ocean: "The language I did not yet speak"), but this poignant and

flattened language and that notion of writing with the grain of the appropriated materials rather than against it—that's very interesting to me. Can you say a bit more about that?

**SD:** Sure. A lot of material in that book is coming from pop songs. I was really thinking about all these love songs as forming a cultural backdrop, where they might be the noise you hear at the mall or they might accompany the climactic scene in a movie, or they might be this ambient soundtrack to decades' worth of car rides. They have this cultural power to define an emotion, but by the same token, especially as a kind of artist/intellectual person, you're not supposed to agree that they define your emotions. That would be a real failure of the intellect—to say that my feelings toward my partner are encapsulated by the song "My Girl" or something like that. I think there's a pretty big cultural slap that comes if you try to argue that that's really true. The alternative is to take the position that pop cultural materials are insincere or mass-marketed or inauthentic in some way. There isn't much in-between to explore the pervasiveness of those materials and their intersection with these kind of moments that we take to be real or true or genuine, because it always has to be caught up in this cycle of critique. You need to lift the veil and do these gestures that are a little bit violent in terms of their always seeking to rip off the scab and discover the

true bloody surface underneath. I really just thought that there's something to that in-between that's valuable. We don't want to just go along with these mass-market logics, but then on the other hand I don't think it makes sense to discount that more mundane encounter that's consistent and ongoing. So how can those things be placed alongside each other in a way where one is not positioned as the kind of accurate or real or more enlightened view than the other (because there's a lot that you have to throw under the bus, I think, to really take on that perspective)?

The other thing that I was thinking about, in terms of it being along the lines of that Frank Ocean phrase "The language I did not yet speak," is that it's actually very difficult to work with that material, because it has this very simplistic language and these very kind of basic structures of repetition. It ends up being horribly complex to try to use, especially in a text that's circulating in this kind of avant-garde poetry world where you're not supposed to use words like "soul" or "love" or even allow yourself to slide into that I/you lyric structure. The challenge of actually using a language that seems so basic was extreme, and I think because it's so heavily marked as being from this kind of more light or silly realm, it's actually incredibly difficult to get it to register in other ways. It was really, really hard to figure out how to put it on the page and how to let it set off whatever

kind of flares it was going to set off, and have those resonant moments. It was really different from any other project I had attempted before, because the language was very hard to manipulate.

**RZ:** So is it a different approach to working with “found” language from previously in your practice—this notion of working with it, working with the grain? This is going back to your earlier question to me around flow and noise, flow versus noise, and beauty versus ugliness. Let’s of course go beyond the binaries. In a similar way to how I used to frame some processes in terms of montage shock effects that draw the reader into new forms of consciousness, in *Janey’s Arcadia* I lure the reader into a kind of lyric space where there’s a character that seems to have a shape. Then I get so bored by the lure and have to disrupt it. In the book, this meant disrupting the “Janey Canuck” voice, that plucky settler voice created by first-wave Canadian feminist writer Emily Murphy, who is famous in Canada for spearheading the “persons” case in 1919, where (white) women were finally deemed to be persons, which led to them getting the vote, etc. Emily Murphy and her Janey Canuck character were these iconic figures that I couldn’t resist skewering, yet there is also something in Janey’s voice that I like. Why would I want to work with her language if there wasn’t something there that drew me in? At first, in my process, I just wrote down

her casually racist banter about Indigenous peoples as is, but then I couldn’t stand to even look at it. So it sort of flows and then some kind of noise rises up. Usually I’ll layer the voices, here by using Janey Smith, Kathy Acker’s guerilla antiheroine of *Blood and Guts in High School*—this limit figure of girl/woman as human capital. Because Janey Canuck really needed a body. These pioneer heroines never seem to have one. I was also interested in how Acker deals with imperialist subjects at the limits of language, so the addition of Acker brought in some really interesting textures. Speaking of noise, though, “Are you noiseless?” is one of the lines in your book. Do you consider yourself noiseless as a writer? Your noise isn’t as obvious as this digital noise that I have in a number of my texts. But in your work the surface is seemingly noiseless; it seems like it’s flowing smoothly, but that betrays its own striations. It feels almost Steinian in that subtle language and sound differences flow more at the surface, which I read as noise in its own way.

**SD:** Yeah, I like that description. One thing that I thought about a lot in putting these different texts together was that all of them seemed just beneath the surface to have this really strange current of anxiety flowing through them. With the song “My Girl,” for example, once you strip the lyrics from the music it actually starts to sound very tense, and all the repetitions start to feel like there’s a need to be convinced or something. There’s a ton of

equivocation, like “I guess *you’d* say what can make me feel this way, my girl.” It’s weirdly deferred.

**RZ:** The conditional?

**SD:** Yeah, and it’s funny because the song, when performed, is incredibly affirmative and kind of declarative. It was really interesting to me that the lyrics, once severed from that music, would be working in such a different way. I think about a lot of the noise in the text as the inscription or recording of that anxiety, and the kinds of twists and eddies of that self-convincing and equivocation and back-and-forth and self-correction and interruption and all that kind of thing. But I think it’s true that, especially at a glance, it looks like sentences. It looks like lines of poetry. There often is a kind of “I” who can guide a little bit, so the noise definitely comes in through the repetitions or insistences, or inability to fully insist, which maybe is where I start to diverge from Stein a little bit. But I think it’s very strikingly different than the kinds of noise that appear in your text, where because of what you’re doing with OCR, optical character recognition software, and bringing these historical materials into your work, you’re preserving all those errors of transcription or using those errors to build out. You’ll read along in a certain poem and you have these great collections of different voices kind of bringing together all these different moments of

dialect or vernaculars, and then suddenly we’re looking at something that doesn’t even, or maybe isn’t, actually the English language anymore, and we’re just brought right out of that.

