

7th ANNUAL NAPOMO 30/30/30 :: DAY 30 :: RACHEL LEVITSKY To and On CARLA HARRYMAN's Female Non/Narrative Killing It



the operating system

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Welcome to the final day of the OS's 7th Annual NAPOMO 30/30/30 Series! This year, contributors far and wide were gathered by four incredible curators, who are also our 2018 Chapbook Poets — you can read more about their curatorial intentions, their work, and a little more about the mission of the series [here](#). You can navigate to the series archive, of nearly 200 entries, [here](#)!

For this final day we close this year's series with Rachel Levitsky's letter to and for and on Carla Harryman — an outlier entry from week two, curated by Mark DuCharme, author of [We, The Monstrous](#). This final entry — this letter — is a glowing coda of deep appreciation and we think it's a perfect way to close out our amazing month.

It feels fitting, too, to close with an excerpt of what Mark invoked in his curatorial statement for week 2, reminding us all that poetry “is an absolute refusal to live with the Bomb in our lives, even if only metaphorically. It is a reminder that life is not such a mean thing (in at least two senses of that word) after all. That poetry is, even when it is an act of resistance, an act of love.”

Thank you, reader, for spending another poetry month with us, and please return to [our always free archive of the now *210* entries in this incredible series](#) anytime you're seeking inspiration and fuel for your own poetic resistance. ONWARD! — *Series editor / OS Founder, Lynne DeSilva-Johnson*



April 17, 2018-April 26, 2018 — *To be continued...*

Dear Carla,

Every time I begin this letter essay on you for The Operating System's 7th annual 30-on-30-in-30 Poetry Month Celebration ("operating eco-system" — what my hand wanted to write), I get more and more mired. At least at first. I'm in a web (or is it a net?) with you in which our friendship, and the emotional courage I get from you and our exchanges, by ways of building things together, among them Belladonna*; your month long Public School Oakland *Principle of Hope* Collective Experiment in November 2013, and the one that followed as a Workshop at Pratt Institute when I was briefly the Associate Coordinator of the MFA in August 2015; your *Artifact of Hope* chapbook that came out from them[1] and, and the thinking through all these things as feminist utopian spaces (a big current research/book project of yours); and that you are one of my first and most lasting poetry teachers: your workshop at Naropa's Summer Writing Program in 1997 produced my first chapbook *2(1x1) Portraits*, published by Jennifer Heath's Baksun Books, made the week after I wrote it for your workshop, printed by Naropa's Kavyayantra Press at the Harry Smith Print Shop, to immediate circulation and quickly connected me that summer and fall to Hoa Nguyen[2] and Renee Gladman and Pam Lu and Mary Burger, the generation that became my generation, of then Bay Area (some still) radical prose writer poets that came after your generation among which I personally include, perhaps incorrectly (perhaps not) Gail Scott and Lyn Hejinian and Camille Roy and Bob Gluck — because I read all of you as a piece then many gathered through the now defunct-ish Narrativity Website[3] in 1999, and the critical anthology *Biting The Error: Writers Explore Narrative* that emerged from it, published by Coach House Books in Toronto in 2000. That web is parallel but not the same as New Narrative, "a movement still coming into focus" according to editors Rob Halpern and Robin Tremblay-McGaw in the introduction to *From Our Hearts To Yours: New Narrative As Contemporary Practice* (ON Contemporary, 2017). Despite a healthy dose of irony around the movement making moment there is a happy induction of the generations I speak of including you, into New Narrative via the above anthology and Dodie Bellamy and

Kevin Killian's *Writers Who Love Too Much: New Narrative Writing 1977–1997* (Nightboat, 2017) and the recent conference that launched both. And why not though perhaps a specificity I'm feeling here is Kathy Acker, as definitive female narrator.[4] And part of this some other thing, a distinctly female, feminist, though code and gender switching thing. A thing with mothers and girlhood thing. "The Killers," a piece by Acker, on narration and gaps and time and movement and "the lie of realism," opens the Narrativity website. Kathy's narrators *really* inhabit. It is a habitation of leaps and gaps, of time and beyond time, moving backwards and forwards, mired in the real while disregarding the requisite signatures of the real in fiction/narrative convention. You and Kathy obviously share a lot and are not the same, and one way is her female narrators occupy (the signs of which are markers like abortion, rape, father-daughter incest, etc.) male and female myths, while in your work the fluidity of power is achieved by rapid switching of genders (and gender codes) each treading on their genders' associative privileges. In an earlier draft I wrote, "the structure of political life seen as a game in which characters dart and shift between public and private violence to opportunities for desire and pleasure." As always and properly, I'm struggling to gender-ize the narration. No explanation will suffice, it is an illegal pursuit: your writing of feminist utopias that never elide the truth of patriarchal violence. Thinking through Judith Butler's *Antigone's Claim: a woman/female is a political field* always complicated by the contractions of public life and the demands of kinship. A contradiction that explodes into a rupture that is ever being forcibly sutured by the king. Suture here recalling the grammatical violence that Gail Scott articulates in "The Sutured Subject,"[5] asking:

