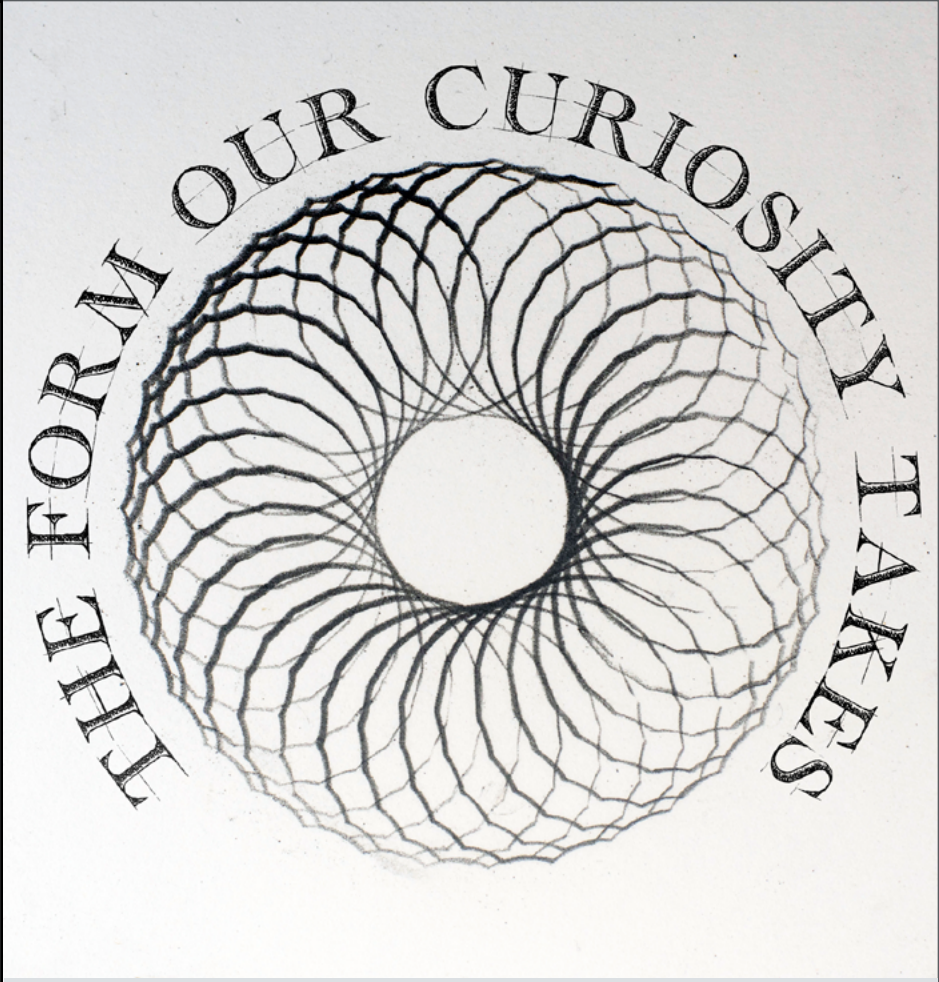

A PEDAGOGY OF CONVERSATION

Curated
by
J'LYN CHAPMAN

featuring
Jenny Boully
Renee Gladman
Cole Swensen

with an afterword by
Danielle Dutton

13

The Form Our Curiosity Takes:

A Pedagogy of Conversation

Curated
by
J'Lyn Chapman

ESSAY PRESS LISTENING TOUR

#13

ESSAY PRESS LISTENING TOUR

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

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FOREWORD

> Language is one of the principle forms our curiosity takes. It makes us restless.
>
> —Lyn Hejinian, "The Rejection of Closure"

In fall 2013, Andy Fitch, then editor at *The Conversant*, suggested I put together a chapbook based on my "pedagogy of conversation." Although I had been initiating interviews between my students in the Jack Kerouac School at Naropa University and a writer or critic whose work I had assigned, I had thought of these interviews as primarily an instructional tool. Inviting writers to visit a class is not an uncommon practice for an instructor, especially on Colorado's Front Range, where the environment is rich with both writing programs and established writers. For some time, I've been taking advantage of my friendships with and connections to published writers by assigning their work and then either inviting them to class or organizing email interviews. Many of these interviews landed at *The Conversant* after the poet Chris Martin suggested we publish our fall 2012 interview there. Only recently have I begun to see those practices as a pedagogy.

Integrating interviews into instructional strategies such as lecture, discussion and student presentations occasions a range of multi-sensory methods and a diversity of media (print text, visual aids and computer technology) that enable me to accommodate different learning styles, talents and interests. When I started to think of the interviews more broadly—as a pedagogy of conversation—it became clear that this methodology aligned with my basic assumption that knowledge is socially constructed and that a classroom is itself a dynamic and diverse social context with fluctuating assumptions, identities and conclusions. By emphasizing diversity and co-active learning, students don't just consume information about diversity; they also draw on their own diverse experiences and actively engage with diverse others.

But more specifically, I've seen how a pedagogy of conversation invites collaboration and levels the hierarchy between the student and instructor. My goal as an instructor is to help what is already inside move

to the outside. Even the texts I assign, what the student consumes, is in service of drawing out the student's internal wisdom. Although I guide the students' preparation for the interview in a fairly structured way (several weeks prior to the interview, students read other interviews with the writer as well as book reviews and theory, post their questions to the online discussion board for peer review, and participate in panel presentations of the work), students ultimately work independently of me to determine the course the interview will take. While I facilitate the interview by corresponding with the writer and handling the (onerous) technical logistics, I actually participate very little in the interview itself. If I ask a question, it comes from my genuine interest as a subject in the classroom. I prefer for the students' concerns and the writer's responses to determine the trajectory of the interview; students become responsible for their readings and encounter the weight of their assumptions (I stress Gertrude Stein's assertion that "there is no neutral position for us to assume," even when it comes to reading). In this way, reader and writer become co-creators of knowledge, co-interpreters of the text.

The interviews included in this chapbook occurred in a graduate-level poetics seminar, "Women Writers, Open Texts." The course examines the multi-genre work of women who write what Lyn Hejinian, in her crucial

essay "The Rejection of Closure," calls "open texts". The open text invites the reader's participation, foregrounds process, resists reduction and examines authority. "The writer relinquishes total control," Hejinian writes, "and challenges authority as a principle and control as a motive." It seemed particularly apropos in a course that emphasized the study of generative, improvisational texts to consciously incorporate a pedagogy of conversation.

To help us understand the "open text" beyond Hejinian's essay, I assigned Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author" and excerpts from *The Pleasure of the Text* as well as essays by Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Rachel Blau DuPlessis. These essays helped us to understand how the open text is what Barthes would call a "writerly text" that requires the reader's active participation in and performance of the text. We recognized the irony of the "death of the author" and how the interview in some ways reestablishes her prominence as author rather than as *scriptor*. Yet a pedagogy of conversation both reorients the writer's place in the writer-reader hierarchy and makes the author herself a subject. I recognized in these interviews a relationship of mentorship when the students asked questions about craft, publishing and academia—though there was also a relationship of genuine interlocution when the writer's humility and vulnerability invited students to see the text as something

incomplete and inconclusive. As Jenny Boully said in our interview with her, books have afterlives. A pedagogy of conversation allows students to correspond with the one who gave the book life but also to participate with and determine at least one manifestation of the book's afterlife.

In teaching this class, I wanted to show that Hejinian's term "open text" describes qualities of a lineage of writing by women in various genres: Virginia Woolf's "myriad impressions" that come on like "an incessant shower of innumerable atoms," or how, according to Marjorie Perloff, Gertrude Stein uses grammar to "draw out specific semantic implications not normally present," a kind of "flowering focus on a distinct infinity," as Hejinian proposes. We opened the discussions by traversing distance and meeting the writers in their homes, writers who were themselves open and generous with us. All of the writers lived in earlier time zones and, since it was an evening class, the interviews impinged on their personal time. When Jenny Boully warned us that she had barricaded the door from her screaming toddlers, and Cole Swensen spoke intimately about her career path, I thought of the radical openness of Bernadette Mayer's *Midwinter Day* (another course text)—not only in the way that time predetermines this text but also in the way that it is like DuPlessis' "catch-all drawer," in which:

> everything there, including your hand, and your gesture, means something, has some history, of its making, and of its being there.… Where the production of meanings is, if not continuous, so interconnected that one has the sense of, the illusion of, the "whole" of life being activated, and raised to realization and power.

When there was a glitch in the video, when the writer would look toward her bookshelf as she sought an answer, when she turned the question back on us—all of this, as well as our material conditions (fatigue, hunger, anxiety), contributed to the meaning-making of these conversations and yet they are also the most difficult qualities to re-present.

We read Cole Swensen's *Such Rich Hour*, Renee Gladman's *Event Factory* (as well as excerpts from *The Ravickians*) and *Ana Patova Crosses a Bridge*, and Jenny Boully's *The Book of Beginnings and Endings*. Mostly I chose books I admired and that beguiled me and that I wanted to discuss with others. I also, personally, wanted to *know* these writers. I was conscious about creating diversity in genre and demographics, and I sought writers who were in various stages of their careers. Mostly, these were not recently published texts. Besides just being curious about these older books, I'm not sure why I assigned them, but I'm glad I did. Implied in each of these interviews is the writer's

praxis—her commitment to her work, to her community and to her personal development. This evolution is explicit in Renee's discussion of her Ravicka books, as when she says, "Things are constantly opening in the writing process, so I keep following." For Hejinian, a "closed text is one in which all the elements of the work are directed toward a single reading of it." Likewise, I admired how our conversations turned away from the trajectory of "the new" to re-open these texts, to resist a terminus, and also caused us to revisit old reviews and interviews—a performance of the bricolage that is the text's meaning.

The event of these interviews (the theme of the class, the students' engagement with primary and secondary sources, and their conversations with women writers) aligns with the ongoing moment of innovative writing and, specifically, women's roles in it. An early version of Hejinian's "The Rejection of Closure" appeared in the "Women & Language" issue of *Poetics Journal* 4, an issue Hejinian and Bob Perlman devoted to addressing "perceptible practical problems (instances of injustice) immediately affecting people's work and lives and to longer-term questions of power and, in particular, the ethics of meaning," as Hejinian describes in the introduction to the version included in her book *The Language of Inquiry*. Yet recent studies, like Juliana Spahr and Stephanie Young's excellent "Numbers Trouble,"

which presents the "Women & Language" issue of *Poetics Journal* as an example of feminist interventions in the "experimental/postmodern/avant-garde/innovative scene" of the 1960s and '70s, and VIDA's annual Count, which for the last five years has attended to "the gender disparity in major literary publications and book reviews," indicate that when it comes to creative practices, both publishing and teaching creative writing, the numbers of men and women practitioners are still imbalanced, the improved acknowledgement of women's role in innovative writing in the last 40 years modest at best.

Numbers are important quantitative representations of what Spahr and Young call "'feminist interventions,'" but I want to emphasize that what occurred in our class was not so much the representation of women's innovative writing as it was the performance of it. Like any meaningful, reciprocal conversation, this interchange with some of the most exciting thoughts of this moment both supports and, more importantly, engenders innovation—it innervates it. That is to say that when we talk about innovative writing, we're not only talking about experiments with language, although experimentation is certainly part of innovation; we're also and more urgently talking about formal innovation as "the cultivation of a philosophy of experience," including, as Renee Gladman writes in "Syntax and the Event of Reading," "a space to

move through, a place of encounter" that conventional writing subsumes in its universal, truth-speaking subject.

