

Poetry as Polarity

an interview with **Carla Harryman**

by Gail Scott

Two summers ago, Carla Harryman and I were sitting on a dock reading novels.

Carla, on vacation in Québec, was sitting with legs straight out, back straight, for quite a long time, a mindful body-presence that I associate with theatre. And indeed, she is a language poet but also a performance artist, and an author of prose works with intricate structures that can be both read and performed. Whatever genre she adopts, she feels no compunction to alter her very unusual way of writing; her newest book, **W—/M— (Split Level Texts, \$12)**—a “diptych” formed by “Look Again” and “Portrait of M”—is a polyphonic performance work featuring several mirroring pairs: Detroit/San Francisco; masculine/feminine; intrinsic/extrinsic.

Born in Orange, California, Harryman studied at the University of California, Santa Barbara and San Francisco State University. She co-founded the San Francisco Poets Theater in 1979, and her itinerary as a writer includes much collaborative work with avant-garde composers, actors, and poets. She teaches at Eastern Michigan University.

Gail Scott: I am curious about how you came to write a prose work in mirroring pairs; and how, in making the work, you envisaged audience engagement with it?

Carla Harryman: May I begin with samples from both sides of the diptych? The “she” in each of these segments is a different she. The first refers to a child, who is a kind of performing object of the narrator’s memory, and the second to “M,” the subject of the portrait, which itself draws attention to the double dynamic between the narrator of the portrait and the subject.

These fanciful things dwell inside, where no one can see them from a distance. She alone, and exclusively, has created the substance and the knowledge of the inside. Standing back to admire her job, she says, I have made the inside of a cloud.

(From “Look Again”)

Thin as a flint she rumbles in wagons across hurt farmland. She’s

a thundercloud water has slipped from into an elsewhere.

(From “Portrait of M”)

The mirror is a complex reflective space; if one looks beyond the face or foregrounded object of reflection, the binaries may disperse, lose their pairing logic, or start to blend with one another. If one enters a mirror—conceptually or in a game of imagination in a performance space—the world on the other side of it may echo at unanticipated moments. I could say that the kinesthetic activity that such a mirror-world elicits in performance may have informed how I came to conceptualize the diptych, but it is also the case that performance is always in my work first page-based writing.

The literal experience of performance over years has certainly impacted how I listen to language while “composing” prose or poetry, even as most of my early writing has a strongly performative affect, which in the poetry (often written in prose sentences), moves away from lyric—for example, some of the Poets Theater Writings, which

encourage performers to engage with language in a “listening” mode in collective, and hence, polyvocal exchanges. In rehearsing for a performance, we don’t at first know what is at the center of the work, what is internal to it until we have made a relationship to the language through the senses, and the site of the performance. This is all to say there is a strong circuitry between prose composition, performance writing, and the performance of writing.

Shifting back to the topic of the prose diptych, you have mentioned the pairings of place, or what I think of as region. In “Look Again,” (the W side of the diptych) the region is imaginary, while drawing from actual places. It is derived from Southern California, the San Francisco Bay Area, Detroit, and a world (expanding beyond location) of ideas, assertions, and texts: including reference books, the Old Testament, poetics, and music—from Miles Davis to song lyrics like “take me to the river, throw me in the water,” which I experienced in a surprising way when the familiar words came out of the mouth of a mechanical fish displayed on a wall in the Northfield Shopping Mall near Detroit. The narratives of “Look Again” begin with childhood’s ventriloquy. The childhood is double-voiced. What is retained of the child in the narratives and non/narrations that skip through time and space in an a-chronological arrangement is a position the narrator assumes as listener, learner, and tester of such content.

Diptych is of course a reference to visual art. The visual form initiates movement of the eyes from left to right and right to left. The mind’s eye of the writing subject or text of W—/M— might be compared to that of an artist making a visual work. The books taken together require a kind of transferential processing through the gap of their separateness. In my prose poem “For She” I have a line, “from right to left and left to right until the sides of her body was circuits.”

GS: Reading W—/M— one gets caught up in a marvelous rebound loop, as if the book moved from its bookends toward the middle. You relocated as an already mature writer from San Francisco to Detroit. Since W— and M— seem to frame those two very different writing contexts, what did the displacement mean in terms of your own writing trajectory?

