

A Conversation with Juliana Spahr Joel Bettridge

Introductory note: Reading Juliana Spahr's recent book *Fuck You-Aloha-I Love You* over the past summer, I was struck by her poems' particular attention, especially the pressure they put on the difference between social and private bodies. The book's investigation into the ways political and personal desires come together and refuse any stabilized joining creates an incredibly complex line —rhythmically intense, violent and delicate. These ruptures and concerns, however, occur in a compounding of poetic, theoretical and ethnographic inquiry rather than in a fractured syntax. While both her poetry and criticism have been important to me for some time, then, *Fuck You-Aloha-I Love You* is, I think, a major work that crucially makes plain some of the emerging concerns of recent innovative poetry. Rather than primarily making them stand side by side, Spahr's book allows a politics of poetic form and a revitalized lyric voice to produce each other. As I repeatedly reread her book with an eye toward its embodied tensions, I began thinking deliberately about *Fuck You-Aloha-I Love You's* formal strategies, from its use of narrative to its interest in source material and rhetoric. I also began to wonder how Juliana Spahr would answer some of the questions I was beginning to ask her poems.

Joel Bettridge: In *Fuck You-Aloha-I Love You* much of the material sounds autobiographic, but those moments do not provide the kind of content I normally associate with autobiography; the poems in your book do not appear to invite a reader to respond in the same way. How do you see these autobiographical-like moments, or would you refuse the connection all together?

Juliana Spahr: I seem to remember Charles Bernstein saying at some point that most poetry was non-fiction. And I guess that is how I would see the poems in *Fuck You-Aloha-I Love You*. Certainly the poems are autobiographical in that they are a record of what I was thinking about and trying to negotiate at the time. But not autobiographical in that they aren't a factual record of I did this and then I did that. They were not written with a desire to tell about my self or my achievements (dubious or worth). Rather there was a desire to tell about how my self fit or not with others and how when the fit happens, even then the fit is difficult, it can also be transformative. I also do not see the poems as necessarily specific to me.

Perhaps it is a false distinction, but autobiography seems to me that it would be more the genre where you tell primarily your own story and document its unique events rather than its thoughts. But I guess the two are always going to blur and it is probably more an issue of what gets emphasized. I'm working on something now that I would consider autobiography or memoir, and it still is about how I fit with others, but it is very clear to me that I am telling a story where my self is the center of it. The piece has characters in it; I am one of them. And as I write I move these characters through certain events. The events have an order and they are connected to one another.

I learned a lot about the self with others from thinking about autobiography and testimonials. Lyn Hejinian's *My Life* has been a really crucial work for me. Also Cha's *DICTEE* which is like *My Life* blurring again that self vs. how the self fits with others distinction that I was trying to

make. And then out of that I've found work like Gloria Anzaldua's helpful. The emphasis on the collective in Angela Davis's autobiography was also really eye opening. Also Stein's *Everybody's Autobiography* (less so the *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*). But when it comes down to it, I'm not a huge autobiography fan. I like autobiography the most when it resembles autobiography the least. I like it when it gets larger than that classic Philip Lejeune definition—"retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality." I like it when the author stops telling their story as unique and starts telling how they were formed with others.

JB: How does such a position affect your critical writing?

JS: I think the critical writing is the same thing: a record of what I've been thinking about, worrying over, trying to figure out. If all poetry is nonfiction, perhaps all criticism is disguised autobiography (or pretending to be authoritative rather than autobiographical). I've been trying to work on this article on anti-colonial poetry. And I find that I can't read much these days without seeing it as taking a stand on colonialism (I even find myself reading the avoidance of colonialism as taking a stand on it). And I was thinking about how before I moved to Hawai'i, I would never have read things this way. But now it seems absurd to not read twentieth- and twenty-first century literature as all about the difficult encounters that were induced by colonialism.

JB: The word "encounters" has a good deal of resonance for your writing, in particular the way your work is invested in joining politics and desire. And yet, the desires your poems propose do not clearly line up against colonialism in the sense that I hear in them a devotion to a type of necessary occupation, even a desire to be occupied, that a straightforward anti-colonial stance might not allow for. Would you agree with this reading? Or, could you talk more about the relationship between desire and politics, or desire and anti-colonialism, in your poetry?

