

RECONFILIATING

Conversations with
Conceptual-Affiliated Writers

curated by CALEB BECKWITH



featuring
J. Gordon Faylor
Danny Snelson
Divya Victor
with an afterword by
Joseph Mosconi

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#41

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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INTRODUCTION

— Caleb Beckwith

If poetry's many communities have agreed on anything this year, it's that so-called conceptual writing is a genre of stakes. These are professional stakes, as seen from 2011-2012, with the rapid-fire publication of *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing* and *I'll Drown My Book: Conceptual Writing by Women*. These are political stakes, as demonstrated by recent discussions of race and embodiment in political critique—an issue forced by purported missteps from some of the genre's most visible practitioners. And these are personal stakes. When else have so many felt so deeply for or against an aesthetic mode of writing?

This fall will see a number of high-profile releases associated with conceptual writing, most important of which will be my friend and interlocutor Divya Victor's long-awaited feature for *Jacket 2*, "Conceptual Writing (plural and global) and Other Cultural Productions." In rhyme with Victor's timely reframing of the genre

around its wider range of practitioners, this present collection lays bare the very limited and communal ties through which I (like my peers) came to know conceptual writing. Rather than claiming authority for the friends and peers included in this volume, my hope is to show how wild and unformed the diverse practices and work gathered under their shared genre-tag remains. If this chapbook has a central concept, other than friendship, it is that “conceptual writing” (as the phrase gets used in conversation, online and in critical essays) fails to capture even a small portion of the actual work currently produced.

All three of my interlocutors in this volume have a connection to Philadelphia. Though we have since dispersed to different coasts and countries, I offer this connection to foreground my own very limited frame of reference. What I understand as conceptual writing is much more informed by writing in Philadelphia from 2012-2015 than by either aforementioned anthology. Had I been living in New York, Los Angeles, Mexico City or elsewhere abroad, my sense of conceptual writing would undoubtedly be different.

Here’s to conceptual writing, to knowing a genre by its manifold practitioners, and to knowing that we never know them all.

- Oakland, CA
October 1, 2015

INTERVIEW WITH J. GORDON FAYLOR

Caleb Beckwith: In your recent interview with Tan Lin over at *Harriet*, you give a really helpful account of Gauss PDF’s founding. Would you mind, in few sentences, recapping this for readers not familiar with that piece? And maybe also expanding a bit on the site’s editorial agenda—that is if Gauss even has one? Also, how has any of this changed over GPDF’s now four-year history?

J. Gordon Faylor: GPDF was catalyzed by a desire common to many small publications/presses: wanting the work of friends and others made more readily available. I still find problematic the vetting processes and sometimes latent conservatism promulgated by publications/labels as a means of iterating a curation-determined set, and wanted to enable a more open platform for various cultural productions not limited to, but including, poetics. Having spent a few years in New York and Philadelphia, I was fortunate to

find overlapping groups and networks sufficient for getting a little Tumblr venture off the ground.

The initial fantasy was GPDF would function as a hub specifically for audio—readings, studio productions of published works (i.e., audiobooks). However, it quickly became clear that by loosening these strictures and including any kind of file type, the site could feasibly encourage unexpected results.

The name is a pun on Gaussian probability distribution functions (a type of dither) and Adobe's popular Portable Document Format file type. Moreover, "dither" also suggests indecision, which pairs well with the indeterminate material issued by GPDF.

No agenda, but maybe a haphazard pendularity between a perceived ideal (i.e., that GPDF has nothing to do with my preferences, and serves as a kind of infrathin platform for the staging of submitted works) and the messy reality of taste, limitations, rejection emails, interviews and so on. That said, I like to support work that doesn't have an outlet elsewhere, as well as "entities" that haven't yet been published or made known. Maybe this inclination comes from spending time on Tumblr and Twitter, where the boundaries between "artist" and "non-artist" are unclear. GPDF welcomes the difficulties and challenges unusual or unprecedented work can reveal.

This approach has changed very little, I think. I feel very fortunate that the site has garnered support (and, consequently, momentum) from individuals and organizations, via social media and conversation—all of which in turn has brought it to an international audience.

Also the cover image changed once, and I started using Typekit for some of the fonts. We moved to San Francisco.

CB: Thanks for bringing up this lack of an agenda—and also the limits that such an ideal can't help but encounter. The sheer variety of pieces housed on Gauss remains, for me, one of the most compelling aspects of the site. Looking now, around 3 p.m. Eastern on Friday, September 5, the first three pieces I see are Aidan Holmans's video piece "Sometimes I leave my house and feel like I'm still at home.," Leopold Brant's (aka Felix Bernstein's) book of poems *Dandyisms* and a Rocksteady mix by Bloodfaceman. Scrolling further, I see Eric Laska's conversation before leaving "Acting on Impulse" in Los Angeles this summer, and Anna Crews's "Smart Casual," which I might call a "catalog" first and "poem" second. You'll have to excuse the list here. The most recent publications just exemplify this "perceived ideal" without running into it—something that, I imagine at least, might crash the site with infinitely large files.

I guess I first wonder how you see these pieces interacting with each other. And if you even think about this at all. And I now have a better way of asking my first two questions: has the variety of material received by GPDF changed over time? And more importantly, how? Clearly exposure has broadened both your reader and contributor list, but do you feel that you've noticed any distinct aesthetic shifts among the Gauss pool of writers/artists that you'd feel comfortable attributing to larger cultural/aesthetic phenomena? I imagine the sample size might simply prove too large/diverse here. Yet I've heard mention of a "Gauss aesthetic" in conversation before, and, somehow, felt that I maybe understood the statement—even though I couldn't come close to defining its terms.

As you might imagine, the obligatory question concerning "conceptual writing" lies behind this previous one. I've found that GPDF (along with TROLL THREAD) inevitably comes up in conversation about that seemingly controversial topic. I guess I'm interested in knowing how, if at all, you see GPDF engaging with conceptual-writing practices, and whether that terminology is even valuable for the work GPDF does.

JGF: The catalog's progression is predicated on a rather subjective and unreliable notion of sequence. It's unclear if this approach is legible to others or in

fact goes some way toward synthesizing the catalog, but it's been quite helpful to me in terms of plotting out a loose or obscure narrative thread between the divergences of the hosted works.

Beyond that, there's a lot of room for interaction between the publications, whether explicit (as in the case of Tonya St. Clair's two published works, or Feliz Lucia Molina and Reynard Seifert's upcoming collaboration, sections of which remix some of Molina's already-published writings) or implicit and so resulting from social contingencies and shared compulsions.

Given that the quantity of submissions GPDF receives from "new" contributors (i.e., those who have not yet appeared on the site) exceeds that of multiple submissions from single contributors, it becomes especially difficult to trace an evolutionary (or retroactive) pattern. Even more so for me because I'm "in it."

I referred to a narrative compulsion above, but again, this is more the product of a temporal aesthetic or thematic resonance (a quiet strategy) than an attempt to foster ideological coherence. It seems like some other small presses/publishers take on, say, a "personality" when communicating through social media; this is something I want to avoid, though maybe that is impossible.

Additionally, I will say that it seems as though the boundaries of certain media are thankfully becoming less and less clear, and that these media cross-pollinate on a more regular basis, both on GPDF and elsewhere—the concern being not whether we might call something an “image” or “poem,” but where and how those terms might vanish or mutate into one another, or what might be gained from obfuscating quotidian reference points for such productions. A side note: in my *Harriet* interview with Tan Lin, I think I was a little wanton in my employing the term “genre.” While I’d still argue that genre is a helpful concept for delineating or even isolating a certain practice, I no longer think that (for instance) file type is commensurate with genre, though I’m open to that notion being argued.

Besides, so much is out of “my” control: these austere, managerial inclinations and terminological/genre-prone scramblings remain helpless against the processes of historicization, academic or otherwise. GPDF, like TROLL THREAD, has a complicated relationship with “conceptual writing” and other strains of contemporary art, and some contributors (myself included) are socially entwined with these. This has obvious benefits, and in some way it has helped to legitimize the site in an unwieldy and densely packed American/international poetry/art milieu.

But it goes both ways: there’s always the chance for crass reductionism, and people are always ready to make assumptions based on affiliations. Differentiation drives GPDF, but such attempts at nuanced distinction may end up folded into themselves by a larger and more established enterprise. I have a lot of admiration for Felix Bernstein’s *Notes on Post-Conceptual Poetry*, which situates GPDF as a kind of “post-conceptual” publication, but I still admittedly do some hand-wringing over the designation.

This is all to say that, basically, I’m not sure what the GPDF aesthetic is (maybe you could elaborate?). In any case, it’s important that we continue questioning the formal models that belie apparently unconsidered productions.

CB: I totally feel your first point about genre distinctions. This may prove a product of the communities I run in, but it seems like nearly everyone I know who produces writing of some sort inevitably produces pieces containing more than. Of course, the focus on writing within a particular medium itself presupposes a particular attunement of attention—i.e., that we focus on the text rather than on the codex if it happens to appear in a book, or on the PDF from a computer, etc.

What I mean is that, for writers working in the contemporary moment, the bounds of writing and

poetry proper seem not only profoundly limited, but very quickly eroding across the board. Things like art books and websites have contained super interesting language for a really long time, but the cool thing is that I am now noticing a critical mass of “writers” across various traditions (“conceptual” or otherwise) viewing these media as another layer of their projects. It’s as if the frame has expanded not only from the stanza to the page, but from the page or whatever to the desk, etc.

