

THE SRPR REVIEW ESSAY:
TO WRITE THE LARGER SCENE:
NOTES ON THE NEW POLITICAL LYRIC

JOHN BEER

Blue Fasa

Nathaniel Mackey
New Directions, 2015
160 pages; paperback; \$16.95

Ban en Banlieu

Bhanu Kapil
Nightboat Books, 2015
112 pages; paperback; \$15.95

The Devastation

Melissa Buzzeo
Nightboat Books, 2015
184 pages; paperback; \$15.95

Olio

Tyehimba Jess
Wave Books, 2016
256 pages; paperback; \$25.00

1. The Political Lyric

Seen from one angle, the idea of a “political lyric” is an altogether familiar one. From their Western inception, lyric poems, like their dramatic and epic counterparts, had a public role to play, as in Pindar’s celebratory odes. Milton, Wordsworth, and Yeats all composed works that combined reflection on the most fraught public confrontations of their day with the emotional intensity and linguistic compression often considered hallmarks of the lyric genre. In a more abstruse vein, a political content has often been descried in the genre of lyric

itself, and even in its more manifestly apolitical specimens. Hegel, for instance, maintains that a moment of universality, of potential public communion, is essential to the poetic status of a lyric: “however intimately the insights and feelings which the poet describes as his own belong to him as a single individual, they must nevertheless possess a universal validity.”¹ In a related vein, Adorno states that “the universality of the lyric’s substance...is social in nature. Only one who hears the voice of humankind in the poem’s solitude can understand what the poem is saying.”² No matter how resolutely a poet professes art for art’s sake, on such a line, to write a lyric is to engage in a fundamentally political practice.

From another angle, the idea of a “political lyric” can only be oxymoronic. While these are each words that afford a wide range of interpretation, the contours of which are a matter of numerous vigorous and long-standing debates, one might be forgiven for insisting that whatever “political” might be, it involves matters of public import, while the hallmarks of the lyric are its dedication to intimacy, subjectivity, privacy.³ Perhaps the most celebrated example of a criticism that sees the lyric as inherently at odds with the kind of public speech paradigmatic of political action is Mill’s little essay “What Is Poetry?” Famously, he defines the lyric as a poem that presents itself as “overheard”; less famously, he goes on to chastise poets that address readers more overtly:

But when [the poet] turns round, and addresses himself to another person; when the act of utterance is not itself the end, but a means to an end,—viz., by the feelings he himself expresses, to work upon the feelings, or upon the belief or the will of another; when the expression of his emotions, or of his thoughts tinged by his emotions, is tinged also

1 G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford, UK: Clarendon, 1975), 1111.

2 Theodor W. Adorno, “On Lyric Poetry and Society,” in *Notes on Literature*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 38. Where Hegel and Adorno differ, of course, is on the ultimate political import of the lyric’s public side: whether, roughly, the lyric expresses the individual’s reconciliation with the larger social world or their continuing alienation.

3 Such an insistence, of course, moves too quickly past the foundational feminist insight that “the personal is political,” a thought that anticipates much of the argument of this review essay.

by that purpose, by that desire of making an impression upon another mind,—then it ceases to be poetry, and becomes eloquence.⁴

One, admittedly sketchy, way of considering the history of much US poetry in the course of the last century is as a series of oscillations around the opposition that Mill sets up between the private lyric self and the public audience. So, for instance, the modernism of Pound, Eliot, and Williams rejected in various ways the romantic valorization of subjectivity, seeking to establish an objective basis on which poems could articulate communal values—even if the results of these endeavors were notoriously idiosyncratic. A not-entirely-unfair portrait of mid-century academic verse is that of an awkward synthesis of Millian reticence and Eliotic objectivity, under the aegis of the New Criticism, such that the overheard message was understandably generally one of dejection. Robert Bly, in his 1963 diatribe, “A Wrong Turning in American Poetry,”⁵ calls for a return to the subjective sensations themselves, to the “experiences private to the poet (which the reader can nonetheless share)” (18). Strikingly, in this cri de coeur of the Deep Image school whose version of romanticism continues to influence today’s mainstream poetry, Bly recognizes a connection between the lyrical stance of the poets he celebrates (Vallejo, Neruda, Rilke, Jiminez, Lorca above all) and the revolutionary political positions many of them held. But this connection remains at the same time a dichotomy: “the poem devoid of any revolutionary feeling, in politics or language” (32); “poetry without inwardness or revolutionary feeling” (33). It is as if Bly senses in these writers the possibility of overcoming the Millian public/private split, and yet can’t quite see how to pull it off himself, how a poem might at one and the same time emblemize inwardness and radical political speech.

