

Three Reviews: Tyrone Williams, Lawrence Giffin, and Judith Goldman

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Call Backs: On Tyrone Williams

Tyrone Williams' poetry, in a tradition of poet-scholars, requires research to understand it to its fullest extent, and yet does not require research to enjoy it, and to benefit from its meaningful critiques. These critiques are obviously of race, and the legacies of African Diaspora; yet, in more complicated fashion, are also of the ways race lines up with gender, sexuality, nationalism, and class implicating language in struggles for power. Having grown-up on identity politics in the 80s and 90s, I appreciate so much the way that Williams' work refuses to subsume politics under the name of 'identity,' and poetry under the qualifier 'experimental.' While Williams' critique of identity is practical in *C.C.* (Krupskaya, 2002), and extremely playful (take the poem which opens *C.C.*, "Calling Cards," featuring found language from Google searches of Bob Hope), something which grounds it is an extremely productive engagement with Deconstruction, and Deconstruction's pre-history in Emmanuel Levinas' ethical philosophy.

For the past couple months I have been testing the idea of the "killer app."—an idea gleaned from Silicon Valley. In computer cultures, a killer app. (short for killer application) is "any computer program that is so necessary or desirable that it proves the core value of some larger technology" (Wikipedia, "killer application," 1/26/2009). While Derrida's notion of the "trace" is endemic to Levinas' Jewishness, and the Jewish experience of memorializing the Shoah through exegesis and testimony, trace may find its larger killer app. through any number of struggles to discover conditions of possibility through mourning and memorialization.

Trace is that which is outside time—chronological time, time as it is tracked by official historical record—and yet immanent to it as disjuncting event. So in Derrida's book, *Specters of Marx*, Derrida relates trace through Hamlet's declaration: *time is out of joint*. What Williams tracks through his own poetics—a poetics that confuses lyricism and illegibility, signifying with academic convention—are the traces embedded in his own autobiography: the writing of his life, which is something different than the inscription and codification of presumed identity.

To be for tracing vs. identifying (or playing-out an identity politics when the outcome is known in advance) is to constantly tease out the place in our social fabric where the citing of identity gives way to a larger critique of interpellation (the hailing of the subject as the ultimate 'call back'). Likewise, by citing the trace—as Williams literally does through the poems of his second book, *On Spec* (Omnidawn, 2008) in which he juxtaposes a reading of Derrida's *The Gift of Death* with short essays on Richard Pryor, Jimmy Webb, and Ralph Ellison—Williams situates trace as a condition of possibility for poetry *qua*

cultural criticism and discrepant historiography (history that “tells it slant”).

Why am I so moved by this poem that juxtaposes a fairly straightforward, yet concise, gloss of Derrida’s chapters in *The Gift of Death* with short essayistic fragments on African-American cultural-political discourse? Perhaps it is because in being placed beside one another these texts should have a dialogue; that, reading the secondary literature besides Williams’ original text, I cannot help thinking Williams is performing the operations to which Derrida’s vigorous theoretical apparatus refers more effectively than Derrida himself. The deconstruction of Blackness as presence, *logos*, plenitude, essence; the interruption of Heideggerian metaphysics by Black Particularism.

Williams’ work also moves me to wonder whether community can be formed out of despair, and whether despair, “sublime despair,” shall finally overcome. I wonder this after Williams’ poem “I am Not Proud to be Black,” a poem I feel the importance of that much more since the election and inauguration of Obama. “Not called and not called back” goes the first line of the poem’s tenth section: a play, obviously, on not being called back by a potential employer, but also, as the epigraph of *C.C. goes* (Emily Dickinson’s final letter/epitaph), *to the dead*, and from the ways the living are interpellated inversely through social death—the exclusions and s(l)ightings which define one’s life in the margins.

Can community be born out of shame, *ressentiment*, melancholy? Can abjection be productive, even creative, for struggle? Why shouldn’t we embrace despair, as that which binds communities and singularities; or trauma, which hurtles us back to past possibilities, future anteriors and futures perfect? Constellating Williams’ work with the work of Taylor Brady, Rob Halpern, Judith Goldman, kari edwards, Jocelyn Saidenberg, and many others, I wonder the fate of ‘bad feelings’ as they also found the socius, and the extent to which Obama’s election—bolstered by the slogan “Hope”—does not offer yet another false promise for the fate of all identities, and the political pursuit of identification’s eclipse.