This is, of course, all old news to folks used to reading not only works housed on sites like Gauss/TT, but also the latter-twentieth-century’s history of innovative writing. That said, I can’t reiterate enough how much I’ve seen the influence of that supposed “Gauss aesthetic” all over the place. I think of a workshop with a poet writing about traditional concerns of the self in a way that does not particularly interest me, but incorporating things like IP address histories and email patterns as a matter of course. I’d say this sort of technological intervention leads out of where said writer wanted to go and into some (for me, at least) much more interesting places, but, the point of it is, this sort of fissure seems to be spreading across something we might call “poetry proper.” As a writer with neither interest nor place in “the proper” (not to mention “poetry”), I find this very exciting.

I wonder, do you notice these things? And is GPDF even invested enough in subjects like the definition of something called “poetry” for you to consider it? And would elaborating on Felix Bernstein’s *Notes* get us closer to that question?

JGF: Your zoom-out (poem-to-page-to-desk) is a particularly helpful move regarding the developments you discuss, though it may risk “mere” philosophizing (e.g., existentialism, OOO). It’s an outward grappling that emphasizes context and the incidental aspects of production, possibly a way to suggest non-production. Given the largely unexplored quality of this approach, what eventually matters is the interpositioning of a figure within a larger set of environments and concepts. And to avoid phenomenology.

This also begs a kind of negative of the holistic or recuperative reading of impelled “poetic” production (i.e., the “poem” absorbs or becomes “life”). Rather, we might ask, what *refuses* the work? By dint of the technological framework through which a human’s poem functions, there are technical/biological/ecological limitations as well as surreptitious legal backdrops. Google owns this correspondence, to name one (though it has also been edited in Word). These questions have helped me get through the lurid swamp of so much essentialist and/or metaphysical shit related to art, much of which posits art as a kind of Romantic dominance over world and

identity, whereby conditions of reciprocal ecology are subjugated to the poet's processing technique and style. The Great Pacific Garbage Patch is like "our" selfie against the ocean; it exhibits a very real will-to-power over one's environment. On a much smaller scale (and more pertinent to this "scene") consider the constant hyperbolics and flimsiness of blurbs, the purpose of which is usually to translate thematics into sales. Distinguishing releases by file type allows GPDF in some small way to sidestep this inclination via its ostensible "neutrality," though of course there is no real escape.

Also, something that pleases me about this approach is the degree to which it allows for a multiplicity/confluence of identities, as well as accident or automation. To resign oneself to an agora as expansive as the Internet may compel approaches like appropriation and duplication—if only, say, as self-immolating critique of its military-industrial origins. And these are modes that haven't even been formally conceptualized so much as attitudinally deployed, anyhow.

So these unexplored means of differentiation are what excites GPDF, apparently, as these means dispute the mire of personality and aesthetic that constitutes so much "poetry discourse" and other interfacing tactics. I'm not interested in a definition for poetry so much as in the tensions its many

definitions exhibit when in the midst of other forms, or when placed in a more general complex of disciplines and approaches.

As for *Notes*: it does seem to register these categorical breakdowns. When I first read it, I couldn't tell whether I should be reading it as performance or criticism or memoir. Felix really covers a lot of ground and speaks effectively to an impulse that may be fictionalized enough to run through a number of "younger" writers, though I'm not sure I can verify that in any substantial way.

There is as well the consequence of staking territory that accompanies any inaugural critical investigation of a largely untouched group of writers and artists (i.e., generating academic capital). Felix is aware of this, or at least makes that difficulty palpable and ironizes it. I'm not sure how much more I can say, regretfully, as I hesitate to suggest that GPDF publications (in general) are exemplary of *any* mode, let alone the "post-conceptual." Rather, it's like situating "reporting" against "curation"—to err on the side of presentation rather than hermeneutics.

CB: I totally feel your imperative to "avoid phenomenology." It both says and does a ton in the context of our conversation about the supposed challenges brought to categories like "poetry" by GPDF and others. Having mentioned it, I can't help but also ask about GPDF's

function within a larger literary landscape. I've found that readers typically find a great deal of permission in the array of works hosted by GPDF, manifest in the categorization by file type, among other things. I think it's wise to avoid complicating that with any direct comments on functionality for you as an editor—especially for the weighted category of “exemplary” works and the like.

I'd like to ask you, then, as a reporter, about another work. I originally conceived this interview around the time that Gauss released Steve McLaughlin's fantastic *Puniverse*. For those not familiar with the work, *Puniverse* is a 57-volume work described by Steve as:

being the ingenuous
crossing of an idiom set
and a rhyming dictionary

Outside of mentioning that I have seriously considered buying all 57 material volumes from Lulu, I'll avoid getting into that work any further to avoid the common conflation of example and exemplary. However, I will ask what, if any, weight you give that work as GPDF's 100th release?

Or, if you'd prefer, maybe just anything on that work in general. I'm currently revisiting it in all three file formats (57 PDFs, one massive TXT doc and one

Web 1.0 page labeled “nfo” that I'd somehow missed until now), and it's more striking than ever. I have to admit that, upon its release, I did feel a pull towards viewing this work as not so much exemplary but as exhausting the perceived trope in conceptual writing of categorically large works. It's as if *Puniverse* almost exhausts exhaustion, a gesture I can't help but appreciate both as a reader and writer. But my response to *Puniverse* feels almost idiosyncratic at this point.

JGF: I can't deny subjectivity outright. But I guess I also like to be dazzled sometimes. There is—I confess—a celebratory/strategic purpose in placing a work as unwieldy and beautifully executed as *Puniverse* in the 100th slot, but I guess it shouldn't be construed as “representative” beyond a basic grab at fleeting publicity. GPDF also gets into a kind of oblique numeromancy or numerological recurrence once in a blue moon, though this may not be the best example.

Puniverse does engender some concerns related to conceptual writing (e.g. textual automation, poetry as informational output), but, beyond the relatively simple premise that spurs the algorithm, I'd say that it manages to generate humor (macro/micro) as well as a narratological mystery—consequent to the unclear pairing of an image from Shiv Kotecha's stunning Instagram account with each volume. Whereas the

algorithmic output will “unquestionably” perform its function across the 57 volumes, the implications of Kotecha’s images encourage questions or inferences of “some” narrative, of entangled modes of expressivity and inexpressivity. Anyhow, I love *Puniverse*, and Steve is great in general. What’s up Steve.

– Fall 2014

INTERVIEW WITH DANNY SNELSON

Caleb Beckwith: I’d like to talk about *Epic Lyric Poem* as well as some related practices in so-called conceptual writing. This may sound heterodox, but I read *ELP* as a narrative in which the lyric plays the central character. The book opens with an incantatory proem, which it follows with an invocation of the muses and a rising sense of conflict that ultimately resolves. I may be reading too closely here, but I want to ask about the role of narrative in this book. The first word in the title is “Epic,” a highly established form—maybe we can begin there.

Danny Snelson: I love this question, and, in fact, maybe the title is wrong. Perhaps it should have been “Epic Lyric Narrative Poem,” which might have been a fine revision, though not nearly as felicitous. Of course the epic has its own mode of narrative written into the genre, and I think that’s very clearly written into the piece, with the evocation of

Alexander Pope's *Rape of the Lock* at the beginning of the poem, and with various markers of the epic as a genre throughout. For example, the invocation of the muses, armaments for battle, long lists of names and lineages of the people who transcribed these lyrics. In this way, the work is structured both to mirror and to mock, while also aiming to consider the epic format as a functional genre—and as a genre that was, you could say, the original narrative. That would be one starting point. With regard to lyric as the “central character,” given the process of the poem, I might suggest that lyric is not a single character, but rather five sequential characters: L, Y, R, I and C. These characters combined as a string enable the Python script to grab the lines with which the poem was then sculpted. So l-y-r-i-c is literally the character, but because of its recurrence and continued presence in the poem, it is also the string around which everything else circulates and constellates. In that regard, I completely agree about the idea of narrative in the poem. I'm not sure if that got to your question or is already spinning off of character and lyric toward points elsewhere.

CB: This is spinning off in a productive direction, but I feel we should talk about the process by which this text was arranged before going any further. All of the language in *ELP* was drawn from a database listed in the subtitle: “167121 Songs, 257.8 MB File Draft

Version 0.3.” But how was it arranged? Would you call it a conceptual procedure?

DS: From the beginning I would resist, in certain senses, the idea of the conceptual, though I think the work is engaged with a history of conceptual practices. I would instead mark this as a kind of editorial poetics, in that the work is more about selection, emendation, distribution and publication than any single “concept.” For example, the project began within a particular context given a concentrated set of interests. The composition began by downloading a torrent file that contained a plain-text file with an SQL extension that offered a 167,121-song database as a resource for others to create a lyrics website. These kinds of websites typically make ad money by way of people searching for, say, Ke\$ha or Taylor Swift lyrics on the Internet. Imagine someone seeking to find the song they're listening to. They type in a snippet and land on one of these pages, where you would make ad revenue based on each of these hits. This is the kind of database that the poem draws from, and I am very interested in the way that database was constructed (primarily ripped from amateur transcriptionists, who themselves misrecognize the lyrics they transcribe), the way that database was distributed (via torrent file on the Pirate Bay) and then later used (in the construction of lyric websites

for commercial interests). So *ELP* attempts to engage these disparate elements simultaneously.