In that impasse, if in little else, Bly is joined by Language writing and its affiliated movements of the seventies and eighties. Whether Language writing should be seen as a primarily antilyrical movement is a vexed issue, and one that is to a large extent verbal: one could as easily describe it as a movement seeking to redefine the parameters of

4 John Stuart Mill, “What is Poetry,” in *Literary Essays* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967), 56.

5 Robert Bly, “A Wrong Turning in American Poetry,” in *Claims for Poetry*, ed. Donald Hall (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1982), 17–38.

the lyric. What is not in dispute, I would say, is that in place of lyric inwardness, the overflowing feelings of a coherent speaking subject, these writers sought to install the materiality of the signifier, the mechanism laid bare, and this endeavor had a preeminently political motivation. One target was, as Lyn Hejinian characterizes it in “The Rejection of Closure,” “the coercive, epiphanic mode in some contemporary lyric poetry...with its smug pretension to universality and its tendency to cast the poet as guardian to Truth.”⁶ We may note here at once that Hejinian demurs from identifying this bad-faith model with all lyric poetry, and that her characterization of its badness reflects a shift as well in political thinking. Granted, her formulation leaves it ambiguous whether any pretension to universality must be smug, but it’s a hallmark of the radical writing practices of the seventies and beyond that they view a liberatory politics as one that makes space for difference, that the model of a charismatic speaker whose inner experiences prove cohesively representative of readerly aspirations is, in a word, coercive.

This is a viewpoint that is, I believe, widely shared among the writers under review. All these books are marked by various forms of interpretive slippage; in none would one find the kind of poem tartly dismissed by Marjorie Perloff in her brief against the twenty-first-century version of Hejinian’s epiphanic model:

the expression of a profound thought or small epiphany, usually based on a particular memory, designating the lyric speaker as a particularly sensitive person who really *feels* the pain, whether of our imperialist wars in the Middle East or of late capitalism or of some personal tragedy such as the death of a loved one.⁷

At the same time, none of these authors would disclaim the personal and political effect of deep feeling—of feeling the pain of our imperialist wars and of personal tragedy. The point is to evoke that feeling without the bad-faith theatricalizing that both Hejinian and Perloff condemn.

What connects these books for me, as part of a significant tendency in contemporary writing, is their commitment to addressing political issues through lyrical means, in ways that tend to expand notions of

⁶ Lyn Hejinian, “The Rejection of Closure,” in *The Language of Inquiry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 40.

⁷ Marjorie Perloff, “Poetry on the Brink,” *Boston Review* (18 May 2012), www.bostonreview.net/forum/poetry-brink.

both the political and the lyrical. With regard to politics, for instance, Mackey, Kapil, and Jess all reference, in ways more or less explicit, the kinds of state and extrajudicial violence that fall under the traditional label of “political.” All four authors, moreover, center their writing on the claims of people subject to racialized or gendered marginalization. Here I must acknowledge that the framing of the discussion thus far reflects inevitably the subject positions of the writers whom I’ve cited. In other words, the very idea that a private utterance could be divorced from public ramifications (or that those ramifications might best be captured through their potential universalization) might only seem compelling to those for whom their status as a public actor was not continually threatened by violent breach. The history of twentieth-century African American poetry has its own recurrent aesthetic rifts, but the trouble traced above around the Millian private / public split is not notably one of them.

