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Cartographic (Dis)Location in the Work of Bloch, Kaminski, and Tremblay-McGaw

Valley Fever

Julia Bloch

Sidebrow Books, 2015

Deep City

Megan Kaminski

Noemi Press, 2015

Dear Reader

Robin Tremblay-McGaw

Ithuriel's Spear, 2015

If you're looking for familiar maps to help locate yourself inside any of these poetry collections, you'll need to be patient because Julia Bloch, Megan Kaminski, and Robin Tremblay-McGaw are constantly redrawing them. City maps, anatomical charts, and literary lineages tilt, reverse, disintegrate, and are remade. To structure a lineage, these women have chosen epigraphs from the following diverse array of writers: Virginia Woolf (Bloch), Honoré de Balzac and Young Jeezy (Kaminski), and Saint Augustine and Robert Glück (Tremblay-McGaw).

Given the epigraphs Tremblay-McGaw chooses for her highly intertextual project, one might presume she possesses the drive to confess. The Saint Augustine quote she selects, however, describes a person beginning to read a book and immediately thereafter bursting into flame, while New Narrative writer Robert Glück, in contrast, describes a body made of words: "My unmade body / is made again" (7). Writing, then, possesses the power to both destroy and reconstruct.

Tremblay-McGaw's work is so densely allusive that it quickly becomes clear that the book can be read as a map of the poet as reader. In fact, as in the title's mode of address, *Dear Reader* shows the book is very much a conversation among a complex web of readers. The range of texts quoted from or referred to is impressively vast: The book is invested as much in the work of contemporary poets as it is in *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), proclaimed the "last of the Gothic novels" (31). "The Melmoth Letters," an epistolary that closes

out the first section of Tremblay-McGaw's book, inserts contemporary writer Jim Brashear's poem, "The Proportion between Offenses," into Charles Maturin's original novel and also adds a new female character, Wanda. As much as *Melmoth the Wanderer* contains stories within stories, Tremblay-McGaw's "Melmoth Letters" might also be considered an epistolary inside an epistolary; the entire book specifically reaches out to you, the reader of the book. One of the letters closes as follows:

xo
Wanda
the wanderer
 wand
 wan
 dear
 reader (37)

The poem thus always makes the presence of an outside reader known. It makes the reader aware of herself.

This method of taking apart and rearranging individual letters of words carries over in a more explicit fashion in "making mARKS," a long poem that comprises the second half of the book. This mode of deconstructing is invested in deftly rooting out and exposing hierarchies, those hierarchies contained in lineages once (or now) commonly accepted. For example, the law of primogeniture creates a lineage that Tremblay-McGaw seeks to expose:

pRimOgeniTure. The rot in such a system. (12)

These laws of property protected the first-born son, laws that do not even comment upon the rights of women, for women were also property.

From small apparently lyric gestures ("after Oppen & Howe"), to letters, to blasts of words that use the entire page as a field, Tremblay-McGaw finds new ways to address a woman poet's necessity to create, for "she / who will not write / seeps troubles the rest" (18). Through the poems, she maps pathways for possible connections, not arriving at conclusions about the "troubles," but opening necessary conversations to enable the construction of communities that can exist inside vexing, problematic systems.

Likewise, Kaminski's long poem "The Cities," which opens her book, explores the architecture of cities, bodies, and language. At times all three merge into

one another as in the following selections: “dear city I want to crawl inside your chest / ply rib by rib by rib and slip soft / extol your innerworks colder sounds” (14) or “city built line on line body on body / alphabet buried beneath the street” (15). The body of the poem is found within the body of the city, which in turn reflects the bodies of its creators. “The Cities” is putatively an epistolary, addressing various others such as “Dear cabbie, dear comfort” (11) and “Dear neighborhood, dear block” (14) and through this address, attempts to gather together the community that is the poem.

In the second section, “Apocrypha,” lines start to stretch out and poems inhabit more space (both black and white) on the page, but the themes of the first section are carried forward: “As chief cartographer for the city / he maps systems” (38). In the same fashion that Kaminski’s lines often proceed by sound (repetition, alliteration) the cartographer does the same: “catalogs stolen memories / models depths of the bay / presses his ear to the wall and listens for coordinates” (38). This mapping, the poet/cartographer’s work, crucially insists on listening in order to orient the self/city.