**RZ:** I’m interested in all the valences of “recognition.” But first to explain: Optical Character Recognition (OCR) is used a lot with old texts that are being eaten away by acid, which are scanned to preserve their contents. Of course Google is scanning all texts now. But old texts may have pieces of snot or food on them that have eaten away at the pages. This stuff actually eats away at the text, so that when the machine scans it and tries to recognize text using OCR software, there are often glitches or errors, and they’re called “errors of recognition.” These errors come up as strings of code. For me it sometimes looks like how you’d represent swear words. That was one of the other reasons I brought in Acker, because of her lovely mouth. Anyway, for me, I’m working with text and I get bored and I look for some way to interrupt the flow. I’m into flow in a Deleuzean sense, and I don’t want it to be consumable. I can’t read anything that’s consumable, unless I’m on a beach somewhere and pick up a mystery novel. It’s the way my brain works. But in terms of “recognition,” it’s pretty easy to do associative leaps. Like from errors of recognition to the classic Hegelian dialectic of master-

slave—the mutual recognition that has been at the forefront of philosophies of witnessing.

I've been studying notions of witnessing, again, trying and failing and trying again to come up with a way of thinking through how I approach writing and how some of the writers I'm interested in approach writing. There's a book called *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition*, by Kelly Oliver, where she posits a way of going beyond the Hegelian struggle for recognition. She goes more into notions of love and proximity, and I cringe a little at that. I'm more interested in ideas like Derridean hospitality or other ambiguous theological-political terms, limit-concepts. That's what I was going to say earlier when you were talking about the song, the reception to song (like, "Are they commodifying"?). This either/or. I'm so sick of the binaries. Hospitality is an interesting notion because "guest" and "host" come from the same root. The same Greek root. And the term also contains the Latin "hostis," which is enemy. My book *Neighbour Procedure* tries to think beyond the binary of friend/enemy and to neighbor as a third term, but when you get into the realm of the threes, you can get stuck in the triad, which I don't want to be. Basically the concept always fails, but I'm interested in a kind of third-or-more space that moves beyond the ethical two—the me and you, you and me, reader and writer, etc. The self

and the other. I'm interested in a kind of impersonal or "neutered" witness, if you want to torque Blanchot.

**SD:** In addition to the question of witnessing that you're alluding to with some of the philosophers you named, there's also the sense of recognition in terms of politics.

**RZ:** Right, and so there's that link that speaks in both of our works. Indigenous scholars in Canada, Glen Coulthard, for example, have done great work at saying "Fuck your 'politics of recognition,'" which is aimed at philosophers such as Charles Taylor, who wrote this well-known piece about the politics of recognition in terms of governmental frameworks. Some Indigenous thinkers and activists in Canada are saying, "We don't want to be recognized by you. We're not the slave. We're not interested in your politics of recognition." The kind of liberal politics Taylor draws on always ends up reinforcing the master-slave dialectic. I'm really interested in looking at it from a complicit stance. I'm interested in someone like Juliana Spahr's work on complicity and the "we," although of course that's a problematic pronoun. Or Kaia Sand's *Remember to Wave* as a kind of complicit work, where her travail of walking and holding a specific, charged Portland space and its hauntological histories is a kind of witnessing to events she is complicit with as a white, privileged United Statesian. I've talked about Paul Celan's lines, "Noone / bears witness for the / witness"

and am trying to figure the “Noone” as a defaced someone. There’s no face. There’s no human. It’s this impersonal stance. This stance of not being a subject, but being complicit.

Another good example would be Laura Elrick’s video/performance piece “Stalk,” where she put on an orange prison uniform that looked like Guantanamo detainee garb and walked down Fifth Avenue in midtown New York City, in shackles, face fully covered, metaphorically defaced. You can’t tell what the gender or race or anything is of this figure shuffling down the street. The piece that she makes is not about her. The project has two parts. There’s the performance itself, and the reaction of people on the street—or non-reaction, which is quite interesting. Then there’s the text itself, that is the voiceover on the video, which has nothing to do with Laura Elrick other than that Laura Elrick is making this piece and she’s complicit in the experience of Guantanamo Bay prisoners as an American, blah blah blah. She’s trying to create a response, but so much of the model for this stuff around witnessing has been the Holocaust. Like Susan Gubar (famous for Gilbert and Gubar, *Madwoman in the Attic*, etc.) also wrote *Poetry after Auschwitz: Remembering What One Never Knew*. That’s about writers who take the place of people who couldn’t survive—she calls them “proxy witnesses.” Giorgio Agamben talks about the notion

