Feeling America Otherwise: Ground as an Earth That Quakes

by

Jessica Eileen Jones

Department of Literature
Duke University

Date: _________________________

Approved:

___________________________
Walter Mignolo, Supervisor

___________________________
Florencia Garramuño

___________________________
Michael Hardt

___________________________
Wahneema Lubiano

___________________________
Richard Rosa

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Literature in the Graduate School of Duke University

2015
ABSTRACT

Feeling America Otherwise: Ground as an Earth That Quakes

by

Jessica Eileen Jones

Department of Literature
Duke University

Date:_______________________
Approved:

___________________________
Walter Mignolo, Supervisor

___________________________
Florencia Garramuño

___________________________
Michael Hardt

___________________________
Wahneema Lubiano

___________________________
Richard Rosa

An abstract of a dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of Literature in the Graduate School of Duke University

2015
Abstract

The artists and writers of my dissertation -- Robert Smithson, Ed Roberson, Rodolfo Kusch, Alejandra Pizarnik, Nancy Holt, Lygia Clark, and Clarice Lispector -- teach us to feel the ground on which we stand as an earth that quakes, and this feeling implies a radical reconfiguration of our relation to the world, one which makes perception, language, art, and world otherwise. Against an aesthetics of representation, predicated on a regime of pleasurable feeling and form which neutralizes the world into an empty space filled with objects, and which I argue lingers as the hegemonic framework for the study of American literature, they offer an understanding art and literature as an embodied engagement with the weight of a world that presses in and pulls down. I call this feeling an aeisthesis of ground and offer it as a way to rethink the ethics of our relation to the world.

From this trembling ground, these artists and writers struggle to make the world and our relation to it otherwise. In so doing, they contribute to the project of decolonizing the aesthetic imaginary of the Americas. They propose a different point of departure for the study of American literature, one which allows us to cultivate unlikely lines of kinship between authors and texts on both sides of the Rio Grande. Engaging the work of these authors and artists contributes to current work in the humanities which has turned to aesthetics as a way to rethink our human relation to the world in the face
of our global ecological crisis. It, however, also radically departs from these efforts precisely in its point of departure, remaking this relation from the more unsteady ground of American art, letters, and life that these artists help us unfold.
For my parents
Contents

Abstract .............................................................................................................................................. iv
List of Figures ........................................................................................................................................ ix
Acknowledgements .............................................................................................................................. x

Introduction: Feeling America Otherwise: Ground as an Earth That Quakes ...................... 1

Floor: Aesthetics in the City as Patio of Objects ............................................................................ 9

Ground: Feeling an Earth That Quakes ......................................................................................... 30

Walking as Method ........................................................................................................................... 39

Chapter One: What the Feet Can See: Walking Art out of the United States and Into America ................................................................. 41

Walking as Method ........................................................................................................................... 42

Study One: "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey," or the Making of the Garden State ....................................................................................... 52

Study Two: "Fredrick Law Olmstead and the Dialectics of the Landscape," or Walking Central Park ........................................................................................................... 65

Study Three: "Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan," or What the Feet Can See 71

Study Four: Walking out of the United States and Into America, or Walking the Spiral Jetty ......................................................................................................................... 86

Chapter Two: Unfolding Clarice Lispector, or Writing From the Ground ..................... 94

Os Fatos Antecedentes (The Preceding Facts): Nothing Comes from Nothing ........... 95

Off the Wall and Into the World: Grounding Aesthetics ...................................................... 98

The Worldly Weight of Making: The Consequences of Writing World From the Ground .......................................................................................................................... 118
Chapter Three: "So on This Ground / Write": The Worldly Weight of Words .......... 135

An Invocation ........................................................................................................ 135

La Barra del Bar: The Sign From Above .............................................................. 145

Leaving the Bar: The Sign From Below ............................................................... 169

Coda: To See The Earth Before the End of the World ...................................... 205

Bibliography ........................................................................................................ 210

Biography ............................................................................................................. 222
List of Figures

Figure 1: Robert Smithson, Bridge Monument Showing Wooden Side-walks, 1967 ..........55

Figure 2: Robert Smithson, The Fountain Monument: Side View, 1967..............................57

Figure 3: Robert Smithson, A Nonsite: Franklin, New Jersey, Painted wooden bins, limestone; with Work on paper: gelatin-silver prints and typescript mounted on mat board, 1968..................................................................................64

Figure 4: Nancy Holt, Smithson Making Mirror Displacement in the Yucatan, 1969 ..........72

Figure 5: Robert Smithson, Mirror Trail in Franklin Quarry, New Jersey, 1973...............73

Figure 6: Robert Smithson, Mirror Span in Great Notch Quarry, New Jersey, 1968........74

Figure 7: Robert Smithson, Fourth Yucatan Mirror Displacement, 1969..........................76

Figure 8: Robert Smithson, Fifth Yucatan Mirror Displacement, 1969..............................77

Figure 9: Gianfranco Gorgoni, Smithson at Spiral Jetty, 1970........................................89

Figure 10: Lygia Clark, Descoberta da linha orgânica (Discovery of the Organic Line), Oil on canvas and wood, 1954..................................................................................................................106

Figure 11: Lygia Clark, Série: Quebra da moldura (Series: Breaking the Frame), Maquette, 1954.................................................................................................................................107

Figure 12: Lygia Clark, Bicho ponta (Pointed Critter), Aluminum, 1960.................................108

Figure 13: Lygia Clark, Invertebrado (Invertebrate), Aluminum, 1960.................................109

Figure 14: Lygia Clark, Caminhando (Walking), Scissors, tape and paper, 1963..............118

Figure 15: Ed Roberson, "Formula for the Poem Dance," Etai-Eken, 1975.........................171

Figure 16: Ed Roberson, "Kokopelli: hand-drawn illustration," 2010................................172

Figure 17: Ed Roberson, "there is a way you can draw," Etai-Eken, 1975..........................191
Acknowledgements

Nothing comes from nothing. This dissertation would not exist as it is - I would not exist as I am - if it weren’t for all of the amazing and beautiful people who I feel so lucky to have in my life. They have given me laughter and music and poetry and wisdom and have taught and continue to teach me much of what is in the pages that follow.

Thank you to my parents, Joan Eileen Jones and George Patrick Jones. For telling me “this is the year of the hoodie!” For traveling to see me in a conference when all the other presentations were in a language you did not understand. For sending me care packages and Halloween cards that you both take time to sign, even though I am old. For having us grow up with the grandparents in our lives. For tears in your eyes when you meet my airplane. And for dinners and cooking and wine together. Thank you for life and unconditional love and heart, and for always keeping things always in perspective. This entire journey would not have been possible without both of you.

To my brother, Andrew Jones, who told me that they will think you are crazy but you do it anyway. To my Aunt, Susan Wallwork, artist, inspiration, who brought me into the world of Georgia O’Keeffe and helped me think of titles. For my grandmother, Helen Mae Wallwork, who showed me how to look at and listen to the birds. For my grandfather, Samuel Wallwork, who took me fishing.
Thank you to my dissertation committee: Florencia Garramuño, who inspired me to study Latin American literature, and whose work and seminars in Buenos Aires planted the early seeds of this project and introduced me to Clarice Lispector. Walter Mignolo, whose own work has done the work of opening up a space in the university so that a dissertation like this one could even be come to be within that realm. Who encouraged me from the beginning to think intuitively, to write affirmatively, from the heart and stomach, and to reflect critically on the place of my own enunciation and relation to the production of knowledge. Michael Hardt who has always and insistently asked me the difficult questions, prompting the difficult and necessary thoughts. Richard Rosa, who read so many early drafts and talked patiently through them with me. Who, in his careful questioning and reading has taught me to read through the cracks, into nuance. Wahneema Lubiano, who has helped me understand that real thinking is an openness to getting lost. Thank you to the other faculty at Duke and elsewhere who have read earlier versions or talked to me about some version of the project: Jane Juffer, Priscilla Wald, Laura Harris, Mark Hansen, and Nathaniel Mackey, whose class on Open Field poetics I’ve gotten to take as I finish writing this dissertation.

Thank you to Tiwonda Johnson Blount for looking out for me, for stopping to talk with me, and for making the otherwise daunting experience of navigating the university hoops much less so. To Karen Bell for long talks and scheduling help. To Tracy Carhart for the small chats and help getting letters of recommendation. And to
Natalie Hartman in the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies for her patience, her enthusiasm and for helping me navigate the system of grants.

Thank you to my friends. Selin Ever, for laughter and the wind, Gastón Mazieres, for offering me ground, even though I could not then call it that, for believing in duendes and for the weight of words, Jeannette Acevedo Rivera, for strength, the beauty of friendship, and the caterpillar, Adra Raine, cat, who has opened up a way into US-American literature for me, turning me on to so many texts, who insisted early on that this would need to be written in a different register, who has read drafts, and who has, in little bits, given me much wisdom about the thing of writing. Navid Naderi, for helping me see so much more clearly the bullshit in the world around me, for showing me what study really is, and for the big heart, Aditi Chawla Schretzman, for teaching me to walk a different set of steps and for so many years of friendship, Nick Schretzman, for the giant joviality, Damien Adia Marassa, for visions of the cosmos and for giving me his copy of *From a Broken Bottle*, Rebecca-Ellen Woods, for rocks and friendship like rocks, Michelle Helene Mackensie, for the energy beats. Ralph Rodríguez, who read so many drafts, and who has offered me the incredible thing of an unfailing friendship, patience and wisdom, and a love of learning and of life. Martín Virgili, for breaking the guitar, and for one of the early quakes in this thinking. Michael Loncaric, for being Mike and for writing early on “YO / this capim embarkment is a whole new game.” Morgan Slade, for
the triangle in the band, Beatriz Llenin-Figuroea, whose own dissertation on islands and
the Caribbean got me thinking about the connection between geography and language.

Ana Fernández, for long talks after long days, Victoria Fernández, for showing
me a moon of Violeta Parra’s frequencies, Emiliano Bulow, for keeping among the few
things you decided to keep in your library Rodolfo Kusch and José María Arguedas, and
for telling me so many moons ago in your kitchen in Villa la Angostura that you thought
the feet in the fountain were the key to many things. Cecilia Eraso, for sharing coffees
and conferences and the club and for giving me Leónidas Lamborghini for my birthday,
Karim Wissa, for stoops and the trumpet and for being a “piece of shit,” Tamar
Shirinian, for reading drafts, and for cooking conversations about work and writing,
Reginald Patterson, for the mosquito drum and for the secret life of plants, Roberta
Rodrigues, for poetry as a way of living, Fernando Ferrer, for gardens in Buenos Aires
and walks in New York, Aldinéa Cavalcanti de Freitas for gathering me under your
wing like a daughter and taking me all around your Rio de Janeiro, Luiz Antônio
Freitas, for telling me that one day I too would read philosophy as a thing of everyday
life. To the tree outside my back patio who has become a chief interlocutor. And to Elsie
Bell, for the quiet insistence, and for the way the pool light reflects.
Rehusad y vosotros, a posar las plantas
en la seguridad dupla de la Armonía.
Rehusad la simetría a buen seguro.
Intervenid en el conflicto
de puntas que se diputan
en la más torionda de las justas
el salto por el ojo de la aguja!

(Refuse, all of you, to set foot
in the duplicitous security of Harmony
Refuse all symmetry with the almost certainty.
Intervene in the conflict
of disputing points
in the ruttiest of jousts
the leap through the eye of the needle!)

-César Vallejo, Trilce

“The only way out is out,” she continued. “We’ve gotta make a run for it.”
She handed him the glass Adidas. “Here. Put these on. They’ll help.”

-Nathaniel Mackey, From a Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate
Introduction: Feeling America Otherwise: Ground as an Earth That Quakes

Ela era subterrânea e nunca tinha tido floração. Minto: ela era capim. (She was subterranean and had never flowered. I lie: she was grass.)

-Clarice Lispector, *A hora da estrela (The Hour of the Star)*, 1977

At the end of Clarice Lispector’s *A hora da estrela (The Hour of the Star)* there is an earthquake.

She lay helpless on the side of the street, perhaps taking a break from all these emotions, and saw among the stones lining the gutter the wisps of grass green as the most tender human hope. Today, she thought, today is the first day of my life: I was born.

(Truth is always an inexplicable inner contact. Truth is unrecognizable. So it doesn’t exist? No, for men it doesn’t exist.)

Returning to the grass. For that puny creature named Macabéa great nature showed itself only in the form of grass in the sewer -- were she given the thick sea or the high peaks of the mountains, her soul, even more virgin than her body, would go mad and her organism would explode, arms here, intestines there, her head rolling around and hollow at her fright -- as you dismantle a wax dummy.

She suddenly paid a little attention to herself. Was what was happening a deaf earthquake? The land of Alagoas had opened in the cracks. She stared, just for the sake of staring, at the grass. Grass in the great City of Rio de Janeiro. À toa. Maybe Macabéa once felt that she too was random in the unconquerable city? For her Destiny had chosen an alley in the dark and a gutter. Was she suffering? I think so. Like a hen with a half-severed neck running terrified dripping blood. Except the hen flees -- in panicked clucks. And Macabéa was struggling mute.¹

¹Clarice Lispector, *A hora da estrela* (Rio de Janeiro: Livraria J. Olympio Editoria, 1977), 38. All translations of this text here are ultimately my own, done in consultation with, but sometimes differing from, Giovanni Pontiero’s (1992) and Benjamin Moser’s (2011) English translations of the same text.
An earthquake, felt like giant caterpillar, burrowing under the ground, headed your way, is a reminder that the earth is not inert and static but alive. Shifting plates on the surface of the earth produce frictions, release energy. "Seismic waves shake the earth as they move through it, and when waves reach the earth’s surface they shake the ground and anything on it, like our houses, and us."  

This caterpillar, this "series of vibrations induced in the Earth’s crust by the abrupt rupture and rebound of rocks in which the elastic strain has been slowly accumulating" produces a friction into this fiction that is Lispector’s writing that is the inexplicable inner contact of its truth.

Earthquake, the dictionary tells me, takes on a figurative dimension as well, means "what is severely disruptive, upheaval." And what appears in this severely disruptive moment is o capim, grass, sprouting through the cracks in the concrete at the same time as Macabéa is dying. The narrator slips into Macabéa’s head. Alagoas has opened in the cracks. The capim has raised the narrator into question. Was what was happening a deaf earthquake?

The book is unsteady. Its author fights for a voice with the narrator. The narrator fights for a voice with the narrator. (Who speaks in parenthesis?). The narrator writes

---

3 Ibid.
from the great city of Rio de Janeiro and has been chasing his protagonist who comes from the northeastern part of the country for a long time. He can’t make sense of the northeastern girl’s life, cannot fit it into any mold he has of what it should mean. "I have a restless character on my hands who escapes me at every turn and expects me to retrieve her."\textsuperscript{5}

The earthquake marks the unsteadiness of the ground on which Lispector’s text rests, the ground that has made it impossible for the narrator to write Macabéa in the way that he wishes, but has made possible Clarice’s own book: \textit{The Hour of the Star}. It sends the ripples of aftershock through the beginning of the text, into the page of its twelve titles, stone hitting the puddle world that opens into Clarice’s cosmology\textsuperscript{6} that is a text that began with a world that began with a yes and a never, because before that there was pre-history and before that pre-pre-prehistory and before that apocalyptic monsters.

It is as though the hour of the star -- the weight of these monsters for what a life can be made to mean -- explodes into the pages of the book whenever the narrator tries to move the story forward, make the girl (explosão) into something she is not. "So much so, (explosão) that she made no protest."\textsuperscript{7} "Now (explosão) in rapid strokes I shall

\textsuperscript{5} Lispector, \textit{A hora da estrela}, 28. 
\textsuperscript{6} I wish to thank my friend Damien Adia Marassa for helping me see this clearly. Upon hearing the opening to the book he exclaimed: "woah, that’s a cosmology!" Damien Adia Marassa, Personal conversation with author, Durham, North Carolina, January 15, 2015. 
\textsuperscript{7} Lispector, \textit{A hora da estrela}, 31.
delineate the girl’s previous history up to the moment when she stood before the mirror in the lavatory.”

When the girl finally goes to a psychic, gets the future he has dreamed of, the blonde-blue eyed man in the Mercedes to marry her, she ends up on the road, on the ground, starting at the capim. She is born at the same time that she dies.

In a moment of impulse (explosão) that was both eager and awkward, Macabéa gave a resounding kiss on the cheek of the psychic.⁹

Frictions in the fictions of meaning, sticking, releasing energy along the fault lines of the text. Clarice Lispector laughs quietly and contentedly in between the lines: Alagoas opened in the cracks.

* * * *

My dissertation begins here, in the cracks of what Lispector’s text has opened up for me as a way into the study of American literature, feeling the trembling earth beneath my feet as I write. It is here, in this making of art and world from the feeling of an earth that quakes that I see Lispector’s poiesis intersecting with that of other American writers and artists who I take up in this dissertation – Ed Roberson, Nancy Holt, Lygia Clark, Robert Smithson, Rodolfo Kusch, Alejandra Pizarnik, Kamau Brathwaite.

Macabéa dies and Rodrigo lights a cigarette, reflecting: there is death.¹⁰ Clalice is

---

⁸ Ibid., 35.
⁹ Ibid., 94.
¹⁰ Ibid., 104.
wiser, woman. She asks: what is the weight of light?\textsuperscript{11} Clarice can feel the earth quake and her text tremors with its pull. She knows that the ground on which we stand is no stable thing, and what it means to write the world from this position changes everything she understands about the world, ourselves, and writing. That to write from this other place, this trembling place, is to make perception, language and world otherwise.

“For more than a star I want the thick black root of the star,” writes Lispector in another novel, “I want the fountain that always seems dirty, that is dirty. I want the material of things. Humanity is drenched in humanization, as though it were necessary.”\textsuperscript{12} “Do not, therefore, expect stars in what follows for nothing will scintillate. This is opaque material and by its very nature is despised by everyone. This story has no melody that could be rightly termed cantabile. Its rhythm is frequently discordant.”\textsuperscript{13} Macabéa is a black hole says Damien,\textsuperscript{14} a magnet that pulls a certain kind of knowable knowledge in, weighs it down with the invisibility of vision, the heaviness that is the totality of an untotalizable existence. Macabéa is Lispector’s kind of star, the weight of ground, the pull of the world, star that needs gravity to gather light, generate energy: explode.

Walter Benjamin articulates constellation as the caesura between the movement

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{12} Clarice Lispector, \textit{A Paixão Segundo G.H} (Nanterre: Fondo de Cultura Económica, [1964] 1991), 101. All translations of this text are mine.
\textsuperscript{13} Lispector, \textit{A hora da estrela}, 21-22.
\textsuperscript{14} Damien Adia Marassa, Personal conversation with author, Durham, NC. January 15, 2015.
of thoughts – that place and that possibility where the tension between dialectical
opposites is greatest. Ed Roberson, Rodolfo Kusch, Alejandra Pizarnik, Nancy Holt,
Lygia Clark, Kamau Brathwaite, Clarice Lispector are a constellation of artist-stars
philosopher-stars writer-stars Lispector-stars who explode the mystical dimension of
Benjamin's dialectic into an American cosmos. Working in and out of the post-WWII
Americas they feed off of existential thought currents, liberation movements, in the air,
but also pull otherwise on the action-oriented American air of this moment, offering the
feeling of heaviness, the pull of the weight of the world, what I am calling an aeisthesis
of ground, as the foundation for their particular poiesis, unfolding of life through art in
the world. Against an aesthetics of representation, predicated on a regime of pleasurable
feeling and form which neutralizes the outside world into an empty space filled with
objects, this constellation of artists teach me that through American literature we can
appreciate grounded aeisthesis as the feeling of the world pressing in, and art, as
Roberson puts it, as “just any means possible to sing.” From this trembling ground,
they struggle to make the world and our relation to it otherwise through art,
decolonizing the aesthetic imaginary of the Americas by offering grounded aeisthesis as
a way to rethink the ethics of our relation to the world.

McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 1999), 475, quoted in
Anthony Auerbach, "Imagine no Metaphors: the dialectical image of Walter Benjamin," Image [&]
Narrative 18 (2007), http://www.imageandnarrative.be/inarchive/thinking_pictures/auerbach.htm#fig05
33, no. 3 (Summer 2010), 680.
Inspired by thinkers of an otherwise American literature such as Fred Moten, Laura Harris, Richard Rosa, Nathaniel Mackey and Susan Howe, as well as thinkers of decolonial aethesisis such as Walter Mignolo, I follow these artists through the cracks in the hegemonic matrices of representation which lingers on in the study of American literature and I approach the capim from the side of the life that drops out of History’s frames, from the place where Hostos’s image does not meet its reflection in the mirror, or Ann Hutchinson’s voice that they tried to eliminate from the records of the Puritan project with fire, lingers on. From the ground as an earth that quakes, fissures spread through American literary history, seeds sprouting through the cracks to cultivate lines of kinship between texts on the other side of History that make a centrifugal America in against the centripetal consolidating projects of United States, Argentina, Brazil and Latin America.

For Clarice knows that there is nothing random about the Northeast being in Rio. It was always there, in the life that drops out of the capitalist colonizing project, the life that this project tries to bury, a seed that shoots up, breaking up the concrete, connecting

the earth looking for the sun to the world above. They tried to bury us, says that old Mexican proverb, but they did not know we were seeds. From the shaking ground below my feet, I know that when Alagoas opens in the cracks, Ogun of Alare, Ogun of Onire, Olodumare, Shango are here as well. Or are our minds so impoverished, so blocked, asks Wilson Harris, that we cannot see the storming seas of Haiti in the syllables of Shakespeare’s verse? 18

"Culture," writes Mackey, is "the collective poesis [sic] that that endows the habitation of a ground with meaning." 19 What this constellation of artist-stars open up, orient me towards, are other worlds, otherwise Americas, stretching South and North across the Rio Grande, which are just this world, made through the cracks in what Rodolfo Kusch will help us call City as Patio of Objects. I think of them often, glance up at their constellation in the sky to orient my own unfolding life because, writing this in the university in Durham North Carolina and in Buenos Aires Argentina I see the Patio all around me and I know that that I do not want the truth of existence or my writing to rest there but rather in a trembling ground their words and works help me feel the weight of.