A further feature they share, and one that to my mind most fundamentally captures the way in which lyric and politics come together in this writing, not as synthesized but as inherently mutually informing, is their sense of the self as multiple, as other to itself and often confounding to itself. Politically, one might say that it is this embrace of unknowingness, of continually coming across and coming to terms with new patterns of fascination and aversion, that underwrites the possibility of a noncoercive community. Aesthetically, one might say that this vision of the self as not altogether present, as temporally unfolding, is the truest vision of the lyric as what gives voice to subjectivity—a subjectivity that evades that mythology of the steady speaking subject which has proven so tempting a polemical target. This lyric self is overcome by the desire to expression, and also haunted by the limits of linguistic expression. It’s for that reason, I suspect, that these four writers have recourse so often to non-linguistic, even non-representational, forms of expression: that for Mackey and Jess, writing aspires to a form of music, while for Kapil and Buzzeo, it ventures toward a form of gesture.

2. *Blue Fasa*

Blue Fasa offers the newest installments of Nathaniel Mackey’s twinned long poems, “Song of the Andoumboulou” and “mu.” Thirty

years in, the poems may well represent the most successful American long poem yet composed. Part of their secret is the poet's ability to sustain a lyric, otherworldly quality throughout the two poems' massively epic scope. Global in both setting and mythography, rooted in African diaspora and, more recently, in the ongoing American wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, "Song of the Andoumboulou" and "mu" are suffused with mournfulness and cool fury, and yet keep up through their endless sonic and linguistic invention something like hope for a world just sideways from this one.

Mackey's practice and theorization of the lyric over the course of his career deeply informs the argument of this essay. In an interview with Ed Foster, for instance, he characterizes the work that lyric poetry can do:

Obviously the lyric, when it is speaking to us in that compelling and convincing way that it does, is doing something that is...in some kind of liminal state that is acknowledging the claims of the particular, and the limitations that go with that....It of necessity does that with a certain hesitation and tentativeness that has to do with being in that complicated liminal area in which there are no easy assurances.⁸

In the preface to *Blue Fasa*, Mackey notes that "[t]o pull the long song, the long poem, particularly the serial poem, the extended lyric, is to be taken over and to be taken afar" (xiii). He also connects this sense of the serial poem as "extended lyric" to *lyric's* often-invoked etymology:

[T]he root of the word *lyric* is the lyre, the musical instrument the ancient Greeks accompanied songs and recitations with...though at times I've wondered if it were something I'd made up or been misinformed about, the lyric of late being so widely equated with phanopoetic snapshot, bare-bones narrative, terse epiphany and the like much more than with music, signaling an ongoing *split* between poetry and musicality perhaps. (xi-xii, my emphasis)

Two points here seem to me decisive in taking the measure of *Blue Fasa's* lyric quality. First, musicality is posited as primordially bound up with the lyric. Second, that modern displacement equating lyric with "bare-bones narrative"⁹ reflects, perhaps, the splitting of

⁸ Nathaniel Mackey, "Interview by Edward Foster," in *Paracritical Hinge* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005).

⁹ One might also see the criticisms of Hejinian and Perloff reflected in "terse epiphany."

poetry and musicality. Traversing the passages and rifts these splits open up allows for the stuttering, stumbling momentum of this poetic inquiry—and it’s precisely that stuttering, stumbling motion (“If I saw myself I saw myself / stagger”(6)) that measures the intimate distance between this writing and the music in whose thrall it remains. A further turn of the screw: as Virginia Jackson reminds us, the lyre Mackey cites had already been disconnected from the lyric by the time the latter got assigned its name by the Alexandrian scholars: “Thus, *lyric* was from its inception a term used to describe a music that could no longer be heard, an idea of poetry characterized by a lost collective experience.”¹⁰

We can see how music, both heard and unheard, plays out in *Blue Fasa* by looking at “Anabatic Jukebox,” or the seventy-second installment of “mu”:

Husk it was one heard, its unsteadiness.
 Reed’s unwieldiness the boon
 it now was, captious, we heard it crack.
 Thus the birdboy’s dreamt kin
came to
 include us, cracked husks’ fissures
 whispering, droll whistle we fell
 back from... A Sahelian furtherance
 it was we heard, Salif Keita, another
new
 cut on the box. We pursed our lips,
 bit seeds albeit the box fell apart, the
 utopic box it continued to be... (47)

