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'Flip the dialectic': Some Notes on the Poetic Practice Seminar

'Steve Evans and I, newly relocated to Providence, were sharing my IBM typewriter. I loved this typewriter...It was the only writing machine in our apartment and, with Steve starting graduate school, it quickly became evident to me that I was going to have to fight for my time at the keyboard. I did not mind sharing, but I soon realised that the outside pressure of an institution took precedence over the inside pressure of inspiration. This realisation led me to insights about the process and politics of artistic inspiration. Nothing could account for my experience but a body of finished work'. Jennifer Moxley, *Often Capital*¹

I'm interested in the debate about the politics of artistic inspiration which Moxley alludes to in her 'Afterword' and I'd like to contextualise it by discussing the poetics seminar which was founded by Andrea Brady, Redell Olsen and myself in the winter of 2003 and which ended about eighteen months later. It had a life a bit like a soap bubble, creating an ephemeral space in which a group of approximately ten women met to discuss their creative practice and its critical context and to share new work. In order to sketch out the background to our decision to set up this group I will cite Laura Hinton, who in her essay, 'Centering Margins: The Language Poets Reconsidered (as Women)' states that 'women do not have a marginal investment in the avant-garde...women, in fact, are *partial* to an experimental poetics'.² Without getting too preoccupied with that italicised term 'partial' although it seems very loaded to me, I would also like to quote from Juliana Spahr's closing comment in her essay 'Astonishment and Experimentation'. She argues that the new anthologies and collected essays by and about

1 Jennifer Moxley, 'Afterword', *Often Capital*, pp 55-56

2 Laura Hinton, 'Centering Margins: The Language Poets Reconsidered (as Women)', *Contemporary Literature*, p182

experimental writing by American women writers that were published in reasonably strong numbers at the beginning of this decade, a selection in which she makes special mention of How2, should 'make it impossible not to acknowledge women as major practitioners and expanders of this tradition'.³ Set against such optimism I note that the Contemporary Experimental Women's Poetry Festival for which this paper was originally written marked the ten year anniversary of the publication of *Out of Everywhere*, edited by Maggie O'Sullivan, and I believe this is the last time that any such collection of writing by women in the UK was published, although women's writing has featured in various chap books and anthologies produced subsequently, including the chap book rem press which I ran with the poet Karlien van den Beukel during the late nineties. I, for one, was questioning where I might belong as a writer, if indeed I wanted to belong anywhere, and I believe that was a preoccupation for others of the writers who agreed to meet.

We met for just over a year and during that time although we discussed making the group more public and indeed opening it out to a broader public agreement was never reached on how or what form that might take. In part, the discussion was a way of vicariously sharing and publishing the work and the ideas about publication which in some cases were too radical or ambitious to reach their desired audience. One of the ideas which we were most engaged by was the setting up of a temporary space for a weekend in which we might display work, hold performances and share the methodologies and ways of working which we had developed.

I'm aware in sharing an account of this seminar that it was understood that this was a very clearly demarcated and therefore limited public arena in which it was possible to take risks and extend our practice in ways which other forums would not have permitted and I don't intend to breach that protected

3 Juliana Spahr, 'Astonishment and Experimentation', *Contemporary Literature*, p175

space. However, I'm also very aware of the fact that the group did not represent a simple consensus of views or approaches and so I need to make it clear that this account is my own interpretation of what took place.

Many of our discussions centred around practice and in particular the relationship between process-centred writing and the role of the personal voice within the work. This often was considered in relation to the more overtly politically engaged work of many of the writers participating. Although the seminar might not still be formally meeting I think it created connections between women writers which remain important influences on all of our work - not least because it seemed to coincide with a new energy and self-confidence which has resulted in numerous performances, publications, essays, classes and meetings subsequently. We met in London in a space that was generously provided by Royal Holloway. It always seemed to me rather wonderful that we should be meeting in the building which, I believe, also houses the office of the poet laureate, Andrew Motion.

The articulation of loss or lack and a profound sense of dislocation and separation is a pervasive theme in the work of both the writers I am going to talk about now and indeed it seemed to surface in the work of many of the writers in the group. I wonder if to an extent that was partly shaped by the context in which we met and the thematic structures for the seminars (which included collection, recollection and collage) as well as the pervasive shadow of war which seemed to linger amongst us.