For my own part, I used it not to make one of those websites, but rather to make this poem, which was first derived by a Python script that Alejandro Crawford helped me write. This script drew out every line that had the strain “lyric” in it, and I put each into a raw text file. I then recomposed each of those lines into a standardized 55 characters per line. Finally, these lines were arranged into 55 20-line stanzas to tell a kind of narrative, an epic narrative that centers around the character of the lyric and the way that popular musicians speak about the lyrics (*the lyric*) in their own work.

CB: Right. So when I talk about a narrative and you talk about a database, we’re actually talking about the same thing—that so much of the narrative comes from the found language.

DS: Yes, and this is one of the fundamental questions of new-media scholarship. The media scholar Lev Manovich, in particular, is known for parsing the relation of narrative to database (of course, there are many justified detractors to his formulation, but his work remains functional at a basic level for thinking about *ELP*). In his take, narratives are bound to a kind of linear reading process that we are accustomed to, that is itself bound to the codex, a relatively stable

cultural form. Then, there emerges popular access to the database, which Manovich recognizes as a “new cultural form,” primarily defined by the potential for sorting and searching. The database offers a variety of modes for navigating any set of data, but, naturally, it’s always in tension with narrative forms. Take any incursion through a database—say you Google 17 different topics in the course of 30 minutes: your navigation through that database is a singular narrative. As humans, we read narratively, in a kind of zig-zag line, and I was interested in constructing a new line through this particular database, and thinking seriously about the supposed opposition (or, better, as Katherine Hayles suggests, the symbiotic) relationship of “database” and “narrative.” I like those two terms as replacements for “epic” and “lyric,” actually.

CB: We’re used to reading through narrative (as you mentioned with Google searches, where we’re imposing a narrative), but there’s also a critical narrative at play here. On the one hand, there is something inherently narrative about the contemporary lyric, despite the fact that it is commonly thought of as a historical replacement of the epic form, which is very narratively driven. *ELP*, however, also seems to replace the lyric with...something else. As much as we’re talking about the lyric, your project is arranged through this other practice. I don’t think I’d be the only reader to read the possibility of a teleology in this book, one in which epic leads to lyric and lyric

leads to something...else. Maybe that something else isn't so-called conceptual writing, but something affiliated with it?

DS: I think I both adore and despise that question. Of course, I'm very interested in what forms poetry might take today (tomorrow). I mean, we're at an unprecedented moment of technological transformation. It's a shift on the level of the emergence of the codex. As a media scholar I am very interested in these changes, and, as a poet, I'm interested in how they might create the conditions of possibility for new modes of creative expression. I think that the turn to algorithms and databases, to networked databases and digital communications, is fundamental to understanding "poetry" or "writing" more generally in our present moment. This poem tries to explore some of that. It attempts to engage with what's changed (and what remains) in our access to language, knowledge and culture through the technologies that have become pervasive in our present situation. This reminds me: I think the only term we haven't discussed yet is "poem"—what is it that a poem does and what might it do today?

CB: That's the word I attempted to avoid.

DS: Ha, fair enough. However, I should add that *ELP* is structured as poem (as *po-em*) in the most classical sense, and does try to think about what a poem can

do: how an antiquated and unpopular form like the poem can engage with culture, with technology, with writing systems. How it might address the contemporary.

CB: This might be a good time to highlight the profoundly human elements of this book. I'm thinking about the function of repetition and your use of paratext. The most common paratext in *ELP* is digital detritus: user emails, autogenerated content from lyric sites, and even Yahoo Answers-style chatter. These appear a lot, and they often dovetail with the literary device of repetition. I think about the line "when it comes to blood and rap it's lyrical combat," which repeats five times. How do these human element differ? How does the decision to include them get made, and what function do you see them having?

DS: I think there are two questions here. The first is the question about the human, and the second concerns repetition. First, regarding the human, this is a question I am intensely concerned with in all of my works: what is it that a human can still do that an algorithm can't do? Unlike certain strains of conceptual poetry, I have no interest in becoming a machine. In many ways, algorithms can already write beautiful lyric poetry; algorithms can write convincing articles increasingly well; algorithms can write beautiful, touching novels increasingly well. So I am interested in isolating what it is that

humans can do well, and I think that revolves around choice—something like a classic idea of agency. In poetry I see this as the realm of diction and editing, including modes of selection, choice and agency. In this instance, I am very interested in what acts I can introduce into this database, this archive of song lyrics, how I might function as a human (writer) within the bounds of a specified system.

That's on one side of the human question. On the other side of this particular work are questions about the act of transcription. This particular database was compiled by many independent users. We don't have algorithms that can listen to, say, a country song or a hip-hop lyric or especially a death-metal song and be able to parse that into intelligible language. Siri and YouTube still fuck up. That's why these texts are still written by fans who transcribe the lyrics of their favorite artists and upload them onto various forums on the Internet, which can then be gathered and aggregated together to produce a massive SQL file like the one I downloaded for *ELP*. It's a collective effort with a huge number of actual humans trying to express their fandom (their feelings) by transcribing the lyrics of their favorite artists. *ELP* splices many technical and user-based errors, which is why it retains so many artifacts. These are artifacts not just from encoding errors, but also from the ways in which different users (a very heterogeneous set of people) transcribed music that was deeply

meaningful to them, and that's one very big part of the poem.

Now to address repetition: repetition is one of the fundamentals of poetry, so now we're getting back to questions of poesy. As we discussed earlier, the repetition of sound (whether it's rhyme, alliteration, consonance or meter) is built into the idea of what poetry does. It's also one characteristic that poetry shares with popular music. Poetry, by definition, pays attention to the formal qualities of language. In this work, I'm trying to invent a new form of repetition. Iterations of the word "lyric" are both constructive and concentrating elements in this project. Obviously it's what culled the lines. But what may not be so obvious is that, from the 167,000 songs, there are at least 10-30 times as many lines that could have been used. In the end, I decided on a very concentrated set of lines built around the repetition of the word "lyric." The word obviously carries a multitude of meanings, but for this work, I found that when musical artists or lyricists talk (explicitly) about their lyrics, they express certain things not mentioned elsewhere. There is a kind of self-reflection to the utterance. Lines with "lyric" express a certain set of emotions, affects, arguments and positions. So I wanted to explore what different writers meant when they use the word "lyric."

This is, coincidentally, where I found the alignment between the epic and the lyric. Lyrics in hip-hop are typically boasting (for example: “they call me lyrical champion”). With death metal it’s often a kind of anachronism (as in: “ye old lyrics of fire”), while in emo it’s often one’s most heartbroken, self-reflexive moment. The fact that all of these are self-reflexive moments forms another layer of interest for me. You know: “I wrote these lyrics to you from my lonely bed”—this kind of expression. Across the board there is a self-awareness when one uses the word “lyric” while writing lyrics, and that leads to how you rhyme with “lyric.” How do you place a sentence that has the word “lyric” in it within your song, and then what role does that play in the larger idea of music and songwriting in general? All of these things are at play in the work.

CB: Maybe now we can talk about the way that this very large database compresses into a relatively small book. When I heard about the project, I honestly expected it to continue the conceptual trope of unreadably large books, but I was able to read this book twice within an hour on an airplane. It seems like a really concentrated selection of lyrics in which the lyric is referenced. Clearly hip-hop belongs here because of the boasting trope you mentioned—same for emo or also death metal. So along what lines did these lyrics fall, and how does that inform the construction of the poem in your

mind? Obviously there’s a ton that gets left out (i.e., when lyric is talked about and when it’s not). How did that come to shape maybe not narrative, but the poem at large?

DS: To begin with, this was composed over the course of five or six years, and a great deal of time was put into writing this relatively small book. This is at the opposite end of the spectrum to the conceptual pattern of enormous books being produced with a minimum of labor. This is a labor-intensive, tiny poem, which is (like all the poems that mean anything to me) largely historical. I mean, I’m trained as an English scholar. I like my Keats, I like my Pope, and they’re not long, you know? *Rape of the Lock* is not a really long poem, but, well, it is *epic*. An obvious joke in the title plays on the dual meaning of “epic” in contemporary parlance. There was a lot of time and thought given to each word placed in its particular location. This is the tradition I wanted to tap—akin to *No. 111* instead of, say, *Soliloquy*, where a single day can produce a massive book that is impressive in the sheer weight of its pages.

CB: We’re also talking about genres, how/why certain genres keep popping up. I find myself very interested in the intersection of rap, emo and death metal on display here. I wonder about the function of self-reflexivity in these different genres, and how they might interact with *ELP*’s interest in the poem and, as

you say, what poems can do. I think about the ways that those popular genres inform the specialized field of poetry, and therefore the way we receive *ELP* in this conversation. Let's say you're working with primarily hip-hop, emo and death-metal songs to make a statement about Pope, Stein, Laura Riding and the contemporary poet Heriberto Yépez. I wonder how those things dialog—what you make of that disjunction.

DS: That's really beautifully put. I love that you brought Stein, Riding and Yépez into the conversation. I would also bring in Charles Bernstein. It would be interesting to compare the number of times Bernstein, or any of the poets you mention, uses the word "lyric," as opposed to, say, Billy Collins.

