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An Interview with Carla Harryman

By Renee Gladman

For a long time, I wanted to talk to Carla Harryman about her sentences, and, for about as long, I had no idea where to start. The questions I needed to ask were entangled in my own preoccupations with the sentence, and it seemed an insurmountable task to separate them out. But time passes; tangles become a recognizable shape, and suddenly there is a way in. The following exchange took place over email between December 2007 and August 2008. As will be apparent immediately, this conversation does not follow the typical interview format. Harryman's responses are wondrous, "thinking texts" that take their time, that take your time, but give you, in return, passage through the mind and practice of one of our most original writers.

RG: Since the mid-nineties, in either reading your work or attending your performances and readings, I have been astounded by the vastness of your imagination. The behavior of your sentences has always struck me as other-worldly, not the way one is trained to think or act in language. I use "behavior" instead of something like "quality" here because I'm trying to call attention to the animate nature of your work, the individual mind of one sentence making contact with the distinct minds of surrounding sentences. I read your paragraphs as spaces of many (sometimes overlapping) voices, impulses, and directions. What I've wanted to do for years is find a way to get you talk about how such spaces come to be in your writing. Not psychological reasons, exactly. Not "what made you this way" so much as what the principles are that organize your utterly unique way of working in prose. A question of your metaphysics, I suppose. In any case, I'd like to try something. Let's say we have a common language. It's called English. In this language we have an extensive group of everyday words, simple words, words that most regular users

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of the language can recognize. English gives us a template for how these words are to be ordered so to make sense. We are encouraged to make sense when using this language. However, let's suppose there is an alternative system for arranging these same words that defies the rules of flow, precision, and codification that this language we share insists upon. We will call that alternative system "Harryman." So what I'm saying so far is that it's not the words themselves that I find so mystifying in your work, but the way they are combined to, in effect, create relations that English—in its restrictive state—cannot sustain. My first question, then, is how would you describe the philosophy of experience or subjectivity that directs the movement of words in the Harryman system? What is the force or question behind their combinings?

CH: Thank you for this amazing question.

I have questions about subject positions. I would like to know more about complicity and power. How complicit am I in the destructive designs of power by virtue of my existence and the particulars of my circumstance? I want to know more about sexuality and desire: I explore these things in writing, including a sense of drive that seems latent or not fully formed, one that can't quite exist in a world such as the one we live in. How constrained am I by the regimen of gender? How do my feelings and questions and agonies about, and pleasures of, societal and psychic constraint differ or not from that of other people? Where does one (one's singularity) begin and end? These are fuzzy questions, but they are also part of what constitutes curiosity, something necessary to writing. To what extent are

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we collectively a “creature” and to what extent are we separate, unknowable one to another, and in what ways? Surely some of these questions are related to the “behavior” of my sentences.

What follows are notes and riffs responding to some of the phrases in your challenging question. I have organized the rest of my response in this way to begin to find out more about how I would answer it.

Vastness of imagination:

a. This is something that one cannot account for. “The limits of my language are the limits of my world.” (Wittgenstein) In quoting W, I am not saying that “imagination” and “limits of language” are linked all the time but rather that this thing that cannot be accounted for is at the limit of language, my language—but not only *mine*.

b. *“In this direction of daydreams of immensity, the real product is consciousness of enlargement...we are not ‘cast into the world,’ since we open the world, as it were, by transcending the world seen as it is, or as it was, before we started dreaming.”—Gaston Bachelard (Poetics of Space, “intimate immensities,” 184)*

c. At the beginning of “The Middle” (1983) considering a problematic of imaginative vastness, I characterize the middle as a site “where what’s enlarged (subjective) and what’s

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reduced (external) by speaking gather.” This is a fragmentary reflection on the literary work that is vast in respect to the internal space of its composition, which then is not limited to “all I can say,” i.e. conventional representation of the external world. At the same time, I am concerned with scale or the question, “What is an appropriate scale?”

The behavior of your sentences

- a. Your question directs attention to the animated properties of the sentence. Behavior is relational.

- b. I am literally interested in behavior—especially when categorical understanding of what behavior is or does is loosened so that one isn’t thinking about behavior in rigidly causal [rational thought, formal logic] or empirical [scientific, experimental] terms, but rather as something that is close to or seen in relationship to the edge or limit of what can be described or named. This something involves motion, relative degrees of closeness, intimacy, distance, physicalization, and abstraction: one can, a sentence can behave abstractly.

- c. But right now I am pausing, on pause, marking pause (the comma), even stalling before I get to the next sentence. Now I pick up the pause: to work between this behavior of the imagination as played out in writing and the philosophical terms you propose gives me pause.

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“and when technique is abandoned, the fainting fit occurs when one least expects it...”