of the complete witness to the catastrophe being the half-dead *Muselmann* (Muslim) of the Nazi camps, who has no voice. And that the witness then must always be multiple and marked by difference. But here Gubar has a whole chapter on Plath’s Nazi/Daddy poems as a kind of proxy witnessing. It’s this classic thing. I don’t want to diss Carolyn Forché’s work on “the poetry of witness,” but it’s just that with a lot of this writing, you either had to “be there” in your physical being or you had to pretend that you were there as a “proxy witness” or “secondary witness,” another term bandied about. As you personify the absent/dead person you’re supposedly bearing witness for (from the camps or some other atrocity), you use the rhetorical technique of prosopopoeia—which, as Paul De Man explains, means putting a face back on. I find that stuff part of a colonizing mentality. Remember that Rae Armantrout article, “Feminist Poetics and the Meaning of Clarity,” where she compares a Sharon Olds poem to a Lyn Hejinian poem? That essay has influenced me so much in this really strange way, in terms of what we’ve been talking about, clarity and noise. She asks, “Is something clear when you understand it, or when it looms up startling you?” What is clarity? In that piece she talks about Olds’s gaze on a daughter figure in one poem. This daughter is a pubescent teen at the pool being looked at by a boy, and Olds is also sizing her up. But what is interesting is that Armantrout deems Olds’ gaze colonizing, or at least that’s what I received from

the reading experience. I might be misremembering it, but I don't care. This is what I got out of the essay, is that Olds's gaze on her daughter is colonizing, and then Armantrout proceeds to argue that Hejinian's more dispersed gaze is not occupying space and thought in the same way, which I would agree with too. But I think that these poems, these poets that Gubar writes about in *Poetry After Auschwitz*, this proxy witnessing, speaking for, is a colonizing stance. Cue the subtitle "Remembering what one never knew." I'm not interested in that. I don't want to make it about me, even though I'm complicit. Like I can't *not* write about colonization right now, because I have to work through it myself as a settler. But *Janey's Arcadia* isn't about me directly, even though all settlers have a little Janey in them, and I'm responsible for everything she says.

**SD:** I was talking about a similar issue with my students the other night. We were talking about how one version of (not just) the poetics of witness (but that term would encapsulate the work I'm thinking about) is to confer a voice upon people, individuals or groups who, historically or contemporarily, don't have one within the political terms of their day. On the one hand there's this idea where that's a benevolent gesture and a good thing to do in a liberal sense—to distribute that position of the liberal subject as it's encapsulated in poetry, to spread it more broadly. But then that also illustrates

the whole problem as well. In that scenario poets are in the position of possessing this quiver full of subject positions that they can hand out however they please, or not. What's troubling to me is that it seems, from my view, that it's more important to actually grapple with the position that someone would be in when he/she doesn't get to be a subject. Rather than try to do this sort of redistributing gesture, it might be more important to actually reckon with what it means to be held outside of that form of voice or personhood or subjectivity. What would it actually mean to have some form of articulation from this position, and is there any way that someone not in this position has access to other types of voices? A work that I find really important along this line of thinking is NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!*, because she doesn't write, say, a suite of poems centered in the "I" from the perspective of the slaves who were drowned and whom the book is about. A lot of the "I" speech in that book is actually from the position of the crew onboard the ship.

**RZ:** Yes, she talks about the captain in particular.

**SD:** Yeah, people who were in positions of power who could feel secure in their personhood. They then have to reckon with what it means to have legal personhood, knowing it confers upon you the power to kill these other people.



**RZ:** That's where we want to go beyond the "I," and the "or," because it's not as if the margins are better. Again back to the master/slave recognition dynamics: these are always in relation to power. That's why I'm trying to think through other types of positionalities that are neither singular nor plural, and that are not the "third way" as a kind of middle ground. It's something outside, yet implicated, still inside, at a threshold. Like trying to think of what *happens* in a materialist sense at the limits of language. Definitely NourbeSe is doing that in *Zong!* by enacting an exploded book that operates at the limits of meaning and readability and consumability. When I have taught that text most people don't "get it," don't even have affective responses beyond frustration, but that's OK—frustration is a start. And reading that text aloud as a group draws many other affects to the surface.

**SD:** Yeah, there are so many works that can be models on how to think through this. Another one that I think is also important to both of us is Bhanu Kapil's *The Vertical Interrogation of Strangers*, which is what I was talking about with my students when we had these conversations that I just alluded to. She draws on all these interviews from we don't really know how many women, and then brings that together with her own answers to the same questions that she asked them. I think what's so challenging about that text is that it's all told from the "I" perspective, which lends these sort of

temptations to continuity across all the different "I"s. Sometimes it seems like you are knitting together a fluid and continuous story of a single person. Then other times you realize when you get a particular reference that one "I" is speaking about a time much in advance of the other "I." It's not exactly a group articulation, because it's not all held together by the force of "we," but it's sitting on this very unstable ground, where you're tempted to assume because of the grammatical convention that it's one person, but then you're constantly being pulled away from that as well.

**RZ:** Yes the blurring in that Kapil text makes the "I" becomes singular-plural. I'm interested in how you're working with newspaper text too, because that seems on the surface to come from an "objective," third-person perspective. The subject matter that you're using in "Starlight Tours," this dealing with what we "bury," what is told and what is not told, the denials and disavowals of what you call an "occupying method"—I'm interested in this notion of the occupying method, and why that poem is in a book playing with all these song lyrics. What "machine" is being turned on there?

**SD:** One thing I was thinking about (and it was a kind of strange decision to put it in) was that I was kind of becoming a teenager when the inquiry into Neil Stonechild's death was going on. It was really revelatory

to realize that this was a kid a few years older than me and he was killed by the police and nothing really happened.