CB: Who writes lyric poetry...

DS: In the colloquial sense, yes. I would be very interested to know how many times Collins mentions lyrics while writing them. I would imagine it's very few. There are also genres of music that use that particular string more often than others, which was immediately apparent in writing the piece. It might be interesting to think about what genres are not represented. How many punk-rock songs sing about their own lyrics? Punk lyrics are not a facade, typically, not a mediating force, but a direct address. However, there are also instances when the fourth wall gets

broken. This is what the work that the poets you mention does. And what Pope did, I think, in his work as well. I probably keep insisting on Pope because I was trained to think of his poems as essays on how to write poetry. There's a pedagogical function that happens as they enact language in the expression of an argument. The lines about lyrics in the pop-music database seem to come nearest to addressing that same property.

CB: I immediately start wondering about the persistence of the lyric when faced with the contemporary glut of language made available by Internet technologies. Despite the supposed death of the lyric via conceptual and other innovative writing practices, the lyric not only survives, but thrives. You don't even have to write the lyrics included in this book to make money off of them. One could simply download the database you use, create a Google-indexed lyric site, and rake in the advertising revenue. I wonder, then, about the persistence of the lyric as a popular genre in the environment of late-late capitalism.

DS: Exactly, and here are some of the provocations, right? I think it's both incredibly fascinating and, in many ways, sad that songwriting is not part of the discourse of poetry. I know you and I both work very intensely on sound, and sound poetry is, in some ways, a kind of strange bridge. This is a bridge that Tracie Morris perhaps walks better than anyone, this

bridge between popular forms (in, say, songwriting and slam poetry) *as well as* experimental poetics and experimental sound art. But those lines of connection are not made very often, even though we all listen to music and we all have our favorite songs. I want to think about the right word for how music and language merged together in the development of poetic forms. As Zukofsky said, "An integral / Lower limit speech / Upper limit music." This is the realm in which poetry should play, and had played back with bards singing the epic poems, right? These poems were sung. They were not spoken in (ha!) the poetry voice we hear today. I'm trying to see how these things might interface more productively, and how we might think about an expanded idea of a poem or poetry that includes not just our small little pocket of language and letters, but the very large and expanded world of language in the service of art, language in the service of music, language in all instances *not* in the service of communication and speech, *not* as an instrumental function. That's what really interests me.

CB: When I think of *ELP* and engagement, I think about how it pushes against the traditional binary constructed between the human and paratextual. Some of the paratextual moments in this text remain the most human. Whereas I earlier joined the paratext with repetition, I now want to talk about the way it often appears as digital debris like broken

HTML tags and dead URLs. I guess I think of this digital trash as profoundly human texture—as the digital footprint of the transcriber's affection for a song. How does this trash (this digitally produced material) mesh with the commodity of these highly stylized lyrics?

DS: I spent a lot of time working over each one of these lines, and it was a very pointed decision *not* to get rid of the detritus. In addition to the email addresses of the people who wrote these lyrics, there's also a long section of thanks. "Thanks to So-and-So..." occurs a number of times. There is also significant attribution to the people who originally wrote the lyrics, in addition to the transcribers. Let me see if I can find one really quickly, because I think that would be useful.

CB: I have some: "Music lyrics Barry, Buck, Stipe," "Lyrics Scott Engold," "Music Richard Thompson," "Music Ministry," "Music Lou Reed."

DS: That's great. So these are the people who wrote the lyrics to the original songs getting some attribution, but that's not all. There are also lines that are like: "Thanks to Mismatch2790@hotmail.com for these lyrics," "Thanks to CondeConay@aol.com for correcting this lyric," "Thanks to WhitneyHill84@directway.com for these lyrics," "Thanks to SweetStuff4780@hotmail.com

for these lyrics.” I had to edit the email addresses. These are not actually their email addresses because I had to make them the right length, so I just put in whatever I wanted for those.

CB: You also don’t want to insert real people into a poem.

DS: Well, but these are real people here, despite the masking. These are real people who wrote the lyrics that countless others used, freely, in any number of ways. They were part of the database that I downloaded, but I see this also as the listing of the lineage. So if “lyric” is a character, this is a character not borne of gods, nor of a king and a queen, but rather borne of the efforts of an unknowable set of individuals. It’s borne of email addresses, people who are only recorded as an email address. This is where I think these long, traditional genres and forms of poetry intersect with contemporary technology. It’s also why there is so much detritus. I wanted to preserve the sense that, while there are humans working at this interface, this is an interface that’s driven by machines. This is ASCII. This is plain text. There are *tons* of errors and artifacts, and it seems important to preserve them. In this way I’m very much inspired by the work Tan Lin has done in *Heath* and other places, where he tries to navigate between these various reading systems: human beings that exist on networks, that *feel* within an

overwhelmingly deterministic technological network for expression. So another character in this poem is the character of distortion, the character of noise within the fluid mechanisms of information capital. Which might be another name for the human?

CB: So if all of this has so much meaning...I wonder about the end of the poem. The last section begins “These lyrics are frivolous, they really have no meaning.” I wonder about this negating gesture, which I can’t read as only ironic effacement, given all of the sophisticated work that’s gone on before it. This is another incredibly human moment in the text, and not just a human moment for the people who submitted, but also for a *de facto* speaker. Throughout *ELP* we get a picture of the lyric as a mode of human expression being transformed, though not effaced, by technology. Not effaced, because there are all these confessional moments in these lyrics, their URLs. If this is the case, what happens with the appearance of a subjectivity at the end of *ELP*—one that I hadn’t sensed since, maybe, the beginning?

DS: Hmm. That’s really interesting. I think it’s part of the heterogeneity. The next line is: “Sit down and tell me about your last lyrical meltdown,”

CB: And then we get “Lyrical Voltron.”

DS: Yeah, and it continues to think about witness, right? “These lyrics were taken from an edition of *The Witness* / Deep like the bottom of a pit, lyrics I spit like grit / Messages as well as lyrics to all the top songs,” which is clearly indicative. As is: “I said my lyrics is my testimony that’s how I live need.” The arrangement of witness and testimony is an important one to me, and I think as writers we are witnessing the Internet in the same way that artists and writers might once have witnessed the industrial revolution or any other paradigm shift. We’ve spoken about the role of historiography in the past, about the idea of archeology, between scholarship and an editorial poetics. In this position one is not just reconstructing the narrative as it was, but is always constructing something new—a new artifice for the telling of history, for the witnessing of history. And this was the role of epic poetry. Epic poetry was the record of the people, and it was told by the same kind of massive redundancy that currently sustains Wikipedia. It was told by a massive redundancy as a way to remember, even if it was just through the oral transmission of voices, to write the histories that might otherwise be forgotten. This is a thought in which I remain invested, and I think there are the conflicting ideas of frivolous (and in many ways a lot of these lyrics are really frivolous) and everlasting lyrics. One of my favorite lines is “Korn appears here instrumentally only, not lyrically.” These are some frivolous lines! I don’t want to be too grandiose

about the poem, but there is something about the frivolous that also taps the idea of witness, that taps the idea of recording one’s place in time, history and genre—particularly in the tiny world of contemporary poetics. Every single one of these lyrics made thousand of times more money (and reached untold figures of audience) than any poem written at the same time.

Despite this seeming futility, I still think of the poet as a kind of witness to the present. I remain invested in the traditional idea of the poet as someone who sets in language, in a way that reflects on form and language, the way in which stories are told for the future. There seems to be a story to tell the future from within this particular moment, which is so technologically and politically vexed. We have all these new forms that we have no clue what to do with. Everything on the Internet right now shows that we don’t know what to do with our platforms. We don’t know how to express ourselves with algorithms. We don’t know what the role of the human is in a technological network that appears so overwhelmingly powerful and deterministic. We are figuring that out, and I think the more reports from that field, reports as witness, as testimony, the better (and, if I may take an aside to be specific: I’m thinking of testimony as a statement of belief rather than knowledge). I think that leap of faith (to use still more religious language here at the end) is something that

the poet is obliged to take, establishing one of the more vital roles that the poet can play.

CB: I think so. If this book is a document of something, for me it's the problem that our most moving collective moments are almost always commodities (like the lyrics you use), yet affectively bonding nonetheless. I think of the way these events have been conformed in a contemporary setting, all the more moving because of their deep entrenchment. I think of watching the NBA finals with a group of radical poets.

DS: This is the difficulty of the contemporary, and I think a poet's duty is to not shy away from these questions or discard these cultural practices—but to think alongside them. If I may cite the mock-epic epigraph: "In tasks so bold, this little Poem engages."

– Spring 2015

INTERVIEW WITH DIVYA VICTOR

Caleb Beckwith: In a recent introduction, the poet Eric Schmaltz described your work as "uncomfortable." He speaks specifically of *Race Card*—in which audience members are forced to match your skin tone with the fleshy options presented by a paint strip, or else refuse to read your race and therefore "deny [your] presence." One can immediately read this piece, along with Vanessa Place, as "the continued underrepresentation of minorities in small press publishing as well as traditional publishing houses." There's a lot to say here, but I'd like to ask about discomfort. I feel a great deal of discomfort not only in this description of *Race Card* (where I immediately imagine myself as a white audience member) but also in your full-length poetry volumes like *Things To Do With Your Mouth*, *UNSUB*, *Natural Subjects*. Would it be fair to read discomfort as binding your poetics? As a foundation? Insert your own metaphor of continuity here if you like.