The poem’s relation to music operates at one level as reference. The first part of the snippet I’ve provided is the climactic description of the series’ “philosophic posse” listening to a particular cut: John Coltrane’s 1966 recording “Reverend King.” This standout track of Coltrane’s late free period features the musician not on one of his trademark saxophones, but on the bass clarinet willed to him by the late Eric Dolphy (“Trane’s bass reed / made us laugh, keep crying, Dolphy’s / clarinet’s high carouse” (46)). Tracking Coltrane’s forays

¹⁰ Virginia Jackson, “Lyric” in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, 4th ed., ed. Roland Greene et al (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 826.

into the shrill upper reaches of the instrument's register, the poem locates the song's potential for transport in the pitched struggle between the player's imaginative ventures and the instrument's resistance. What's there to hear is both the persistence of material conditions and the possibility of envisioning them different—but the “utopic box” can only continue to be utopic insofar as the charts it makes audible acknowledge, in the attempt to breach, the stubborn persistence of physical, and by extension social and historical, fact. The sound is a sounding in that the heights it reaches map out fundamentals. This is the ontological structure that enables “Reverend King” to figure via music an impossible present undoing the traumatic exclusion that stands as that music's originary condition.

And then there's another new cut on the box, this time from the West African singer Salif Keita. We're not told the title of this song, but it's at least tempting to conjecture that this is “Mandjou,” in which Keita “declaims the names of the five renowned Soninke *mori* families of Wagadu.”¹¹ One source of the title *Blue Fasa* is the epic that tells the story of Wagadu's destruction and the ensuing Soninke diaspora. What seems to be a dramatic shift in time and space turns out to be a recapitulation of music's testament to dispossession and loss, linked sonically to the Coltrane piece through the piercing quality of Keita's vocals, even as the steady groove of his backing band recalls the cooler texture of Mackey's unspooling verse.

That texture demands our attention as well, since the intense referential relation to music highlights the text's own musicality. Mackey's distinctively propulsive poetry relies in part upon the careful coordination of rhythm and phonetic qualities, allowing him to control the relative weights of accentuation and thereby develop complex syncopated structures. Look, for example, at the first three lines of the excerpt quoted above. To my ear, the lines crescendo from that initial “husk it was one heard,” hushed by the alliterative presence of that opening *h* (also serving as a talisman for the *spiritus*, what's released by the cracking of the husk) up to the relatively thunderous final crack. One particular effect along the way adds significantly to

11 Eric Charry, *Mande Music: Traditional and Modern Music of the Maninka and Mandinka of Western Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 38.

the gathering force and also appears to me characteristic of Mackey's prosodic method as a whole: the prosodic rhyme and amplification of "its unstead- / ness. Reed's unwieldiness." Prosodic rhyme, inasmuch as the first five syllable's stress pattern: ITS unSTEADiness, is repeated in the second; amplification, because the assonance and lengthened vowels of *reed* and *wield* raise the volume of those accents. One general way that Mackey's poetics replicates improvisational verse form is by organizing stretches of verse around such repeated stress patterns or tags and simultaneously varying them, in part through phonetics and in part through syntax.

Mackey's syntactic formations, in turn—marked by loops and divagations, stacked genitives, and sentential inversions—creates a more abstracted form of free linguistic music. The tonality of these phrasings varies. In the passage we've been concentrating on, inversions such as "Husk it was one heard" or "the / utopic box it continued to be" split off nouns from their temporalizing predicates, serving at once to accentuate the drama of transcendence heard in the Coltrane and to provide a steadying counterpoint, a sense of ongoing temporal stream. Elsewhere, lines such as "we the stars' / understudies, night's / love love's lit recompense" (55) offer a more traditional intensification of emotion. In both cases, though, an integral part of the effect arises from the syntax's simultaneous displacement of and continuing relation to the more straightforward patterns of ordinary speech. Much as the language may approach the condition of pure formal and sonic pattern, it remains parsable and communicative. It's through traversing the space between these two linguistic modes that *Blue Fasa* pursues its lyric investigation, its liminal encounter with the reader.

