

## ANNE BOYER

### Kansas City

A TALK PRESENTED AT BEYOND OAKLAND, AUGUST 2013

Kansas City is a condition to aspire to, a direction to head, an urgent requirement, a location at which one must and will arrive, a longing, a place of both general and specific bliss. How precisely one gets to Kansas City is of no importance, it is only that Kansas City must be gotten to.

When Fats Domino sings his version of the song “Kansas City,” he is like Socrates who says of his ideal city:

Let me feast my mind with the dream as day dreamers are in the habit of feasting themselves when they are walking alone; for before they have discovered any means of effecting their wishes...they proceed with their plan, and delight in detailing what they mean to do when their wish has come true.

That is, Fats Domino might take a plane to the ideal city, he might take a train, but even if he has to walk there, he will get to it the same. Kansas City is a site of general desire at which there is a specific point of bliss: the northeastern crossroads of 12<sup>th</sup> Street and Vine that during the golden era had a hundred clubs, a million songs, was the place where the instruments learned the form of human rhetoric and would argue back and forth til dawn. And, as is the nature of Kansas City, there was no law but that of nature and/or pleasure and/or temporary arbitrary displays of corrupt civic power.

It is unclear whether Fats or whoever else sings his version of the song has a specific woman in mind as he begins: perhaps she is an ideal Kansas City woman narrowed down and built up from the general desirability of all Kansas City women who are not merely pretty but also “crazy.” That is, to be a

woman in Kansas City is to be like Kansas City: attractive, irrational, lawless, simultaneously attainable and unattainable, governable and not. He's going to get him "one" of these citizens of the dream city, but, also, he will be got.

When Fats sings, Kansas City is never got to and the Kansas City woman is never precisely had—it is the city kept static in its utopian criminality then.

In some versions of the song, it is not the idea of the possession of a crazy little woman that causes the singer to desire Kansas City, it is crazy ways of loving—the attainability and unattainability of Kansas City no longer located in a specific or gendered body, but in the no-law-but-that-of-Dionysius nature of the Kansas City love. This is the version, too, in which one ends up on the corner with a Kansas City woman and some Kansas City wine. There are versions, too, in which the singer tells whoever is listening to keep his or her hands off the Kansas City woman: as if a Kansas City woman is a thing which must be protected—not at all the point of Kansas City. There are other versions where one no longer ends up on the corner of 12<sup>th</sup> street and Vine, but merely on a corner with a suitcase. No longer does the singer arrive in a district of a thousand songs, but is merely as innocent as any traveller about to set up home. There is a Beatles version, like a blanket of anglopheniety which descends upon the city and extinguishes it as both ideal polis and historical fact. Their version is full of math, dickishness, and nostalgia. Kansas City, for them is a place one fetches a possessed woman from, rather than an ideal and criminal republic of crazy women, and crazy wine and crazy love.

I am walking to the corner of 43<sup>th</sup> and Warwick and I am listening to Fats Domino sing of 12<sup>th</sup> Street and Vine. I am in Kansas City but all I want in life is to go to Kansas City.

How does one go from Kansas City to a Kansas City? What mode of transportation might I take? 12<sup>th</sup> Street and Vine is no longer an intersection. After every Kansas City Royals' game, the Beatles version plays.

\*

If you ever actually get to Kansas City, near the place Fats Domino aspired to, you will see the facade of “Kansas City.” Now I don’t know how to make this sentence clear enough when spoken aloud, because it sounds poetic, but what I am trying to tell you is quite literal: if you get to Kansas City, near 12<sup>th</sup> and Vine, you will see the facades erected during the Robert Altman film, *Kansas City*.

These facades were erected in 1996, the year I first lived in Kansas City. I don’t know how to explain how I got to Kansas City without a complex and personal story and what was then out of these events my abandonment of everything that had to do with “poetry” or being “a poet,” but I swore I would never do anything like that, be anything like a “poet” if that’s what being a poet meant. I was 23 years old. For the first time, I’d crossed a state line and left Kansas to live, if only just barely: me, who had never been east of the Mississippi, who had never been to anything like a large coastal American city. Kansas City, in its sprawling Midwestern-ness, was what I had to aspire to—the ideal city that I wanted to arrive to, in liberation from what had come before.

What I knew when I got to Kansas City was that I couldn’t be a poet, I mean I refused to, and I was soon in whatever was a not a poem, working in the shelters and community centers of Kansas City and thinking the only possible life was a life of politics, and the only possible politics was a politics for women and children and the poor.

When I think of telling you what was in Kansas City the year the façades of Kansas City were built, my thoughts turn a kind of red, and what I see is a field of feeling: sorrow, rage.

I think of the children I loved in Kansas City before I had my own child, before we were a poor mother and child like these poor mothers and children I worked with in the shelters. And when I think of the year the façades were

erected in Kansas City, I think of the other monumental failure of that year—Clinton’s “Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act”—which you may know as “welfare reform”—that one piece of legislation which more than any other, directly and catastrophically immiserated those who are women, and mothers or children and poor.