But to understand all this I needed to see how my aesthetic imagination got so impoverished in the first place. Kant speaks: I see Rio, Macabéa, and the capim as

19 Mackey, "Wringing the Word," in Paracritical Hinge, 40.
Rodrigo perceives them, from the floored world of the City as Patio of Objects stuck in an aesthetics of representation that cracks open with Alagoas.

*Floor: Aesthetics in the City as Patio of Objects*

Oh [exclaims Rodrigo] what fear of beginning and still I do not even know the girl's name. What is more, this story drives me to despair because it is too straightforward. What I propose to narrate seems easy and within everyone's grasp. But its elaboration is extremely difficult. For I have to make clear what is blurry and that I can barely see. With hands of stiff muddy fingers I must feel the invisible in the mud.\(^{20}\)

Nerva Bordas de Roja Paz points to the fact that what has come to be understood as "aesthetics" does not just emerge, but is underwritten by an order of things that implies a relation to the world. “In modernity space and time come become of the subject: they are *a priori* forms for a transcendental subjectivity. The West conceives of an empty space which it fills with objects. Out of this space originates an aesthetics of pleasure and form.”\(^{21}\) What will not allow Rodrigo to see Macabéa, what renders the meaningfulness of her existence opaque to him, is what I am calling an aesthetics of representation, solidified in Western Europe with emergence of the philosophical field of aesthetics in conjunction with the beginnings of the industrial revolution and the consolidation of what Kusch, drawing on a concept from Nicolai Hartmann, calls the City as Patio of Objects.


Kusch, born Günther Rodolfo Kusch, son of German immigrants, writing from Argentina in the 1950s, articulates the concept of the Patio to describe middle class life in Buenos Aires. He has studied philosophy at the University of Buenos Aires, is witnessing both a consolidation of the culture industry around him -- what Laura Podalsky describes as a new hegemony of the consumer city\textsuperscript{22} -- but also has seen another Buenos Aires emerge as though through the cracks with the mobilization of the masses under Peronism.\textsuperscript{23} Out of a fundamental fear of the wrath of God, says Kusch -- out of a fear of those bare feet in the fountain in the middle of the Plaza de Mayo -- man elaborates another world, Rodrigo’s world, which is rooted in an existence that locates its affirmation in the floor of the City as Patio of Objects: that furniture, architecture, those social practices and customs, those ideas about politics, art, culture, that reinforce human existence as Parmenidian negation of the world that it must shore itself up against.

[Everything being created] corresponded only to one aspect of human life, that which was realized in the city and for this reason the city was transformed into a patio of objects. This is how Hartmann names the sectors of reality that are absolutely comprehensible…The patio supposes an empty space where we talk and where we live with our neighbors, so we put furniture, or in other words the things that we have created to be comfortable in the world. And the city creates this possibility, for this reason it is a patio of objects.\textsuperscript{24}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{23} Oscar Terán, "Peronismo y modernización" in Nuestros años sesentas. La formación de la nueva izquierda intelectual argentina, 1956-1966 (Buenos Aires: Puntosur Editores, 1991).
\item \textsuperscript{24} Rodolfo Kusch, América profunda, in Obras Completas Tomo II (Córdoba: Editorial Fundación Ross, [1962] 2007), 146. All translations of Kusch’s texts are my own.
\end{itemize}
That regime of perception that we come to know as modern aesthetics, universalized through what Mignolo and Aníbal Quijano call the coloniality of power, is born out of a particular aesthesis that rests firmly on the floor of Kusch’s Patio.25

Aesthetics is born in the mid to late eighteenth century Western Europe, and, as Terry Eagleton argues, is set out to deal with the preoccupations of a newly emerging bourgeois subject in the face of industrialization, and the specter of absolute rule that it is emerging from.26 It is a regime of perception which needs to shore up this newly emerging class’s political hegemony both by resolving the bourgeois subject’s freedom of will with what is seen as a threatening “nature” in an increasingly secular universe, and also by promoting a regime of taste, affection and sensation which can compensate for absence of absolute rule and an economic life in which individuals are structurally isolated and antagonistic. It is no coincidence that it both acknowledges what might threaten a reasoned will by drawing attention to what it has not yet accounted for -- "the whole region of human perception and sensation, in contrast to the more rarefied domain of conceptual thought"27 -- and also that it promotes a regime of feeling in which this unaccounted for world of nature is kept at bay.

If we -- as many do -- take Kant as a paradigm for this aesthetics and we close

27 Ibid., 13.
our eyes and read Kant's world into his *Critique of Judgment* (1790) we see not the universal truths about the beautiful and the sublime but the particular aesthesis of a man in the Patio of Objects. Germany in the period that Kant -- and his national colleague Alexander Baumgarten, founder of the field with his *Aesthetica* (1750) -- are writing, "was a parcellized territory of feudal, absolutist states, marked by a particularism and idiosyncrasy consequent on its lack of culture."28 "Such were the unpropitious conditions of the German bourgeois in this parochial, benighted social order. Its professional and intellectual strata, however, were steadily growing, to produce for the first time in the later eighteenth century a professional literary cast; and this ground showed all the signs of exerting a cultural and spiritual leadership beyond the reach of its self-serving aristocracy."29 It would be anachronism to say that Kant is fully a "middle class subject" but his thought already manifests some of the preoccupations with that order.

That famous speculative philosopher is five feet tall and of fragile health. He manages his routine like the winding of a clock – one pipe 5AM; one hour walk in the afternoon -- and his rationalistic approach to knowledge is felt as such a threat to government of Prussia in 1792 that he is barred from teaching or writing on religious

28 Ibid., 14.
29 Ibid., 14 - 15.
subjects by the King, Frederick William II. If we read the Critique of Judgment like going on a walk with Kant through Königsberg, seeing the world as he sees it, what we see are a set of objects of leisure or landscapes that he is able to step back from and contemplate: "a poem that is presented for judging" on the same plane as "clothing" a "concert" "a building, a view" or "the green of a lawn" "wind instruments" and "sparkling wine from the Canaries."

It is perhaps no surprise then that what emerges is an aesthetics in which the beautiful has a certain kind of form. Which is to say that the beautiful conforms to man, reminding him that he is "at home in the world." And that the sublime is the limits to that -- that mountain, which perhaps Kant sees when he leaves the city for awhile -- which humbles his reason into submission, his feeling alive in the limits of his own death.

Kant writes:

The beautiful in nature concerns the form of the object, which consists in limitation; the sublime, by contrast, is to be found in a formless object insofar as

32 Ibid., 98.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid., 164.
35 Ibid., 108.
36 Ibid., 97.
37 Ibid., 97.
limitlessness is represented in it, or at its instance, and yet it is also thought as a totality.\textsuperscript{38}

Eagleton translates:

Some of the pleasure of the aesthetic, then, arises, from a quick sense of the world’s delightful conformity to our capacities: instead of pressing ahead to subsume to some concept of the sensuous manifold we confront, we just reap enjoyment from the general formal possibility of doing so. The imagination creates a purposive synthesis, but without feeling the need for a theoretical detour. If the aesthetic yields us no knowledge, then, it proffers us something arguably deeper, that we are at home in the world because the world is somehow mysteriously designed to suit our capacities.\textsuperscript{39}

At the unspoken center, what underwrites a feeling of the world as beautiful and sublime is what Kusch will help us call the ser, and Foucault names the transcendental-empirical subject of Kant’s Critique of Reason, that divided being of the Patio which recognizes his own limits and finitude, yet whose recognition of those limits paradoxically prompts him to try to overcome this condition, and locate existence in an elsewhere that negates it. If this being’s project is to live, living is understood in terms of shoring up life against death, accumulating wealth against what is viewed as the poverty of a hostile world that he casts outside of himself and calls ”nature.”\textsuperscript{40}

The merchant wanted to ser-someone to the feudal aristocracy. He consolidated his urban enterprise, cut the umbilical cord that tied him to the previous idea, initiating his experience as a definitive ser: parmenidian, spherical, round, complete. Later Descartes and Kant would come to show that this ser isn’t any longer God, as was thought in the Middle Ages, but instead is the thinking

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 98. Emphasis in original.  
\textsuperscript{39} Ideology of the Aesthetic, 85.  
\textsuperscript{40} Michel Foucault, The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences (New York: Random House, [1966] 1994)
merchant, he who thinks therefore exists, because all that effectively exists is that bundle of textiles that navigates in the Mediterranean and that the merchant tied, thread by thread, with his crew/employees/workers, in the secret passion of tying everything, as though everything were a tremendous bundle of textiles: the world, nature, and man, far from the wrath of god.41

The unstated effect of Kant's aesthetics of pleasure and form and his account of the beautiful and the sublime -- or should I say its unstated foundation, which it also naturalizes as effect -- is the neutralization of space of the outside world through the production of “nature” as either beautiful landscape or sublime exception to a generally harmonious relation to the world. Underlying Kant's aesthetics of form is what Foucault, in The Order of Things, identifies as a representative order, or an epistemic order that emergences in the seventeenth century in Western Europe in which knowledge, truth, and world are understood re-presentationally, in relation to what can be known and seen about this world sufficiently to form an image or a concept, the overall schema into which the thing fits illuminating what it can come to mean.42 It is the order of things that Foucault calls "rationalism" and that Max Weber calls the “disenchantment of the world”43 because it is characterized by “the disappearance of the old superstitious or magical beliefs and the entry of nature, at long last, into the scientific order.”44 It is a dangerous order, says Timothy Morton, reading Romantic literature, because even as it

41 Kusch, América profunda, 137.
42 Foucault, The Order of Things.
44 Foucault, The Order of Things, 130.
thinks it is celebrating nature, it is trapping it through the representative structure of language and a pen that writes Nature from inside the Patio: eco-mimesis.45

The historical roots of this regime of perception -- what allows Kant to turn the world into an object or landscape or lawn to be contemplated in the first place, what underwrites the colonization of the Americas which will generate the industrial revolution in the first place -- are in the Renaissance, that empty space of Galileo and the scientific revolution, and that perspective in art which lowered the horizon from the heavens to a human-centered world, relying on a principle of convergence built around a vanishing point whose unspoken center was a pair of eyes so comfortably resting on the floor of the Patio that they seemed to be without feet. In this ability to neutralize the world into landscape Kant’s particular aeisthesis is built on an understanding of the world also shared by those imperial eyes Mary Louise Pratt attributes to the early naturalists of the new world who were his rough contemporaries, and by what Raymond Williams refers to as the urban logic which produces the modern pastoral as idealized escape from a rapidly industrializing England. 46 It is such a regime of perception which will ultimately make it possible for Rodrigo to see the capim in the urban space of Rio de Janeiro as a random interruption, as though, in the first place, Alagoas did not belong there.

It is here, in the heart of this representational order of things, with feet resting on the firm floor of the City as Patio of Objects, walking with Kant through the streets of Königsberg, that the aesthetic imagination is impoverished, blocked, because it is here that basis of our perception of the world becomes homogenous and uniform. It is as though we are in a cage that is a perceptive framework: we see building landscape, building, landscape: mountain, all centered around ourselves as the center. This is an understanding of the world that rests firmly in visible visions of the Patio of Objects: what is left out of such an understanding of the world is any feeling of beauty of that which does not have a representational form, or a mode of perceiving the world which has no place for a category of the sublime, because the world is not a thing that can be delimited in the first place. Illuminated here is the world of the polis and obscured is the world of the cosmos, those visions of the invisible -- "o invisivel na própria lama" ("the invisible in the mud") -- that is the simplicity of Macabéa’s life Rodrigo cannot give contours to. That world of shadows and sparkles which is simply this world, perceived otherwise.

Art here in the Patio of Objects is a thing of the museums, concert halls, and poetry contests, where the museum is that world of smooth floors and white walls that emphasizes certain aspects of the work -- year, materials used, technique, its formal

47 A poetic post by Damien Adia Marassa on his Facebook wall allowed me to see these two words, "cosmos" and "polis," which we often collapse into the same urban phenomenon - cosmopolitanism - as separate. Accessed September 2013.
relation to other art works -- yet eliminates what is vital about it by divorcing its relation to the world and a life-lived-in-the-it, a separation reinforced in a distinction made between 'folk' art and 'real' art. As we see with something like the realist novel -- which, as Fredric Jameson helps us understand it, can only come into being in the nineteenth century, when a genuinely historical understanding of the world is available due to the global spread of industrial capitalism -- the totalities in which an art of the Patio traffics are entirely contained within what Lispector will help us call the overly humanized world of the Patio, and leave little room for a relation to the untotalizable totalities of a chaotic cosmos.48

Kusch, drawing on Andean thought, contrasts a notion of magical art which puts man in relation to the world as space-thing – the world in its mysterious indeterminacy, "esa vida en su aspecto tenebroso," (“that life in its unknowable darkness,”) pushing in on all sides, threatening to annihilate man -- to an art of the Patio of Objects, which placed itself and man in the air of empty space of Galileo and the Renaissance.49 This will be the difference between an art which conjures an untotalizable world into being and an art which expresses or captures existence in the Patio, to make a judgment of. To help make this point clearer, Kusch contrasts Atlante de Tula or the Fraile de Tiahuanaco – which stand with four magic walls exposed to the elements and what Miguel Angel’s

Moses (1509) which seals itself off as though in a tomb. In Atlante de Tula we see a
defensive, engaged art, an art which conjures the world in all its mystery and puts the
human in relation to the inhuman. And in Moses, we see an art that neutralizes the
world around it by setting itself off from the world on a walled-in platform, in
meaningful relation only to the order out of which it emerges. It is the difference
between the art of the human-in-the-world and the art of the human-only-in-function-of-
itsel. Within the representative order that characterizes the production of life in the
Patio of Objects, there is no room for art to become heavy with the affirmations of the
totality of an untotalizable existence that constitutes the weight of the world. Art’s
entrance into the City as Patio of Objects inserts it into a circuit of meaning which serves
to reinforce man’s separation from the world.

*   *   *

As Mignolo and others argue, aesthetics is part of what Aníbal Quijano calls the
colonial matrix of power, imperial structure of control that is put in place in the
sixteenth century with the emergence of the Atlantic commercial circuit and colonization
of the New World.\(^{50}\) As historian Serge Gruzinski helps us see, this peculiar aeithesis of
representation and form worked to try to colonize the aesthetic imaginary of the
Americas, attempting to transform existing perceptions of the surrounding world into
the neutralized and dominable landscapes through the imposition of a representative

\(^{50}\) Mignolo and Rolando Vázquez, "Decolonial AestheSis: Colonial Wounds/Decolonial Healings," *Social Text / Periscope* (2013).
order of book language sign and world conductive also to the Christian belief system.

Comparing the space of the western European book to the Mexica Codices, Gruzinski notes that

Once again the influence of the western European book was not unfelt, providing the example of a format whose borrowing imposed on the painters an insidious reorganization of pictorial space: reduction of size of the lienzos led to more modest proportions, or redistribution of pages in the case of the old screenfolds. So it was that in the tonalamatl painted in the Codex Ríos and the Codex Borbonicus – served as framework, as skeletal structure of a group of representations, collapsed. One as the impression of passing from a space saturated with precisely distributed forms – the scattered – attribute space – to an empty sheet of figures floating without support: what Robertson designated a ‘landscape without space,’ figures without a ground that seem to call up a third dimension, a horizon line, a kind of background...Another tonalamatl, that of Sahagún in the Florentine Codex, illustrates the outcome of this transformation: a landscape was sketched, the third dimension was established, but already the pictographic image was changing into the illustration of a text written in Latin characters. The rabbit, designating a day of the calendar, was from now on painted in this tonalamatl under the traits familiar to us of a small animal frolicking in a landscape.51

This representative aesthetic order becomes hegemonic as it is solidified under what Ángel Rama calls the "Lettered City" -- the “cities, the societies that were to inhabit them, and the ‘lettered’ interpreters of them” -- that was at the center of the imposition of the Old World project in America.52

Within each visible city stood another, figurative one, that controlled and directed it, and this less tangible lettered city was not less girded by defensive

walls nor less aggressively bent on a certain kind of redemption. The lettered city acted upon the order of signs, and the high priority of its function lent it a sacred aspect, freeing it from subordination to ordinary circumstances and conferring, implicitly, the priestly quality mentioned earlier. The order of signs appear as the realm of Spirit, and thanks to them human spirits could speak to one another. This was the cultural dimension of the colonial power structure, whether or not people of the time conceived it as such.\(^{53}\)

It is this representative order which, as Rama argues, emerged as dominant in Western Europe at the same time as colonial capitalism began to take hold more firmly in the Americas with independence and the project of consolidation of newly emerging Nation-states. The Lettered City served the “the cultural dimension of the colonial power structure” in the New World, working through literature, laws and maps and a representative order of the sign to impose an ideal City (Europe) upon a ‘material city,’ a natural world, and "the immense majority of the population,” which it situates as lacking the letter, lurking somewhere outside of its symbolic horizons.\(^{54}\)

* * *

Yet, creeping into this regime of the American Letter, unsettling its hegemony and the pretentions of a perception which pretends to cancel body and world, is a grass that, cut, always grows back.

The capim does not only grow in Lispector’s *Hour of the Star*. It grows into the Aurélio Dictionary of the Brazilian Academy of Letters where its over fifty entries take up almost an entire enormous page: capim-açu; capim-agreste (wild grass); capim-

\(^{53}\) Ibid., 17.
\(^{54}\) Ibid., 32.
amarelo (yellow grass); capim amargoso (bitter grass); capim-amonjeaba; capim-azul (blue grass); capim-balça; capim-bambu (bamboo grass); capim-barba-de-bode (beard-of-a-goat grass); capimbeba; capim-bobó; capim-branco; capim-branquense; capim-burrão; capim-canudinho (spiky grass); capim-cantingueiro; capim-cheiroso (fragrant grass); capim-cidreira; capim-colonião; capim-da-cidade (grass of the city); capim-da-colônia (grass of the colony); capim-de-angola (capim of Angola); capim-seda (silk grass)....capinar (to cut the grass)...capinador (grass cutter). 55

It grows into the empirical project of Euclides da Cunha’s 1902 Os Sertões, which set out to document the conquering of Canudos in the project of the consolidation of the newly independent Brazilian State. 56

It appears in legal documents concerning property maintenance in the US zone around the Panama Canal (it should be “maintained at six inches high”). 57

It is there in the degenerating lots of Buenos Aires in Sergio Chejfec’s contemporary novel El aire. 58

In Walt Whitman’s Leaves of Grass. 59

Growing up in the suburbs of Philadelphia, my father always complained about having to cut the grass, and I read in Kenneth Jackson’s Crabgrass Frontier that idea of the

55 O Novo Dicionário Aurélio da Língua Portuguesa (Curitiba, Editoria Positiva, 2004), 393 - 394.
57 Julie Green, “The Canal Builders: Making America’s Empire at the Panama Canal” (paper presented at Duke University Working Group in Environment in Latin America Series, Durham, North Carolina, April 15, 2014)
manicured lawn that he worked so intently to maintain emerged at the beginning of nineteenth century, part of a Garden Cities movement influenced by Romanticism and Naturalism.\textsuperscript{60}

And it grows as through the cracks of urban Argentina in Ezequiel Martínez Estrada’s 1933 \textit{Radiografía de la pampa (X-ray of the Pampa)},

El campo entra por las calles y por los terrenos con los yuyos. Los yuyos son los heraldos con que el campo enuncia su lenta, infatigable invasión. Hay que estar cortándolos siempre y siempre crecen, hasta que por cualquier evento pueden invadir las habitaciones, que suelen ser de piso de tierra, o echar su ramita entre los ladrillos. El campo llega hasta el patio y el patio entra hasta la cama.\textsuperscript{61}

(Weeds invade streets and fields. The weeds are harbingers of the countryside’s slow, tireless invasion. They are constantly being cut, yet they always sprout again from the dirt floor or from among the bricks. The countryside overflows into the courtyard, and the courtyard spills into the bedroom.)\textsuperscript{62}

The capim grows into the Patio, up to the bed, and up into the brain:

Está vencido, destrozado; la pampa sube hasta él por su cabello, entra hasta sus entrañas, domina su voz, aplasta su mirada. Es pampa, cubierto de pampa, comprando animales, sembrando, vendiendo, firmando contratos, haciéndose temer.\textsuperscript{63}

(He is defeated, shattered; the pampa rises to his scalp, penetrates his insides, rules his voice, flattens his look. He is the pampa, covered with the pampa when buying animals, sowing, selling, signing contracts, or being feared.)\textsuperscript{64}

\textsuperscript{60} Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 57 - 61.
\textsuperscript{63} Radiografia de la pampa, 106.
\textsuperscript{64} X-Ray of the Pampa, 169.
The capim is there when Alexis de Tocqueville observed so early on about US-American literature that “[t]aken as a whole, literature in democratic ages can never present, as it does in the periods of aristocracy, an aspect of order, regularity, science, and art; its form, on the contrary, will ordinarily be slighted, sometimes despised. Style will frequently be fantastic, incorrect, overburdened, and loose, almost always vehement and bold.”65 And in what so many generations of American writers worked anxiously to overcome: “Anxiety, compulsion, self-consciousness, desperation, frustration, tension, obsession, fratricidal intensity: these terms probe the dark side of the American will toward poetic independence, a will that Emerson’s address, 'The American Scholar' (1837) first voices so aggressively in public.”66

It is there when Georgia O’Keeffe goes to study at the Art Institute of Chicago in the 1920s and the men there tell her to imitate European forms.67 The capim is there in Amiri Baraka’s insistence, tears, that there was something in him so "out" that he would never be able to -- nor did he desire to -- write like the poets who were being featured in the New Yorker magazine.68 In Maya Deren’s inability to fit her films into the simple

question -- what are your films about -- on the park permit. In Kamau Brathwaite’s cursing of his colonial education, the one that taught him to write a poetry based on what he was not: giving him Shakespeare’s Desdemona instead of his own sisters or mother, iambic pentameter instead of that calypso rhythm of sea shell skipping across the sea. It is there in the publication history of Emily Dickinson’s poetry, first in those who refused to publish it, and then in those who eliminated her punctuation marks when they passed it into the clean sheets of bound volumes, edited by Harvard University.