For these reasons, it was my pleasure to invite Danielle Dutton to participate in the project by writing the Afterword. Through the years, our conversations about innovative writing by women, our friendship and support of each other's art and lives, and her tremendous contributions through teaching, writing and publishing innovative women writers (through her press, Dorothy) have changed me and continue to change creative and readerly practices. I also consider the students who participated in these interviews, whose insightful readings and questions *produced* the conversation, my collaborators in and out of the class. In a cultural environment in which MFA programs are often regarded skeptically (see our interview with Cole Swensen), I want to credit the students' investment in their current moment, and to acknowledge the real work they do to cultivate such a rich field for exciting creative practices beyond the classroom and our small university.

Students involved in the interviews include, Indigo Weller, Joseph Navarro, Ella Longpre, Jennifer VanAlstyne, Genelle Chaconas, Matthew Pincus and H. J. VandeRiet. Amy Lukau was a special guest for the Renee Gladman interview.

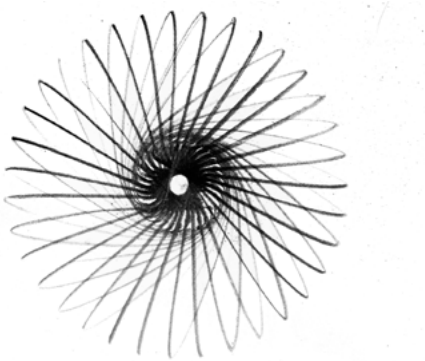
A special thanks to Indigo Weller for editing the audio versions of these interviews and to Kelly Alsup for transcribing the Jenny Boully interview.

J'Lyn Chapman

Boulder

June 2014

DISCUSSION WITH COLE SWENSEN



The Class: On the University of Denver website, you described your teaching philosophy as "writing as thinking." Could you elaborate on "writing as thinking" within your own work?

Cole Swensen: It's through writing itself that I find content emerging. I may have an idea of the theme or direction I'll take, but I have no idea of what I'll write until I've written it. It's the act of writing itself that motivates and creates thought. I find that the same thing can happen when talking to other people—in both cases, it's the externalization of language that enables creativity. I have to get the language beyond my body, out into the world, in order for it to expand, to grow.

TC: In "The Rejection of Closure," Lyn Hejinian writes, "for the writer, the poem *is* a mind."

CS: That captures it perfectly. That essay captures so much perfectly, and has been such a strong influence on reestablishing or rearranging a sense of form as the condition of possibility for poetic mind.

TC: *Such Rich Hour* reflects a structure that suggests that time is not subjective but simply functions in a non-linear way, or according to a calendar constructed with a different intent. Which concepts of time affect your approach to writing?

CS: What a great question! In that book in particular, I was interested in time as a cycle. All books of hours begin with a calendar called an eternal calendar; it's a way of setting up the calendar so that no matter what year it is, you can easily correlate the date with the day of the week. It's a structure that reinforces the notion of time as cyclical rather than linear. It's easy to slip into anachronism and apply contemporary notions of time to earlier periods. I think we in the twenty-first century have a greater sense of linear time, based upon an obsession with progress, and we're consequently much less aware of time's cyclical nature. Weather is about the only thing that reminds most of us. In *Such Rich Hour*, I was interested in evoking a different sense of time—in evoking the uncanny through a different perception of this most basic structural element of our world.

On the other hand, there are so many parallels between the twentieth/twenty-first centuries and the fifteenth—dramatic technological revolution, huge social shifts and cataclysmic weather changes. I wanted to explore that play of similarity and difference.

TC: We have been talking about your experience as a translator, and we wanted to know what translators can teach writers about the use of language and grammatical structure.

CS: That's another great question. I think that translating teaches one so much about one's own language, about how a language is put together, and what its limits are. I find that I'm aware of the limits of English most when I'm translating, and I have a more vivid sense of the way it constructs experience—and limits it as well. At the same time, translation also makes me aware that anything I want to say can be said in at least four or five different ways, and that, therefore, I am always making my choices based not on what is being said, but on how it is being said. This is of course obvious with poetry, but it's equally true with translations of prose, no matter how "mundane." The choices are always based on sound, for while a text may be "information-based," sound relationships are a fundamental aid to understanding—they are information in their own right.

TC: We're curious about your experience with foreign languages—when or how you learned a second language, how you've practiced it beyond translating.

CS: I have only one language other than English, and learned it relatively late. I was in my early thirties. I had taken French in school, but it wasn't taught seriously,

and I didn't learn much. It wasn't until I went to France for several months and took immersion courses at the Sorbonne that I began to learn it. But I was greatly hampered in my language acquisition because I met a number of marvelous poets whose work very much interested me—and who spoke English better than I spoke French, so I had to decide whether to turn my life into a language lesson or to have stronger conversations with people about their work. I went for the latter, so it took me forever to get really fluent in French. Translation was a great way of forcing a refinement to what I learned; it offered an occasion to think about the structure and movement of French in a more detailed and formal way than I could through conversation.

TC: Are you working on any translation projects now?

CS: Yes, I tend to work on a couple of projects at a time. I'm working on a philosophic text by Gilles Tiberghien, called *Amitier*. That title makes a verb of the French noun for "friendship," which doesn't exist, or didn't until he invented it. In English, we have the verb to "befriend," but that means "to initiate a friendship"; that's not exactly what he's talking about. He's interested in friendship as an ongoing, active relationship over time—the way, for instance, that we think about love: as an ongoing activity, an ongoing engagement.

I'm also working on two related texts by Jean Frémon on the artist Louise Bourgeois. I tend to work on certain writers' works in an ongoing, galumphing, sort of way, in particular Suzanne Doppelt's, Nicolas Pesquès' and Jean Frémon's.

TC: In an interview with *Free Verse*, you agreed that translation might be a form of ekphrasis in that it "entwines with its object" and suggested that translation might be "that kind of ekphrasis...a commentary upon the text at the same time that it is a text." Could you speak more about this intimate engagement with intertextuality? Specifically, is *Such Rich Hour* a translation? And if so, how does it differ from your other projects that are published as translations or the translations that you're working on right now?

CS: I like that question because it seems to me that the terms "ekphrasis" and "translation" are both extremely convertible terms; they can be applied to so many things. In other words, though they seem to be nouns, they're actually more verbs—it's just as possible to ekphrasticize as it is to translate. It's a matter of approach. Both involve an engagement with an other in ways that transform that other by creating an additional point of entry.

Such Rich Hour is perhaps easier to think of in terms of ekphrasis than translation, as it's based on the 12 illuminations of the calendar cycle of *Les Très Riches*

Heures du Duc de Berry. Illuminations demand that you look closely, and I tried to slide this scrutiny from the images to the descriptions of daily life in fifteenth-century Paris—whether of great storms, vegetable markets, falconry or the plague. Ekphrasis is a way of questioning framing. When the subject is an image, the frame's already there, but when you slide the ekphrastic gaze over to a less obviously artistic object, the gaze itself must establish the frame through selection, arrangement and emphasis; that ekphrastic choice creates the object that is its subject.

TC: We noticed a YouTube video of an interview that you did when you were a visiting professor at Iowa. You said that the visual, aural and textual feel of language is integral to your poetic praxis. Is there a modern visual artist who stands out to you, and what do you admire about his or her work or process?

CS: Many. One who is very important for me is Cy Twombly, for what he does with the physical act of writing. In so many of his paintings, we see writing at a point of crisis. The language he incorporates in his paintings compromises the line. It's forced to hesitate between the written line and the drawn line, which puts tremendous pressure on the artistic status of writing in all its multiplicity. And the tension shows—it always looks like he's writing with the wrong hand. And in a sense, he is—in a sense, we all are.

Another artist I often look to is Gerhard Richter. I'm interested in general in landscape, in landscape as a dream of the world, as the construction of an impossible world, as an asymptotic approach to the experience of the world. He blurs the line between landscape and abstraction in very productive ways in his play between photography and painting. By working back and forth between the two, he achieves a documentary anchor on the world that abstracts it at the same time.

Agnes Martin, too, has been important to me for her work on precision and imprecision—she attains a kind of precise imprecision. She intentionally uses only square canvases so that she's not falling into either the tradition of the portrait or of the landscape, and her hand-drawn grids and stripes similarly manage to dodge both the representational and the abstract realms to land somehow in a third space. Her work, like Twombly's, constantly puts the line into question.

TC: We noticed that in the "Eye to Eye" issue of *Conjunctions*, you published poems from *Such Rich Hour* with computer-manipulated images from *Les Très Riches Heures*. Why didn't these images make it into the book?

CS: It was so much fun to work with those images, but it was 15 years ago, and Photoshop was not what it is today. I was acutely aware of what I couldn't do, as

well as what I could—and I wasn't able to do what I wanted. I also didn't want the absolute resolution of the image itself. The poems constantly approach the image without ever reaching it, and I wanted to retain that ever diminishing but ever inevitable distance.

TC: In a *Bookforum* review, Tim Griffin wrote that *Such Rich Hour* places "broken syntax...against the tenuous philosophical backdrop/ground of the first Western systemizations of time." Would you say this broken syntax or fragmentation is deterioration over time? Or something from the past resurfacing? Or, in an interview from 2003, you were also talking about the page as a "canvas." Would you say that your words and phrases are not broken syntax but components of a figure?

CS: To address the first issue, the fifteenth century was a time of technological revolution, and many evolving technologies involved measure of one sort or another, and one important one was the measure of time. At the beginning of the century, the concept of the regular hour was rare. The hours referred to in a book of hours are not units of time; they're liturgical hours, eight moments that divided the day with services and prayers, and those moments were not evenly spaced. Yet by the end of the century, there had been extensive development of clocks, and the division of the day into equal units was becoming more and more widespread. "Keeping track" took on a new importance during the century. It's

something so pervasive now that we take it for granted, but it's an interesting exercise to imagine a world in which there was no set time, in which set time was not needed.

I don't see the book as written in fragments, though obviously, grammatically speaking, it is. But the term "fragment" puts the emphasis on incompletion—on what's not there—whereas I see them as wholes, as small units of impression or information that, like medieval illuminations, make us look more closely.

Anything that is a fragment of a larger unit is whole in its own right and can also be fragmentized, and on the other hand, anything we think of as a "whole" is necessarily part of a larger structure, so the distinction is a false one. What matters is attention, and small units cause us to sharpen our attention—both of our senses and of our imagination. They are all wholes, and I'm interested in thinking about how they relate to other wholes.

The page as a canvas: yes, I see a page as a visual space. Many more people today read poetry on a page or screen than hear it, and yet most people still think of a poem on a page as being a score for the real poem that happens somewhere else. I'm interested in a poem as language arranged in space. As soon as you read it, it is also arranged in time, but as you open a book or Internet

window, it appears first as a spatial composition, and, thus, reading poetry reminds us of how difficult it is to get time and space to work together. We know perfectly well from physics that they're a continuum, and though we cannot experience that in our daily lives, poetry can give an intimation of it.

TC: In an interview with rob mclennan, you said you loved the ongoing nature of bookmaking because your work is "increasingly based in research." Could you tell us a bit about the process of researching for *Such Rich Hour*? How has that process changed over the last 10 years?

CS: Research-based work attracts me because it displaces the center of the poem from the writer to the world, and to an exploration of that world. The center becomes a line of flight into what is not yet known. I love facts—their concrete quality—but I also love what's *between* facts, that amorphous zone into which facts overflow. That's where research and documentation can be creative as well as reflective.