JS: Yikes. That is a hard one.

I like to joke that the reason I like to hang out with poets because they are devoted to the tradition of eros. To be at all interested in poetry means that at one point or another one had to declare an allegiance or an interest in how humans love things because that discussion takes up so much of the genre. And I like the political lyric because I see it as arguing that we must approach our politics with as much devotion as we approach beloveds.

I have never thought of my work as proposing a necessary occupation. But I think you are right. I am unwilling to give up desire. I am unwilling to abandon connection. I am unwilling to not be occupied. But I was born into the position of the colonizer not the reverse. So I have to see things differently as a result.

A few years ago on the poetics list, Andrew Rathman was calling me out as having "a rather benign and hippy-ish notion of human 'connectedness.'" (And I should note that that was probably the least of his complaints.) And I guess I meekly have to say guilty. Although I have tried to say that the connections are always impossible (the sexual position in "Switching," for instance, is one that is not possible to do; although perhaps someone with years of yoga could get

there) and yet we always have to go after them with all we've got. And I guess this is probably where I part ways with some, but not all, anti-colonial writers. I cannot imagine a return to a pre-colonial, pre-global world. My concern is with imagining an anti-colonial, anti-global world. I want to think about what we do now that we've been born into this moment with all of its pathetic and bad histories.

JB: Where do you see the connection between politics and desire breaking down? Or, alternatively, most usefully coming together?

JS: I guess what I like about poetry is that it has a certain tradition of exploring intimacy and another tradition of exploring the political, the social, the cultural. And I find myself most amazed by poems where these things happen at the same time. I think the reason why poetry retains an aura of political usability in our culture is because it often mixes intimacy with politics, or even when it is being intimate it has something to say about politics (see, for instance Sappho's "Some say a company of horsemen, etc. . . . is the most beautiful thing to behold on this black earth but I say it is whomever one loves" or Donne's "To His Mistress Going to Bed"). Poetry convinces, thus, through intimacy in a way that other genres tend not to do.

JB: Although *Everybody's Autonomy*, as well as the company your work keeps, by and large distrusts the Lyric "I" in poetry, the lyric self seems to deliberately haunt much of your writing, especially *Fuck You-Aloha-I Love You*. (I am thinking of "things" in particular). All of which is to ask, I suppose, if you would talk about the lyric "I" as a rhetorical device or otherwise in your poems?

JS: I keep rethinking the lyric and its I. For years, I was misreading it. I thought that it was a device that people used only to talk to themselves. But then I read more in the tradition, and I realized that it had all sorts of uses and I had been reading like an idiot for some time.

I do this exercise sometimes on the first day of class. I make a cross on the board. And on one axis I put conventional language/artificial language. And then on the other axis I put community/individual. And then we sit down and chart a bunch of poems and/or poetic traditions. What happens is that you end up having these fights around the community/individual axis. Where does Neruda go for instance? What about surrealism?

Neruda is fun because you start putting his love poems on the block for individualism and conventional language and then someone says but what about *Call for the Destruction of Nixon and Praise for the Chilean Revolution*? And then you have to discuss how even Neruda's love poems got used differently after Allende was assassinated. Etc.

I always want to put surrealism on the collectivism and conventional language axis. But someone always wants to put the surrealists under individualism. Again, a good chance to discuss how a work's alliances can change how it gets read and used culturally. I had read surrealism for many years through Dali, as slightly silly. Yet when I sat down a few years ago and read more I became very interested in how surrealism so deliberately figured itself as a dialogue between France and its colonies/former colonies.

I'm trying to make the I be on that line as much as I can in my work. I would feel hubristic claiming that I write for community. And I would be annoyed if I had to write from the community of my birth place, if I had to be a poet who gives voice and dignity to the people of Appalachia or southern Ohio. Instead, I see my work as indebted to work with deeper ties to community and as a way for me to think with them about how to think with others. *Fuck You-Aloha-I Love You* uses the I, but I saw the book when I wrote it as about a we which had room for a variety of I's. I was trying to think about the dirty word of "we" (a word that is especially troubling in Hawai'i with its complicated identity politics). And if I could be a part of this we or not.