By 1787 there was not only a positive need for strong central government to protect the large economic interests, but also immediate fear of rebellion by discontented farmers. The chief event causing this fear was an uprising in the summer of 1786 in Western Massachusetts, known as Shay’s Rebellion.

Shortly after this, a smaller mutiny took place in the New Jersey line, involving two hundred men who defied their officers and started out for the state capital at Trenton. Now Washington was ready. Six hundred men, who themselves had been well fed and clothed, marched on the mutineers and surrounded and disarmed them. Three ringleaders were put on trial immediately, in the field. One was pardoned, and two were shot by firing squads made up of their friends, who wept as they pulled the triggers. It was “an example,” Washington said.

To pull it all together in the illusion of a Republic, all the while coming apart at the seams.

---

70 Kamau Brathwaite, *ConVERSations with Nathaniel Mackey*, ed. Chris Funkhouser (Staten Island: We Press, 1999).
71 Susan Howe, *The Birth-mark: unsettling the wilderness in American literary history*.
73 Ibid., 81.
Cultural histories which are varied and seem at times as numerous as the proliferation of the grass help track the appearance of the grass as part of the production of Nature in the imaginary of the New World. According to these histories we can read the grass working as a symptom of an anxiety of a failure to be freed from nature, an inability to reach what Domingo F. Sarmiento idealized as the triumph of Civilización over Barbarie. Or, as in various regionalist movements or cultural nationalisms in Americas art and literature, grass or elements of the natural environs are shown to be celebrated as what makes American life unique from its former European colonizers.

While these kinds of cultural histories -- and some of the literature and art which they discuss -- go a long way into showing how Nature is produced at the service or failure of regimes of colonial capital, they tend to end up reinforcing an idea of civilization or barbarism, celebrating one side or the other, or perhaps illustrating both sides, diagnosing the problem as a greater symptom of modernizing frames, but leaving in basic tact the hegemonic representative frame and the basic antagonism that underwrites existence on the Patio.

---


Literary histories in a representative framework tend to reproduce the same logics. There are for example the many attempts to explain the capim as derivation, reinforcing it as derivation from a capitalist colonizing norm. Doris Sommer argues that it is Maria’s ethnic Jewishness that prohibits the consummation, the fictional founding of the Columbian Nation-State. It is Romanticism, says Jean Franco now speaking about Latin American literature more generally, but a very peculiar breed of it, one which must account for the fact that Nature in Latin America is not the idyllic pastoral spaces of an industrialized Europe but untamed and horrific. It is existentialism, says but ultimately not a Sartrean one says Benedito Nunes about Lispector’s nausea. It’s modernity but a peripheral one says Beatriz Sarlo. ”As idéias fora do lugar” (misplaced ideas) says Roberto Schwarz. Yet don’t these attempts to explain – even celebrate – these differences always ultimately inscribe Latin American literature back to lettered regime of the metropole, framing them as exceptions, lags, oddities, against a lettered norm?

When seen from the Lettered City there is so much which can only be remarked

76 Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1993).
77 Historia de la literatura hispanoamericana: a partir de la independencia (Barcelona: Ariel, 1997).
80 Ao vencedor as batatas: forma literária e processo social nos inícios do romance brasileiro (São Paulo: Livraria Duas Cidades, 1992), 11 - 31; See also Roberto Schwarz, Misplaced Ideas: Essays on Brazilian Culture (New York: Verso, 1992).
as strange, unruly – frankly, weird -- about American literature. It never seems to fit these terms, the letter never quite able to prop itself up, enforce itself against the realities in which it finds itself writing, the idealized European forms it tries to impose upon reality almost inevitably deformed. Take José Eustasio Rivera’s La vorágine (The Vortex) (1924) in which the regime of the letter disappears with the protagonist into the sounds of the jungle. Or Jorge Isaac’s María in which the protagonist, in London studying, can’t make it back home in time to the Cauca Valley to consummate his relationship to María, detained in a long detour which the book’s narrative also takes through the jungle.

* * *

Couldn’t these exceptions, these lapses into "noise" punctuated by the capim, actually be a signal that something else is also going on here, pulling on these texts, that there is a life -- an existence -- a world -- here that is dropping out of these matrices or organization, that we might explode out into if we approached these texts from a different perspective, pulling them not centripetally into the void of History, but instead out into the centrifugal forces of life. Isn’t this, asks Kusch, picking up on the notion of "organic consciousness" that Martínez Estrada theorizes -- that perceptive framework penetrated by the pampa, unable to dominate it – not the very possibility of America?

---

83 Radiografía de la pampa, 122; Rodolfo Kusch, América profunda, 18: "This same opposition instead of seeming tragic, is actually a way out, for it makes possible a dramatic interaction, a kind of dialectic that we will come to call fagocitación. It is about the possibility of the absorption of the
What Kusch is after here is to unsettle the hegemonic aesthetic imaginary of the Patio of Objects, to read into America not civilization or barbarie but the reverence that Sarmiento holds for Facundo even as he condemns him as barbarous. To do so will be to approach the capim and American literature from a different place than the Patio of Objects, one which I am calling an aeisthesis of ground. For Kusch, writing in his historical moment of the 1950s, thinking of those feet in the fountain of the Plaza de Mayo, the possibility that he saw was for the making the world otherwise, from a different place of relation to it, outside of the negating foundation of the Patio. For me it is the same. I would only add that the urgency is just as great now, in the midst of what those forecasters at the World Social Forum are calling our “civilizational crisis” as it was then and has always been.84

What makes the possibility so difficult to realize for a life whose affirmation rests on the floor of the Patio is that unsettling the aesthetic imaginary is to unsettle your relation to the world. It is to unfold yourself otherwise because it is to feel the weight of existence in a trembling earth, death no longer limit but constitutive of making life. Rodrigo looks into the mirror with Macabéa and sees himself and is afraid. "I see the girl from the North-east looking in the mirror and -- the ruffle of a drum -- in the mirror polished things of the West by the things of America, as a way of balancing and reintegrating the human in these lands.”

there appears my own face, weary and unshaven.”

He is exasperated by her. She sticks to him, like a molasses, and won’t get off his shoulders. Rodrigo’s great anxiety is one that haunts an American literature and life which locates existence in the Patio, yet never the less feels the pueblo pushing in – feels threatened by those feet in the fountain – because there is something of its own life wrapped up in those feet. A life in the Patio is a life of endlessly cutting the grass. But what would happen if we just let the grass grow?

But the deeper went the knife, the deeper sank the Hand, until at length its tiny grasp appeared to have caught hold of Georgiana’s heart; whence, however, her husband was inexorably resolved to cut or wrench it away.” Every lie leads deep into itself. The intuitive retrospection of Hawthorne’s unpremeditated art is just beyond the genealogy of civil reach. Ann’s name holds on.

Ground: Feeling an Earth That Quakes

“My world today is raw” says G.H., another one of Lispector’s protagonists, her perception falling to the base of the tall apartment building she lives in when she sees a cockroach inside. Ancient beast. “It is a world of great vital difficulty.”

---

85 Lispector, A hora da estrela, 28.
86 Kusch, Antotaciones para una estética de lo americano; “Prefacio,” Tango, in Obras Completas Tomo IV (Córdoba: Editorial Fundación Ross, [1957] 2007), 481: “The problem of our art is prior to aesthetics, because it is a problem of attitude and of interior truth.” See also Toni Morrison, Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination (New York: Vintage, 1993), in which she describes a national literature which writes itself white against an “Africanist presence.” What I think Kusch and Morrison are both getting at are consequences of an American literature (and life) -- a literature of the capitalist colonizing project -- whose very condition of possibility (and “failure”) is the floor of the Patio of Objects and the negation of the world.
87 Howe, Birth-mark, 10.
88 Lispector, A Paixão Segundo G.H. [The Passion According to G.H.], 101.
89 Ibid.
For, more than a star, I today want the thick black root of stars, I want the fountain that always seems dirty, that is dirty. That is always incomprehensible...I want the material of things. Humanity is drenched in humanization, as though it were necessary; and this false humanization impedes man and impedes his humanity. There exists a thing that is more ample, more silent, more deep, less good, less bad, less pretty. Although this thing also runs the risk that, in our clumsy hands, it becomes transformed into ‘purity,’ our hands thick and full of words.  

The constellation of artist-stars that I take up in this dissertation feel the world differently than Kant and it is from that feeling that they make their lives and art. Space is no longer empty and neutral but felt as full, pressing in. Lygia Clark writes: “When one places an object within a space which is too great in relation to it, the space does not stop being empty and dead, but when this object finds its space, then the space that surrounds it is full...At the moment when, breaking the rectangle and virtually inverting the surface, which stops been a thickness of the space and becomes the thread of this space, this expression is now inside this real space in which all the living and cosmological irradiated forces act.” Nancy Holt: “However in the spring of 1963 something affected me more than my interaction with any of the artists around me...My body relaxed and my breathing came from a center which felt endlessly spacious. With every breath I was aware of sharing air, like an atmospheric bellows, with all the other beings on the planet...By the way, ‘spiritual quest’ does not describe my experience; I was not on a search for an ideal or transcendent vision. What I experience was a

90 Ibid.
91 Lygia Clark, "O Vazio-Pleno" ["The Empty-Full"], Lygia Clark (Barcelona: Fundació Antoni Tàpies [1960] 1998), 45
profound and lasting shift in perception that occurred suddenly without any conscious preparation."

What is at stake in these feelings of space, these understandings of space, as is at stake in all understandings of space, debates of whether it is a void or an extension, is not just an abstract question of what space is, but a radical remaking of relation to the world.

Rodrigo SM decides to write Macabéa, to confront the weight on his shoulder, pressing him down, but she continues to escape him because he is still approaching her from the Patio, as though she were a thing to be approached. Clarice, Ed Roberson and the other artists of the dissertation realize that being on the side of the capim is to approach the making of the world from a place of collective life lived-in it.

Kusch, attempting to find a way to articulate the relation between geography and culture, philosophy and life, offers ground, or suelo, as the feeling of the weight of the world which pulls us back into the world, a way for thought (pensar) to be heavy (pesar) with the affirmations of what we will come to call the totality of an untotalizable existence that is a life lived-in the world. “The idea of foundation/ground in philosophy is in reality only a derivation of the concept of suelo, in the sense of ‘not falling more,’ of standing on the ground, or of estar, as in stare or to be standing (Stehen in German). And this to be standing is a being open to the circumstances with the end of being able to in-

stall existence. Ground as a feeling of the earth that quakes is what Kusch (distinguishing between two modes of the verb “to be” in Spanish, ser and estar) calls the “circumstancia del estar mismo, the insistence that we-are / estar in the world -- something more than un ”ser que está” as in Heidegger’s Da-sein, but rather what Kusch elaborates as un estar-siendo. On the ground we are not in any kind of subject – object relation to the world. We are not in harmony with it, nor are we in an antagonistic relation to it. The world is a hostile space-thing that we-are-in. Out of that in-stallation comes the unfolding of collective life. “I, who live to the side, am to the left of who enters. And the world trembles inside me,” writes Clarice Lispector. It is this heaviness that ground offers thought and art, giving it what Kusch calls a “gravidad” or “weight” of the world. Rather than serving as a support for universal philosophical thought, ground is characterized by Kusch as the place of its deformation from the universal, for it is in what looks like a deformation that is actually where thought is heavy with life and is what constitutes its pluriversal truth.

In making their art and lives from the ground, the artists help us understand deformation as formative, as the place where life feels the weight of the world and constellates through culture otherwise modes of being and making the world. Art is no

94 Kusch, "Qué pasa con el estar?" in Ibid., 353 - 372.
95 Clarice Lispector, Água viva [Living water], (Rio de Janeiro: Rocco, [1973] 1998), 34. All translations of this text here are ultimately my own, done in consultation with, but differing from, Stefan Tobler’s (2012) and Elizabeth Lowe’s (1989) English translations of the same text.
longer object in Patio but grounded poiesis, making of life in the world, crucial to politics, which is the unfolding of collective life-in-the-world, always in relation to the world.

It is from the ground that what we knew on the Patio about art, aesthetics, shifts. On the ground the framework of perception is otherwise -- you feel taste see smell and make the world otherwise -- because the relation to the world is otherwise. It is not just that one sense – vision – becomes replaced with another – touch – or that the sensible is partitioned differently, as Rancière would have it.\footnote{Jacques Rancière, \textit{The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible}, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Bloomsbury, 2006).} It is that the entire perceptive framework is otherwise because our relation to the world is otherwise and the aesthetic imagination is no longer impinged by the Patio. Worlds open, refracted through puddles that form after rain. An aeisthesis of ground is that quaking feeling there in that photo that looks off from the perspective of on: a foot, a piece of a tree, mass of branches, the back turned, contours filtering asymmetrical patterns of light and shadow. It is the diversion of the gaze from the sublimity of the sunset to perhaps the sparkle of light on water.

Ground is no static thing, reified entity. It is a feeling of the earth that quakes. Not all artists write from the ground. And in the ones that seem to they will do not have the same response or way of engaging the weight of the world. They each live it differently. And these responses will also look different at different historical moments,
because the inputs, the strains that run through all of them are different, the weights that are felt and experienced, the way that the processes of History cut across and sediment within the body, producing scars. Yet -- against the machine that is the colonial matrix of power which works to colonize the aesthetic imagination on both sides of the Rio Grande leaving the ghosts and shit of History to be dealt with and sorted through -- I am interested in these artists as inhabiting a shared difference "against the violent reinforcement of the 'given.'" A shared aesthesis that – while it never looks the same or means the same – you can start to see it, recognize in artists across the Americas, in that glimmer that glint, that heavy feeling of the world pulling in, and an otherwise making of America that accompanies it.

* * *

The artists and writers who will come into the pages that follow are, like Kusch -- who is also an artist, writing plays, taking photographs -- are living and making art at a time in the Americas when the Patio is consolidating the art and culture world, centripetal forces pulling tight. America is emerging in History in both parts of the hemisphere. The US, global hegemon post-WWII, has become a center of the art world. Argentina and Brazil, emerging out of national contexts that have just seen massive


98 Laura Harris, "What Happened to the Motley Crew?,” 52
industrialization projects under Vargas and Perón, are part of a Latin America of the literary "Boom," a Latin America of the great hopes of the Cuban Revolution, of a Brazil of "Fifty Years [of development] in Five," of the new modernist capital Brasilia. This is an America that is seeing a whole host of new institutions such as museums, cultural supplements, and new institutes financed by commercial capital such as the DiTella Institute in Buenos Aires.

It is also an America of State-sponsored repression, heightening in the later years in which these artists are working: communist trials, assassinations of political leaders like Malcolm X in the United States and, in Brazil and Argentina, brutal dictatorships. These artists pass through many of the institutions of a consolidating art world of the Patio of Objects. Roberson studies at the University of Pittsburgh; Clarice graduates law school in Rio, marries a diplomat, writes for Senhor magazine, which is part of the burgeoning mass culture industry. Kusch studies philosophy at the University of Buenos Aires, writes with the guys of Contorno, the new magazine of the new left. Lygia Clark grows up in Belo Horizonte in a middle class family, marries an engineer, studies with landscape architect Roberto Burle Marx who helped plan Brasilia. They can each one of them be made to fit into whatever matrix of meaning one wants to read them in relation to this hegemonic History: modern, postmodern, boom, subaltern....

But they choose a strange option for any of these perspectives: the weight of the world. Sartre’s Roquentin goes to the garden and realizes that he is not the root:
negation, history, consciousness, *ser.*\(^99\) Clarice Lispector’s Ana goes to the Jardim Botanico (Botanical Gardens) and falls in love with the world: ground.\(^{100}\) At a time when, as Oscar Terán tells it, Heidegger could have been forgiven for being a Nazi but not for his take on history, when the new left is obsessed with Sartre, and historical agency, Kusch writes of Heidegger, and becomes interested in indigenous thought.\(^{101}\) Alejandra Pizarnik’s poetic voice is populated with howling winds and ancient forests. That supposedly cool postmodern conceptual artist that is Robert Smithson made the Spiral Jetty. And Ed Roberson, at the height of the Black Arts Movement, is writing nature poems.\(^{102}\) In their own lives they seem to spin out centrifugally from the apparatus of the State. Kusch, expelled from the university under dictatorship, living in Maimará, selling sandwiches at the bus station to earn a living, writes an outline for an anthropological philosophy. Lygia Clark ends up leaving the art world entirely to run psychotherapy with her art objects. This will situate them not outside of History, (that would still be the perspective of Patio), but in a "non-oppositional relation" to History, participating in a radical ecology of being and making life and art otherwise on another

---


\(^{101}\) *Nuestros años sesentas*, 20.

\(^{102}\) Roberson describes how weird this seemed at the time: "Ed Roberson reads and discusses his own work" (Talk given at Northwestern University on November 14, 2007), http://www.poetryfoundation.org/features/auditocom/817
side of History, which we will come to understand as this side, seen through the cracks.\textsuperscript{103}

The critical establishment, [writes Brent Hayes Edwards] especially in the world of African-American poetry, seems to have utterly unprepared for \textit{Etai-Eken}...[It] hardly made a ripple when it was published in 1975. It would be nearly another decade before friends of Roberson in Pittsburgh raised funds to publish a limited edition of the remarkable \textit{Lucid Interval as Integral Music} (1984), and another decade after that until \textit{Voices Cast Out to Talk to Us} (1995).\textsuperscript{104}

Throughout her career Ms. Holt was under-recognized, [writes Randy Kennedy for the \textit{New York Times}] in part because her best work...could not be shown in museums or galleries. And she held a fairly dim view of the traditional art world anyway. "If work hangs in a gallery or a museum," she once said, "the art gets made for the spaces that were made to enclose art. They isolate objects, detach them from the world."..."It was painful because I had no product," she said. “And especially a woman in the art world at that time, you had to have something to show.”\textsuperscript{105}

Are these not Macabéa’s, stars with peculiar densities and weights which complicate attempts of literary and art history to resolve them into neatly legible categories, or see them at all. Approached either from the representative frame, or its critique, they always seem to confound analysis, not appearing at all or resulting in a well of contradictions for any kind of analysis that tries to contain them. And is this not precisely what they offer the study of American literature?

Could it be that their peculiar way of feeling the world – that this aeisthesis of ground -- to these projects because it is obscured on the other side of what Mignolo calls

\textsuperscript{103} Moten, "An Ecology of (Eloquent) Things."
\textsuperscript{104} Brent Hayes Edwards, "Black Serial Poetics: An Introduction to Ed Roberson," \textit{Callaloo} 33, no. 3 (2010), 622.
colonial difference, a way of feeling and perceiving and being-in the world that is invisible to the post-modern or alter-modern or trans-modern frameworks that try to decipher them. That to appreciate their ground, we must delink from these frameworks in our approach to study.\textsuperscript{106} Rather than expanding the field, as Rosalind Krauss will have it, we must step outside of the field, and approach them and the Americas they us explode out into from the place of a trembling earth.\textsuperscript{107}

Walking as Method

Rachel Blau DuPlessis explains that for her the "postpatriarchal essay offers a method of thought and an ethical attitude, not simply a style or a rhetorical choice."\textsuperscript{108} "I must be careful…I must set the precarious / words. like rocks. without one snowcapped mistake," writes Ed Roberson.\textsuperscript{109} These writers and artists have helped me see that books and poems and words and artworks are not only dangerous things that further the project of colonial capitalism when used in the project of the objectification of the world and people, but that they can also be used in poiesis to write the world in the making of meaning otherwise. This dissertation is for me a grounded poiesis, the unfolding of an otherwise American world with these authors.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{106} Walter Mignolo, "Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of De-coloniality," \textit{Cultural Studies} 21, no. 2 (2007).
\item \textsuperscript{107} "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," \textit{October} 8 (Spring, 1979), 30 - 44.
\item \textsuperscript{108} \textit{Blue Studios: Poetry and Its Cultural Work} (Tuscaloosa, University Alabama Press, 2006), 3.
\end{itemize}
If I write about chaos, as the object oriented philosophers do of their ground, then that is false because chaos becomes object. And so I walk. Walking is the mosquito drum of my poetry, a thin line connecting drum in earth to tree, heavy with breeze and ghosts, the energies that animate thought in between the lines.

---

Chapter One: What the Feet Can See: Walking Art out of the United States and Into America

History produces all this shit . makes history.

...and the wind began to howl.

-Jimi Hendrix,
“All Along the Watchtower,” 1968.

Walking with Robert Smithson, Ed Roberson and Nancy Holt is to cut a counterclockwise spiral through the marble vomit of US History, opening up a portal to the world of Beasts, finding Mu in the Great Salt Lake of Utah right there next to the Transcontinental Railroad. It is to cultivate the weeds that grow in the pillars of the Courthouse, follow the fissures in the desolate parking lot of the strip mall, the strip mine, the shiny white statue of George Washington.

So that on a hot day in that desert of that New Jersey parking lot we can see our shadows as the contours of another world without contours, that is this world, the one our bodies in the sun already inhabit.

If this shadowy dimension of life is invisible to the project of American art and literary histories, “Why not reconstruct one’s inability to see?” says Smithson.¹ “Let us give passing shape to the unconsolidated views that surround a work of art, and

develop a type of ‘anti-vision’ or negative seeing.”

Walking with Smithson and Roberson pries open the cracks in the smooth floors of the museum that is the City as Patio of Objects and opens art out into the world we make otherwise with our feet. It is to follow our feet into an-other relation to History, out of centripetalizing circuits of the Uniting States and into the centrifugal circuits of American life spiraling otherwise, counterclockwise, in a history whose bigness rests in the refusal to capitalize. Against an aesthetics of representation which underwrites the uprooting of consciousness, the continual displacement of life towards the extreme legibility of visible visions, grounded aesthesesis is the muddiness of a mind with feet, opening our vision into a sparkling and shadowy world, offering an American grounding for US art and letters.