Much of the research I did for *Such Rich Hour* necessarily took the form of reading, since unfortunately one can't visit the fifteenth century. But I'm increasingly interested in doing research that gets me out of books, that gets me out of the world of words and out into the world of things and experience. I did a book a few years ago on

the gardens of a well-known baroque gardener, André Le Nôtre (1613–1700). In that case, a lot of the research involved going out to his gardens, walking around them, physically sensing his design decisions in relation to the moving human body. Then the issue becomes how to present a non-linguistic (in this case, kinetic) experience in language.

TC: One thing that stood out and kept coming back to us after reading your text *Such Rich Hour* was the way the parenthetical in many of the poems began but would never end. In your recent interview with Andy Fitch, you say, "I try to use such disruptions to create fissures in a subject that offer new points of access." We were wondering if you could elaborate a bit more on these disruptions—how they interact with the content or rather how the content is contextualized in your poetry.

CS: One thing that's important about poetry is that, unlike prose, it is a discourse full of fissures and gaps, but which are often paradoxically caused by the overflow occasioned by figurative language and other modes of ambiguity.

One sort that that book uses is the open-ended parenthesis. It seemed to add an additional register—you open up a window, and it never shuts. You have the sense that it continues on in the background while the rest of the discourse resumes its principal route. I

hear parentheses as an aside, a voice coming from the wings in a theatrical sense, and then melding back into the principle voice, which creates a dissolve between an exterior voice and an interior voice, reconstituting them as one, but one composed of reverberating layers.

TC: In an interview on technology and innovation, Paul Virilio notes, "you can't innovate without creating some damage." Your text strikes us as highly innovative in its use of syntax and the page. Do you think innovation is inescapably imbued with damage? How do you attend to damage within the innovative?

CS: I like Virilio's statement very much and think he has a particular reason for using the term, but in a more general sense, the notion of damage is based on the way that change is interpreted, which is in turn based on agendas that may or may not be declared, that may or may not be clear. I would tend to look at innovations as changes and pay close attention to who gains from the change and who doesn't, who might be thwarted by it, and who might be enabled by it. Innovation is inevitable, particularly in a culture that values innovation as highly as ours does. In every realm, people are pushing for the different, are trying to experiment. We're very restless in that way. Are we damaging ourselves or not? Again, it's entirely dependent upon perspective, which is itself entirely determined by desired outcome.

TC: To clarify the question: Virilio talks about how inventing the plane is also inventing the crash and the breakdown. It's an issue of causality.

CS: Absolutely. And while that might be an overly dramatic analogy to make with poetry today in the United States, it would be a perfectly appropriate one in many countries and cultures today and in the past where people risk death, imprisonment and torture for their poetry or art.

TC: What about issues of subjectivity and otherness as a kind of damage?

CS: That's an excellent direction in which to take this and one that has particular pertinence for translation. The representation of others, whether through adopting their subjectivity or not, always risks misrepresentation. Translation approaches the issue from the inside, multiplying the difficulties, and yet the realm in which this is most crucial is not literary translation but the translation of medical records, legal documents and the like, which speak for others in situations with often life-changing consequences. Discussions of the ethics of translation rarely address these crucial areas, because the tacit assumption is that such documents are "strictly factual" and, therefore, unambiguous—which, of course, is not true.

TC: How would you think about cultural appropriation in relation to that?

CS: Cultural appropriation is a particularly volatile subset of appropriation, because there is often a very fine line between appreciation, hybridization and appropriation—at what point does it become unethical? Contemporary poetic practice pays a lot of attention to the *practice*, which is to say, to the appropriator (what he or she is doing), and little, if any, to the appropriatee, who is often never consulted, which makes the practice not only not collaborative, but actively anti-collaborative. That's fine. I'm as interested in anti-collaboration as I am in collaboration. The part that bothers me is the part that seems to endorse an assumed/proposed bankruptcy of culture—i.e., that there is nothing more to say (or to do or to paint, etc.) It implicitly proposes a failure of the material (in this case, language) but it's not language that's failing; it's we.

TC: This leads nicely to the question of conceptualism as formalized by Vanessa Place and Robert Fitterman, who write, "failure is the goal of conceptual writing" and the "critique [of the culture industry] is in the reframing." In using or re-versioning a well-known historical text, would you consider your text a work of conceptualism or at least contiguous to its premises? How do you engage notions of failure in your writing?

CS: First, I don't consider my work conceptual, and the notion of success or failure doesn't come into it. My work is driven by historical events and aesthetic facts, rather than by a formal or constructive concept of the sort used by conceptual artists or writers (which is to say, the concept as a mental sculpture, with three or more dimensions—meaning that there are always aspects you can't see working in concert with those that you can, and with the motion of the immobile object that dynamic sculpture achieves). And though that all sounds metaphoric, I don't think it is. A concept can have that presence, even though intangible.

As for the Place/Fitterman statement: if "failure is the goal of conceptual writing," then if it fails, it succeeds. It's the classic semantic game ("Everyone from my native city is a liar"), which I read as their assertion that it's not a matter of success or failure—the very possibility of either presumes external and a priori criteria of judgment, which I can't imagine either of them accepting, and so the whole argument falls apart, which is precisely what I think they intended.

TC: In your interview with *Free Verse*, you speak of working for a progressive canon, which (among other things) should acknowledge "that all writing is a political act." How do you engender the political in your creative work?

CS: The political is inherent in every choice we make every day, even the small ones. To choose to be a writer, particularly of poetry, is a political act in the sense that it is to choose to make a particular kind of cultural investment and an investment in language that is fundamentally different from that that most people are making. This investment recognizes language as one of the principal determining elements of our lives; to choose to write is to choose to engage directly with that. Language is the base material of the polis; therefore, to act upon it is to act politically.

To speak more specifically about my own approach, I look at history as a political construction and a site of political potential. Through historical parallels, I think it's possible to present both the horror and the grandeur of the human project (it's not just about we who are living today—it's about all of history; there's no such thing as the past; it's all still with us). We have inherited all prior conflicts and still need to resolve them. Our present moment rightly puts an emphasis on forms of non-human life and their potential futures, and the terrible degree to which we now control them.

The political can never be separated from the social, nor, as is increasingly generally recognized, from the environmental and the commercial. In *Such Rich Hour* I hoped, through echoes and refractions, to point to choices that we're making today that went equally badly

500–600 years ago. A more recent book, *Gravesend*, is ostensibly about ghosts but is more generally about the dissemination of death inherent in occidental imperialism. I was interested in ghosts as a manifestation of things a given group will not face, and in looking at communal grief and communal guilt and the way that the two operate together. Many US citizens feel a real sense of guilt and responsibility for much of what the United States is doing in the world, and also grief over it. Yet there's no way that we're held directly accountable, and, therefore, there's no way to express that guilt and grief directly. So it seeps out in indirect ways, and I think ghosts are one way.

The book also tried to address imperialism's inevitable ironies. Gravesend is the name of a town where the Thames River meets the English Channel, and as such, it was the port from which thousands and thousands of immigrants left England from the 16th to the 19th centuries. Many of them, most of them, would end up participating in the colonization of various places. For the most part, they were not setting out to do evil; most were either exiled or trying to find a "better life." And yet how many people and cultures did they kill in the process? And in a particularly ironic turn of events, the first Native American who came willingly, as a free agent, to Europe died in Gravesend. The many levels of irony involved in the place, and then in the title, all seem to

me to relate to the imperialism that the US is practicing today commercially and militarily in so many places in the world.

TC: In the *Free Verse* interview, you said:

> I tend to look at religion and concepts related to it as historical events, or a historical continuum that has had tremendous impact in every era and location for which we have a history…and at the same time, I have a deep fear of organized religion and a deep generalized faith in life itself.… Obviously, in many parts of the world, I would be forced to decide precisely how I feel about these matters, and to make sacrifices based on that. Instead, I feel the real luxury of being able to explore the question.

In your exploration of the question, have you come to any conclusions that differ from where you stood in 2003? How has this impacted your writing?

CS: I haven't come to any conclusions at all, and while it continues to be a question that informs my work, I think one must keep asking the question while assiduously avoiding any conclusions. We are so limited in our knowledge, based on the limitations of our senses; we clearly haven't a clue about the actual structure of the universe and the nature and extent of life, so how can we reach any conclusions? Furthermore, any conclusion shuts down the sense of wonder that drives productive questioning. If questioning is driven not by wonder, but, for instance, by anxiety, then the questioning goes in a very different direction.

TC: *n+1* recently published the article "MFA vs. NYC: The Two Cultures of American Fiction," which was written by a recent Iowa fiction graduate. It was a recurring topic at the last AWP. When it comes to poetic practice, what role do you think the MFA plays?

CS: I spent 10 years at Iowa teaching in the poetry side. I can't speak for the fiction side, but what was said in that article is completely inaccurate in terms of the poetry side. I think MFAs are great for a number of reasons. The classic complaint against them is that they create cookie-cutter poetry, but I find that, in fact, they do the opposite. A good program gives students significant exposure to a wide variety of poetries as well as to writings on poetics and aesthetics and their roles in society; it also gives students both elders and peers to discuss these texts with, all of which creates an atmosphere of poetic plurality rather than singularity. The idea that one is going to be much more narrow and programmatic about a subject by virtue of studying it in depth for two years I find both inaccurate and nonsensical.

MFA programs give people two or three years to really focus and explore. I find at both Iowa and Brown, students explore radically different things. Someone is looking into Oppen, while someone else is studying Ted Berrigan, and someone else is investigating the Guerilla Girls—and they all get together regularly and talk. Exposure to such different lines of inquiry forces students, and their professors, to constantly enlarge their perspectives.

There are two other ways in which I think MFAs are valuable. One is that, in addition to teaching poetry and fiction, creative writing teaches *creativity*; it teaches students to approach something they do every day (dealing with language) in different ways. It asks, "How many different ways can you come at this?" It's an approach that overflows from language into many other realms, into the problem-solving, both minor and great, that we do every day. The other thing that creative writing teaches is *writing*. And as writing is still the most common mode of communication—whether it is a magazine article, an online commentary, an advertisement or a how-to manual—an MFA is a very practical degree. Everything we read every day, someone got paid to write (unless, of course, it's a poem). People graduating with MFAs are actually well-prepared to serve the world, to do something useful. Everyone needs things written. People who have been

through MFAs are used to cranking out a lot of writing, doing it quickly, doing it incisively and doing it creatively. It's a matter of learning to be flexible and constantly innovative with language.

TC: Do you think the argument of MFA vs. NYC, or academic vs. real-world experience, is inherently about pedagogy vs. publishing?

CS: I'm going to approach that slightly differently. I don't see a dichotomy between the academy and "the real world." The academy is a real place, and a lot of very real ideas come out of it, and a lot of very real experience occurs there.

I'm sorry to see this argument come up again because it implies a dual-culture system that's neither accurate nor productive. It's divisive and pits people against each other who actually have a lot in common. And just as a lot of real-world experience takes place in an academic setting, pedagogy occurs all over the place. It occurs when two friends go to a film and talk about it over a drink afterward; it occurs when someone reads an Agamben book and thinks about it; it occurs when one friend helps another improve her website. It's important to erode the distinction rather than to reinforce it.

TC: One argument was that the Iowa workshop model of pedagogy begets a specific system that leads into publishing.