Divya Victor: Discomfort is certainly binding. After all, we tend to cluster away from things and people who make us uncomfortable. As the inverse of the warm-fuzzies, this affect really does produce a kind of binding among audience members, but one that tends to keep them disarticulated from each other. So it is binding through disarming, alarming, displeasing—rather than through pleasing, relating, comforting. (How far is a swaddle from a straitjacket?)

I've been invested in producing discomfort for a very long time, and increasingly as a complement to aesthetic pleasure. This is tied to a larger political effort to thwart or prevent happiness from occurring in public places. Jamaica Kincaid has spoken in multiple venues about divesting readers of the pursuit of happiness, and I'm similarly curious about how a racially marked poet can curb an other's enthusiasm for reaching over, feeling closer to ciphers of ethnic experience, or even assuming that I endure one and its purported contents.

There is a long and devastating genealogy that I am a part of, as an aesthetic and cultural producer who appears Indian and female. My kind has served the sensual, spiritual and aesthetic comfort of white audiences since the mid-1800s, through American strains of neo-Orientalism: from Emerson calling his wife "mine Asia" to philosophical rationalizations of Oriental Primitivism—of history originating in a

mysterious East (*ex oriente lux*). This has, in turn, supported the rationalized colonization of a people prone to affect and spiritual decay or fecundity (depending on which side of the journey you were on). So even while Thoreau, Whitman and Emerson were consuming an Indian mysticism to rehabilitate and comfort the industrializing, alienated, bereft white American "soul," American missionaries were conquering souls of brown folk, those "naked 'niggers [of Calcutta], members of a race...all such miserable, fawning, cringing, slavish cowards, especially when flogged.'" Add to this the pleasures of the Nautch girls, the peddling of Indian trinkets at the Jersey shore in the mid-1800s, the effusion of mystical, cross-cultural, high-capital exchange of The Beatles, the gritty heroism of Patrick Swayze in *City of Joy*, and the banal inclusivities of *The Big Bang Theory* and the general *jai ho* of the Indian geist, and you'll notice the trend in the interior décor we've provided the American consumer's soul from the nineteenth century onwards. So I find that the racial critique has to at least begin with the refusal to be the American avant-garde's Deepak Chopra.

My newly forged (as in, imitation) hyphenation between "American" and "Indian" has necessitated a greater vigilance against being a comforting minority presence anywhere: in public, in publishing, in my poetics. I want a poetics of racialized experience that remains inassimilable for both marked and unmarked

audiences, and this has often meant withholding pleasure, divesting the audience of its pursuit of happiness. If Indian-Americans, as “model minorities,” have been the state’s chosen “solution” to Du Bois’s singular question of the “negro problem” (as Vijay Prashad, whom I quoted earlier, has theorized and criticized), then my poetics of discomfort is one way of challenging the state-sanctioned representation of this marked life as a solution—a way of preventing its truths from becoming a pamphlet intended to make you feel better.

CB: I wonder about the modes of discomfort in your work. As a white, male-bodied reader who happens to be an American citizen, the discomfort I feel while reading *UNSUB* varies wildly from the experience of a text like *Natural Subjects*, which explicitly uses first-person narratives and immigration documents as part of its estrangement (this is also to say nothing of the radical *Things To Do With Your Mouth*). Of course there are also similar enough moves that I can’t help but see these first two mentioned texts in a series. Whereas *UNSUB* appropriates and erases FBI descriptions of unidentified subjects, *Natural Subjects* similarly reworks documents associated with the United States’ immigration naturalization process.

I wonder about the lines you draw between these works. Are they primarily lines of similarity—possibly

from the related sourced documents? Or do you see more difference, with the presence of a first-person narrative signaling a differing horizon of expectations for the work?

DV: I would say that one never “happens to be an American citizen.” A state of citizenry is also a choice. And it presumes prescribed forms of loyalty, which (as *Natural Subjects* cites) include the promise to kill those who threaten individuals who “happen” to be American. That is, becoming a naturalized citizen involves making the necropolitical promise to destroy other civilian threats. This is something non-naturalized citizens are often unaware of, or do not “undertake” explicitly. What matters is whether, depending on your position and privilege, this choice (the “happenstance” of citizenry) was made for you by yourself or by another social agent (read: conditions of globalization and uneven development). *Natural Subjects* is interested in the conditions and contradictions of this choice-making. It cares about the way some of us fashion ourselves, as immigrants, out of the conceits of imaginary belonging and the material implications of these imaginary belongings: the proscriptions and freedoms of owning private property; the payment of certain kinds of taxes and the protections from other moral and ethical taxations that *ought* to trouble us (but don’t). They ought to trouble us because the forms of citizenry I left behind (Indian, Singaporean) are, in turn,

affected and constrained by my current nation. In other words, when I talk about achieving citizenry through naturalization, I am also talking about which side of the trade treaty I end up on, and what this means for the survival of some over others. (After all, “citizen” comes from dENiZEN, which is now a Target Corporation native brand of denim!)

UNSUB (short for “unidentified subject”) is interested in the inverse of these conditions that nevertheless produce the survival of some over others. So yes, these books are linked. *UNSUB* is interested in the very unsubjects (those unnamed, unidentified, disappearing and disappeared people) who fall outside imaginary belonging (those alleged suspects and criminals who are constructed to be our Others—the threats to our very belonging here as citizens). What I learned in making *UNSUB* is that the unidentified subject (the subject of an FBI hunt) must resemble us enough for us to follow a scent, but must be monstrous enough to be the object of that hunt. I actually learned that through the banal thralls of *Law & Order: SVU*, but learned it again through cutting and pasting my own complicity into a publishing platform.

I use official discourse and government documentation to study how these subjects (the naturalized citizen and the alleged criminal unsub) are introduced into the social imaginary. How do we become them

or become *because* of them? What is the “we” made possible by the answer to that question? *Natural Subjects* draws from Homeland Security documents, passport-photo prescriptions, online immigration forums, manuals for slaughtering large mammals. *UNSUB* draws from the FBI’s and CIA’s “Most Wanted” lists, published explicitly for citizens—who in turn become bounty hunters through their commiseration with official discourse. Headhunters are now just people on their laptops, who could use the \$1,000,000 for pointing out an “alleged member [who] wears eyeglasses, a moustache, a beard.”

So the citizen studies, documents and creates documents, in order to become “documented” so that she, in turn, becomes the addressee of other official documents designed to apprehend those whom we find don’t belong to us. See something/say something, right? The official anthem of public life: the sphere circles the panopticon; we must be penitent in the Catholic sense (show publicly our sorrow) in the privacy of surveillance pacts. *UNSUB* documents how the forum, quite unsubjectively, comes from the forensic—the detection of the detested.

The concerns of both these books are linked, as I’ve suggested here, but stylistically they could not be more different. *UNSUB* remains highly restrained, minimalist, almost wry in its reproduction of official discourse. *Natural Subjects* is openly self-involved

and emotionally implicated with its own production because it spins autobiography by the midriff and swells to considering a conflicted narrative of belonging with and separating from white, European (and often fictional) women who are forced into naturalizations of other kinds: Eliza Doolittle of *My Fair Lady*, Maria Von Trapp of the *Sound of Music*, Ibsen's Hedda Gabler, and so on. So that book is self-involved with a "self" evolving (ostensibly) under the regimes of high literature and low Hollywood pop culture, when we all know the true regime is that of the dollar sign—the one we were all born under.

I suppose *Natural Subjects* is quite ready to claim a first-person narrative, and to say that yes, this is a book about how I was made. But *UNSUB* is also, despite its seeming aloofness, a book about how I was made—the very thing that points to the unnaturalness of all us natural subjects.

CB: Thanks for dealing with these rather serious questions as we boil it down to the self here. That's the quantity to which we reduce all writing, right? A personal narrative dressed in the trappings of genre—be it lyric, conceptual or otherwise. I'd like to push on the part of your answer that I joke about here: the relation of a (not "the") subject in your work and questions of genre. *UNSUB* is short for "unidentified subject." *Natural Subjects* fleshes out its title, but offers a different sort of flesh (beef) in

its sumptuous cover image. I'm wondering: do you consider these works in the same genre, despite their profound aesthetic dissimilarities? How helpful do you find questions of genre when it comes to contextualizing your work? And might I be muddling these questions of subject and genre in your work?

Obviously "genre" is a loaded term when it comes to outlining one's aesthetics in a collection of "conceptual-affiliated" writers, so let me take the opportunity to spell it out a bit more clearly. I'm not asking whether/how you feel these volumes fit in with a colloquial understanding of so-called conceptual writing. To read through such a strict lens would be unfair to both these works and, more importantly, you as a writer. What I do want to ask about is how genre may or may not inform work published under the name Divya Victor—possibly published by presses with pre-established conceptual affiliations.

Perhaps another angle of approach might help. You mention *UNSUB* in relation to *SVU*, which reminds me of a long-standing theory I have about that *Law & Order* spinoff: I believe it's the most popular because it's the one case in which we, as an audience, don't secretly wish the bad guy would get away. Restricting the cases to the *SVU* (which investigates sexual crimes) allows us to condone the narrative flatness of the "bad guy," and temporarily buy the fictional righteousness of these cops. I mention this

theory because, by asking about genre, I'm also asking about how the television-watching subject Divya Victor interacts with the author "Divya Victor," and what happens if we start reading a fuller subject into so-called conceptual writing. What if we started reading these works as products of meat rather than machine?