CH: The move was traumatic and also fascinating as I was both plunged into and leaping into change. In moving, I lost a world that was changing in any case as many friends—literary people and artists—were moving away from the Bay Area as part of the 1990s brain drain. This move is mingled with other changes and losses including the loss to AIDS of the filmmaker Warren Sonbert in May 1995,



photo by Rachel Levitsky

a few months before I moved to Detroit and to whom I dedicated *Gardener of Stars*—a novel that was begun in 1994 in the Bay Area and completed in 2000 in Detroit. I had to change my line of work from nonprofit arts to university teaching, which encouraged thinking in cross-disciplinary modes directed toward teaching. Time changes everything, no matter where one is living: events are indifferent to such biographical details. Thus, the move to Detroit gets absorbed into 9/11, the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, and the unanticipated consequences of the social logics and economies that follow from disaster. Yet, the proximity of Dearborn, with the largest Arab American population in the United States, had a profound impact on me. Through all of this, I was also involved in quite a few collaborations, performance and text based—including *Grand Piano*, the multi-authored memoir of ten writers who participated in shaping language writing poetics on the West Coast. This work partly came about because of the geographic dispersion of these writers.

GS: The device of mirroring implies ambiguity or at least shifting as light or angle shift; if there is not a clear distinction between W— and M— as far as sites, for me the tone of W—, with its fantastical resonance, corresponds to my Northerner’s perhaps clichéd notion of California, while the harsher rhetorical tone of M— is Detroit. How does the late Detroit artist Ron Allen, to whom the work is dedicated, figure here?

CH: Ron is featured in the “Look Again” side, which is the W— side (if we hold the W up to the mirror of M, it is W . . .). The dedication is a tribute to his memory and work and our sustained conversation, which included some theater collaboration. Ron strongly features in, inflects the atmosphere of the writing: he is weather in it. He is also the interlocutor of “Look Again.” It’s seldom that I have a person in mind when I’m writing, as if I am having a conversation specifically with them or positioning them as an “ideal reader,” and I am not sure if I thought of him exactly in this way: perhaps he was rather an ideal listener—who sometimes didn’t listen at all. Nor did I exactly hear or understand everything he had to say to me, which was sometimes too much information. I am fascinated by the force of mutual recognition and affinity that mixes with mishearing or misinterpretation that often characterizes sustained, energetic conversation: such conversational qualities are often explored in my writing.

Let me see if I can say something about Ron’s Poets Theater plays, of which there are at least twenty, none of which can now be performed until something happens with the estate. His most innovative writing/art is disappearing, at least temporarily. His plays are volatile, Ayleresque. They seek transformation through destruction and a language

that has broken free of constraints and the interpolation of the black subject in a racist society. Yet they grapple with philosophical, political, and religious questions that are structured as dualisms—that are sometimes complementary and sometimes contradictory. He thus draws on different systems of dualism, Eastern and Western, mythic and Marxist. The source and inspiration for the work includes a difficult personal history transposed through his experience working with people in drug and alcohol treatment programs, a vigorous spiritual and philosophical questing, and a wicked sense of humor. His “target” audience and inspiration was the marginalized, urban African American man. His work was an offering of possibility, a manifestation of the capacity to transform the hardened and oppressive logics of power to energetic resistance and the possibility of liberation.

Ron was one of the people through which Detroit became a revelation, especially as a place where “the outside” was a kind of obscuring agent of life lived “inside” or in anterior spaces, where identity is not so fully defined by race, class, and wealth.

The “knowledge of the inside,” a fascination for the “little girl” in “Look Again” results in a wishful daydream that, as daydreams do, fuses given reality with fantasy. It begins with a fantasy of an interracial world (possibly inspired by my childhood experience of attending an integrated Methodist church with my grandmother in Compton, California) and incorporates projections activated between the Southern California of my childhood and the Northern California and Detroit of adulthood. Recalling your observation about pairings: micro narratives, expositions, and poetic excursions of “Look Again” are posed at thresholds between inside and outside, what was and what is, the West and the rustbelt.

The other side of the text, “Portrait of M” is less narrative and wilder, more rhetorical, and would thus perhaps stylistically connect with some of Allen’s rhetorical wildness and maneuvers, but this side of the diptych is definitely not written with an interlocutor in mind, except perhaps the double figure of the narrator and the subject of the portrait itself. The portrait is a mode of undoing, assembling, and disassembling conventions of gendering. I would add dissembling to the list; dishonesty, bragging, making shit up are all part of M’s (or the portraitist’s) arsenal. Region is exploded and distributed in this work as a kind of hallucination of screens and images.

