

AAB IS AS FUCKED UP AS ANY GROUP SITUATION:

a dialogue for *Tripwire* between Danielle LaFrance and Anahita Jamali Rad, once of About a Bicycle.

David Buuck: *Tell us how AAB came about?*

Danielle LaFrance: I think we both are officially tired of this question, while, of course, we can't exactly evade this question forever. It just seems, from my experience at least, and likely yours as well, Anahita, that sometimes the origin story overshadows the work we do collectively and independently. Like, I want people to meet us (and myself, on a personal note) in media res all the time, which is obviously completely impossible, not to mention pure fantasy. Like you, Anahita, said somewhere: girl interested in texts meets girl interested in texts. For me, it will always really begin with that fateful night after too many drinks and just enough dancing, where we wound up at your place, with the lush pot of basil, and talked till the wee hours of the morning. We were both excited in a similar way that I really liked. I remember some guy who had been with us that night passed out in an office chair, head back, mouth open, drool, while we demanded more from texts and the readers who read said texts and profess to do something other than reading.

Recently at SFU's Goldcorp Centre for the Arts, Joshua Clover said something to the effect of "I just write and read texts" and, while this was remark was soon slyly blunted, I thought of you and us and AAB and how that was never what we were solely interested or invested in — the text separate from life and movement making. Or, I guess, that's what's left of the utopian in me, not that I ever was one to begin with. Maybe that's why I have such an aversion to AAB's origin story, because I sound cocksure.

Anahita Jamali Rad: I find so often when we talk about AAB, how it came about, the decisions that were made, it always goes back to these moments

between you and I. It's like there's this electric energy when we get together during which we think up ideas and concepts and theories and so on and so on and when we look back on it to see what started it or who even said what, we can't remember. Even if we're just sitting around shooting the shit, I find we're able to produce a particular and exciting analysis of everything from interpersonal relationships to the structures that shape our lives, and how they relate to one another. It's almost as if we bring out clarity in each other, or can access parts of each other in a way that fires up our own neurons.

DB: *What is the relationship between the “study group” and the magazine, or more broadly, the collective political research and its expression by many of its members in poetry and other forms of cultural production?*

AJ: The journal came about because, at the end of the first session, we wanted to produce something, an archive if nothing else, of what came about in those conversations between our two apartments. It just so happened that many of the people involved were already producing culture in some form.

If you really want to get at what AAB is about, I'd say it's about relationship. The relationship between all the people involved, even those who are involved peripherally (like the STAG [Strathcona Art Gallery]), the texts, and the cultural production that occurs in the journal and in other outlets as a result of what happens during AAB sessions.

DL: Speaking of us, I wish we could have seen each other this morning before my takeoff. Reading about our neurological connection has put a smile on my face. Currently sitting in the airport waiting for my first of three flights to visit Milena in Sofia. I'm certain it was her who attended our first meeting? I didn't actually realize how much I missed her until the days leading up to this trip.

The full-service bar is under construction and there's a man who keeps on trying to talk to me while I'm obviously writing an email. He just asked

where I was going and now I have an imaginary Liam Neeson sternly whispering in my ear: *Danielle, this part is very important, you are going to be taken.*

I've said in passing before that the journal was and is never to be considered as a "poetry and poetics" journal, though it's sometimes deemed as such. While it's an expression of the comings and goings of the project at hand, it provides a space for contributors to soapbox to a certain extent by way of poetry, images, dialogue (real or mock) and diagrams. I've been thinking of soapboxing as a more serious form of protest of late. I just came into some research on 60's Viennese Actionism where they'd screech their violent radical politics in the name of emancipatory performance art. Our sessions are like that at times: soapboxing as a way to force one another to hear a text's reality (thinking here of when we read Geraldine Finn's *Why Althusser Killed His Wife* over reading texts you'd readily find on a critical theory syllabus for university studies. In the classroom, we read Althusser's "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" three times to the letter, yet shelved any biographical mention of how he strangled his wife to death. Our undoctored realities (but oftentimes heavily prescribed or under the influence or traumatized); as well as the city we settle in's brutality (the violent pricing out of the marginalized poor and indigenous peoples).

And then, on the other hand, we've discussed (or spewed vitriol) how the journal was recently "unintentionally" demoted as a non-cultural object, or more specifically, a cultural object that isn't carefully curated. This is something not to dwell on, but definitely there are these social moments we've experienced where a soft kind of sexism presents itself. It's not a critique I take seriously; it feels like a soft pat on the head.