**RZ:** Can you explain the context a bit more for the non-Canadians?

**SD:** Right. He was a First Nations boy who was 17 in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, and he was taken on a starlight tour, which means he was picked up on the suspicion of being drunk in public. This is a thing that police there do and historically did, and rather than take him to the drunk tank and fill out paperwork (not to suggest that that would in any way be a good act), instead they drove him to the edge of town and they beat him and left him to die. It was in November so it was very, very cold and he actually died of hypothermia and was found a little while later—I think by someone who worked for the power company. This was by the Queen Elizabeth II Power Station. A few years later an inquiry into his death was started and the police officers were given some kind of nominal punishment but, as with so many cases like this, it was virtually swept under the rug. Around the same time, just a couple of years later, there were two young guys who had just graduated from the high school I was about to go to, and they had murdered a woman who was working as a prostitute and was also First Nations. They had tricked her into going

with both of them and they drove her out to the airport and sexually assaulted her and beat her and left her to die and she did die. I remember that trial being very eye-opening for me as well, because the judge actually instructed that the fact that she was a sex worker should be used to weigh against the severity of the sentence that these two young men would receive. They both received very light sentences in the end, not surprisingly since that was the attitude. I think I was about 12 when that happened. I remember that just kind of clarified a bunch of things for me. When you're a child you have a sense of the way things are working, but those two cases really solidified and reconfirmed my sense of how power was operating.

In some ways it seemed kind of inappropriate to place this really violent and disturbing and racially inflected material within the manuscript, but it was important for me to do that, because it's not as if you can sever the kind of ambient noise that comes from the pleasurable parts of popular culture from the ambient noise that describes the more sinister aspects of that same culture. On the same radio station you're hearing the news reports about these cases and then they say the name of the station in a bold, commercial voice and it transitions into some very saccharine pop song. There's not a clear division between the ways in which we receive these different kinds of information, and because so

much of the material in the book is saturated with this sense of an adolescent moment, I really thought it was important to include that material that was so formative for crystallizing my sense as an adolescent of how these things were operating. It was really crucial to me that that would be in there alongside the material that seems itself adolescent—that had been included all along.

**RZ:** Interesting. One of your other questions in the book is “what could make this aesthetic?” Like this aesthetic combination of disparate and desperate discourses that are rubbed against each other. The rubbing is visible. The sparks come off. The seams are left intact, and the seems as well. I think we both do this kind of ambiguity that is left there. There’s not a didactic message. There’s just an experience that you, as reader/listener, are responsible for, and in your own way can do whatever you want with.

**SD:** Yeah, I think that’s a similarity between our projects too. You talk about rubbing different rhetorics against each other for this sort of spark effect, but also you talk about doing that for stickiness (where Sara Ahmed describes stickiness as what objects do to other objects as a way of transferring affect). It’s not this kind of passive/active binary, but more this sense of clinging, doing, that’s very sexualized in your work and in her description too. But it is about letting that sit and slowly

operate or unfold, rather than having a very particular message or moral of the story in a kind of simplistic take-away sense.

**RZ:** I think we do some similar things around queer rhetoric. Obviously we’re both queer writers, but we’re not foregrounding our queer subjectivity (well, I did a bit in my first couple books). It’s more a queer approach to critique. How I describe *Janey’s Arcadia* is that Janey Canuck and Janey Smith are fucking and they produce Janey Settler-Invaser. There’s this rubbing up against—what’s the term for lesbians rubbing against each other? What’s it called again? You know when you rub...

**SD:** Are you talking about scissoring?

**RZ:** Scissoring... no... tribadism! Isn’t there some theory that if you rub up against each other you can make a baby or something? Proprioception? Maybe I’m crazy. I haven’t had my lunch yet. That kind of rubbing up against discourse you could determine as being queer.

**SD:** Yeah. I think it’s very interesting to think about what it means to do queer writing from this kind of rhetorical perspective, rather than from the subjectivity perspective. I think this ties into the question of witnessing that you were talking about before, where it’s not about bearing witness to one’s own life, except maybe in the abstract sense or even in terms of inscribing

a queer community or something. Again maybe in the abstract sense, but rather it seems to be more about the ethics of description or a particular kind of stance or an in-between position. I think the challenge of this is that you are going to end up with something very bizarre, but whether it's necessarily identifiable as queer in the sense that we think of that right now often then becomes a question. In the beginning of *Janey's Arcadia* there's a lot of stuff about cocks and cunts and stuff like that, and within a certain framework that might not register—well it may not register as gay, let's say. Even if it does register as queer. Because you use queer as a rhetorical strategy rather than as a set of things that must be included within the text as a kind of representational mandate, you end up with something that's much beyond the expected sense of what that word means. I'm very interested in how, when this becomes a queer rhetoric, it actually opens out different kinds of content, which will filter into that space.

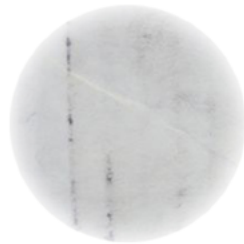
**RZ:** Yeah I'd say, for both of us, it's about creating excessive spaces that, for me, include Acker, or being influenced by New Narrative excesses. Not being afraid to go right out there with the sex. I try to make the sex ambiguous, even though Acker is present and there's a lot of fucking that seems to have a hetero vein. But it's troubled. You talked earlier about "My Girl" and remember when we traded manuscripts and discussed

whether you should insert "boy" into the "My Girl"—you know, "Boy I Love You," and whatever those songs are? There's this campiness to your text. There's the bathos. There's excess. I think that's more along the rhetorical line I mean, but that frankly I don't consciously think about, because it's ingrained. Not simply just a position of in-between, but a position of threshold. Not in-between, but almost-outside. This notion of outside that isn't absolute, that's noisily dangling. There's not a margin and a center, with positions that we can take in language. Language is in this event or torqued outside-inside. That's what I'm just trying to think through a bit: the limit, but not a limit as a thing that you can see, but as this potential event, the mirror becoming a window. There are no right words for it. It's finitude in a sense, but always to come.