3. *Ban en Banlieu*

Ban en Banlieu repeatedly announces itself as the shadow of another, the trace of a failed project. "I wanted to write a novel but instead I wrote this" (19). Kapil's fifth book follows in the trajectory of such earlier works as *The Vertical Interrogation of Strangers* (2001) and *Schizophrenie* (2011), testing the boundaries of an aporetic, sometimes clinical and sometimes scaldingly emotive prose. *Ban*, like its elusive title character, is at times alarmingly porous, the text melting into notes on actual and potential performances carried out by its

author, even as its form resists containment in the conventional body of the book, its table of contents and endnotes as integral to *Ban*'s constitution as the central, numbered section titled "Auto-Sacrifice (Notes)." But this metacritical and aesthetically daring writing bumps up bruisingly against the racialized and gendered violence of the "actual" world. Puzzling the borders between sentences and paragraphs, as between political units, searchingly and achingly aware of how its most internal contents are continually subject to externalization, *Ban en Banlieu* seems to me emblematic of the potential for working through political and lyrical concerns in tandem. No wonder its project winds up feeling impossible. Perhaps it can only come to fruition in a future whose utopianism it both suspects and provisionally makes visible.

"I wanted to write a book that was like lying down," Kapil writes (42). This gesture, or tableau, the body of a girl or woman lying down—on the pavement, on the ground, clothed or nude, recurs throughout the book; one might almost say that *Ban* is the act of lying down, and that *Ban* aspires to that condition. The position is a response to public violence, or to violence within the home.

She hears something: the far-off sound of breaking glass. Is it coming from her home or is it coming from the street's distant clamor? Faced with these two sources of a sound she instinctively links to violence, the potential of violent acts, *Ban* lies down. She folds to the ground. This is syntax. (31)

Understanding the movement is understanding *Ban*, or *Ban*: or better, understanding how the movement ramifies its meanings is understanding how *Ban* remains outside the grip of understanding, resists (in the body) assimilation to discourse. It's a confession, an enactment, of vulnerability; a repetition of trauma; a form of passive resistance (a kind of singular die-in); a marking of territory, making it perhaps a sacred space; an exhaustion; a disruption; an identification with the dispossessed (the homeless person, the refugee, the victim of rape or police beating). *Ban* is related to both Jyoti Singh Pandey, gang raped and murdered in Delhi in 2012, and Blair Peach, killed by police while protesting the National Front in London in 1979. Yet that relation is no simple identification: both references are made in the supposedly paratextual table of contents; we're told that Blair Peach is the secret martyr of the novel (though he does appear again once

in the main text), and when Kapil performs in conjunction with an anti-rape protest at the site of the attack on Singh Pandey, she asks, "How does the energy of a performance mix with the energy of a memorial? How does the image support the work that is being done in other areas?" (16).

The questions are significant. One of the most fraught questions in the area of the political lyric, and one that exerts some pressure in the direction of maintaining the split between the two categories, is whether such lyrics aestheticize the suffering and violence that they seek to deplore. How can concerns about artistic representation, genre, or the nature of selfhood sit alongside the spectacle of anti-immigrant violence, the charge might continue, without distracting from the necessary clarity of a call to resistance? An answer might begin with Amiri Baraka's observation: "Imagination (Image) is all possibility, because from the image, the initial circumscribed energy, any use (idea) is possible. And so begins that image's use in the world. Possibility is what moves us."¹² In other words, the imagination has an indispensable role to play in confronting political realities and finding avenues for their transformation. And the tradition of the lyric provides a valuable space for the testing of just such imaginative possibilities, of giving voice to the full spectrum of desires and fantasies that fuel political action and of imagining forms of selfhood and mutuality beyond contemporary habits and structures of domination. It's particularly noteworthy here, I think, that Kapil eschews a vision of her artistic work that valorizes it as the royal road to political truth: rather, her performance, and the subsequent writing of that performance, exists alongside and in relation to other forms of necessary political engagement.