CS: Again, I think that view sets up a false opposition, one that suggests that there's something "pure" about not publishing and something negative about publishing. I sense that this negative impression is based on a much earlier model. Publishing has changed tremendously over the past 15–20 years, largely because of technological advances, such as short-run digital printing and the Internet, so that almost anyone can start a publishing house, either with print books or online works. The result is that the means of production have been put into many, many more hands, greatly extending editorial opportunities and powers. I think most poets, whether they're in MFA programs or work as organic gardeners or are going to medical school (whatever), are interested in communicating and participating in community through their work, which means publishing, so I don't see publishing as bad; I see it as communication.

TC: What is your impression of the Iowa workshop model's embrace of experimentalism?

CS: The success of the model used at the Iowa workshop, which has been adopted fairly widely, is obviously based on the specifics of each program; the model itself advocates aesthetic pluralism, but that doesn't necessarily mean that it's achieved everywhere. As for the embrace of experimentalism at Iowa itself, my impression of it was extremely positive. Though Iowa has a pervasive

reputation for conformism and conventionality, in fact, the range and intensity of experimentation I found during the 10 years I taught there was tremendous—both exciting and encouraging. And so varied! And so many students who've graduated from Iowa in the past few decades have not only gone on to write extensive bodies of work, but have also founded journals, small presses, reading series and arts organizations. Such work on community construction through poetry seems an integral aspect of contemporary experimentalism. I have found this equally true in the other programs I have worked in, at Denver and now at Brown, where both aesthetic experimentation and community commitment are thriving. Brown benefits from a particularly well-integrated graduate-student arts community as well; the fluid interaction of writers, visual artists, media artists and musicians fosters great collaborative works and events.

Your question also raises the issue of what's experimental. What was experimental 10 years ago is not what is experimental now. The construction of the new normal is naturally an ongoing process, and yet is the experimental necessarily the different? What's the relationship between experimentation and difference? And different from what? We tend to privilege difference as if difference was good in itself. Difference is good to the degree that it offers new options and extends

the territory of the possible. But not all difference does that, so we need to keep attentive to differences that are actually augmentative rather than those that aren't.

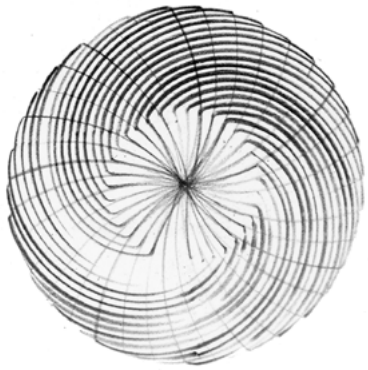
TC: You edited *American Hybrid*: *A Norton Anthology of Poetry*. Can you speak to the process of anthologizing?

CS: This is extremely relevant to what we've just been talking about. First, it's important to note that I co-edited it with David St. John, which was a determining element of the project and a process in its own right—and an extremely rewarding one. The impetus for the project was the persistently espoused dichotomy between the experimental and the conventional. The model that's advanced in many contemporary articles and blogs (that of a continuum from the conventional personal lyric at one extreme to the formally-challenging experimental at the other) is completely out of date, and doesn't represent what we actually see in the written work. Instead, most contemporary poetry doesn't fall along any sort of continuum and is often not open to such comparisons, either on grounds of relative experimentalism or any other. The range of American poetry being written today constitutes a field of radically different practices, which is so much more *interesting* than the experimental-conservative continuum. *American Hybrid* was an attempt to show that scattered diversity, and offer an alternative model,

one that's rhizomatic rather than linear, to that other outdated but persistent one.

The hybrid model presented by that anthology is not proposing a meeting in the middle between conservative and experimental, but an explosion outward from that center, going somewhere else entirely—going everywhere, in fact.

DISCUSSION WITH RENEE GLADMAN



The Class: In the talk you gave at the 2009 Summer Writing Program, "Syntax and the Event of Reading," you compared the sentence to the city as a site of encounter. Could our relationship to the city affect our relationship to language? Could geographic location or nationality? For instance, can one be in exile from, or within, a sentence?

Renee Gladman: Language is affected by everything. That is the nature of it. It's the thing we most often put between ourselves and the world, so you might say language operates as a kind of sieve. Though the problem with using sieve as a metaphor is that a sieve doesn't change (only the thing that moves through it does), and language is always changing, always responding to its surroundings.

I'm interested in the problem of language, where one finds oneself in a sentence having to deal with the requirements of grammar, which is sometimes at odds with what one is trying to do. There's a kind of conflict there always for me. Even at the very utterance of a sentence, you have to begin with putting a subject into

space, which requires a kind of certainty of knowing what your subject is or where your subject is. I find that often it's not that I don't know, but I would like to occupy the space of not knowing. So there is a tense relationship. But I don't experience it as exile because you keep moving in language and keep trying to talk to it. I'm still very connected to language even though sometimes there's this problem of getting it to do what I want it to do or getting it to represent what I'm seeing or thinking about. I believe we're still connected to it and a part of it. But I would be interested in someone making an argument for what it would feel like to be exiled in a sentence or, further, to be a fugitive.

TC: As a follow-up question, in an interview in the *Poetry Project Newsletter*, Lisa Robertson says, to paraphrase, the transferable quality of the pronouns "I" and "you" guarantees the community of language. Can you elaborate on the role community plays in the site of encounter—both in language and in physical location?

RG: That's beautiful. What's the context for that? Where is the encounter happening? Are we in the world? Are we in a book?

TC: We hoped you could speak to both in terms of language as well as physical and geographic location.

In your talk, you made such a strong case for both of those being vivid sites of encounter.

RG: Canadian prose writer Gail Scott has a term "community of sentences" that fascinates me: it opens a dialogue about how sentences come together, what draws them. It asks, "Is there some internal syntax or conversation that conducts how they gather?" Through this phrase, I think about what paragraphs are and about the page as an inhabitable space. Encounter, particularly in writing, often feels like a solitary experience. A community of people—that would be the thing on the other side, the thing that one is moving toward. For instance, in *The Ravickians*, Luswage Amini is moving toward the promise of community, the group that awaits her at a poetry reading, her friends that she hasn't seen in weeks or years. The encounter is that process, the crossing of space between departure and arrival. I tend to situate community as something desired, within reach, but something whose "way" is usually rife with obstacles, or various kinds of syntactic or epistemological confusions that make arrival difficult to achieve.

TC: In this same panel presentation, "Syntax and the Event of Reading," you speak of how you "like to bring the city into my conversation about language, because there are so many ways in which the two correspond." What are some of the correspondences with texts on

architectural theory or other topics that have formed or contributed to the writing of the city grid of Ravicka and perhaps even your poetics in general?

RG: For a long time I was attached to Julio Cortázar's novel *62: A Model Kit*. It's the quintessential city novel because in the midst of this story he's telling about a group of friends, who are writers and artists stationed in various European cities, he theorizes about what a city is, a city occupied by people who are thinking and feeling and moving toward each other and away from each other. City becomes a kind of philosophical question about time and experience. I've recently read a lot of architecture books looking for them to take up language or the book or the text as a kind of space that is compatible with built spaces, a correspondence that allows you to talk about being inside of a text from a position of architecture. I haven't found many that do this directly and none that I can think of right now. Italian architect Aldo Rossi's *A Scientific Autobiography* comes close. But this interest in architecture has in the past year or so brought me to a preoccupation with the line, with mark-making and that moment or threshold where the mark becomes drawing or the drawing becomes language. I've been reading and looking at a lot of monographs of mostly abstract artists like Julie Mehretu, Eva Hesse, Brice Martin, Monika Grzymala, Henri Michaux, Cy Twombly and the Venezuelan

sculptor Gego, who all seem to be using the line as a way of thinking. Michaux talks about the "inner phrase." Grzymala talks about drawing as a process of thought conducted by the hand. So what's happening for me is that I'm beginning to think about the possibility of a text that writes towards architecture. You'll find this at work in *Ana Patova Crosses a Bridge*.

TC: A sentence from *Event Factory*: "When I walked down the marble stairs the next morning, I understood that the city was a greener yellow at the start of day but every moment glowing golden."

Here is a sentence from Rachel Kushner's novel *The Flamethrowers*: "I stood for a long time tracking the slow drift of clouds, great fluffy masses sheared flat along the bottom edges like they were melting on a hot griddle."

Not to over-generalize based on two sentences, but Kushner's two novels, *Telex from Cuba* and *The Flamethrowers*, both feel much more linear than *Event Factory* or *Juice*, although her sentence structure and style seem rather similar. At the end of *Event Factory*, you allude to Samuel Delaney's *Dhalgren*, which is also a much more linear narrative. Could you comment on the impetus for drifting away from linear narrative toward a more experiential one?

RG: In a way, you've just answered the question for me. You beautifully juxtapose the linear to the experiential, which seems to suggest that to write experientially from a documentary perspective one has to work non-linearly. So I guess I'd say my writing drifts (another great word) from the linear because I am foremost interested in how experience enters language, how it moves or affects narrative in both the time of its occurrence, which is always outside of language, and the time of its retelling.

But I don't think of my sentences as being particularly experimental in the sense that you can't understand them, or you have to work really hard to figure out what they mean; there are a lot of examples of that very dense kind of language in lots of work, but I don't think my work is that way. I think that it's more orchestrating sentences so that the feeling of strangeness is created. I think for the perspective of this narrator, who is entering a foreign place where she knows she has some competency but there is so much she's still learning, it's important that there is ambiguity. She doesn't have control over this environment, thus what she perceives is slanted and sometimes fragmented. I wanted a language that wouldn't cover these gaps of interpretation, that would allow her confusions to occupy as vital content.

TC: In the essay "Line," Lyn Hejinian refers to the use of line in poetry as "lines of sight, lines of investigation."

She also speaks about lines not offering a complete thought. Within the prose novel *Event Factory*, we see our narrator following such lines, and we are with her in her confusion. In this way, the line creates a certain chaos within the text. Do you think chaos is a feature of the "open text," to again use Hejinian's term? How is it effective?

RG: How would you define chaos? What's an example of chaos in *Event Factory*?

TC: Chaos is all these events that are somewhat distant and seemingly disconnected—they seem to just be happening. Chaos theory came to mind, as if to suggest that there is some sort of connection to these seemingly disconnected events. In many of the books we've read in this class, there seems to be this feature.

RG: I don't know enough about chaos theory to give an adequate response. When I think about the word "chaos," it brings to mind clutter and excess, which is opposite to how I see these Ravicka novels, which are so sparse. But I don't think that's what you're asking me about. In terms of the line (I'm really glad you brought in Hejinian's essay), I see it as synonymous with sequence in the case of fiction. But I guess the question is where does sequence take us. In *Event Factory*, there is a preponderance of events, and the notion of "event"

seems important to our narrator. However, she struggles with what to do with them, *in* them, as each occurs, and is equally confounded by how they should be followed, how to get from the one to the subsequent. Not so much in terms of physical movement—she knows that she just needs to keep walking—but more so emotionally. She might ask, "What does it mean to have had this experience versus that other, or what does it mean not to have the experience I wanted?" It's an inquiry or state of being that complicates the line that moves us forward, the line that pulls us through time and through events and experience. Even though you have an ordered reality (a string or chronology), you don't necessarily have order within that shape. Perhaps this is what you meant by chaos.

TC: Do you feel the events happening to our narrator in *Event Factory* happen because she is setting them in motion? Or do the events in Ravicka have no cause and effect, and, therefore, is the narrator in the middle of chaos without meaning? Is that why Ravicka is having a crisis that cannot be defined? Does this inform your personal philosophy about cause and effect in your own life?