What the slogan “Hope” smoothes over, and what the poets I mention here will not stand for through their work, is the idea that any social fabric should cease to produce antinomy, antagonism, and struggle (i.e., that it should successfully assimilate and synthesize difference, or foreclose antinomy as that which motivates and produces the social). So the poet descends into negativity—they become “negatively culpable” to borrow Stephen Cope’s witty play on Keats’ terminology—and what is left over is the subject itself—the subject as remnant, as affirming lack.

Williams’ work, like Halpern’s or Saidenberg’s or Goldman’s or edwards’ or Brady’s, relates a tenuous community. A community founded less on the recognition that we are all ‘one,’ or that we ‘hope’ collectively, or that we resolve the lacuna of our identifying features any time soon, so much as how to produce social action by activating our lacks—the very incommensurability of ‘we,’ ‘our,’ ‘us.’ To truly be ‘called back’ is this: to be interpellated by our shared condition which is language and which is what is lost every time we dare to speak or write ourselves into existence. William’s poetry bears out

the consequences of the interpellated (therefore implicated) subject through perfectly pitched and modulated lyrical address.

Sovereignty and US: Lawrence Giffin's *Get the Fuck Back Into That Burning Plane*

Reading Lawrence Giffin's Ugly Duckling Presse chapbook, *Get the Fuck Back Into That Burning Plane*, I recall my excitement at first reading Charles Bernstein and Bob Perelman, two poets who I now recognize as injecting John Ashbery's poetics with a politics of the sign. Like Ashbery, Bernstein, and Perelman before him, Giffin offers his reader a lyrical navigation of a semiotic matrix, tearing away at our daily mediation metonymically, syllogistically and through a dynamic rhetorical delivery. While the book is post-apocalyptic, it also maintains that we are still in the grip of Event, and therefore the agents of compossible futures. The time-sense of this often reads like a kind of dystopian science fiction where the grammar posits a collective subject's conditions of possibility in alienation:

The memory of owning nice things
is practiced in the emotional life.
It distorts the latter in the former
and puts a face to his profile page,
not from a lack of understanding
but of a living that we are now.

All that remains is for the act
to have been accomplished,
whose counter will have been
the duration from lecture to recitation.

It doesn't stop being written
that it stops not being written.

For the 245 whites of Shanksville, PA,
bombed from eight weeks in the future...

The plane that the title of Giffin's book refers to is that of United Flight 93, the third of the three planes hijacked on September 11th, 2001 that went down in Pennsylvania after the passengers were able to overtake the hijackers and redirect the flight away from its intended target. The voice that intones "get the fuck back into that burning plane" is a voice of governmentability, if not sovereignty itself ("A finger prodding you through an array / of channels and devices"). Though it also pleads "please, madam, please" it is clearly telling, not asking (the qualifier "fucking" only emphasizes imperative). Such is our recent national discourse, a discourse as commanding through its ambience as the emergency procedures of in-flight crews and other public safety announcements we tend to pay only distracted attention to.

I am particularly fond of the ways that Giffin grounds his critique through the bathetic and sophistic. Consistently, throughout the chapbook, he proves himself to be as much a whip-smart lyricist, as a rigorous dialectician "failing in [his] hegelia":

When you sang, “Justice
will be served / And the battle
will rage / This big dog will fight /
When you rattle his cage / And
you’ll be sorry you messed with
The U.S. of A.”
did you really mean to imply
that America is a cage?
And when you sang
“A natural beauty should be /
Preserved like a monument /
To nature,” were you seriously
suggesting that something beautiful
and naturally occurring
should be killed
in order to be preserved
as a testament to the nature
that it no longer is?