**SD:** I like that sense of the limit—maybe thinking of it in a more mathematical sense than anything, where in high-school geometry class you have that graph and you're supposed to plot the line, and the thing you know to be true is that the lines are never going to intersect. That curve is just going to keep getting closer and closer for all of infinity, but they don't actually ever come together. Thinking about the tension of that space seems really productive and interesting. But that's all I know about math so I can't say any more.

**RZ:** I know, me neither.

## Kate Durbin and Ray Hsu



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**Kate Durbin:** Hi Ray, Are you here?

**Ray Hsu:** sho am

are you ready for this?

**KD:** You bet!

**RH:** awesome. what would be the awesomest way to begin?

**KD:** I think you just began pretty awesomely for us, but I do have a question for you that might be a good jumping off point. Shall I ask it?

**RH:** yes!

**KD:** Since the theme of the symposium was Affect and Audience in the Digital Age, what would you say the role of audience is in your practice?

**RH:** the role of the audience is to be impolite

or maybe more accurately, the role of the audience is to be polite

but it would be more fun if the audience either resisted this role or failed to fulfill it

what is the role of audience in your practice?

**KD:** Do you see your performance work as curating impoliteness, or at least creating a situation where audiences might reflect a little more on their own role within the context of a poetry reading?

(After you answer, I'll tell you the role of audience in my practice.)

**RH:** hmm. impoliteness would be a difficult thing to curate, if curation involves centralized authority

Sent at 1:54 p.m. on Saturday

**RH:** yes, helping create (which is slightly different than creating per se) a situation in which the audience could reflect on itself in relation to a "poetry reading" would be awesome

i think that, like all groupings, "the audience" is a diverse mix. It's uneven. some folks are more polite than others

just like in any organization. there are some people who are more invested in the logic of that organization than others

so my goal is to see if i can tease out any emergent impolitenesses

as a sociologist once put it, any concessions of politeness are political concessions

**KD:** What are the political concessions of politeness at a poetry reading, I wonder?

What is gained from shaking up that mold?

**RH:** perhaps they parallel those of democracy

democracy, as i see it, is not built of consensus, but of dissensus

**KD:** OK, so democracy is inherently impolite.

**RH:** ought to be. if i don't disagree because i feel the need to be polite, then there's a problem

**KD:** Yes, I would agree with that (hah).

Do you think that the poetry world has become too polite?

**RH:** yes

**KD:** Or is the world-world too polite?

**RH:** hmm. in some ways

but in many ways not

i think of the difference in coverage between *Democracy Now!* and a lot of other media outlets

*Democracy Now!* is invested in covering all sorts of impolitenesses that other outlets either don't bother with or are invested in avoiding

Sent at 2:05 p.m. on Saturday

**KD:** I can see the political connections you are drawing, which is interesting because many poets consider themselves highly political and radical. I am wondering why the poetry world is so polite. Do you think it has to do with the institutionalization of poetry, things like MFA programs? Or is it because poetry is seen as a quiet, sentimental, feelings-based art form? Or another reason?

**RH:** if we invest journalists with giving us back a contemporary moment that is too fragmented for us to comprehend in a totalizing way, then "the polite world" is just a vision we have access to through many media outlets

Sent at 2:06 p.m. on Saturday

**RH:** i think you're right that many poets consider themselves highly political and radical. but if we willingly

relegate ourselves to the free-speech zones we call poetry, then we also internalize and rearticulate the terms that have been given to us. Poets' corner = free-speech zone

yes, i think that the institutionalization of poetry in such things as MFA programs is part of the problem

Sent at 2:09 p.m. on Saturday

**RH:** it is part of how we make our free-speech zones palatable and desirable

and yes, it's also because poetry is seen as a quiet, sentimental, feelings-based art form

but seeming apoliticalness can also be powerfully political

like the "[Japanese housewife](#)"

Sent at 2:11 p.m. on Saturday

**RH:** the figure of the "Japanese housewife" is seen as an apolitical figure but in fact holds tremendous power in the Japanese political system

Sent at 2:12 p.m. on Saturday

**RH:** because that figure is seen as speaking from an apolitical position when speaking in the “political realm,” as it were

Sent at 2:14 p.m. on Saturday

**RH:** anyway, yes to both your points and probably more

**KD:** Does the “Japanese housewife” have power because she is controlling her husband behind the scenes?

**RH:** that’s not part of what i’m thinking

it’s more that a figure that represents “apoliticalness” actually has tremendous political power

**KD:** Your point being that nothing is neutral.

Or no one.

**RH:** and that what seems most neutral can have tremendous power

neutrality is a form of power

**KD:** That’s an interesting stance—I tend to think of the neutral as somewhat siding with the oppressor, but do you see it as different? Do you see your performance during poetry readings as a kind of powerful neutrality?

**RH:** i’m still curious about how you think of audience

**KD:** Oh yes. Well.

My first book was called *The Ravenous Audience*.

And the second one, which I read from at the symposium, is called *E! Entertainment*.

I also have a project called “Women as Objects,” which is about how young women present their digital avatars to an audience on Tumblr.

So I am always thinking of questions of audience, particularly from a perspective of a woman/object.

**RH:** i agree with your point about neutrality, which i think is slightly different from what i’m talking about

do you care more about audience than most other poets?

