

FROM THE CENTER OUT

CSU POETRY CENTER'S
NEW AUTHOR
INTERVIEWS

CURATED BY
CARYL PAGEL

FEATURING
LEORA FRIDMAN
LO KWA MEI-EN
MARTIN ROCK
WITH AN AFTERWORD BY
LEE UPTON





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#46

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

— Caryl Pagel, *Director of the Cleveland State University Poetry Center*

Last spring, my first in Cleveland, along with a handful of generous local poets and the CSU Poetry Center staff, I read nearly 1,100 full-length manuscripts of poetry and prose. The experience was thrilling. Our competitions resulted in a commitment to three books of poetry and one book of prose, all four of which will be released in the spring of 2016. Three of the books were chosen by outside judges (Leora Fridman's *My Fault* was selected by Eileen Myles; Lo Kwa Mei-en's *The Bees Make Money In The Lion* by past CSU Poetry Center authors Lesle Lewis, Shane McCrae, and Wendy Xu; and Lily Hoang's collection of essays, *A Bestiary*, by Wayne Koestenbaum). I selected Martin Rock's book *Residuum* for the First Book Poetry Editor's Choice award. Interviews with the three poets are included in this chapbook, and a conversation with Lily Hoang appears in the December 2015 issue of *The Conversant*.

Putting together the interviews that follow has revealed the deep intellectual generosity of these writers, as well as the specific nature of their curiosity and their lean toward the social. These books stun with their varied sense of shared responsibility and communal engagement. This observation is not intended as an aesthetic stance or a permanent prediction of what we'll publish in the future, but it seems important to note the commonality: these poets are not navel gazers; they are not solitary bards singing a sad and lonely song into the cliff's wind, but instead profoundly ethical (if sometimes in the most humorous or hand-wringing ways) and curious critics of the swarm, the group, the canon and so-called *culture*. These collections are not focused merely on individual accounts of the lyric interior, but are formally inventive attempts at looking outward, toward the political, toward the complicated nature of human networks and systems. I won't ruin the specifics by summarizing. The books will be in your hands soon, and until then you'll see much of this thinking in the interviews. I will say, however, that these are the poets you'll want to call over when playing Red Rover. They will run at high speeds straight into the crowd.



interview with
LEORA FRIDMAN

Caryl Pagel: The poems in *My Fault* often express ethical concerns about existing as a body in this world, a body that consumes, crushes, profits and leaves a mark or scar. Will you talk a bit about this book's approach to environmental or communal responsibilities? And how those responsibilities can create guilt, shame or blame?

Leora Fridman: I was raised to be responsible. I like to think of myself of as a responsible person, though I'm not sure how good of a job I'm doing at that. I get a lot of joy out of feeling that I'm supporting something larger (be it environmental, communal, otherwise)—I also am very aware of how much "responsibility" is a performance, how much I place ego weight on being responsible, responsive to other people, doing the "right" thing.

And the “right” thing is tenuous. Even in the three decades I’ve lived I’ve already seen social, communal and environmental “right” behavior change around me a lot, and so I perceive the tenuousness of the performance of responsibility. I also perceive how weighed down and divided people and narratives feel by responsibility toward guilt and blame (I come from an ethnic/religious background known for its cultural “guilt” tropes), and I don’t find those moves useful. I see how clearly we start to feel that “we” are the bad ones and others the good ones, or we are the good ones and others the bad ones. For example: I have often felt that I am bad because I do not shop at Whole Foods, or I have often felt like my physicality is bad because it takes up space and creates waste in an overpopulated ecology. These feelings/thoughts mostly make me depressed and don’t motivate me to do anything.

My Fault does, though, contain what motivates me: attempts at acting, attempts at participation with/including flaw. The other day I heard Judith Butler and Jacqueline Rose talk at UC Berkeley, and I wrote down this bit from Rose: “you ambivalently subsist in the space of your own ambivalence—you don’t destroy it, and you don’t control it.”

In the same conversation, Butler mentioned “the biopolitical” as a question of “how life is managed.” In *My Fault*, I’m interested in interrogating what we

think we can manage, what we are attempting to manage, and what kind of responsibility or fault we incur upon ourselves when we believe that we are in charge, that we are responsible.