Walking as Method

Un método tiene sólo una finalidad didáctica pero no hace a la profundidad del problema porque no lo logra expresar. A lo más se logra dar otra perspectiva, o mejor, otro punto de arranque, a los efectos de que sepamos qué hacer en adelante. No es cuestión entonces de decir todo lo que tengamos que hacer, sino saber que, a medida que nos realicemos, descubrimos áreas que una excesiva colonización nos ha suprimido.

(A method only has a didactic aim but it doesn’t get at the heart of the problem because it is not able to express it. At best it is able to provide another perspective, or better yet, another point of departure, with the effect that we will know what to do only later. It is not a question, then, of saying all that we have to do, but of knowing that, as we unfold, that we will discover areas which an excessive colonization has buried.)

---

2 Ibid.
Navid: “You know what’s the best? Walking is the best.” We were walking, down Prince Street in Durham North Carolina, crossing Anderson which cuts the neighborhood in at least two but the neighborhood and the walking continue. The night is heavy with a sort of mist that traps the street lights and the softer porch lights and the moonlight so that the darkness sparkles in a way. Is poochie with us? I think so. Adra smokes a cigarette. And it makes the smooth sound of Adra’s perfectly rolled cigarettes.

Like we couldn’t smoke in the house so we would go for these loooooong walks in the neighborhood, a big group of us. And we had forgotten to bring matches or a lighter so once the first cigarette was lit we had to keep one lit the whole time or else we would lose the fire...And so we were a roving cloud of laughing smoke.5

None of us is from this place. We arrived to America from all sorts of places within the United States and without. We are mostly graduate students at different universities in the area and, in a certain light, the forces and agents and products of History brought us together: the States that issue passports, visas, skyways and highways and bridges, national situations, personal situations, which make it difficult to live, to live and study in the place where we are from, the Universities which will issue our degrees, pay our salaries, our salaries.

Let us start with the institutions that brought us together. No. Let us not START there. The institutions did not bring us together.

5 Ibid.
“And so we were a roving cloud of laughing smoke.” A strange sight we might seem to the lens of History: Robert Smithson, Ed Roberson, Nancy Holt and I, plodding along the gravel dirt path around the Duke University East Campus. Four heads bopping at different rhythms and speeds, turning in different directions to see different things around us, to see each other, feet on the ground: walking as we talk.

Ed Roberson (1948 –), poet, born in Pittsburgh; Nancy Holt (1938 – 2014), installation and earth artist, born in Worcester, Massachusetts, raised in New Jersey; and Robert Smithson (1938 – 1973), a sculptor and earth artist born in Passaic New Jersey. And me (1981 –), a PhD student born in Norristown, Pennsylvania. All here walking, we and the others we bring along with us – the embodied voices that enter into our conversation Clarice Lispector, Lygia Clark, Kamau Brathwaite, Rodolfo Kusch - are quite a pack, a motley crew: of different social classes, races, genders, nationalities, ages, working in different media, some of us knowing or knowing of each other, others not.

Are these differences barriers to conversation, steel bars that divide voices and channel them into different anthologies, without limit pinning us down into categories of identity, reducing us to those endlessly piling identities, so that all that we are left with in the end is a pile of string, empty bodies?

What brings a group of friends – of critics, of artists and writers – together and allows them to walk laughing through the night? This is a question whose answer
cannot, it seems to me, be reduced to a set of Historical circumstances, but rather must also be understood also in terms of an impulse to life, an impulse to live-in the world, in spite of and through all of the shit of History, collective laughter an engine of unfolding life. And it is precisely this impulse – so understated that it could be easily overlooked – that gives the words “brought us together” the weight of the world. And so it is precisely this impulse, this desire to make life otherwise, through and against the circumstances of History, out of step with the State, that is what I want to give a great weight to in consideration of art and poetry in the United States, the country I am from and live in now and have encountered America within in part by unfolding the work of Smithson, Roberson and Holt in relation to my life.

Following Laura Harris, we begin to see that the motley crew – that revolutionary set of hands coming together against the violence of coercion for a temporary purpose such as sailing a ship -- that many headed hydra which Marcus Rediker and Peter Linebaugh say died with reification of racial difference under the solidification of the Nation-State -- is alive and well.6 We begin “to understand the activities of a scattered and discontinuous underground formation that does not always materialize in conventional evidence accessible to conventional modes of study.”7 So that when Nancy Holt says she reaches for Emily Dickinson when trying to make sense

---

7 Ibid., 51
of a radical shift in perception that she suddenly experienced, what takes on weight and articulates the contours of our analysis is not that one is from the nineteenth century and one from the twentieth, that one is a poet and one a plastic artist, or even that a direct influence could be established, but the radical shift in perception and the possible shared inhabitation of the difference of making life and art otherwise in and against the hegemonic forces of the State.

Because when the basis of the encounter is trying to figure out a way to live life-in-the-world then these Historical differences – which do often seem to subsume us into the Museum of the State, such that all that we are left with in the end is a pile of endlessly accumulating identity categories, ever expanding anthologies of American art and letters, periodizations, emptied bodies made to speak to one another through the medium of History – fall away. Not in the sense that they are no longer there or relevant but in the sense that, to the extent our analysis starts there, these are the problems of History.

And the coalition – the making of life in America in and against the centripetal vacuum of the United States — is something else, has its own set of problems, the problems of coming together, unfolding a world, in a way that must appreciate but

---

cannot reify these differences, does not get stuck in framework of History. In friendship, in the slow walk through the streets of Durham on a summer night, it is not that History drops away, but our relation to each other, this unspoken commitment we have of making life in the world, somehow inverts our relation to the categories and City plans, buildings, that hold us, the weights it asks us to carry “…making us into…what? People?” unfolding art and life otherwise together in the world.

*   *   *

Walking slowly, in a spiral, out of step with the State, with others, is grounding. It picks up, intuitively, on the part of life that drops out of relation to the City as Patio of Objects, to the headlines of History, because that corporeal contact with the street or the dirt or the grass as you laugh with your friends emphasizes that dimension of life that is-in the world, travelling quietly under the radar screen of the Patio of Objects, spinning life and art out otherwise.

And so, we contribute to ongoing efforts (Moten, Rosa, Saldívar, Harris, Mignolo) to rethink the approach to American literature and art by approaching it from the ground, this place of relation to a quaking earth that our walking feet feel. It is not, as Kusch suggests, that walking will reveal a predetermined content of our encounter, but its insistence on an embodied relation to the world gives us another kind of starting

point, connecting it to a mind that has feet, that moves in the world, always in contact with the ground, that must tie its shoes, that notices the moon, to art that unfolds in relation to the temporality of a life lived-in the world, the way it spins out, in living, in the world.

Walking will help us move away from what Kusch defines as the centripetal mode of world making that is the project of Hegel’s History to which the realm of art objects, periodizations and museums belongs: the mode of making of America into the United States inaugurated under the conquest, defined by a mode of negation and History’s progress entirely inscribed within the visible visions of the Patio, the kind of centering around itself that is the ceaseless and violent effort to compensate for a lack of center, a lack of ground.

And it will help us move instead to articulate what Kusch calls a centrifugal mode of world-making, a world that art can make otherwise, a world and a kind of history (which Kusch will call big history) that inscribes its making in a different logics of negation entirely, a logics which negates the affirmations of History in order to affirm the totality of an untotalizable existence-in-the-world. This will be the logics of the life we are making by walking, a world and an art that is made in relation to a larger life – the earth and our bodies in the world - that our feet connect us to and intuitively understand. A world out of which an-other visions of America emerge.
To study America and its literature through walking is to move us away, then, from an emphasis on where the lives and work of Smithson, Roberson and Holt have intersected with the matrices of History, illuminated by the City as the Patio of Objects, and towards an understanding of what is in the shadows of such analysis.\textsuperscript{11} “I was just being. I was emphasizing being over becoming. And in the art world that’s a hard stance,” says Holt.\textsuperscript{12} “It was painful, because I had no product. And especially a woman in the art world at that time you had to have something to show.”\textsuperscript{13} And we become more interested in the fact that she was a “reluctant conceptualist” than a conceptualist. Less interested in the fact that she and Smithson are part of the blossoming conceptual, minimal, and performance art scenes in the late 1960s, friends and collaborators with Sol LeWitt, Carl Andre, Michael Heizer, Robert Morris, Allan Kaprow and Claes Oldenburg and more interested in the fact that what she and Smithson shared was an “receptiv[ity] to many different ideas.”\textsuperscript{14} We become more interested in what it might have been about Roberson’s poetry and its engagement with Nature that kept him off the critical radar screen of US letters than on it. More interested in Smithson’s insistence on earthly materiality than how he might be considered as part of a larger trend of the


\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{14} Nancy Holt, "James Meyer Interview with Nancy Holt," 221.
dematerialization of the art object. We are less interested in post-modernism, the expanded field, the dematerialization of the art object and more interested in what the feet can see as the life-in the world that drops out of such analyses.

We become less interested in Robert Smithson, cool postmodernist, flying high in an airplane above the artwork, an airplane that eventually crashes, ending the artist’s life at age 35, and more interested in what he was trying to see from that airplane.

The Nazca lines [writes Smithson], have meaning only because they were photographed from airplanes, at least for our eyes conditioned for the twentieth century. All we can do is us our orders and systems to investigate them, and they generally turn out to be wrong…

What is dropping out of analyses such as the ones mentioned above – what is there but is merely registered as a kind of dissent from the dominant frames, an interest in “something else” that gets articulated as a “life away from art” or an “abandonment of art” or “art moving into the world” -- is actually a radical reconfiguration of our relation to the world through art, which means that what is hidden from view is actually an other world, this world, the ones our bodies in the sun already inhabit, seen from the ground. Seen by the feet, this is not only an art that broke the frames of the Museum and lingered still in the world and the totalities and the visions of the Patio. This is an art that – as Nancy Holt articulates it to an interviewer – was not just about ”putting art in the world,” but about “putting the universe in art.”

Yet to understand all of this, to see what I think Smithson was trying to see in those Nazca lines about the world that art could put is in relation to, the an-other America of our walking that art can help us make, we will need to study the problem. How is that art, especially an art that treats the natural world, could be said to be foreclosing such visions? Such a relationship to the world? How might we come to make art from a place like our feet? What other kind of relation to the work could it help us make? What would it allow us to see?

Come on, says Smithson, motioning to us, follow me. Because Smithson is precisely the artist among us who has quite literally taken to studying the problem with his feet. He walks the landscapes around him – the suburban New Jersey in which he grew up -- and, through his art and his walking he connects the mechanisms that produce those landscapes – his concrete material reality – to the mechanisms that represent the world through art. The problem of remaking art’s relation to the world is a problem which he studies his whole life, and at first his feet don’t really have an articulable answer to it. Nor is he going to be able to resolve everything for us, offering the solution to the problem of History -- he works out of his experience, and so he will only see certain things and what he makes will not be without its own contradictions; the rest of us working out of our experiences will see others, some of which can come into the space of this chapter, and others which will need to wait for other chapters. But he knows enough to trust his footed intuition and his feet will eventually lead him – and
us – into some useful formulations for our own project of remaking this relation art life world from the ground.

We follow Smithson’s feet out of the Patio and out into the America his feet help us see.

* * *

Study One: “A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey,” or the Making of the Garden State

Smithson’s first site of study is the place he grew up, Passaic New Jersey. Passaic, which gets its name from the Lenape to designate "valley” or "place where the land splits” is the site of Dutch settler colonies and becomes, in the project of consolidation of Patio life, an industrial center, the Great Falls of the Passaic River the centerpiece of Alexander Hamilton’s blueprint for the first planned manufacturing center in the United States.17 Industry grew in the nineteenth century, and Passaic became of the largest economic centers in the world. People from abroad and other parts of the country come to work and live and the material city grows. And then many of these industries leave. By mid-century Passaic, as the hegemonic narratives tell it, is experiencing widespread "blight" and "dilapidation."18 Factories are closed. The river is polluted. And there are other developments: post-WWII suburbs, the New Jersey Turnpike, car culture: diners, drive-thrus. The draining of the Meadowlands. The downtown shopping district is now

---

18 Ibid., 66.
in competition with "exurban shopping centers like the Garden State Plaza and the Bergen Mall."\textsuperscript{19} As well as tensions, revolts which challenge divisions, the dividing visions, that underwrite the logics of colonial capital: Newark, 1967.

New Jersey, the Garden State – earning its nickname when former Attorney General Abraham Browning of Camden, speaking at the Philadelphia exhibition on New Jersey Day compared his State to “an immense barrel, filled with good things to eat and open at both ends, with Pennsylvanian’ grabbing from one and New Yorkers from the other.”\textsuperscript{20} New Jersey, the zone of externalities, a place if there ever were one to see what happens when the logic of the garden is underwritten by the logic of the State, the shit of History piling up high over the years to produce a landscape where – as Smithson described it -- “everything is chewed up”\textsuperscript{21}: a heterogeneous landscape, a William Carlos Williams \textit{Paterson} landscape, comprised of strip mines, the Pine Barrens, landfills, suburbs, industrial zones, post-industrial zones. A culture of turnpikes, of diners, structures built to move people in cars through the space without touching the ground: a “derelict California.”\textsuperscript{22}

Born in 1938, between the wars, beginning to make art in a post-WWII Eisenhower United States, Smithson has grown up swimming in holes, in the by then

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
abandoned quarries that were once sites of rich mineral deposits in the northern part of the state, and it is this New Jersey, layered onto this later post-war New Jersey -- the suburbanizing, deindustrializing one -- that becomes the focus of his walking studies.

With a camera and a notebook and often a group of friends he visits a series of places: quarries in Montclair, Sandy Hook, and Franklin, the Pine Barrens, abandoned airstrips, industrial wastelands, and the debris-filled Meadowlands as well as vacant storefronts and parking lots.

On September 30, 1967, as he writes it, he takes a bus from the Port Authority terminal in Manhattan to the city of Passaic. He gets off the bus and he walks the city, taking a series of photographs that he will eventually publish in the new Art Forum magazine in an essay he calls "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey."23 In the essay he uses a narrative written in the first person coupled with a set of photographs of various 'monuments' to depict the landscape of his hometown. Getting off the bus, Smithson’s I with feet hits the pavement, stepping on a flat surface, a three dimensional contact, his shadow, the bulk of his fleshy body in contradistinction to the glassy surface.

"The bus passed over the first monument. I pulled the buzzer-cord and got off at the corner of Union Avenue and River Drive..."24

24 Ibid., 70.
Figure 1: Robert Smithson, *Bridge Monument Showing Wooden Side-walks, 1967*  

The monument was a bridge over the Passaic River that connected Bergen County with Passaic County. Noon-day sunshine cinema-sized the site, turning the bridge and the river into an over-exposed picture. Photographing it with my Instamatic 400 was like photographing a photograph. The sun became a monstrous light-bulb that projected a detached series of "stills" through my Instamatic into my eye. When I walked the bridge it was as though I was walking on an enormous photograph that was made of wood and steel, and underneath the river existed as an enormous movie film that showed nothing but a continuous blank.  

Over five hundred years after the colonial capitalist project begins to build its Patios of Objects in America, Smithson’s feet sense the void in the material realities that shape his everyday American life. For Hegel the industrializing northern United States

---

26 Ibid.
was the future of World History, achieving a post-Civil War hegemony that would assure its future spot on the world historical stage. Yet where Hegel saw History – and at the same time as the United States and its art world is appearing as hegemonic on the world historical stage – Smithson, like many of his colleagues, sees holes. From New Jersey, across the river from the shiny towers of New York’s financial district and art galleries, the lasso of History is pulled the other way, showing the edges in the project of History, defining the contours of its inherent entropic truth.

That zero panorama seemed to contain ruins in reverse, that is - all the new construction that would eventually be built. This is the opposite of the "romantic ruin" because the buildings don't fall into ruin after they are built but rather rise into ruin before they are built. This anti-romantic *mise-en-scene* suggests the discredited idea of time and many other "out of date" things. But the suburbs exist without a rational past and without the "big events" of history. Oh, maybe there are a few statues, a legend, and a couple of curiosities, but no past - just what passes for a future. A Utopia minus a bottom, a place where machines are idle, and the sun has turned to glass, and a place where the Passaic Concrete Plant (253 River Drive) does a good business in STRONG, BITUMIOUS, SAND, and CEMENT. Passaic seems full of "holes" compared to New York City, which seems tightly packed and solid, and those holes in a sense are the monumental vacancies that define, without trying, the memory-traces of an abandoned set of futures. Such futures are found in grade B Utopian films, and then imitated by the suburbanite.27

27 Ibid., 72.
Figure 2: Robert Smithson, *The Fountain Monument: Side View, 1967.*

Smithson, surrounded by the New Jersey suburbs, going swimming in empty quarries, collecting rocks, looks into the shit of History and says holy shit.

Writes Hegel:

> When the spirit strives towards its centre, it strives to perfect its own freedom; and this striving is fundamental to its nature. To say that spirit exists would at first seem to imply that it is a completed entity. On the contrary, it is by nature active, and activity is its essence; it is its own product, and is therefore its own beginning and its own end. Its freedom does not consist in static being, but in a constant negation of all that threatens to destroy freedom. The business of spirit is to produce itself, to make itself its own object, and to gain knowledge of itself; in this way, it exists for itself.  

---

Only in the State [Hegel continues] does man have a rational existence...The aim of the State is that the substance which underlies the real activity and dispositions of men should be recognized and made manifest, and that it should ensure its own continuity.30

New Jersey, the Garden State, a place if there ever was one to see what happens when the logic of the Garden is underwritten by the centripetalizing logic of Hegel’s State.

From the place he is standing on the Passaic River Bridge Smithson’s landscape looks bleak, life vanishing just beyond the vanishing point of the photograph of the Bridge. This is the history of the United States that ends Hegel’s History in the place -- folding endlessly back over itself, constant centering to compensate for a lack of center -- that it was perhaps heading all along: in the sprawling suburbs that post-modernism will come to theorize “as the tired, deflated spirit of the present age.”31 As Fredric Jameson elucidates, in relation to the realist novel, to even be counted in Hegel’s History one must ‘overcome’ one’s existence in the natural world and inscribe one’s life entirely within the space of the Patio. "As was already foreshadowed in Hegel’s system, the outside world, as the result of human labor considered now not as nature but as history, is of the same substance as the subjectivity of the worker himself: the subjectivity of men can now be seen as the product of the same social forces that create commodities and ultimately the entire reality of the world in which men live.”32

30 Ibid., 94.
31 Moten, "An Ecology of (Eloquent) Things."
32 Marxism and Form, 188.
What Smithson helps us see is that such solipsistic logics cannot produce anything but a kind of simulacrum, the subsumption of life so fully into the void of capitalism such that even the sunlight can be no more than the artificial light of a camera flash. There is no distance between feet and state, and the only possibility of resistance to the dominant order is their lurking presence, outside the frame. Smithson’s feet barely register against its the glossy surfaces, empty tinning clicks that do not sink in.

It is not a landscape that encourages walking; driving is the mode of conquering it, feet not touching ground smoothing over the contradictions that the roads are producing.

* * *

But Smithson’s feet do not stop there. He takes more pictures. He is trying to understand, to study, what has produced this reality, this void. He is using his feet to explore perspective. We see the monuments from the side: “Fountain Monument -- Side View.” From above: “Fountain Monument -- Bird’s Eye View.” What he realizes is that part of what is driving the problem – part of what has made the void that he walks over -- is what he will come to call the logic of “realism” a representative logic, a logic of an eye without feet. He will connect the centripetal project of Hegel’s History to vision, a violent way of seeing the world underwritten by the idealizing perspectives of the Renaissance that he sees art reproducing.

---

34 Ibid., 70.
Because look at back at that first photograph of the Bridge, he tells us, just to get
us thinking, that bridge that fades into the distant horizon: what do you see? A way of
seeing which organizes the world centripetally, converging it around a central vanishing
point. What has been cast over the world here, he says, is a grid -- an order of things --
which lines up the world up as though it marched forward in time, and the human must
set out upon it, trying to catch up to a distant future, a horizon of possibility predicated
on what is never just then possible, the illuminated future we will reach only in Western
death.

For what Renaissance perspective was the calculated translation of the world
into the frame of an “I/eye” without feet that stood at its implicit center. Whereas
earlier religious art populated its spaces with Gods, a heavens and the earth,
Renaissance perspective put a floor over the ground, lowering the horizon into a strictly
human world, a secular world, in which what Kusch describes as the wrath of god is
replaced by the wrath of man, a world populated reasonable man. Underwriting the
construction of Renaissance perspective was a vision interested only in what was visible
to what those footless eyes, standing high above the ground, could clearly see from that
position, a vision which would require a painting of buildings and landscapes to reflect
back a world of buildings and landscapes.

It was a vision whose foundation in visibility would pave the way for the world
of scientific reason, for the light of the Enlightenment, and for the order of Smithson’s
suburbs as over-exposed simulacrum. For, Smithson realizes, what a way of seeing the world which could allow us to carve up the land of Passaic into a City designed to facilitate the circulation of capital shares with realism, romanticism, modern art, and the museum is that they are all visions of the world emanating from the City as a Patio of Objects, a sealed human world in which an overly humanizing frame is imposed upon the production of the landscape from a position of man's separation from it. It is the problem of what Timothy Morton calls eco-mimesis, or the reification of the world through a structure of language or thought that is representational -- that tries to write the world in an idealized frame based on a closed and previously known -- visible -- system of knowledge about the world.35 Writes Smithson,

Much modern art is trapped in temporality, because it is unconscious of time as a "mental structure" of abstract support. The temporality of time began to be imposed on art in the 18th and 19th centuries with the rise of realism in painting and novel writing. Novels cease being fictions, criticism condemns "humoral" categories, and "nature" acts as the prevailing panacea..."Nature" is simply another 18th and 19th century fiction...The "past nature" of the Renaissance finds its "future-nature" in Modernism – both are founded in realism.36

What Smithson has identified as reproducing itself in art is a way of seeing the world which shares the root logic of Hegel's History – a logic which makes the world of the Patio only in relation to the world of the Patio, with no room to affirm or see what is outside of its humanizing frames. It is a bleak vision in the sense that what drops out of

it is what drops out of the New Jersey landscape of Smithson’s photographs: the life of the feet and the world they might possibly open out into. And it is an extremely dangerous vision in the sense that it is underwritten by a human relationship to the world and to others that is defined by domination, the supposition that we can stand above the world and project ourselves and our projects on to it, objectifying it and stuffing it -- as Roberson will put it -- like so many grizzlies on the wall.\footnote{Ed Roberson, be careful,” \textit{Just In: Word of Navigational Challenges: New and Selected Work} (Jersey City: Talisman House, [1970] 1998), 1.}

One externality of such a way of seeing is the production of Nature as external to the human or the City, the Garden as some sort of Hudson River School painting, or English Romantic Poem, idealized pastoral retreat from the mechanization or the alienation of urban life: The Garden State.\footnote{See also: Raymond Williams, \textit{The Country and the City} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975).}

* * *

Smithson’s feet move in search of other perspectives. Studying Cézanne he zeros in on \textit{Bibemus Quarry} (1900), what he finds there is a fellow artist with feet, investigating his own chewed up landscape. Cézanne has started to pry open this idealizing perspective, flattening it, twisting it, distorting it. We see bowls of fruit from above, tables shortened, the rules of Renaissance perspective subverted, inverted, interrupted. The painting breaks apart a little, and in there through this disjointment in perspective is an opening: the insertion of time and movement of the viewer into the painting, but

---

more than that: the insertion of the feet of the viewer outside of the painting. Cézanne is standing somewhere and this influences how he depicts the landscape.

