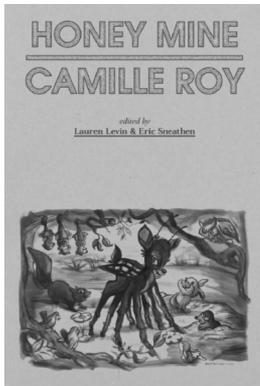


Camille Roy

Honey Mine

Editors: Erik Sneathen and Lauren Levin

New York: Nightboat Books, 2021



I've been wondering if I can start with this word. *Derange*. As in, to throw into confusion, to disrupt the regular order. There's a risk I'll be misinterpreted. But risk is what I'm getting at. What Camille Roy propels us toward. Hurtles us toward, even.

Roy's book *Honey Mine*, a collection of new and previously published works, enacts a derangement of self, narrative, and desire, in pieces that are sometimes stories, sometimes essays, sometimes both or neither. As a whole, the book proceeds

REVIEWED BY MARY BURGER through a series of reversals, between past and present, disclosure and concealment, performance as revelation, performance as illusion. Between tenderness and violence. Between familiarity and risk. And of course, it rips right through the gauzy hallucination of such binaries, into the exploded field of intertwined, interdependent meanings and identities. Into derangement.

Disarrangement.

The publication of *Honey Mine* grew out of the conference *Communal Presence: New Narrative Writing Today*, held at UC Berkeley and UC Santa Cruz in 2017. In their introduction, editors Lauren Levin and Eric Sneathen

place Roy's work in the contexts of New Narrative, the Bay Area literary scene, and evolving queer and trans identities of the past several decades.

Honey Mine is loose-limbed and restless, turning and returning to particular settings and tropes and characters, viewing them from different angles through the guise of Camille, a changeling avatar in her own stories: in the South Side Chicago neighborhood where Camille grows up, discovering the possibilities of erotic love and the brutal divides of racism almost in the same moment. In the remote mountain town, or desert town, or mountain desert town, where Camille or someone she imagines or pretends to be finds love, or lust, or has it taken away. In the embattled city neighborhood that might be San Francisco's Tenderloin or Polk Gulch or some similar scene in the early '80s, home to the bands of outsiders who have only each other to see them through their linked calamities. In the cafes and waitress shifts, the bars and bartending gigs. In the massage parlor, a low-rent operation up several flights of stairs, where young women crowd together on the couch, waiting for the furtive men who will come through the door. Where sometimes Camille, sometimes her beloved, sometimes both, are among the young women there. In the *bomber jacket and rolling stride* that describe Camille's beloved, that also describe Camille in nearly the same language later in the book.

Camille, in search of life, in search of herself, deranges conventions because they can't possibly give her what she's looking for. She doesn't know what she'll find, but she knows when she's being gaslit, and she has some idea of where the holds of convention break down.

Camille wanted her life illuminated by the information which the world told her she couldn't have. And whoring was perfect because it was like life, but more blunt.

—"The Agatha Stories"

Nadine had told me in this club the dykes were impossible to tell apart from the whores. They looked as though they were all wearing the same mask, and that interested me more than anything. It was the mystery I wanted, I could feel myself headed towards it though I didn't move.

– “Friends”

Camille the character places a low premium on the commodity of “truth,” because the truths she’s been told so rarely coincide with the truths she lives. Roy the writer treats truth as inert matter to be experimented upon, to be rigorously deformed in the interest of revealing a truer nature. The pieces in *Honey Mine*, even those that might conventionally be called “stories,” are laced with moments of analysis about the act of narration and the collisions between experience and language. In a few pieces Roy confronts narrative theory—veracity, intimacy—head-on.

I don't care what the truth is—not enough to pursue it, anyway. I'm registering something more vague—a sort of cloud at the center of the story, which is where I've spent most of my life.

...

There's inescapable falsity in my condition.

–“Craquer”

I think that stories have all the sneaky pleasure & mutilations of intimacy hidden within what we call narrative structure. Narrative moments are always coupled and involve multiple manipulations of deceit and recognition.

–“Sex Talk (With Abigail Child)”

Narrative provides context so that the rupturing of identity is recognizable. I think we are impossible beings. We ruthlessly evade

scrutiny, yet recognition is the beginning of transformative emotion.
It's a feeding process. You don't know if you're creating a monster.
—"Experimentalism"

Rearrangement.

So, how does Camille find her way? Through the body, of course. Through the authenticity of erotic desire, which, despite its pitfalls, its lacerations, its frequent false hopes, and its tendency to leave bruises, remains the one truth that can't be corrupted.

I climbed on her hips, up on her white panties and I sat there for a moment, looking. It was so unfamiliar, a girl rolling between my legs and the little blast offs in my blood.
—"The Faggot"

I thought about Monica.
Her sharp teeth and brown cheeks. The way her greed slid across my hips could be scary but her palms were narrow as slots, that made it okay to have sex with her.
—"My X Story"

Choices. Dusty said I had some. What came up was sitting on Dusty's hips, twisting her nugget. If I could, I'd choose to be her little sex witch...

...
It felt sort of like blood pushing into damaged tissue. Sort of ugly. One of those love moments. I relished it. I felt sick. I knew it would be ages before Dusty and I calmed down enough to carry on a conversation.
—"Perils"

Deracination.

The young avatar Camille, and the young writer Roy, could not have anticipated these works existing as a single volume, could not have foretold the shifts in cultural context which affect how these works now play against one another, or how Roy or we now see them. Time is the continual derangement that uproots us whenever we've reached some stasis that, for better or worse, we feel to be true. Roy addresses some of the derangements of time in the Afterword:

Sometimes I feel that the truest respect one can show towards the past is to allow it to be something other than a predecessor of the present. Perhaps its alien and most forbidden nature did not reproduce. Exploring the deep lostness of what has died out is a freedom I didn't have when I was young.

She underscores what we've already come face to face with in her stories from the marginalized worlds of her youth.

Being a lesbian meant living at the edge of a disastrous and threatening form of visibility. Recognition could turn to violence in an instant although mostly there was erasure and absolute zero cultural capital.

We can celebrate that these conditions of disaster and erasure have for some—certainly not all—been supplanted by vocal, visible queer and trans cultures, where violence and forced marginalization are not the defining conditions, or at any rate where there are routes to other, more flourishing conditions. We can celebrate Roy's role in helping to create these vibrant, vigorous cultures, without erasing the historic specificity of her work.

Regeneration.

The title *Honey Mine* is an endearment—*my beloved*—and a fanciful place of extraction, the site where sweetness is dug from a dark crevice. Roy hands

us chunks of honeycomb to cram into our mouths and let drip from our chins. Don't you want to come along?