My Fault is also specifically interested in responsibility as it pertains to resources. In lines like “do you have enough flesh / for all of us // would you like me / to put it away” I’m interested in the materiality of being responsible today: I’m curious about how to manage material responsibly in the age of things like massive toxic-waste dumps, recycling, the zero-waste movement, eating disorders, brownfields, digital personas, gentrification. I’m interested in all of these as places where we put objects/people, where people/objects put themselves, where people/objects remove themselves or scrape themselves away or are removed forcibly. *My Fault* is curious about how to deal responsibly with material (human and otherwise) on a planet/container of limited space.

In *My Fault*, I’m also interested in an approach to responsibility that both understands (as in *comprehends* and also as in *has compassion for*) where an individual is coming from, and still holds that individual up toward responsibility—a responsibility in which we can always be good, do good, support one another but/and when we fail at our responsibilities we are not disqualified from

goodness or the right to exist, to feel connected, to try again.

Poems are the only place I've really found to talk about and to truly live in a both/and world, a world that holds up an idea and simultaneously, lovingly, allows it to fail.

CP: What surprised you the most during the composition of *My Fault*? How did the act of writing it change you?

LF: I was surprised by the extent to which my own ethics grew like mushrooms out of the dark mashy logs of this book. This is a total Franken-book (term credit to Wendy Xu), one that emerged from killing off three old manuscripts, culling poems from each of them, and adding new poems—so at some point I just thought it would be collection of so many different things. But then I read through it and I saw how clearly my current obsessions showed through.

When I start writing a poem it is not explicitly with a certain goal/story/ethic in mind (that totally kills the process for me, vis-à-vis *Poetry is Not a Project*). I just start with a current obsession, word, phrase or letter I'm writing to someone, and then bore forward through to see what is there, what travels occur. "Boring" feels like the right verb. Yes, so then I am surprised by how/when the act of boring *into*

leads to a cohesive ethics or at least a cohesive set of questions. I speak and then something speaks through me, not in an oracle sense, but in the sense that the speech act allows for clarity to take place in a way that it doesn't if I think/plan my way through it beforehand.

So I'm surprised by how easy it is to make knowledge from boring into/through. Perhaps because I'm a woman or because I've been taught that *art* is not the same as *smart*, I don't expect myself to *create* knowledge or thought. And then it happens. I'm currently working on a collection of lyric essays/letters that do a lot of this kind of *boring* but in prose form, and I would never have been able to have the confidence to work on those essays without writing poems like those in *My Fault* and then realizing that they had taken shape in themselves.

CP: In a recent correspondence of ours you wrote that "the role of gender has become increasingly important and exciting to me in my poems, and I've been strongly influenced by a set of feminist ancestors/sisters/aunties as I become more brave about positing in my poems a queer/-ed politics.... Alice Notley (The problem of / America is my body) has encourage me to put my own thinking into my grammar. I'm less interested in whether this is woman-ish, and more interested in observing grammar in the context of various hierarchies." Will

you speak to the ways in which *My Fault* negotiates aspects of gender and feminism via grammar? Of the ways in which these concerns drove your composition?

LF: I expect people to think I'm either incomprehensible or perfect, a failure or a genius—because I often think in those black/white ways. One end of spectrum or the other. Which is not how I think about gender, and I'm trying to take my own binary thinking apart in *My Fault*, as well.

Or, one way I'm trying to negotiate gender/feminism via grammar in *My Fault* is by failing at normative grammar but making my own system of sense.

Or, once Peter Gizzi told me over sushi that I needed to learn more about *écriture féminine* before I just *did* it—that there was a history there that I needed to understand. I believe this and I also found it hilarious, that even in unpacking the relationship between the cultural and psychological inscription of the female body and female difference in language, I needed to make sure I'd read the canon, referenced the right theorists, etc.

But in retrospect I needed the good kick in the ass Gizzi gave me. I needed to be reminded that just because a form is strange doesn't mean you can be sloppy about it. You still need to work

hard at it. Usually you even need to work harder for it. I needed to be told this as I was trying to make my own kind of meaning—that I couldn't just give up on trying hard just because I was doing something no one had told me how to do. This, too, is part of how I try to negotiate gender/feminism in *My Fault*: I'm trying to speak as myself but also be rigorous about it. *My Fault*, to a large extent, is me trying to figure out what authentic rigor looks like, to me.

So I'm grateful for ancestors, but when I read too much of someone who has the same thought about writing as I do it just blocks me up, too. For this reason sometimes I need to abandon the "aunties" you mention. I need to put Alice Notley and Rosmarie Waldrop and Anne Carson, Maggie Nelson, Eileen Myles, Lorine Niedecker, H.D., Adrienne Rich—I need to shove them in the back of the closet where it's moldy so I can write without being them.