RG: One of the things I return to a lot in my work is the idea that we each have a philosophy of experience. So, even if we don't write it out, there's a way in which

we approach storytelling, approach putting a character in space that communicates what our problems or questions or desires are in relationship to experience—what we understand about it, what we want to refuse. The question of whether the narrator initiates her own events or sets them in motion is a question that we're often asking ourselves about the things that happen to us. Are they happening because something outside of us says so, or are we manifesting what we want or what we don't want in the world?

I would agree that the narrator's desire for events is producing the type of event that is happening to her. The way that she occupies the city is producing the experiences that she is having. If she approached the city in a different way, if there wasn't this downtown that she is constantly looking for, that for some reason she can't find, then she would have a different set of experiences. This bisects my own philosophy of event at the point of articulation, making record of the experience. How do you make experience an event in language? How do you represent memory, time and not knowing in language? When the articulation (the writing, the trying) starts to get unclear or vague or ambiguous or melancholic that's when I get excited. How to grasp what it is to be a person in the world and a person in language.

TC: Ravicka could be anywhere. Or, *how* is Ravicka specifically an American city?

RG: How is Ravicka specifically an American city—what does that mean? What's at stake in that question?

TC: Like a lot of dystopian fictions, it seems that Ravicka could be any city, but there's so much emerging and so many intersections happening, and a lot of the failing infrastructure made us think of American cities that are failing. This failure of communication and these losses in translation—could Ravicka be anywhere? Or were you writing it specifically with an American model of a city in mind?

RG: You will see in other interviews how I've talked about Ravicka as being located in another possible Eastern Europe, though I continue to feel discomfort when I say this. It is, however, decidedly not an American city, and I think this is because American cities, many of which I've been to, don't confound me in the way that this space is confounding. My sense of Ravicka emerged from many years of engagement with the films of Bela Tarr and Andrei Tarkovsky. There were points of recognition for me in how those post-Soviet or post-communist communities were portrayed. You have a sense of a culture moving towards some form of democracy and capitalism but having not yet arrived, such that they occupy a liminality that is neither communist nor completely Western. It's an odd space that I connect with.

If there is a U.S. presence here, it's that of the narrator. But this story—I really felt that it needed to be set somewhere else. Ravicka can't be in this country because somehow we make this country so known. Ravicka's in ruins, but we don't really have a city in ruins here. Although there's Detroit.

TC: Yes. Detroit came up in our class conversation.

RG: What did you guys say about Detroit?

TC: We were waxing nostalgic and talking about how you can actually watch it fall apart over the course of 20 years.

One of the first passages in *Event Factory* refers to a sheet of blue paper, which should not be dreamed of, according to one character, for it belongs to the city. We thought that was an interesting concept—something belonging to the city. Numerous phrases in Ravic refer to possession by the citizens of Ravicka. Does Ravicka as an entity own or determine its own nature? How does the concept of "possession" or "belonging to" affect this text?

RG: In *The Ravickians*, there's this kind of anxiety expressed around acknowledging that everyone has a group. You're in the world, you're separate, you're an individual, you're isolated, and then we find this group

and feel belonging. The second book thinks a lot about that—getting to the place where you belong, being able to recognize it and also how language moves between the members of this group, where this belonging is in place.

It's interesting that you noticed the poster, the blue sheet of paper, because I'm not a very detail-oriented writer, so I wouldn't think there were a ton of details in the book. I don't usually go out of my way to describe what people are wearing or what things looks like. There's always a general kind of description of the city, but I don't think about detail. The mysterious blue paper—in that moment of writing, I was thinking about all the objects that exist in a city space and how they each have a kind of life, a kind of time and a kind of space. The car that's left on the corner for two days or overnight has a kind of space that it occupies. I was interested in how the blue sheet of paper would be recognized by people, what it would signal, what would happen if it were gone; I was playing around with those things. I don't know how Ravicka relates to possession. I don't know if it comes up in a way that I understand. Of course, you're seeing things that I can't see in the book. For me, I don't know that about Ravicka at this point.

TC: In *The Ravickians*, Luswage Amini expresses concern over the translation of her works from Ravic to English,

and encourages translators to "not pick the next best thing. Sometimes you will have to put a *0* there; this will indicate a hole." We wanted to know if you could speak further to this zero or hole as a more suitable substitute for a word. Does this gap or missing space in meaning fulfill something about the nature of communication?

RG: That's Luswage Amini's opinion. It's not necessarily mine. I haven't had a lot of experience with my work being translated, but I'm interested in the problems of translation. How does one deal with the fact that the text that you're reading is only an aspect of the original text, not the text itself? I'm very interested in the absences within a translation, in what gets distorted, re-routed, disordered, etc. As a reader, I like the spaces in a translation where there's a kind of awkwardness, and I don't mean sloppy syntax or poorly shaped ideas, obviously, but, more, a strangeness, a presence that hovers above the target language or is enshrouded within. So as you're reading you feel something that you can't exactly see. I like the sensation, the problem it inspires in my mind, that the thing being described is somehow farther off than it's supposed to be. The discrepant space provides an additional field for thought.

TC: You said, in an interview with Zack Friedman in *BOMB Magazine*, "I don't have an experience in my

life that isn't fictional." Could you elaborate on this especially in regards to the fictional city of Ravicka?

RG: "I don't have an experience in my life that isn't fictional." What was I talking about?

TC: You were talking about how the city was based around a created personal language.

RG: I think I was being a little facetious. What's exciting and interesting to me is that whenever you take something from one place, let's say a memory of an experience in your life, and you try to put it into language, you immediately change it. So as soon as we start writing, as soon as we start thinking, we already change the thing. It's not the original event. It becomes a version of itself, a kind of fiction. For me to tell you about my life is to immediately begin to change my life or the story of my life because now I'm putting it into language, I'm putting it into order, I'm choosing what to say and what to leave out.

TC: Can you speak to the process of creating a fictional reality that develops through multiple works? Do you initially envision the same thematic layout or a similar protagonist for each of the works?

RG: Thus far, I've only created one fictitious place, and that is Ravicka, and I didn't plan it out, and it really isn't a fiction anymore. What happened was I wrote *Event Factory*, and I was very drawn to the crisis that Ravicka is undergoing. I wanted to think about its conditions, to ask what is it that makes the Ravickians flee the city, that makes them think they see ruins, etc. I took these questions to the second book. Also, it's very hard for me to write books longer than one hundred or so pages. Around that mark, the narration finishes itself; it's like "I'm done!" In the case of *Event Factory*, the narrator basically says, "OK, time to go home," and the novel ends. It doesn't want to go on. But things remained once it closed that I wanted to bring forth. I think of the narrator's discovery in the closing pages of *Event Factory* that goes something like, "Oh, Luswage Amini, the great Ravickian novelist. I can ask her to explain what's going on." This essentially established the premise for the next book. The Ravickians compelled me. I wanted to get to know them and think about their language and how they use their bodies to communicate with each other. Writing the second book was about getting attached to these characters. The third book, *Ana Patova Crosses a Bridge*, emerged out of an impulse to think about the relationship between architecture, writing and society (i.e., living a life with others). I also wanted to see if more things could be said about the crisis, if I could see it better through Ana Patova's eyes.

The fourth book is called *Houses of Ravicka*, which actually seems to be taking place before the crisis. Here I got interested in the houses and how they move and how you measure that movement, and now there's a science—geoscography—that measures that movement. Things are constantly opening in the writing process, so I keep following with my one-hundred-page books.

TC: When talking about the phrase "acts of expression" in your prose piece "Calamity," published in *Floor*, you said, "I thought as I meandered—the event needed to occur between my body and the city." I'd like to hear more about your connection to place, more specifically the city, and how location affects your writing. At the level of the sentence, do you find your writing changes depending on a particular city or location?

RG: If we're talking about what's happening at the level of the sentence, then I think I can talk about being near-sighted, which means that place is what's closest to me, what I'm experiencing against my body. While I talk a lot about cities and city writing, the scale of that is often the street. That zoomed-in feeling—finding oneself on a street where there are other people or where there are not other people or where there is traffic or there are buses. At street level, there is something in every direction: some encounter, some danger, something

to learn or to see and forget immediately, a reflection, distortion, things heard, smelled. All the material of the street, then, begins to parallel the material of sentences and paragraphs, because it's the same line you're following and breaking and partitioning. Place is a space for thinking, a space to drop a character, and whatever her problem or motivation is begins to be affected by the space that surrounds her. Place is a kind of catalyst and a kind of container. And this is what it's like to be in language.

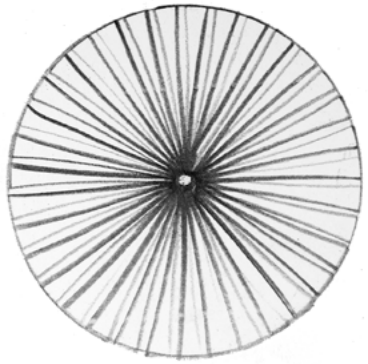
TC: Two things keep coming up. One is decay and the second is recuperation, and I'm wondering if these things were relevant to you when you were writing this book.

RG: Very much so. I would not have used the word "recuperation" at the time, but it's a word I've been saying a lot recently, which is interesting when you think of writing as an act that you perform in the world. I think of the recuperative acts of Ana Patova in the third book of the series, where, through a kind of indexing and circling, she's trying to gather her days and the days of her friends as a way to define the crisis and to end it. She actually thinks that by writing about it as if it is past then she will arrive at some terminal point. That in time the end already exists: she just has to get there. But the real

revelation is that this whole time of enduring the crisis where many people have fled and most people have grown sad and isolated and there's no infrastructure so little is happening—this whole time she's been with others and they have gathered and they have produced. I learned a lot from that moment because, in writing these first three books, I also believed that they were isolated and that they were not in the present somehow. I learned something vital about being in the company of others with *Ana Patova*.

In terms of decay, Ravicka came to me as a city-state in ruins. Though, strangely, these were ruins that a passerby could feel but not actually see. I haven't said this before, but I think that discrepancy has to do with trying to imagine what our inner states do to external environments, what type of architecture they erect as we move through space. I also was interested in thinking about cities that are so built that it's very hard to add new architecture and new ideas. I was thinking about inheriting a place where it feels that there's not a lot of room for the body or for new ideas or new structures, and where the old structure is not completely healthy, somehow in a state of disrepair. I wanted to think about that but not focus on a particular city that we'd all recognize. I wanted to be able to control what could happen in this city, and that's part of the reason it's so far away and not necessarily in this world that we have.

DISCUSSION WITH JENNY BOULLY



The Class: In an interview for *Triple Canopy*, Renee Gladman talks about her series of ditties titled "Calamities" and the decision to move away from the form of the essay "because they fail as essays. They don't sustain an argument, they don't go anywhere, they don't conclude anything, and the half-paragraph ones seem even more so, kind of absurd." Using Gladman's rubric of how an essay should perform, *The Book of Beginnings and Endings* fails in the normative or traditional sense of the essay. Could you speak about your decision to stay within the essay as a form as well as comment on what it does to the writing?