[Catherine Clement, *Syncope*, 14].

d. In thinking about physicality of phrasing, it's hard to avoid the topic of breath, Charles Olson's immense-field of the breath. Allen Ginsberg talked about the breath and the openness of vowels—the open breath of the line—claiming this open vowel sound was essential to good poetry. Is it? Certain writing doesn't claim this kind of embodiment. But we are talking about sentences and I have no problem with breath or breathing. I am breathing and that's fine in all its permutations. The physicality I am referring to needs the breathing. The elbow can't bend without it. But not all of the sentences of my writing are known to have my breath. The breathing is circulating amongst imagined others, readers, and the dog was licking my elbow and somebody was laughing. So that happened, then it's over. (And boo-hoo my dog died). I am in mourning. It's true.

e. I throw darts at a target. They fall off, leaving a pattern on it. The analytic pointedness and/or energetic aggressivity that motivated what eventually came about falls away and what's left is the pattern, which is more open to interpretation and analysis than is the subjective drive and the intermediary processes that initiated and produced the pattern. This type of displacement would represent one variety of sentence among many.

f. I didn't lose consciousness once when writing the above paragraphs. I was thinking about a phrase, “the behavior of your sentences,” and I wanted to respond to the phrase

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and this was challenging, something I couldn't quite accomplish, perhaps because of the relational nature of "behavior," its unpredictable qualities mixed in with limit/limitation.

g. "the entire art of syncope exists in preparing a surprise"

...except I copied the citation incorrectly. Rather:

"the entire art of syncope consists in preparing surprises" [Clement, 14]

The meaning of Clement's original sentence assumes an enveloping cultural framework, "an art," in which the surprise can be prepared. The first sentence is less smooth, it suggests a certain kind of behavior—teasing, undercutting, or duplicitous

"the entire art of syncope exists in preparing a surprise."

Has always struck me as other worldly

a. A reprocessing, different arrangement, a different, unimaginable, consciousness. One can ask of words to do something that is not already of one's mentality or other's. They can be moved around, against, with, between the rules.

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So the writing is not of this world because it is resistant to *of* this world— Of a different world has something to do with being something other than *of* a context and the identities that one can neither fully discard nor fully willingly agree to.

Not psychological reasons, exactly. Not “what made you this way” so much as what the principles are that organize your utterly unique way of working in prose.

a. A psychological “reason” may have little – in a direct sense – to do with what made me do this or that in writing, or such causes—you seem to hint—may not be all that revealing. But I am motivated by psychological theories. I think about how we are interpolated, defined, (de)limited, over-taxed, subjugated by power. All of these concerns have a psychological dimension. I am interested in the interleaving of innocence and experience, of naiveté and sophistication. And within this context I am interested in play and “object relations.”

b. ...resistance to blending drama, narrative, and memory —refusing a dramatically charged relation to memory, identity, and the dramas of psychology... “play” between psychological and philosophical modes. Perhaps the animating qualities of the writing have to do with my not being able to decide between philosophical and psychological modes—there is distress between modes that textures the sentences.

*A question of your metaphysics
and philosophy of experience*

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a. The philosophy of experience or subjectivity:

I wish I knew where the poem with the kitty cat went. I was six or something like that when I wrote it—

I need to cite it to provide a kind of evidence—including that it resembles my writing now. Also the kitty cat could fly, but I don't think it was flying in order to get away.

It is important that it was a kitty cat. The kitty is for calling the cat. The cat is a creature that can be called...kitty. It matters that the two words were together and that they were not redundant. There is animation and a thing or a being—an exchange of energies. The calling of the being invokes a constellation of relations that include something unstated between the voice or utterance and another who hears. Yet in writing, one can also fill in that space. Perhaps between calling, being called, running toward and away, is a trail of tears or a death march, or something a little more promising--a migration.

b. Regression—going backward meets the moment in which something is reaching, moving out, growing. Babble, meaning making, fantasy were happening all at one time as a part of growing, developing. The reintegration of word/sound play (in both sense of perform using an instrument and playfulness), the semantic scales, and the interior daydream codified within an adult mind. I associate movement, or dancing scaled back to potential vocabularies and systems, with the word behavior. But the word experience is

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a vexing one. I've thought about it in respect to philosophical traditions—I love Martin Jay's *Songs of Experience*. But there are as he notes so many songs or types of experience, all predicated on how we understand them intellectually and live them historically—and I'm not sure what to say about how the many songs mingle and contribute to making mine within the intellectual traditions. And to approach this question I would have to say some impossible, qualifiable things in regards gender, alterity, complications of identity, resistances to categories and symbols, but would one know any more about these sentences at the end of it? I don't know. (I truly don't know). (I'll think about it).

RG: So much to consider here. And this is what's so tricky about conducting interviews, how each part of a response produces its own set of questions, so that instead of one new question you have twenty concurrent ones. However, because questions of subjectivity are integral to how I'm thinking about your work, there was something you mentioned that I want you to expand upon: the notion of "creature." It seemed to be a suggestion of a transformative state in your narratives, a kind of crossing between *human* being (or *human* subject) and an alternative living-thinking thing? But I didn't get the sense that this was animal or alien life you were talking about? Is *creature* a possible identity for the contemporary subject? Is it a place for hybridity?

CH: Creature: being and living. One casts oneself into the creature of oneself in being aware of being a living thing—not a worker, or a girl, or momma's little cutie, or a student, or one who types one's thoughts, or a communicator, or a decider. Sipping in air

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while feeling the feet supported, not thinking of what supports, but feeling what supports the feet or any part of one's body in contact with something but without identity. The floor is not a floor, it has no identity and the feet feel the support but the creature doesn't need to cognize what supports it. The thinking if there is thinking is an awareness of physicality in a nonobjective (as in nonrepresentational) sense. But this isn't really thinking. Perhaps creature is non-identity or non-identical to identity.

