

An Interview with Carla Harryman

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an interview with
CARLA HARRYMAN

Conducted by Megan Simpson



Carla Harryman is a prose writer, playwright, poet, and essayist. Born in 1952 and raised in Orange, California, Harryman moved to San Francisco in the early seventies.

She is one of the relatively few women who participated in the very earliest theorizing and practice of what has since become known as “language writing.” Harryman has been active in the Bay Area’s community of experimental writers for over twenty years, regularly reading, performing her work, and giving talks on poetics. She was a cofounder of Poets Theater in San Francisco, a venue for experimental plays from 1978 to 1984. Many of Harryman’s dramatic works have been performed, including *Memory Play* in May 1994 at The LAB in San Francisco and *Fish Speech* in 1996 for the Public Broadcasting Service’s television miniseries *The United States of Poetry*. Harryman has also performed in and directed productions of her own as well as others’ works. She directed the 1995 production of Leslie Scalapino’s play *Goya’s L.A.* at New Langton Arts in San Francisco, and in 1994–95 she was dramaturge for *A Little Girl Dreams of Taking the Veil*, an opera based on the text by Max Ernst. She has taught fiction and scriptwriting at the University of California, San Diego, a seminar on narrative at the Detroit Institute of the Arts, and a course on gender and hybridity at Wayne State University. Harryman recently moved from Berkeley to the Detroit area with her husband, poet and scholar Barrett Watten, and their son Asa.

Harryman is the author of many books, including *Percentage* (Tuumba, 1979), *Under the Bridge* (This, 1980), *Property* (Tuumba,



Barrett Walfen

CARLA HARRYMAN

1982), *The Middle* (Gaz, 1983), *Vice* (Potes & Poets, 1986), *Animal Instincts* (This, 1989), *In the Mode Of* (Zasterle, 1991), *Memory Play* (O, 1994), and *There Never Was a Rose without a Thorn* (City Lights, 1995). Her work has also been widely published in journals known for promoting innovative writing, including *New American Writing*, *Zyzyva*, *Mirage*, *This*, *Abacus*, *Avec*, and *Poetics Journal*. Harryman is currently working on three new manuscripts: "The Words: After Carl Sandburg's Rootabaga Stories and Jean-Paul Sartre," in which she uses Sandburg-style repetition as an investigative mode; "Gardener of Stars," a "post-plague" novel with two wildly subjective narrators; and "Games," a collaboration with San Francisco visual artist Amy Trachtenberg. Also mentioned in this interview is a piece Harryman is writing in collaboration with Lyn Hejinian, "The Wide Road." Written in the first-person plural, part verse, part prose, this piece explores the erotic tendencies of language and violates the norms of literary erotica by describing shared heterosexual fantasies.

In the short preface to *There Never Was a Rose without a Thorn*, which brings together new as well as previously published short prose pieces, Harryman refers to the works collected there as "hybrid writings, staged as they are between fiction and theory, the domestic and history, abstractions and androgyny, the rational and the nonrational, the creator and her artifact" (1). This hybridity is precisely what caught my attention when I first read Harryman's work in the early 1980s. Her writing everywhere insists that the division between the critical and the creative upheld by conventions of genre and form is not only constraining and arbitrary but illusory. Many of Harryman's published volumes are collections of individually titled short works: parable-like narratives, dramas, poetic essays.

Harryman's writings challenge the distinction between the creative and the critical by investigating a range of notions that uphold this distinction, including authenticity, originality, and objectivity. For instance, in "Autonomy Speech," the writing moves from one type of language to another, in and out of dialogue, from internal monologue to third-person narrative, thus continually thwarting any gestures toward wholeness or autonomous identity for the speaker that any one of these modes might initiate on its own. These units of language become the performers in Harryman's dra-

matic insistence that autonomy—if it exists at all—can be neither discovered nor expressed in language:

There is no autonomy save

the daily

the banal emptied out, the forms of human practice that have no formal language. If there were a formal language for pouring pepper onto the clay no one would ask what happens when you have to pee.

(*Animal Instincts* 114)

Statements, when they occur in Harryman's writing, are not expressions of inner truth, identity, or meaning, but statements of themselves—how they are formed, what their relation is to other statements and their speakers. Harryman's critique of autonomy extends to incorporating into her writing material appropriated from other texts; her many sources include H.D., Freud, Saint Augustine, the Marquis de Sade, and "nonliterary" material such as a promotional brochure for the Rova Saxophone Quartet.