Sent at 2:20 p.m. on Saturday

**RH:** i also think that the idea of the oppressor is a complicated one

NEwayz

**KD:** I care about audience both thematically and in the way most poets do, which is when they present their work to an audience. I also make my body part



of the performance (not that it could ever not be—I am stuck in it). These things overlap, as I am a woman object presenting difficult work about audience to a sometimes indifferent or bewildered (sometimes even hostile) poetry audience. Due to these variables, it is a very complicated undertaking for me to present my work to an audience... in a way that I think it is not as complicated for many other poets.

**RH:** i think that the role of the body in performance is very interesting

i think that the fact that you're stuck in your body is an interesting one

i am too in different ways

**KD:** Yes we are all stuck, aren't we?

**RH:** not necessarily

some people are more stuck than others

or their bodies are more stuck in categories than others

**KD:** Yes, I would agree with that.

**RH:** or the categories are more visible than others

their bodies are more "in your face," as it were, than others

**KD:** Yes, and it's not just bodies, it's also roles—like we have a certain role for the poet, which also happens to correspond with a specific body.

**RH:** at least in certain contexts

yes

**KD:** In this way I felt doomed before I started in poetry. But I also think that it can be a generative place to work from, the place of doom. I wonder if you felt similarly.

**RH:** i'm very interested in the range of affect that seems to be available in your audiences

is there a wider range in yours than in many others?

and why is it more complicated for you than for many other poets?

Mount Doom

**KD:** Well, it is certainly complicated for other poets too, and in different ways.

Sent at 2:29 p.m. on Saturday

**RH:** Mount Doom is where we forge the One Poem and where we destroy it

what is the nature of your doom?

and perhaps we do feel similarly. i'm curious about that

Sent at 2:31 p.m. on Saturday

**KD:** Hah! Well, my work has to do with pop culture, toward which there is a lot of disregard in poetry. A lot of it is conceptual, which is usually seen as men's terrain. I am platinum blonde. I don't identify as a poet. I am committed to expressing my texts via fashion. All these variables make me a weird Mount Doom.

What about you?

I know you have to go in a minute.

Sent at 2:33 p.m. on Saturday

**RH:** it feels like the second i agree to "poetry" as my box, then i've already made some pact

i am given special powers

but i am doomed

**KD:** I wonder why "poetry" feels like such a doomed word

This is a terrible note to end our conversation on. Quick, say something awesome!

**RH:** i think you're way cooler than poetry

**KD:** Thank you—so are you, Ray.

**RH:** hey thanks

how did we do relative to our previous convo?

**KD:** Better, I think. I liked that one too but I couldn't imagine parceling it out, plus I was PMSing.

**RH:** should we steal bits from this convo or submit it in its entirety?

or let them steal?

**KD:** Maybe let them steal? What do you think?

**RH:** I'm always PMSing

yes let's let them steal

should we ask for final approval of their tiefing?

**KD:** Yes I think so.

**RH:** aight

**KD:** Hahahah.

Laughing at PMS comment.

**RH:** it's not you it's poetry

jk i love you poetry

**KD:** Poor poetry.

The muse is all mussed

**RH:** a mussy muse sounds hawt

devil may carish

**KD:** Yeah, she's like wind-tousled and smoking a cig.

**RH:** yeah hawt

**KD:** Playing Sega in the jade room at the Korean spa.

**RH:** fuck yeah

friggin altered beast

phantasy star

## Afterword: OkCupid

—GREGORY LAYNOR

"Gregory, you need to participate."

—Bartender

"I think I can, I think I can."

—The Little Engine That Could<sup>1</sup>

I am the son of a community college librarian and a college textbook salesman, who met through an ad in *Philadelphia* magazine. A product of print culture and the academic service industry, I have been reading about the artist in Berlin who was projecting the messages he was receiving on Grindr onto the wall of a glass box in a public space, while living in the box and communicating outside the box only through Grindr. Grindr issued a statement that while they support the arts, they can't

allow an artist to use their app to invade user privacy and lure users of the app into serving as the materials for an artwork. *Wanna play?* The artist's statement says that the work was about playing chess with the men invited to the box, and making them pancakes, and having conversations with them about love and intimacy and the Internet.

For this afterword to this *Affect & Audience in the Digital Age* digital chapbook, I want to mention that what I really want to discuss (somewhere over the rainbow) is that fundamental question of the historical avant-garde: the work-life balance. Part of what is nice about institutionally fundable keywords like "affect" and "audience" and "digital age" is that such keywords can point back to the pancake-making, the emotional-laboring, the debt-accruing—the textures of everyday life through which the work of art and the work of scholarship occur.

In a scarier version of this afterword, written on the night before Halloween, I considered the possibility of dressing up as The Little Engine That Could, having read in David Joselit's *After Art* that artists are now human search engines: retrieving, reframing, reiterating the already existing (once when waiting in the Seattle airport for a flight to Philadelphia, seeking affirmation and approval before my flight, I posted to Facebook a footnote from Joselit's book on Duchamp: "If each

person may be understood as *readymade* by others—including but not limited to one's children—then others, like one's parents, are *readyfound* by oneself").

This summer, in Detroit, I sat at a table with friends and we watched a video of a shark attacking the Google fiber optic cables in the Pacific. In the conversation with Sarah Dowling, Rachel Zolf mentions that pieces of snot and food are eating away at old texts. In scanning these texts consumed by snot and food, "errors of recognition" occur in Optical Character Recognition (OCR) software. Craig Dworkin, in the conversation with Brian Reed, mentions that most textual production now occurs between machines: machines generating text for other machines. Thinking about Nick Montfort's poem-algorithm that writes a poem again and again until the computer processor can no longer handle it, Reed mentions how the Montfortian crashing of the computer can generate a Cageian situation for the computer user: turning away from the crashing computer and noticing "that the cat is under the desk desperately trying to get our attention."