The poet/cartographer then moves to the process of writing to locate the reader: “it is the key to understanding today / or maybe visit my house” (39). Keys, directions, and codes offer possible paths: “enter the code / three flights / knock twice” (47), but sometimes “there were other signs birds / circling the parking garage the tea cabinet in / disarray delayed flights into Memphis” (61). Can the poem serve as a stronghold against disarray? Kaminski prompts us to ask.

The previous quote is from the last section, “Collection,” poems that coalesce into neat boxes, then rain down waterfalls, and finally rearrange neatly into boxes once again. Kaminski has a keen sense of form: “we were / wooed by architecture wooed by other things” (61). She creates an architecture to structure sense.

In contrast, Bloch’s tightly structured poems paradoxically mourn the lack of structure:

We drive unharmed
beneath tinted windows
in this apparently
structureless city. (71)

In Los Angeles, which the poet tell us “is always moving,” yet “never moving” (71), tinted windows, dust, white noise, “yellow mist,” rain, always rain, that smudges but never cleans, all cause the speaker’s senses to blur, catch, and become obscured.

..... I’m sorry for the subject
line in the email, the window opened
and a hard piece of metal flew
in from the street, I think
that must have been what happened, just
the dirty structure of everything. (61)

In this poem, “Apology to Los Angeles,” as in the rest of the collection, Bloch focuses on the often absurd concrete details of the everyday—“the peacocks at Hollywood / Forever walked around and around / in caged circles” (61)—while showing us the difficulty of ever grasping the whole or drawing an all-encompassing conclusion. Indeed what sense is there to be made?

.....Then
one person says “Your body
is like an anatomy” and
another feels the city reel past
anything calendrical. (30)

In the same fashion that Bloch’s tight writing structure reveals the failure of structure, her sharp grasp of detail highlights the ever-present breakdown of perception. Here, the body is not only reduced to its anatomy; rather it is “like” not just anatomy, but “an anatomy,” a disembodied anatomical chart or textbook. The body, then, is twice estranged from itself: it exists only in parts, and those are recorded in a text. Moreover, the city exists outside the structure of time—“anything calendrical”—which would allow the speaker to chart and order experience.

Bloch’s poems are situated between cities—many take place on a highway—and between relationships. “Now she says we were never married / My hands go bone-dry” (25), bone-dry as the actual (not imaginary) California. Though many musical compositions, art objects, and literary texts are researched and quoted throughout the book, Bloch also leaves us with the possibility of full perception that does not require this allusive work: “This is a love poem / and I did not do any research,” (79) gesturing toward a lyric interiority that her work continually complicates.

Through the work of these three contemporary women poets, the reader can contemplate such relationships as those between self and other, reader and text, body and city, structure and decay, while also meditating upon a wide array of careful forms that these poets have invented to put these collisions into action.

Kathy Lou Schultz's creative and scholarly work has appeared in a wide variety of journals including *The Journal of Modern Literature*, *Contemporary Literature*, *Jacket2*, *Cleaver Magazine*, *New American Writing*, *OnandOnScreen*, *Aspasiology*, *Fence*, and *Hambone*, and in the anthologies *Efforts and Affections: Women Poets on Mentorship*, *Biting the Error: Writers Explore Narrative*, *Building is a Process / Light is an Element: Essays and Excursions for Myung Mi Kim*, *The New Fuck You: Adventures in Lesbian Reading*, and *Rainbow Darkness: An Anthology of African American Poetry*. She also performs her work on the CD, *The Colored Waiting Room*, by Dr. Guy's MusiQology. Her essay "Talking Trash, Talking Class: What's a Working Class Poetic and Where Would I Find One?" was published in the first issue of *Tripwire*. Schultz's monograph, *The Afro-Modernist Epic and Literary History: Tolson, Hughes, Baraka*, was released in paperback in 2016.