DB: *How does AAB position itself within overlapping sites (and discourses) of local/national poetry, academia, and radical political practice?*

AJ: You know, I was thinking recently (resulting from my recent “cleanse” of cis white men), what it means to exclude certain people from our space and lives. I’ve been thinking of this a lot lately, because I’m been feeling my brain cluttered and trying to clear out the unnecessary “noise.” I realised the unnameable/unrecognised reasoning for the exclusivity of the AAB social space was that, at least for me, I wanted to clear out the noise and get to the signal. That’s what was so apparent/felt in that early meeting between us on your birthday, or the day when we first ran into each other at Gene (was it Gene?). We had met at another reading group in which the “noise” prevented us from hearing each other.

I don’t want to talk about text. I don’t want to talk about the sessions in any specific way. There were good moments and bad, moments in which I did not feel safe, moments in which I felt like I was on the outside of a space that I had supposedly co-organized, and moments in which we had to address how different power relations and fucked up ideologies can seep into whatever “curated” social experience we were trying to have.

I guess I don’t know what I want to talk about. I’m feeling so exhausted. I remember telling someone a few weeks ago how I think I just have less capacity than most people. As if there’s just something inherently wrong with me or lacking. There’s a difference between knowing that there are material conditions that affect you, and then really recognising that that is what your experience is. It’s simultaneously more difficult and easier to recognise these things when you’re actually in the body being affected in these ways.

This past session made me re-evaluate the kind of space I want to be in. I felt the academic influence was especially strong. The whiteness especially present. I felt myself reacting in the kinds of ways I was reacting in the reading group in which we met: reactive, angry, resentful.

I am at the coffee shop where Rafaela works, and telling her about what I’ve been trying to think through, I told her how in this past session, I

felt fucked up by the fact that I had to work so hard in order to puncture dominant ideology. That perhaps the academic spectre that was haunting the space was making it more difficult for others to do the same.

Maybe we're supposed to talk about poetry? The pieces I wrote, at least in the earlier versions of the journal, were meant as a conversation with the project, never as stand-alone poems. I feel like a lot of the time, though, it was a way of extracting theory from the collective site of knowledge production. As if I wanted to be alone with the words again. Just me and the ugly, reactive words. Always reaching, never fully feeling satisfied, and just saying, fuck it, let's publish some shit.

Maybe the vitriol was correct in some way, however malicious it felt at the time.

DL: I read your email at 5am, just as I woke up. It's given me a lot to think about. I witnessed these feelings you're expressing here during the projects even before the last one against the couple-form, and it seemed that it came from both a necessary place and an exhausting place for you. The energy involved in being understood in a way that actually feels sincere when there's all this ideological ugliness crowding its transmission is, well, fucked up. AAB needs a new form or it needs to end.

Whatever ideological seepage was never seepage at all — it was always there regardless of intentionality. It makes me return to the internal call for killing the whiteness inside. (Ivan Drury's 2013 Rent Assembly presentation "Killing the White Man Inside" spurred some of the initial concepts for my thesis on self-abolition.) Not to parodize whiteness (which just autocorrected to "paradise," here lies my phone's subconscious racism) nor ironically call it out (like in a poem), but fucking *kill* it. This is why bringing the "I" to the fore is so important, and also why it is so widely dismissed as lacking a politic when it is "the other" who employs it. Once "we" say "the other" we have already failed. The failure of Western Philosophy is how the "I" works

alone. “It is a philosophy of the dominant, for whom material life plays out to their benefit — the necessities of their survival are fulfilled, but externally to them” (from Chistine Delphy’s *Separate and Dominate*).

I think as a byproduct of trying to clear out my own parasitical noise, I felt the necessity to be even more aggressively myself last year, mainly sexually and verbally. This had more to do with attempting to work through the damage done to get to something vaguely conclusive. (“Something” is inherently vague, isn’t it?) Maybe those yearnings for a denouement are similar to what you’re referring to as “a signal.” I’ve had to reconcile with the ever-present (though largely denied) desire for a purge, a cleanse, an outside from late-capitalism and its penetrating objects. This is why I so desperately want to believe CAConrad when he says how “we” can heal the damage from white supremacist patriarchal capitalism through poetry. I so want to believe him. But I think I just believe *in* him, which is fine.