Would creature be a "place?" A site of attention of awareness? I am working on a staged reading of *Memory Play* with the artist Catherine Sullivan. Yesterday in rehearsal, she directed the performers to concentrate on sensation *and* concentrate sensation. This concentration additionally was facilitated by "zones"—the love zone and the party zone and the dead zone, among others. Perhaps there has to be a place in order for the creature to appear. If so the creature is not place but contiguous with place.

Or, the zone exercise may be thought to accommodate a language of the creaturely. The zones have identities and histories but are not identical to the individuals that inhabit them, although they also impress themselves on the zones, bring them to a place of liveliness or animation or mortal existence, somehow. The zone is marked by who has been there, but this who may or may not impress itself on this space as an identity.

This is a very good approach to performing a work in which language itself is a kind of being or character. The language already exists autonomously from the performance.

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The language is another performer in a zone but also of a zone and among and between zones.

RG: I was wondering how long we would go before ideas around performance came up. In a way, it is ever present in your work, regardless of whether it is being announced as such. But aside from the obvious energy and character of your language, there is an art that preoccupies you, there are plays and other dramatic pieces that you write that have an explicit engagement with the stage, with movement and sound of bodies, with time and pace. Can you talk about your ongoing relationship with theatre? One thing you could focus on in particular is *Memory Play*. This current reading that you're working on with Catherine Sullivan is the latest in a number of stagings of this play. I wonder if each production has differed radically from the other, or if there is a question or set of questions that must constantly be reassessed when you're working with a new director and a new set of actors? Also, how does collaboration fit here?

CH: (Poets) Theater is something I could and perhaps should write a book on. I will say a few things responding to some of the language you use above and then I'll discuss *Memory Play* and its recent incarnation.

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My interest in making plays is derived from the energy/character of the language and the character of the language is derived, in part, from an interest in performance. I took movement classes in graduate school and these gave me a direction in writing that has something to do with a sense that phrasing or sentence making is both kinetic and spacial. Additionally the interest in making plays is both critical and social. I have been sometimes continuously and sometimes intermittently engaged in the challenge of interpreting or explicating text as performance. This would mean that I would experiment with approaches to explication and interpretation within a collective and collaborative situation. Making performances, whether these are “plays” or other kinds of collaborations provides a live situation for the exchange of ideas with another person or with a group of people. It’s an occasion in which one can think, reflect, and play at the same time in the company of others.

All of my “plays,” including *Memory Play* are written as works first. They are meant to be read. And they offer themselves also to performance. Because they must be read first rather than performed first this act of interpretation I describe above is very much connected to reading. So each performance is a reading of a text that’s meant to be read. Some of the plays obviously announce this by the way they look on the page: they have no characters and look like hybrid works that incorporate poetic lines, block paragraphs, columns, and scene settings that are as much part of the language of the text as anything else. Some of the plays are very minimal in their look; for instance, *There Is Nothing Better Than a Theory* is just a sequence of lines that suggests a polyvocal conversation.

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Memory Play is one of the few plays that uses character designations in a conventional way. The characters are Fish, Pelican, Reptile, Instruction, Child, and Miltonic Humiliator. The work itself is a kind of symposium on memory, in which the one kind of memory that is overtly placed under assault is that form of memory most indulged in the “bourgeois” dramatic theater, the memory of the past that weighs on and determines the drama of character.

Because it is written as collective conversation (or as a conversation in the context of “a bedtime story out in the salt flats”), it is a difficult piece to perform. It is theater without drama (or with little drama) but with poetic and philosophical language. Every once in a while there are tensions between characters, but these are fleeting: tensions don’t build up and burst.

The most fully realized version of *Memory Play* was the 1994 production at The LAB in San Francisco. It was directed by Philip Horvitz, a brilliant innovator in the queer cabaret scene in San Francisco. He was also connected to the conceptual art and performance art scene and understood the plays critique of theater. Another collaborator in the production was John Woodall, a site oriented sculptor and performance artist, who played Reptile and built the sets. The cast was a combination of poets, visual and performance artists. Philip’s choreographic skills and John’s visual sensibility created a total environment for the performance that developed gradually in rehearsals. And there were a lot of rehearsals: as the assemblage of the work was based on approaching

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rehearsals as collaborative experimentation—guided by a plan which was developed in conversation between Philip and me and then reprocessed in mysterious ways by Philip.

This is in great contrast to the piece as it was just performed in Chicago. There I was assigned a collaborator, three professional performers, and two student participants. I would fly in for a weekend, do a couple of rehearsals, leave, and fly back on another weekend. The last rehearsals were held over a week's duration as I took time off from work to focus on the piece. It was not memorized but a staged reading. Catherine and I approached rehearsals as events in themselves as much as possible. We more or less thought of the public performance as a last rehearsal of the piece. Thus, it changed every time we did it. This was an interesting process but I think, oddly, that the last rehearsal landed in a somewhat incommensurate place. A lot of the strangeness of timing or movement that had been explored got rather smoothed out and it ended up feeling like a more or less elegant reading with nice lighting in an attractive raw space. I think I would have liked to have seen the “next” rehearsal with an instruction to rough-up the verbal tones and movement.