Another way of saying this is: I do write "about" a gendered body, but it's not just in the subject matter. I'd wager that I write a gendered body. I write in/into a gendered body in my search for honesty, authenticity—I peer through my body, talk through my body, and I wonder: will there be anything honest in there? Will anything come out that "is true" or "makes sense"—will anything real and recognizable present itself from my body? If it isn't recognizable

to anyone, is it still real? Whose *fault* is it if it isn't recognizable?

I am so often told to speak up. I am told to be more direct, [apologize less](#), care less what other people think/need, etc. In lines in this book like "I have come to withstand him," I'm trying to talk about the muscle mass I've developed in order to stand in a patriarchal context.

But in addition to developing this muscle mass, I also believe in the way I more naturally am, which is in part gendered, and part of that means offering my emotional labor, my labor as being responsible/responsive to others. I want to be accountable to the people I love and the people I don't love and the beings (beyond people) that I don't know. There is a feminism here for me, as in: instead of adjusting to a "man's world," I would like it to adjust to me.

I've written about this for VIDA [here](#), especially regarding why I choose to speak/write in a way that may not be understood as easily as more traditional (patriarchal?) texts. I think also about Amy Berkowitz choosing to write "*écriture féminine en homme*" in her book *Tender Points*: essentially it's about choice. As a white-presenting female-presenting female-bodied person, I have a tremendous amount of privilege and freedom in how I express my gender, in writing and otherwise. I am not claiming that I am

the most oppressed by any stretch—I am among the most privileged. And I feel deeply, politically committed to exercising this privilege to voice a narrative that is strange to mainstream patriarchal narrative, especially when writing in/around gendered bodies.

CP: Name the poets who are most exciting to you now (living or dead), the poets who have been on your mind in, say, the last year or so. Are you learning from them, raging against them, feeling intimate, energized or bewildered?

LF: Oh! I love to be a fan/child so this is a good question to ask me.

I've been reading and grappling my hands/mouth/body around everything the Mongrel Coalition Against Gringpo puts out, most recently [Own Your Canon](#).

Kelin Loe and Carrie Lorig are these national parks of sisterhood for me right now. If I can't write I look at their work. The cover of [Carrie's new book](#) is like a soft animal I like to pet (and I'm not an animal person, so that's saying a lot) and the cover of [Kelin's book](#) is hunters' arrows that can find you anywhere.

Right now Cathy Park Hong is writing the political, serial and rigorous poem in a way I aspire to so deeply.

Julie Carr and Laynie Browne both have beautiful chapbooks that I'm reading along in right now from Essay Press (I promise I'm not saying that because of this context!!). These two have taught me so much about address, spirituality, the spiritual address, confessional speech to be proud of, conversation. They also have a great conversation together in [The Conversant](#).

Wendy Xu grows ever braver. She has a new chapbook out called [Naturalism](#) that I can't wait to read.

Speaking of brave, I continue to read Bhanu Kapil all the time. It bewilders me that she can be alive the way she is in such a burning alive way. I aspire to being alive that way.

Hillary Gravendyk is no longer alive in that way but her poems are alive, and I'm grateful to Cindy Arrieu-King and other people who knew Hillary on this earth for bringing me to her poems. Juliana Spahr was one of the first poets I ever liked and a few weeks ago I watched her read from [her new book](#) in a living room in South Berkeley very close to my house, and my legs were numb, freezing up crunched underneath some stranger's thighs, and trying not to get dripped on by someone else's ashy cigarette. She, like Maggie Nelson, stuns me into trying to be honest with/in my politics + poems. She (and Maggie) make

me believe it's possible. They make me believe I'm not dumb for having beliefs or for looking into them.

I met Christian Campbell on a residency last month and I've been reading his work since. I am awed by his relentless, courageous insistence on the somatic and the physical and human capacity for movement. We were both competitive swimmers when we were younger and I am newly curious about that. I've also put myself on a drowning/swimming course with women Beats and their descendants: I stumbled across [this anthology](#) this summer and went from there. I feel responsible for being with them, given the work they do and have done, given that I live in the Bay Area, and for many other reasons. I am grateful every single day for Eileen Myles, Alice Notley, Anne Waldman, Joanne Kyger, Diane di Prima and the people who publish them.