I have chosen to discuss the work of two of the women in that group, Dell Olsen and Andrea Brady, although the list of fine writers participating in the workshop is a long one. I am not intending to give a comprehensive account of this work nor of its context, but I would like to present some closer readings and to try to identify some common themes which link this work

together or perhaps explain my own interest and pleasure.

I'll first take a brief look at the work of Andrea Brady who is a lecturer at Brunel University. Her recent publications include *Embrace* and *Vacation of a Lifetime* as well as *English Funeral Elegy in the Seventeenth Century*. She has also published numerous essays and edited the anthology *100 days*, a collection of responses to a hundred days of the Bush presidency. She is, with Keston Sutherland, co-founder of Barque Press which has been publishing exciting new work for about ten years. For the past two years she has also been engaged in a project called Archive of the Now which involves endless journeys around the country to record readings by contemporary UK poets and to edit and collect this work in a new online archive. Brady's output is characterised by its generosity, she shares her work in progress, engaging actively with responses and opinions of others, she also discusses and reviews the readings, events and exchanges in which she participates and thereby creates a log of activity which otherwise might simply evaporate. This generosity, for me, is also a defining feature of her poetic practice.

In reading Brady's work, some of the questions I find myself asking are: What does it mean to be an American writer writing in the UK? How does it feel to be in self-imposed exile from the heart of the global superpower? and How do the answers to these questions relate to the inevitable feelings of nostalgia and sentiment which such exile might generate? I think you can see these themes considered in some detail in the poem 'Saw Fit', which was published in the collection *Embrace* in 2005 by Object Permanence Press.

I've chosen to discuss this poem because this was one of the pieces which Andrea shared with the group as a work in progress and also because I feel it partly reflects the mood of the group – as I have said we were all writing in the context of the Iraq war and I think it shaped everyone's writing to a

greater or lesser degree. I certainly see this shadow falling over much of what I wrote during that period. In Brady's writing, typically this is not simply a shadow, it is a tangible reality with which the reader sees her grapple across the page in the attempt to contextualise in her poetry the outrage to which she bears a witness.

In this poem Brady talks about the case of Lindy England, the soldier who was photographed torturing and humiliating Iraqi prisoners of war. The theme has an added resonance because of her surname and the complicity of the UK with America in this war; and in a reading of this poem it strikes me that Brady is able to bring a further resonance to her reading of Lindy England's behaviour and her displacement from America to Iraq in its reflection of Brady's own dislocation from America to England. It brings with it a kind of doubling up or catching herself short in the poem, which adds to the nuancing and layering of emotion and this balances with a tone that also gestures to the polemical.

The poem combines images of violence, sexual exploitation and new technologies, all of which work to portray a system which corrupts the individual and warps their actions: "she wouldn't even drag a dog/ on a lead let alone a human" until a Titan consultant told her to/ cut to the/ chase'. They are 'underlings left to sweat the details' literally in a desert which is 'a hundred degrees in the shadows'. The poem combines such passages with the corporate language, which masks the stark reality of state-endorsed torture within a jargon of false-logic that employs the semantics of smoke and mirrors. "Our challenge is to give analysis/ guidance on how to extract/ the most appropriate information,/ as well as the tools and technologies/ to reason from this data". This dark statement is couched against the darkness experienced by the prisoners as they are "forced to crawl through it/ and then placed in a dark cell, this/ would freak them out because they would glow".

The individual, whether they be torturer or victim, is placed, apparently passively, within the context of this culture or infrastructure of tacit endorsement. It is imaged as a body which is diseased and rotten: 'the speculum which opens the rotted/ wound to congress inspectors inside the body,/ which is forced to get up off the table and keep walking'.

The sordid reality of the routine torture of prisoners which is investigated here is juxtaposed with references to Caliban's response to his torture by Prospero, an embodiment of political authority and colonial power in *The Tempest*: 'can you imagine the noises and sweet airs / the thousand twangling instruments'. This poetic language is pitched against the clipped and unexpressive comments reported from the people amongst whom England grew up: "Kind of weird" speaks the voice of westerns' and also against the silence of the torture victims who are not given voice within the poem.