In addition, Harryman's writings interrogate the operations of narrative and the rules governing language use. "I prefer to distribute narrative rather than deny it," she writes in "Toy Boats," a piece in a *Poetics Journal* symposium on narrative (*Poetics Journal* 5 [May 1995] 104). Her response to the symposium's inquiry is direct: "The question of the status of narrative presupposes a hierarchy of literary values I do not entertain in my work. Narrative is neither an oppressor to be obliterated nor the validating force of all literary impulse" (106). Harryman's motivations for breaking conventions and transgressing boundaries in her writing, as well as the political, philosophical, and aesthetic implications of doing so, are central themes in this interview, conducted in Oakland on June 17, 1994, and revised and edited over the last two years.

Q. I'd like to begin by asking a question about genre. Your writing is frequently published in certain venues and contexts that identify it as poetry—I'm thinking of the earliest published selections of "language poetry" in the journal *This* and Ron Silliman's anthology *In the American Tree*, as well as some more recent anthologies, including Douglas Messerli's *From the Other Side of the Century: A New American Poetry 1960–1990*. And although your work in

Norton's new anthology edited by Paul Hoover, *Postmodern American Poetry*, is not there represented as "language writing," it is represented as poetry. Do you think of your work as poetry?

A. I'm exploring genre. The writing partakes of poetry in addition to prose narrative, discursive writing, theater. One could read many writers through the lenses of various genres. Steve Benson, who writes much of his work with performative constraints meant to facilitate improvisation, is a good example. In *Blue Book* [Great Barrington, MA: The Figures; New York: Roof, 1988], he's writing everything he thinks as if that were possible: it's demonstrative—it invokes the paradoxical system by which one could perform the impossible. The challenges and obstacles he creates for himself to produce the work in performance and on the page are not genre-specific per se: they are not poetic forms, they are not necessarily fictive or thematic in their demands, they are not plays; however, the resultant texts may from point to point seem like any number of generic forms as they develop and discard themes. Many of his written works are derived from cycles of interactions between written texts and live improvised oral responses to them. These responses often use an audiotape of a prior improvisation as an interference system or feedback mechanism by which to produce more words. The written, oral, and aural are all intertwined in the accrual of disruptions. There is something wonderfully scrupulous and messy about the resultant writing: it is quite liberating due to its ethics of playfulness.

I like to put families of language in conversation with each other, such as theoretical discourse, fiction, and nonsense—I use the page to perform the dialogue, first, although I think of the page also as a staging device. Virtually anything can be performed, after all. Wouldn't it be interesting to do an evening of performances of *The Principle of Hope* by Ernest Bloch? I think so. My quest or interrogation is performative—"it thinks" it can even invent its audience as a character of the text [Barrett Watten, "Mimesis," 1–10 (Berkeley: *This*, 1980)]. "It thinks" is the ultimate performance in writing of mimetic performativity—it is a loop, a trope, and a joke about the human production of the object that is not "it," that is, human. That's why it's so memorable.

There are contemporary writers—such as those appearing in Maggie O’Sullivan’s *Out of Everywhere: Linguistically Innovative Poetry by Women in North America and the UK* [London: Reality Studios, 1996], including Diane Ward, Joan Retallack, Tina Darragh, Geraldine Monk, Caroline Bergvall, and Paula Claire—working within visual/musical/performative areas. The writings can be seen as enactments for the page and off the page, where another enactment is formed in relationship to a text that announces itself as a performance, visually. A lot of my writing is prose or looks like combinations of poetry and prose. Its values are not typically visual or musical. The performance/conversation occurs between the kinds of language put into play: thus “the audience” that might hypothetically be a character of the text would be a character only insofar as the writing produces itself as a character.

I do feel ambivalent about the designation “poet” and for good reasons. I certainly appreciate that I’m read by poets. This issue of designation would not necessarily have the same value or history in another (or my ideal) literary culture.

Q. What are some of the reasons for which you feel ambivalent about being designated a poet?

A. I’m extremely interested in prose narrative and novels both as instruments at the mercy of the imagination’s narrative drive and as media for response to social and public issues. Yet I also appreciate that poetry with its verve for condensation and play of constraint can make use of philosophical discourse: it can construct itself as a demonstration of a philosophical analysis, it can rebuke, deform, betray, and become philosophy. It can use the language of philosophy for its own pleasures. In the realm of theater, I see that poetry vitalizes theater, and that this has been the case for most of the history of modern (in its broadest sense) theater, but that density of language in theater has suffered under a weird, American, I think, modish line-drawing of genre that seems to have to do with terms like “mass market,” “commercialization,” “professional,” and “television.” There are what I consider faux divisions of genre, or great simplifications of aesthetic knowledge, in our contemporary culture.

