

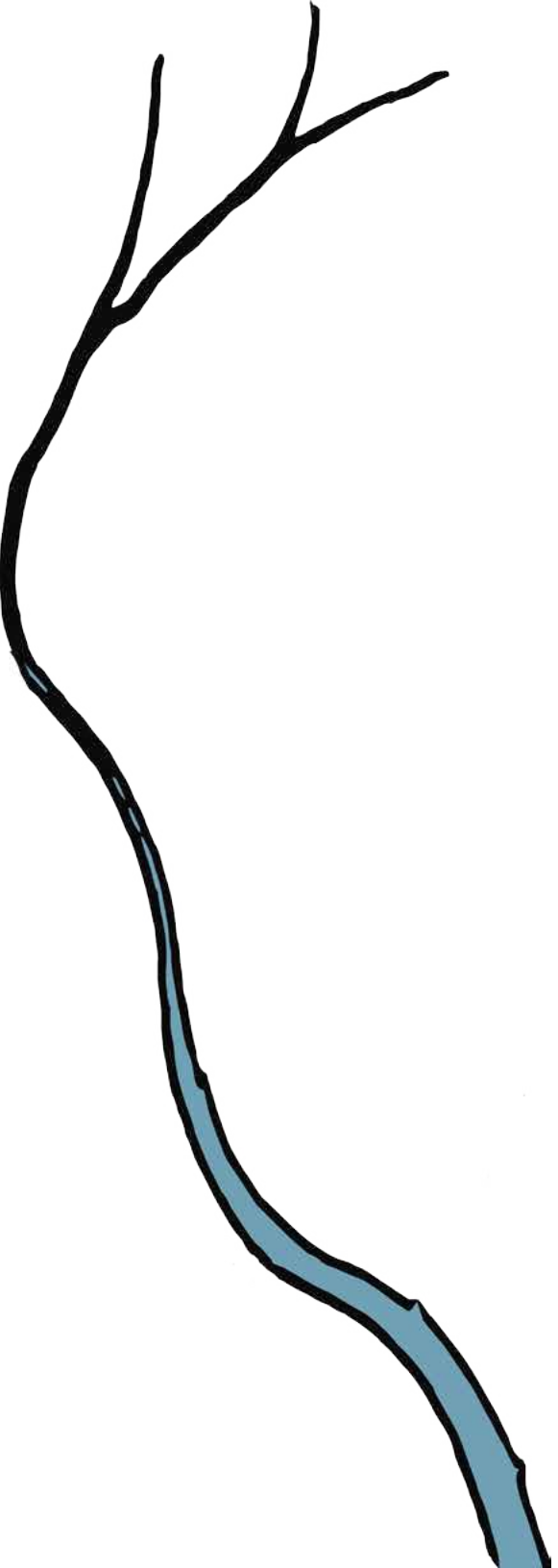
Braided River

NAROPA'S SUMMER
WRITING PROGRAM 2015

interviews curated
by Andrea Rexilius

featuring
Omar Berrada
Rachel Levitsky
Fred Moten
and with an introduction by
Anne Waldman





BRAIDED RIVER

interviews curated by
ANDREA REXILIUS



#38

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 culture.

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CONTENTS

Introduction by Anne Waldman	v
Interview with Rachel Levitsky	1
Interview with Fred Moten	20
Interview with Omar Berrada	24
Afterword by Andrea Rexilius	46
Acknowledgments	50
About Naropa 2016	51
Author Bios	52

INTRODUCTION

— Anne Waldman
SWP Artistic Director

These are three interviews, the same questions for three eminent, wildly progressive poets who have been guest faculty during Naropa's Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics Summer Writing Program—all visiting/teaching/performing at Naropa before these conversations took place, but queried here specifically in the context of our 2015 pedagogy, which carried the thematic rubric of *Braided River, the Activist Rhizome*. Symbiosis (= "together living") teaches that life is more like a braided river, horizontal waterflow with tributaries falling apart and coming together again (as algae, as fungi do), rather than the Abrahamic tree of life with its vertical, hierarchical branch system. We are the riparians alongside, inside, riding this river of interconnectivity. And we are the Activist, too, within a longtime praxis of Kerouac School mandala. And the Rhizome, "image of thought," of interconnected tuber system "that apprehends multiplicities," made

parlance by Deleuze and Guattari serving here as well. "A rhizome works with planar and trans-species connections." Often in midst of a Naropa session I ask students: are you in the Rhizome yet? Are you in the Zone? This summer before every reading we gave playful astrology, astronomy notes.

Summer Writing Program 2015: Fred Moten reads beautiful heart-bending letters to NourbeSe Philip and Claudia Rankine, in a witness-meditation of deepback and current racial trauma and struggle, and Rachel Levitsky asks her workshop "Can a sentence complete the indeterminate thinking that is the realm of poiesis?" Omar Berrada (with Sarah Riggs) in class invokes a writing of movement and ideas, incorporating dance with North Africa poetry: "Poetry is not alone."

Naropa was awakened by students in occupying mode protesting diversity issues, camping on the school commons (the "decolonized commons") this past spring. This led to increased awareness, conversation and vital commitment to radical institutional change. This nationwide re-awakening seemed backdrop for much of the pedagogy, discourse, as in these interviews.

Our mentor poets rally here to the JKS commons, an "academy of the future" (John Ashbery) and "a walking grove of trees" as Philip Whalen once mused.

Diane di Prima invoked the war on the imagination as war we need to conquer with our shining intellectus. Amiri Baraka in his many summers at Naropa used to project "common ground," as basis for our incipient cultural revolution.

"There's a lot of good energy that flows from the love of poetry that the folks who gather hold in common" Fred Moten says. Rachel Levitsky quips that perhaps common ground is a coffee bar. Omar Berrada references Édouard Glissant's distinction between "common place and lieu-commun" (common ground) with its "conditions of possibility for the emergence of unpredictable feelings of resistance against the systematic truths induced by commonplace thinking and reasoning; and against the meanings imposed by the logics of coloniality and governmentality."

The three individually and collectively touch on profound current brutal events which shake and rattle the void. They touch on origin stories, ponder the trembling disjunct of our poetry communities that should be fighting instead for mutual survival and preservation and archival memory. They share generative essential-reading lists, books like *Architecture after Revolution*, a spatial intervention "from the edge of the desert in the town of Beit Sahour in Palestine" (recommended by Fred Moten). They conjure friendships, their own commitment to literary and educational institutions they have helped

found and curate: Dar al-Ma'mûn in Marrakech, with its attendant scholar/poet/translation projects into French, English, Arabic; Pratt's recently inaugurated radical MFA.

Common ground, underground, undercommons, decolonized commons have been invoked far back and lately in many interstices, institutional and street. It's powerful strong insistence and resistance that has bolted much of the world awake in these hard dystopic times.

When Allen Ginsberg and I committed much of our lives in 1974 to this hundred-year project of Naropa University, the first Buddhist-inspired university in the West, with its lineage of Tibetan tantric Buddhism and Kerouac mishap intelligence and lefthand-path poesis practice, we invoked the "charnel ground" and its attendant "sky burial" practice of "feeding the hungry birds." The charnel ground is a site with an endless loop of birth and death. It is the hospital, the bone house, the rubble of war, the Shoah, a place of exile, the troubled Anthropocene, "the abyss of the rupture," the decimated eco-grounds across the lands, "the socioecological disaster," the site of suffering where everything must start from, transmute and arise. It is also the protest, the poetry reading, the performance, the book, the stage, the ideas, the body, the library, the archive, a mess of hope and fear, site of justice, resistance,

entanglement, the "archeological imaginary," the incubator, a vigil for Trayvon Martin.