And finally, to revert to your question about the difference in performances—the situation of the performance, the people involved, the place, the context, all of these things are used to make new versions of the work. And this goes back to the question of critique, interpretation, and the performance as a social experience (or experiment). There is no inherent reason to mirror or parrot something that has come before.

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Retaining something done previously is a choice. And the text, in any case, stands on its own—or for itself.

RG: As a way to push the performance question further, I want to combine two things you've told me about sentences. At the beginning of the interview you wrote, "I understand tailoring the question of the sentence toward its animated properties," and just now, in response to my last question, you mentioned that through movement classes you got the sense that "phrasing or sentence making is both kinetic and spatial." These are incredible ideas, particularly in thinking about narrative, about what produces it when it is not a desire to coalesce (fragmentary experience) or to represent inherited realities. I like to think that the building (or evolving) of a narrative has to do with the energy between words, a kind of intuition the words themselves have. This sounds similar to what you're saying. What's interesting to me is how these notions of kinesis and spacing broaden the character of performance in your work. Many texts you write are performances without ever having been conceived for the stage. "Performance" begins to strike me as something that *takes place* prior to enactment, as something to do with the event of writing itself. What do you think about that? Also, I wonder if you would look at two of your books, specifically *Vice* and your new work *Look Again*, and talk us through their animated properties. In other words, can you talk about the energy (whether magnetic, repulsive, or something altogether different) at play in each work, as well as how this energy transforms across books?

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CH: I am curious about our having both gravitated toward discussing narrative, performance, and writing outside conventional frameworks and categories. We are developing a bit of an eccentric language. Do you think this is the case? What is the reason for this? Are we looking for new descriptions of writing? Different frameworks that focus on the activity of writing, “the event of writing itself.” Something that complicates reader-as-producer of text? Something that skirts binaries like experimental and conventional? In other words, even though we’re focusing on my work, I sense that we are talking about something in addition, less author-centered. And yet, we’re not exactly excluding conversation that more conventionally focuses on how artists make work and experience their work getting made.

Still, I’m wondering, is there a critical or theoretical problem that this focus attempts to invoke? When you write that in your experience “the building of a narrative has to do with the energy between words,” a reader could interpret this as a mystical expression—but I choose not to, or not to exclusively. I think about the relationship of an observing function to what is being put down on the page—and also I think of other mediums, sound, visuality. Yet, the observer is in/with her body—and this now actual and hypothetical writing-body is not simply experiencing heat, cold, fatigue, exhilaration, sore muscles—but so many kinds of stimulation, which involves our ability (or, conversely, uncontrolled urge) to refocus our attention. There is a pleasure-related or erotic aspect to this kinesis that mutually interests us, perhaps. One could replace body with writing:

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“...a gridding or marking of the body in terms of sites of uneven intensity, patterns or configurations of feeling, labyrinthine maps...” (Elizabeth Grosz “Animal Sex,” in *Space, Time and Perversion*)

Or am I only talking about myself?

And yes, the performance does happen prior to enactment, as you say. In fact, an enactment is reading plus re-functioning of the performed writing. Or it is the construction of a composition whose ground is the writing performed—the performative within a live performance situation is always available to variations in spacing, and thus variation in composition. Something that you might have to follow very slowly on the page can be animated and dispensed with in a flash in a live performance; conversely one can slow compositional time way down if one so chooses. This recognition of what can happen within the plastic medium of live performance can be used as a device in writing itself: there’s a kind of reciprocity within the two imagined or conceptual spaces of performance and composition.

I like what you say about narrative’s own motion. Where is the writer mentally in regards the narrative, as it follows itself or moves itself around? This seems to be a spatial question.

Drawing is s trope for this excursion of narration in “Entombment. Liver. Such.” in *Baby*. There’s a bit of a *Harold and the Purple Crayonesque* aspect of the work, the conceit that

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Baby lives in the drawing she makes, although this is qualified by the idea that there is something already pre-fabricated in the drawing/world Baby makes.

She was therefore greatly surprised when a teenager swaggered through an opening in the labyrinth, stood right in front of baby, and began speaking the unspeakable. The teenager told baby that she and her friends had been listening to her weird thought for a couple of hours and they recommended she just keep going on her way, back toward the exit. You are about to enter the adult prison... This is my drawing and I can go where I want, are the thought that baby did not express, but you can't talk that way to a teenager and she knew it..."

A narrative can veer away from where it started, or create a thick interior space in the barely-populated side of a mountain it has come upon: then it can move in, out, and away from these spaces—or jump over them, whatever. It can look back reflexively at itself, respond to, and interject something that occurred in a different place into its present site or situation.

Perhaps the reason narrative seems to do something on its own—beyond or other than what the writer determines—is related to the writer's observing of its plastic capacities, so that for instance, rather than insisting on a certain kind of content, a premise like "A girl hanging clothes" in *Look Again* becomes both an aspect of the narrative and something produced by narrative. This phrase, "A girl hanging clothes" is *placed*--like a performer

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might be placed in space—as a fragment of thought or memory or imagination, a thing existing in more than one space and time—consciousness, the actual past, the invented past, the present moment of composition. Like a performer, the words and phrases we choose cannot simply be pressed into service.