The reification of genre is disadvantageous to contemporary

women artists, because generic terrain “appears” to be limited to forms that may not be conducive to mapping out consciousness that invents itself or its forms of cultural expression, which is part of the cultural work of women right now—the creation of cultural forms. But the disadvantage really comes not so much from the prohibitive construction of generic boundaries as from the struggle to advocate for work that does not fit into a predictable slot. It is important that the art that women produce not be slotted as marginal, privatized, women’s writing but that it be articulated dynamically in relation to the discussions already on the table. This issue does not necessarily relate to formal experimentation. For instance, if a male author were to write about a gynocentric world, his book would not be understood to be directed only to women, but if a woman were to write a book about a gynocentric world, then it *might* be presumed that mostly women would be interested in reading it. This is and is not hypothetical: some writers are only taken seriously in closed identity circuits, but not for justifiable reasons. This all has to do with how writing is mediated—not who talks about it so much as how it’s discussed.

Complex, exploratory forms of writing are part of our history. *Tristram Shandy* need not be seen merely as an artifact: it is part of cultural memory, history, possibility. People construct, alter, reawaken cultural practice by picking up threads that have been neglected or underused as well as by charging into the unknown. Sometimes charging into the unknown involves writing something down that one imagines has been said but never written, creating a shift in meaning and context by adding to its communicative medium. In fact, there is not so much difference between reusing, pillaging, and pioneering when it comes to cultural construction. The terrain is there to be opened up.

Q. In *Vice* you seem to be arguing for another kind of “opening up” in writing; I’m thinking of the section where you analyze the museum catalog description of a work by Max Beckmann. You compare the catalog copy to news coverage in that both ignore and thereby leave inarticulate the audience’s “primary response to the image” [55]. Can any discourse accommodate and acknowledge primary responses? Is this a goal in your work?

A. Yes, a discourse can point to a primary response as being there, as being separate from its own trajectory by taking its own approach to the object and/or its objective account. What I mean is that even “informative” writing like wall material can call attention to its own limits without invalidating its discursive objectives. It can demonstrate, like Steve Benson might when igniting a series of mishearings with additional self-conscious mishearings, that what “it” says may not be as important as what a viewer sees when she looks at a work of art. It can announce itself as having a slant, its own aesthetic bias, et cetera, but not if the “author” of the explication believes that the person looking at the work of art is entirely dependent on her explication of the work of art. This is an issue for anybody in any writing medium who wishes to communicate something to someone else. Simply imagining the audience’s presumed ignorance is not an adequate basis for communication.

Any visual image can only be rendered secondarily in any written analysis or description. The image and the writing are not the same thing. Didactic mediation can overdetermine what the response ought to be. Some of the catalog copy I use in *Vice* attempts to instruct the viewer that Beckmann’s images are “never static,” while framing the observation in a narrow set of scholarly concerns about “rational” and “natural” ways to mentally store images. What one learns from the catalog copy is that the scholar makes a distinction between how a scholar would store images and how an artist like Beckmann would store them: the copy is distanced from what someone might see as it invests in the clichéd distinction between the artist as “nature” and the rational scholar.

Q. You seem to me to be raising questions—especially in plays such as *Third Man* and *La Quotidienne: An Atmospheric Play* [*Animal Instincts*], and also in the less formalized dialogues that take place within prose narratives—about the relationship between verbal constructions and various social contexts of discourse.

A. I’m interested in a measure of dialogue in which, on the one hand, somebody asks a question and somebody answers the question; on the other, the person answering the question is only talking to herself, and the question itself is only heard as a question she

would ask herself, something that would be a product of her own mind. Thus you ask me, "Do you like roses?" And I answer with the question "Have you disposed of the fading roses?" because I had been thinking about tossing the wilting cut flowers out. Your question might be, "Do you like roses?" And my answer might be, "I've been thinking about it off and on all morning." It might in a peculiar way sound like I'm answering your question, but I'm really answering a different question, not necessarily knowing that what I'm answering and your question differ.

Q. And you make that quite conspicuous in your writing.

A. Yes. So "the president" manipulates this form of knowledge, right? By rallying his forces, and getting everybody to figure out what the questions are in advance, and making sure that he is going to answer them either precisely or entirely indirectly—calculated knowledge in understanding or misunderstanding questions and social habits of misunderstanding can be turned into pretenses to great advantage. On the other hand, people often believe they are talking about exactly the same thing. In fact, it's fascinating; to some extent, civilization rests on the belief that we know what each other is talking about. Or sometimes talking is like sex; you just want to be with somebody, and it's not important whether or not you're able to understand the other person.