This is the urgent discourse we want to have. The company we want to keep mind with. Many other voices enter. As Rachel Levitsky asks "Do I use other voices? Is there anything else?" These three interviewees make a braid that intersects at luminous points on the landscape and tributaries of our lives.

INTERVIEW WITH **RACHEL LEVITSKY**

Andrea Rexilius: How has a sense of the rhizome (an interconnected energy field that runs horizontally) affected your own writing projects? Do you work with translation, documentation, for example, others' voices in the text? How does the work braid together?

Rachel Levitsky: I'm against notions of a transcendent self. I was raised into a particular, admittedly peculiar, refugee chaos post-Shoah (Nazi genocide or Holocaust in USAmerican parlance—there are complex reasons for using “Shoah” instead of “Holocaust,” among them, for my purpose here, precision). My family tells no story, claims no narrative of origin or antecedents, none of those elements which can be fiction or myth, but which are told over and over to each other as a means of locating, situating, rationalizing, historicizing. I lack the origin story that might beg for disruption. I am white and

work to continuously engage, unpack, disrupt, not take for granted the power of that position—part of which for me means a keen wariness towards appropriating cultures of people of color, and an attempt to follow POC leadership. Here I fail, get things wrong, and get back up to try to show up for the work again. This whiteness is about my body's relationship to power in the world as it is, but not exactly the origin story for which I'm attempting to claim a lack. I don't feel American. I don't feel European. I don't believe in any god and never have. I'm not a mother and I don't identify (in the sense of a feeling state) much as a woman, although I really like female parts, pussy etc., as both something to have and to love.

I am not claiming trans identity. Even when I am feeling most manly I am as at home as one might be in my grotesque and confusing female body parts. I say "grotesque" because I have been raised in misogyny as much as anyone with a cunt and boobs. I say "feeling most manly" because I see in daily encounters that people with whom I interact are confused by it—that odd combination of a feminine shape on top of the less demure, less caretaking, less accommodating ego expression that is expected of and praised in men. I understand that in this world of gendered ego assignments I may be more of a man than a woman.

Critiques of gender and race identity make perfect sense to me. I hesitate before listing major texts that have represented those critiques for me, and that frame popular discourse—because I don't want to eclipse an always-eclipsed realm of knowledge-building in community, among genius friends (and foes!). So much of what shapes my thought and identity is 30 years of being in queer community, being witness to how discourse plays itself out on/ in bodies and vice versa, coming out as a Radical Lesbian Feminist into a Butch/Femme upstate New York scene, as well as my proximity to the emergence of a Trans movement with its wild multiplicity of expression ranging from [kari edwards's](#) insistence on [NO GENDER](#) to playful simultaneities (many gender expressions all at once) to a highly medicalized embrace of a more bifurcated masculinity and femininity. Both the range of texts and intimate conversations flood forward: Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis's major study of working-class lesbian culture in *Buffalo, Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, Gore Vidal's *Myra Breckinridge*; of course Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*; and most recently the very necessary translation of *Testo Junkie* by Beatriz-turned-Paul Preciado, published by Amy Scholder when she was at the Feminist Press. But with these major "texts" I want to also somehow represent the power of ongoing conversations with Akilah Oliver when she was in the realm of the "shaman" Ricky and playing with her own gender mutability,

and with the brilliant Diana Cage on sex, sexiness and mobility in masculinity and femininity—they both have lots of published work and I read them as well, but I am highlighting here the way affect and conversation make knowing happen, because you realize something in the physical proximity of connected others, so simultaneously feel that your body can move into a knowledge without ceasing to exist. The tradition of transgressive bodies writing and perhaps having to write in a manner that dances between theory, poetry, autobiography, fantasy and manifesto is both the tradition and political imperative of my work. I don't find it easy.

Lack of origin story makes me mobile while sitting in place. It does not however make me experience myself as alone. Rather, I take the intellect to be in a permanent state of exile, meaning it can commune best with other exiled intellects.

On the other hand (which is in fact the flip side of the same hand): I have this historically disrupted and refusing-to-be-told story of being a Jew straight out of a particularly Jewish episode in recent bloody twentieth-century history. My mother is perhaps a classic USAmerican product of a post-Shoah. There is no discussion of the past. When I tried to interview my survivor great aunt and uncle while in college, I was shut down absolutely. Anyone with any memory is dead now. In fact my father had started

to remember things and to speak Yiddish. It turns out to my surprise he was fluent in Yiddish, but he died while I was still in the process of revising this essay (I am just adding this sentence in September, while the rest was written in May). My mother had a drive forward, built a business (we lived on top of it—a nursery school turned summer camp), grew it. She and my father now live in a retirement village on a golf course in Palm Desert, California—which doesn't make much sense. Neither has ever played golf and I have never known my mother to play a sport. Perhaps in an emergency I have seen her break into a run. My mother is very responsive to emergencies. Amid the lack of a past, extremity, anxiety and emergency make reality. (Now I should change this part too, since dad just died, mom is still there on the golf course, alone. I worry about her.)

My mother's mothering of her children was absolutely affected by the multiple traumas of her birth, early life, continuing ruptures. All that difficulty is identitarian for me. In August 2013 I went with Christian Hawkey (who very generously escorted me: I get shut down around such familial investigations/entries, and could not have managed myself) to Krefeld, the German town from which my mother had fled with her mother in late December 1939. I suppose I went to see if I would find something of a family story, meaning a story that no one tells, but what we found was an occupation of the Jewish quarter by Ukrainian

immigrants who were converted to active Judaism by the messianic Chabad movement—a global surge of fundamentalist Jews in the U.S. and Europe, perhaps akin to Mormons in Mexico and South America, or Pentecostals in sub-Saharan Africa.

For many Jews, maintaining a Jewish story in Europe holds a primal psychic power. It's an interestingly non-Zionist (even anti-Zionist) fidelity. Some of the Chabad rabbis and their families have sustained repeated anti-Semitic attacks, even murder, for being visibly Jewish in areas in which the last encounter with known Jews was during the Third Reich. The Chabad continue to resurrect decimated "communities." Through these migrations and by having many children they understand themselves to be restoring Jewish populations to the locations they historically inhabited.

Although I recognize that some nationalisms frame revolutionary and anti-colonialist drives and necessities, I am not a nationalist. If actual bodies have little relation to each other, I don't think of them as being a community. However, many Jews do think of all Jews as intimately connected in terms of interests, desires, *natalities* (in both the dictionary and Arendtian sense).

In their work of re-occupying European Jewish communities, it is presumed that the Chabad, or

Jewish missionaries, are not actively converting non-Jews to Judaism, because Jewish law is interpreted as being against this thing. That's why if you live in proximity to a Chabad outfit you've been asked by a bearded man holding holiday-specific religious paraphernalia like a menorah/chanukiah or a lulav and etrog "Are you Jewish?" and why you are excluded from the ritual if you say "No." However, I recently lost my absolute faith that Jews only seek to convert Jews when I stumbled upon this [article](#), which sheds yet more light on the actual madness of the current project of Israel.