But my argument risks making Kapil's work sound all too responsible, fails to engage the wildness at work in her work. Here, for instance, is a snippet of her "Inversions for Ban," in part a meditation on Agamben's *Homo Sacer*:¹³

A "monstrous hybrid of human and animal, divided between the forest and the city." (Ban.) To be: "banned from the city" and thus:

12 Amiri Baraka, "The Revolutionary Theatre," in *Home: Social Essays* (New York: Akashic, 2009), 238.

13 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

en banlieu: a part of the perimeter. In this sense, to study the place where the city dissolves is to study the wolf. Is this why some of my best friends have come from the peninsula of Long Island?

To ban, to sentence.

To abandon is thus to write prose. "Already dead." Nude. A "wulfeshead" upon a form. The form is the body—in the most generic way I could possibly use that word. The nude body spills color. (41)

Kapil's book, she suggests, exists in the same state of liminality as Agamben's criminal, banned from the polis and existing essentially outside the law, also potentially subject to violence from any front. She picks up on the philosopher's provisional equation of liminality with hybridity: the Homo Sacer wears a "wolf's head," the expulsion from the larger human community tantamount to lycanthropy. *Ban* is thus in its form, its body, sentenced to sentences: its abandonment amounts to taking on its lyrical prose form. And that body: prone, nude, "already dead." Readers can respond with violent rejection—or they can find a way of speaking that touches and awakens their own openness to hurt and wonder.

4. *The Devastation*

How does one say The Devastation
When it no longer is
When I am not waiting for you writing for you
When we

are not

intact. (19)

So begins Part One of Melissa Buzzeo's epic, taciturn, imagistic, refractory *The Devastation*, a section framed appropriately with an epigram from Maurice Blanchot's *The Writing of the Disaster*.¹⁴ It seems that the book has ended before it begins, is no longer upon the occasion of reading it. Why does Buzzeo insist upon the absence of the book

¹⁴ Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995).

at its outset? On the one hand, the problem of presence in relation to writing and reading is a constant theme of this long poem. Every piece of writing by its existence expresses a hope of its continuation beyond the context of its composition. But *The Devastation*, it appears, might just vanish once its author has stopped writing it, stopped waiting for the reader who has finally come into view. This anxiety seems of a piece with the ecstatic unity that the book both celebrates and mourns. *The Devastation* seeks to make its author present to the reader in a way that the deferral of writing blocks from the beginning. It is to that degree bound up with the apocalyptic separation, the Devastation, whose valence shifts through the course of the poem: the end of a personal relationship? a natural catastrophe? the civilizational collapse threatened by climate change? coming to language? *The Devastation* is all of these, and further, as with Kapil, it is the book itself, which aims to work an unspecifiable transformation upon its reader and itself in the course of its unfolding.

At this point, it's worth addressing a shared feature of these four books that might, as suggested earlier, disqualify them in the minds of some readers from warranting the label "lyric" whatsoever. Each of these is a substantial, not to say mammoth, undertaking, and while all partake of some labyrinthine scheme of subdivisions into pieces that could resemble the familiar lyric burst of the workshop poem, they are all essentially book-length (or, in Mackey's case, multiple book-length) projects. Most authorities would follow Virginia Jackson in counting brevity as one of the classical criteria for the lyric poem;¹⁵ even granted the countervailing tradition of the lyric sequence, an uncomfortable fit for the examples under discussion, what might compel me to jettison this long-standing feature of the genre? The answer is, in brief, that the extended form that the subjective expressions of these poems take is intimately connected to the political status that I'm ascribing to them. What the length of these poems reflects is an unwillingness, or perhaps even an inability, to take for granted the immediate identification of a reader with the speaker of a poem that enables the traditional lyric's tight circuit of meaning. The processes of elaboration, revision, reflection, and even self-cancellation that occur over the length of the

¹⁵ Jackson, "Lyric."

poems enable them to foster and test the possibilities of relation to a reader that earlier lyric forms simply assume.