Q. So as long as the dialogue comes off it doesn't matter if it makes sense?

A. It typically doesn't make sense.

Q. That's why I think your plays are so comical. But this is serious too, maybe even dangerous.

A. Well, the great thing about plays is that one knows there is an audience. One is performing to observers/readers. In *La Quotidienne*, when June starts to read a letter to her father, the other character in the play may not recognize that she's jumped to a different track or context, but the audience perceives it. There is an interesting triangulation between the knowledge of the charac-

ters and the knowledge of the audience. It's a conventionalized use of irony in an unconventional context.

It is the case that in some of my plays there is a recognition that the characters have more desire to speak to each other than to understand each other.

Q. Although your dialogues often remind me of Eugène Ionesco, it seems that your attitude is much more optimistic, your plays are more optimistic.

A. Yes, they are, and I think they're more political too. I think Ionesco is more of a metaphysical writer than I am. Because of his metaphysics, his sense of communication is arrested and fixed.

Q. Whereas you're searching for possibility.

A. Yes. We have differing relationships to the knowledge of modernity.

Q. Still, has Ionesco influenced you?

A. Some, I suppose. The carnivalesque aspects of the plays come from the contemporary heterogeneous experience of cultures and the problematics of fixed identity within it. Ernie Kovacs, Ionesco, Johnny Carson, Lautreamont, parades, representations of carnivals in film, Warren Sonbert's films, Steve Benson's performances, Laurel and Hardy, phantasmic images of women to replace women's historical invisibility, Balzac's heroines, Plato, Marx, Beckett, the maudlin and the modish, opera design, Brecht, the travesty of the representation of the feminine, Djuna Barnes, seventies performance art, Frank O'Hara, Shakespeare—the influences are not generic, and I would not have selected Ionesco as an influence without your mention, but it's apt nonetheless.

Q. You make a statement in *Vice* that maybe explains what allows you to look out and ask questions in your own writing: "I do not write with inner truth. Writing is a demonstration of the influence of relationships" [54]. Could you write with inner truth if you wanted to?

A. No. I just experience writing as thinking. The writer, the reader, or the writer who is the reader tends to have certain world-views that have something to do with her self-construction(s). A detachment from authenticity is native to my self-construction.

Q. What kinds of relationships does writing demonstrate?

A. Well, Barrett [Watten] and I have been talking about the book *The Bonds of Love*, by Jessica Benjamin. It's an engaging book, and much of it has to do with the relationship of the mother to the child and acknowledging it. In a way it's in the domain of object relations but not entirely, because there is more fluidity between the objects. In our conversations I thought of the experience of having a child and the sense—the very ongoing sense—that whatever individuation actually is, whatever that real dynamic is (which is not adequately accounted for in the psychoanalytic tradition), it has to do with the basic fact that when the child has autonomy from the parent, it's because the child understands that the parent can grant the child autonomy. Which is like society. So that familial relationships are very like the construction of society. There is never a time when a human being is not in society. That would be the basis for your question.

Q. So the writing is the site of encounter between self, worlds, individuals? Is this what you're getting at in the beginning of *The Middle*, where you write, "Characterizing the middle where what's enlarged (subjective) and what's reduced (external) by speaking gather" [n.p.]?

A. Yes. I think that in the practice of writing, the subjective expands—it kind of fills consciousness. So in a sense, x'ing out the world is in a relational dynamic with the expansion of consciousness within an individual. The "world" shrinks as the "individual" expands.

Q. What does language have to do with that, in the process of writing?

A. Language accesses both subjective expansiveness and the subject's relationship to externality. Those are interdependent terms;

once again, this has to do with social reality and the person's or the child's imprint on the external world. Writing makes its path within such a relationship. The experience between an individual subject, her impulse to expand, to meet the world, and her knowledge that in so doing the world is reduced is the ground of the writing.

Q. It's a kind of displacement.

A. Yes, it is. It's a displacement. The writing is a kind of displacement, but it's one you can follow, that allows you to follow its construction.

Q. And why would you want to do that?

A. Well, this reminds me of a work the composer Jon Raskin made recently, which was based on the metaphor of "critical path." The critical path in architecture would be the scenario by which a building gets made, and so the path that defines the process of construction is what people can adhere to or veer away from, but they have to have it or nothing happens—there is only stagnation, there is no building, there is nothing. So you have to have the scenario, even if you depart from the scenario. I think that in writing, we can't have the knowledge, whatever having knowledge is, about the relationship of a given person or peoples, without some kind of displacement in language.