The other day I listened to Myles give a talk/conversation on obsessions in San Francisco. About using unfamiliar vocabulary she said: "It's like gender—I was waiting for someone to say the word so that I could figure out how to use it."

Then, for me, there is James Tate: I miss him being on this earth with us. I am endlessly grateful for him as a gateway and a teacher and an expander.

CP: What are you working on now?

LF: As I mentioned briefly above, I'm working on a collection that is lyric essays/letters that address themselves to and through private/public space. It's a collection interested in how to address directly. I'm trying to address people directly, as a public act. These addresses are personal and political and about bodies, gender, digital culture, relationship, romance, fear. I'm trying to really let myself bring it all together in these addresses and, in their texts, pull honestly on all the sources I'm actually pulling from when I write.

I'm also working on a newer book-length poem called *Glacier National Park*. This poem is interested in what's dying off right now on this planet, and how humans in bodies act when things are dying off, when people are talking about our planet dying off. This poem is trying to talk through a body and its ecological context at the same time. This poem is curious if anyone can speak for anything, on behalf of anything, or inside of anything, really. This poem believes in climate change and climate context.

I also edit *Spoke Too Soon: A Journal of the Longer* with Kelin Loe, so I'm working on that. I'm so proud of the space we've made for longer thought and longer poems there.

I also work on collaborative/interdependent projects as a part of [The Bureau](#).

I also have a full-time job and a home that I like to cook in and a garden I try to keep from dying and dishes that need doing and a body that likes to get exercise and political/activism work I like to show up for and friends and family and I like to stay in touch. So I'm working on that. For the sake of acknowledging emotional, social and paid labor (and for the sake of integration), I like to note that that's all part of what I'm "working on," too.

interview with
LO KWA MEI-EN

Caryl Pagel: The poems in *The Bees Make Money in the Lion* think through patterns of disruption and exploration, alienation and citizenship, and the individual body within a larger group. Could you discuss how and when these themes first revealed themselves, and if the metaphor and structure of bee colonies was an integral part of the manuscript from the beginning?

Lo Kwa Mei-en: Those themes had been a part of my day-to-day existence for many years, but I didn't understand their importance in this book until I let myself impart equal urgency to (what I thought of as) seemingly unrelated sources: the thirst for heroic romance and the hunger to establish the first extraplanetary colony, reality television and the tower of Babel, a sonnet crown and honeycomb. I don't know why it was so hard to allow myself that interrelation (I think I just regurgitated my

favorite Keats quote). But such a shift in perspective coincided with my growing understanding of my life as an immigrant woman of color and how certain experiences I'd had couldn't be forced into singular categories, no matter how much creative work I did to constrain my response to them. Once I realized I'd already been living a life of constraint and creativity, I felt more free to listen to the work as much as direct it.

Similarly, the metaphor of bee colonies was not a part of the manuscript from the beginning, but I can't remember its ever being absent from the work. When I wrote the line "In this book, the bees make money," I felt it was proof that the bees had been in the book all along, and probably homing in on the speaker since the Babel poems took their shape. (I like to think I don't know whether this particular colony came into my life from the Old Testament, the erotic pastoral imaginary, or the stars, but given my personal history, the source is probably biblical.) I didn't know that my imaginary bee colony was part of *The Bees Make Money in the Lion* until I acknowledged that the colonizing human imagination was, too.

Maybe there's another book in my future that is more directly devoted to bees. I would write about many important things: the existence of solitary bees, the role propolis serves, the fact that male bees'

genealogical trees enact the Fibonacci sequence, the time a Brooklyn colony began feeding exclusively off a maraschino cherry factory, et cetera. This is a great subject to research because you can find equally life-changing information in farmers' almanacs from the early 1900s as well as Instagram accounts like @girlnextdoorhoney. Actively researching bees is also important to me because at some point in the process I have to face the fact that I am cavalierly admiring (*liking*) an entity that our civilization depends on, yet is pushing toward irreversible endangerment. Not an easy truth. I think to look at a bee is to look at everything it relates to, including yourself. One day when I was 15, standing around listlessly in my parents' back yard, a sweat bee came and hovered six inches in front of my face, uncannily steadily, and I thought it looked me right in the eye. As soon as I had that thought, a ridiculous panic filled me and I turned and ran as fast as I could back into the house.