JB: What is dirty about "we"?

JS: The story goes that the "we" assumes a false universal. It assumes that there are shared concerns. It denies contradictions. The usual stuff. A good deal of United States literature is against the "we." But I think the "we" is also a great utopian pronoun and also a necessary one for various sorts of political action. And so I wanted to think about a wide "we" or a variant "we."

JB: I could ask another question here, but it would mainly be to ask you to talk more about how you see "we" in your poems. My first thought is "switching," and lines like "the problem is how to we all / together now" or "how to speaking as our bodies / come together and recline" (49). Or the echo of Clifford Geertz writing "The primary question . . . now that nobody is leaving anybody else alone and isn't ever again going to, is not whether everything is going to come seamlessly together or whether, contrariwise, we are all going to persist sequestered in our separate prejudices. It is whether human beings are going to continue to be able, in Java or Connecticut, through law, anthropology, or anything else, to imagine principled lives they can practicably lead" (*Local Knowledge* 234). All of which is to say that much of the "we" of your work does not seem dirty in any straight-forward sense to me. At least to my ear it is a longing for a particular kind of intimacy, and is not simply a desire for us all to get along. A poem like "switching" I think sounds a desire that makes "we" more than livable or possible, but necessary, even joyously so. Of course, this is not a question.

JS: That is a great quote, of course. And I think it says better than I ever could what I'm interested in finally. And it is also probably another reason why I am not writing the anti-colonial poem, as you noted earlier. I'm interested in trying to figure out those moments when we can come together and then those moments when we don't want to. The answer is, of course, not a choice between coming together or staying apart. It is rather a series of answers and some of the answers are about coming together and some are about staying apart. And again, because poetry has a huge history of discussing how humans come together because of the love poem and the war poem, then poetry feels like a good place to be doing some of this thinking.

JB: Can you talk more specifically about what encounters you see twentieth- and twenty-first-century literature confronting and why and how these encounters are crucial?

JS: One of the constant questions of modernist literature is what to make of the cross cultural contact that is the inevitable result of nineteenth-century imperialism. And different modernists

want to do different things. Pound's response is different than McKay's which is different than Stein's which is different than Conrad's. But all are trying to think about what happens when people from different cultures come together, when western forms of literature meet non-western forms, when different languages meet, when people migrate. None of that literature could have happened without colonialism/imperialism. Some of it is against that project and some it is, sadly, supportive of it. But all of it is under the sway of ideas from elsewhere and could not have happened without ideas from elsewhere.

JB: Your last point calls to my mind the way the four writers you mention all had projects self-consciously drawing from or moving into substantially different cultural and linguistic spaces than the ones in which they started, which is perhaps why your work seems of a kind with theirs. I'm also reminded of Marjorie Perloff's claim that much contemporary innovative poetry is continuing the project of radical modernism, certainly some of the writers you mention, like Stein. In your own right then, how do you see your work relating to the projects of the modernists?

JS: I remember a few years ago seeing Carla Harryman speak at the MLA or some such event. And she very clearly said that she was writing in the modernist tradition. And I was like wow. I had always felt that modernism was too divorced, too lofty for me to claim. But her confidence interested me. And I think after that moment I started to think more about how I might find my modernism, which I guess is this way of reading modernism as a literature that is thinking about what is happening to the world through colonialism, imperialism, globalism or any of those other big terms. I was very much educated in modernism over all other literary periods. And I do think that most of the writing that I'm interested in is doing something with modernism.

JB: Modernism being as famous as it is for formal difficulty and fragmentation, how do you see interruption functioning in your writing? Mainly, I am thinking of the fact that in your essay "Spiderwasp or Literary Criticism" in *Telling it Slant*, (ed Mark Wallace and Steven Marks, Alabama UP) as well as much of your poetry, there is a tendency to let individual parts hold together longer than what might be expected given your poetic allegiances. What do you see yourself risking here? Or, what do you see yourself trying to accomplish?