GS: Exuberant narrative re-distribution has been a bailiwick of women prose writers since the early 20th century at least (Stein, Bowles, Barnes, etc.). That day on the dock, you were reading Rachel Levitsky’s *The Story Of My Accident Is Ours*, and I remember your remarking she broke representational rules by refusing concrete language (or the usual novelistic referent). One could make a fine list of contemporary women writers currently writing such prose works, where, as you put it in your *Grand Piano* essay on everyday life, “Drift à deux”: “I might have said the ‘I’ who hates mythology is a pronoun in a text gesturing toward a predicament one can only separate oneself from within provisional and performative renegotiations with language.” Experimental prose is often treated as difficult, inaccessible. Is the reading of it something that requires a learning curve?

CH: “I might have been born in a more simple schoolyard,” (from

“For She”) but, well, as you note, I wasn’t . . .

After years of teaching, I would respond yes to your question. And I could say no. The critical reading of anything typically requires a learning curve and if the literary work in question is itself a kind of critical reading, this learning curve may be magnified. The response to a first encounter with a writing is conditioned by what one has already read and has access to. But readers are different, one from another, no matter. What one is able to read or is drawn to in reading depends on our mysterious wiring, or education, culture or pre-inclinations, or tastes and the context of reading. It depends on the reader’s desires, or obligations, or attention span, or work schedule. A student who writes from the experience of the inner city prefers canonical literature and realist narrative; another who works at a rural Walmart is interested in non/narrative poetics: this scenario could easily be reversed. I continue to find readers’ receptiveness to any given work partly mysterious.

Let me come at the question of the reader from a slightly different angle that takes us back to an emergent feminist poetics, itself a source for bringing you and me together in long-term dialogue. Well before Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* there was gender trouble that led me to the performative in writing as a way of constructing something other to patriarchal poetics with its adherence to poetic lineage, as if one had such a lineage and one’s work would be understood and interpreted through what has been passed down within a given genre. Genre boundaries were/are/were/are crossed for both energetic and theoretical purposes. The reader was/is/was/is potential, a potential reader of these writings.

GS: Of the core language writers, it is you who have been most concerned with feminism. Yet . . . *she is to present herself as an enigma*, you say in almost the last sentence of *W—M—*. That is, “she” is a tonality, what Fred Wah calls the *Music at the Heart of Thinking*. I am struck by how the language brings one into a state of listening, something you refer to earlier, rather than a state of interpretive attention that is a usual prose-reading posture.

CH: The aspects of listening you refer to have a strong kinship to improvisation in performance, whether musical, physical, or verbal, going back to very early work, such as “In Front”:

Take the school off the cape of responsibilities.
I shoot.

Like what I was saying before.

You look at me from across the table and taunt. We are the only island. Someone else is wearing your shirt. Take the school off the cape of responsibilities!

(From *Under the Bridge*, 1980)

This early work of indeterminate genre (i.e. poetry) perhaps anticipates the improvisatory, which opens itself up to multidirectional thinking in various time-based dimensions and informs the “sentencing.” The constraints that help to make form from the improvisational experience include reading the text reflexively and making decisions about its formal limits that are informed by reflexive reading. In stating this, I could simply be describing writing, any writing, that isn’t

thickly plotted or planned out in advance and is process-oriented; however, the attentiveness to improvisation, reflexive reading, and constraint derived from a decision or the cognition or interpretation of a gesture activates it in a particular way for me.

GS: From our first meeting in 1985, I felt a tremendous kinship with your work, yet we are writing from very different spaces. It is interesting that *l'écriture au féminin* (as we have named some of the early work in Quebec, with an emphasis on *écriture*) has consistently figured in your and my ongoing conversation. I should add that this poetics was honed in an interventionary and militant context in the very volatile '70s in Québec. What were the early intellectual (theoretical?) influences that led you to this place, particularly with respect to language and the body?

CH: I'd like to mention a bridge between the intellectual influence and everyday social experiences; before the word "intellectual" had much meaning or value, there was the encounter with peers who viewed me as other. This otherness was twined with also being in a lower economic class than most of my peers, and it was also twined in what we would now call sexual harassment—mostly performed by one person on the high school football team. I felt elevated by reading an American history book that was written from a Marxist economic perspective. I assume such a book no longer exists in American public schools, but in any case it was a book that changed my view of myself, because it helped me to understand contradiction and the economic causes and conditions of American history. Why was I ashamed of my body and not proud to be an American? The veil of ignorances lifted.