CP: What surprised you the most during the composition of *The Bees Make Money in the Lion*? How did the act of writing it change you?

LKM: When I realized how important the abecedarians were to the book, I felt intense desire and anxiety. I wrote one as a joke, almost—this was during Mars One's first call for applicants. I wanted to write about the Mars One colony and

needed a formal constraint to distract me from self-consciousness. *That was a humbling experience*, I thought. *OK, been there, done that! Thanks for the memories!* And then, "shockingly," all I could write for the next year was abecedarians. I decided to write "The Alien Crown" to force myself toward an end in sight. I needed a legal pad to chart the forms out, and looking at these diagrams made me feel kind of stupid and kind of high. But when I finished the crown I was genuinely surprised by how its role within a larger project allowed the other series in the book to be more generous in context than they had been alone. Before that, I thought it was the silliest idea to position all of these poems as part of the same universe.

I was also surprised, in hindsight, by exactly how badly I first wrote these crucial poems, and that changed me. At the time of finishing the first draft of *The Bees Make Money in the Lion*, I had an intensity of drive and ambition that made me feel pretty impressed with myself even as the rest of my life was muddily eroding away. All my energy went into finishing the book and maintaining the tiniest of veneers over my alcoholism, and when I got sober a few months later I looked at the book I'd written and was embarrassed and amazed by how much of my creativity had gone toward the latter. The abecedarians I'd written were important to me but still larval. The problem was that by the time I

got sober I'd lost the ability to tell the difference between early and evolved drafts of my own poems. Once I saw this, I made a point to be willing to revise the entire manuscript every other month. Doing this made me a better poet.

CP: There is much delight in the building up and breaking down of forms in this book. Could you speak to your interest in traditional forms and how they cause particular or perhaps unexpected sonic outcomes?

LKM: I like to think a form is a fern. There is no singular sonnet form, but a spiral of them, Gerard Manley Hopkins and Bernadette Mayer and Tory Dent wresting the form and being tested by it. Investigation of a form's past unearths the power of variation, expansive and explosive, like a mother of spores. The history of the abecedarian yields the existence of the double-abecedarian, itself predicting itself. Anne Marie Rooney's "No Reward" sestinas torque the demands of structure beyond complaint, beyond restraint, into a shape like a molecule of desire denied. Any form that could still double its constraints has half the restrictions (as if it faced itself in the mirror), but not necessarily twice the freedom. And yet double-sided constraints have freed me from the fetishistic lie of original perfection, since so much about a poem (how it begins, how it

ends, every transition between every line) has been predetermined. The poet cannot be totally in control.

Five years ago I would have felt this a deeply unsexy way to write (which is probably why I didn't write in forms very much). *The Bees Make Money in the Lion* is literally formulaic. I had a legal pad covered in diagrams on my kitchen table for a year. But my experience is that what I lose in sexiness of writing process I gain, twofold, in eros. The less control I have over a form, the more I chase after it. The more inept a form makes me feel, the more recklessly I search myself for an argument that might intrigue it. The more I fail with a form, the more I feel for it. I tend to objectify myself in the face of a constraint: I feel I am acted upon by it and being invited or challenged to demonstrate my own agency. I think the unexpected sonic outcome is a transliteration of the noise the poet makes the moment before the form snaps shut around her left hand.

CP: Name the poets who are most exciting to you now (living or dead), the poets who have been on your mind in, say, the last year or so. Are you learning from them, raging against them, feeling intimate, energized or bewildered?

LKM: Yes! I am learning so much, raging alongside, and at times saved from myself by these poets: Dodie Bellamy, Inger Christensen, Tory Dent, Natalie

Eilbert, Cathy Park Hong, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Bhanu Kapil, Rickey Laurentiis, Philip Metres, Ladan Osman, Bao Phi, M. NourbeSe Philip and Roger Reeves.

CP: What are you working on now?

LKM: I'm working on a fantasy trilogy and a science-fiction trilogy, but only the former is in poetry.

interview with **MARTIN ROCK**

Caryl Pagel: What is your relationship with the gesture of the strike-through, which appears repeatedly, relentlessly in your first book, *Residuum*—as self-censorship, indication of a thought in process or revision? How is the strike-through like or unlike erasure?