"Why has the space for formally "avant" fiction not opened, in the wider world, in step with dance, independent cinema, visual art, music?"

and notes that for,

"evolving subjectivities both the question of the shape of the sentence and the relationship between sentences are crucial."

In prose, the relationship between sentences is physically open and remains to be questioned in writing that challenges (gendered) subjectivities. It is for Gail Scott, the question of “how, in this foregrounding, to keep writing over the cramped space of the period that leads to the next sentence beginning.” The canon’s refusal to critically endow the prose writing Gail writes about is the refusal of prose that keeps the in-between space open for maneuver, open demanding upkeep, open refusing the violence delivered in closure. A most anti-patriarchal fact of your work is that it most ardently refuses to ever allow the gap to suture, calcify, nor to be the space where the shifting gendered always sort-of-female narrator gets fucked out of existence by such a closure.

Who was it just asked me how you turned *Gardener of Stars*[6] into an opera libretto. You are always moving the gaps around.

~

“Briefly, women enter a nearly inchoate myth.” (GOS 131)

Defining New Narrative and who writes it matters less to me than what I want to do in this crazy letter, talk to you about reading you and being connected to you. I keep thinking this is the queer critical space, to never veer too far from the gossip of formulated kin-ties in public space. I’ve been wanting to do it for a while, formulate a writing around critical reading that is also always in the same moment of pleasure reading and reading the work of my friends, who are often my friends because of what they write, and the community that we make with each other which also literally saves our contested lives/minds. The call for this was around ‘neglectorino’ which you are probably not — your work is well written about — but! your practice is always a contested one that refuses the strictures of any of the camps that also include you (I don’t feel like naming them it feels retro to do so). Also, you weren’t on the list of who had already been addressed by this Operating System project, and your pursuit of feminist liberation in writing, via a lot of sex and domination and submission and things that are properly often

neglected as spaces for critical discussion. And after all we'd been through recently, I needed to write to you, about you.

It got even more complicated by real time events — the Kathy Acker Marathon Reading of *Blood and Guts in High School* at Performance Space in NYC on this April 7 — commemorating a series of Acker art events and a new Grove volume of that book with an introduction by Chris Kraus and a switch of the two last parts according to notes and recalled comments indicating Kathy's wishes — an event you flew to from Michigan, at which you and I sat together behind a mutual interlocutor of our lives, a deep intertwining we oddly share despite having encountered this person in such different times and circumstances; a person we both have a lot of feelings around, though our stories are rather distinct: yours having to do with Kathy and book publication and mine all comparatively recent and romantic. Beyond this one person who we came to fairly separately but not coincidentally, how is it possible that so many of my people are people and work reached through our first week-long encounter in 1997 and the little tall bright yellow and red book it produced. As I recall — and my recollections are confessedly completely suspect — in that course you asked us to write a portrait of something in which the thing was approached but never directly addressed. I'm confident my memory is bad and what you actually said is said better. I know for sure that we read André Breton's *Nadja*[7] perhaps my first reading of many, many and all of this reminds me that amid the other ways that we relate on or connect with or share and reach toward, things and ideas *in common*, a biggie is a relation to source material in our pedagogy and in our writing. The teaching, the writing as (and) a conversation.

Kathy writes, "I need someone who knows everything and who'll love me endlessly, then stop." She and I had this in common, even if I might have wished to solve the problem of knowing everything and endless love by achieving and impossible androgyny; not unlike that fantasized by Thivai — or am I thinking of Abhor? — in Empire of the Senseless.