I’m bothered by how AAB enacted the left by oppressing people of colour. But not surprised. The way I’m thinking of this right now, dripping with sweat in my seat — but still take this seriously — is how the aftermath of AAB projects makes material, quite potently, the invisible ideology that is a part of the composition of our relationship. And therein lay its politics: what we do when your experience meets mine and my experience meets yours? And the same goes for the other collective members. What do we do as facilitators when the space is unsafe? When you, as a facilitator, feel unsafe?

On Sofia’s pride parade Facebook page it warned attendees to leave the parade without any proof you were there (rainbow flags, sparkled g-strings, etc.) for fear of attacks from Neo-Nazis. I see swastikas everywhere. I’m trying to determine why I felt more bisexual after the Orlando shootings when I’ve been with women and loved women since my late teens. Why did such an unbelievably violent and devastating act produce such an intense self-identification? I can’t shake it.

I'm on the train with Maia and Milena. We're on our way to the sea. I mentioned your email and this, whatever we want to call it, "interview" for, not really with, David. (Oh, I think we should title it "things just got real"). Milena and I have been discussing how Vancouver lacks soul. "It's full of insincere and superficial people," she says to me. I want to tell her how only I'm allowed to talk about Vancouver this way, not her. Like when someone says something nasty about my mother. In all fairness, Milena's family and friends are baffled by her return to Sofia. How could she leave the West? This myth always makes me think about how the city was abducted from some kind of infancy. Like a promise for the future.

Milena thinks I'm not directly responding to you. And I'm really sensitive to her saying that just now. I think it's because I want to acknowledge how you felt/feel, while at the same time negotiating my defensiveness around your comment about the academization of the last project. Because that session overlapped with my time back at university. I don't want to talk about that return and recent departure. (Maybe we should call it "It's only complicated because we don't want to talk about it.")

AJ: I wrote "safe" in there because I think I had, in the back of my mind, also been thinking about another group dynamic (a political organizing one) in which I felt under attack in some way by an older woman, and that anger from that earlier thought made its way into thinking about AAB. I am in bed now. Also I don't want to talk about AAB in a celebratory way anymore. It's as fucked up as any group situation. We've talked about this before. About how we had to make our politics explicit. It doesn't work that way, though, does it?

Anyway, group situations fuck me up. Maybe that's why I always just want to talk about me and you when talking about AAB.

DL: This is the end of AAB. It's something I've been waiting for. The best part of The Invisible Committee was them admitting collectives should

have knowledge of their end at the beginning. I have my own issues with ending things, particularly with people, and at this moment I realize how I've been waiting for you to propose AAB's definitive conclusion.

AJ: It's interesting to me how we had previously criticized these other spaces, particularly those that have some sort of claim on being "safe spaces," and somehow, because AAB was "not as bad," it was elevated to some sort of ideal.

But, we were right all along: there is no safe space. Maybe we thought because we didn't claim AAB as a safe space, our criticisms didn't apply. And when we realized our constraints weren't enough, that we had to make our politics explicit, we were met with more shit.

During the last session, the most fucked up responses to the texts were when we were reading Hortense Spillers and Lee Edelman. I had hoped the pairing would bring out complex issues in both texts, particularly problematic elements of the Edelman. Instead, it was as if we had returned to some pre-critical primordial soup: the Edelman was celebrated as a validation of lifestyle choices, and the Spillers, well, it was completely misread. I think, at least for me, I expect people to be doing the same amount of work as we do with dealing with such issues, but they don't. This was the frustration with the group dynamics all along. It's almost as if it doesn't matter the kinds of texts we "curate" for the group if the only work that is being done with those issues are done within the context of the group. We tell people, "it doesn't matter if you're not familiar with theory." Basically implying that it's a safe space to work through those issues, and then realizing that sort of space is actually not safe.

I'm wondering about this in the same way I'm wondering about your stronger identification with queerness in the face of violence. My response to your thought was initially, "of course, once a part of you is under threat, you feel it more strongly." I am familiar with that feeling. So many parts of

me have been under threat that I often wonder if there is anything solid, material left of me, and how deep do I have to dig to get there.

Anyway, I'm not going to go back on my use of the word "safe." I think I was worried at first that it was too harsh. That I didn't actually feel that way. And I didn't want to hurt your feelings. But it's not about your feelings. Or about anything you or I did or didn't that would have in some way alleviated those feelings.

I find myself dreading entering into Vancouver poetry spaces. I feel less and less like I want to be there, and less and less like I am able to, with my presence, convey the difference between my experience and those of the others participating in the space. Bodies don't inherently convey meaning. How can they, if even words don't.