I like to think about the constellation of contingencies on which a writing, whether narrative, non-narrative, might rest. (Consider this series: a mother believes that it is important for a child to learn to hang up clothes and so the mother is passing on a domestic skill—women’s work—and the mother also has to figure out how to engage the child in filling time or in having a directed relationship to time: and the family needs its members to do chores like hanging up clothes so that they all have clean clothes to wear).

The sense then that narrative (in this case we are referring to a narration) has its own autonomy or trajectory may have to do with its being contingent on a myriad of things outside the control of the writer, or the writer’s mother or grandmother, etc. Social things, creaturely things. Does this make any sense?

“A girl hanging clothes in the backyard,” then represents processing of a great deal of information: the sentence indicates a distilled site of cognitive processes. Of course one can’t cognize these processes in fact. Here the imagination enters the scene.

The work of mine that perhaps most explicitly demonstrates the kinesis as you describe it is “Etude for Essay” in Adorno’s Noise. This is how it begins:

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Pushing out to it then seeing it finally and going toward it with feet tied so rolling and hopping forward toward it, liting a little then listing things mentally while fizzing forward actually pushed by spray shooting past and over the frame then slopping outward and catching up to the fizzing and slopping. Making a discrete step after taking pains to have caught up and gathered together enough to exhibit a certain coherence while still having very much enjoyed the fizz especially in the vicinity of the ear and keeping the hands clean too. The slop was a little less pleasurable around the ankles but still necessary.

It refers to and enacts the physical sense of prose-making, or narrative, or essay excursion at a particular moment.

Important to movement is listening and hearing. This is something I've recently written about "listening" in a draft of a Grand Piano essay:

Questions of performance lead to questions of gender and of the body, as material fact and representational construct. As I discussed in an earlier essay, taking movement workshops changed my relationship to writing. Words first experienced in physical space as thrown, tossed, lobbed, rolled, and catapulted out loud, created a new space for listening. Listening became the foundation for all of the works to follow, including the prose work "For She," which Ron [Silliman] discussed in his well-

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known essay “The New Sentence.” The sentences in “For She” were connected to listening, hearing, and receptivity as actual, intellectual, conceptual, and recollected aspects of space: sentences reform space. And the paragraph is an architectonic space. This consideration of the sentence is not unlike Gail Scott’s sentence by sentence construction of the novel-as-installation. If you can’t start from scratch, change what’s already there.

This puts a slightly different slant on the discussion. “For She” like much of my work is a kind of “invention” (like a piano invention) that relates non-narrative to narrative and visa versa. Its composition was constructed, heard, meticulously worked over, listened to again.

Okay with all the above in mind and without trying to force any connecting of dots, I am going to turn to your question about *Vice*. I like that you shade your use of “energy” with rather 19th century sounding metaphors—repulsion, magneticism—that refer to, what? “kinetic theory?” Of Light? Of Gases?

Turn to page 65 of *Vice* and you get “There is no we but others throughout space.” This fragment moves across the top of the page and stops, suspended. There is no punctuation at the end of the phrase and the rest of the page is blank. Does the unwritten page provide the energy to suspend this thought where we find it?

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lived through (page 62) this is a phrase from a description of Max Beckman's work, which is variously engaged, both as descriptions of his work and writing related to the visual eventfulness or impact of it. *lived through* – the writing is lived through, the encounter with the painting is lived through, and the time of the thinking of the writing is the time of living. But this also suggests a resistant medium. Living through, moving through—one must exert energy to make this motion *through*--so there is an exertion, an activation.

These associations are quite connected to the overall circumstances of writing *Vice*: I wrote it when Asa was in his first year: I had to steal time to do it, use everything at my disposal. Close and open doors at home, at work. Sleep, wake, record. Close and open books and magazines. Rock. Sing. Embrace. Lift. Withdraw, speed-up. I would begin writing anywhere: there was no rule. The book made itself, and it was the only way to have made it. But it's making itself was contingent on opening and closing books and doors, etc.

Vice was written under a paradoxical circumstance of pressure and freedom. Thinking and writing took place in confined, constrained temporal circumstances, but these constraints lead me to throw myself freely into the writing. I had to decide on a place to begin and just do it. Energetically, I think there is also a sense of resistance and alterity involved in the writing.

As for *Look Again*: it is not exactly a new work: it's just a largely unpublished work. But insofar as it needs to be worked on some more, I suppose it's an on-going and therefore

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new work, but it feels to me like something that is its own thing and just needs some care, attention, advancement, editing, and reconsideration. I started it after I moved to Detroit, probably in 1996—this is scary: it's been twelve years. This is a more narrative work than is *Vice*. Like *Vice* it develops sequentially, but without an expectation of the content or approach to the segments in the sequence. I would say that temporal and physical *distance* is the motivating kinetic problem of the narrative in this work.

When anarchy beelines into the orifice, it commences to mingle with what's already there, confusing the function of readymade organs with the function of readymade feelings. Anarchy serves a particular purpose, perhaps: is this purpose that it endangers the separation between organs and emotions, as it works its way between the crude categories of the physical and invisible world under the skin, thus producing sensations in the manner of skin, of sensitive skin?

Has this body become as wild as thought?