Martin Rock: Maybe it's helpful to think about the poem's original title before it grew into a book: "Or Both. We Could Do Both." The words in *Residuum* are crossed out but remain legible. They're hidden without really hiding. They attempt, as you say, to reveal both revision and thought in process, but I'm not so sure they're an act of self-censorship. I think of the crossouts more as an attempt to reveal/allow/engage with subtleties and subversions that might be censored through revision, rather than to restrain/conceal/censor—these crossouts are not the fully blacked-out words of government-censored letters

and documents that have been employed so well by poets like Solmaz Sharif, Nick Flynn and Philip Metres. They are also not the beautifully whited-out or painted-over erasure in work like Mary Ruefle's *A Little White Shadow* or Tom Phillips's *A Humument*. While the crossouts in *Residuum* are not themselves acts of censorship, I do hope they gesture toward the pervasiveness of censorship in our culture, and help to provide a form for thinking about ways in which our lives are directed by forces whose power is tied to their ability to remain hidden: these include the usual suspects such as political, corporate and ideological forces, but also organic and biological forces like bacteria, viruses and DNA, as well as, increasingly, digital or virtual forces such as programming languages, computer viruses and quanta. All these things are primary actors in our lives and yet they all operate through a kind of semiotic camouflage. Our relationships to these objects and hyperobjects (see Timothy Morton's book *Hyperobjects*) are not of direct communion but of mitigated experience; we read the time while the gears remain hidden behind the watch's face. But this is a faulty metaphor—the watch measures time, rather than creating it (though that could be argued).

And of course these forces interact with one another and inform each other and transform to perpetuate themselves in new ways, such as with recent developments in quantum computing or the trend

for some environmentalists to ascribe economic value to objects in the natural world in an effort to slow down their destruction. I don't like to think of the "net value" of the Tetons or of all the fresh water on Earth, or of the sum total of insects, but if the economy is seen as the primary force in our world, all else must conform to its systems; in fact it permeates every molecule on Earth. I don't think it would be unfair of me to suggest that the crossouts in *Residuum* are an attempt at formal evolution: both in the sense that they are an evolution of form and also evolution, formally enacted. If this is the case, then the crossouts also act as a machine capable of compressing time. The poem contains within its structure the linguistic fossils and branches of its own becoming. Of course this is true of all language, but I hope that the crossouts in *Residuum* bring these fossils and this transformation to the surface, and force the reader to become aware of language as a constantly evolving code. I'm fascinated by the work Christian Bök has done with developing a protein language code to embed poetry into the DNA of very simple kinds of organisms, to see how they continue to replicate and produce new meaning and new images as the organisms themselves change and replicate. While I don't see *Residuum* (or the words in it) as having the potential to literally evolve or mutate in the same organic way that Bök's work will, I do hope the form of the book allows readers to have the experience of watching something change

as they move through it, even of enacting structural and political change through communion with the text. I hope it encourages readers to question their choices, to slow down and experience the possibility of embodying simultaneous truths. I've been amazed to hear friends read this text aloud in completely different ways, such as reading only the crossed-out parts to make another poem—possibilities I'd not anticipated.

CP: What surprised you the most during the composition of *Residuum*? How did the act of writing it change you?

MR: I've been writing this book for about five years, and during that time both I and the book have gone through so many changes: I've fallen in love and gotten married (another experience that is embedded into the book), I've moved to Houston to work on a PhD, I've edited a book on the late poet Catherine Breese Davis with Kevin Prufer and Martha Collins, I've translated work from Japanese and poured hours and hours into the cultivation and design of *Gulf Coast*, I've lost people whom I love dearly and new people have entered my life whom I've grown to love dearly. All this is in the book in some way. As Gertrude Stein wrote, "The change has come. There is no search."

One thing that surprised me was how difficult it was to make a decision about which poets' words I would include in the poem. Anyone who reads *Residuum* will notice that, while it is full of incredible biological and structural diversity, all the poets who are quoted and crossed out are dead white guys (yes, I'm labeling Popeye as "dead"). I found that, because of the violence inherent to crossing out and rewriting the words of another author, I was uncomfortable doing so with the words of traditionally marginalized voices. I see this action of crossing out canonical writers as a way of simultaneously celebrating poets I deeply love (Whitman, Stevens, Ammons—how I love Ammons!), but also of working away at walls and urns, of inserting space between the tombs (and tomes), to be filled not only by my own work but by work that reflects the diversity and fullness of the planet. Because of this discomfort with striking out those whose voices were already being erased even as they wrote, I have had to leave so many writers out of this book who are in my own personal canon: Emily Dickinson, Ryōkan, Robert Hayden, Elizabeth Bishop, Pablo Neruda, Li Po, Gwendolyn Brooks, Federico García Lorca, Muriel Rukeyser, James Baldwin, Matsuo Bashō, Sonia Sanchez, Czesław Miłosz—any list is of course incomplete, especially when one considers the many writers who were silenced and whose work we will never read.