JS: I'm just trying to think. That is how I see writing. It is thinking. Lyn Hejinian's essays are really helpful to me on this. And the reason one publishes is that one needs to think with others. One needs to put one's thinking to the risk of publication (to let others get up and say that is bullshit). And one needs to find others to think with, those who might help you think better.

The interrupted or the disjuncted or whatever it is, is interesting. But I don't think that way. I have to think on things over and over. I have to turn them around a lot and look at them from different perspectives. And finally, I don't want to push things apart. I'm not all that committed to tearing things down. I think of writing less as a resistant practice and more as a place where one explores new alliances and builds new structures that require lots of scaffoldings. Some of these structures fall down. But others might become entirely different forms of thoughts.

JB: How is looking at things from multiple perspectives something other than interruption? In terms of form or otherwise?

JS: When you ask this, I realize I am assuming that interruption only breaks things down. And then I'm realizing that anytime that I've used interruption in my work, in *Live* for instance, I've used it to break down or to talk back to what I saw as a powerful authority (in the case of *Live*, the diagnostic manual for children's mental health and the work place). One thing that has always fascinated me about Bruce Andrews's work is that it reads to me as so aggressive, as so much about talking back, that I have a hard time connecting it with his critical essays on reader empowerment. It often appears to me as if his work, and this is what is great about it, mocks the essays. But then Ron Silliman and Lyn Hejinian use interruption in their sentence-based works in a different way, in the way that it is supposed to open up a space for the reader. And I think that works.

JB: Your references to these other poets makes me want to ask what written conversations have been the most important to you? How have they helped you develop your thinking?

JS: Oh jeez. This is so endless. And changes from day to day. I just did this exercise with my class here where I gave them that chart a Duncan originally made (but is published at the back of Spicer's *Collected Books*). And then had them chart their influences. And I made myself do it, just to see how long it would take and also how possible it was and what I would learn. And I ended up with a chart that began with Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* and the New American Poets to language poetry and the poetics adjacent to it to something that might be closer to a cultural poetics such as the work of Cecilia Vicuña and Kamau Brathwaite, to Hawai'i's poetics and its debates about appropriation, the politics of language, and the responsibilities of literature.

JB: While living in Hawai'i and working with Susan Schultz you must have been exposed to poetry not simply beyond the traditional cannon, but outside the avant-garde cannon as well; you have even written and given talks about some of this writing. How has this exposure affected your own work? Has it created any changes in how you imagine your overall project?

JS: Hawai'i and conversations with Susan have dramatically changed my thinking. I remember when I first got to the Pacific, I went to the bookstore and bought a huge stack of books about the Pacific and sat down and read them. I had so little knowledge of the literature of the area. The field was wide open to me. This reading dramatically changed my work. I think this desire to say something more "clearly," or to attempt to say something more clearly, has come from that reading. And I think also the feeling that literature needs to make its alliances clear comes from the literature and the literary debates of the Pacific. Also a suspicion of ambiguity has come from that scene (the controversy around Lois Ann Yamanaka's work was very instructive here) and a feeling that literature needs to risk idea in both form and content.

But mainly, my map of poetry dramatically changed. I was educated to see two traditions—an experimental and a conventional one. And within those two, I was educated in the experimental one (in both undergraduate and graduate school). I now see these two traditions as massively subdivided even within themselves and as small parts of a vast range of poetics. I stopped seeing poetry as a war between experimental and conventional forms and started seeing both these poetics as local poetics, written out of specific moments, out of specific locations with very specific concerns. I can no longer see a dominant poetry. I can see that certain poetics have

more control over certain institutions, but this doesn't seem to matter much to the richness and wideness of poetry which seems to continue on without institutional support.

JB: One, perhaps obvious, change I've noticed in your work since you moved to Hawai'i is that you appear to be using a lot less source material in *Fuck You-Aloha-I Love You* than you did in *Response*. What accounts for this change? What do you think is the effect?

JS: I feel like *Response* isn't clear enough; doesn't say enough. So I think the turn away from source material is the desire to state something more clearly. Or to attempt to do so. But I'm not sure it was that deliberate. There is probably more hidden source material in *Fuck You-Aloha-I Love You* than is readily evident.