(from *Look Again*)

RG: Let's shift gears now, to the polis. In San Francisco, in the mid-70s, carrying on into the 80s, two important events of avant-garde writing were in full swing. You were deeply immersed in one—Language poetry—and, I believe, peripherally involved in the other—New Narrative, steered by writers such as Kevin Killian, Robert Glück, and Camille Roy.

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Can you talk about these overlapping involvements? I'm interested in your texts of this time, how they traveled across genre discussions, how this crossing might have informed your thinking.

CH:

Constellated Conversation:

“Of course you want safety,” says Freud, stroking his celestial beard. “it’s because latent homosexuals are paranoid. They imagine everyone is against them.” He never mentions that this may be a realistic point of view. When God visits the paranoid Dr. Schreber, the Father of Creation yells, “Scoundrel!” Voices assure Dr. Schreber that his proposed transformation into a woman is an abomination. The world’s contempt crushes his personality, so he gathers his shattered gestures and rewrites them, elevating this degradation by staging it as cosmic drama. But isn’t it Freud’s disease too? Frankly, Freud’s clinical and bemused objectivity repel me, it’s a violence that colludes with the disease; we wait in vain for him to say that being a woman is not contemptible.

Robert Glück, *Elements of a Coffee Service* (Four Seasons,
1982)

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The conversation with “New Narrative” would have evolved in fits and starts.

Additionally, the prose writers (not all of them “New Narrative” writers) whose work I felt closest to or most vividly engaged with by the mid to late 1980s would be Bob Glück, Kathy Acker, and Gail Scott: so New Narrative itself was a phenomenon, an idea, a site (and a unique literary moment, for sure)—but my way of reading and then conversing whether in the sense of a social and literary scene or in the sense that Jean Luc Nancy would envision “community” as constituted by a conversation of texts produced among contemporaries—was particular, even within the aesthetic umbrella of “Language Writing.” I quite often disagreed with or felt ambivalent about positions taken by some language writers (obsession with Zukofsky, over reliance on significant but also I think limited and/or vague theoretical constructs of narrative, e.g. “the new sentence,” “realism,” and a rather narrow use of Structuralism). I could say that I had an appreciative ambivalence to New Narrative—although, as you can see, I’m addressing the claims that writers make about writing more than the writing itself. And “disagreement” isn’t exactly how to characterize what I’m pointing to: let’s just say in cases of debates around narrative and non-narrative, identity and language, I would have an eccentric position, one partly constituted through disidentification all the way around: this, I suspect, has something to do with gender.

Something agonistic, antagonistic, in being inevitably part of a gender system is converted into a linguistic and theoretical drive or energy. The Freudian narrative and the Lacanian non-narrative were important sites of generatively ambivalent thinking. Even in the case of the passage from Glück’s *Elements of a Coffee Service* that I quote above, the disavowal of

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Freud is generative in respect to its linking theory, to autobiography, and fictional invention. Another writer of that moment, who explored agonistic relation to gender, inventing a new or open-genre methodology is Beverly Dahlen.

For I have resisted Freud. Is that a confession?

[There is what I might call an interrogative style that seems to turn up frequently in the writing of feminist women. It's a style I'm ambivalent about—it annoys me—and yet I find it to a remarkable extent, as here, in my own work. There are not rhetorical questions, a device used to introduce the answer, since the answer is known in advance. What I am calling the interrogative style of women questions because there are no answers. They are real questions...] [Poetics Journal, 6]

This is from a Talk, “Forbidden Knowledge,” given at 80 Langton Street in 1980 and later anthologized (*Hambone 2* and *Poetics Journal 4*). Dahlen also identifies it as part of *A Reading*, her endless work of poetry, or “writing”, or something close to but not *écriture*:

...the interminable text is a metaphor; it affirms the endlessness of language, and the question of language indefinitely. [Poetics Journal, 14]

“Forbidden Knowledge” was presented in the same year as *The Middle* (Gaz, 1983), which I delivered in March, 1982. There is a conversation between the two presentations. Their overlapping concerns include a critique of gender, feminism, “knowledge,” Wittgenstein,

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appropriation, and psychoanalytic theory. We are both interested in “babble” and “Babel,” something that I also take up in *There Is Nothing Better Than a Theory* (Moving Letters, 1982). I suppose I could (but won’t attempt that here) write quite a few pages on the ways that I think our works converse across significant lines of difference, with Dahlen’s work affectively sliding toward the tragic and abject and mine tilting toward comedy, tragic-comedy, and play. Here’s a passage from the last page of *The Middle*:

Book 3: And what have I accomplished with all this? In explaining the concept I have substituted the use for the picture.

I am folding the picture. It is a sheet. There is not one meaning or finding. I say to myself Freud is wrong. I dust the crusty top of the nightstand, which I have been spilling drinks on since childhood. The chipped pink lamp with the stained and tasseled shade, almost a remnant of childhood, in my fantastic knowledge of it grows out of the nightstand.

By fantastic I suppose I mean that something that has lived past its expiration date grows into another being—in one’s desires to see it gone one invents extraneous attributes to explain its longevity and to transform it into a superior object. An object not confined to the repetition of seeing it, the idle thought and silent rages I have shed upon it. Something that makes a sham of my unspoken thought by the invisible power I bestow on it... [22]

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As you can see, the subject of New Narrative takes me to multiple sites of conversation: I think I have an inherent resistance to stabilizing the site of literature.