(TGP 55)[8]

I added the italics to *in common* like you added the -ed to Kathy's present tense, in your opening sentence:

I never dreamt I am nymphomaniac but "I absolutely loved to fuck."

of "In Proximity of" i.e. the first section (which you call "been there done that" referring to a weary and condescending attitude among oil-spill activists toward non-oil-spill leftist politics) to make a past tense, of Kathy's word:

"love" not "loved." By using the past tense, I have connected my writing here to her writing then, as if I were speaking about myself through her modus operandi. My language is stained with her language.

Our mutual interlocutor liked to say to me:

"Never date a writer."

I might say, never write about a writer that you are friends with.

I love how you can't recall Thivai or Abhor, like later I won't remember which book of yours an etched scene I live with comes from. Rather, importantly, I remember it wrong.

I enter your books with desire for their reference and source material. Years ago, maybe ten, when I started reading your book *The Words: After Carl Sandburg's Rootabaga Stories and Jean-Paul Sartre*, I went out and bought *The Words* by Sartre. It's an 'autobiography' of his first ten years. I liked it but I was slow reading it and gave up. I wanted to read your *The Words*. I can't find your book *The Words* right now (although I'm in Sarah's workspace staring at her copy of *The Complete Poems of Carl Sandburg* as I type) so forgive me if I say something stupid about how I think that little bit of reading Sartre's

helped me see your *The Words* as not being early autobiography itself but rather objectifying the form of early autobiography; Sartre's progressive chapters met in kind which an abstract of what progress in chapters imagines it does. I think we'll both forgive me, knowing I've moved around so much. I could have sworn I left it here in Paris, after the Poets and Critics Symposium at Université Paris 7[9], organized by Abigail Lang who is a professor there and Olivier Brossard who did his national service in literature at the French Consulate in NYC back in 2000 and that is just an anecdote — he's a prodigious scholar of contemporary U.S. poets especially John Ashbery, and just edited a critical anthology on Frank O'Hara, but for a while back then when he was at the consulate, the neglectorino New York poets got to drink champagne and eat pigs in buttery dough and that seems important to say...how a moment comes and goes but is critical to these relations. Also I met Vincent Broqua through that consulate moment and when he came soon after to stay for a while with a Fulbright and we became close friends. He is the third organizer, and a poet and critic and translator of many, including recently Anne Waldman. I think I'm forgetting someone...all of it matters, no? It was on February 15 and 16, 2018, just two months ago (and by the way today is April 18, Akilah Oliver's birthday, our seventh without her. I'm determined to finish this today, for the both of you and for Lynne DeSilva-Johnson and Mark DuCharme who've been generous and patient with me).

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The Symposium, which was two days in a room around a table, eating meals and talking with a hodgepodge of people, 30 or so, multiple nationalities and professions (artists, poets, academics, translators, actors, students, mothers, professors, friends, visitors, citizens, famous, half-famous, unknown, known to some) including you. A university seminar room for two full days with

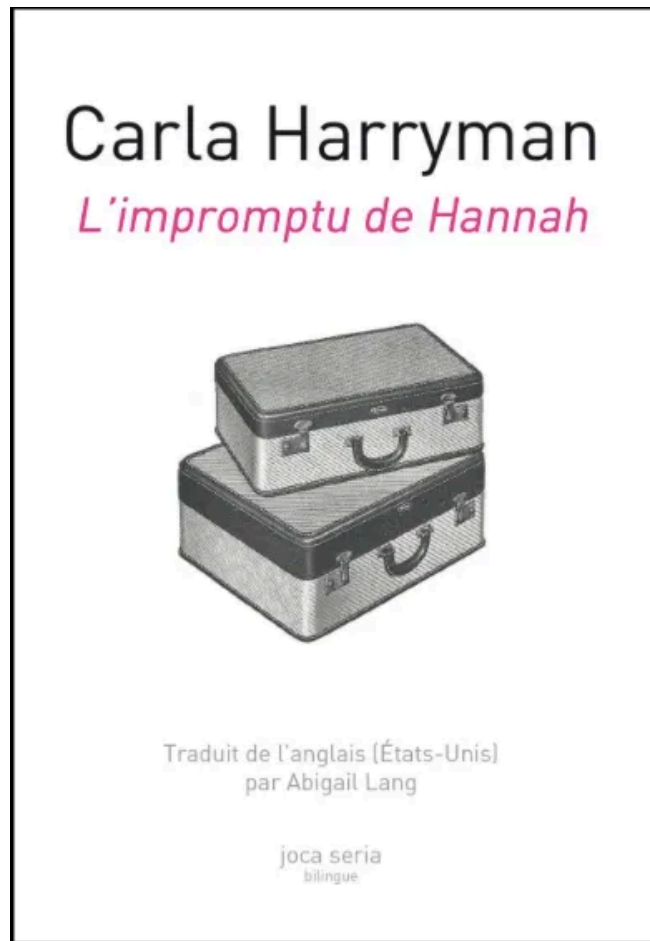
stacks of your books. The group mostly looking at you and asking you to tell. Trying to get answers, maybe not trying so hard to make sense. Stendhal and the misquote in *Property* generated a lot of excited feeling. I felt stupid when I tried to talk to you about Hope, the rub I have with it — voicing my worry about the word's use by populist figures (I perhaps too blithely say: "I think Hope is fascist"), and being unable to communicate my question without seemingly undermining your complex approach to the problem (then I wrote a piece about feeling stupid and in that piece saying what I meant, so felt less stupid — you're in it, I'll share it with you soon). You wrote of your approach, how you were making use of Bloch, in a letter to the Pratt Students in August 2015:

...just now I want to explain as simply as possible why I have returned to reading Bloch with increased concentration. At some point in the last seven years, I found that my imagination of the future or my feeling for the future, was disappearing: I have yet to assess how personal or depressive was my attitude — or how shared with others, but the impersonal and numbing Bush Era is part of the social ecologically through which I or one would begin to experience the "disappearing." The accelerated destructiveness of global capitalism and climate change, and the intensified cognition of the Anthropocene as out-of-control actuality, may still loom as impossible abstractions, but not without material effect, including the physical and biological effects that grand abstractions can produce, negatively, in a person. Around 2009, I felt that I was slowly being absorbed in a death-drive vortex and was shocked by what I was experiencing, thinking of it as a failure of imagination and a failure to know how to be in the world. I attempted for awhile to stay with this sense of impossibility and to keep it with me even after I renegotiated my relationship to "the future."

Of course there were hopeful activations ongoing and new sorts beginning to arise in the world that would offer me or anyone welcome contradiction. Here I recall the lines, "The activity of the young is never/in keeping with loyalty," in recognition of the capacity for change in "the young." And, to bring things in close for a moment, I know that there are such activations now happening among you, the writers I am writing to. Yet, for me, at a certain moment, the horizon (the

metaphor that Marxism loves) was not receding but getting way too close, and it was not utopic or hopeful but rather a quasi-blinding obstruction.

The Symposium, which I loved despite the discomfort, who would we be if we didn't love the discomfort, ended with the staged reading of your recent brilliant play that contains Hannah Arendt, Etel Adnan and Simone Fattal and your mother Marion, and a dirge for the intentional allied gutting of the Middle East...*Hannah Cuts In*. It was published by Joca Seria[10], in the usamerican [sic] Series that is edited by Olivier Brossard. A beautiful edition translated by Abigail Lang and made available that very night!



I was so pleased you asked me to rehearse and perform the role of the English language Pseudo Voice, alongside Juliette de Laroque and Abigail Lang and yourself, letting me loose with the manual typewriter.



photo: Lisa Robertson

I always have a sense when reading your work of also being directed, on stage, as a reader. Not controlled, but directed.

“The writer imagines the reader to be the subject of her work.” (GOS 127)

This habit I have of getting very curious about your source material happens again and again. Even now reading and re-reading *Gardener of Stars* for the scene that isn't there, I begin to imagine the variety of texts and personas as bases and intersections. And Ernst Bloch! Those three volumes. A philosopher ex-lover was as committed to *The Principle of Hope* as you are, so it wasn't my first encounter but what a relief to just read “Little Daydreams” and the introductions you provided, over and over. I think I am saying something about the danger of dating a writer or being friends with the writer and a kind of simultaneous need to defer pleasure and have it right away.

Like with sex, I can't hold on to a singular image in your books. The book I'd intended to write about, and as I just noted, did a lot of study about for this letter, but haven't yet quite gotten to, is *Gardener of Stars*. I'd read it cover to

cover when it first came out and for years assigned passages from it and talked about the scene that tethered me most to it, in which Gardener masturbates in the museum in front of a masterpiece.