I guess I wanted the book to be more an argument and less an assemblage (although those things aren't necessarily antithetical). I wanted it to say, now think about this some or about this because this has helped me rethink things. I wanted it to argue, not just collect.

JB: In your last two response your use of the word "clear" appears to mean something other than what critics of innovative poetry mean when they say such poetry is unclear or meaningless, so what do you mean? Do you see yourself offering in any way a critique of language poetry's critique of the uses of reference or transparent language?

JS: Gulp. First, by clear I don't mean conventional. I think I might mean something that is not deeply based in personal reference or something not coded because it is so personal.

And I don't want to critique language poetry's critique of reference and/or transparent language. I actually find that critique moving and important. Language poetry, if we can talk about it as a whole in this context and we probably can not, has been unusually clear in taking a stand on certain issues, mainly the issues of how language gets used, how genre gets used. If I had to make a list of clear poetries, I wouldn't hesitate to put Bruce Andrews's work on that list.

On the issue of taking a stand, I was telling a friend this story tonight while doing the dishes. A friend told me that he had published a story once. Then the state department, or whatever that propaganda wing is called, had bought the story. They had bought the story because they read it as a story about the United States, as a story about baseball. And they bought the story because they wanted to tell that story to the residents of the Soviet Union, which was intact at the time. But he had always seen the story as a sort of socialist allegory. Then, my question to him was... were you happy with the story after that? I think to him, although I don't want to speak for him, it was a joke on the stupid state department. But I keep wondering if it is a sign that the story isn't clear enough in its alliances. What I mean by clear is that we've all got to write so clearly that the state department does not want to buy our stories.

JB: Your thinking about clarity looks to inform at least part of what you write in "After Language Poetry" in which you say that much of the contemporary work that excites you uses the concerns of language writing to discuss race and sexuality. How do you see your own work engaging in this concern, in particular your choices regarding style and form?

JS: Sometimes people say that any one who is not Hawaiian should not write about Hawai‘i or things Hawaiian. And that haoles in particular have done enough damage with their writing things about Hawai‘i. There is a certain amount of legitimacy to this argument. I feel there are certain rules I have to follow when I write about Hawai‘i. I should not tell or retell or mess with Hawaiian cultural and religious knowledges. I should not portray myself as an expert on Hawaiian life or values. I should make it clear that I am not Hawaiian. I should not claim a special, insider knowledge about things Hawaiian. I should not tell Hawaiians what form of sovereignty they should want. But to be writing in Hawai‘i and to not take a clear stand against the colonization of Hawai‘i is to me a greater problem than the risk of appropriation. The history of the colonization of Hawai‘i is a shared history, one that people of many different identity positions have participated in. It needs to be written about by many different people so that things can change.

I think I am not answering your question. But I think I want to rephrase that passage of mine that you are quoting. Instead I want to say that to not take a clear stand in your writing against empire, against the United States military industrial complex, against the repressive economic policies of the United States, against the disproportionate wealth and resource use of United States citizens seems to me to be a missed opportunity to have the writing matter in some way.

I went and saw Ron Silliman read a few months ago. I love Ron’s work. But I was hearing his work in the context of how he says that younger poets don’t have enough politics. And what I heard in Ron’s work was sometimes a reference to something that might be political—the piece, if I remember correctly, mentioned a munitions factory but didn’t really come out and say anything that was against arms sales. And then this political reference would be surrounded by a great deal of wonderful personal detail. It was a great reading because Ron is a wonderful poet. And I know the argument that he makes about the politics of form. But I kept wishing I could also hear how these wonderful personal details informed his politics or that he would provide more of a path to help me change my political mind (I know, I’m supposed to make my own path). I think that is what I meant when I wrote that. It isn’t just identity. But I’m interested in the contemporary writing that has taken the politics of form argument and used it to construct argument.

JB: Before you talked about the need for poetry to take a stand against colonization and what that stand might accomplish; on the opposite end of that question, what do you think is the risks of not involving yourself in the history of colonization, Hawai‘i’s or otherwise?