What I found in Krefeld didn't seed a personal narrative I could build around my mother. I found instead a more sterile story of Jewish state interest and nationalism (albeit in the bodies of Ukrainian Jews, who have their own horrific stories of anti-Semitism and historical rupture—who in fact, as Christian Hawkey, the accompanying friend who took this photo can attest, looked something like me).



Yesterday, two years after that trip, I texted my mother and asked her if she knew what her grandparents did in Krefeld. She texted back:

do not know occupation sorry I was only 2 when came to America ☺.

I am reminded, reinscribed to my belief in exile as my intellectual state. Research into a severed past returns me only to the abyss of the rupture.

Akilah Oliver's last book (still in limbo), *The Putterer's Notebook or How I Became Strange to Myself*. is a long work that reckons exactly with that: the constant search for an identifying story that fails, because all the gestures to locate oneself are met with tragedy and rupture, and the person looking is left alone with a set of gestural interactions of intimate private and public self and other—a sentence which is not one.

From Chapter Six of an earlier and incomplete manuscript of that in-limbo book:

The line, non-continuous remainder

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the world a postcard of old black men sitting on folding chairs in front of Brooklyn

brownstone with the caption 'my Brooklyn, 4th annual photo + essay contest exhibition'

but looking now I can see they are not so old, just captured by a lens that condenses a body to a dissipation, to a relic, to a mail slot

(this tone must have something to do with the not so alive, i.e. dead father)

We (do I mean Akilah and I?) invent our stories. We draw ourselves from the edgy language and looks of another. We weave from out of an abyss of discontinuity, death and other linguistic historical extinctions. We grab hold of relics and icons or canons and revolutions. We repeat the terms of our attachments, their lack. Do I use other voices? Is there anything else?

**AR:** As someone who is engaged with many aspects of your own culture as well as others, and "forms" other than poetry (e.g., Cuba, Morocco, jazz, feminism) both here and abroad, what is your sense of a common ground or purpose in the communities you have worked in and served?

**RL:** Common ground...is there a coffee brand called that? I don't mean to be snarky. In my experience of cultural work (Belladonna\*, Pratt MFA in Writing most presently), common ground is, on one hand,

what is made by communism, which I think of as an agreement of sharing power and whatever possessions. And I know that is simplistic but it serves to get to what I want to say, which is that sharing space, time, food, and knowledge (study), and agreeing to be in common, to be common, requires relation, excludes exceptionalism, excludes special pass.

I'm finally really reading Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's *The Undercommons*. I'm listening to a cover of Led Zeppelin's "Thank You" by Lizz Wright in a hippie cafe in Ypsilanti, where the sky is blue blue and the leaves are green green. It's a perfect moment to believe, as Fred and Stefano say, "We're already here," "here" being this fugitivity, this "scandal of enjoyment." For me, relation and what is built by that is outside of the law. It is wild, exuberant, dangerous, protective. Obviously that relation, sexual or otherwise, requires a person to appear naked in front of the other, to not have nothing but to be holding onto nothing, to be homeless as Harney and Moten say, to be occupiers not settlers. And what has been sticking in my mind from Fred (Moten: he, like Eileen...Myles, gets to have just the first name and people know who we mean) is the [talk](#) he gave on January 29, "Chris Ofili: Bluets, Black + Blue, in Lovely Blue," at the New Museum, which pointed to the erasure of the edge, the coming together in the dusk space where the lines become

indistinguishable—so that black identity and the requirements the state (violence) puts upon it blur in the crepuscular atmosphere. I have in my notes that Fred said "The face is an enclosure." To make relation, to get into that revolutionary space of pleasure, give up your face.

Another piece that's been really useful and is pretty blurry itself, not in the sense of incomprehensible, but in the sense of the movement and fizzing of drawn lines, is Judith Butler's essay about Tahrir Square, "[Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street](#)." Here really it is a score...I made a performance out of it and so have my students, several times (speaking of form, the ellipsis of the indeterminate, incomplete sentence, which is not one, which I referred to in the above question). We cannot be complete in our knowledge of the other, in our representation/ imagination of them, in our thorough attempt to be culturally sensitive. We *can* keep on approaching the relationship, and not live behind the vast racial/ economic gaps we have inherited. I note the "we" here, coming from a dominant, domineering U.S., is largely white and middle-class, with a recognition that this too is unstable.

As of the revolutionary movement begun in Ferguson in front of the August 9, 2014, police murder (having the attributes of a Jim Crow lynching—the visual trauma of the body left out for

an extended time, inflicting community helplessness, the power of white supremacy on ritualized display) of Michael Brown, and continuing through this April to the unfathomable van ride that tortured (April 12) and killed (April 19) Freddie Gray in Baltimore, and having something not so indirectly to do with the 2011 Tottenham protest of the killing of Mark Duggan and the subsequent broader rebellions against British housing policies and the policing of black youth (see John Akomfrah and Black Audio Film Collective's 1986 film *Handsworth Songs* for a multi-form account of the 1985 Handsworth/Birmingham rebellions—I can call them riots, but I am asserting a textual pedagogy here), white people are being pressed (asked?) to think and talk about race and segregation and white supremacy and their individual relationship to it. Am I overly optimistic to imagine these conversations to be an entry point of possible relation?

Relation, it is a thing that is ongoing, that depends on people putting themselves and their loud selfness aside, that is made of care and love and anger and loss and return. Recently I had (thankful) cause to read again the work of second-wave feminists from the '70s and '80s: June Jordon (*Some of Us Did Not Die, Haruko/Love Poems*), Judy Grahn (*A Simple Revolution*), founding member of a cappella group Sweet Honey in the Rock Bernice Johnson Reagon ("[Coalition Politics: Turning the Century](#)," a

devastating essay on how repulsive it feels to build coalition across the barriers of historical racism), Audre Lorde (*Sister Outsider, Zami*, etc.), Minnie Bruce Pratt (*S/he, Crime Against Nature*), Leslie Feinberg (*Stone Butch Blues, Transgender Warriors*) among them. Much of the work they did was in the form of letters, of processing relationships, what it meant to recognize the other in real time, real body and real context of power relationships (I am amazed at how little we speak of the structure of power in the current conversation). Two texts I am thinking of are June Jordon's "Letter to R. Buckminster Fuller" (here thanking Tisa Bryant, who pointed it out to me last fall), in which she addresses his erasure of her name and person from a housing project on which the two of them worked, and Audre Lorde's "History is a Weapon: An Open Letter to Mary Daly," in which she painstakingly accounts for the real value of Mary Daly's work and for her erasure of black women's history and agency:

I would like not to destroy you in my consciousness, not to have to. So as a sister Hag, I ask you to speak to my perceptions.

Whether or not you do, Mary, again I thank you for what I have learned from you.  
This letter is in repayment.

The archives of these feminists are replete with unpublished letters that do this same sort of work of recognizing the complex condition of being political while also drawing lines. The direct address to a person and a relationship was and is the space of the possible, even in the context of betrayal, disappointment—slow work at which I often fail. Judy Grahn in her recently published memoir spends the time to draw how she as a poor white butch lesbian, brutalized for that condition, can simultaneously be both perpetrator and perpetrated upon. Her long poem *A Woman Is Talking to Death* is a gorgeous representation of this. It is the book that ultimately, years after reading it, enabled me to be a poet. You can find it as a chapbook-made-PDF at [DeepOakland.org](http://DeepOakland.org), a great online archive.