Where the Cubists claimed Cézanne and made his work into a kind of empty formalism, we now have to reintroduce a kind of physicality, the actual place rather than the tendency to decoration which is a studio thing, because the Cubists brought Cézanne back into the studio. It would be interesting to deal with the ecology of the psychological behavior of the artist in the various sites from the period. Because in looking at the world today, you can’t just say that it’s all just shapes, colors, and lines. There is a physical reference, and that choice of subject matter is not simply a representational thing to be avoided. It has important physical implications. And then there is Cézanne’s perception, being on the ground, thrown back into a kind of soil. I’m reversing the perspective to get to another viewpoint, because we’ve seen it so long how from the decorative design point of view and not from the point of view of the physicality of the terrain. That perception is needed now more than the abstract because we’re now into such a kind of soupy, effete thing. It’s so one-sided and groundless.39

Cézanne was the possibility of a mimetic break for Smithson, a way out of the suburbs.

Out of that opening he will make Site-Nonsite sculptures, the beginning of his Earth Works. He will cut off the idealizing perspective and cut through the containment of the museum frame to insist on the beginnings of a more real relation between work and world.40 He will bring quarry rocks into the museum, and he will provide a "map" of the site which they came from, but all within his own cut-off, non-representational framing that tries to eliminate idealizing mediations. “I’m reversing the perspective to get to another viewpoint.”

40 Ibid., 188.
While the Cubists translate Cézanne's exploration of perspective into a problem of the subject, a problem of point of view, Smithson follows the feet:

Figure 3: Robert Smithson, A Nonsite: Franklin, New Jersey, Painted wooden bins, limestone; with Work on paper: gelatin-silver prints and typescript mounted on mat board, 1968

---

Study Two: "Fredrick Law Olmstead and the Dialectics of the Landscape," 42 or Walking Central Park

"Entering the Park at 96th Street and Central Park West, I walked south along the western side of the reservoir on a bridle path,” Smithson writes in his essay “Fredric Law Olmstead and the Dialectics of the Landscape.” 43

Central Park for Smithson is in a different kind of relation to the Garden than the State. It is a turn away from an idealization of the landscape and a turn towards a desire to be in a more direct relationship to it. Where for History art worked through imposition to pull the landscape into the void of the City as Patio of Objects, the Park that Smithson walks opens the making of art into the landscape. It as though the notion of organic consciousness that Martínez Estrada theorized, that perceptive framework penetrated by the pampa, unable to dominate it, is the potential of the imaginary to read the landscape outside of a civilizing paradigm and becomes the basis of a relationship to it.

“One wonders what the likes of [Alan] Gussow would make of America’s first ‘earthwork artist’ Frederick Law Olmstead,” wonders Smithson,

Perhaps if Gussow had lived in the mid-19th century, he would have suggested Olmstead write "lyric poetry" instead of moving ten million horse-cart loads of earth to make Central Park. Artists like Gussow are the type who would rather retreat to scenic beauty spots than try to make a concrete dialectic between nature and people. Such an artist surrounds himself with self-righteousness and

43 Ibid., 168.
pretends to be saving the landscape. This is not being an ecologist of the real, but rather, a spiritual snob.\textsuperscript{44}

To the clearing consciousness of History that propels itself forward by overcoming its contradictions, Frederic Law Olmstead's Central Park offers Smithson's feet a dialectics of the landscape and the muddiness of the mind. “One cannot avoid muddy thinking when it comes to earth projects” says Smithson.\textsuperscript{45} “A consciousness of mud and the realms of sedimentation is necessary in order to understand the landscape as it exists.”\textsuperscript{46} “Slag heaps, strip mines. Polluted rivers. Because of the great tendency toward idealism, both pure and abstract, society is confused as to what to do with such places. Nobody wants to go on vacation to a garbage dump. Our land ethic, especially in that never-never land called the ‘art world’ has become clouded with abstractions and concepts.”\textsuperscript{47} The “authentic artist,” says Smithson “cannot ignore the contradictions that inhabit our landscapes.”\textsuperscript{48}

Fredrick Law Olmstead is just such an authentic artist. Central Park “was the result of ‘urban blight’ – trees were cut down by the early settlers without any thoughts of the future.”\textsuperscript{49} Resolving the contradictions that inhabit the landscape is going to

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 164. Emphasis in original.
\textsuperscript{46} Smithson, “Fredrick Law Olmstead and the Dialectics of the Landscape,” 170.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 156.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 164.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 165.
require physically wrestling with them to make out of them something other than the
logic that produced them in the first place.

We cannot take a one-sided view of the landscape within this dialectic. A park
can no longer be seen as a 'thing-in-itself,' but rather as a process of ongoing
relationships in a physical region -- the park becomes a 'thing-for-us.' As a result
we are not hurled into the spiritualism of Thoreauian transcendentalism, or its
present day offspring of 'modernist formalism' rooted in Kant, Hegel, and Fichte.
Price, Gilpin and Olmstead are forerunners of a dialectical materialism applied to
the physical landscape. Dialectics of this type are a way of seeing things in a
manifold of relations, not as isolated objects.50

Ecology, notes Donald Worster, is derived from the 1749 "oeconomy. " "Thus the study of
'ecology' -- a word that appeared in the nineteenth century as a more scientific substitute
for the older phrase -- was in its very origins imbued with a political and economic as
well as Christian view of nature: the earth was perceived as a world that must be
somehow managed for maximum output."51

If ecology is management of resources in the Patio then there is a sort of radical
ecology going on here in Central Park, Fred Moten might help us say, one in which the
notion of the work must shift.52 We are no longer in the oppositional relation to the
world presupposed by the Patio but making it from an-other place that History can only
register as the bleakness of poverty or mud, externalizations of – or perhaps
contradictions produced by -- its Project. Out of an abandoned, rusty car, Thorton Dial,
who Moten mentions, makes a four part sculpture that rests in a yard garden: "Driving

50 Ibid., 160.
52 "An Ecology of (Eloquent) Things."
to the end of the World: Sheik.”53 Out of the burnt landscape of New York City Fredrick Law Olmstead makes Central Park.

Neither the Sheik, nor the Park, ever pretended to be autonomous. They are open, alive. The work is not a negation of life as it is in the Patio but rather is understood as produced with life and for life. The work is a Park. The artist’s labor does not transform the materials of the world into a reified object on the Patio, rather the artist creates life in the world in relation to life in the world. ”Sex isn’t all a series of rapes” says Smithson, in his way. ”The farmer or engineer who cuts into the land can either cultivate it or devastate it. Representing nature once removed in lyric poetry and landscape paining is not the same as direct cultivation of the land.”54 Not art work, says Smithson: earth work. And, in an effort to cultivate this kind of life he conceives of his art works -- his earth works -- as garden sculptures, as “offerings” to the world.55

Yet all this and more of this is what our feet, walking, refusing to resolve the Park, intuitively understand.

* * *

Smithson’s feet get carried away by the Park.

54 “Fredrick Law Olmstead and the Dialectics of the Landscape,” 164.
55 Ibid.
Quickly I vanished into The Ramble, -- a tangled net of divergent paths....The network of paths [Olmstead] twisted through this place out labyrinthed labyrinths. For what really is a Ramble but a place to walk aimlessly and idly -- it is a maze that spreads in all directions. Now The Ramble has grown up into an urban jungle, and lurking in its thickets are "hoods, hobos, hustlers," and other estranged creatures of the city (see John Rechy, *The City of Night*). Olmstead had brought a primordial condition into the heart of Manhattan.56

In the heart of Central Park the City becomes something other than a Patio of Objects; Smithson’s feet glimpse at an underground America flickering in the shadows of the day.

The Museum pulls art towards the State, the void, the centripetal. The Park pulls art the other way, towards life. "Olmstead's own view on buildings and museums in *The Spoils of the Park* is: 'The reservoirs and museums are not part of the Park proper: they are deductions from it. The Subways are not deductions because their effect, on the whole, is to enlarge, not lessen, the opportunities of escape from buildings.'"57

See those holes that you see punctuating the void, says Ed Roberson to Smithson, they are also openings. Can punctuate a different rhythm. Because weeds grow there, says Nancy Holt, thinking of her *Western Graveyards*. Because words, structures, towers, held together so tightly, too tightly, by the centripetal visions of History inevitably start to crumble, pulled apart by the weight of life, by steps taken out of step with the State.

56 Ibid., 169.  
57 Ibid.
18,000 feet

how these loose rocks got piled up here like this
where everything below builds up so steadily –
    a swoop a day long countries wide increases
from deeper green into a paler learning
ice    then to this small pile and finally
to room for each of us one at a time
careful    of the cracking of the flag.
how piece by piece    stepped beyond    the element
of left and right    taken away, the sense of here
is made    all there is
under the feet,    all to come    down
how much a prison freedom is
to what is    i
    learned

(Ed Roberson, "18,000 feet," 11) 58

Looked at from underneath, from below, from the subway underneath the City,
from the place where these structures are supported, you can appreciate the way they
begin to crack, fissure, crumble, when the life that supports them pulls them into
question, refuses to march the required steps. And, adds Kusch, “this same opposition”
between the world made by the Project of History and the weeds that challenge it,
“instead of seeming tragic, is actually an exit, for it makes possible a dramatic
interaction, a kind of dialectic that we will call fagocitación. It is about the possibility of

the absorption of the polished things of the West by the things of America, as a way of balancing and reintegrating the human in these lands.”

The holes in the line, the life that drops out, the life that is there that can’t be measured. Smithson’s feet, carried away with themselves, have taken him where perhaps they knew where they were going all along, what was there informing but never fully articulated in the theorization of his dialectics of the landscape – into another relation to and vision of America, glimpsed at when he gets lost in the Central Park Ramble.

*Study Three: “Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan,”* 60 or *What the Feet Can See*

Smithson’s next study is a series of mirror installations he makes in sites of previous historical or natural destruction, such as abandoned quarries or strip mines. The mirrors themselves are always placed at odd angles, up high above the rocks, bringing bits of rock or snow from below up to the sky, or not in the rut caused by the truck in the entrance to the Franklin Quarry, but just to the right of it, as though like the sunlight that it refracts off of it at a dislocated angel.

The world they reflect and help make is not in any obvious or direct relation to the landscape around them and the history embedded there, but is dislocating its logics to open up the possibilities for something else. “The mirror is a displacement, as an

59 Rodolfo Kusch, *América profunda*, 18
abstraction absorbing, reflecting the site in a very physical way. It’s an addition to the site. But I don’t leave the mirrors there. I pick them up. It’s slightly different than the Site-Nonsite thing. Still in my mind it hasn’t completely disclosed itself. There’s an implicit aspect to it."\(^{61}\)

Figure 4: Nancy Holt, *Smithson Making Mirror Displacement in the Yucatan, 1969*\(^{62}\)

---


Figure 5: Robert Smithson, *Mirror Trail in Franklin Quarry, New Jersey*, 1973

An-other relation to History and world making emerges through Smithson’s work with the mirrors, one which we will come to theorize as a Kuschean negation. The mirrors are his way of breaking art and vision through the smooth walls and floors of the museum surfaces to make the world and art entirely from affirmative place of the ground the feet can see.

---

64 From: Smithson, Slideworks, 19.
“Walking conditioned sight, and sight conditioned walking,” Smithson writes of an encounter with one of his “Mirror Displacements in the Yucatan” a group of mirrors placed along the sandy shore of a riverbank and part of a series of mirror installations that he made at nine different locations along sand, in the roots of trees, along rocks of the water near the town of Villahermosa in the Yucatan Peninsula. 65 “Until it seemed only the feet could see.” 66

Sight turned away from its own looking. Particles of matter slowly crumbled down the slope that held the mirrors. Tinges, stains, tints, and tones crumbled into the eyes. The eyes became two wastebaskets filled with diverse colors, variegations, ashy hues, blotches and sunburned chromatics. To reconstruct what the eyes see in words, in an "ideal language" is a vain exploit. Why not reconstruct one’s inability to see? Let us give passing shape to the unconsolidated views that surround a work of art, and develop a type of "anti-vision" or negative seeing. The river shored up clay loess, and similar matter, that shored up the slope, that shored up the mirrors. The mind shored up thoughts and memories, that shored up points of view, that shored up the swaying glances of the eyes. Every clear view slipped into its own abstract slump. All viewpoints choked and died on the same tepidity of tropical air. The eyes, being infected by all kinds of nameless tropisms, couldn’t see straight. Vision sagged, caved in, and broke apart. Trying to look at the mirrors took the shape of a game of pool under water. All the clear ideas of what had been done melted into perceptual puddles, causing the brain to gurgle thoughts, walking conditioned sight, and sight conditioned walking, till it seemed only the feet could see. Squinting helped somewhat, yet that didn’t keep views from tumbling over each other. The oblique angles of the mirrors disclosed an altitude so remote that bits of ‘place’ were cast into a white sky. How could that section of visibility be put together again? Perhaps the eyes should have been screwed into a sharper focus. But no, the focus was at times cock-eyed, at times myopic, overexposed, or cracked. Oh, for the happy days of pure walls and pure floors! Flatness was no

65 Robert Smithson, "Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan," 130.
66 Ibid.
where to be found. Walls of collapsed mud and floors bleached detritus replaced the flatness of rooms. The eyes crawled over grains, ships, and other jungle obstructions. From the blind side reflections studded the shore – into an anti-vision.  

Figure 7: Robert Smithson, *Fourth Yucatan Mirror Displacement*, 1969.

---

Ibid., 130.

From: *Slideworks*, 81.
Away from the illuminating gaze of the City as a Patio of Objects we follow the feet into the complex density of Smithson’s anti-vision. “Oh for the happy days of pure walls and pure floors!” exclaim Smithson’s feet, crawling along the surfaces of the earth, seeing bits of clouds mixed with stone, mixed with sunlight in the refractions of his mirrors. What the feet can see is a strange, chaotic world weighed down in the knots of what they encounter.

From: Ibid., 87.
“A horizon is something other than a horizon,” writes Smithson in the Yucatan essay, “it is closedness in openness, it is an enchanted region where down is up. Space can be approached but time is far away.” In this convoluted horizon we are in the space of the mirrors, and the world that comes to view is not the easily digestible, organizible or knowable world of the Patio. It is a world in which – as Holt says, in relation her own art and evoking Seneca Indian expression “Pools of water are the eyes of the earth” – the sky is brought "down to earth" in the mirrors and everything is all mixed up.

For rather than a vision which is used to reinforce our separation from and distance from the world, a way of seeing of those two eyes who stood so far above the earth on the floor of the Patio, Smithson’s the eyes with feet have no possibility of seeing this world this way. They crawl along the surfaces of the earth and from this place of seeing the world that they see overwhelms them and presses in as vision breaks apart to produce the anti-vision. There is a re-ordering of perception going on. Vision, emanating from the place of a body in the world, is no longer the empty set of eyes set out to dominate the world. It is in no subject-object relation to the world, linearly organizing its causalities like the supermarket shopping you had set out to do. It is full.

70 Smithson, ”Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan,” 119.
71 ”James Meyer Interview with Nancy Holt,” 233.
We are seeing, as Roberson so beautifully puts it, with the body and all of the senses at once. “There’s a shift that signals a possession, the gods entering into the body. I think in drumming it’s called a ‘breakdown,’ the shock of something like your whole body feeling itself seeing. All the peripheral vision is opened into that.”72 Space is no longer the abstract and emptied and neutralized space of the Spanish colonizers that Serge Gruzinski described as organizing it into a three-dimensional landscape. It is the full, hostile, space-thing that is the world that pushes down and in on us. “Space back into space restored” writes Roberson.73 We are seeing whole.

Space back into space restored  beneath the moon
to here in the shading of eclipse. The distances.

We have to feel the spatial in what we see
to see clearly  the eye measure in hands and feet;
as when we kiss,
distance disappears, our eyes close,
and we see bodily

in raised detail

72 Ed Roberson and Kathleen Crown, "'Down Break Drum': An Interview with Ed Roberson," Callaloo 33, no. 3 (Summer 2010), 652.
a measure deepen into our world
in each other. And what we are
in the shadow the world makes
of our love, by this earth shine, we see

ourselves whole, see in whole perspective.

(Ed Roberson, from "Lunar Eclipse," 10)\textsuperscript{74}

To see in whole perspective is to see by the light of shadows the earth makes
when it blocks the sun in lunar eclipse. Which is to say we see by the light of darkness,
not by the light of what we know, but by what we do not know. The anti-vision is not
about bringing previously invisible things into the realm of visibility. It is about shifting
the axis of seeing entirely. It is to rest seeing and vision not on the smooth certainties if
the visible visions of the Patio, but on the uncertainties of a relation to the world made
from the ground. The uncertainty of seeing, seen as a debilitation in the Patio, is the
potentiality of the anti-vision. What was once a cat in the Patio, is now charged with all
the weights of its possibility of being a leopard: “the chairs and the table obscured,
camouflaged / within a thicket of spotted light, a shadow- / potted veranda, the house
cat’s nap catches / to play with a switch in its leopard step.”\textsuperscript{75}

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid.
The totality of the world that Smithson’s mirrors conjure into being is a totality that is not closed, can never be closed, because it understands the world as indeterminate, mysterious and unknowable. This is not an art of buildings and landscapes reflected back to buildings and landscapes, the human consciousness that sees itself reflected back to itself (self-conscious, the Absolute, as Reason). But an art of a cosmic consciousness, an art of the totality of an untotalizable existence. Of sky in earth and earth in sky, full of shadows and sparkles, temporalities and universes, illegible to the perspective of light. An art that – to reiterate Nancy Holt – has done more than put art in the world, but has put the universe in art.

The relation of life to History that Smithson is proposing through his mirrors is what Kusch helps us call negation -- a mechanism Kusch will develop in order to be able to give weight and affirmation to the world and the dimension of life that cannot be seen within the frameworks of History. Kusch – like us – needs a notion of negation because, writing from Argentina and faced with the coloniality of power, he has to wrestle with History (he can’t simply opt out, pretend it isn’t there), yet the terms of the negation are not History’s because the world he is invested in – the world we are invested in – is not encompassed by the City understood as a Patio of Objects.

Kusch’s notion of negation, for example, has little to do with a Hegelian notion of negation because for Hegel what is being negated is strictly within the world of reason, the City understood as Patio of Objects. What Kusch negates, instead, are the
affirmations of History, in order to affirm what these affirmations negate. “La afirmación de la verdad está colocada como una totalización de mi ser a partir de la negación de las circunstancias.”76 (“La affirmation of the truth lies in the totalization of my being given the negation of the circumstances.”) It is what he calls a “perpendicular” or a “symmetrical inversion” of the logics of History.

Diríamos que hay una apertura a dilucidar, por un lado, el enfrentamiento del yo al mundo, y, por el otro, una apertura que apunta un sentido perpendicular, por decir así, simétricamente invertido, en dimensión que trasciende la simple oposición de yo-mundo, para inquirir por problemas de otro orden, más vinculados a la verdad de la existencia.77

(We could say that there is a an opening to elucidate, on the one hand the confrontation of self against the world, and, on the other, a perpendicular kind of opening, symmetrically inverted to put it one way, in the sense that it transcends the simple opposition of self-world, to inquire into problems of another order, more linked to the truth of existence.)

We negate, then, in order not to have to affirm the logic (and world) of History and instead – in the same breath taken – affirm the totality of our-existence-in-the-world.

Smithson’s mirrors are not the shiny surface of a simulacrum that separates us from the world, but the obsidian stone of Tezcatlipoca, the convex mirrors of the Olmecs that he also mentions in the essay, some of the earliest mirrors uncovered by the archaeologies in America.78 They produce an image that if you look into it, it pushes

---

76 Rodolfo Kusch, *Una lógica de la negación para comprender a América*, in Obras Completas Tomo II (Córdoba: Editorial Fundación Ross, 2007), 552.
77 Ibid., 626.
back out, such that what is seen inside the mirror seems to reach out of it, into this
world, reaching back from a world beyond and into this one. These are mirrors that do
not try to trap, or colonize, our mind, but rather work to decolonize the mind by
affirming what the affirmations of history negate. These are mirrors that functions as
portholes to another world, which is this world, augmented.

For what does such a vision see but what was previously unseen, the leopard in
the cat, hidden from Patio view. It is as though the world that was sucked into the
vacuum of the City as Patio of Objects disappears and a whole other world of shadows
and sparkles appears.

In the rear-view mirror [writes Smithson in the Yucatan essay] appears
Tezcatlipoca – demiurge of the "smoking mirror." "All those guidebooks are of no
use," said Tezcatlipoca: “You must travel at random, like the first Mayans; you
must risk getting lost in the thicket, but that is the only way to make art.” 79

In another moment, Coatlicue and Chronos converse.