Q. So when you're tracing a "critical path" in your writing, are you both veering from it and adhering to it?

A. Oh, yes. In some way or another I have a formal direction. And it might have something to do with just having some little spark of an idea and then looking at the way this spark came out and then investigating what sort of consequences its rhetoric invokes. So I might see a work being constructed by the way I initially chose to approach an idea, with the sense that I could have approached it another way but I chose this: it would be a loosely conceived path. Sometimes I have more rigorous kinds of investigations, but they don't have anything to do with a desire for a particular result.

Q. Does any work of yours in particular come to mind in which you take such a “rigorous” approach?

A. Yes, *Memory Play*—in the sense that I was always returning to an investigation of memory, whether it was overt or concealed, whatever that would be. I mean, I would test everything against that. And then this book that I’m writing, “The Words,” is very much involved with investigation of ideas using a quality of repetition derived from Carl Sandburg. But my formal strategies are often tied to philosophical questions or theoretical questions.

Q. So the philosophical concerns of the project define what limits you need to set for yourself.

A. Right.

Q. In an interview with Manuel Brito, you say, “the way I use sentences is involved with discovery” [Manuel Brito, *A Suite of Poetic Voices: Interviews with Contemporary American Poets* (Santa Brigida, Spain: Kadle Books, 1992) 65]. What does your writing have to do with discovery?

A. I think that I’m trying to find out if there is a sort of nonrigid utopian imagination, and what I want to know is if it’s possible to do this in a way that admits and addresses and doesn’t simply alter but actually takes on as material reality, in some way or other, dystopian conditions.

Q. Is what you’re seeking, the utopian, any more real than what you’re questioning, the constructions?

A. Well, I think it’s less real. I’m deeply curious about what art can discover about the potential shifts of consciousness and structures in society. When we’re talking about discovery, it might be part of the Euro-American impulse to romanticize the unknown, and this romanticization can no longer be about what’s on the other side of the Rocky Mountains. I hate to say this, because I think it’s an awful thing to say.

Q. What are the awful implications of what you’re saying?

A. Much utopian thought in literature—though I think there are some real exceptions to this, like Monique Wittig’s work—is basically reactive and reactionary. You know, it has to do with the individual’s critique of the present world. Society is organized to protect the author, whoever that is. The world is constructed in his image.

Q. So it’s a kind of imperialism?

A. I think that would be an obvious critique of some utopian texts. I’m not writing utopian texts, but I’m very interested in whatever impulse it is to make—you know, like in Sir Thomas More’s *Utopia*, diamonds have no value. I love that metaphor, because, like death, it makes room for other things to be valued differently—women and children, for instance. Also, what women and children value might surface more readily. I mean, in this imaginary realm we’re discussing, the negating of one value might leave a place for some kind of submerged value to surface. Then we might be able to examine forms of knowledge or habits of mind that might not have received the attention they deserve. I don’t mean to gender this as much as it might sound. There are after all “male mothers,” and there are many blurred boundaries between the roles men and women assume.

Parenting (mother and father, mother and mother, mother and uncle, father and father, grandma and mother, et cetera) creates the pleasure of a shared knowledge rarely expressed. The pleasure is quite primal and rarely discussed in books.

Jessica Benjamin’s book, on the other hand, identifies moments of intense peacefulness among people that tend, even in psychoanalytic discourse, never to be noted. The peacefulness is not neurotic; it’s healthy! This is what I’m trying to address in regard to the utopian imagination—there is a realm of knowledge that has to do with healthy human relationships sacrificed to the psychotic, the neurotic, the demonized, and the politically repressive, and at the same time, the politically repressive and deep experiences of human pleasure are not seen as being linked.

Benjamin describes a situation that is absolutely true to my experience: when there is a child in the same room with me and we’re do-

ing different things, the child can do what she or he is doing separately from me because the child knows that I'm there. It's the most pleasurable thing in the world to see this person becoming himself or herself in front of me. Nobody ever talks about this, even though it's a shared experience among many, many human beings. What does it mean, that there are these shared experiences that you don't find out about unless you experience them personally, and then you might not know you're experiencing anything in particular, because there is no language or context for them? Lack of articulation about significant daily experience undermines consciousness, creates a condition for repression, doubt, insecurity. Then social norms that may not serve the best interest of "the mother" or "the child" can take hold.

Q. Yes. That's an interesting example. So this is the same thing you were talking about in the Brito interview when you say, "there are other orders by which people think and live, which I want to call up, find out about" [65]?

A. Yes. Also, it goes beyond that. We're so isolated from each other, we don't know. I grew up in the alienated, homogeneous suburbs of the fifties and sixties. Crossing boundaries is important if one wants to get a sense of how to live, to be able to project that in any useful or knowledgeable sense.