CP: Could you speak to your interests in the so-called “digital age,” to social media, online personae, and how technology impacts writing or reading? How did these interests manifest themselves in *Residuum*?

MR: The digital age is also the biological age. For millennia people have been leaving their bodies to return with the fire of the gods. It seems now that the drapes are on fire, and the walls, and the backs of our eyelids. There’s so much fire all around us, and we’ve become neurotic about collecting all of it. The problem is that, in this metaphor, we’ve also become the gods, and most of our fire is not worth stealing. It simply burns a dull blue light and hums at us while we try to sleep. There’s something magical and even desirable about infinite information, infinitely available, but it seems to come at the expense of another kind of infinite information, infinitely available.

One of my brothers is a guide fisherman in Colorado and spends about 75% of his waking hours outdoors. He knows how to look at a stream and identify where the fish are. He can glance at a cloud of insects and know what the fish are eating, can place a dry fly on a dime 30 feet away in the wind, surrounded by tangles of sagebrush. He collects tufts of fur and feathers and bits of cloth and ties them into beautifully intricate Woolly Buggers and Elk Hair Caddis and Pheasant Tail Nymphs. He can read the

clouds and the current and the air pressure. On the other hand, if you ask him about memes or poetry or foreign policy he’ll just shrug and grin. That’s not part of his data stream.

I don’t know what the Internet is, but I’m pretty sure it’s alive in the same way the river is alive, or the weather, or capitalism. Recently I read (and posted on Facebook) an article about the “many interacting worlds” hypothesis in quantum mechanics. The gist is that not only do an infinite number of alternate worlds exist, but that they interact with our world in ways that are observable through the actions of quanta. As I write this the Large Hadron Collider is about to test this theory and to draw data from a parallel world. I think again the boundaries and binaries need to be blurred a bit, the words crossed out and redefined. Self-awareness splits the world, is the first trunk-split-into-branches of the many worlds, only there is no first, because our experience of time is not representative of its plasticity. We think about ourselves and rename ourselves and create versions of ourselves online, or maybe we’re finding versions of ourselves that already exist in other worlds. The distinction is moot, for now, because the result is the same: our digital personae allow us to become comfortable with the idea of being multiplied, of existing both with and without bodies. It could be argued that language does the same thing. Certainly this has been one of the goals of religion since its

inception. I guess I should also mention that I met my wife Heather on the Internet. So my day-to-day life has been permanently changed by this blurring of digital and physical selves (if only there were such a thing as permanence).

CP: Name the poets who are most exciting to you now (living or dead), the poets who have been on your mind in, say, the last year or so. Are you learning from them, raging against them, feeling intimate, energized or bewildered?

MR: I haven't yet mentioned Brenda Hillman or Matthea Harvey or Alice Notley or Francis Ponge or C.D. Wright, all of whom had a part (though unbeknownst to them) in the making of *Residuum*. I just discovered the work of Brian Teare, who I wish I'd been reading as I wrote this book. Young poets whose work I love are Cecilia Llompart and Ocean Vuong and Lo Kwa Mei-en and Danniell Schoonebeek and Karyna McGlynn and Saeed Jones and Dan Rosenberg and Wendy Xu and Idra Novey and Henk Rousseau and Cathy Che. I've also been enamored recently with the work of Adrian Matejka and my mentors and friends Kevin Prufer, Michael Snediker and Roberto Tejada—really any poets who are tackling something seemingly permanent and unyielding, who are writing for the reinvention of myth and against hegemonic values and injustice,

and trying to make space for a more inclusive, less rigidly defined world.

CP: What are you working on now?

MR: I'm in the last year of coursework for my PhD and in the second and last year of my tenure as Managing Editor and designer of *Gulf Coast*, so it's been a struggle to find time for much else. That said, I'm trying to use my papers for class as sounding boards for creative projects, and am now thinking about writing a book in favor of ontological multiplicity that identifies and undercuts the Western preoccupation with binary logic and meaning-making—such as the Cartesian dialectic between spirit and body. I'm not sure what form this will take, or even what genre (likely some kind of poetry/nonfiction hybrid), and I can't imagine it will take less than a few years to write. Look for it when your self-driving car flies you to work, maybe.