COATLICUE: You have no future.
CHRONOS: And you have no past.
COATLICUE: That doesn’t leave much of a present.
CHRONOS: Maybe we are doomed to being merely some “light-years” with
missing tenses.
COATLICUE: Or two inefficient memories.
CHRONOS: So this is Palenque.
COATLICUE: Yes; as soon as it was named it ceased to exist.
CHRONOS: Do you think those overturned rocks exist?
COATLICUE: They exist in the same way that undiscovered moons orbiting an
unknown planet exist.

79 Robert Smithson, "Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan," 120.
CHRONOS: How can we talk about what exists, when we hardly exist ourselves?
COATLICUE: You don’t have to have existence to exist.⁸⁰

A confluence of pasts and futures opens up in the other horizons opened up through Smithson’s mirrors. Space and time converge. What comes into view are not just shadows and sparkles as the unseen, but also what Mignolo calls the darker side of the Renaissance, histories that the idealizing perspectives of modernity not only produced but actively worked to obscure from view.⁸¹ In Smithson’s essay we see mentioned for example William Prescott’s *History of the Conquest of Mexico* as well as an entire pantheon of Mayan and Aztec Gods.

While Smithson seems aware that he is following in the footsteps of Prescott, arriving to Mexico from the imperial North, he is trying to find a different kind of relation to this place and his pasts. These pasts and the voices of the people that are buried in the those landscapes are no longer abstracted events on a timeline, but are lived histories that are embedded in the landscape and are activated when one is in relation to them, come to populate the visions of what is felt there, put in relation too to Smithson’s own embodied landscape of memory and experience. “The Jaguar in the mirror that smokes in the World of the Elements knows the work of [Smithson’s friend

---

⁸⁰Ibid., 126.
and fellow artist] Carl Andre,” said Tezcatlipoca and Itzpaplotl at the same time in the same voice “he knows the future travels backwards.”

* * *

If in the representative frame – that idealizing language – we often get the anti-map or the anti-vision as simply opaque, figuring as a limit to the illuminations of our reasoned analysis, Smithson’s writing works as a anti-map of the anti-vision, the tracing of the contours of a world without contours that is the world that opens on the other side of the mirrors.

The world that Smithson maps out of his perceptions forms an “island” what Smithson calls “the unknowable zero island” akin to “other islands of incommensurable dimension” – other “lost worlds” in America: “For example, the Land of Mu, built on ‘shaky ground’ by Ignatius Donnelly in his book Atlantis, The Antediluvian World, 1882, based on an imaginative translation of Mayan script by Diego de Landa.” Smithson’s writings, like these writings, serve as a trace, as a way back into those worlds.

Smithson insists: In the end I take the mirrors away, and all we have is a trace of what is there. And in the end, that is somehow the key to everything. For what we see from the Patio are traces – shadows, sparkles, bit of tree refracted there in the puddle on the ground – but what Smithson is telling us is that behind those ‘traces’ there is a world

---

82 Robert Smithson, "Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan," 123.
83 Ibid.
that is not lost. He has just mapped it for us. If we peer into the mirror or the puddle reflection, there is actually another world there – it is this world, seen from the ground.

And it can only be accessed, he suggests, if we are seeing with our feet.

**Study Four: Walking out of the United States and Into America, or Walking the Spiral Jetty**

Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty* -- an enormous Earth Work made out of over six thousand tons of black basalt rocks which spirals out into the Great Salt Lake of Utah in a counterclockwise spiral -- is something like the culmination of all of the studies his feet have made. The *Spiral Jetty* is a work of the other side of mirrors. A work of visions of the feet. A work of the ground.

“One seizes the spiral,” writes Smithson, “and the spiral becomes a seizure.”

Driving through Utah, it is as though the spiral emerged from the landscape, asking to be built, and when Smithson encountered it there asking to be built, it is as though all his previous perceptive frameworks, still informed by the logics of the Patio, collapse. He feels an earthquake:

About one mile north of the oil seeps I selected my site. Irregular beds of limestone dip gently eastward, massive deposits of black basalt are broken over the peninsula, giving the region a shattered appearance. It is one of the few places on the lake where the water comes right up to the mainland. Under the shallow pinkish water is a network of mud cracks supporting the jig-saw puzzle that composes the salt flats. As I looked at the site, it reverberated out to the horizons to suggest an immobile cyclone while flickering light made the entire landscape appear to quake. A dormant earthquake spread into the fluttering stillness, into a

---

spinning sensation without movement. This site was a rotary that enclosed itself in an immense roundness. From the gyrating space emerged the possibility of the Spiral Jetty. No ideas, no concepts, no systems, no structures, no abstractions could hold themselves together in the actuality of that evidence. My dialectics of site and nonsite whirled into an indeterminate state, where solid and liquid lost themselves together in the actuality of that evidence. It was as if the mainland oscillated with waves and pulsations, and the lake remained rock still.85

The logic of the *Spiral Jetty* is the logic of feet visions. Smithson had a long time fascination with the spiral form, which he explored through his early study of crystals, structures that can seem both highly rational in a traditional sense but that can also quickly diverge and, through an 'error,' unfold according to another, 'dislocated' logic, what Smithson liked to call the logic of the “surd,” a mathematical expression containing one or more irrational roots of numbers, an "irrationality" generated by a "system defeats any kind of system."86

If there is something primordial about the *Jetty*, Smithson makes sure we know that it is also deeply embedded in History. There is all the labor it took to make it Smithson tells us -- a crew with a foreman and bulldozers -- contracts which must be secured in order to do work there, an art world in New York which might sponsor it. Smithson chose to build the *Jetty* just beyond the *Gold Spike Monument*, which he notes commemorates the meeting of the rails of the First Transcontinental Railroad in the solidification of the United States after the Civil War and the signing of the Treaty of

85 "The Spiral Jetty," 146.
Guadalupe-Hidalgo which ended the Mexican-American war. If there ever were a material symbol made to express the logics of the centripetal it would be the transcontinental railroad, literally unifying, or violently pulling together under the frame of the United States, the then dispersed States or territories won through war.

In and against the centripetal visions of the Uniting States, America spirals out. The logic of the Jetty is one of art and life’s dislocation from the logics of History, yet simultaneously it is an anchoring of art and life in the logic of the centrifugal, that logic of a center that gains its orienting potential from the pull of the ground. “After a point,” writes Smithson, describing the scale of the Jetty, the way its spiralling form can also be found in the smallest salt crystals that compose it, “measurable steps (‘Scale...a. originally a ladder; a flight of stairs; hence b. a means of ascent’) descend from logic to the ‘surd state.’ The rationality of a grid on a map sinks into what it is supposed to define."^{87}

The Jetty is designed to be walked and to walk the Spiral, to make the Spiral out into the Great Salt Lake, is to make a world through art that negates History to affirm life as the totality of an untotalizable existence in the world. Walking the Spiral is not a becoming in History. Rather, spiraling out from the grounded horizons of the Jetty is a becoming in what Kusch calls la gran historia (big history), a becoming that draws its informing weight from the moment of contact of feet on earth, the realization that the

^{87} “The Spiral Jetty,” 147.
true time of history is activated in the upward downward pull of that contact, in the
sense that everything that we es/are or hope to become – rests in our mero estar. It is the
becoming of what Kusch calls estar-siendoo, a becoming of eyes closed to the affirmations
of History and eyes opened to the weight of the world, a becoming of day in and day
out, with the garden, community, world, and our mere humanity pressing in.88

Figure 9: Gianfranco Gorgoni, Smithson at Spiral Jetty, 1970.89

Walking the Jetty is neither to arrive linearly at another place, nor wander lightly,
nor to come full circle; it is to make life in counterclockwise spiral. The temporality of

88 Kusch, Una lógica de la negación para comprender a América, 66.
89 From: Robert Smithson, ed. Eugenie Tsai (Berkeley, University of California Press/Whitney Museum
of Art, 2004), Front endsheet.
the Spiral, of walking the Spiral, is the temporality of a life lived-in the world, a life that
eddie into sinkholes of the America's past, that is heavy with the light of the sun and
also with the dark of the night. The poles of static and dynamic do not capture the terms
of this spiraling movement because they try to measure it against the horizons of
History, of life time, and walking the spiral is the time of life, spinning out centrifugally
from the shore... "the time being, in the interim, in the course of time, from day to day,
from hour to hour, until, in due time, and in the fullness of time, time endures, goes on,
remains, persists, lasts, goes by, elapses, passes, flows, rolls on, flies, slips, slides, and
slides by."[

* * *

*Caminhando (Walking)* [writes Lygia Clark, reflecting on her interactive work in
which the participant is asked to cut along the contours of a paper Moebius
Strip] only took on meaning for me once, crossing the countryside by train, I
experience each fragment of the landscape as a temporal totality, a totality in the
process of forming, of producing itself before my eyes, in the immanence of the
moment. The moment, that was the decisive thing. Another time, while watching
the smoke from my cigarette: it was as though time were ceaselessly forging its
path, annihilating itself, remaking itself, continuously...And each time
*Caminhando* wells up in conversation, it gives rise to an actual space and
integrates me into the world. I also find that my architectural attempts, born at
the same time as *Caminhando*, wished to be a connection with the collective
world. This was a matter of creating a new, concrete space-time -- not only in me
-- but for the others. In making them, these architectures, I feel a great fatigue as
though I had worked at it all my life.91

90 Nancy Holt, "The Time Being (For Robert Smithson), Nancy Holt: Sightlines (Berkeley: University of

It is not necessary to travel to the Great Salt Lake of Utah to walk the *Jetty*. It is an orientation, a horizon that unfolds, opening ground in cities, in daily life, in and against the suffocating horizons of History. The *Jetty* is the America that we make walking in relation to History on those Durham streets. The space of making life out of so many spiraling moments. For the *Jetty’s* spiraling horizon is no longer that distant one of life lined up along a road that is trying to reach some distant point, vanishing. It is there in the feeling of the feet sinking into crystal covered ground that is the pavement at night under the street light, the engine of laughter the air which keeps the smoking fire lit, in and against the suffocating horizons of the Patio of Objects.

It is the tenuous, fleeting, glimpsed, horizon of those other Hills that we sing with Ed Roberson, on our way to just this side of that, as the coal cars pass in front of us, taking the mountain with them, on the day we lost our title.

The Hills

Coal piled in the hopper cars draws out a low continuous ridge like the one from which it’s stripped, scraping by at the crossing in town, a horizon so familiar I didn’t see it end. The pickups’ horn chorus of those who did see, focused no further than where they are and on their way to just this side of that, opens the lead for me, and I sing into gear as usual not fully here but at the wheel. We sing something like, the hills
are forever, hill places that know our way.

The truck pulls off. Today, I have no way.
No shiny new shed skin, a sameness thickens
so opaque there are no markings anymore,
nothing’s new but that worn out seeing

has worn in. So close is our same to forever.
Though in the human hand of companies, we read
the hills roll away. We,
as graffiti on the cars’ wall says, have lost. Our title.

(Ed Roberson, "The Hills," 2)92

* * *

"I’m interested in something substantial enough that’s permeate," said Smithson
about his Jetty.93 "Perhaps permeate is a better word than permanent -- in other words
something that can be permeated with change and different conditions." The totalities of
an earth work are not those of art object in the world of the Patio because they are like
our walk, in relation to a world and an existence that can never be captured because it
cannot be totalized. The Jetty is located in land that used to be the home to the Ute
Indians, that used also to be Mexico, in a lake with a higher saline content than the sea
and an ancient, evaporated past that lingers on in its salt. It changes colors with the
seasons. For a time, until very recently, it was entirely submerged under the Lake.

---

93 Moira Roth and Robert Smithson, "An Interview with Robert Smithson (1973)," Robert Smithson
What seeps into the crevices of the jetty we are walking there on Prince street in Durham is the America of the jetty, the salts from the Lake, the weather of different seasons and sunsets, but also its pasts, the voices of those who drove that Great Stake into the ground to mark the joining of the railroad, but also the peak of that Lakewood amusement park rollercoaster sticking out of the overgrown lots behind what is now the supermarket strip in the neighborhood where we walk, and the wailing of ghosts, whispering in the wind and the rustle of the trees. We are not the space-time of realism, but in the Moebius space of Clark’s walking, the seemingly impossible, continuous topology of the knot that is America, the heterogeneous temporalities of a present filled with a past released from History but held in the land.

* * *

Smithson called the jetty Gondwanaland, the Austral Sea, and Atlantis. It is his way not only out of a centripetalizing United States but a way in-to unfolding an America otherwise through his art. And so it is the Jetty, ultimately, that Smithson, studying so furiously with his feet the problems of History, will offer us as a kind of compass as we continue, orienting our relation to History and the unfolding practice of our everyday lives.

Rounding the corner now, up Pierce Street towards Wrightwood, from the spiraling Jetty that Smithson offers us as a way of encountering America, to the project of US History, we offer up a roving cloud of laughing smoke.
Chapter Two: Unfolding Clarice Lispector, or Writing From the Ground

For Adra and Navid.

...In the relationship established between you and the Bicho there is no passiveness, neither yours nor its. There is a type of body-to-body relationship between two living entities. In fact there is a dialogue in which the Bicho has very defined answers of its own for the spectator’s stimuli. This relationship between man and the Bicho, previously metaphorical, becomes real.


What I am writing you is not for reading, it is for being.


The narrator of Água viva writes, “What I am writing you is not for reading, it is for being.”

What does it mean to say that a book is-in the world, that reading and writing become heavy with life? To think with Clarice Lispector is to turn writing and reading into open processes -- forms of engagement -- which unfold through grounded poiesis, in relation to a concrete dynamic time-space that is the indeterminacy of the world, what Kusch calls “esa vida en su aspecto tenebroso” (“that life in its unknowable darkness”) and what Lispector calls the world in all its rawness. It is to think of form as relation with the world, plastic, alive and open, because it is produced out of a loving

---

1 Ibid.
2 Rodolfo Kusch, Anotaciones para una estética de lo americano, 784; Lispector, A Paixão Segundo G.H. (The Passion according to G.H.), 101.
engagement with its weight. This notion of form as lived engagement with the weight of the world applies to both writing and reading, and to the life in which these practices are embedded. Writing from the ground is an encounter akin to unfolding Lygia Clark’s kinetic metal sculptures, *Bichos* (*Critters*). Neither the spectator nor the *Bicho* has complete control over how the form is produced; life unfolds, always in relation to life, illuminating the window in all its specificity.

*Os Fatos Antecedentes (The Preceding Facts): Nothing Comes from Nothing*³

As I will now explain, this story will be the result of a gradual vision – for two and a half years I have been little by little discovering the whys. It is a vision of the imminence of. Of what? Who knows if later on I will know. It is as though I am writing at the same time I am read. I only don’t start with the end that would justify the beginning – as death seems to say about life – because I have to record the antecedent facts.⁴

In my first encounter with Clarice Lispector the text was firmly on the wall. It was in a class and I had to do a presentation on *A hora da estrela* (*The Hour of the Star*). And there we were, me and the book, and I sat and I scratched my head and I made a map of the text and I tried to make sense of it. What could I say about it. What did it mean? And I carried the book with me across the city of Buenos Aires I was living in at the time, on a train, and I shored up in coffee shops and I went to the library, and illuminated its meaning by reading what other people had to say about it, what some

---

³ Fred Moten, “An Ecology of (Eloquent) Things.”
⁴ Lispector, *A hora da estrela*, 16.
philosophers had to say about some of the themes I was seeing in the book. It was about the city, about subjectivity, the production of Patio space.

We were both in the world, me and the book. But somehow (I look back and say now!...because how can I not say this and still have you understand what I am trying to say, what I am going to say next. There is a certain kind of death inherent in registering preceding facts) the book was still the book, and I was still a me trying to make sense of the book. And the world was also something different from me and the book, even though this whole operation was taking place in the world. I say now: there was no ground.

Against my neat map of meaning, life kept falling out:

This isn’t just a narrative,
it’s above all primary life
that breathes, breathes, breathes.5

I have a restless character on my hands who escapes me at every turn and expects me to retrieve her.6

This is life seen by life. I might not make sense but it is the same lack of meaning as a vein which pulses.7

5 Ibid., 17.
6 Ibid., 28.
7 Lispector, Água viva, 14.
It is the work of carpentry.

My Clarice Lispector was asking something else of me because, maybe, I was also asking something else of her. We are two lives meeting, in dialogue. It is as though I am writing at the same time I am read. I carried the pieces that had fallen out with me and more than four years later as I was beginning to write my dissertation, me and Clarice Lispector met again, on different terms. She pulling me in one direction and me pulling her in another, unfolding a meaning together. I spiraled up the sort of spiraling stairwell of my apartment building. The staircase folded back and I was carefully walking up the stairs, slowly, in relation to a person who inhabits the world that deliberately, that presently, pondering that relation.

"It seems to me," reflects Susan Howe, commenting on a line of poet-critics who have influenced her own work, "that as writers they were trying to understand the writers or people...not to explain the work, not to translate it, but to meet the work with writing -- you know, to meet in time, not just from place to place but from writer to writer, mind to mind, friend to friend, from words to words. That's what I wanted to do in My Emily Dickinson. I wanted to do that. Not just to write a tribute but to meet her in tribute. That's a kind of fusion."9

---

8 Lispector, A hora da estrela, 19.
I began to unfold Lispector, with my hands, my head, with my heart and with my gut, as though her words were one of Lygia Clark’s *Bichos*. When the spiral got into my thinking, it started to seem as though Clarice Lispector were offering me the weight of the world. Thinking with Clarice Lispector became grounding aesthetics and a learning to write the world from the ground. This is life seen by life. This is my Clarice Lispector.

*Off the Wall and Into the World: Grounding Aesthetics*

Clarice Lispector is born Chaya Pinkhasovna Lispector in 1920 in the Ukraine, the youngest of three daughters. Her family is Jewish, suffers pogroms during the Russian Civil War that followed the dissolution of the Russian Empire, flees to Romania and then emigrate to Brazil, where her mother had relatives, in 1921. Chaya, renamed Clarice to fit into the new land, was one year old. The family arrives to the Northeastern part of the country: Maceió, Alagoas, moving to Recife in Pernambuco when she was four and to Rio when she was fourteen. In Rio, Clarice studies law, receives a degree in 1939. She marries a diplomat and travels the world with him and their two children: Europe at the end of the second World War, eight years in Washington DC, and then back to Brazil, Rio de Janeiro, in 1960. She will separate from her husband, move to an apartment in Leme, a few blocks from the sea in the southern zone of that city. She will stay in Brazil until her death of ovarian cancer in 1977.
All this time writing, struggling to write, writing: novels, chronicles, translations, short stories.

Lygia Clark is born in 1920 in Belo Horizonte, a city in the Minas Gerais region of Brazil to a conservative middle class family. Clark will marry at age eighteen, an engineer, the couple will move to Rio, have three children. After the birth of her third child, as Laura Harris tells it, and as Clark herself articulates it, at times, she suffers a terrible depression, a 'madness.' She separates from her husband, and, in Rio, in 1947, as well as for a time in Paris, begins to study art. In Rio she play an important role in two significant art movements -- Grupo Frente and the Neoconcrete movement. She will move to Paris to teach at the Sorbonne in the 1970s and return eventually to Brazil in the late 1970s. At this time she will leave the art world entirely and turn to using her art objects in a practice of psychotherapy until her death in 1988.

These two women are living and beginning to make art at a time in Brazil when the Patio is consolidating the art and culture world: museums of modern art in São Paulo (1948) and Rio de Janeiro (1949), "establishing an infrastructure that would bring international art to the country," a burgeoning mass cultural industry, and the reign of a chic new modern, international, constructivist, style: "Abstract geometric and concrete

---

art gradually became the new aesthetic."\textsuperscript{11} This is the post-Gertúlio Vargas Brazil, that had "accumulated significant wealth through the export of raw materials and agricultural products to the Allies during WWII and was welcoming new investments and foreign capital."\textsuperscript{12} The Brazil of a growing middle class and the Brazil of Juscelino Kubitschek and his famous "Fifty years of development in Five" campaign, culminating with the construction of Brasilia, the new modernist capital city carved out in the middle of the Amazon, shaped like an airplane, and designed to launch Brazil into the future.

And they will also live and make art in the Brazil of their later years, the Brazil of a brutal dictatorship that will come into power in 1965 and last until 1985. The Brazil of a number of, underground, counter-cultural "movements" -- marginal poetry, Tropicália music, marginal cinema -- which would challenge the sweeping formalisms of constructivism by insisting on the everyday, on the desires of the body.

Some consider Clarice part of the "Generation of 45," those new poetic voices that surfaced after WWII, after Vargas and the new state, the robust industrializing state, part of the "introspective school" of poets who have rejected the themes of Brazilian identity to embrace more 'universal' themes of modern existence. "For the first time," proclaims São Paulo critic Sérgio Milliet, "a Brazilian author goes beyond simple

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
approximation to this almost virgin field in our literature; for the first time an author penetrates the depths of the psychological complexity of the modern soul.”\textsuperscript{13}

For others the opaque density of her language challenges the foundations on which such a modern soul might rest. "Clarice," says Silviano Santiago, "inaugurates a tradition without fortune, unfortunate, feminine, and -- to top it all off -- subaltern."\textsuperscript{14}
"The plot of Clarice's novels doesn't drain into or flow towards models of nineteenth century literary history. It's a river that inaugurates its own course, like the úroboro serpent which eats its own tail, emptying into the source. Literature is literature -- there you have the most simple and most enigmatic formula with which to learn the meaning of Clarice's inaugural lecture."\textsuperscript{15}

Still others, trying to explain these differences, suggest that perhaps Lispector (and Clark) started out making art, but that they -- and in line with a more generalized crisis in representation around them -- eventually "abandoned" art or literature for something more like pure life.\textsuperscript{16}

I tried to situate the book, [writes Lispector's friend and philosopher José Américo Motta Pessanha after reading an early manuscript of \textit{Água viva}] notations? thoughts? Autobiographical passages? A kind of diary (portrait of the writer in her daily life?). At the end of it I think its all of this at the same time….I

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
had the impression that you wanted to write spontaneously, playfully, a-literarily. Is that so? It seems that, after refusing the artifices of reason (or, better yet, the artifices of rationalization), it as though you also want to reject the artifices of art. To strip yourself, to be yourself, less disguised to your own eyes and to the eyes of the reader. And in that the un-shamefulness in showing your everyday life (mental and otherwise), not uncomfortable with juxtaposing passages from different registers, without being afraid of the trivial. To speak of God and to speak of whatever comes to mind, without picking a theme, without perfecting the form of the writing. Without being a "writer."