In this poem, the body is placed within the context of extremes of pleasure and pain, delight and disgust, as Caliban was. There is a Sadeian nod to the banality of such extremes or a canceling out of the boundaries between pleasure and pain in images such as 'vanitas and death's /giving head in the digital snap' and 'Shit-boy watches through a pair of her smalls'. This is also reflected in England's own anticipated exploitation of her pregnancy and its redemptive possibilities 'she'll make her money back/ get more out of the birth' as well as her own sexual exploitation: 'Madonna of the spectacle...the CO gives them England's Victoria's Secret/ catalogues to loosen them up'. England is thus seemingly offered the opportunity to transcend the banal reality of the photographs 'her lewd face in the Lynch mirror' as she becomes 'mother of all "persons in my higher chain"/ England the moon-/face of the 72-point matrix/ of stress and duress'. However, the poem ends, not with England's image but with that of the erased and literally defaced torture victims, 'above her, men, hooded/ leave no paper trail through the wreckage'.

Brady's poem offers a finely balanced interplay between the dialectic of individual need and desire and collective good or wellbeing. It judiciously articulates and interrogates the potential, which the environment has both to corrupt and to redeem individual action. This juxtaposition and the desire to find a happy resolution drives Brady's work as a whole, and structures the active relationship between reader and writer which the poems negotiate.

Redell Olsen is a lecturer at Royal Holloway, University of London, and also editor of the online journal *How2*. Her publications include *Book of the Fur*, published by rem press in 2000, the collaborative book *Writing Instructions*, published by Gefn Press in 2004, and *Secure Portable Space*, which was published by Reality Street Editions, also in 2004. Olsen's poetic sensibility stalks the zeitgeist with fervency and wit. Her work incorporates a broad sweep of ideas, themes and media framed by her experimentation with a range of formal styles and structures and her ability continuously to challenge the limits of these diverse media. Her writing balances an intense engagement with process, identifiable in poems such as 'The Songs of Minimaus', with a sustained political awareness, as in the critique of the fur trade in *Book of the Fur* and of the slave trade in *The Minimaus Poems*.

The Minimaus Poems, a sequence published in *Secure Portable Space* in 2004, offers in microcosm both the process-driven and the political dynamics of her writing. The sequence has as one of its obvious points of departure Charles Olson's *The Maximus Poems*, an irresistible topic perhaps as a woman writing from Gloucester in the UK with a shared surname. Instead of grandiose themes of masculine heroics and American fable, Olsen presents the reader with snippets of the daily domestic tedium and surprise that lie in a provincial market town such as Gloucester.

Here I turn to 'Letter 5'. It opens with the line 'The Dunkirk Mill Centre Cross Cutter', a phrase evoking numerous resonances for the contemporary reader; that of wartime conflict alluded to by 'Dunkirk'. 'Mill Centre' suggests another nostalgic nod to British history with its allusion to mill buildings whose function has entirely transformed during the past twenty years so; for most buildings which remain standing, their old function as centres for manufacture, production and export is long since gone, only the name remaining as a signifier of that original function. The final image of a 'cross cutter' is suggestive of a sense of agitation and displacement in the doubling of anger and wounding, and the echo of religious iconography; it also suggests the old manufacturing skills which might have been used in the cloth production process, and hints at the new use for a mill building, with its near miss allusion to 'cost cutting'. Such images create a backdrop of half-formed nostalgia for a history, as well as a present, with which the author has an uneasy although familiar relationship. In its entirety the line refers to an invention of 1815, which replaced the work of the shearmen who cut the nap from the cloth. Its unique design led to the further invention of the rotary lawn mower.