I've now combed the book for a month looking for this scene and have not found it, or the particular passage that might have caused me to invent it. I mean there are museums and masterpieces and masturbation but not together.[11] I held a scene from *The Hunger* for years, of Catherine Deneuve and Susan Sarandon and David Bowie all in the steam room together, and could not wait to see it again and when I finally watched it after twenty years of carrying the scene, it wasn't there. Each of them was there, but never all together. I was disappointed in *The Hunger*, but not in *Gardener of Stars* for what I found was more necessary for me now, a beautiful complicated and possible life (hope beyond the horizon!) in the wake of unspeakable loss and the violent incision of motherhood.

"As we know, memory is altered by shock in one way or another. We see this symptom of shock when people stop talking about where they come from." (119)

"There was something (and ought I to say this?) despairing about the hands. Raised in the glow of hopeful desire, their perfect gestures had been portrayed as extra need." (125)

"It's a garden of brown, thorny, uneven things." (142)

In your *The Grand Piano* Part 2 contribution "In Proximity Of" (proximity is something I write a lot about, we have *in common*), you say of Ed Ruscha (while speaking of your total immersion in art) that his work is "...collected by Mobile Oil Corporation." Complicity. I think in this essay you are writing about beaches, college, an oil spill and a civic development from it, about

beauty and toxicity, and about wanting and needing sex, and how writers spill and have or don't have the sex even when they are or are not having sex.

Never date a writer.

"One cannot do anything alone." (GOS 136)

Lots of Love,

Rachel

1. Harryman, Carla. *Artifact of Hope*. Kenning Editions. 2017 — available as PDF and hard copy via order.
<http://www.kenningeditions.com/shop/artifact-of-hope/>
2. I should say that Hoa Nguyen is distinctly a poet. It was she who, meeting me via snarky feminist comment on Buffalo Poetics List — those guys were often right out a 1960's sitcom, caricatures of themselves having missed being educated *at all* by feminism — and getting the chapbook I made from your workshop, and passing it to Renee, began these linkages to "my generation."
3. <https://www.sfsu.edu/~newlit/narrativity/home.html>
4. Kathy Acker, like New Narrative is having a moment of re-recognition and critical attention: Chris Kraus biography, *After Kathy Acker* out from MIT/Semiotext(e) and Douglas Martin's book length poetic critical essay *Acker* from Nightboat. Both were published in 2017. There's forthcoming book of interviews, *The Last Interview*, edited by Douglas Martin and Amy Scholder and to be released by Melville House this December 2018. Plus the anticipated biography by Jason McBride, to be published by Columbia University Press.

5. Gail Scott, "The Sutured Subject," *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, Vol. 28, №3, 2008.
6. Carla Harryman. *Gardener of Stars*. Atelos #10, 2001. (Referred to as GOS)
7. In her note on the early draft of this, Carla reminds me that we also read the first portrait in Gail Scott's *Main Brides*.
8. *The Grand Piano: An Experiment in Collective Autobiography Part 2*. Mode A/This Press, January 2007.(Referred to as *TGP*) The experiment contains 10 volumes total, all authored by Barrett Watten, Ted Pearson, Rae Armantrout, Steve Benson, Kit Robinson, Tom Mandel, Ron Silliman, Carla Harryman, Lyn Hejinian, Bob Perelman.
9. At the Symposium's website are links to several useful bibliographies:
<https://www.poetscritics.org/2017/12/22/poets-and-critics-symposium-2018-1-carla-harryman-thursday-15-and-friday-16-february/>
10. <http://www.jocaseria.fr>
11. Also in Carla's note on the draft, "You are remembering "In the Mode of" published by City Lights in *There Never Was a Rose without a Thorn*."



RACHEL LEVITSKY is the author of *Under the Sun* (Futurepoem, 2003), *NEIGHBOR* (UDP, 2009) and the poetic novella, *The Story of My Accident is Ours* (Futurepoem, 2013) as well as numerous chapbooks, recently, *Hopefully, The Island*, part of an ongoing collaboration with the artist Susan Bee. Levitsky builds and participates in a variety of publishing, collaboration and pedagogical/performative activities, such as “Geometries of Recognition” a movement poetry workshop made into a super8 film by the filmmaker/poet Stephanie Gray. In 1999 she founded Belladonna* which is now Belladonna* Collaborative. Levitsky teaches writing, regularly, at Pratt Institute, less regularly at Naropa University’s Summer Writing Program, and occasionally at lay poetry institutions like Poets House and The Poetry Project in NYC. She’s currently on leave and in Paris where she’s working on her next novel, *Existing Condition*.