How do we interrogate the most ordinary terms of empire without allowing our performance to become mired in negative critique or parody (the trap of the mimetic)? How does the poem become an active inquiry about the ways we read our constant mediation and interpellation? I am appreciative of the ways Giffin has used the poem as a vehicle for reading our cultural moment, and how his hermeneutics is constantly injected with a necessary turbulence. I believe semioticians attribute this turbulence to the “arbitrariness of the signifier” as opposed to the vicissitudes of who is in power (... “the touché, / the *Nacht und Traume*, wedlock and / warlock. / Everything’s flamboyant.”). As history becomes a jumble of facts few have the time to get straight let alone narrate adequately— “Either way, it has been revised, / the book from which you quoted, / rewritten word for word”—Giffin manages to find considerable purchase in an increasingly mutable economy of signs.

Judith Goldman's *The Dispossessions*: a Via Negativa

Last spring I received an email in my inbox asking for recipients to draw pornographic drawings for the cover of a forthcoming poetry book:

To the nitty gritty: We are looking for super dirty (even middle-school mentality) line-drawing porn, especially featuring penises and vaginas. Something small, something you'd draw on a desk in a coupla minutes. You may want to consult the attached text (of the chapbook) for "inspiration."

The images will appear on the backboard of the book, which will be covered by a dust cover using die-cut peep holes.

The book of poems by Judith Goldman, *The Dispossessions* (Atticus/Finch, 2009), takes as its subject the 'junk' (or, if one prefers, *dispossessed*) language of the internet. Throughout the book, Goldman sculpts language found from internet sources (chatrooms, websites, et al) and whittles them down, forming edgy exercises in the vulgate. What is remarkable in reading the book is how ickiness can switch to gorgeousness in a split second, and the extent to which vulgarity is spiritualized—turned into a spiritual exercise, albeit a negative one. What takes shape is a *via negativa* (paths paved by hell) of the virtual age—of the many ways we are mediated, and fantasize one another through this mediation. The poetry makes one feel close and then distant again. It flickers with impossible proximities. There is a mood about the poems peculiar to our age. The language is immediate, and yet prophylactic; hands-on (Goldman's method is collagist), and yet vaporous. It reminds us that in all relationship is the threat of violence, violation, humiliation, harm.

Invites rather, uh, Awkward questions
Clutching at the first thing Lickety uh Do we have no other words to use?
Seeds wreaking violence
A negative dialogue between seeds
Words do not harm each other
Looking for words [that] don't harm each other
Grammar as window,
Words as voyeurs
A word [that] does not give
Onto anything else
Voyeurism of one word giving onto another
No accumulation?
This horror will not bear my words
The words are mute

And
Wait, is it
Loud in here because

because This silence is very loud

—from *The Disposessions*

The internet is both a carnival and a void into which we speak. It is a night of the world—nothing has been created yet and everything would seem possible. Goldman's language evokes sacred discourse through the backdoor—the back entrance and 'poop chute.' Words are muted because there is nothing to hear here. "This silence is very loud." A profound negativity is of the hour. It is a negativity of words accumulating but not saying anything; of a world of appearance in which images speak mutely. The aughts are a Babylon of nonsense (degraded sensuality). Recent poetry makes present an imagination increasingly dependent on unreality. The unreality, say, of the physical distance separating those who wage war and those who are victimized by it; or, say, of those who slave for consumer values and those who consume recklessly without a thought for others/the Other. There is a feeling of dread throughout Goldman's book—that things cannot end well. Though the language is also beautiful, and titillating, and playful. There is likewise a sense in the book that we can all see each other constantly, that as Paul Chan says, we suffer from a "tyranny of connectedness," and that this connectedness only complicates our alienation. Constant connectedness does not mean contact. Nor does seeing (physical perception) equal disclosure (revelation, understanding, faith). The book cites an orgy committed at the expense of the entire world, and worlds yet to come. An orgy of perceptions, an orgy of consumptions, the orgy of total warfare perpetrated by the United States and its allies within and without its national boundaries.

Thom Donovan lives in New York City where he edits Wild Horses of Fire weblog (whof.blogspot.com) and coedits *ON Contemporary Practice*. He is a participant in the Nonsite Collective and a curator for the SEGUE reading series. His criticism and poetry have been published widely in *BOMBlog*, *PAJ: performance + art*, *Modern Painters*, and at the Poetry Foundation where he currently blogs.