DV: *Law & Order: SVU* wages the ancient battle of good versus evil over the bodies of sexual-assault and rape victims, while pandering to the pleasure of viewers and reinforcing hegemonic understandings of victimhood, urban space, racialization, sexual consent. It offers libidinal explanations for structural problems, because no one likes a castrated capitalism. We want our demons with their balls on, please. I'm afraid a lot of lovely lyric, confessional, crush-aesthetics, post-selfie poetry does this—offering the remnant body as evidence for how it once existed with a purported subject (awkward roommates), offering access to an imagined authorial position (doggy). Authorial disclosure appears in the game of show and don't tell, or don't show and do tell (variations thereof). This is the good cop/bad cop of the scopophilic-poetics trade that we're all part of. And this impulse is part of an aesthetic approach to representing gendered bodies as things to be *loved into safety* by readers—what Vanessa Place has called, in a very different context (her crucial *The Guilt Project*), "voyeur vigilantism." I like it more

when poetries make this impulse transparent, or make the act of making it transparent elsewhere. Some poetry that can be called conceptual does this. In poetry that can't be thought of (*méconnaissance*: ignorable/can't be known) as conceptual, the poet's strategies apparently need to keep the (linebreak) reader (linebreak) long enough to read the subject into existing, into survival, into being loved and cared for—that is, cared *about*. We value the act of caring about things while reading. It makes poetry really feel useful.

You know, one of the least interesting things implied in Marjorie Perloff's über-blurb about Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* is this notion that the book offers an answer to the question "What does it mean to be a black citizen in the US of the early twenty-first century?" This is the fantasy of the most valued poetry books (and the fantasy about our most valued poets): that they both pose the questions and offer the answers; that they *produce* care in readers. The people who turn to poetry for such answers are the people who watch *Law & Order: SVU* to understand something about the discipline of punishment—because they think they haven't been the subjects of disciplinary or racialized experience all along. Perloff's blurb casts poetry as a voyeuristic, utilitarian enterprise, and I don't think that is what is most important about Rankine's book.

I think “genres” (binaries like lyric/conceptual, Language/documentary, etc.) are another way of reducing poetry into something that is inclined to offer answers to questions that can be posed in blurbs like Perloff’s. Which means it is a way of reducing poetry to utility, activity, coterie.

Genre can be useful when writing about poetry—less so when reading it. If you want to make poetry answer your own questions (Am I fat? Am I good? Am I useful? Am I famous?), genre can be very useful. But it can just as often obscure questions posed by the poetry itself. And what good is something like that for a poet like me? Historically, “genre” has greater stakes for scholars, curators, editors, grant writers, funders and foundations than for the author who is composing—and I do compose, even through my discomposure as a labeled tag “Divya Victor” or “Conceptual” on some blog post or tweet or conference paper or review. I think (pro)claiming genre is another way of not looking the author in the eye.

CB: Your description of genre reminds me of a line from the Tom Hanks/Meg Ryan classic romantic comedy *You’ve Got Mail*. This is the film in which Tom Hanks’s character runs a Barnes & Noble clone threatening to close down the quirky independent bookstore run by Meg Ryan. The two have also been anonymously corresponding, and falling in love, via

email for a number of months. Prior to discovering that the sensitive Jane Austen fanatic she’s spent months falling for is also the capitalist tycoon she’s hated for almost as long, Ryan snidely tells Hanks: “If I knew you, I know exactly what I would find. Instead of a brain, a cash register. Instead of a heart, a bottom line.” The obvious joke here is just how wrong Ryan becomes. As the movie ends, she retracts this statement in an Aristotelian moment of recognition as she discovers Hanks’s Internet identity—immediately proclaiming: “I wanted it to be you, I wanted it to be you so badly.” Aside from the overwhelming neoliberal optimism of late ‘90s America Online (AOL) culture, I take the moral of *You’ve Got Mail* to be the overturning of Ryan’s earlier sentiment. Via the post-cyberpunk capitalist dreamscape of AOL/AIM, Ryan learns that Hanks has a heart and a brain; he only dedicates those two towards the accumulation of capital during business hours.

I mention this film because it illustrates the revolutionary nature of your seemingly modest imperative to look writers in the eye. In *You’ve Got Mail*, Ryan’s “problem” is that Hanks’s deep inculcation within capitalism prevents her from seeing clearly when she literally looks him in the eye during several face-to-face encounters. Even when she believes herself to be “looking through” him, discerning the cash register and bottom line in place

of internal organs, all she sees are her own feelings of class conflict—staged on the battleground of chain versus independent seller of mass-market novels. It is as if the film says: “The world is crazy. Capitalism is a jungle. And the wonderful commodity that is the Internet helps us see through the brush of our daily hustle.” In and after millennial neoliberalism, the eye cannot be trusted.

At least in our present moment, when genre tags and social-media activity are becoming dominant ways of reading poetry, I notice writing communities following the logic of *You’ve Got Mail*. There seems to be a belief among many (though certainly not all) that one’s most intimate impressions of writers and their work might not prove reliable. I think of statements like the following:

I liked this author’s reading, but I heard he/she posted something fucked up on Facebook in support of/against (insert conceptual writer here). This writer seems super intelligent and politically with it in person, but the project didn’t fully articulate that radicalism in a way I’m already prepared to recognize. I should check his/her Facebook feed so I can know whether or not he/she is actually radical by counting the number of trending obligatory articles about (enter SJW-approved controversy here). This project must not be political.

Hopefully the critical use of SJW here signals an exaggeration with a radical agenda, but I wanted to open our conversation to this much larger issue of poetry, politics and genre—before locking eyes with you/your work in an exchange this conversation won’t dare break.

DV: OK, let me say this, since we’re not talking about poetry, but rather the places in which we try to be “poets” (i.e., on Facebook and in the after-reading stupor smoking the “I quit but…” cigarette). I used to get really irritated at my mom for posting on my Facebook feed—and she would post some universally “mom” things. Like, if there was a review of my work that praised its stripped affective economy, she’d write “I’m so proud of you!”; if I posted something I thought was just the right balance between acrid wit and performed sincerity, she’d come and shatter that balance with “You always know just what to say!” What I wanted to say to her: “I don’t want them to know I am anyone’s child. I want to be a pure construct of managed affects and data movement. My whole career depends on them believing that I believe this.” Of course I needed this because of the genre tag on my name—are conceptual poets allowed to have mothers? I *don’t* think so. (If they *were*, then you’d have to admit something about their history, their poverty, their race, etc. So *better not*.)

I realized, after the initial bluster of annoyance and embarrassment (“Mom, WHY?!”), that her interruption of my carefully sculpted social-network affects and circulation was as threatening to me (in my loss of control over *the* neoliberal tool of marketing my “self” as a semiotic hologram) as it was symbolically useful to her in the construction of her Internet momness. Facebook for me was like being at a cool conference and sitting next to my mom’s uterus, like, “Hey, this is where I come from. Yes, I’m glad you think I’m problematizing subjectivity.” Her Facebook role was to remind me of that Kristevan “milk skin”—the abject veil. She kept returning to pull at the thickening cream right on the surface of my purportedly neutral, manageable substance. That skin (like Hamlet’s awful arras) behind which all of my neurotic signifiers stood with their feet sticking out, was the very thing she was motherfucking up.

I enjoy this shaming and mistaken identity more theoretically, of course, because it makes quite transparent how much everyone is laboring to curate affects on Facebook and Twitter. To me, social networking resembles nothing more than the kind of constant labor described by Sontag in her critique of leisure-class photography. The compulsive construction of and conspicuous consumption of images on social networks promotes both surveillance and documentation of one’s own “most important” labor in late capital—that is, the

labor of being an individual. And, in our case, the labor of being a “poet-citizen.” As we know, the more successful we are at being laborer-consumers, the more semiotically successful we are at appearing as individuals. And vice-versa. This is the Laurel and Hardy, the Abbott and Costello of slapstick neoliberalism. We are falling all over ourselves to be *more* individual than others. A tweet is a “valuable good” that promotes “reputability to the gentleman of leisure,” if I were to put it in Veblen’s quaint, velvety way.

All poets accumulate capital conspicuously on social networks. Poets work when we are composing poetry; poets work when we are composing social-network content: the latter form of labor articulates itself as heart-felt expression, when it is really a form of conspicuous leisure, a way of consuming one’s *preferred* signifiers in a public sphere—like those jerks with their quadruple-scoop cones standing at some traffic intersection calling for the liberation of Tibet with a mouth full of American dairy. Work sells books. Within this logic, what is happening with the Mongrel Coalition (which social media has paradoxically produced as both an anonymous band *and* as highly moral individual agents) and the denouncement of conceptual poetry is a veritable potlatch—an expenditure of reserved cultural capital towards a targeted reordering of social power and cultural capital. That is: a misplaced fireworks display

aimed at illuminating (and exposing) the monarchs of a genre-kingdom that doesn't exist. It is still the 4th of July for the symbolic order (sorry/not sorry to Lacansplain). The great joke of course is that at least one of these so-called stripped monarchs, Vanessa Place, has been happy to be a nudist the whole time. You can't strip that.