I do have a more traditional collection of poetry I've been working on since my MFA, and I'm (slowly) translating books of poetry by Shuntaro Tanikawa, Masato Tomobe and Tsubouchi Nenten, three of Japan's most well-known poets, whose works are virtually unknown in the U.S. The Tsubouchi Nenten book, tentatively titled *River Horse Haiku*, is a somewhat experimental translation project I'm working on with Joe Pan. *62 Sonnets* is Shuntaro

Tanikawa's second book, published in 1953, and perhaps my favorite of his work, and I think it needs to be more readily available in the U.S. One translation exists but it is an old translation and virtually impossible to find. My own copy was shipped to me from Japan and it reeks of cigarettes.

I also do book-design work. I've designed for Pleiades Press and *Gulf Coast* and Brooklyn Arts Press, and I was thrilled to be allowed to design my own book at the CSU Poetry Center. You can check out my work and hit me up [here](#).

AFTERWORD

— Lee Upton

What are we asking of our poetry? I finished reading these interviews with the realization of how much these poets ask of themselves and of their poetry, and of how many large-scale considerations swim into each poet's awareness.

These poets (Leora Fridman, Lo Kwa Mei-en and Martin Rock) aren't simply responsive to the historical moment they occupy. They push against normative conceptions. They enter and enact a nuanced and yet capacious sense of the political and the body politic. They pay sensitive homage to a host of other writers. They interrogate their own assumptions and grapple with big multi-layered ambitions. I admire how readily they refuse any facile self-satisfaction.

I'm fortunate to be one of the Cleveland State University Poetry Center's authors—and doubly fortunate to encounter this new grouping of poets

and the imaginative flexing of their thinking in these interviews. Publishing such poets is evidence of the press's commitment to bringing adventures to adventurous readers.

What are we asking of our poetry? Some possible answers: to trouble our thinking. To bring more thickness to thinking. Never to leave the sensuous body behind. To extend language and our notion of culture and cultures. To give us an experience unavailable by any other means. What do we ask of poetry and poets? Let every poet answer the question differently. And ask new questions. To work the differences.

AUTHOR BIOS



Leora Silverman Fridman is the author of the chapbooks *Precious Coast* (H_ngm_n Books), *Obvious Metals* (Projective Industries), *On the architecture* and *Essential Nature* (The New Megaphone), and the chapbook of translations, *Eduardo Milán: Poems* (Toad Press). She lives in the San Francisco Bay Area, where she is founding co-editor of *Spoke Too Soon: A Journal of the Longer* and forms one fourth of the collective *The Bureau*.



Lo Kwa Mei-en is the author of *Yearling*, winner of the Kundiman Prize, and *The Romances*, a chapbook forthcoming from The Lettered Streets Press. She is from Singapore and Ohio, where she earned an MFA in Creative Writing from The Ohio State University. She lives and works in Cincinnati.



Caryl Pagel is the author of *Twice Told* and *Experiments I Should Like Tried At My Own Death*. She is the Director of the CSU Poetry Center and an Assistant Professor of English at Cleveland State University.



Martin Rock is the author of the chapbook *Dear Mark* (Brooklyn Arts Press) and co-author of *Fish, You Bird* (Pilot). With Kevin Prufer and Martha Collins, he edited the *Unsung Masters* volume *Catherine B. Davis: On the Life and Work of an American Master*. He is Managing Editor for *Gulf Coast* and intermittently publishes the online journal *Loaded Bicycle*. Martin is working on translations of a number of Japanese poets and is Poet in Residence at Texas Children's Hospital.



Lee Upton is the author of five previous books of poetry, including *Undid in the Land of Undone*, *Civilian Histories* and *Approximate Darling*; the story collection *The Tao of Humiliation*; the essay collection *Swallowing the Sea: On Writing & Ambition, Boredom, Purity & Secrecy*; the novella *The Guide to the Flying Island*; and several books of critical prose, most recently *Defensive Measures: The Poetry of Niedecker, Bishop, Glück, and Carson*. She is a professor of English and the writer-in-residence at Lafayette College. *Bottle the Bottles the Bottles the Bottles*, published by the Cleveland State University Poetry Center, won the 2014 Open Poetry Book Competition, selected by Erin Belieu.



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