Jenny Boully: We put too much pressure on the essay sometimes. That is, we think that within the essay, a problem has to be solved, an argument has to be argued, that there is an end in sight. I like to tell my students that every essay is essentially an act of mourning in that it relies, more often than not, on a past experience that cannot be reclaimed. The best essays know this and mourn completely, falling apart at the seams. The best essays, therefore, are not perfect,

are not unblemished, are the sites of mourning and disasters, are catastrophes. I am more supportive of the type of essay that begins in uncharted territory, in the unknown. I am more comfortable with the essay that begins not even knowing exactly what it wants to write about, not even knowing what the point is. I like a piece to be nebulous and to take shape by trying to chisel out its form or mold its form or shape its form, so I find that Gladman's thoughts about what an essay should do offer an argument for what essays shouldn't do. I don't think they should sustain an argument. I don't think they should go anywhere or conclude anything. I think that maybe she was a bit hard on the work in terms of the essay. You could very much say that essays are more beautiful because they don't quite come to any type of perceived fruition. Some of my best-loved essays by Joan Didion leave us by saying, "I don't know what the point is; I can't see clearly; I don't know what this is all about; I've written it down, but I still don't have any answers; the narrative has failed me." I love those inconclusions.

Essays are certainly not what people want to reach for when they reach for reading. People seem to think that essays are the ugly stepsisters of poetry and fiction or memoir. Part of my job, as I see it, is to educate people on what the essay can do and what the essay can be,

and it can be many different things. I think more than anything it's a way of thinking.

TC: If we trace the etymology of the essay to Montaigne's "attempt," this etymology reveals the attempt as an "effort to accomplish something by violence." How then do you attend to violence within the form of essay? Is the innovative act of incompleteness a subversive or lenitive one? Is it time to move away from Montaigne's *essayer*?

JB: I love thinking about violence and the essay. In every act of reading and writing there is a bit of violence done. I'm looking at my bookshelf and thinking about reading and writing and how we tend to gloss over, we tend to drift, we tend to forge, we tend to conveniently tell half-truths or no-truths or just leave things out. It's almost as if we are trying to present a certain version to the world. We're trying to write a certain version. I think that could be seen as an inherently violent act, because you're ridding possibility. To write/forge ahead is essentially to choose one, to make a final stroke. And I think that is sometimes why I am frightened to sit down and write something. When I am writing it takes me a long time to get something down on paper. I'll think about it for a long, long time. And I'll jot things down in my notebook for a long, long time. And I think that, more than anything, I am fearful of the possibilities of this finished product—which essays weren't written because I've now written this one, because I've taken

this one path? It could have manifested in many different ways, and it's now this one thing, this one final thing, and that's what it is.

Montaigne is very interesting because he is this patriarch, this big staunch rook of a writer; there he is at the back of the chessboard waiting for us. We can't break his defenses. He's there. We have to think about him as, essentially, a very experimental and strange writer. I think that we can also go further back and think about how other writers before him were essayists in their own right. I think that we lend too much weight to Montaigne. I have this joke with my students (I teach a "History of the Essay" course) that we only read one Montaigne essay because if you've read one, you've read them all. I know that's not true. The essays are on many different subjects, and he's very versatile, but there is this pattern in his essays that you can see. He has very much these postmodernist tendencies as well that I find fascinating and exciting (his sampling, his collaging, his riffing, his storytelling, his segues, his digressions) but, I'm getting away from the question.

I think that all essays are incomplete in a certain way. Like I was saying before, we write a version of something, and we leave things out to accomplish that version. I think that in *The Book of Beginnings and Endings*, I've just made that more radical.

TC: John D'Agata often heralds you as an innovator with the essay form, and we're interested to know where that started—how you wrote essays initially and how your writing evolved.

JB: My affair with nonfiction writing has a very strange beginning, and that beginning, I think, comes from my writing a personal column in my high-school newspaper. These were very narrative, very personal, very familial. Sometimes they were didactic. They tried to create something beautiful out of lived experience. Then I began to write poetry, and I did not know that you could study poetry in college, so I was trying to find a good journalism school at that time until I got this little bookmark in one of my college mailings, saying, "you can study creative writing!" So I studied poetry at this little all-women's school in Virginia called Hollins University, which was Hollins College at the time. My last semester there, in the MA program, I began to be very reluctant about my line breaks, and I could no longer justify them, see them or even want to labor over them. It just became very meaningless to me. I began to write in prose. I would turn in things that were half-prose and half-verse, and my professor at the time said I had to pick one.

So I decided that I would write in prose. I thought what I was writing at the time were prose poems, but the problem was that my prose poems were very long.

Pages and pages and pages, and they often changed subjects. They had a meditative feel in certain parts like Montaigne. They tended to want to catalog. They tended to want to reach towards dreams, towards literature. So they were very expansive in their approach to their subjects. Then I went to get an MFA in poetry, and I was writing my first book, *The Body*—my poetry thesis for that program, and it was in prose. I don't think my classmates or my professor quite knew what to do with me. I had read a little article about something called, at the time, lyric essays in *Seneca Review*, and I thought, *Oh my God, this is what I want to do. This is what I want to be*. Suddenly, what I was doing had this real currency in the world. I realized I didn't have to choose in a certain sense. I could still be a poet and do what I was doing.

I became very enchanted by essays, and I read as much as I could my final semester of my MFA. I picked up Phillip Lopate's *The Art of the Personal Essay* and just dived in. Then I started to find the books that were excerpted in there. So I went out and read Kenko and *The Pillow Book* and Didion. I had a real hunger, and I was ferociously reading anything that I could get my hands on, and did imitations and thought about form. For me, form is always an accident. It's always this suppressed byproduct of the actual writing, so it's not something that I go into when I sit down to write—it's something that is the aftermath of what's been written.

So I often happen upon the correct form somewhere in the process.

TC: We have been exploring what an open text is, and the idea that it is always turning, changing, progressing and, in the case of *The Book of Beginnings and Endings*, opening and closing, beginning and ending. This idea, as well as Luce Irigaray's "The Sex Which is Not One," got us thinking about a book being a symbol of a woman, in the literal sense that it opens or spreads itself before us, and we dive into its pages. If a book is a symbol for a woman, does that make the reader phallic, in that we open and enter into its contents repeatedly?

JB: One of the beautiful things about books is that they lend themselves so wondrously to metaphor, especially metaphors concerning the body, which was what my first book was titled, and I was thinking about how books could be likened to existence and a physical existence and what that would mean. But then what really excited me was thinking about what happens if we think about books in terms of spiritual existence, so a life before we get to open the book, the life after the book closes—the very beginnings and the afterlife. That really excited me to think about the book as a life. I know I'm moving away from the question. I guess because I don't know if I'm comfortable with the reader being phallic.

I feel so hopelessly unprepared to think about that because it's been so long since I read Irigaray. I could try to fake this answer, or I could just be honest. I do think that, yes, books can very much be likened to physical existences. If I am to answer the question, I would question what it means to be phallic. And I'm not exactly sure if I would know what that means exactly, at least for me because I associate the phallic with some sort of resistance or violence that probably isn't inherent in phallicism (I don't know what you would call it). But I think of books as welcoming that intrusion, welcoming that penetration, as you say. I think that books beg to be read, that they want that audience, however imagined or actual. I love to think about the book as a symbol for living, that there is a definite beginning and a finite end, and that there is an afterlife to books. For instance, we can think about the afterlife of Irigaray's book being the discussion we're having now, right? So you carry on that knowledge, or you carry on the mystery or the memory of that text, as it were.

TC: In that case, do you feel that an open text transcends those psychosexual boundaries based on its open, changing nature?

JB: Let me try to think about the question and unpack it a bit. There was a Shakespeare professor at Hollins, who would joke that a little green man went into his collected works of Shakespeare every summer and rewrote the

plays. He said that every time he read one of these plays (and he had been teaching them for 30-some years) they would be different. When we reread, we change the text in a sense. We come to know it more, we come to know it better, we come to it more informed. Or we are more attentive or we see something we had not before; we make different connections than we made before. So the idea of a text being open and changing I love very much. I reread a lot of books because I love them so much, and I wonder, because I am a voracious underliner, what if one day every sentence in a book I've read is underlined? That would mean that I have totally loved that book. That would be great. Can an open text transcend psychosexual boundaries based on its open, changing nature? I'm going to say, yes. I don't know if I can add anything more to that question because I'm intimidated by it.

TC: In the interview you did for Sarabande Books, you said you had been working on *The Book of Beginnings and Endings* since the end of your MFA at Notre Dame. We were wondering if you could give a short history of how the text came to be published?

JB: I believe I started writing *The Book of Beginnings and Endings* in 2003. I remember it was very early on when I was living in Brooklyn, and I lived in this very tiny, tiny little rented room that was a broom closet

essentially. So it's no wonder that I was so fragmented. I wanted to think about various books. How could I write in the guise or the voice of different types of books? So my idea was to write all of these different books. I don't know what I was thinking. It would have taken five thousand lifetimes to write all of these books. One day I was on the train platform, and a train was coming while another one was going. I thought, *Ah, first and last pages.* I realized that I had not so much work cut out for me anymore, that I didn't have to write the whole book about invertebrate zoology, that I could just write the first page or something like that. It was maybe two years later that I had realized that. I began writing every morning. I would write a beginning and an ending, and that was my writing for the day. I had to force myself to do it some mornings, and if I didn't like what I wrote, I just didn't use it, but the idea was to write every day.

I sent it bundled with a whole bunch of other work to Sarabande. First I'll preface this by saying I sent a lot of work to Sarabande once, and they didn't want any of it. And they asked to see something new. So I sent them all the things that they rejected before, along with *The Book of Beginnings and Endings*. I tried to package it as one big book. At the time, *The Body* was out of print, so I put *The Body* in there too. It was a very strange thing I was doing, but I didn't have anybody to advise me. They called me one day, and they said, "We'd like

to publish your book, but there's a caveat." And that was the first time I had ever had to think about the word "caveat." I don't even think I knew what it meant at the time! So I remember just focusing on that word the whole conversation. Sarah Gorham, the publisher of Sarabande, said they only wanted *The Book of Beginnings and Endings*. And I was like, "That's fine. I don't care. You can just do that!" It was very exciting for me to get that telephone call.

There were some sections that she wanted me to make more resonant. So I did some revision to the text. I did some reordering of the text. I took out some things I felt weren't working. But what was really exciting for me was working with the book designers to make this look like a book that's comprised of many different first and last pages but without it looking like what one designer called "a font flea market." I think that they did a fabulous job, and what was very surprising for me is that they didn't need me to fudge with any of the beginnings. They somehow got them to fit on the page exactly as I did in Microsoft Word. So I was very pleased with how it all turned out. I don't know how book designers do it, but they did such a fabulous, fabulous job at Sarabande. I was quite in love with this as, I guess, a piece of art that could only be accomplished in its published form.

TC: Do you see the classic construct of a linear narrative with beginning, middle and end to be a condition of an androcentric literary canon?

JB: I'm going to say, no. I'm going to say no because I think it's more indicative of, not so much the canon, but I think more of how humans think and how humans work. I'm trying to think of "androcentric"…. Could you tell me what that means?

TC: We were thinking more along the lines of hegemonic, like Gramsci (hegemonic and subaltern), but we wanted to gender the statement, and so without saying "patriarchy" or "phallocentric," without really getting into Irigaray, we decided on "androcentric."

JB: And the funny thing is I would have understood "phallocentric."

TC: You just said that the editor was talking about a grammatical or a font flea market, right? Isn't that a statement that engenders or reifies the old canon in the face of hybridization or creativity?

JB: I'm not sure. How do you see it doing that?

TC: Here you have a creative gesture to try to be hybrid or experimental, and they shut it down by basically diminishing it, saying it's just a collection of hodgepodge words and fonts.

JB: Maybe I didn't explain that in the right way. I think that they were trying to do a great service to the book by genuinely trying to make these pages look like different books rather than just using different fonts to accomplish that. They really wanted to work hard on it. So I think I did not explain that fully.