That said, I don't think I knew Kevin Killian's work until sometime after 1984, but I could have my dates wrong. Likewise, Camille Roy grabbed my attention somewhat later. The performance in the early 1990s (at New Langton Arts) of *Bye Bye Burnhilde* (Kelsey Street, 1992) was an important event for me: it was thick, claustrophobic, hilarious, and autobiographical. The work, performed in a venue known for performance art, was a brilliant critique of the rather monovalent autobiographical trends in performance art.

The active consideration of the relationship of reading to writing in Dahlen, Glück, Acker ("reading is writing"), myself, and other Language Writers, including those like Bob Perelman, Steve Benson, and Kit Robinson involved in the "brat guts" aesthetic of misreading and mishearing (for more on "brat guts" see assorted passages in *The Grand Piano, vol. 1-7*) emerge more or less at the same time. We shared in common, yet differently, the history and political frameworks that came along with it of the Viet Nam and post-Viet Nam period.

I enjoyed a productive tension between making noise by messing with pre-existing texts and making something complex and writerly through an attentive writing invention. The "noise" of the detoured text or societal iteration is figured as public, perhaps and the

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“composition” has to do with an individual act, or commitment to aesthetic practice:
these were not mutually exclusive features of writing.

I was interested in Acker’s use of repetition and redundancy as a mode of filling up negative, self-canceling space with noise, which would also result in an edgy idea or prose-work as conceptual object. My impulse was to engage in distance—to work dynamically between interior and exterior space. The sentence itself was a kind of phenomenological thing, or object (as in object relations): the displacement of Acker’s work has to do with reprocessing a mass of writing and I think with mine it has more to do with a phenomenon of simultaneously constructed and focusing on an object. I was interested in a kind of athletic reflexivity that I associate literally with sports and physical activities including dance and sex. The writing moves forward and backward—it animates the space of the writer reading.

I hide behind a category by misbehaving. (“Various Devices” in *Under the Bridge*, 1980)
I have recently spent a bit of time with Bob Glück—and we were talking about this period, as he has been reading the *Grand Piano* volumes with interest. In passing he made the comment that at the time (1975-1980 although not just these dates exclusively), anybody who could avoid being gay would avoid it. The stakes were too great, the hatred of gays and lesbians too ubiquitous—one would identify as homosexual only if there were no choice. A postmodern avant-gardism that comes out of that circumstance is connected to and dissimilar from my own negative sources.

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Commentary focusing on texts:

There are certainly fictional threads in many of my works up to the writing of *The Words: After Carl Sandburg's Rootabaga Stories and Jean-Paul Sartre*, but this book engages the questions of fiction as more closely aligned with the novel than do my earlier works. Even so, I have the impulse to bracket the word “fiction.” Even when I was writing *The Words*, I was more concerned with story, construction, language, and the novel than I was with fiction—what’s construed in the absence of truth, to point to a moment in your *Newcomer*. The interest in what happens *sans* truth also refers back to Dahlen’s engagement with the question of knowledge. And it appears in Michael Amanson’s *Liar* as well. Lying is something I take up in *The Middle*. The desire to lie has to do with power, and the limits, or non-existence, of dialogue within unequal and unknowable power relations. “Lying” and asserting the unknowable as an unending space of writing is an aspect, and/or a masking, of the political current that runs under the fiction I most readily choose to think about.

...I had one thing in common with the world; unimaginable creation. So I assumed that the places things had were the places they had had and were always to keep. Only *I* was an accident among them. The people in my universe had no interest in my future as far as I knew, since they would be here with or without me. Consequently I assumed a blasé attitude, so that I could hold in reserve some hidden choice, a secret I could not name and

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would not name so as not to destroy its value in the face of all the
permanent stuff.

An image of a world without character. (*The Middle*, 3)

Perhaps the focus on construction, story, on the distribution of narrative (“I prefer to distribute narrative rather than to deny it...” [“Toy Boats,” *Poets Journal* 6, 1986] and the pixilation of narrative so that it cannot be contained as narrative only, creates patterns that I can’t easily associate with fiction as a genre. Whether or not one actually considers *The Words* to be a novel, as I do, its spacial-temporal structure, even as I have placed it rather invisibly in the background, is novelistic. I don’t narrate what happens but enact the effect of what is not explicitly narrated, and the enactment itself produces patterns that displace the novel onto another field, hybrid and iconoclast. Perhaps “fiction” comes in at the backdoor with iconoclasm. The image of the novel gets smashed, but that itself is a kind of fiction. This constructed site of make-believe, leads to strange organizations, both in regards social organization and text:

In defiance of the mother’s flower estate, the legs part a little
farther in the song, and the mother’s body’s gold mountain side and baby
pragmatism collide. You cannot, says the strange doctrine, written with
this mother’s class.

But defeat will be remade into rapture. (*The Words*, 24)

Reprise:

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You asked about the conversation I have had with New Narrative, and I want to conclude with another example of what I consider to be conversation.