Social-media performances (i.e., all activity on social media) are the invariable end result of what Paul Virilio describes as the invention of the public gaze in early modernity. The invention of such a thing produces a state in which each person becomes "for everyone else, in the manner of the *sans culotte*, a benevolent inquisitor...a deadly Gorgon." Likes, retweets, comments and hashbrags are devotionals at the feet of the benevolent inquisitor. The Gorgon is deadly because it stabilizes and fixes: it turns consciousness into stone (an image). The Gorgon's gaze is sculptor par excellence. We get to be re-made in our own image (stiffs that we are) and in the service of the benevolent inquisitor's agenda. I am skeptical of the moral exculpations of the hashtag (which many white and non-white poets are wearing in place of their WWJD pendants these days). And needless to say, I'm supremely skeptical of the so-called radicalism of denuncements and abdications—because these often pretend that the rhetorical labor of social networks doesn't accrue cultural capital in publishing economies, and worse,

these pretend at pretending by trying to keep it 100% real homegrown in the least homegrown of all publics.

CB: "Homegrown" and *Natural Subjects*: I wonder if it might be helpful to parse the language separating this term and this book of yours. I can't help but hear you begging this question, given that immigration documents populate your collection, not to mention the slaughtering manuals that conjure the contemporary idea of homegrown/grass-fed/so-called-ethical meat—as if we could somehow dissociate the gravity of slaughter from meat, the speaking subject (on Facebook) from the actual social body he/she occupies.

Given that you pay taxes in two countries, I can't imagine that your understanding of the homegrown remains even relatively stable. *Natural Subjects* thus reminds me of the tension between naturalization and the so-called natural-born citizen, as well as the objectification to which even "natural" bodies remain subject. It may be from Whole Foods, but its still beef. It was still part of a cow that has since been slaughtered, just as Hedda Gabler has to die at the end of her own drama in order to upend her feminine mystique, and Eliza Doolittle must obliterate her cultural sense for her drama to even occur.

If *Natural Subjects* paints a skeptical portrait of the homegrown through these examples (reminding us that the seemingly authentic always comes at the cost of another mode of being), what sort of critique might it level against the social-media behaviors we're discussing? Is there an inherent tension between the digital landscapes of the contemporary poetry-sphere and the actual communities in which we live and labor? Moreover, since so many critiques hinge on the presumed purity/homegrown credentials of those wielding the call-out (critiques that makes their home in the digital but ground their credentials in the lived political), what happens when we subject these critiques to their own logic?

DV: The "authentic" or "homegrown" doesn't quite exist—and this is a terrible blow for many. The conservative turn among my kith, for instance, in non-resident Indians and young first-generation American-Indians, is a symptom of seeking out an origin narrative (located in *one* passport) when they don't receive one in their current contexts (located in *another* passport). Instead of political activism, cultural chauvinism (Indians invented the zero; Indians are inherently more successful, ad nauseam) becomes the most immediately satisfying way of fighting white supremacy. The quest for cultural authenticity is the other side of resisting assimilation—but they both produce each other and serve conservative agendas, ultimately. The quest

towards cultural authenticity often turns backwards and in, rather than outward and towards the future.

The women in *Natural Subjects* are imagined as "rescues" in their own cultures—taken from one ("lesser") context and naturalized into another ("greater") context: India to Amrika, flower shop to Ascot races, unsafe homes to safe asylums/institutions. There is a false assumption that, if assimilated properly, they can live better lives—much like Charcot's promise to the hysterics. Note that "to assimilate" is something *done unto* you. One cannot undertake this; one undergoes this. These women (which includes my kinswomen, Eliza Doolittle, the mental-health patients of colonial India) have been *cared into living naturalized lives* in new contexts. Often these acts of care are carried out in the form of a game or a bet—as with the "bet" placed on Professor Higgins's ability to transform the way Doolittle's body and voice signify, as with the waiting game for the Green Card where you work for sub-market survival wages offered as a "gift."

Cultural assimilation transforms everything: the way you walk; the way you cross your legs; the way you reach for a knife; the way your soft-palate and teeth conspire in a timely manner to seek out an "R" that makes you sound more American than Indian, and so on. For instance, I've watched myself and my kith learn the compulsory performance of the "A-OK,

all is good, can't complain, just on my 'pursuit of happiness' jog" routine; how to signal a "yes" or a "no" by nodding in the United States; how to give a thumbs up instead of pinching thumb and forefinger; how to say "hunky-dory." Like the latter phrase, it is an act of emotional minstrelsy. If cultural assimilation is about learning how to embody a specifically American brand of affects, naturalization is a series of minor events where the performance disappears and "the individual" emerges: the seams vanish, the swan appears from the ugly duckling, and so on. When I was writing *Natural Subjects* this is all I thought about—the small ways in which giving something up is to take something else up. The freak show, as it turned out, is just an identitarian juggling act, so sad. Naturalization is a loss not just because you give up a so-called original identity, but because you realize that that identity was never *yours* to begin with, never natural, never original. I envy, as a result, people who are convinced that they *are* people. Many of us are walking around knowing too well that we are people made of paper. It becomes harder to subscribe to *any* form of cultural essentialism after this. As you say: no matter how you slice it, a T-bone or a skirt steak is still just a death turned into a meal. This is the essence of necropolitics with a side of parsley. The poetry is just the framing garnish to this terrible truth.

CB: My own affection for terrible truths is perhaps my greatest difficulty as a poet, at least socially. If this was the case when I lived in Philadelphia, it's now more than ever that I live in the Bay Area. This conversation is now sounding like my last job interview (didn't get) because this weakness is also one of my greatest strengths. I have to admit that I notice a fluency in terrible truths among an increasingly small numbers of my peers lately, and find it a self-selective trait—terrible-truth tellers travel together. Perhaps they always have. I recognized this trait almost immediately in you, and must admit that it is probably the largest reason as to why we're having this conversation right now.

If the terrible truth of naturalization is that it's both a gain and a loss (one whose ebb and flow constitutes *Natural Subjects*), I wonder what conclusions about the larger state of poetry we might, finally, draw. At this point we've talked about Divya Victor the writer and Divya Victor the television watcher, but I think this question also calls for Divya Victor the editor.

You've spent the better part of 2015 putting together a collection of writings on Conceptual Writing (plural and global). Would you say that the transnational, naturalized subjectivity of *Natural Subject* in any way informs the decisions made by your editorial self? At present, I've seen only the lineup for this feature, but it suggests a picture of conceptual writing that I

think many, with varying relations to the genre, might find a terrible truth. I think of the very familiar (and not inaccurate) charge that conceptual writers in positions of privilege and power repackage, reframe or otherwise “remix” the work of global practitioners to further their own capital, and it seems like your feature wants to occlude this practice by providing readers with direct access to a number of these practitioners themselves.

On the other hand, this edited issue also holds the potential to dispel a myth and tell a terrible truth about conceptual writing itself. It promises (and, from what I’ve seen, delivers on that promise) to complicate the very simple picture of the genre as uniformly white/male/American and otherwise privileged. Of course this fact is complicated, if not undone, by the fact that the issue will run on *Jacket2*, and could only be such “a thing” with that magazine’s deep institutional context and support.

In other words: how does the naturalized ontology from *Natural Subjects* inform your editorial practice—both in this issue and beyond?

DV: Naturalization is first and foremost a strategy of managing a native labor market through foreign labor sources. To me, what I hear in complaints against conceptual writing and conceptual writers boils down to concerns about how the labor of

poetry is performed (methods, strategies), and to what end (the creation of what moral/political product, the change in what material condition, etc.). Two of the more damaging notions in the communities I roam and eavesdrop into: 1) that a certain cultural positioning (privileged, white, upper-class, institutionally powerful, hetero) is “natural” to conceptual-leaning strategies; 2) that any subject who does not occupy that cultural position only utilizes conceptual-leaning strategies because of aspiring to become/grow/appear into that cultural position. These notions are both accusatory and fallacious in terms of the diversity of the genre, its regional variants, the political (and denominative) diversity of its practitioners, and its anomalous and jagged developments from and through the world. It is obviously stupid to assert that cut-and-paste is a racist act. It is even more stupid to naturalize the analogy between word and world—to assert a relation of equivalence rather than homology between textual and material violence. But such assertions and naturalizations serve to diversify a saturated community, and to cause arbitrary divisions based on denominative identities rather than textual analysis. I really don’t think directly equating whiteness with conceptualism mobilizes a radical position, but it does allow for a simple splitting of the market. As with market diversification, poetry communities (which are markets) re-brand, introduce new products, form profitable alliances with

complementary agents, and license new aesthetic modes/technologies for production. The consumer eats up the fantasy of “community,” while doing all the work for market diversification—and most of us occupy both these roles within artist communities. I’m no exception. What I find embarrassing is the illusion that there is an outside to this.

In the last year, I’ve noticed one too many a poet who has never written about civil struggle or who has wanked off to the in-grown aesthetics of his/her soft-lit living-room *rage* against conceptual-leaning projects that dare to take on racialization in full force. I’ve observed how people rhetorically repurpose working-class black American subjects *in order to chastise* those who use *textual* material belonging to a racist American lineage. And I’ve also observed how public performances of outrage and mourning synthetically rebrand and mask one’s social identity—one’s class, one’s institutional position. As I’ve said elsewhere, our tear ducts are banks that weep out gold.