I had, the year the façade was built, a terrifying immersion in the consequences of these shock waves of life under neoliberal austerity and the failure of the left, and of the failures of what remained of “feminism” to organize around the interests of poor women and children. And though the lives of the poor mothers I worked with was not yet my life, it was soon enough. I think of the exhausted mothers who, as welfare became “workfare” and constricted into an impossible bargain, had to choose between abusive partners and living in their cars or the unsafe living rooms of people who might hurt their children, who had either the option of continued personal abuse or the draconian, impersonal abuse of the shelters and privatizing welfare system that regularly humiliated the mothers for being poor, for being unmarried, for having been women of color who had children or children by many fathers or white women who had children with fathers who were not white.

I stayed in Kansas City from 1996 to shortly after my daughter was born. I thought it was strange the facade of Kansas City stayed up for four years. But it is 2013, and it looks like the facade of Kansas City will stay around till they fall off.

The facades are their own ruin now, instead of a mask on a ruin. It sounds like a poetic problem, that we have a ruined mask on ruin, and it is, and because of this I distrust it.

\*

Kansas City is made up of more than one city. Sometimes people will know this—they will ask you *Which Kansas City?* If you live in what is roughly

understood as Kansas City, this question has many answers. It's a city of lines and borders and boundaries, and while this is the case with many cities, the lines and borders and boundaries of Kansas City have a unique historical weight.

If it was the 1860s, and you crossed the line between the different Kansas Cities, on one side you were a slave, and the other you were free. Or if you are white, in one Kansas City you could own other humans, the black ones, and if you crossed the line, it is possible that you crossed it because you were interested in keeping other white people from owning humans.

There is a town in Kansas City, Kansas, that doesn't exist anymore, called "Quindaro." It is hard to get to. It is now only ruins. Its name means "bundle of sticks tied together." You must first go deep onto Quindaro Boulevard. If you are lucky you will find the wooden John Brown statue, then you must walk up a muddy bluff past it, past what used to be locked gates. If you get to Quindaro, you will see the ruins of an autonomous community built by self-emancipated former slaves and abolitionists, the site at which people who crossed the river could finally be free.

In 1996, when I first visited it, the local historians said that Quindaro was hidden from Kansas City as part of a conspiracy of the powerful, that no one wanted the people to know in Kansas City that black people had formed a community for the purpose of liberation, that there were indigenous people and white people too who would be so "crazy"—like John Brown—to fight and die for black people and against the whites. The local historians wanted people to know this Kansas City, so if then you were asked *Which Kansas City?* you would have a better one to chose from than the Kansas City, like this.

\*

Does Kansas City have a content? Or does it only have a form? I think a lot about the form of Kansas City. I think I must think about it because I am now

a poet again, and if I think of the content of Kansas City, even for a moment, I get that red painful scrim over my memory that brings me back to politics.

In Kansas City there are things that are not quite riots. I once wrote, in the time before the occupations, “There are no politics in Kansas City. In Kansas City, instead of politics, we have two things: money and race. We have a third: children, and the way they are hated and feared here has mostly to do with the two other things.”

In Kansas City there are sometimes weekend gatherings of mostly poor kids of color in the areas the city has devoted to the wealthy. These children are called “mobs”—their being certain bodies in a place not for their bodies is close enough to a riot for the cops. The youth or almost youth then sometimes shoot at each other and the mayor gets pushed into a flower bed outside the Cheesecake Factory. The youth are there on the Plaza where the shopping and fine-dining is supposed to be.

Because of this, if you go to the Plaza on a nice night in spring and summer at 9 pm, you will see the KCPD stand over the mostly black children, sometimes the children in groups of a dozen or more, the children with their hands zip-tied behind their back.

\*

There is a problem for any poet who lives in a city like this. There is the aesthetic allure of ruins, and the long poetic tradition of admiring them. Like many “ruined” Midwestern cities, there is the problem of “art” in Kansas City, and of artists and gentrifiers and “lifestyle”—a problem I am, because of my current work, this second time living in Kansas City, deeply involved in, and a problem so complex I can’t sufficiently explain it here. It is a problem that exists precisely because of the aesthetic allure of a city like this, and its cheap space and joyful “lawlessness”: those vacancies created by white supremacy and capital.

I have a problem this time in Kansas City because I have no longer refused poetry. Because what I come from now is poetry, and poetry is also my city, and poetry is a city whose citizens have a tradition of admiring and/or colonizing the suffering of others. The poetry of Kansas City is society erupting into firefights and tragedies, of the natural comedy of ruined cities, of puppets and shams, of holy and unholy divisions, of ghosts which are given free reign over memory

I thought I should come back to the material facts of Kansas City. If I were doing this better, I would show you every diagram of borders here, of race and money, and you could marvel like me at the lines drawn across Kansas City and what does and does not cross them. I would give you the facts of death in this place, also called “Killer City.” I would give you the facts I’d collected about the women who die of intimate partner violence here, in disproportionate number to other cities of this size, give you the facts of death of the city which hates its children and kills its women.

I think sometimes, when people come to visit me and we drive across these borders, about what terrible ghostly police must enforce these checkpoints, must hold these conditions as stable. But we know what these ghost police are, they are white supremacy and patriarchy and capital, and we know how the actual police, which in Kansas City have for decades been denied even local control, work in concert with them.

I think also of the ghost armies that could rise against these ghost police, think of the history which waits under the façade again revealed, ready to provide content for the now brutal form of city.

I think of how this is a city which once had the most meaningful border any city could have—that between freedom and slavery—and what borders, and traversals and reversals, could, and must, most urgently occur.