**AR:** What do you see as the most urgent issue of our time, as poets, as citizens of the planet? How does this move your writing?

**RL:** If I were the ruler of the universe I would outlaw plastic immediately, then cars, then industrial food. I would make a website that announced the moment-to-moment locations of the people who hoard the world's wealth at any given time, using drones to find them, so that the people on the street could mobilize to go to that person's location and constantly demand their participation in the equalization of wealth. I would have the poet feminists stop attacking

local schmucky smarmy guys as *discourse*. Yes, say who they are. Yes, cut off their dicks. Yes, gossip—we need to always know who are dangerous ones are (see the conversation between Sarah Schulman and Bob Gluck in *Belladonna Elders Series #2* on the value of queer gossip; see Lizzie Borden's amazing film *Born In Flames*). But more time please on the reorganization of sex and power, redistributing real wealth, undoing the carceral system: hell, let's revive the movement for the ERA.

I need to say this more clearly—I don't want us to eat our own innards. We need to work with each other, as Audre Lorde says above, "in repayment." Poets don't have enough real estate or institutional power as poets to let any of it go to the thieves who have everything.

In my writing I like to think about big issues of power and relation. Following my first answer: beyond the specificities of history, I don't believe that essential categories inform much about a person, that they are the intellect. Eileen Myles has said that Lesbian isn't an aesthetic category. People in power get to own their *personalities* while poor people, people of color, and whichever disabled, homeless, paperless, etc. person that is marginal, gets defined by the outside, is not seen to have an inside, a subjectivity. This is the problem with being against subjectivity. You can only be against bourgeois subjectivity,

because the others are so precarious and disallowed to begin with. And yet in fact everyone suffers from personality, and how it fucks up relation. Personality is a passive-aggressive stance of trying to align the outside (how you are seen by others) with an imagined inside (subjectivity, subjectivization). I am against personality.

**AR:** How would you define “contemplative activism”? How does your writing or your daily practice engage the contemplative? What is being sustained within your writing? What is being activated?

**RL:** I do think that activism is better with a contemplative side, but I find it personally confusing. For example, what is the relation between speech and activism? Where is there room for silence? As a community “leader,” I am often asked to speak, to represent, but I often feel like being quiet, decentering myself, being a resource rather than the loudest voice. Part of this is self-care. It’s exhausting for me to be public. Before I was 27, I was never a public person. And then I was. And then it was a responsibility. And then I shared the responsibility with others and then I was all in for life.

**AR:** What conversations, movements, lineages have shaped how you come to the page (either as an artist, activist or human, etc.)? How do you see your work reverberating off of or beyond the page?

In other words, how do you enact the relationship between writing and community?

**RL:** Here are several of the people I am in direct conversation with who enable me to think about sentences, exploratory prose forms and political necessity.

Gail Scott’s writing and editing work in conjunction to build a historico-contemporary feminist language habitat. She has been at the forefront of feminist radical prose-making and language theory. Her prose and her editing work challenge any notion that writing lacks materiality or is separate from action, or that theory need to be the anemic side of praxis. You can find a lot about her at her [website](#).

Renee Gladman has been the philosopher of what I call prose prose (sitting with itself) theory and what she calls the “problem of the person.” Gladman is working on a theory of prose architectures, and has recently been writing on sentences that follow the form of drawings (her drawings and the drawings of others). Her Ravicka trilogy is published by [Dorothy, a publishing project](#). You can read this [essay](#) by her at *Almost Island* called “Origins.”

Carla Harryman is a radical writer, performer, activist, pedagogue and really amazing friend. She participated as one-tenth of the 10-volume collective

autobiography, *The Grand Piano*. She's now writing about feminist utopias.

Also: Christian Hawkey (who built the Pratt MFA in Writing, who has invented forms that press against mastery and toward radical intimacy—see *Ventrakl*), Tisa Bryant (and Dark Room Collective), Marcella Durand (who reminds me it's OK to keep the writing radical and pleasurable even if that looks impenetrable, and whose wild ecopoetic scientist materialist poems are my favorite—see all her books, including the one I edited for Belladonna called *Area*).

**AR:** Could you speak a bit to your experience of the Summer Writing Program at Naropa University, to the community here, our pedagogical practices, what is made possible, what is being manifested?

**RL:** This is a big question, because I went to Naropa as a student, and then we got closer and closer. It's worth mentioning that the first person I met was Akilah Oliver, and that I was able to emulate Anne because of her radical poet generosity, her absolute engagement. There is so much to say, and I did write a paper on lineage and Naropa that I will make available online soon. I think the most profound thing for me personally is that Naropa is a committed, ongoing, radical community that has family-ed me as a writer and an activist and a person

for 20 years. How else could I live? As for pedagogy, it is the story of YES, of the possible, of allowance that is so true here and perhaps unmatched.

**AR:** What are you reading that shapes your thinking about this current moment of the twenty-first century?

**RL:** Everything I mentioned has shaped me. Looking forward, I think we all need to read books about communism and money and debt, etc. I need to read Piketty's *Capital*. In case anyone would like to do it with me, I'm easy to find. I also need to start listening to Richard Wolff's [podcasts](#).



## INTERVIEW WITH FRED MOTEN

**Andrea Rexilius:** How has a sense of the rhizome (an interconnected energy field that runs horizontally) affected your own writing projects? Do you work with translation, documentation, for example, others' voices in the text? How does the work braid together?

**Fred Moten:** It's social and it's sensual. The field is a feel, or a range of feel, and this isn't realized so much as surrealized, continually, materially imagined. It's one thing to imagine what doesn't exist—this is about imagining what does exist. So yeah, braid and feel. If anything comes first it's that, and we try to sing about it and to it and with it, whether relaxing by a creek or relaxing at Camarillo.

**AR:** As someone who is engaged with many aspects of your own culture as well as others', and with "forms" other than poetry (e.g., Cuba, Morocco, jazz, feminism) both here and abroad, what is your sense

of a common ground or purpose in the communities you have worked in and served?

**FM:** The common ground is under. We dig for it. We turn it over. We cultivate it all the time.

**AR:** What do you see as the most urgent issue of our time, as poets, as citizens of the planet? How does this move your writing?

**FM:** The ecological disaster. The question of sustainability almost gets at it. But it's not about whether or not we can alter our practices so that the earth can be sustained; the earth is gonna be here anyway; the question is whether we can alter our practices so that the earth can sustain us. Such alteration demands that we recognize that the ecological disaster is a social disaster. How do you live on Earth, with Earth, as Earth? And how can we finally begin to understand that the socio-ecological disaster (the question of the earth's capacity to sustain us) is given in/as the slave trade, settler colonialism and the imposition of sovereignty—which are modernity's building blocks. Basically, this is all I've been thinking about. The writing is part of that thinking.

**AR:** How would you define "contemplative activism"? How does your writing or your daily practice engage

the contemplative? What is being sustained within your writing? What is being activated?

**FM:** Maybe we could think about it in terms of active contemplation rather than contemplative activism. Working, playing, loving and fighting are active contemplation, the substance and sustenance of our continually enacted, ceaselessly differentiating entanglement.