This feature of all four books is particularly pronounced in *The Devastation*, which loops back in wave-like movements to consider from multiple angles the gesture that its prologue sets at the poem's heart: "At the bottom of the sea, unidentified lovers have survived The Devastation. . . . They reach and they recoil in a gesture of extreme eroticism." (15) Both cool and impassioned, erotically charged and yet as from an infinite remoteness, Buzzeo's lines trace out again and again this approach and retreat, situating it within its hushed, transfiguring context under the sea, and pulling back to reflect upon the writing that makes this gesture itself available to the reader:

To have never left: this broken text.
That we fold over skin.
I had set out to write about the cold
The frozen freeing of form
But it no longer existed
But we no longer existed
This harsh formlessness over skin (51)

The passage exhibits the subtle microstructures that vary the larger oceanic surge of Buzzeo's writing: the sonic play of *left / text* or *fold / cold*; the incantatory repetitions of "no longer existed"; the abrupt and complex shift from form's "frozen freeing" to the "harsh formlessness" that abrades, or obliterates, the skin separating lover from lover, or author from text from reader. Like the vast majority of the book, it also lacks the clear political referents to be found in Kapil or Jess's writing. In what way is *The Devastation* a work of political lyric? To be sure, there are scattered hints that the Devastation itself is tied to one or another aspect of globalized systems of domination: patriarchy, capitalism, environmental degradation. In the book's preface, Buzzeo invokes among numerous other influences¹⁶ Hélène Cixous, and the

16 *The generosity with which both Kapil and Buzzeo note their reliance upon constellations of other writers is of a piece with the aesthetic, ethical, and political stances of both books—and each receives a central acknowledgment from the other. A mutual interview that documents their friendship contains a dazzling scene of the two burying copies of Ban and The Devastation side by side: jackkerouacispunjabi.blogspot.com/2015/10/friday-interview-series-melissa-buzzeo.html.*

tidal rhythms of her book seem as successful a candidate for the *écriture féminine* theorized by Cixous¹⁷ as anything. Even more fundamentally, as Buzzeo herself suggests in that preface, the political thrust of the book is to be found in its vision of the difficulties of, but necessity for, human relation. "That there would be space for each person. That no one is replaceable. / That no one contains a light that could be shared stamped or silenced off." (162) This late phrasing articulates a way of being that *The Devastation* as a whole, as I see it, is working to effect. Its vexed attention to language and writing, in particular, reflects a vision of those media as at once obstacles to and essential vehicles for such relation. And the insistence on gesture and eros indicate that language, if it is to make room for "we" ("A we that is difficult to pronounce" (162)), must acknowledge and incorporate its own corporeality.

V. *Olio*

The centerpiece to Tyehimba Jess's amazing volume *Olio* is the fold-out "Dunbar-Booker Double Shovel." One side of this double sheet is the shovel in question, a 32-line poem in two columns in the form of a "golden shovel":¹⁸ the last word of each line successively spells out the first two lines of Paul Lawrence Dunbar's searing meditation on minstrelsy, "We Wear the Mask." One column offers a pithy and bitter explanation for donning that protective mask: "We got our lies / scraping by as sacrament against lynch" (143). The facing column, Booker's side, presents a brief for uplifted pride often not quite distinguishable from Dunbar's masquerade: "This be our slick survival guile: / bestudded with built-in automatic smiles." On the reverse side are two grim tables of lynching statistics by state from 1882–1930 and the hideously ludicrous rationales for those lynchings. A note in the book's end materials offers instructions for dealing with this large perforated page: it can be taped into a cylinder, so that the dialectic of the two columns continues ad infinitum. (In this work dedicated to the excavation of African-American popular culture

17 Cf. Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," in *Signs 1.4*, trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen. (1976), 875–893.

18 *The form, invented by Terrance Hayes for his book Lighthouse* (New York: Penguin, 2010), takes its name from the "Seven at the Golden Shovel" of Gwendolyn Brooks's "We Real Cool."

before the advent of recording, the resemblance to a piano roll, or Edisonian cylinder, is likely no coincidence.) Or, for the ambitious, it can be made into a Möbius strip, running poem and statistics into one continuous scrolling page.