It was around 2000, after I had moved to Detroit, and I was visiting San Francisco. As I often and love to do, I was having an afternoon meal in Bob Glück's kitchen. I think we may have been talking about the writing assignment for an exhibition at the San Francisco Art Institute. I was admiring his concise way of rendering his encounter with visual work. He is stunningly gifted, or practiced, at animating his subjective experience within a carefully selected intellectual discourse: he gives the work its due within multiple frames—he doesn't try to capture its otherness and try to put it into some kind of jail of sameness, as the scientists do in his "Purple Men."

I'm enjoying the delicious food and conversation. At some point he turns the conversation to a book he thinks I should read, Raoul Veiganon's *Movement of the Free Spirit*. This reminds me that we had also been discussing Giorgio Agamben's *The Coming Community*, which I had found worthwhile and problematic: I think I said that I thought it was too Catholic. Then I wonder(ed) why I had said this, as I am attracted to radical Catholicism. Bob's response was to tell me to read *The Movement of the Free Spirit*. I'll end my response with a little passage from this book, the opening of Bob's "The Purple Men," as published in *Denny Smith*, and a passage from *Gardener of Stars* to mark the possibility of on-going conversation:

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In the debate on love that dominated the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the movement of the Free Spirit had a natural point of entry. Because the Free Spirit radicalized courtly love, and restored the shriveled idea of love embodied in the detumescent effigy of Christ on the Cross to its authentic lawless wholeness, the movement's greatest enemy was inevitably that primarily masculine theology which simultaneously spiritualized love and treated it as a perversion. (*Movement of the Free Spirit*, 91)

They are not entirely purple yet. They have purple shadows and the space around them protects and amplifies their nakedness with pinks and salmons of undifferentiated flesh. One man reaches through the other's crotch to pin down a wrist, getting a spot of purple, I guess, on this forearm. The scene may be naturalistic, but it conveys the interior effulgence of the lovers, sensual immersion akin to repose, power unconfined by definite boundaries. Really they are just wildlife in the garden. They strain away and toward and also try to remain still. White-coats-of-objectivity peer through one-way glass. Although science is about to name them, the lovers turn away, keeping all their tender membranes to themselves. I am visually aware of gravity's individual tug and their sensation of rising together. (*Denny Smith*, 185)

Sometimes the men who still visit our world like to hang out around garden walls. I try to make my way over to Gardener's when it is her wall

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they lounge on, which it often is because of all the stylish food and honeysuckle garden scents offered indiscriminately to anybody in that chaos of light and yelling called a home. We gather and watch them from inside to comment on the size of their asses, the curve of their backs, the fit of their pants. The tight, loose, big, voluptuous, and scrawny ones. Those with no belts and dimples on their butts. And those with no shirts and rolls of fat and muscle. While drinking large mugs of home brewed beer, we discuss meticulously which ones attract us and why, speculating on the squeeze of their balls, the taste of their tongues, and the softness of their hair. Which one of them is most like a collie and which a tarantula? The word parrot causes us to scream... (*Gardener of Stars*, 86)

RG: These essays you've written are a critical contribution to what's possible to think and say about contemporary literature and practice. In particular, I think this conversation has opened up (or re-ignited) a set of questions important to the ongoing of unconventional prose writing, which we call by many names. In one way or another, we've been addressing how narrative happens at the level of the sentence, from word to word, or phrase to phrase, how is it culled, fractured, re-pasted, and fractured again, and what is at stake or being queried at this almost-microscopic perspective. Your thinking about subjectivity—the coming-to-form and directionality of it—has been instrumental in getting narrative to be a place where one can work out one's preoccupations with being in

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time, while also playing in language and thinking perhaps of beauty or sex. To conclude, I want to ask you to do something, which is a kind of contrivance, but nonetheless of interest to me. Let's say you were to author three pamphlets on the relation of self, time, and place in the making of the sentence, taking into account a possible bleed between the moment of writing and the "moment" created or distilled in the work. What might the titles of these pamphlets, or even their first lines be?

CH: I think I must resist the temptation to answer your last question precisely, but I can offer you some indications. It might be that the titles of my pamphlets would be what you have named them: "Self," "Time," and "Place." The pamphlet titled *Self* would only cite other people. Perhaps I would begin with something by Hannah Arendt in *The Life of the Mind* on the relationship of the "thinking-ego" to the "self." My job would be to make a readable work, something lively, using others' sentences—and perhaps a few fake citations from my own "pen" on the subject of disidentification.

My current mood is such that the pamphlet titled *Time* would begin with a question about the relationship of writing to catastrophe. I do not yet know how to pose the question. It might be that I would ask, "How do sentences follow disaster? It is not the anticipation of disaster, or even of something marvelous, and certainly not of something redemptive, that is of concern, although it might have been not so long ago. Now the sentence is being asked to respond to something any individual can directly experience only in a small way, while the sentence itself is also being observed as an indication of unknowable time."

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The pamphlet titled *Place* would consider concepts and constructs of place: locality, site, non-site, “globalization,” transnationalism. I would think “aloud” about assigned values of place. For instance I would consider Lucy Lippards *The Lure of the Local* as a source for thinking about the politics of place. Such considerations would place the question of the sentence into diverse spaces of culture, art, and literature. But I think that much of what I would have to say would engage “dislocation” as a value within sentence making, as dislocation offers a compelling site of critique in contemporary literature.