DB: *You both were and are poets before, within, and separate from AAB: Care to comment on the interconnections in your own writing practices (and/or day jobs, intellectual pursuits, etc etc)?*

DL: Just as an aside, my poems in the AAB issues are not my favourite. Always too rushed. Maybe there is a reason why editors of journals don't include their own poems in their issues. I'll stick to the preface from now on. My poetry outside of AAB is much different. I think that's why I eventually turned to a more dialogical format for my contributions like the mock dialogue with Patrick [Morrison] and the I said/you said piece in the newest issue with Roger [Farr] as well as the dialogue explicitly between the two of us in issue 4. I wanted to produce a communication with the sessions, but quite independently from AAB as a collective to the point of leading the "enemy" quite explicitly and purposefully inside my contributions.

I wrote a new poem while in Varvara that has the line, "There is no scholar pill, baby, as they squabble over spilt class." Sitting on Milena's terrace after the performance last night, she said how "the Varvara Poems are cruel." And

I said how “Varvara was cruel.” I wrote them on the beach as the sea carried to the shoreline an army of red and blue Jerry Cans as well as a dead baby seal. They are starting to drill for petrol in the Black Sea. Milena and Maia stayed inside the hotel room most of the time, while I swam and wrote. One evening we were talking about class: how she’s “working class” and I’m an “intellectual,” and it was a strange competitive thing to experience, bickering over who has the lowest class position. And on being labeled an “intellectual,” well, I don’t think my mind is very good most of the time. So I wrote lines like “I’m so sick of freedom & money,” “Homeowners wade in warm milk as a special treat only,” and “To perform for you, is the class half full or half empty.”

When I was unemployed in 2013, I remember going for joy rides in Patrick’s work truck with my computer and writing and rewriting the new book. I’m going through edits right now, and it’s bringing up these memories of how the book came about. In Malamata, I isolated myself in that family house. My cousin tried to contact me, but I wouldn’t pick up; I had to be alone in order to resurrect the book. I think I rewrote it a handful of times, always starting with printed pages and a blank document. I’ve been narrativizing the production of this book through these Balkan experiences that frame it. It feels really important to be back, though it’s Bulgaria and not Greece this time, like being connected to my mother’s blood roots. A woman I have frequent estimations about.

Social tensions frequent the pages. How could they not? It’s a book on friendly fire after all. My critical investments always tend to involve the ways in which “total war” are embedded in our social relations, and what that looks like when we imagine what ourselves and the world and our relationships and our objects will look like “after the revolution.” While attempting to establish a discourse (actually if I were to apply a name to whatever it is that is “my poetics” it would more like a “function creep,” a sociological term where one discourse or method slides from one site to another) on friendly fire exclusively, it’s also been a critical task for me since

Vancouver's Winter Olympics to intersect it with other social sites. There were all these missing signifiers during that time, constant conflict, and I was thinking a lot about who I know in my life who's actually prepared for crisis. Mostly the depressives I know. But the thought really was, in all its naïveté: who of us actually knows how to aim? My writing practice is not always coming from an autobiographical site, but it is personal. Milena and I were discussing as well last night how poets are narcissistic, how it's all ego, and I was saying to her how I'm more interested in recuperating narcissism rather than just dismissing it outright as an inherent flaw where women writers are always accused of performing some weak, feminine vanity. I'm deeply committed to my own self-annihilation.

DB: *What's next for AAB?*

DL: Last night you mentioned how we could never get the collective right, reminiscing about problematic dynamics and fucked up things that were said in session (e.g., "black people have been conditioned to be pro athletes because of slavery"). Dynamics will never be right whatever form they take and it's ridiculous to presume they ever could be. The more we shave off the types of people who are the problem, the internalization of those structural issues, that were always there, surface more readily. Those post-revolution communal apartments in Russia come to my mind, where such close quarters enabled these kinds of joyous and poisonous dynamics. I wrote to you recently how I don't actually want to be misanthropic, I just want to hate the right people. Let's officially soapbox before you leave for Montréal next year. Contributions will be vitriol and call outs exclusively. No publication. No archive. No recording. No documentation. Then, because you know how I feel about collective sacrifices (really the only thing to come out of Bataille that's worthy of serious attention. Besides new myths and fucking a dead priest), AAB commits *harakiri*.

AJ: No more reading. No more writing.