

## Trish Salah

*Lyric Sexology Vol. 1* (Roof Books, 2014)

REVIEWED BY ZOE TUCK

Trans women poets: raise your hands if you have written poems about or in the voice of Tiresias? Although I'm not sure if there are enough trans poets AND trans poets who have written Tiresias poems to call them a commonplace, I will cop to having written a few. The figure of Tiresias looms over the search for precedent. Trish Salah recognizes that sometimes the only way around these commonplaces is by honoring the spirit of the search for origins in myth while also critiquing its pitfalls (on these more momentarily). Note the irreverence of "Tiresias, Impersonated":

I am not a transsexual. Or an intersexual, or a hermaphrodite. (Hermaphroditus can write her own damn book.) I am not any of those things

you have words for now. You don't have words for what I am. What I was was this:

I was a dude.

Then I was a chick.

Then I was a dude again.

Hah. You didn't think we said "dude" or "chick" in what you call ancient Greece, Hellas of the Hellenes, etc. Think again. (11)

The wit masks a real concern that has dogged transgender history and queer history before it: who can we claim, either in the past, or across cultural boundaries, as being one of us? Put another way: is there a universal category of gender? This *isn't* a guide or a 101, so don't go looking for an answer. While this lyric sexology involves time travel (and cylons), it is not a safari.

Salah deploys Madame Tiresia in “Berdache: Trans\* National Geographic Edition,” a biting homeopathic orientalist romp through cross cultural gender difference. She immediately follows it with “Polemic Anthropologies,” which gives the plan of a (typical?) lyric sexology:

On the books though it’s all one or the other,  
Like they declaim. It is like biography:  
In the first chapter of a lyric sexology  
Lies the proof, or the deconstruction  
Pink and blue were not as they once always were  
The world is very different now from how it once was...

Literature review is the second chapter  
Ambrose Bierce, Aliester Crawley vs. the Skoptzy Sect of Russia  
Gallae, Hijra, and don’t forget Ovid, Tiresias  
It’s the usual suspects really.  
Alibi for colonialism, but seriously high  
— how pot gives you boobs—  
fantasy of the sex role reversal  
critical utopia  
Marge Piercy, Joanna Russ, Suzy McKee Charnas,  
Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Virginia Woolf  
Variety. White Lady feminism.

To say nothing of whether Havelock Ellis really cribbed  
*The Adventures of Julian Robinson*, or Michel Foucault  
Jerked off to *La Mystère Alexina*  
Herculine Barin’s softcore bodice ripper adaptation).  
Oh to be alone in a Nunnery at last among my own kind  
And young and in love, like Rousseau among the Cherokee.

After that, well, I’m sorry to say, but  
it’s all down hill. (74-75)

I've mentioned so far the search for *origins* in myth in *Lyric Sexology Vol. 1* by trans subjects, but not on behalf of trans subjects—a thornier matter. I think I know what I'm writing about when I write about Tiresias, but what about interested cisgender writers like those mentioned above? Salah, in her easy conversance with and Kathy Acker-esque disobedience from the canon, traces their emphasis on sex. The gods' question (which sex [sic] has the greater pleasure?) becomes Freud's. *Gynecocracy*, a Victorian erotic novel regarding forced feminization shows up, along with Bataille and Genet, and the above-quoted poem's sexological equivalents to the questions in Donne's "Song: Go and catch a falling star," re: Ellis and Foucault.

At this point, since I've invoked Acker's ghost, it's relevant that, like any proper -ology, Salah's comes with quite a bibliography, or, as she puts it, "This book **rips** riffs off many texts" (136). She has said in conversation that *Lyric Sexology Vol. 1* is the other side of her doctoral dissertation. Now I wish I remember the precise word. The inverse? While it may have chapters, and a works cited, this text is definitely not compatible with strictly academic writing, both from its kari edwards-inflected typography to its incorporation of personal narrative. And yet, it should be admissible, because the transition between personal and historical is (to me) seamless, because both are mediated by the medicalization and psychiatrization of gender difference. Case in point: Salah gives us Schreber's *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness* (and Freud and Lacan, natch) and on a more personal note, the song cycle "diagnostic detour," in which the speaker expresses desire for:

An older and more beautiful diagnosis, the kind you could  
bring home to mamma  
More, one from even before Freud, the science of the mythic past,  
and how it keeps coming up. (92)

She is stymied in this pursuit, however. I have to quote section V in full:

At the end of my intake interview, at the Montreal General, Doctor Abdullah asked me something, I don't remember, about the length of my hair, manic fuchsia tendrils, my lace up pants, and eighteen skull books, the scorpion crawling my arm a year later, being unstuck in time, I don't remember. And I said something half defensive and art school smart about subcultures and semiotics, about how queer was the new punk, again

In 1991 I thought that might be clever

He didn't bother to conceal the condescension, mumbling "Borderline." his answer "Borderline." to a question "Borderline." I'd not asked

You don't need to be psychiatry smart to know what he meant, that the word wasn't incidental, and wouldn't be.

It would be a while before I got that diagnosis. (94-95)

In case any readers missed the political stakes of this: trans lives are mediated by gatekeepers. Our access to hormones, surgery, changes on legal documents, are too often contingent on our ability or willingness to represent the image of a pole of binary gender that satisfies the retrograde standards of the medical imaginary.

This is the other side of the desire for origins mentioned above. If (some) trans people want to know where we came from, something of our forbears, some cisgender people want to know where we're going. For example: the more femme, the better we pass but the more we open ourselves up to (tired) criticisms or *parodic* femininity. The more butch, "You're not even trying," etc. This is perhaps the most basic version. Salah offers at least one rendition:

People at parties are reassured when they see a transsexual in a dress...

The fact that she is wearing a dress tells them they are at a party, and  
the fact

That transsexual is a she perhaps not a he a she not a she

That she is transsexual, of course, let's them know they are women  
and men

enough to be at a party with a transsexual in a dress.

When she is not wearing a dress, all trembles with the terror,  
the confessional

Cool (67-8).

Of course, not all of gender's demands are sartorial. See also: "Metacritical Comment on the Expectation that Transgender People Demonstrate Their Feminist Analysis" (105). Or Salah's answer to Poetry's and Feminism's (imagined here as monoliths) uncritical celebration of Adrienne Rich, whose transmisogynistic comments made mourning complicated: "Explore the wreck." Though critical, this is not a takedown, just more exquisitely sophisticated ripping or riffing—which Salah doesn't limit merely to cis gatekeepers and critics. She alludes to/converses with the Rachel Pollack, Trace Peterson, kari edwards—whose typographic stamp shows up off and on throughout the text. She also riffs, prosodically and stylistically, off of other Canadian and US experimental writers, many of whom appear in her Acknowledgments, which functions like a second Works Cited for the lyric portion of *Lyric Sexology Vol 1*. This book demands another review to treat the prosody, but "I am counting the kinds of impossible" and I have only counted this far (127).

I continue to get caught up in the long twentieth century that lives on in our jails and bathrooms, writing in advance of the possibility of reviewing trans lit *qua* lit. In *Lyric Sexology Vol 1*, Trish Salah has given trans readers our most poetically rigorous genealogy yet. The extent to which she has worked the rupture stand to make reviews of this nature obsolete—a happy prospect.