JS: NEA and Guggenheim grants. Endowed professorships. Reviews in the *New York Times*. I’m joking. But our culture rewards poetry that avoids taking on these issues more than the reverse. So I’m not sure there are any risks to not involving oneself in the history of Hawai‘i’s colonization. There are many writers in Hawai‘i who do not and they do just fine. But I think that one should make one’s work address issues that one sees as important. Otherwise, why bother.

JB: Considering language poetry’s critique of argument, and your own writings on connective reading, both of which move away from overt statements in poetry, how do you reconcile a politics of form with a desire to have more argument? Would you say you are trying to expand

what counts as argument, or what argument means or how it can happen? How does a reader maintain an active role in a poem that is in the middle of trying to tell him or her something?

JS: I see language poetry as all about argument. I would almost say that I think argument matters from reading that work. But I guess I wouldn't want to say that a politics of form has to be one that excludes argument. But I don't really see my own work as in that Stein tradition of making a work that is meant to be read variably by different readers. I'm not smart enough to write that work. So yes, I want an expanded definition of argument.

JB: You've talked a lot about your relation to other poets, so rather than asking more in that vein I am interested in what parallels you might draw between your work and other artistic mediums, in particular non-linguistic forms? Or, better yet, with things other than what we might normally call artistic?

JS: For years, music and art were very helpful to me. Although less so lately. There were two crucial works that changed things for me when I was in high school: Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* and the Sex Pistols' *Never Mind the Bollocks*. The dogmatic leftist politics of some hardcore music remains instructive. The rethinking of the everyday that is so much a part of conceptual art similarly.

Most recently, I have spent some time reading around in ethnobotany. The shapes and patterns that plants make were really helpful to me to thinking about systems and connections between things. And I'm getting a lot out of globalization theory right now.

JB: Can you talk more about what you are getting out of globalization theory, both in your criticism and your poetry?

JS: I guess I felt like I needed to figure out why U.S. economic policies are doing such bad things to so much of the world. So I turned to globalization theory because that is one place that conversation was happening. This in turn led to the interest in ethnobotany. Again, I feel like I need to think about what an emphasis on economic growth was doing to the environment. I feel I need to think about this because one of the "approved" poetic subjects is nature, yet very little nature poetry thought much about how the massive migrations of the twentieth century were changing the environment. I still feel like I am someone who does work on the local or who is interested in the local. But in order to understand that, I have to understand the global. And obviously, they can't really be separated. As I write this I wonder how much the emphasis in Hawai'i on the local led me to the global. I remember when I first moved to Hawai'i that the way that local was such a good thing was very weird to me because I had grown up in a place of localism and had seen localism as being very close with racism and xenophobia.

JB: As a teacher how do you introduce students to poetries that are not local to them? How do you help them find these unfamiliar poems compelling?

JS: Right now I'm teaching a class to MFA students that is called Cultural Poetics and it is basically a class in poetic arguments, the sorts of arguments that happen when poets stop talking about themselves and start talking about local issues. So we've looked at McKay's early work in

dialect or creole and then his later work in standard English and his own disavowal of the earlier work. And we've looked at Brathwaite's arguments about the language of the hurricane and his complaints about McKay. And we've looked at the Yamanaka controversy. My argument, and I'm not sure I'm convincing everyone, is that poetry has a role in the world—this again is how poetry explores intimacy and politics—but it is a really complicated one. And you can write against the world, you can write from the purely personal, but your work will still go out in the world and take sides on all these arguments. So you might as well think about them in advance and think about how your work fits into them.

JB: Practically, where would you suggest those schooled in the experimental tradition begin reading to create a more complex understanding of the poetic field?

JS: Kamau Brathwaite's *History of the Voice*. Édouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation*. Cary Nelson's many books on left poetics of the United States. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. Jerome Rothenberg's and Pierre Joris's anthology *Poems for the Millennium*. Warner Sollors' and Marc Shell's *The Multilingual Anthology of American Literature: A Reader of Original Texts with English Translations*. If you ask me next week I'll give you a different list.

JB: As a poet and as critic, how do you argue for the value of a local poetry to an outsider audience without reducing your position to a simple relativism, without relying on the cliché of identity politics that difference is good? What do you think is crucial about reading poetics that our not our own even if they are not local to us?

JS: New information! New brain patterns! New forms of critique!