I am looking at OkCupid (no new messages), the conversations collected in this chapbook, and Jonathan Beller's *The Cinematic Mode of Production: Attention Economy and the Society of the Spectacle*. I am trying to understand what Beller means by "the attention theory

of value," "in which attention, in all forms imaginable and yet to be imagined (from assembly-line work to spectatorship to Internet-working and beyond), is that necessary cybernetic relation to the *socius*—the totality of the social—for the production of value for late capital."

Part of the conversation between Kate Durbin and Ray Hsu is about work in poetry *about* audience. Durbin mentions presenting as a "woman object," "difficult work about audience to a sometimes indifferent or bewildered (sometimes even hostile) poetry audience." Hsu mentions the possibilities of "helping create (which is slightly different than creating per se) a situation in which the audience could reflect on itself in relation to a 'poetry reading.'"

My secret agenda in this concluding paragraph is to put words like "relational" and "behavioral" next to words like "conceptual" and "poetry."

November 2014

## ENDNOTES

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1. A photographer wrote to me on OkCupid and we chatted about The Brave Little Toaster. A printmaker wrote to me on OkCupid and I took an eight-hour train ride to Spokane, Washington and we played bingo at the Moscow Moose Lodge in Moscow, Idaho. An anthropologist wrote to me on OkCupid and I still have to Skype every other Thursday with my therapist (who used to play poker with Charles Olson).

## Appendix

### Conceptual Writing, Artists' Books and Artists' Publishing

*Some of the artist's books and small press publications exhibited as part of the Affect & Audience in the Digital Age symposium.*

Dave Allen, *Musical Consequences: A Piano Book for Children* (Paris, France: [Onestarpres](#))

Siegrun Appelt, *Intérieurs* (Paris, France: Onestarpres)

Craig Atkinson, *London, Barbican* (London, UK: [Cafe Royal Books](#))

---, *Someone Else's Summer in Moritz* (London, UK: Cafe Royal Books)

*Bad Choices* (London, UK: [Catalogue Library](#))

*Batchelorette Parties* (London, UK: Catalogue Library)

Erica Baum, *Dog Ear* (New York: [Ugly Duckling Presse](#), 2011)

Dodie Bellamy, *the buddhist* ([Publication Studio](#), 2011)

Aeron Bergman and Alejandra Salinas, *The Smell of Deposition* (Eindhoven, NL: [Onomatopee](#))

Giasco Bertoli, *Tennis Courts II* (Zurich, Switzerland: [Nieves Books](#))

Stephen Boyer, *Parasite* (Publication Studio, 2013)

Gretchen Bennett, *Windfall Alphabet* (Publication Studio, 2011)

Alexander Buhler, *Tokyo Traces* (Zurich, Switzerland: [a/b Books](#))

---, *Transfer* (Zurich, Switzerland: a/b Books)

Mimi Cabell and Jason Huff, *American Psycho* (Vienna: [TRAUMAWIEN](#), 2012)

John Cayley and Daniel C. Howe, *How It Is In Common Tongues* (Providence: [Natural Language Liberation Front Press](#), 2012)

Jay Cover and William Edmonds, *Cause* (Oslo, Norway: [North South East West](#))

Peter Dench, *Suited and Booted* (London, UK: Cafe Royal Books)

*Doubting*, Essays by various artists (Berlin, Germany: [TLTRPreß](#))

Craig Dworkin, *Remotes* ([Little Red Leaves](#), 2013)

Daniel Eatock, *One + 1* (Eindhoven, NL: Onomatopee)

Francis Elliott, *Eraser* ([Foundry](#), 2008)  
---, *Dark Globe* (2009)

Hans Peter Feldmann, *Views out of hotel room windows*  
(Barcelona, Spain: [Ediciones Originales](#))

Angela Genusa, *onlinedating.teenadulthooddating/Adult Dating* ([Lulu](#), 2012)

Crispin Hellion Glover, *Oak Mot* (Los Angeles: [Volcanic Eruptions](#), 2007)  
---, *Rat Catching* (Los Angeles: Volcanic Eruptions, 2011)

Kim de Groot, *Lissitsky Distribution* (Eindhoven, NL: Onomatopee)

Marianne Holm Hansen, *100 Things Not Worth Repeating: On Repetition* (London: [LemonMelon](#), 2011)

Ulrik Heltoft, *52 DAYS* (Skive, Denmark: [Krabbesholm](#))

Karl Holmqvist, *What's My Name?* ([Book Works](#), 2009)  
---, 'K ([JRPIRingier](#), 2012)

*In Almost Every Picture # 6, 9, 10 & 11* (Amsterdam, NL: [Kessels Kramer](#))

Nedine Kachornnamsong and Sara Hallstrom, *50 Ways*  
(Stockholm, Sweden: [BILAGA](#))

Kevin Killian, *Spreadeagle* (Publication Studio, 2012)

*LIGHT* Miniature Garden + N S E W (Oslo, Norway: North South East West)

*Linear Manual*, Colophon (Berlin, Germany: TLTRPreß)

Christian Marclay, *Shuffle* (New York: [Aperture](#), 2007)

Phil Maxwell, *Underground* (London, UK: Cafe Royal Books)