Indeed, [writes Laura Harris, Clark] bursts through the confines of art almost as soon as she enters them, leaving the art movements she helps found, leaving painting, the plastic arts and the 'work of art' as she had known it and radically expanding in "propositions" the possibilities of what art could be and do. Always concerned that it might merely be "an activity which will in no way affect the balances of the social structures," insofar as it was continually recuperated by the very forms of social life it sought to challenge, Clark declares at one point that the only option for the artist who wants to do more than this is to leave art and "to seek out a launching of the general creativity, without any psychological or social limit."

Yet what if we didn’t try to resolve things this way. What if, instead of framing Clark and Lispector’s trajectories in terms of a leaving art for life, we considered that, from the very beginning, they were struggling to remake art as life? Packed into this reformulation is no simple thing to explain in Patio vocabulary, but at the root of it is the difference between a grounded poiesis and a Patio mimesis, of a text not just for reading but for being, and an insistence that the relationship between man and Bicho, previously metaphorical, becomes real. At the root of this is the weight of the world.

---

18 Harris, "At the egg’s edge," 169.
Lispector’s literature, Lispector’s life, Clark’s work, Clark’s life, has a capim-like quality to it.

What runs in the cracks?

*   *   *

The pieces that fall out of Clarice Lispector’s text insist on life: they insist on the world. They insist that the book is in the world and that it is therefore alive. Lispector was a writer of stories, a teller of lives, who saw problems with books and with literature and the way they seemed to be positioned as far away from the world, from the life she wanted to tell. Her writing searches for a way out, writing in and against a tradition of Western Letters. Lygia Clark, working in the plastic arts, was also making a way out, and, like Lispector, not simply to be out, not simply to escape, but rather to be in the world. In the name of telling this other life, of making this other world, both women illuminate the prison that is the apparatus of representation and they fight to kick it to the side. We kick it to the side.

*   *   *

Lygia Clark was influenced by Russian constructivism, the Bauhaus and Neo-Plasticism. She studied in Paris with Fernand Léger and Árpád Szenès and in Brazil with Roberto Burle Marx, who was involved with the planning of Brasilia. But she and the other signers of the Neoconcrete Manifesto wanted to make something else, an art that
exploded the logic of constructivism to produce “a new space” in which the concrete, material, living world could come rushing in.

Either the vertical and the horizontal planes really are the fundamental rhythms of the universe and the work of Mondrian is the application of that universal principle, or the principle is flawed and his oeuvre is founded on an illusion. Nevertheless, the work of Mondrian exists, alive and fertile, in spite of such theoretical contradictions. There would be no point in seeing Mondrian as the destroyer of surface, plane, and line if we do not connect with the new space built by his destruction.19

Mondrian, like the Brazilian Concretes, was on to something for the Neoconcretes. He recognized that the representational frame – organization of the world through line, surface, plane - was everything because it was tied to perspective, and that that perspective was the perspective of what Kusch would call the *ser*, born in the Renaissance and set out to dominate the world. Enframing humanized, folded life back onto itself, ensaring it in the trap of the ser. Mondrian moved away from representation, trying to prune, to express, present, life outside of this organizing frame. He tried to push past the dominion of the ser by bringing dynamism, time, movement, seemingly self-generated or organic form, into space of the canvas: *Broadway Boogie-Woogie* (1943).

Through the positioning of color, lines, Mondrian questioned the distinction between figure and ground and tried to insist on art’s worldliness by routing art through the world, instead of through perspective of the *ser*.

But he was still making paintings that hung on wall, a way of saying that the paintings were haunted by the all of the problems of representation: the universal: Man. There was only an intuition of real life in these paintings, an unrecognized sense of ground.

The plane [writes Lygia Clark] is a concept created by man with a practical aim: To satisfy his need for balance. The square, an abstract concept, is a product of the plane. Arbitrarily marking out limits in space, the plane gives man a totally false and rational idea of his own reality. Thus appear opposing concepts such as high and low, the right and the inverse, which contribute towards destroying within man a sense of totality. This is the reason for which man has projected his transcendental side and given it the name of God. Thus he then posed the problem of his existence – inventing the mirror of his own spirituality.20

In her *Discovery of the Organic Line* (1954) and her *Series: Break the Frame* (1954), as well as her *Series: Modulated Surface* (1955-56), Clark freed organic form from the confines of the plane, and this started to change everything because it threw man off balance, into a real relation with the world. To change the axis of the relation between man and the world is to let the world into art. It is to explode the frame and make art from the ground.

---

Figure 10: Lygia Clark, *Descoberta da linha orgânica* (Discovery of the Organic Line), Oil on canvas and wood, 1954.
The line – life – flees the confines of representation. But the crisis of the rectangle was not going to be resolved so easily. It was going to require what Clark – in a letter to Hélio Oiticica – later described as “a genuine rethinking of structure.” This, for Clark, in part, meant leaving the confines of the two-dimensional plane for good and entering into three-dimensional space. To this end, perhaps her most notable early spatial intervention came with Os Bichos (The Critters). Realized over three years (1960 – 63), the Bichos were said to have to have emerged from Clark’s Casulo (Cocoon) (1959-60), an

inflated plane still hung on the wall, from which they “fell” into three dimensional space.

Figure 12: Lygia Clark, *Bicho ponta (Pointed Critter)*, Aluminum, 1960.²³

As Lygia Clark struggled to free the organic line, reading Clarice Lispector’s novels and her short stories there is the feeling of a long and anguished battle going on against the representative enclosure of life. There is an idea that the narrative devices often employed to tell a story about life –plot, character development, grammar, syntax which all rush to the service of rendering what Lispector calls ‘bio’ graphical – kill this life as a painting on a wall.

In Lispector’s first novel, *Perto do Coração Selvagem (Near to the Wild Heart)* (1944), the protagonist reflects:

---

She had no story, Joanna slowly realized, because if things happened to her, they were not her and didn’t mix with her true existence. The main thing – including past, present, future – was that she was alive...This was the backdrop of the narrative. At times this backdrop seems effaced, eyes closed, almost inexistent. But all it took was a tiny pause, a short silence, for it to loom up in the foreground, eyes open, a light, constant burbling like that of water between stones. Why describe more than that?25

In Lispector’s last novel, Um Sopro de Vida (A Breath of Life) (1978), published after her death, the narrator gives two bits of information about the protagonist she is writing, and then throws up her hands: I’m not going to tell you any more. 26

“Who polices questions of grammar, parts of speech, connection, and connotation? Whose order is shut inside the structure of a sentence? What inner articulation releases the coils and complications of Saying’s assertion?”27 How do you tell a meaningful story about a person when what happens to them is that they live in the world: that they are born, they live, they die, ending up of the same stuff in the same stuff they always were. What allows bio to achieve a legible and translatable quality, plotting itself in defined and meaningful points along a narrative arc is a life trapped in the City, a life whose meaning unfolds entirely inside a Patio of Objects, its significance wrapped tightly around education, marriage, lifetime achievements, history. A writing which tells life in such terms entraps it, enclosing it in an overly humanized world. This is the writing of the *ser*, a writing which finds meaning in Western death, which is a way

of saying that meaning can only be found when life is seen from some other moment than the moment of the living.

There is a world, a relation to it, implicit in the making of meaning. What Lispector realizes is what Clark realizes which is that art needs to do something else besides represent or present a life. Even if you say: “they lived” you have already missed the point, folding that life back on to itself, antagonistic to the world. What writing needs is a different kind of relation to the world. Writing needs to be-in the world. It needs to emanate from a heavier place and make its meanings there. To change that relation, we must hook the telling of life into a different circuit, the circuit of life seen by life.

“My world today is raw. It is a world of great vital difficulty” reflects G.H. after encountering a cockroach in her top floor apartment and having its smooth floor crumble, leaving her on the ground at the base of the building.

For, more than a star, I today want the thick black root of stars, I want the fountain that always seems dirty, that is dirty. That is always incomprehensible. I want the material of things. Humanity is drenched in humanization, as though it were necessary. And this false humanization impedes man and impedes his humanity. There exists a thing that is more ample, more silent, more deep, less good, less bad, less pretty. Although this thing also runs the risk that, in our clumsy hands, it becomes transformed into "purity," our hands thick and full of words.²⁸

The first page of *A hora da estrela* (1977) is Clark’s *Breaking the Frame*. It lifts the flaps of the book’s cover and a great ancient wind rushes in, blurring the relationship between book and world, as though the book were not a hermeneutically sealed object and parallel world, but rather a radically open universe that is Clarice’s cosmos.

All in the world began with a yes and a never. One molecule said yes to another molecule and life was born. But before prehistory there was a prehistory of prehistory and there was the never and there was the yes. It was ever so. I don’t know what, but I do know that the universe never began.

Make no mistake, I only achieve simplicity with enormous effort.

As long as I have questions and no answers I’ll keep on writing. How do you start at the beginning if things happen before they happen? If before prehistory there were already apocalyptic monsters? If this story doesn’t exist now, it will. Thinking is an act. Feeling is a fact. Put the two together – It is me that writes what I am writing.29

The world began with a yes, but the world had already began.

Lispector amplifies the scale of *en media res*, narrative jumping into an action already unfolding, beyond human time. It is that a earthly world exceeds the book, and the book opens its gates to it.

O que te escrevo é um "isto." Não vai parar: continua…O que te escrevo continua e estou enfeitiçada.30

(What I write you is a "this." It is not going to stop: it continues…What I am writing you continues and I am under a spell.)

Against my neat map of meaning, life kept falling out:

This isn’t just a narrative,

---

30 Lispector, *Água viva*, 95.
it’s above all primary life
that breathes, breathes, breathes.\textsuperscript{31}

I have a restless character
on my hands who escapes
me at every turn and
expects me to retrieve
her.\textsuperscript{32}

This is life seen by life. I
might not make sense but it
is the same lack of meaning
as a vein which pulses.\textsuperscript{33}

It is the work of carpentry.\textsuperscript{34}

Lispector’s books fall off the wall. She does not cut horizontally, as the terms of reflexive
mimesis suggest. The book does not stand as a representational nor as an abstract
painting. The axis of relation is more like a diagonal, an unfolding in three dimensions.

* * *

The weight of the world – the pull of a quaking earth – is activated in this fall.
The book and the Bicho \textit{are-in} the world and become heavy with its weight. “You were
right when you commented on how other artists are still continuing to make things in
space,” Lygia Clark writes in a 1968 letter to Hélio Oiticica, “There hasn’t been a genuine
rethinking of structure, only its dislocation in space, a moving of its support. They

\textsuperscript{31} Lispector, \textit{A hora da estrela}, 17.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 28.
\textsuperscript{33} Lispector, Água viva, 14.
\textsuperscript{34} Lispector, A hora da estrela, 19.
realize there’s a crisis in the rectangular plane but they trivialize it by merely moving into 3-D space without incorporating any virtuality…expressive force.”

“When one places an object within a space which is too great in relation to it, the space does not stop being empty and dead, but when this object finds its space, then the space that surrounds it is full…At the moment when, breaking the rectangle and virtually inverting the surface, which stops been a thickness of the space and becomes the thread of this space, this expression is now inside this real space in which all the living and cosmological irradiated forces act.”

What Clark describes as the fullness of empty space engages the world as what Kusch, drawing on Andean thought, calls a “space-thing”, the world in its mysterious and charged indeterminacy, “esa vida en su aspecto tenebroso,” ("that life in its unknowable darkness,”) pushing in on all sides, threatening to annihilate us. This, says Kusch, is an understanding of art as being-in the world covered over in hegemonic American art since the Conquest, when a magical art which put itself and man in relation to world as space-thing was covered over by an art which placed itself and man in the empty space of Galileo and the Renaissance. The difference between this magical art and the art of the Renaissance is the difference between an _Atlante de Tula_ or the _Fraile de Tiahuanaco_, which stand with four magic walls exposed to the elements, and Miguel

---

37 Rodolfo Kusch, *Anotaciones para una estética de lo americano*, 784.
Angel’s Moses (1509), which seals itself as though in a tomb. It is the difference between what Kusch calls a defensive, engaged art, an art which *conjures* the world in all its mystery and puts the human in insistent relation to a terrifying and impossible to dominate world that presses in. And what Kusch calls a neutral art of “la cosa en sí,” ("the thing in itself," ) an art of a world with objects, an art whose meanings rest in the neutralization of a world made human and dominatable through technology. It is the difference between the art of the human-in-the-world and the art of the human-only-in-function-of-itself.

Philosophical truth is for Kusch a thought weighed down by a living world -- the unshakeable, elemental dimensions of the a life-in-the-world that seep into the crevices of everyday life. And art – to be true, to be real – must also be alive in this way.

Todo lo que va más allá de este planteo es accesorio. Lo formal, el instrumento, el material utilizado pertenecen al segundo término de la ecuación esencial del arte, o sea a lo social. Lo importante es el primero, la vida y más aún, esa vida en su aspecto tenebroso. Cuando ella falla, o cuando no hay un reconocimiento de lo tenebroso, el arte cae en manos de los realizadores como el actor o el ejecutante y se convierte en juego o también en arte abstracto.38

(Everything that falls outside this point is merely accessory. Questions of form, use, material utilized all belong to a realm of secondary importance to the essence of art - that is, they belong to the social. What is most important is the first realm, life, and even more so, that aspect of life in its unknowable darkness. When that life is not there, or when there is not a recognition of the open darkness, then art falls in the hands of its realizers like an actor or a performer and it turns into a game or also into abstract art.)

38 Ibid.
When Clark and Lispector open their works to the world they are taking art out of its resting place in the Patio and resting it in a much more uncertain, shaky place, a feeling of the world pressing in and pulling down. They invite the world – that life in all of its unknowable darkness - into the artwork. “We dive into the totality of the cosmos; we are part of this cosmos, vulnerable on all sides: Above and below, right and life, in short, good and evil – all concepts are transformed.”

A dynamic space-time pours into Água viva, into A hora da estrela, into the Bichos which are-in the world and there can be no more imperium of form, an attempt to fit the world into some pre-existing mold, trapping life. There is this tension, this weight, a networked production between the work and the world. The forms the Critters take, the forms the texts take, unfold, live-in-relation-to-the-world.

“I have managed to transform the surface of the Bichos into a living organism,” Lygia Clark writes to Hélio Oiticica,

The return to organic materiality comes from this [crisis in the rectangle]. Time is the new direction of artistic expression. It is not mechanical time, rather lived time that brings with it a lived structure. Sincerely and without modesty or exaggeration, I am sure that my Bichos exemplify this.

“I am struggling with the matéria-prima…behind what is behind thought” says the narrator of Água viva, and we have the image of a world in formation, in conjunction

---

39 Lygia Clark, ”The Death of the Plane,” 117.
with the book itself and its narrator.  

“I am’ is the world.” Basic conventions, the literary molds into which the world must ordinarily be fit when writing a novel, seem to be open questions, the forms that will be generated on their own terms through the thing that is forming. “Doesn’t time start now?” the narrator asks, seemingly unsure how to incorporate what appears as an abstract category into the thing she is building.

“Does the word ‘perpetual’ not exist because time doesn’t exist?” she wonders, finally realizing that understanding the abstract parameters of a category like time is not crucial to the task at hand. “It occurs to me suddenly that I don’t need order to live. There isn’t a pattern to follow and there isn’t a pattern: I am born.” The novel has no beginning, middle or end; “Muita coisa não posso te contar,” (“I cannot tell you much”) writes the narrator, “Não vou ser autobiográfica. Quero ser ‘bio’” (“I am not going to be autobiographical. I want to be ‘bio’”). "It is not going to stop: it continues." It never pauses and stops or ‘cosifies’ or ‘thingifies’ but rather, as if to avoid this, it breaths, or articulates itself with breath, as though this were a book that was a living thing. “Is this next instant made by me?” asks the narrator, "or does it make itself? Let’s make it together by breathing.” Its narrator at times takes advantage of the space on

41 Lispector, Água viva, 13.
42 Ibid., 37.
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid.
45 Ibid., 35.
46 Ibid., 95.
the page to create a respiratory form which is never uniform, but present, or perhaps simply: here.

But the most important word in the language has but two letters. Is. Is.
I am at its core.
I still am.
I am at the living soft center.
Still.48

The narrative form takes on a plastic quality, in the sense that there is the idea of an immanent relationship between form and life.49

*The Worldly Weight of Making: The Consequences of Writing World From the Ground*

Figure 14: Lygia Clark, *Caminhando (Walking)*, Scissors, tape and paper, 1963.50

"And each time *Caminhando (Walking)* wells up in conversation," reflected Lygia Clark about her interactive work in which the participant is asked to cut along the contours of a paper Moebius strip, a work that she did in association with a number of

48 Ibid., 28.
other architectural explorations just after the *Bichos*, "it gives rise to an actual space and integrates me into the world. I also find that my architectural attempts, born at the same time as *Caminhando*, wished to be a connection with the collective world. This was a matter of creating a new, concrete space-time -- not only in me -- but for the others. In making them, these architectures, I feel a great fatigue as though I had worked at it all my life."\(^{51}\)

What is at stake in these feelings of space, these understandings of space, as it at stake in all understandings of space, debates about whether it is a void or an extension, is not just an abstract question of what space is, but rather a radical remaking of our relation to the world.

Ground is not only *grund*, support for a standing being, but also *suelo*, that *being-in* an indeterminate world, heavy with "ese aspecto tenebroso" of life. It is the careful cutting of path through world as Moebius strip. It is deformation as form, pulled by the weight the world exercises upon the relation, the place where life meets the weight of the world and constellates through culture otherwise modes of being and making the world. Art is no longer object in Patio but grounded poiesis, making of life in the world, crucial to politics which is the unfolding of collective life in the world, in relation to the world.

The *Critters* look like abstract sculptures [writes Yve-Alain Bois]. With the black-and-white paintings of the 1950s they are in appearance her most excitable and most photographic works. But one should not be deceived; they are inaccessible to anyone not engaged in combat with them, to anyone not unfolding them. The conflicting directions of the hinges connecting their many plates forces you to make certain movements and prevent you from making others, and this ways unexpectedly; they turn inside out like a glove, for example, without your wanting them to or even thinking it possible.\(^{52}\)

Clark makes the *Bichos* out of a seemingly inert aluminum, but she insistently calls them *Bichos*, animate lives in the world. "When asked how many movements the *Bicho* can make, I answer: 'I don't know, you don't know, but it knows..."\(^{53}\)

The *Bicho* is-in the world and someone encounters it – as I encounter a friend, as I encounter Clarice Lispector. And the form the relation produces – what friendship means – unfolds, open, changing, contingent. But also always in relation to the world, the life that is us, and that is also more than us, pulling the whole unfolding back down into to the world.

Ximena Dávila and Humberto Maturana understand love as a relational dynamic that emerges out from a place of radical acceptance of the world. "That act of seeing without prejudice, without demand, without expectancy, is the amorous act. And we can only achieve it through a different way of looking. Or, if I am looking from the same place as where our culture is in a linear, causal epistemology, with a reality that is independent from me – those things happen out there – then I am not going to enter into

---

\(^{52}\) Ibid., 86.

a space in which we are generating the world in which we live. Love continues to be a discourse — and not a relational dynamic that has to do with looking at the other as a legitimate being in coexistence with you.”

Unfolding Bicho is not a love that emerges from the subjective position of the ser. It is the love that Dávila and Maturana describe, love from the place of a quaking earth, the love of radical acceptance of the weight of the world pressing in on you. Seeing the – green leaf - green leaf – red leaf - green leaf – of the plant in the world gives each of its particularities the weight of falling in love; they absorb you like the toe or the elbow of the one who is dear to you.

Gosto de intensidades. Tomo conta do menino que tem nove anos de idade e que está vestido de trapos e magérrimo. Terá tuberculose, se é que já não a tem. No Jardim Botânico, então, fico exaurida. Tenho que tomar conta com o olhar de milhares de plantas e árvores e sobretudo da vitória-régia. Ela está lá. E eu a olho.

Repere que não menciono minhas impressões emotivas: lucidamente falo de algumas das milhares de coisas e pessoas das quais tomo conta. Também não se trata de emprego pois dinheiro não ganho por isto. Fico apenas sabendo como é o mundo.

Se tomar conta do mundo dá muito trabalho? Sim. Por exemplo: obriga-me a lembrar do rosto inexpressivo e por isso assustador da mulher que vi na rua. Com os olhos tomo conta da miséria dos que vivem encosta acima. Você há de me perguntar por que tom cor conta do mundo. É que nasci incumbida.

Tomei em criança conta de uma fileira de formigas: elas andam em fila indiana carregando um mínimo de folha. O que não impede que cada uma comunique alguma coisa à que vier um direção oposta. Formiga e abelha já não são it. São elas.

---

55 Lispector, Água viva, 60-61.
(I like intensities. I look after the book who is nine years old and dressed in rags and all skin and bones. He will get tuberculosis, if he doesn’t already have it. In the Botanical Gardens, then, I get worn out. With my glance I must look after thousands of plants and trees and especially the giant water lily. It’s there. And I look at her.

Note that I don’t mention my emotional impressions: I lucidly speak about some of the thousands of things and people I look after. Nor is it a job because I don’t earn any money from it. I just get to know what the world is like. Is it a lot of work to look after the world? Yes. For example: it forces me to remember the inexpressive and therefore frightening face of the woman I saw on the street. With my eyes I look after the misery of the people who live on the hillsides.

You will no doubt ask me why I look after the world. It’s because I was born charged with the task.

As a child I looked after a line of ants: they walk single file carrying a tiny piece of leaf. That doesn’t keep each one from communicating something to the ones coming the other way. Ant and bee are now not it. They are they.)