Q. What you say about crossing barriers and sharing experiences brings to mind your collaborative project with Lyn Hejinian, "The Wide Road." In that work you explore the erotics of language, "determined to adventure across normal boundaries, or to blur them at the very least," as you put it. How does the plurality of subjectivity you're exploring here afford one "unusual liberty and power" [Carla Harryman and Lyn Hejinian, "A Comment on *The Wide Road* for O," *Subliminal Time*, spec. issue of *O* 4 (1993): 83]?

A. I'm not sure that Lyn would agree with me, but I think that the freedom has to do with this work being erotic literature. We're trying to eroticize language, trying to see how far we can get with it. But I would say that this is also like public girl-talk, except that it's literarily transformative. It's not real girl-talk, because it's just not

exactly or only about girl-talk topics. We infuse other topics with the desire inherent in girl-talk. That is not permitted; you can't just do that. So the freedom is in doing something that's not permitted. But the great thing about it is that it's *so* not permitted that it's not even talked about, so it doesn't feel like it's not permitted. Sharing heterosexual fantasies in writing is an uncharted territory. It's not as if people say, "you can't do that." It's unstated.

Interestingly, we have absolutely no problem with it. It doesn't even feel like we're violating anything; I don't feel like I'm being bad. It's like play. So I think that this has to do with what is knowledge, what is social knowledge, and what is private knowledge, and all that.

Q. So it's along the same lines as what you were talking about that happens when you're watching a child become himself in your presence—it's not talked about but it happens.

A. Yes, and because the text is literary, it engages highly charged linguistic play so you can really get at much of what's palpable about this type of relationship in which you're not too worried about who's who, for instance. There is a breakdown or meltdown of barriers that is like the breakdown of erotic barriers in sex. I mean, it's a different barrier, but I think that's one of the reasons why this thing works so well; it's a sort of egalitarianism, not in the sense of "you get this much and I get the same amount," but having to do with a conceptual feminine reality. And I think another boundary that we're consenting to transgress, and doing so very assertively, is this relationship of women to men as one of victimization.

Q. What about the boundary between humans and inanimate objects? I realize I keep bringing us back to *Vice*, but I want to ask you about the narrative that begins on page 43: "The rock turns on its hindlegs and pleads innocence."

A. It's like a cartoon. This can be read in another way; whereas the rock is usually situated in the symbolic, it is here transformed into a vehicle for narrative. It has to act. Symbolic conventions are thus transgressed.

Q. Why do cartoons do that?

A. When one visits the rock in the desert, there is an incredible sense that the rock's going to be here a lot longer than you are; it's the wonderful, unfathomable rock. Conversely there are all these things that humans do to rocks, in literature and in actuality: they explode them, they hurl them into roads. And so "the rock turns on its hind legs and pleads innocence" is an act or activity of the anthropomorphic—an intentional fusion of the human agent with the otherness of the rock.

Q. And you do that throughout your works. Even concepts have emotions.

A. Right. So the other questioning behind that is, What if we didn't see rocks as profundities, or barriers? What if we saw them as thieves, or something else? I think this piece of writing engages an atavistic impulse, although I don't like that word very much. There is a sense of human beings and their relationship to the natural world, which is storylike but somewhat untroubled by the direction of the story.

Q. So in a way you're breaking knowledge away from our construction of it to see what that construction is and also how else we might imagine it.

A. Yes. But it's also play, an aggressive kind of play. I think it's related to the imagination as it comes through in the intense fantasy play that children engage in, that actually has to do with both acting out and learning. Violent fantasy play is connected to getting control of violent knowledge. Such play helps them learn about violence, their own violence and the world's violence. When they play, children will take something from the adult world that they observe and then manipulate it and stretch it in different directions to get information. They get power in relationship to this thing that otherwise only has power over them. There is a power dynamic going on, once again, between the inside and the outside.

I think that the adult imagination desires mastery over different objects. The rock story in *Vice* may be an observance of complexity

of the imagination within a “speechless time,” as if the observance were a game. Saint Augustine was a source for some of this writing. I take Augustine’s constructed observations about “the games” as a game, something for me to play with—or against. Pleasure and transgression are connected to repetition, and this has something to do with dispersal—an eros. The rock occurs repetitiously and is dispersed erratically throughout the text (the erratic dispersal’s lack of allegiance to consistency is also cartoonlike). A writer might construct an imaginary eros that can violate forms of knowledge and turn them into something else.

Q. I want to ask what your thoughts are on subjectivity. A short piece in *Animal Instincts*, “My Story,” begins with this sentence: “Speaking in a state of fidelity to the subject, living flesh though it may be, is similar to assuming one has acquired the song of birth through the ritual repeating of the names and gestures of newborn infants” [32]. It seems like this whole piece is a radical questioning of the authenticity of the subject.