I don't think it is at all about the straw man version of identity politics that difference is good for you. I think there are crucial informations embedded in poetics from different places. (And if not, then I can't see why we should bother.) Sometimes that information is about the names of the plants or the uses of the plants or the fish that can be eaten or not eaten. Sometimes that information is about different ways of being in the world, different values, different collectivities. Sometimes that information is about different forms of critique and resistance. Back to autobiography from earlier, my hesitation about autobiography/memoir/etc is that it can fall into this I'm different sort of narrative and then doesn't do the work of structural critique.

JB: A lot of the work we share an interest in depends heavily on its composition method—from Stein to Harryette Mullen. What is your writing process? Or perhaps more specifically, how does your process relate to what you are attempting in your poems, particularly your desire to include different forms of critique and resistance? I guess I'm asking whether you think that the potential realization of that desire can be more fully allowed for by some composition processes rather than others? Whether or not your interest in expanding the possibilities for argument is tied directly in your mind to any set of compositional methods?

JS: It goes like this. I walk around and do nothing and do nothing and then I think oh I need to think about that some more because that is interesting/upsetting/confusing/would change my life. Then I say, what is the best way to think about that? And sometimes I answer, the best way is to

write an essay and I go and try and write an essay but often the essay never gets written because I've got other essays to write and essays take a long time for me to write. And sometimes I answer, the best way is to write a poem. Then I usually think some about what sort of poem it should be. And if I need to do research, I go and do research. Research is the main thing that I do. When I wrote "Witness" I spent a lot of time reading the literature of alien abductions. When I wrote "Gathering: Palolo Stream," I walked along the stream and wrote down what I saw. Now I can't imagine how one wrote poetry before the internet. When I write poetry I spend a lot of time with search engines like Google and Nexis. As I do this I take notes and collect things (for a piece I'm currently working on I've got two big files of newspaper articles and emails). Then I go and sort through the notes and write the poem. This probably takes numerous drafts.

For years I used to write everyday because I think I read in *The Bell Jar* that writers had to write everyday. And I believe somewhat in this method. But I found if I wrote everyday I wrote short poems. I would get all the data out in the short form. But if I just wrote when I had something to say, then things got longer and more exploratory and comfortable.

JB: One last question: Now that you have recently left Hawai'i has your thinking about that place or about your own poetry begun to change at all?

JS: I don't know if leaving Hawai'i has changed my thinking all that much. I've only been gone for two months so far. I'm sure it will. But how it will I don't know yet. Traveling often changes the way I see Hawai'i because it is so easy when in Hawai'i to think only about issues that are specific to Hawai'i and to see Hawai'i as marginalized or as oppressed or as not getting a big enough piece of the United States pie. I remember going to Brazil shortly after I moved to Hawai'i and that really altering my perspective. The plants were the same, yet the economic terrain was so different. And I remember when I came back that I felt a little annoyed that it was so hard for me to think outside of Hawai'i when in Hawai'i. Or that Hawai'i took up so much of my brain that I couldn't think about what neo-liberalism was doing to Brazil. Even while Hawai'i is haunted by a bad history that is part of the same bad history that haunts Brazil, it is also a place of great privilege. Its citizens are, whether they like it or not, American citizens in the sense that they use up a huge amount of resources. When one goes to many other places in the Pacific, with the exception of Aotearoa/New Zealand, Hawai'i's great privilege again zooms up in your face. And this is not to say that Hawai'i should just get over it and be glad to be colonized. But I do think that part of being anti-colonial in Hawai'i also means recognizing a large bad history.

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Juliana Spahr was born in Chillicothe, Ohio in 1966. Her books include *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs* (U of California P, 2005), *Fuck You-Aloha-I Love You* (Wesleyan U P, 2001), *Everybody's Autonomy: Connective Reading and Collective Identity* (U of Alabama P, 2001), and *Response* (Sun & Moon P, 1996). She co-edits the journal *Chain* with Jena Osman (archive at <http://www.temple.edu/chain>) and she frequently self-publishes her work (archive at <http://people.mills.edu/jspahr> <<http://www2.hawaii.edu/%7Espahr>>).

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