It’s been hard to watch the performance of (sometimes) white-liberal benevolence in poetry communities that have carried out a “valiant” vendetta against the *naturalized* racism and elitism of conceptual-leaning writing, despite there being multiple critical documents (and embodied examples) that demonstrate the personal and textual

intersections between conceptual-leaning strategies and broader politics of struggle—whether these be articulated in writers’ denominative identities (race, class, gender, sexuality) or material priorities (publishing, production, labor, exchange, markets) or lexical concerns.

My editing of *Conceptual Writing (plural and global) and Other Cultural Productions for Jacket2* was a response to this. I wanted critique, not Twitter; I wanted analysis, not gossip; I wanted descriptions of process and composition, not lectures and tirades riddled with personal animosity. But mostly, I wanted writers and artists around the world to talk about why they make books and projects in a certain way—to explain and describe why they do what they do, without having to take on a defensive position in relation to an environment of knee-jerk petitioning and arbitrary (aesthetic and social) fragmentation. There is some remarkable, incisive historical repositioning in the feature (Ta’i Smith’s intrepid revision of the readymade, Michael Nardone’s commentary on “settler conceptualism”). But there is also a sense of expanded social concerns (Elizabeth Jane Burnett on environmental activism, Daniel Falb Karl-Kunger-Straße on terrapoetics and the anthropocene, Mathew Landis on corporeality and ablism/disability). The feature has also turned out to be an unexpected treasure trove of artist/poetics statements from writers and thinkers from

Canada, the United States, the U.K., the Philippines, Mexico and elsewhere, from people we need to be paying more critical attention to: Kristen Gallagher, Alejandro Miguel Crawford, Shiv Kotecha, Marco Antonio Huerta, Steve Giasson, Holly Pester, Angelo Suarez, Angela Genusa, among many others. These folks have been important to my own thinking about why I write, and while our methods and ends diverge radically, there is a shared interest in querying the subject, challenging the conditions of production, confounding utility and resisting the clumsy derivation of moral ends through aesthetics.

– *Summer 2015*

AFTERWORD: ON RECONFILIATING

— Joseph Mosconi

Throughout the spring and summer of 2015, as observations about the whiteness of avant-garde poetry and allegations of racism in certain strains of so-called conceptual writing took center stage in the poetry community, the Twitter feed [@fuckeveryword](#) made its way routinely through the letter C of the English alphabet.¹ Fuck catnapping. Fuck capitalism. Fuck casseroles. Fuck children. Fuck circuses. Fuck clams. Finally, on June 17, the bot settled upon a phrase that seemed to be on the minds of many poets that summer: Fuck conceptualism.

The tweet was favorited and retweeted a handful of times, and received a single facetious comment that it had “gone too far,” but the event otherwise

¹ [@fuckeveryword](#) is a parody account of Allison Parrish’s Twitter project [@everyword](#). Over a period of seven years, [@everyword](#) tweeted every word in the English language in alphabetical order, every 30 minutes. [@fuckeveryword](#) attempts a similar feat but adds the word “fuck” before every word.

passed without commentary. The next day the bot continued its long march through the alphabet. Fuck concession. Fuck concord.

I retweeted the phrase myself, perhaps a bit self-consciously, and smiled at its appearance in a quasi-conceptual Twitter project at the very moment when conceptualism in poetry seemed *truly* fucked. Conceptual writing was [accused](#) of contributing to white supremacy, mimicking the hierarchies of financial capitalism and promoting a debased colonial aesthetic. Some writers, who may have had an uncertain affiliation with conceptual writing, via friendships, shared publishers, methods of composition or editorial practice, suddenly discovered that they were emissaries of a despised and hateful genre and literary movement. Other young writers, perhaps more cathected to the idea of conceptualism as a movement or school of poetry, were at pains to distance themselves from the missteps and provocations of its most famous practitioners. Some did so while admitting complicity with structural racism. Some made public denunciations of fellow writers and former friends. Some were defensive. Some made jokes or memes. Some wrote essays. Some said nothing.

Whatever you think or feel about the work of Kenneth Goldsmith and Vanessa Place, the contention that conceptual writing as it is currently practiced is inherently racist, affectless, apolitical or unethical

is problematic at best. Such readings are reductive, avoid actual textual analysis, and ignore the many conceptual-affiliated writers (some of whom manage to avoid the conceptual genre-tag) who actively engage the political, affective and embodied realities of language—and who even develop strategies of social activism and anti-imperialism.² Institutional racism and sexism persist in both the experimental and mainstream poetry communities—and certainly conceptual writing, like all writing, has the potential to be unethical and racist. But this is not a question of genre. As the poet [Stephen McLaughlin](#) points out, discussions of literary taxonomy cannot be taken seriously: “Each piece stands on its own. The most woodsy/introspective water! light! rain! poem can be pretty good sometimes. A harsh text concept bomb is often harsh in a bad way.” Conversely, the woodsy introspective water poem might be a sexist piece of trash. The harsh text concept bomb might contain an incisive critique of cisnormativity. Zooming out from poetry, a racist horror novel (of which there are many, many examples) cannot corrupt the entire genre.³

² See Jacquelyn Ardam’s [review](#) of *The Voyage of the Sable Venus and Other Poems* by Robin Coste Lewis. For a more thorough discussion on this topic, and the proposition of art as a product of labor, see “[Materializing free time: Notes toward a new constructivism](#)” by Angelo V. Suarez, in *transit: an online journal*.

³ To be clear, I am not denying that genre and form are ideologically circumscribed, but rather that they are

As the interviews in this chapbook attest, many writers affiliated with conceptualism create work that might best be described as open-platform poetics. The gesture of performative interactivity in Divya Victor's *Race Card*, the database in Danny Snelson's *Epic Lyric Poem*, and the file type distribution utilized by J. Gordon Faylor of Gauss PDF are merely three nodes in a field of undisciplined practices that constitute an unprecedented expansion of poetic language. This might be "language in the service of art, language in the service of music, language in all instances not in the service of communication and speech," as Snelson notes. Or it might be language in the service of bright and ugly feelings, or language in the service of nothing at all. The affects of anger, displeasure, discomfort and indecision, or of vulgarity, stupidity, nihilism and blissed-out ambience, may be inassimilable to mainstream and experimental poetry alike. But they do not constitute, to borrow a phrase from Seth Price, a post-problem poetics—a poetics that rejects debates over meaning, criticality, historicism, politics and taste.⁴ Divya Victor says it best: look the poet in the eye. Forget the genre.

always historically contingent—one of the points of a work of art, if the artist is so inclined, could be to upset genre conventions, or to determine and redefine genre limits.

⁴ For more on "post-problem art," see Seth Price's *Fuck Seth Price: A Novel*.

Engage the work. This is a poetry of witness and engagement.

There is an Icelandic lullaby, reportedly catalogued by W.H. Auden, that begins:

Sleep, you black-eyed pig
Fall into a deep pit of ghosts

I like to think of Big C Conceptual Poetry as the black-eyed pig baby we must lull to sleep, not to protect or mythologize, but to move beyond, to disperse among a family of ghosts. Such ghosts may bear a family resemblance to the formerly living, but they are more diverse in their methods, more varied in their affects, and more willing to scare a sense of urgency into you. This is the undertaking of reconfiliation.

- October 2015

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Caleb Beckwith is a writer and editor living in Oakland. He is a senior editor at *The Conversant*, and, in 2014, co-edited the Conceptual Writing feature in *Evening Will Come*. Recent work can be found at *Gauss PDF* and *Jacket2*.



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Joseph Mosconi is a writer and taxonomist based in Los Angeles. He co-directs the Poetic Research Bureau and co-edits the art & lit mag *Area Sneaks*. He is the author of *Fright Catalog*, *Demon Miso/Fashion in Child* and *Galvanized Iron on the Citizens' Band*. His chapbooks include *33° Houdini* (PRB Publications, 2008), *But On Geometric* (Insert Blanc Press, 2010), *WORD SEARCH* (OMG! Press, 2010) and *QUESTIONNAIRE* (forthcoming).



Danny Snelson is a writer, editor and archivist currently residing in Chicago. He is the publisher of Edit Publications and founding editor of the Reissues project at *Jacket2*. Recent books include *EXE TXT*, *Radios*, *Epic Lyric Poem* and, with James Hoff, *Inventory Arousal*. With Mashinka Firunts and Avi Alpert, he works as one-third of the academic performance group Research Service. He currently works as the Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow in Digital Humanities in the English Department and the Alice Kaplan Institute of the Humanities at Northwestern University.



Divya Victor is the author of *Natural Subjects* (winner of the Bob Kaufman Award), *UNSUB*, *Things To Do With Your Mouth*, *Swift Taxidermies 1919-1922*, *Goodbye John! On John Baldessari*, *PUNCH* and the *Partial* trilogy. Her chapbooks include *Hellocasts by Charles Reznikoff by Divya Victor by Vanessa Place* (Ood Press, 2011) and *SUTURES* (Little Red Leaves, 2009). She has been a Mark Diamond Research Fellow at the U.S Holocaust Memorial Museum, a Riverrun Fellow at the Mandeville Poetry Collections at the University of California, San Diego and a Writer in Residence at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE). She lives in the United States and Singapore, where she is assistant professor of poetry and writing at Nanyang Technological University.



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