A. It’s a radical questioning of the representation of subjectivity in writing, the sense of the continuity of the self in language, constructing a character or person as having a continuum, which I think has very little to do with the “living flesh, though it may be.” In your terms, I am submitting “the authentic subject” to a kind of erotic play or tease. The teasing would not be possible without our already constructed sense of a subject as being whole—the whole baby, the whole person. On the one hand, there is no partial person, and on the other, our persons are constitutive of parts. I address this issue in act 2, scene 3 of *Memory Play*. “Self,” “subjectivity,” “authenticity,” and “real” sometimes are confused. One can read about a “real” cowboy or an “authentic” artist, as if there are some people herding cattle or making paintings who are fakes. In these examples, such terms are used to separate the natural or genuine from the suspect. What’s interesting, of course, is what constitutes the “suspect.” Consider: “a real man is an oxymoron,” and “if gender is a kind of imitation for which there are no originals” [Judith Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991)

21]. There is, I suppose, something about the idea of authenticity that I don't want to take too seriously.

Q. Yes, I can see that, because although your work is almost always narrative, and many of the narratives are written in first person, your intent does not seem to be to render a transparent construction of personal history.

A. Right. My aesthetic project is not related to a transparent construction of personal history. I interrogate uses of language, and to the extent that I construct stories, I posit the probable and the impossible in the same narrative context. I do this to put the past, present, impossible, and unknown into conversation with each other and to create a conversation between those things that one can imagine as occurring in the world and those things that can only occur in literature or art or backyard play—all of which is also in the world. The human mind is ubiquitously capable of producing materials that cannot exist in "real life" but that may form a relationship to real life or real desires. One human desire seems to be to construct the unrepresentable. Even these definitional edges and distinctions ("real life," "real desires," "mind," "materials," "unknown") must be continually examined for flaws: digression is always meaningful.

I am interrogating constructions of narration in their intersections with constructions of the individual: such constructions are quite complex, and I suppose that is one reason for the complexity of my own work. My work "In the Dome of the Imitator" is entirely autobiographical, but it "distributes narrative" (to quote myself) while being constructed through a process of thematic recurrence, coincidence, and improvisation ["Toy Boats" 104].

As I suggested above, I have always had an affinity with the "irrational"—a fascination with the mind being able to think what cannot ever fully exist in material form. Leonora Carrington's work (her visual art and writing) has been very much on my mind recently, because of the fabular and fantastical iconography rendered within a context of formally traditional pictorial space and/or prose structures.

Obviously unacknowledged knowledge (women's personal experience, for example) is extremely important. When autobiogra-

phical material becomes truly challenging for me is when it startles and disrupts conventional forms or surfaces. The writings of Dodie Bellamy, Robert Glück, Camille Roy, and Kevin Killian are wonderful examples of this practice, as are Lyn Hejinian's *My Life* and *Writing as an Aid to Memory* in a poetic medium. In these writings the author takes open responsibility for writing the work and for the formal values in the work.

Q. To what extent do you see these kinds of disruptive autobiographical writings as political gestures?

A. I don't think that how a given author writes, formally, has to do with social policy. Because aesthetic practice always implicates the political, aesthetic practice can be confused with the actual creation of social movements and social policies. A work of art can solicit social action successfully, and it can intend to solicit action and have no real effect. The reciprocity between the reader and the writing implicates social forms outside that one-to-one relationship, but the implications are never unitary or monological. The writers who have been writing transparent personal narratives have provided a basis for a younger generation of writers to widen the prospects of autobiography. I have seen very inventive uses of autobiographical writing by students, men and women. Many students experience the straddling of two worlds, two cultures: the culture of the academic environment or learning environment and the life outside that environment, which might be a Los Angeles barrio, a working-class neighborhood, or a gay community. In these circumstances vocabulary takes on particularly interesting sets of issues.

Q. What do you think of the argument that it takes a position of privilege for a writer to be able to depart from normative structures such as personal narrative?

A. I don't buy that. I didn't grow up in a privileged situation—I grew up in a lower-middle-class situation, and I had lots of relatives who weren't middle class, who were working class—and I've often found that people who like my writing who aren't literary people are like the people I grew up with, my relatives, and I think that that class discourse is wrong. I don't think it's necessarily wrong for bad

reasons; I think there are probably some very valuable impulses in there, but I don't think it's right. I've worked with artists who have grown up in "elite" environments whose values for narrative were strictly autobiographical. Class is not necessarily related to an artist's method.