It would be very easy to argue that this is indicative of the repression from the phallocentric dudes that are in all of our anthologies that we're forced to read, but I'm going to go with the less popular viewpoint and argue that I think that the beginning-middle-and-end linear narrative is inherent in natural storytelling, and I think that when we start fudging with those things, it kind of make us writers (or not writers, no, I take that back—because I know some very good storytellers who don't fudge with the ordering of things). For example, when my Thai mother tells a story, it drives me absolutely nuts because I know there's a logical conclusion, but she won't give it up until she's gone through the story from the very beginning to the end. So I think that it's this natural inclination of the human storyteller to withhold the golden nuggets or the diamonds until they get you to where they want to get you. This is a very rough, off-the-cuff answer to something that I think I could probe deeper and more seriously. It's a great, interesting question to think about, but my inclination is to consider it from an anthropological perspective, and think about

people who aren't writers and how they tell us things when they want to tell us things.

TC: It's interesting that you mention anthropology because the oral tradition doesn't necessarily emphasize the beginning, the middle and the end, but we really see the beginning, the middle and the end in classic Greek poetry and plays, or in Aristotle's "Poetics."

JB: There's a lot of new scholarship being done on oral storytelling and oral traditions, and, like I said, I think that I could spend more time with this question because it's fascinating. I'd be very curious to learn what shapes some of those narratives take.

TC: In developing *The Book of Beginnings and Endings*, was your intention for the readers to infer their own middle? Or was the intent for them to simply do without a middle?

JB: Some descriptions of the book say that they are the first and last pages of books, but they're not intended to meet up. They're not intended to be from the same books. So what we're looking at are beginnings that don't have the endings represented in the text, and vice versa. So when you have a beginning for the book, you also don't have a middle or the end, and when you have the end, you don't have the beginning or the middle. More than anything, I wanted to stress the idea of

what beginnings are and what endings are. I wanted to stress how we think about the beginnings and endings of things more than anything when we are mourning the loss of a certain experience—that the elements that make up the middle of these experiences are what we conveniently forget sometimes.

You know, in the case with love affairs, we think about the promising beginnings of that love affair, and when the love affair is over, we think about the last words, but we don't necessarily think about the times when we sat on the couch trying to watch a film with our beloved, and he wouldn't shut up during the whole film and how that annoyed us, or how when we were cooking pasta and went to use the bathroom he went and turned the fire down, that he didn't know how to cook pasta. We forget these things that annoyed us, or the everydayness of things, and we think about how it was a beautiful spring, and the flowers were so gorgeous, and he took me in his arms and kissed me and said sweet nothings in my ear, and then this is how he dumped me. I wanted to stress more than anything how we're so taken by the delusions of promise or what I want to refer to as the springtime of experience, and we're absolutely crushed by the impending winter of that or the end of that.

TC: Can you talk about your process of assembling/writing the pieces of *The Book of Beginnings and Endings*? Especially since, in an interview with *Black Warrior Review*, you said, "I tend to not take anything back" in terms of your writing and revision process. How did working on a book like this differ from your usual practices? Can you talk about your relationship with the backspace button within this book?

JB: Great. I love talking about revision. I really love thinking about this. And you know, I want to say that my experience with *The Book of Beginnings and Endings* was very similar to my book *The Body* in that a lot of my revision had to do with (and even with my Peter Pan book, *not merely because of the unknown that was stalking toward them*) reordering, taking everything and literally cutting and pasting the work into a new arrangement. I think that that's what I do—I tend to write and then reorder, at least in these books I did. Sometimes when I start writing a piece of prose, I write a chunk and then I insert myself in that chunk, and write out and insert myself here, and write out and insert myself here, and write out…. It just depends on what I'm writing.

With *The Book of Beginnings and Endings*, I tried to ask, "What various guises can heartbreak take on? What is the language of the broken heart? How can we put it into different disciplines?" And when I say I tend not to

take anything back, that goes for what I say to people and what I write. When I write something, I tend to think it exists for a reason, so it has to be there. Any omissions that I make, I'm making mentally and not so much after something's written. I don't tend to strike out. If anything, I may just dispose of a page. I may say, "Well, this page doesn't fit in, so I'm not going to use it." But will I actually sit there and fudge with what's on the page? No. So when I do throw out, I throw out in chunks and not so much line by line.

TC: Can you address your use of various genres within this one book and how they all fit together? And how much of those are imaginings, how much are lyrical, fictitious?

JB: Some of these come from essays that I wrote, so you may see the beginning of an essay or the end of an essay. For instance, I have the first page of *The Body*, one of my books, in here, and there are some excerpts in here from longer pieces that haven't been collected into a book yet. These were probably in the book I submitted to Sarabande that they didn't want. In some, I was trying to think about the language of fiction. In some, I tried to think about the language of science. In some, I started from a very lyrical core of true lived experience and wondered how I could take that true

lived experience and rework it so that it sounded like the beginning of a novel or like the ending of a book of literary criticism. I had great fun thinking about how we could fuse heartbreak and literary criticism, or an epilogue, or a Greek textbook, mathematics, the uses of dialogue…. It was all very fascinating and great fun to me, but I love, too, thinking about the genre game, so that might be why the book is the way it is. I wanted to be every kind of writer here, and this book allowed me to do so. The book also allowed me to feel like I could be a specialist on things that I love—I love thinking about, for instance, the notebook for the amateur naturalist. I think I always wanted to be somebody who would go out into a field of flowers and catch butterflies, but I can't. But I can write about it.

TC: You mentioned throwing out chunks of a book rather than editing. In a previous interview with Sarabande, you said, "there were some types of writing or topics that I just couldn't get to work for me, and those were ultimately tossed out" of *The Book of Beginnings and Endings*. So we were wondering if you could elaborate on what types or topics those were and why you felt they weren't working. Was it the difficulty of mastering these particular voices, or did they just not fit in with the project? Would you ever revisit them?

JB: I don't recall what I actually tossed out. I still have them somewhere in my files on one of my computers. There was one in particular where I was trying to mimic eighteenth-century novels, and I was doing the random capitalizing, the dashes, and the subject was of a certain Madame and her lap dog and how she had lost a jewel. In the end, I thought, *You know, it's not going to work—it just does not fit in with what is going on at the core of this book*. So that got thrown out. Like I said before, the idea was to get to my desk every morning and write. So there were going to be things that were failures of cohesion. I wouldn't say that they were failures of form, but they were failures insofar as they did not exactly add to anything that the book was trying to accomplish in terms of its message. If I just wanted to mimic different books, then I could do that, and it would be much longer than what it is now. It's the size that it is because the exercise could only go on so long before I exhausted that, because the book did have at its core this very personal essay. It is a memoir of sorts.

TC: You've previously stated that a "poet more than wanting to be understood wants to be loved through his or her writing." How might *The Book of Beginnings and Endings* be an act for love?

JB: *The Book of Beginnings and Endings* is interesting for me when I think about where it is situated in my life.

So here I am on this train platform, and I'm seeing one train come while another train is going, and I think that that's where I was at the time in terms of love, which sounds very strange for me to talk about now that I am the age I am, married, with two children. It sounds very strange for me to think back to a day when I was in between relationships. My God, when was this? This was a long time ago already. And I was just thinking today that I am so over writing about love. I don't want to write about it anymore. I'm so done with it. I guess it's nice to be where I am now that I don't have to go to my desk with a broken heart anymore. Now I'm writing an essay about gray hairs, so I think I'd prefer to write about love again.

The book's subject has very much to do with a love affair that was on its way out. At the same time, there was a love affair that was forming, and that love affair is still the one I have today. It was with my husband. My husband played a major role as the book was being written in terms of championing it, making me excited by it, making me write, suggesting things that I could try to reinvent or mimic. He was very much holding me through the process of writing the book, and I'm very fortunate in that he didn't mind that the book's subject was this heartbreak over this other guy.

On an elementary level, yes, certain types of writing, for me anyway, are those unspoken messages to the beloved, things that went unsaid. It's a chance to have those things said. It's a chance to be who you could not be because you were a coward. It's a chance for you to redo what you didn't do right in the first place. It's a place where you can own up to your failures and say, "You know what, I am my very best when I am writing, and when we're out and about and being lovers, we're not writing, but here I am, and I'm writing—this is me." On its very elementary level, that's what writing is. On another level, I think that we want to be loved by people that we don't know. We want that kind of validation because, as I said before, this is our truest, real self. I don't walk about the world as a written text, but it is where I feel that I am my truest self.

TC: In your interview with Sarabande Books, you referred to your writing process with the verb "compose." You also state that "when a book refuses to give all, it increases the probability of opening a great space to wonder and misread." And so in our potential misreading of your answer, we want to ask: do you consider *The Book of Beginnings and Endings* to be written text only, or does the verb "compose" relate this work to other forms of creative work, such as visual artwork or music? And in what ways is a text "composed" rather than written?

JB: I really love this question, because it makes me think about an essay that I love, which I think is why I started using the verb "compose." There's this little essay called "Riddled" by David Weiss, in the lyric-essay issue of *Seneca Review* from 2000, for which Weiss is also one of the editors. Weiss talks about having first to be composed before you write—the act of composure and thinking about composure. He talks about how, in order to be composed, you have to think about being sincere in your writing. I always think about being composed as the condition for composing that piece of writing. I guess for me it has more to do with one's stance rather than the art of writing or composing. It has very much to do with being in a certain state of mind before you write. How do you get a grip or get a handle on your writing without having first thought about your motives or why you're writing or who you are when you're writing?

I was thinking more about those things when I used the word "compose," but I also think that, as someone who comes from a poetry background, the musicality of language and the sounds of language and language itself are very important to me in writing. To read a work that sounds bland to me is probably not going to be a great reading experience. I very much love reading work that is always aware that it is composed in language. I think that also my work tends on the visual side, so yes, we could say that my work is composed through its

stance, through its insistence on a visual component as well. A text is composed rather than written because I think we have to come to know what "I" is at the desk, if that makes sense.

TC: We were really fascinated by the character, or the presence, of Genevieve Abouille. It seemed that she was functioning as sort of a meta-narrator. Was that your intention for this figure?

JB: One day I was watching a Fellini film, and one of the actors or actresses had the last name Abouille. And I thought, *Well, that's kind of similar to Boully—I think I'll write that down and remember it.* And when my husband and I first started dating, he would call me Genevieve. It was kind of his term of endearment for me, and so I thought it would be interesting in this text to talk about this dead writer named Genevieve Abouille, who of course is Jenny Boully. I like to take thinking about putting pieces together, thinking about fragmentation, thinking about message-making and meaning to another level. What if the person who did the composing is no longer there? How do you construct meaning? And that's what we do when we read a text by writers that we don't have physical access to, either because we don't know them or they're dead. What we're doing essentially is trying to construct a story or narrative, and all I've given you in *The Book of Beginnings and Endings* is

that fractured story with which you have to construct its narrative.

To complicate things even more, I introduce a quilt, and, in that quilt, it is discovered that there are written fragments and pieces. I leave you with the great mystery of what would have been the story imbedded within *that.* There's a story within a story. I give you a little piece of those quilt squares at the end, in the epilogue. You see that there's square number 479 and 480, so you know how many squares there are, but you only know fully what the last two contained, and that one was just a fragment of 478. It is something that I mention here and there throughout the text, so you know I have fun thinking about these hypothetical lives. It's not to be morbid or anything, but I do it in *The Body* too. I talk about when the author dies. It's kind of my version of the death of the author, just not as serious.