Holly Melgard, *Black Friday* ([Troll Thread](#), 2012)

Metahaven, *White Night Before a Manifesto* (Eindhoven, NL: Onomatopee)

Simon Morris, *Pigeon Reader* (York: [Information As Material](#), 2012)

Jorge Pardo, *PARDO HOUSE* (Skive, Denmark: Krabbesholm)

Lina Persson, *HAND(G)JORD* (Stockholm, Sweden: BILAGA)  
---, *Class Divider* (Stockholm, Sweden: BILAGA)

Vanessa Place, *Boycott* (New York: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2013)  
---, *The Father & Childhood* ([Queue Books](#), 2011)

Tom Pratt and Oliver Shaw, *Puppies in Hats* (London, UK: Catalogue Library)

Lisa Radon, *Sentences on Sentences on Paragraphs on Paragraphs* (Publication Studio, 2011)

Alejandra Salinas & Aeron Bergman, *KRABBESHOLM MONOTONOUS ORNAMENT* (Skive, Denmark: Krabbesholm)

Vanessa Samp, *Landscapes* (Oslo, Norway: North South East West)

Travis Shaffer, *AB:C* ([Printed on demand](#) by Travis Shaffer for Amaranth Borsuk on August 10, 2013 in Columbia, MO)

Flavia Spichtig, *Serie von zehn Zeichnungen* (Berlin, Germany: TLTRPreß)

Ola Ståhl, Carl Lindh & Derek Beaulieu, *Local Color: Ghosts, Variations* (Malmö: [Publication Studio Malmö / In Edit Mode Press](#), 2012)

Andy Sterling, *Supergroup* (Gauss PDF: [GPDFeditions](#), 2013)

*Sunsets Over Water* (London, UK: Catalogue Library)

Peter Sutherland, *Game* (Zurich, Switzerland: Nieves Books)

Chris Sylvester, *STILL LIFE WITH THE POKÉMON YELLOW VERSION TEXT DUMP* (Troll Thread, 2013)

Nick Thurston, *Reading the Remove of Literature* (York: Information As Material, 2006)

*Veneer Magazine*, Issue 09 ([Ve](#), 2012)

Anton Vidokle, *HERE, THERE, ELSEWHERE* (Skive, Denmark: Krabbesholm)

Nathan Walker, *The Invention of Collage Reduced to Material Objects* (Lulu, 2013)

Jessica Williams, *Diary* (Zurich, Switzerland: Nieves Books)



## AUTHOR BIOS

### AMARANTH BORSUK



**Amaranth Borsuk's** most recent book is [As We Know](#) (a collaboration with Andy Fitch). Her other books include [Handiwork](#) and [Between Page and Screen](#) (created with Brad Bouse). Her forthcoming project *Abra* (1913 Editions) was written with Kate Durbin. She teaches in the School of Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences and the MFA program in Creative Writing and Poetics at the University of Washington Bothell.

### SARAH DOWLING



**Sarah Dowling** is the author of [DOWN](#), [Birds & Bees](#) and [Security Posture](#) (winner of the Robert Kroetsch Award for Innovative Poetry). Her critical work has appeared in *American Quarterly*, *GLQ*, *Canadian Literature*, *Signs* and elsewhere. Dowling is an Assistant Professor in the School of Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences at the University of Washington Bothell.

KATE DURBIN



**Kate Durbin** is a Los Angeles based artist and writer. Her most recent book is [E! Entertainment](#) and her most recent performance is "[Hello, Selfie! NYC](#)," in collaboration with Transfer Gallery in Brooklyn.

CRAIG DWORKIN



**Craig Dworkin** is the author of [Reading the Illegible](#), [No Medium](#) and several books of poetry, including *Alkali* (forthcoming from Counterpath Press), [Chapter XXIV](#) and [Motes](#). He teaches literature and literary theory at the University of Utah and serves as Senior Editor to [Eclipse](#).

RAY HSU



**Ray Hsu:** poet // [Art Song Lab](#) co-founder.

GREGORY LAYNOR



**Gregory Laynor's** work in poetry includes a reading in 913 MP3s of Gertrude Stein's *The Making of Americans*, 816 of which can be accessed through UbuWeb and 97 of which cannot be found. He is writing a dissertation at the University of Washington Seattle on the making of intermedia from 1952 to 1972 and teaching courses in art history, poetics, and performance at the University of Washington Bothell.

BRIAN REED



**Brian Reed** is a professor of English and Comparative Literature and the chair of the Department of English at the University of Washington Seattle. He is the author of three books: [\*Hart Crane: After His Lights\*](#), [\*Phenomenal Reading: Essays on Modern and Contemporary Poetics\*](#), and [\*Nobody's Business: Twenty-First Century Avant-Garde Poetics\*](#). He has also co-edited two essay collections: [\*Situating El Lissitzky: Vitebsk, Berlin, Moscow\*](#) and [\*Modern American Poetry: Points of Access\*](#). A new book, *A Mine of Intersections: Writing the History of Contemporary Poetry*, is forthcoming in 2015.

RACHEL ZOLF



**Rachel Zolf** has published five full-length books of poetry, including [\*Janey's Arcadia\*](#), [\*Neighbour Procedure\*](#) and [\*Human Resources\*](#), all with Coach House Books. She has won the Trillium Book Award for Poetry, among other honors. Her collaborations with other artists have included film/video/sound projects that have appeared across North America. She taught poetry at The New School and the University of Calgary, and now lives and works in Toronto.



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