Q. Do you think it's difficult to conceive of ourselves as coherent subjects? Of course, critiques of the unified transcendental subject are basic to postmodern discourse. But I'm wondering if you share the Marxist (or feminist) version of this critique that says we are fragmented subjects as a function of alienation, and that under better conditions we will be possessed of unity and continuity. In other words, is the disunified subject a symptom of a malady, or a liberating reality?

A. The subject is alienated and fragmented—there is no golden age of the self, certainly not for women or any oppressed people. The desire for unity, still, is true, a true desire, and it has constructive and destructive outcomes. The world is so complex, and there are so many competing interests, that alienation is here to stay. It's how civilization makes use of it that matters—alienation need not be all.

Q. Do you think that language-oriented writing, which tends to assume fragmented subjectivity, may offer women writers and readers something that more representational "this is my story" modes of writing might not?

A. Yes, I think so. But I don't think it's exclusively the domain of language-oriented writing. For instance, there are women novelists who play with novelistic conventions; I think what you're talking about doesn't only exist in the word-to-word or sentence-to-sentence kinds of constructions that you would find in my work or Lyn Hejinian's work or Leslie Scalapino's work. Sarah Schulman's farcical novels or Gail Scott's or Nicole Brossard's writings are good examples. The scales differ, however.

Q. How are these different scales doing one thing that's different from the "my story" type of writing—how would you describe that difference?

A. Well, this definitely goes back to Rachel Blau DuPlessis's statement that "no 'writing' exists that is not in fact a reading of former writing," in the sense that the writing is being constructed by reading [*The Pink Guitar: Writing as Feminist Practice* (New York: Routledge, 1990) 120]. I think that's very important literarily, because once again it deals with displacement in a certain way in which there is a real investigation between the autonomous constructions that writers engage with and the social structure that they can't exist without. Kathy Acker is another example.

Q. In the title piece of *In the Mode Of*, the narrator says, "For right now I contest this gender knowledge and its self-devouring demise by simply not making a claim as to my own gender." This opposes American feminist identity-politics theory that finds power in claiming one's gender. But the danger, as you see it, is that "[w]e will see each other first as sets of gestures, postures" [34–35]. What could or should we see each other as if not sets of gestures and postures? Are you seeking something more authentic?

A. First, let me clarify that I am not the "I" in the story. This is one of the problems that "I" or I keep running into in respect to contemporary/postmodern critiques; people inadvertently think biographically.

The work was written to see if I could get away with not identifying the gender of the "I." Of course, it is highly likely that every woman who reads this work will identify the "I" as being female. I wanted that. But the joke (inside joke) about it is that many men identify with the speaker as being male. My position, as writer, is that there is a freedom in messing with concepts of identity and gender, and that there is a realm of playful objectification that is related to having the experience and history (that is, female) of being objectified, individually and as a class. But, I would say, I do claim my gender, but not simplistically, and I think that the terms of identity politics tend to be rigid. I am posing the "gestures" and the "postures" mentally and comedically.

Q. So gender is a concern for you in your writing?

A. Yes, gender is a real concern for me in my writing. I don't think everything I'm saying is only applicable to women, or women's ex-

perience. But I'm very committed to my project as a woman. So while it does matter what form I'm writing in, what matters more is that I'm investigating that. I'm very interested in power and the marginalization of women. I'm very interested subjectively in the gap between my experience and the discourse that's available to me—whether it's theoretical, philosophical, or just sort of quotidian media—and I feel that the older I get, I think more and I know less what a woman is, and I think that is good. I think it even goes back to Shulamith Firestone, the feminist critic who in *The Dialectic of Sex* links the oppression of women to sexual difference; even though she wants a lack of differentiation of gender—and I have no idea of what I think about that, really—I like the idea of being less and less overdetermined.

For instance, I think that in American culture, when women get to a certain age, they're old. And old doesn't mean revered and respected, but no longer useful. I see these Chinese women on my block. Right now I think there are the youngest daughter, a teenager, the mother, who's probably my age, and her mother and her mother-in-law. When they walk down the street, the oldest woman walks first. And the next oldest woman walks behind her, and the woman my age walks behind her. It is a completely different world. And it's interesting, seeing how this traditional culture interfaces with my concerns. I don't want anyone walking behind me, nor do I want the flip side of that—when you're fifty-five, you're old, and there is only one way to be, only one set of clothes to wear. I think it is important to be willing to live outside the way society genders women, to the extent that one can. You don't want to go crazy doing that, though.

Q. But it can open possibilities.

A. Yes. And one wants that. Because we want our students and children to live in a different world.