If Olsen's poem articulates an indefinable sense of loss and ambivalence, then this is partly expressed through the disjunctions and incomplete snatches of conversation and syntax from which it is constituted. This tactic also permit humour to surface, as in the allusion to 'A revolutionary invention; Imagine a rotary lawn mower'; this witty double play of revolution and rotary frames a persistent image of slicing, separation, layering and cutting which continues throughout this letter and indeed throughout the sequence as a whole. It is at the fore in the cutting and undercutting of layers, which are explored here. The following phrase 'two boys supervised by a man' is repeated later in the letter, referring to the process of industrial development which replaces the skilled manual labour of men with that of untrained boys, and which is again

replicated in the new use of the 'mill centre', the invention and inventiveness of industrial pioneers juxtaposed with that of the author. The 'thousands' of cutters which resulted, and which subsequently 'by 1829 quickly /replaced shear', represent a formal separation from the hand or the link between the individual and labour expressed in the phrase 'Two boys supervised by a man/ could work two machines, much faster than by hand'.

The reference suggests a combined image of cutting and loss, bringing with these nostalgia framed by the image of freshly mown grass (or grace), which the poem also introduces, as well as the rise of the bourgeois garden with its lawn in place which the linked technical development permitted. It is an image, associated as it is with traditionally masculine work and leisure activities, which suggests a link with the loss of life hinted at throughout the entire poem by its images of war and death.

In this poem there is a theme of harm and of imminent damage, as well as the record of actual loss, which seeps even into the images of progress and development, which it also records. The National and Provincial Building Society contains Roman gate stones, 'last remnants / demolished in 1974', and commerce elsewhere in the poem is frequently associated with alienation and depersonalisation. After coins ceased being used, 'Circulation stopped', an image of mortal danger for the individual as well as for the processes of exchange and currency in all its most positive guises. And I should stress that, in places, this poem can be tender and even sentimental about the Gloucester scenes of quotidian life which it describes.

Elsewhere, however, 'CCTV watches blindly' and the statement, "I just forgot to pay" he sd' appears as if jotted down shorthand in a store detective's notebook. Later, 'he' is 'shocked to receive a letter from a debt collection/ agency acting on behalf of the supermarket asking for £100 to cover/ the cost

of the incident'. This represents a further depersonalisation of even the act of loss, both for the merchant and its customer, an amnesia or loss of understanding partly contextualised by the 'blindly' watching CCTV, an observing presence that sees nothing. It is here that the poet finds a place to step in as observer and documenter of such tiny incidents of modern life.

Both Redell Olsen's and Andrea Brady's work juxtaposes public and private space, past and present experience, individual consciousness and collective power structures, and explores the desire for a poetic form able to bear witness to but also transcend these dichotomies. Brady and Olsen, like others in the seminar that met at Bedford Square, were seeking a collaborative space in which it was possible, as Jennifer Moxley puts it, not just to share the writing machine but to create a balance between institutional power and creative process. Further, this search led to an investigation of the degree to which 'the political arena was a place that did not fulfill life but prevented it'.⁴ The work produced by the writers participating in the seminar demonstrates the same balancing of personal and political life which Moxley identifies in her own work during the first Gulf War. Refuting the spin generated by the media at that time, that we could not '*feel* because our lives were ... *mediated*'⁵, became for Moxley a critical act which was, at its core, a defence of the validity of art and indeed of poetry. The creative engagement with community, institutional power and the political arena demonstrated by Brady, Olsen and others of the Bedford Square group negotiates a parallel critical and creative act.

Andrea Brady, *Embrace*, Glasgow: Object Permanence, 2005

These Pages Are Marked by Women: Anthology of the Contemporary Experimental Women's Poetry Festival, edited by Emily Critchley and Neil

⁴ Moxley, p 59

Pattison, Cambridge: CEWPF, 2006

Laura Hinton, 'Centering Margins: The Language Poets Reconsidered (as Women)', *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 41, No. 1, 180-188, Spring, 2000

Redell Olsen, *Secure Portable Space*, Hastings: Reality Street Editions, 2004

Out of Everywhere: Linguistically Innovative Poetry by Women in North America & the UK, edited and introduced by Maggie O' Sullivan, London: Reality Street Editions, 1996

Juliana Spahr, 'Astonishment and Experimentation' (Review of *We Who Love to Be Astonished: Experimental Women's Writing and Performance Poetics*, ed. Laura Hinton and Cynthia Hogue [Alabama, 2002]), *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 44. no. 1, 172-175, Spring, 2003