I am not sure that there was anyone else interested in this textbook or the history class, but I found it so easy to master and so persuasive that I saw my difference in a positive light through my encounter with it. Thus an application of theory became a source of sustenance and comfort: it gave me courage and the gift of articulation. It also helped me grasp the nature of my frustration with certain academic subjects that were taught as dutiful narrative, data, and fact. Marx offered whatever will to power there was latent in my murky adolescent self a springboard into a new world. Reading and thinking to some degree protected my body from abuse and there was quite a bit of that in my young 1960s life, excluding the elected experiments with drugs and sex. I was protected because of the mediating power of political theory and philosophy. Perhaps this body owes it coherence to the intellectual realm. And wouldn't that be true for so many?

At the moment I am thinking of the phrase "one is not born but rather becomes a woman," written first by de Beauvoir and recast by Wittig as "one is not born a woman." Perhaps in some way I grew up with *The Second Sex*, a volume that at some point appeared on my mother's bookshelf. It's being in the house and hence available for my perusal as well as hers surely made my uncertain mother nervous. (Even if the books in my own room, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and Ginsberg's *Howl*, likely made her even more nervous!) This one phrase, "one is not born but rather becomes a woman," explodes a category that assumes the body within a symbolic system of language. Once "woman" is called into question in the passage through the birth canal, one comes to understand that language controls the

body and its social relations. One sets out to change this for oneself, encountering a problem of language, which cannot be returned to neutral or natural in any legislated sense. Around the time that you and I met, in the mid 1980s, there was access to Kristeva, Cixous, Irigaray; whereas, at an earlier point, I had been more aware of Wittig due to some time spent in France and de Beauvoir as well as many Anglophone feminists who had not focused so intensively on the question of language. I suppose what I gravitated to was writing that informed my understanding of the relationship of language to play and desire, an Eros involved in its deployment as art. This was not exclusively writing by female theorists and, in fact, I often thought that the theoretical writing of those thinkers I have referred to could not ever perfectly align with a literary writing practice, but this also makes reading them all the more productive.

I am quite interested in the non-alignments of literary and theoretical works in the cases where theories and philosophy are yet integral to the creative text. Your novel *The Obituary* is a significant example of this non-aligned give and take.

GS: Here we could segue into a whole discussion about desire and the body in writing, as concerns the "feminine," but that's another conversation. When I first encountered your work, it took me some time to realize that I needed to read you as I was (learning to) read Gertrude Stein: if you enjoy it you understand it, said Stein, an experience she likened to enjoying a football game. Like Stein, the intelligence of the work is often underpinned with a child's acuity and aural sense. More direct than with Stein, however, is your commitment to social engagement. In your essay *Adorno's Noise*, your reading of writers like Anais Nin and again of everyday are in conversation with the thèses of Adorno's *Minima Moralia*. The narrative is out there somewhere in the space between the two. Can you talk a little about how you see narrative in the essay form as compared to other prose work?

CH: The essay is a poetics where poetry is becoming something other to itself, a prose. Narrative is only partly what made the poetry something other to itself. Obviously in *Adorno's Noise* I am thinking of the essay in a mode that opens the form, that works against normative values of the essay: the personal essay, the lyric essay. Within the essay, narrative might be a context for the writing rather than the writing itself, which may be responding to an existing narrative negatively; or the essay might fold narrative into an argument or prose excursion that is working itself out as it proceeds along a non-prescriptive path of encounter. The Nin essay, "no more casement windows to open" is composed of little accounts that sometimes reference her biography, sometimes mine, and are sometimes completely fictional.

"I prefer to distribute narrative rather than deny it" is a comment I made in "Toy Boats," a non/narrative essay published in the 1980s. That essay itself performs a distribution of narrative and nonnarrative. It thus borrows from what has come before, an important criterion of the essay for Adorno. Both narrative and nonnarrative in the essay are actions that lead to the essay's demonstration of its concerns, which in part is to take pleasure in its historical sites and citings. History, like that Marxist history book I referred to earlier, and its changing objects require the attention of the essay "in my book." ❧