**AR:** What conversations, movements, lineages have shaped how you come to the page (either as an artist, activist or human, etc.)? How do you see your work reverberating off of or beyond the page? In other words, how do you enact the relationship between writing and community?

**FM:** The movement and lineage that sends me is the black radical tradition. But saying something like I've been "sent" is imprecise and grandiose. Writing is a form of study; study is communal practice; this is so even when one thinks one is alone—a condition that is, in fact, impossible.

**AR:** Could you speak a bit to your experience of the Summer Writing Program at Naropa University—to the community here, our pedagogical practices, what is made possible, what is being manifested?

**FM:** Well, the main thing is that it's really fun. There's a lot of good energy that flows from the love of poetry that the folks who gather hold in common. One gets the feeling that in and from that energy, everything is both necessary and possible.

**AR:** What are you reading that shapes your thinking about this current moment of the twenty-first century?

**FM:** The book that I have been coming back to the most over the last year is called *Architecture after Revolution*. The authors are Sandi Hilal, Alessandro Petti and Eyal Weizman, who together form a Bethlehem-based collective called Decolonizing Architecture Art Residency. There is no more creative and elegant writing than theirs on the necessity for and actuality of militant preservation.

## INTERVIEW WITH OMAR BERRADA

**Andrea Rexilius:** How has a sense of the rhizome (an interconnected energy field that runs horizontally) affected your own writing projects? Do you work with translation, documentation, for example, others' voices in the text? How does the work braid together?

**Omar Berrada:** Not only do I work with others' voices in the text, but for me others' voices are the only way into the text(ual), be it through translation or through a practice of quotation and sampling.

Translation has been my way into writing. It has been, for me, a way of writing. Antoine Berman characterizes translation as "an act of self-conscious creative de-centering." It can be a useful way of desisting from your own voice, or at least of approaching the possibility of such desistance. When I translate, I write through the voice of another.

At the same time, I lend my accent to that voice, inevitably making it sound different. My own voice is transformed in the process: it is transformed for good, having, thanks to another, discovered new possibilities within itself. Translation is extraordinary training for writing and for life, being a mode of writing under constraint, as well as an exercise in humility and hospitality.

Translation proposes the challenge of building an ethical relationship through language. As Rudolf Pannwitz writes about nineteenth-century Germany:

Our translations, even the best ones, proceed from a wrong premise. They want to turn Hindi, Greek, English into German instead of turning German into Hindi, Greek, English. Our translators have a far greater reverence for the usage of their own language than for the spirit of the foreign works.... The basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue.

As a translator I must, instead, "expand and deepen" my language "by means of the foreign language." I must, in sum, allow the other to change me.

Writing comes from reading. I depend on the words of others. I write with the words of others. My practice is, at least in part, citational. I arrange words from other texts like memory traces distributed on the page. I assemble bouquets of ready-made language to hold my own, a spatial mingling of my voice with other voices. There is, in this, a horizontalizing impulse—composing the words of several authors into one new text. I often hesitate to refer to myself or think of myself as a writer. My writing is but an homage to my reading. I am a hyphenated reader-writer. Publishing means imposing my signature on what is in fact a collective production. Often I balk. Authorship, like ownership, is vertical practice.

Writing, therefore, is the act of othering “my own words” by staging an encounter, by attempting to connect energy fields from different periods and different languages. This started with a commission, in 2004, from the French poetry journal *Issue*, whose central focus was the translational and transatlantic writing space between France and North America. The editors asked me for a piece “on” bpNichol, who was unknown in France. In the course of my research, I was struck by the combination of materialism and spirituality that informs his writing, from the playful, half-scientific, half-kabalistic tone of his *probable systems* to the epic depths of *The Martyrology*. For Nichol, words are saints, and the activity of language is sacred activity. A martyrology is a history of the

lives of saints. *The Martyrology* is the story of an encounter with language. This brought to mind vague notions I had of Sufism, and in particular writings on the science of letters by Ibn Arabi, the thirteenth-century poet, mystic and theologian from al-Andalus. I dived into that material with bpNichol by my side. My [piece](#) for *Issue* ended up being a poetic reading of Ibn Arabi’s account of the creation of language, by way of bpNichol’s probing of his own relationship to words.

Postcolonial existence often means that you have easier access to Western languages and traditions than to “your own.” I feel an intimate bond to what Jalal Toufic calls [The Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster](#)—when your tradition becomes unavailable to you. In order for you to access it directly, it must first be resurrected. Until then, it can only be accessed by those who are not members of the community of the disaster. Toufic states that “at this juncture in Arab history, John Barth, the author of the intricate *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor* (1991), is a foreigner to me, an Arab writer, precisely because of his proximity to and his ability to use, as if it were completely available, *A Thousand and One Nights*, a book to the other side of the surpassing disaster.” Jalal Toufic’s book *Over-Sensitivity* has a section on one episode from *A Thousand and One Nights*, which is “accessed” and addressed via Pasolini’s 1974 film *Arabian Nights*. At

times, in order to access “your own” tradition, some mediation is necessary.

bpNichol was my way to Ibn Arabi, Canadian “Pataphysics my way to Andalusian Sufism. My role as a writer was to find a form, to produce a site for the encounter within the space of the page. The result is a hybrid text, which appears to take liberties with form, to switch between languages, to alternate between prose and verse, fiction and document. These are not flights of formal fancy; they are mirrors of my daily mental travels between languages and frames of reference. More importantly, they appeared to be the most effective and, above all, the most ethical way for the work to braid together, for the others’ voices to coexist next to each other and through my own, to enter a conversation with one another without being blended into homogeneity or subsumed under a hegemonic instance of enunciation.

**AR:** As someone who is engaged with many aspects of your own culture as well as others, and “forms” other than poetry both here and abroad, what is your sense of a common ground or purpose in the communities you have worked in and served?

**OB:** This phrase “common ground” makes me think of Édouard Glissant and his *Poetics of Relation*. He makes a distinction between “lieu commun,” which

translates as “commonplace,” and “lieu-commun,” with a hyphen, which would be a “common ground.” In an [essay](#) on a series of photographs by artist Kader Attia ([Rochers carrés](#)), cultural theorist Manthia Diawara elaborates on Glissant’s concept:

A common ground...is a source of creativity and opacity, a fertile ground of inexhaustible energies, where relationships are continually generated, woven between the ideas and poetics of one place and those of another. Sharing a common ground with someone is to be related to him/her through the rhizomes of places and imaginaries, to feel, like him/her, the vibrations and pulses of the world. A common ground creates the conditions of possibility for the emergence of unpredictable feelings of resistance against the systematic truths induced by commonplace thinking and reasoning; and against the meanings imposed by the logics of coloniality and governmentality.

Kader Attia’s photographs are of huge slabs of concrete that the government installed on the beach at Bab el Oued in Algiers, in the same way other governments erect walls, with a view to preventing people from attempting to cross over to Europe or even look to the other side. But what the pictures show are youths sitting or standing on the concrete

blocks, and looking at the Mediterranean Sea. The monumental obstacle is in fact providing them with an observation point. In Manthia Diawara's words:

Thus re-appropriated by Attia's camera, the blocks on the sand, which were before perceived as masses of lifeless and hostile objects of obstruction, as a kind of wall or frontier to stop people from crossing-over, are now recharged and invested with new meanings and emotions, that put them in a relationship with other objects of architecture around the world, other poetics of migration, and other imaginaries of border-crossing.