Someday when my children are grown and I have the time, I'm actually going to make that quilt.

TC: In *The Little Friend*, by Donna Tartt, the main character, Harriet Dufresnes, is supposed to resemble Harriet the Spy, and there's mention of *The Wind in the Willows* and Peter Pan, as well as *Treasure Island.* In an interview, Tartt said that "the trick in writing about children is to resist sentimentalizing them or making them 'lovable.'" It's more for her about making "children

perceive things clearly, but showing their emotional motivations are murky, primitive," as she says. We were wondering, since you wrote about children in *not merely because of the unknown*, do you agree with this statement and why?

JB: I quite agree with that statement. When I wrote my dissertation, I did a lot of research in the idea of the child, and the thinking out there is that the concept of childhood is constructed by our sentimentalizing our own childhoods, and that the idea of children being innocent and pure develops from the thought that we, at one time, possessed those qualities. But those qualities are not inherent in children at all. Children are just as complex and full of motives and ill-doing and bad thoughts as we are as adults. There's a great book, *Centuries of Childhood* by Philippe Ariès, that gets into this very much. And then Marina Warner, who is a great theorist about fairytales, has a beautiful little book, *Six Myths of Our Time: Little Angels, Little Monsters, Beautiful Beasts, and More*, in which she talks about how we're always pairing children with beastly creatures. We put dinosaur clothes on our little boys. We make the kids play with bears, and it's just not anything we would do if these animals were real. However, there's a real reason why we think about children in relation to these otherwise very violent creatures; children themselves are quite violent and taken to violence.

What really attracted me to Peter Pan was how complex the children were—Wendy Darling especially. Here she is supposed to be the model of an Edwardian girl child, and rather than staying at home and listening to her father and mother, she runs away with Peter Pan. She wants very much for Peter Pan to love her, and she is spending a lot of time on that island trying to capture him and make him go back home and ask her mom and dad for her hand in marriage. She knows that Peter is unfaithful; she knows that Peter has a lot of women on that island (Tinker Bell, the mermaids, Tiger Lily), yet she still sticks around. She's very complex. At the same time, however, she displays all the traditional Edwardian roles of women being mothers and caretakers.

Peter, on the other hand, confuses mothers with wives. He doesn't quite know the difference, or, at least, he pretends not to know the difference, and he also conveniently misremembers or forgets when things happen. There's real death on that island, too. Very early on when we get to Neverland, the narrator says, "I'm going to show you how easily people are killed on this island. I'm just going to kill this pirate, Skylights." And Skylights, we know, gives one screech. So this pirate, Skylights, lives for hardly more than a few sentences, just so the narrator can show us how quickly death is done on that island. Peter Pan has a pretend sword and a real sword, and he often confuses the two. He doesn't

know which one he is using when he is fighting Hook. Of course, he does kill Hook at the end. Poor Hook, we learn, only wanted to play. He only wanted to be a little boy. He and Peter were best friends in terms of being playmates. They have the best playtime together, but sometimes play isn't play on that island. Children and the consequences of their behavior can be quite real, even if it's pretend.

TC: How do you teach essay-writing to your students? Specifically, what kind of techniques do you use to get them out of the more traditional personal essay or the memoir? Earlier, you said that the best essay is a catastrophe. We're interested in how the classroom can become a place for failure and for catastrophe, since we typically think of it as a place to help students succeed.

JB: I teach many different types of classes, to many different types of students. So I always try to tailor to that. With my beginning students, I try to give them fun, quick assignments, and I may come up with very strange types of writing prompts—writing prompts that were inspired by one of my professors, Wayne Koestenbaum, who would give us quirky assignments along the lines of "you must do these five things: mention a cross street, talk about a time you vomited, mention your mother's favorite dessert," etc. I love seeing what they come up with when I give them an assignment like that, but I always try to tie it into the reading in some way as well.

For example, if we are reading Anne Carson's "Kinds of Water," I'll ask them to try to write a classification essay, in which they write about kinds of *something*, but also they do these things in their essays, too. It's so they have more guidance, but also so they can be surprised at their own experimentation.

People think of me as an experimental writer, but it's not exactly how I teach in the classroom. I try to have students experiment insofar as I try to have them break out of their own patterns and forms, and sometimes that's more difficult to do when students are at the graduate level. One semester when I was teaching a graduate workshop, I saw that the students were in a funk, and that they were just doing the same thing over and over again. So I taught a class I called "The Radical Trinity," and they had to do a radical memoir. They had to do a radical piece of reportage, in which they could not use the "I" at all. And then they had to do a radical assignment, meaning that each student in the class came up with an assignment, and we handed them out randomly, and they had to write on that. They weren't resistant to it at all. They really did great work. I think sometimes an assignment helps to break them out of their comfort zones a bit.

I think that more than anything I want to inspire my students by assigning reading that will help them to think about what's possible in the nonfiction form,

and also help them realize that one form of nonfiction is not better than another form, that you can't enter a classroom thinking, *Well, those people are memoirists and I'm not a memoirist. I write this kind of nonfiction, and that's better than that kind of nonfiction.* I think that we need to be in an environment where we can help each other think about what we're working on. So I try to assign a mix in my class, and I try to assign different examples of a subgenre as well. What can a memoir look like? I had one student write on my evaluation at the end of the semester that she was very unhappy, that she wanted to write memoirs, but I had assigned no memoirs, and I thought, *Wow, that's really alarming—I should revisit that.* I looked at my syllabus, and I saw that I had assigned nothing but memoirs, but they just didn't look quite like memoirs to her. In the list was one of my favorites: *Speak, Memory*, by Nabokov. You couldn't get more memoir-y than that.

AFTERWORD

> reading feels like a discontinuous yet infinite rhythmic dispersal that generates singularities. It isn't knowledge at all. It's a timely dallying and surge among a cluster of minute identifications. I prefer to become foreign and unknowable to myself in accordance with reading's audacity.
>
> —Lisa Robertson, *Nilling*

Having just read three great interviews between one smart class and an incredible trio of writers, I'm thinking about the many ways we make connections: between ideas, between the books we read and the writers who write them, between ourselves and others—our students, our friends. I'm thinking, too, about the generosity of not-knowing, how as a reader I gravitate toward writers who welcome confusion, who don't pretend to have the answers I need, who themselves "prefer to become foreign and unknowable" inside of a book.

When I was a girl, I read constantly. Perhaps as a result, the distance between my waking life and my sleeping life seemed not terribly far. Both of these lives were lived slightly out of focus, were oddly terrifying, baffling. Many of my earliest memories are of trees: light between branches. Sitting reading. The scent of orange blossoms or eucalyptus. My experience of the world seemed to me even then somewhat problematically dumbstruck, gappy, as if I were lacking some essential part that allowed other people to just get on with it, make sense of it. There was a pepper tree next door under which I inexplicably lost my watch. There was a banana tree throwing wild shadows across my walls. Were they leaves or arms? Am I awake or am I sleeping?

Sometimes, a text is what wakes you. You instantly feel as if some exile has finally and only just that instant ended, though you hadn't quite realized you'd been in exile until then. You could cry at the wonder and relief you feel from a pain of not-belonging you hadn't been able to articulate only hours or minutes before. I was a grad student when I first read Lyn Hejinian's "The Rejection of Closure." "I can only begin a posteriori," Hejinian writes:

> by perceiving the world as vast and overwhelming; each moment stands under an enormous vertical and horizontal pressure of information, potent with ambiguity, meaningfull, unfixed, and certainly incomplete. What saves this from becoming a vast undifferentiated mass of data and situation is one's ability to make distinctions. The open text is one which both acknowledges the vastness of the world and is formally differentiating. It is form that provides an opening.

I stopped being more overwhelmed than not inside my life during the same period in which I began to write. I don't know that the one lead to or from the other, and yet, as events, they feel related. Hejinian's essay helps me understand why that might be, how writing might have forced me to look more carefully into the vastness, the shifting, to make distinctions, to form a form from the mud. This mattered. This had a huge effect on me. It's not that I figured things out (I like Boully's discussion of Didion: "'I don't know what the point is; I can't see clearly; I don't know what this is all about; I've written it down, but I still don't have any answers'"), but the writing-it-down helped, might literally have saved me. Also: finding writers who seemed to be thinking through the world in ways that made sense to me or continued to open it up for me within texts that were themselves thinking texts, not fixed, not knowing, but inventive, often sitting strangely on the page, themselves a bit dumbstruck or gappy. As Robertson says in that same essay from *Nilling*: "Form—its because there are consequences." It would be hard to overstate the effect

Hejinian's writing has had on the way I write and the ways in which I think about how literature can be, can just be in the world, as a tree might be or a girl might be (as Swensen has stated elsewhere: "I'm much more interested in saying the poem is.").

And so I love that Chapman has honored Hejinian's text by forming a whole class around it. I love that the class was clearly designed like an open text, in which students were asked to think their own way through. Of course, any teacher offers distinctions: this text and not that one, this writer, and then this one. And these choices build something specific in the world. The chain of conversation provided here, out of this specific class and in conjunction with these specific writers, is deeply engaging and generative. I found myself wanting to butt in, to ask another question (about ekphrasis, teaching, translation, failure, research), to keep a good conversation rolling. And so I offer this as no kind of closure but only a small exclamation mark of admiration for the work and writers and thinking that came before.

Danielle Dutton

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AUTHOR BIOS

JENNY BOULLY

Jenny Boully is the author of five books, most recently *of the mismatched teacups, of the single-serving spoon: a book of failures*. Her other books include *not merely because of the unknown that was stalking toward them*, *The Book of Beginnings and Endings*, *[one love affair]** and *The Body: An Essay*. She has a PhD in English from CUNY's Graduate Center, and lives and works in Chicago. She is at work on many writing projects, including a book of regrets.

J'LYN CHAPMAN

photo credit: Alex Garcia

J'Lyn Chapman's chapbook *Bear Stories* was published by Calamari Press. Her chapbook *Our Last Days* is forthcoming from Erudite Fangs. An essay derived from her doctoral dissertation on W. G. Sebald was recently published in *Picturing the Language of Images*. She is Core Candidate Assistant Professor in the Jack Kerouac School at Naropa University, and edits the online poetics journal *Something on Paper*.

DANIELLE DUTTON

photo credit: Harold Abramowitz

Danielle Dutton is the author of *Attempts at a Life*, *S P R A W L* and *Here Comes Kitty: A Comic Opera*, a collaboration with the artist Richard Kraft due out from Siglio Press in January 2015. She is an assistant professor at Washington University in St. Louis, and the founder and editor of Dorothy, a publishing project.

RENEE GLADMAN

Renee Gladman is the author of seven works of prose and one collection of poetry. A new novel, *Morelia*, and a collection of essay-fictions, *Calamities*, are forthcoming in 2015. Since 2005, she has operated Leon Works, an independent press for experimental prose and other thought-projects based in the sentence, making occasional forays into poetry. A 2014–15 fellow at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard, she lives in Providence with the poet-ceramicist Danielle Vogel.

COLE SWENSEN

Cole Swensen is the author of 14 volumes of poetry and a collection of critical essays. Her work has twice been a finalist for the *Los Angeles Times* Book Award and once for the National Book Award, and she has won the Iowa Poetry Prize, the San Francisco State Poetry Center Book Award and the National Poetry Series. A 2006 Guggenheim Fellow, she has also been supported by grants from Creative Capital and the Shifting Foundation. She has taught at the University of Denver and the Iowa Writers' Workshop, and currently teaches at Brown.

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