The result, as often in this meticulously sculpted work,¹⁹ is a plethora of potential readings. Line beginnings and endings are tailored to fit multiply, in a way reminiscent of Raymond Queneau's "1 00,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 Sonnets,"²⁰ so that the double shovel can be read "backward, forward, and diagonal-wise" (213). No matter how much enjoyment the reader gets from Jess's ingenuity and the textual play it affords, though, it's always tempered by the inescapable material facts that the flip side of the sheet records, and in response to which the giddy, boastful, and lamenting voices of Jess's poems arise. "The Dunbar-Booker Double Shovel" in essence presents *Olio's* theory of history, emerging like a 3-D pop-up from the book, imaginatively reanimating the multiplicity and musicality of the African-American past and always thereby bound to remember the murderous reality of American white supremacy.

Jess has described his project as an excavation,²¹ and a substantial piece of the book's thrill is straightforwardly historical, in the little-heralded but remarkable musicians from American history that it reimagines for us. These include such figures (listed in the book's opening cast of characters) as "Blind" Boone, able to recreate any piano piece from a single hearing; Sissieretta Jones, the first black American to sing at Carnegie Hall; and the conjoined twins Millie and Christine McKoy, for whom Jess concocts a cycle of "syncopated sonnets," affording the same kind of multi-dimensional reading possibilities as the "double shovel." But Jess's project is as much about seeing what has always been in plain sight as it is about reinstating figures who have slipped into obscurity. In a bravura act of reappropriation, he rewrites the "blackface" sections of John Berryman's *The Dream Songs*²² in the voice of Henry "Box" Brown, who escaped slavery by mailing

19 *And here, as elsewhere, the meticulous crafting of book designer Jeff Clark also deserves credit.*

20 www.bevorowe.info/Queneau/QueneauHome_v2.html

21 lithub.com/tyehimba-jess-on-excavating-popular-music-through-poetry/

22 John Berryman, *The Dream Songs* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007).

himself from Richmond to Philadelphia. Henry's set of "Freedsongs" concludes with a revision of Berryman's first Dream Song, expressing the not-altogether unrealistic hope that stories such as that of "Box" Brown will come to supplant white minstrel acts akin to Berryman's:

Our Box Henry hid away.
John Berryman's Ol' Henry sulked.
I see his point—he was trying to put one over.
It was that he thought that we thought
he *could* do it that breaks out Henry out this-a-way...

Here, in this land where some strong be,
let Box Henry grow in every head. (85)

The "Freedsongs" could be read as a form of "signifying,"²³ as could the first line of the book proper, the opening of the "Fisk Jubilee Proclamation," which recasts Psalm 96's "O sing unto the Lord a new song" as:

O sing...undo the world with blued song
born from newly freed throats. Sprung loose from lungs
once bound within bonded skin. (7)

It's in the sonnets presenting the songs of the Fisk Jubilee Singers that *Olio* waxes most traditionally lyrical; even here, though, it's also an act of ventriloquism. Jess's authorial hand undoes the present world by doing the past in different voices, juxtaposing the quiet melancholy of "Blind" Boone's dramatic monologues with the metafictional explorations of Julius Monroe Trotter's search for Scott Joplin. A singularly heart-rending juxtaposition runs through the book: framing each of the Fisk sonnets is a listing of African-American churches burned, bombed, or otherwise terrorized. Like Robin Coste Lewis's *Voyage of the Sable Venus*,²⁴ Jess's gesture here underscores that conceptual strategies can unquestionably serve anti-racist ends. Here also, as in his book as a whole, and indeed in all the books under review, one can

23 Cf. Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), but see also Aldon Lynn Nielsen's stinging rebuke of white academics running amok with the term in *Black Chant* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

24 Robin Coste Lewis, *Voyage of the Sable Venus* (New York: Knopf, 2015).

see a palpable ambition not merely to make an institutional mark or provide a source of private reverie, but to presume poetry as a form of art capable of speaking to the most profound and painful rifts in our culture, and to do so with the intimacy of one voice speaking to another as it might to itself.