The common ground can be understood as a stepping stone to constituting archipelagoes of interlinked sites of resistance.

In Morocco I run a nonprofit organization, [Dar al-Ma'mûn](#), which is essentially a library and a residency center for artists and writers, with a focus on working with isolated and largely illiterate communities from the rural area in which we find ourselves, near Marrakech. A few years ago one of our residents, Icelandic artist Elín Hansdóttir, installed a monumental sculpture called [Mud Brick Spiral](#) between Dar al-Ma'mûn and the entrance of the nearest village: a large mirror labyrinth made out of the same mud bricks the villagers use to

build their houses. Several villagers actually helped build the structure, and the spiral was immediately appropriated by children as a favorite hangout and play area. This artwork, and people's use of it, made visible to us a space we had never paid attention to: an empty expanse lying at the back of the residency, right by one of the entrances to the village. We realized that this empty space of separation could become a neutral space of coming together, a literal common ground on which meaningful work could be carried out across heterogeneous communities. It became a site for lectures and discussions, performances and screenings, a space where communal meals were shared. At a moment when insurrections were shaking up the whole Arab world, it was a place where the meaning of public space was, at the level of one rural community, interrogated and renewed in equal-to-equal conversations with artists and thinkers.

This was carried out through processes of translation, both literal and metaphorical. For the speakers, addressing an illiterate audience meant lecturing in vernacular Moroccan Arabic, not in French, not in English, not in Modern Standard Arabic which is only studied in school and never spoken in everyday interactions outside formal and academic circumstances. When a non-Moroccan speaker was invited, we would translate the talk live into colloquial Moroccan Arabic. Naturally, this involved

moments of awkwardness and misunderstanding, but it also made for unlikely, irreplaceable moments of exchange. There was also a constant process of translation at play, metaphorically speaking, in the sense that each person had to try and put oneself in the place of the other, in order for this unlikely scene of interaction to take hold, instead of being what you might expect it to be (i.e., a scene of untranslatability bound by social, economic and intellectual barriers). As French philosopher Barbara Cassin (who was one of our speakers) likes to say, an **untranslatable** is not something that cannot be translated—it is something that you must never stop translating and re-translating. To translate is thus to refuse the refusal of the obstacle, to believe, against all odds, in the possibility of a common ground.

In saying this I am well aware that a material, geo-cultural examination of the issue of translation is likely to produce hopelessness rather than belief. That translated books account for only 3% of books published in the U.S. is a telling, if well-rehearsed fact. Another telling fact is that of all books translated into French, over 60% are translated from English, while only 0.6% are translated from Arabic. Just like Kader Attia's rocks, our common grounds cannot dwell but in the margins (a stretch of sand at the edge of the land) or on the borders.

**AR:** What do you see as the most urgent issue of our time, as poets, as citizens of the planet? How does this move your writing?

**OB:** I am not sure I can name one single most urgent issue of our time. I feel we have to be attentive to an overwhelming range of issues that are constantly threatening if not destroying any possibility of being-together. Racial injustice, economic inequality, imperial wars, global warming—in these matters, I don't believe poets have any more or less insight than other citizens. Our societies and our planet are the responsibility of all of us, and in such responsibility there is no reason why poets or artists should enjoy any particular privilege.

Therefore, as a poet, my most urgent task is perhaps not so much to try and address all the urgent issues of our time, as it is to find a language to address the complexities of whatever issue I am tackling at a given moment. To refuse the linguistic reductions and simplifications imposed on reality by the worlds of corporate greed, political irresponsibility and mainstream media. By stereotyping our ideas and narrowing our vocabularies, they are impoverishing our imagination. They are imposing one single way of viewing reality, and presenting the neoliberal status quo as a natural, inevitable state of affairs. They are gradually damaging people's ability to imagine alternative realities.

Not being afforded the kind of leverage necessary to effect visible changes on a large scale, we can use our modest tools in order to contest established distributions of the sensible (to use Jacques Rancière's phrase), and therefore open up possible avenues for the imagination. Perhaps the most important task of our time, politically, in the face of the neoliberal globalization that has us all locked into its world system, is to keep open the possibility of imagining alternatives.

This is not about dreaming up utopian futures. It is about inventing ways of perceiving the present differently. This can be done, for instance, through digging into archives of the past in order to uncover what might have been. The archeological imaginary informs the work of many poets and artists and scholars today. I am thinking for instance of Ariella Azoulay's beautiful concept of "[potential history](#)," which she articulated through assembling and exhibiting a photographic archive of the formative years of Palestine's transformation into Israel. As a scholar, a filmmaker and a curator, the goal she sets for herself is that of *potentializing history* (i.e., rendering the past potentially reversible):

In differential regimes where citizens are governed alongside noncitizens, potential history is first and foremost history not shaped in the perspective of the ruling

discourse—sovereign nationality. Potential history insists on restoring within the order of things the polyphony of civil relations and forms of being-together that existed at any moment in history without being shaped solely, let alone exhausted, by national division. Potential history is an attempt to develop a new model for writing history, using photographs and citizenship to free myself of the clamp of sovereignty and the perspective of the national conflict and to extract from the past its unrealized possibilities as a necessary condition for imagining a different future.

Here's to art and poetry as activist time-travel!

**AR:** How would you define "contemplative activism"? How does your writing or your daily practice engage the contemplative? What is being sustained within your writing? What is being activated?

**OB:** I am not familiar with the concept of "contemplative activism." What I spontaneously hear in it, though, is a healthy refusal of the binary between activism and what might be termed passivism, a resolution of that binary into a kind of *pensivity*—a thoughtful passivity, which mentally reconfigures what it is beholding. I would define it as a form of attention to the world that involves patient observation, receptivity, listening. In this context, writing can be viewed as



a seismographic practice, compatible with the reading-writing I was mentioning earlier, provided what is being read is not only books, but the world at large.

Between 2002 and 2005 I took part in several collective translation seminars at the Abbey of Royaumont and at the [cipM](#) in Marseille, organized by Emmanuel Hocquard and Juliette Valéry's [Un Bureau sur l'Atlantique](#). This was a crucially formative experience. I was in my twenties. Through the mentorship of Emmanuel Hocquard, and through practice, I came to see writing and translating as something other than an inscription, as something at odds with adding to the signs of an already saturated world. I came to see it (in the best-case scenario) as a way of charting new territories, of carving out unexplored terrain between languages. Hocquard [describes](#) this terrain as a no-man's land, literally (i.e., a territory that does not belong, that is not owned by an individual or a nation or a language).

When I translate a poem from English into French, my translation is (ideally) a French poem. But (ideally) it should be a poem that no French poet could have written "directly," without the mediation of translation. My translation belongs neither to French nor to English, but to a space between, a space that was instituted in the act of translating and did not exist beforehand.

The planet having been fully explored and colonized by man, there are no more blank spots on maps to signal remote lands. Writing and translating are perhaps a way of creating or enacting, within language, blank spaces that seem to be no longer conceivable in "reality."

**AR:** Could you speak a bit to your experience of the Summer Writing Program at Naropa University, to the community here, our pedagogical practices, what is made possible, what is being manifested?

**OB:** For me, not being from the U.S. and not being familiar with creative-writing programs, experiencing the SWP in the summer of 2013 meant encountering radical newness, in terms of pedagogy, but also of geography, landscape, diversity and community. It was like diving into a world that has its codes and principles, but that is always happy to welcome strangers with open arms into the living memory of Ginsberg and Rinpoche and all those who have sat under the sycamore tree in the last 40+ years. The easy, informal access of everyone to everyone else in the program, as well as the open and candid conversations on various pressing issues of poetics and politics, were a beautiful thing. The main caveat in my mind is the relative lack of international (i.e., non-North-American) perspectives. I appreciate the extraordinary diversity in the faculty and the student body, though it runs the risk of being

diversity inside a predetermined, closed framework. I understand, of course, that financial considerations might undermine the possibility of internationalizing further.

At the SWP, Sarah Riggs and I were lucky to teach on the same week as NourbeSe Philip. My first impressions of hearing her read and lecture will remain with me for a long time. No one is so movingly sensitive to the call of forgotten voices, so effectively receptive to the haunting of lives long gone but whose traces and echoes are everywhere insofar as we are willing to see and hear.

During our week in Naropa the news came that George Zimmerman was being acquitted after having murdered Trayvon Martin. For many on campus this news was traumatic, unfathomable. NourbeSe decided to turn her reading into a wake for Trayvon. She asked everyone to dress in white and bring candles. Instead of reading onstage to a seated audience, she distributed xeroxes from her book *Zong!*, and everyone read together while pacing around the room, candles in hand. It was inclusive, cathartic, beautiful. It brought everyone together in the face of pain and mourning and anger. It linked the death of Trayvon Martin, and the legal injustice inflicted upon his departed soul, with other victims of racism across the centuries, and in particular with the souls and voices of the victims of

the Zong massacre, who are invoked in NourbeSe's book.

Lately I have been concerned with new expressions of racism in my own country of Morocco, against black migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa, who find themselves forced to end their journey in Morocco because Europe has sealed its borders more radically than ever before. The increased visibility of black bodies in Moroccan cities has been met with widespread rejection from people who refer to them as "the Africans." Morocco is in Africa, but culturally many Moroccans identify as "Arabs" or "Mediterraneans" as opposed to "Africans." In the past century the Sahara has been culturally constructed as an uncrossable frontier, which of course it is not and never was. Behind these conceits is an ignorance or denial of the long history of trans-Saharan circulations, including the history of slavery in Morocco. On these matters our school curricula, our mainstream history books are silent. But documents abound for who cares to look.

I wanted to start a project that would be a poetic intervention in the current racial politics of Morocco, through an investigation of the histories of trans-African circulation and exchange. Thanks to the annual [READ seminar](#) organized by TAMAAS in Paris, I had an opportunity to invite NourbeSe Philip to collaborate with me on this project—to bring her

study of the transatlantic slave trade to bear on “my” Moroccan stories and histories. The idea was to sit together and examine various historical documents in order to hopefully make some voices emerge out of the abysses of forgetfulness. This is a [work in progress](#). We will keep going back to it whenever we can manage to meet somewhere for a few days.

Collaborating with NourbeSe allows me the rare opportunity of seeing my own history with different eyes. I do not think we could have met in this way and so instantly connected without the warmth, the serendipity and the intensity of the Summer Writing Program at Naropa.

**AR:** What are you reading that shapes your thinking about this current moment of the twenty-first century?

**OB:** I am not a very methodical reader. I read voraciously, eclectically, haphazardly. Often, because I have limited time on my hands, I do not finish the books that I start. I keep them nearby, with plans of going back to them at a later point. Readerly libido remains alive thus. My library is a collection of the books of my desire. This is to say I am currently reading too many things to be able to meaningfully answer your question.

I have been reading and re-reading Achille Mbembe recently. He helps me get a richer perspective on Africa—geographically wider, historically deeper, theoretically savvier. The range of his work is impressive, encompassing anthropology, political science, history, literary analysis and more. I love how his writing can go without warning from the analytic to the lyrical and back again. He is best known for his landmark book *On the Postcolony*. In a more recent, yet to be translated book titled *Sortir de la grande nuit*, he makes the point that France may have “decolonized” Africa, but that it has, so far, failed to decolonize itself. For someone like me who had been living in France for many years after growing up in a former French colony, this was a luminous thing to read. Colonization lies not only in the act of invasion and exploitation: it is a mindset, deeply ingrained in the worldviews that still sustain Western societies to this day. More recently Mbembe has been analyzing new forms of world-citizenship afforded by the African diaspora (see the concept of Afropolitanism), and thinking about the relation between humanity and the non-human world in the era of the Anthropocene.

Another author I have been impressed by is Palestinian writer and academic Esmail Nashif, who, after a PhD in Texas, decided to return to Palestine and publish in Arabic as opposed to English. This in itself is a highly political act, provided the huge

difference in potential audience and circulation of the work. He has a book whose Arabic title translates as *Threshold for Opening the Episteme*, where the central question is: "what is the world like when you look at it from Palestine?" The whole book is an epistemological critique of the concept of modernity, elaborated from a territory that modernity has excluded from its confines, a territory that is not so much post-colonial as it is actually still colonial. One of the beautiful and impressive and difficult things about the book is its linguistic ambition. It attempts to carve out new ways of writing Arabic, swaying between philosophical and poetic modes, between terminological precision and syntactic playfulness in order to achieve a subtler and more relevant grasp on its subject. Such work needs to be translated into English.

I have been living in New York for a few months, and "discovering" glorious ranges of writing I had not encountered before. One of these is Chicana literature. As someone who grew up bilingual, the question of writing at the border is fascinating to me. In this context, Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands—La Frontera* has been a revelation. The book was published in 1987 but does not seem to have aged at all. One of its strengths lies in how it powerfully enacts the tejas-Mexican border in the writing, how effectively and poignantly it moves between the various languages and dialects of the border,

"without benefit of bridges." In reading it one feels both the exhilaration and suffering of mestiza existence, where one is out of place as soon as one opens one's mouth. This is her home / this thin edge of / barbwire. Gloria Anzaldúa lived a life of multiple marginalities—economic, cultural, linguistic, sexual. In her writing, she unapologetically embraces these marginalities and turns them into strength. They provide her with a unique position from which to speak, from which to defend her culture when it is attacked, even as she does not "buy all the myths of the tribe" into which she "was born." Most movingly, she never fails to acknowledge that, however marginal you may be, there is always someone who is more oppressed than you are. Perhaps even someone who was oppressed by you, or an identity you have neglected among the many that compose your story, as has been the case with Chicanos regarding their "predominant Indian genes": "To live in the Borderlands means knowing / that the india in you, betrayed for 500 years, / is no longer speaking to you, / that mexicanas call you rajetas, / that denying the Anglo inside you / is as bad as having denied the Indian or Black." Hence Anzaldúa's call to move toward a "new consciousness," one that sits at the crossroads and tolerates ambiguity, one that does not pit identities against each other, since "the possibilities are numerous once we decide to act and not react."

## AFTERWORDS

— Andrea Rexilius

From 2012-2015 I worked as a Core Faculty Assistant Professor of Writing & Poetics at Naropa University, teaching in the year-round MFA and BA programs. During this time I was also the Faculty Director of the Summer Writing Program. In those four years I had the great pleasure of hearing numerous writers and artists speak on panels, lead workshops and writing chats, give readings and tell stories at our favorite after-hours haunt, the Boulderado.

Curated by Anne Waldman since 1974, the Summer Writing Program is in its 41st year and counting. In the summer of 2015 (June 14-July 11), we explored *The Braided River: Activist Rhizome*.

Week one was dedicated to “Disparities, Exigencies, Identity, and Lineage,” and featured guest faculty: Rosa Alcalá, Sherwin Bitsui, Aaron Cohick, Samuel

R. Delany, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Noah Eli Gordon, Laird Hunt, Rachel Levitsky and Selah Saterstrom & Kristen Nelson. They discussed the threats to an artistic life, support and inspiration, and writing as affirmation. Rachel Blau DuPlessis lectured on the friendship of George Oppen and Louis Zukofsky. Rosa Alcalá discussed Cecilia Vicuña's performance work. Aaron Cohick taught us about letterpress printing.

In week two, "Who Am I When I Dream?: Philopoetics," guest faculty Omar Berrada & Sarah Riggs, C.S. Giscombe, Janet Hamill, Vincent Katz, Joanne Kyger, Kyoo Lee, Jennifer Moxley & Steve Evans, Eileen Myles, Julia Seko and Eleni Sikelianos allowed us to philosophize and dream alongside them as we asked: "What is the pedagogy? How can we bring back the intuitive logopoeia? How can we disrupt the logic, meet it, diverge from it, create a discourse within it?"

Week three always operates as the pinnacle of the program, the time when transformation meets endurance meets epiphany. This year we called it "The Activist Rhizome," and the metamorphosis was facilitated by guest faculty Allison Hedge Coke, CAConrad, Marcella Durand & Rich O'Russa, Mark Nowak, Bernadette Mayer & Philip Good, Margaret Randall, Kyle Schlesinger, Jonathan Skinner, Juliana Spahr and Steven Taylor. CAConrad gave his

students a piece of tree agate that was charged on the roots of the world's oldest sycamore tree, in western Massachusetts, while Bernadette Mayer & Philip Good insulted trees, among other things, in their insult poetics course. Marcella Durand & Rich O'Russa transformed their classroom into a living poetic event, full of moving sculptures, mini-libraries, utterances and grottos.

When week four, the week of "Sangha: Cross Worlds and Common Ground" arrived, the attention shifted toward celebration with guest faculty Kameron Bashi, Clark Coolidge, LaTasha Diggs, Thomas Sayers Ellis & James Brandon Lewis, Lydia Lunch, Thurston Moore, Fred Moten, Brad O'Sullivan, Anne Waldman and Ronaldo V. Wilson. Tom Hayden spoke as a special guest about grass-roots political action. Text expanded alongside music and performance with Thomas Sayers Ellis, James Brandon Lewis, LaTasha Diggs and Lydia Lunch, and even though the weeks are long, everyone wished the summer writing program would last even longer.

This year Giovannina Jobson led our meditation courses and ceremonies. Day one began with a cleansing ceremony over a barrel of smoking leaves, and in the final week we created a giant natural mandala out of flower petals, sticks, leaves and pinecones. Reed Bye, Robert Spellman and Judith Lief taught us about Dharma Arts. Khadijah Queen,

Eric Baus, Jeffrey Pethybridge, Richard Froude, Joseph Navarro and Heather Sweeney led discussion groups with our MFA and BA students. We heard lectures and readings by special guests: Cedar Sigo, Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, Richard Tuttle, James Sherry, Maik Nwosu, Tom Hayden, Jack Collom, Maureen Owen, and Bobbie Louise Hawkins.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I'd like to thank, and dedicate this chapbook to, the 2015 Guest Faculty and to all of the summer writing program faculty and guests who came before and who will come after *The Braided River*. Thank you for your contributions, your hard work and your brilliance. Thank you especially to Omar Berrada, Fred Moten and Rachel Levitsky for participating in this chapbook and answering our interview questions. And thank you, Margaret Randall, for also answering our interview questions and being featured on *The Conversant* as a kickoff to this chapbook.

## ABOUT NAROPA 2016

In 2016, Anne Waldman (Artistic Director) and Jeffrey Pethybridge (SWP Manager) will present *Indra's Net Poetics*: "The co-rising and interconnectedness of the multiverse, safety net of community, labyrinth of communication and performance, and the curses and blessings of social media. The wilderness of the archive, decolonized mind, hive mind, wild mind, grids and mappings. Printshop, recording studio, meditation, and collaboration."

Guests of the upcoming Summer Writing Program include: Rikki Ducornet, Will Alexander, Pauline Oliveros, Uljana Wolf, Christian Hawkey, Srikanth Reddy, Gloria Frym, Simone White, Orlando White, Roberto Tejada, Anne Waldman, Julie Carr, Laird Hunt, Steven Taylor, Junior Burke, Thurston Moore, Andrea Rexilius, Eric Baus and Eleni Sikelianos.

For more information you can go to this [page](#) or contact [swp@naropa.edu](mailto:swp@naropa.edu)



## AUTHOR BIOS



**Omar Berrada** co-directs [Dar al-Ma'mûn](#), a library and residency center for artists and writers in Marrakech. Previously, he hosted shows on French national radio and public programs at the Centre Pompidou, curated Tangier's International Book Salon and co-directed Dubai's Global Art Forum. He has translated numerous texts of poetry and philosophy from English into French, by Avital Ronell, Joan Retallack, Kathleen Fraser, Stanley Cavell, Bob Glück, Jalal Toufic and Jennifer Moxley, among others.



**Rachel Levitsky's** books include [Under the Sun](#), [NEIGHBOR](#) and [The Story of My Accident Is Ours](#). She is a member of the Belladonna\* Collaborative, an officer of the [Office of Recuperative Strategies](#) and faculty in the MFA in Creative Writing and Activism at Pratt Institute. She is working on collaborations with Susan Bee, Marcella Durand, Ariel Goldberg and Christian Hawkey.



**Fred Moten** is author of *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, *Hughson's Tavern*, *B. Jenkins*, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (with Stefano Harney), *The Feel Trio* and *The Little Edges*. He lives in Los Angeles and teaches at the University of California, Riverside.



**Andrea Rexilius** is the author of three full-length books of poetry, *New Organism: Essais*, *Half of What They Carried Flew Away* and *To Be Human is to Be a Conversation*. From 2012-2015, she was an assistant professor of Creative Writing & Poetics at Naropa University's Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics, where she was also the Summer Writing Program faculty director, coordinator of the *What/Where Reading Series* and the co-founder/-coordinator (with Michelle Naka Pierce) of the biennial conference *[Dis]embodied*.



**Anne Waldman** has been a prolific and active poet, performer, editor and teacher many years, a founder of the Jack Kerouac School and artistic director of its celebrated Summer Writing Program. She is the author most recently of *Gossamurmur* and *Jaguar Harmonics*, and co-editor (with Laura Wright) of the anthology *Cross Worlds: Transcultural Poetics*. Waldman has been deemed a “counter-cultural giant” by *Publishers Weekly*, was a Guggenheim fellow for 2013-14 and is a Chancellor of The Academy of American Poets.



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