In this process of writing as loving tracing there is a great humility – the writer is not first, but rather must wait for the world. She must write it as it appears to her in this state of waiting for it, and it makes her tired, weary almost with its weight. The world is Bicho. Its lines pull in and out. There is no distance here of mimesis. No overarching telos. There is the world irregularly. There is a falling of perception down into the world: “Formiga e abelha já não são it. São elas.”

In Água viva figurative language fills up with the everyday, and it circles back, moves me to the world which the is everyday full of the now-instant, the “it” that the book moves in relation to. “In this now instant I’m encompassed by a drifting desire, diffuse with wonder and thousands of sun reflections in the water, which runs from a spout in the grass of a garden fully ripe with perfume, a garden in shadows which I
invent right now and which are the concrete means of speaking in this my own instant in life.”56 “I write round, turbulent, and tepid, but sometimes cold like the fresh instants, the stream water trembling on its own riverbed.”57

Words, says Lispector, are bait, meaty with the world, the riverbed that they catch in their telling.58 They entangle us in the world because they are it. They are not aiming for transcendence. The mountain is the mountain. The mountain is god.

No era una apariencia o una ilusión visual que remitiera a otra parte, a un ‘más allá’. En este sentido, el ixiptla se situaba en las antípodas de la imagen: subrayaba la inmanencia de las fuerzas que nos rodean, mientras que la imagen cristiana, por un desplazamiento inverso, de ascenso, debe suscitar la elevación hacia un dios personal, es un vuelo de la copia hacia el prototipo guiado por la semejanza que los unía...Desconocer esta diferencia es condenarse a no comprender la confusión que desencadenó la Conquista. Ahí donde los cristianos buscaban ídolos, los indios no conocían sino ixiptla.59

(It was not an appearance or a visual illusion that refers to another part, a ‘beyond’. In this sense, ixiptla was situated in the antipodes of the image: it insisted on the immanence of the forces that surround us, while the Christian image, through an inverse displacement, of ascent, prompts a carrying up [of the referent] towards a personal god, it is the flight of the copy towards the prototype guided by the similarity that unifies them...To not know this difference is to condemn oneself to not understand the confusion that was unleashed with the Conquest. The Christians looked for idols and the indians knew only ixiptla.)

56 Ibid., 17.
57 Ibid., 11.
58 Ibid., 22.
“That expression ‘form-content’ always vitally disagreed with me” notes Lispector in a rare academic conference presentation, “without ever pausing to think about it very much, I rejected this model as one in which, as though after having vertically cut a hair, one insists that the string of hair is composed of two halves. Well the string of hair doesn't have two halves, unless they are made, like the division between form and content is sometimes a thesis for a paper or an instrument used to study.”

“This text that I give you isn't for being seen up close... It acquires its secret roundness previously invisible when it is seen from an airplane flying high over it. Then scatterings of islands, canals, and oceans can be seen.” Pulling back from the work only grounds it further: islands, canals, and oceans are the concrete materiality of abstraction. “In none of this does the abstract exist. It is the figurative of the unnameable.”

Grounded aesthesis is an embedded entangled way of seeing, of being-in the world, the immanence of encounter that is Ed Roberson and the mountain, unfolding each other.

Bend

(among twenty snowy...)

that unfolds the road through the pass has

---

60 “Literatura de vanguarda no Brasil,” in Outros Escritos (Rio de Janeiro: Rocco 2005), 98.  
61 Lispector, Água viva, 27.  
62 Ibid., 81.
that point where you leave
the whole side of one

mountain
back on the other side

for this one as
it’s all of any side you can see

that simple that
huge one

migratory origami
fold

No one notices
your eye a black history have to do this.63

(Ed Roberson, "Bend," 1).

*     *     *

Form is the irregular line that is drawn as one life meets another, but it is not entirely random. Olga Borelli, who helped Lispector piece Água viva together, called her method for editing the book “breathing together, it’s breathing together.”64 The form of life is life and this is what keeps it alive.

“’I don’t know where you get this business of gathering vs. dispersing,’” [Aunt Nancy] argued, turning to a fellow from the radio station. “The sense of them as an either/or proposition, one choice against the other.” “We inhale as well as

63 Ed Roberson, "Bend," Closest Pronunciation.
exhale, the heart dilates as well as contracts. Those of us in the band want music that shows similar signs of life.”

But eternally is a very hard word: it has a granitic “t” in the middle. Eternity: for everything that is never began. My small ever so limited head bursts when thinking about something that doesn’t begin and doesn’t end – for that is the eternal. Happily this feeling doesn’t last long because I can’t take it if it lingers and if it stayed it would drive me mad. But the head explodes to think the opposite: something that has started, well, where did it start? And that ended – but where does it go after it ends? As you can see, it is impossible to go deeper and take possession of my life, it is in the air, it is my light breathing. But I know what I want here: I want the inconclusive. I want profound organic disorder which nevertheless gives the feeling of an underlying order. The grand potential of potentiality. These stuttered sentences are made as they are being written and they crackle for being so new and still green. They are the now. I want the experience of a lack of construction. Although this my text is traversed from end to end by a conductor thread – which? that of diving into the material of the word? That of passion? Luxurious thread, I blow and it warms the unfolding of the syllables.

“I preferred Água viva, a thing that bubbles. At the source,” said Clarice Lispector about the title of her book. The surface of the stream is a kaleidoscope of color but underlying it is a riverbed. Although the narrator wants to break free and be spontaneous -- “I want the experience of a lack of construction” – the text remains grounded in the circuitry of life seen by life: “completely traversed from point to point by a fragile conductor wire.”

---

66 Lispector, Água viva, 26 - 27.
67 Clarice Lispector, quoted in Benjamin Moser "Breathing Together/Introduction," xiii.
“This is the word of someone who can’t.”  

“I don’t direct anything. Not even my own words. But it is not sad: it is a happy humility. I, who live to the side, am to the left of who enters. And the world trembles inside me.”

The “overly humanized” human steps to the side to open up a space for the ground, for the structuring presence of the world. It is because the writing unfolds in relation to the world that it remains alive. It does not reign in, fold back. It unfolds-in-relation-to. The world.

As you see, it is impossible to take possession of my life, it is in the air, it is my light breathing.

“Because,” insists Olga Borelli, "there is a logic in life, in events, as there is in the book. They follow one another. They must. Since if I took a fragment and wanted to move it further ahead, there wouldn’t be anywhere to put it. It was like a puzzle. I took all the fragments and collected them, kept them in an envelope. On the back of a check, a piece of paper, a napkin…I still have some of those things at home, and some of them still even smell of her lipstick. She would wipe her lips and then stick it in her purse…Suddenly she noted something down. After collecting those fragments, I started to note, to number them. So it’s not difficult to structure Clarice, or it’s infinitely difficult, unless you commune with her and already are in the habit of reading her.”

---

68 Lispector, Água viva, 34.
69 Ibid.
70 Lispector, A Paixão Segundo G.H., 11.
71 Lispector, Água viva, 26.
72 Quoted in Benjamin Moser, "Breathing Together/Introduction," xii.
When you write from the ground there is no such thing as the formless. What structures the book, its logic, is life in its “aspecto tenebroso.” Perhaps that should not be called a logic, but it is a structuring tension, a compromise with the world which offers the unfolding relation, the writing, the weight of the world: this is life seen by life.

Well, things went on pretty much like that, back and forth, for three hours or so. I’d go into more detail – and maybe some other time I will – but I’ve begun to get hungry, so I have to bring this to a halt. But that reminds me: You may be wondering what Penguin had to say during the press conference. I forgot to tell you he wasn’t there. Yesterday, as you know, was John Coltrane’s birthday. Penguin, by way of homage and celebration, insisted on eating three sweet-potato pies, just as Trane did one afternoon in Georgia in the late forties when he was in the Cleanhead Vinson band. We all warned him but he wouldn’t listen, so he ended up sick and had to have his stomach pumped.73

*   *   *

And then.

What?

When the world looks so bleak, when dictatorship is pressing in. When you are dying of cancer. How can this kind of writing with streams and riverbeds and stars and cosmologies change any of those things? Why anguish so to write?

Lispector will do some things that are easily legible as politics. She will march with other important intellectuals in the “March of One Hundred Thousand” against the dictatorship; she will write some public letters. But they are few. And, especially in the years of the dictatorship, she is attacked for not being more politically compromised.

73 Mackey, From a Broken Bottle, 13.
Henfil, the cartoonist for the popular satirical magazine *O Pasquim*, buried Clarice Lispector in 1972 in his famous "Cemetery of the Living Dead" where he put people for failing to be sufficiently engaged.74 "The attack occasioned protests, including from the writer herself. In the next issue Henfil drew a fretting and hysterical Clarice" under a glass dome, washing her hands, surrounded by birds and flowers, while the crucifixion of Christ is happening outside.75

She ended up in the Cemetery, Henfil wrote, because she was a reincarnation of Pontius Pilate, “a simple writer about flowers, birds, people, the beauty of life...While Christ was being crucified."76

Julio Lerner asks Lispector, leans in: why, why why do you write?77 And it is barely perceptible her response. She is slouched in her chair, she is so closed. She is dying. Benjamin Moser tells us that she didn’t want to be there, that the interview wasn’t planned.78 The colors are yellows, browns, reds. Books don’t change anything...I don’t write to change anything. She is attacked and ridiculed for not being more politically compromised.

74 See also for example: Suzi Frankl, "Jovem com Ferrugem," Os Pobres na Literatura Brasileira (São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1983), 155 - 6. "[Macabéa..suffers from an] incompetence for class struggle...Macabéa’s luxuries are characteristic of Clarice’s other characters. They are completely gratuitous...Disconnected from the world and from themselves, they don’t have memory of the past, nor of the social present, nor of the future. They don’t have history, nor are they inserted into history.”
75 Benjamin Moser, *Why This World*, 325.
76 Ibid.
78 Moser, *Why This World*, 370.
Put under a glass dome of meaning, the apparatus of representation closing in around her texts, my Clarice Lispector responds with a prayer.

É uma alegria tão profunda. É uma tal aleluia. Aleluia, grito eu, aleluia que se funde com o mais escuro uivo humano da dor de separação mas é grito de felicidade diabólica. Porque ninguém me prende mais. Continuo com capacidade de raciocínio – já estudei matemática que é a loucura de raciocínio – mas agora quero o plasma – quero me alimentar diretamente da placenta. Tenho um pouco de medo: medo ainda de me entregar pois o próximo instante é o desconhecido. O próximo instante é feito por mim? Ou se faz sozinho? Fazemo-lo juntos com a respiração. E com desenvoltura de toureiro na arena.79

(It’s with such profound happiness. Such a hallelujah. Hallelujah, I shout, hallelujah merging with the darkest human howl of the pain of separation but a shout of diabolic joy. Because no one can hold me back now. I can still reason – I studied mathematics, which is the madness of reason – but now I want the plasma – I want to eat straight from the placenta. I am a little scared: scared of surrendering completely because the next instant is the unknown. The next instant, do I make it? or does it make itself? We make it together with our breath. And with the flair of the bullfighter in the ring.)

Writing is a hallelujah. It is a conjuring up of the world in all of its terrifying indeterminacy, and with this, it is also carrying us through that world. The book is a whistle.

"There is a need then, writes Terry Eagleton, describing the Kantian imaginary, which neither politics nor morality can fulfill, to promote a unity between individuals on the basis of their subjectivity; and it is this which the aesthetic can provide. If the

79 Lispector, Água viva, 9.
aesthetic is a vital register of being, it is in part because of the reified, abstract, individualist nature of the moral and political spheres.  

But...Art is not going to *save* anything! Art can only save something that is broken, and what is really broken is the circuit in which we consider art, as separate from life, as rushing back in to suture back up a supposedly fractured social. Whose social is this? Whose world? "There exists a thing that is more ample, more silent, more deep, less good, less bad, less pretty."  

It was, and is, inconceivable in the African culture," writes Amiri Baraka, "to make a separation between music, dancing, song, the artifact, and a man’s life or his worship of his gods. Expression issued from life, and was beauty. But in the West, the triumph of the economic mind over the imaginative, as Brook Adams said, made possible this dreadful split between art and life. Hence, a music that is an "art” music as distinguished from someone who would whistle while tilling a field. 

What does the whistling song mean? The whistle doesn’t mean. The whistle doesn’t not mean. This is an odd axis on which to consider the meaning of the whistle.

---

80 Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, 84.
"Those aren't things I have in front of me," says Kusch, "but an existence."83 The whistle makes.

In one sound the whistle conjures up the indeterminacy of the world, of life, and it also, in the same sound, offers a provisional shelter from it, securing our humanity in the face of the world. Not our overly humanized humanity. Our humanity. In the world. The book is-in the world. The book is whistle grounding.

Michael Fried looks at this 'new' kind of art like Lygia Clark’s that seems to be emerging around him in the 1950s, an art that has left the museum and is, he says, in the world. He writes of literalist art, the theatrical presence of minimalist art.84 But Michael Fried is still in the world of the Patio. To say that this is all performance is to linger in the apparatus of representation. “The relationship between Man and Bicho, previously metaphorical, becomes real.”85 It is miss the circuit of life seen by life. It is to miss the Bicho as Hallelujah. Clark’s Bichos, along with the spectator turned participant who plays with them, actively unfold a different kind of space: life in the world.

Tudo no mundo começou com um sim.
Uma molécula disse sim a outra molécula e nasceu a vida.86

(All in the world began with a yes.
One molecule said yes to another molecule and life was born.)

83 Rodolfo Kusch, *Una lógica de la negación para comprender a América*, 553.
85 Lygia Clark, "Bichos," 121.
To write is to say yes to the world. "Poiesis is etymologically derived from the ancient term which means 'to make.' This word, the root of our modern 'poetry,' was first a verb, an action that transforms and continues the world. Neither technical production nor creation in the Romantic sense, poietic work reconciles thought with matter and time, and person with the world."87

...Mas antes da pré-história havia a pré-história da pré-história e havia o nunca e havia o sim. Sempre houve. Não sei o que mais sei que o universo jamais começou.88

(..But before prehistory there was a prehistory of prehistory and there was the never and there was the yes. There was always something. I don’t know what, but I do know that the universe never began.)

To write from the ground is to say yes and no to the world at the same time as the world says yes and no to you.

Grounded poiesis is to insist on Bicho, to insist on making as unfolding a world which also unfolds us. And that somewhere in that tension, that pull that is the action of unfolding, is actually the secret of keeping the world, the writing, the form of life that is life, and yourself alive. For if you step out, you try to dominate, you try to impose, be fancy, impress, if you stop feeling that tremor of the quaking earth, the thing you and the world are making dies a Western death along with a small piece of you and the world.

88 Lispector, A hora da estrela, 15.
Writing from the ground unfolds the world in love. We do not only write books. We write life, always in relation to life. But this is not just up to Clarice Lispector.

Escravo neste instante com algum prévio pudor por vos estar invadindo com tal narrativa tão exterior e explícita. De onde no entanto até sangue arfante de tão vivo de vida poderá quem sabe escorrer e logo se coagular em cubos de geléia trêmula. Será essa história um dia o meu coágulo? Que sei eu. Se há veracidade nela – e é claro que a história é verdadeira embora inventada – que cada um a reconheça em si mesmo.89

(I’m writing in this instant with a bit of previous shame because I’m invading you with such an exterior and explicit narrative. Out of which however blood so pantingly full of life might ooze and instantly congeal in cubes of trembling jelly. Will this story someday become my own congealing? How do I know. If there’s any truth in it – and of course the story is true though invented – may everyone recognize it inside themselves.)

89 Ibid., 16.
Chapter Three: "So on This Ground / Write": The Worldly Weight of Words

...is very very very difficile to find the words -- 'the right words?' -- to fit these things, these drifting continents of feeling, drifting (g) like in the night -- where other images/pressures begin to impinge/impose themselves -- creating, in a strange way, an unhinging process -- an unhinging (g) like the archipelago itself -- a metaphorical chip ping away of it -- hence (itself a 'strange' word but part of this 'ne(w)/old 'Europe' world) at one level -- X/Self --

-Kamau Brathwaite, Conversations with Nathaniel Mackey, 1997

Words. It is all they have given me. My inheritance. My condemnation. Ask that they revoke it. How? With words.

/ Words are my particular absence. As in the famous <<muerte propia>> there is in me an autonomous absence made of language. I do not understand language and it is the only thing I have. I have it, yes, but I am not it.

-Alejandra Pizarnik, "Letter to Ivonne Bordelois," 1963

An Invocation

"So on this ground / write" writes Kamau Brathwaite in his poem "Vèvè"

within the sound
of this white limestone vèvè.

(Brathwaite, "Vèvè," 265)

And in writing his poem in the ground and sound of the white limestone Vèvè, it is as though he offers his poem as Vèvè, as a practice of resurrecting the Word through

---

grounded poiesis. A gesture, an attempt, which dialogued with, made flower, the seed of what another American poet, Nathaniel Mackey, articulates as his previous attempts to think what he calls the “animate word” in the African pantheon, the Nummo, or the Word in Dogon cosmology, and in relation to his own writing and poetry.

I had been reading Conversations with Ogotemmêli, Marcel Griaule’s book on the Dogon sage Ogotemmêli, and the various tales about attitudes towards the Nummo, the Word, were very resonant and powerful for me, and I saw something like that happening in The Arrivants. I would later read essays by Kamau in which he in fact alludes to, or speaks directly, of Ogotemmêli and the Dogon, but I didn’t know it at that time. One of the places where some of these things spoke to me is towards the end of The Arrivants, towards the end of Islands (the third part of The Arrivants), there is a poem called ‘Vèvè,’ and it takes its title from the word for the usually chalk or cornmeal inscription that is put on the ground in Haitian voudoun rites, and they are ways of invoking the loa, the orisha, the deities.²

Reading Mackey speak about the poem, a seed in me sprouts as well, for it connects to a subterranean feeling I have, gives me a way to think about the weight of the world that I have been feeling in the writing of two other American writers and poets, Clarice Lispector and Ed Roberson. For to me the poem, written in the space and the sound of the white limestone Vève, seems to lift itself out of the pages of the book and inscribe itself on the ground, itself becoming a kind of Vève, a grounded inscription like the sweep of broom on beach sand in a morning ritual that conjures the gods, the past, and the indeterminate material mystery of the world. That the reader of the poem is put in relation to, invited to inhabit as though stepping into the ritual space opened by the

² In Kamau Brathwaite, ConVERSations with Nathaniel Mackey, ed. Chris Funkhouser (Staten Island, NY: We Press, 1999), 21.
Vèvè, the poem conceived as a lived architecture of existence whose meaning unfolds and takes on weight in and through the practice of an everyday life grounded, lived-in the world.

When the poem works as Vèvè, tracing words as conjuring chalk lines onto cement, Brathwaite offers,

the Word becomes
again a god and walks among us
look, here are his rags,
here is his crutch and his satchel
of dreams; here is his hoe and his rude implements
on this ground
on this broken ground.

("Vèvè," 266).

Is this not a kind of complex resurrection of the Word, I think, I ask, reading those words, reading the poem, whose sacred power is invoked by this Jesus-like god who walks in rags among us in the poem, but, I think, I ask, whose meaningful weight is not ultimately underwritten by a Christian belief system, but instead, for Brathwaite, by this broken ground that is the visible and invisible world, laden with the blood of the past and the totality of an untotalizable existence in an America where Christianity -- and Christian ideas of Word and World -- came with colonization and come to mean otherwise in the creole practices and cosmologies of Haitian voudoun. This is “the

3 Brathwaite, The Arrivants.
What emerges for me in Brathwaite’s poem is a resurrected Word, an animate Word -- a living Word -- a word which is powerful in that it can conjure like a Vèvè, but is also humble, an inscription that pleads no permanence, made with the knowledge that it will be washed away with rain, or, as with the sweep of the broom on the sand, with the coming of the tide or a storm. An inscription, a Word, animate because it carries in it -- and helps make -- all the weights of a life lived-in the world.

"So on this ground / write" says Brathwaite, and I invoke his poem here to begin this chapter because I see in it his call to situate the Word "on this ground / on this broken ground" a search to ground language, to decolonize language, by grounding it in the world, to wrestle the Word away from the emptiness of being it comes to acquire in a Western tradition of books and letters that he has -- that I have -- been brought up, educated, to work and write in --

-- my -- [says Brathwaite] -- major (colonial) damnation & ambiguous education and influence -- the major conscious (‘daylight’ / ‘lux ex occidente’) educational influence: Europe, our Euro pean/?European (in my case English (?)) education...that which leads us, teases us out to what we are - which = what we are not --

---

4 Ibid., 265.
5 Brathwaite, ConVERSations with Nathaniel Mackey, 110. Emphases in original.
Wrestling the Word away from an epistemic regime and vision of the world in which it acts as problematic knife that cuts us out of life and colonizes us by separating those under the rule of its Kingdom from the flesh of life -- the Word conceived as my absence, says Pizarnik, echoing Brathwaite from another American ground and set of experiences, some thousands of miles away.⁶

To rest it on, to build it out of, on what Mackey conceives of as a rickety, creaking -- discrepant -- foundation of an indeterminate, mysterious, noisy, world.⁷ Not the smooth floor which underwrites the visible visions of the Renaissance, but the ground. A Word, then, which can affirm the totalities of an untotalizable existence of the centrifugal life in that America we walked with Robert Smithson, spiraling counterclockwise into the Great Salt Lake with his Jetty. A Word, then, which can affirm the life that drops out of what is affirmed by History -- "these drifting continents of feeling, driftin(g) like in the night -- where other images/pressures begin to impinge/impose themselves...."

It is in this desire to acknowledge a Word that can affirm life otherwise – a word that is heavy with the weight of the world -- that Brathwaite not only speaks to Mackey, but also to Lispector, Pizarnik, Smithson, Roberson, and to me. In different sites across

---

the Americas – and always traversed by the particularities of these sites, historical moments, and our embodied lives – we are struggling with a similar colonial legacy of the way the Word, language, the sign, and writing have been colonized to mean, and in our own ways are attempting to wrestle it away from hegemonic circuits of meaning into the world, onto the ground ultimately, because the Word lives.

What Mackey and Brathwaite remind me through their own turn to the Vèvè is that to think something like the animate word reveals that the hermeneutical frameworks that come part and parcel with Western philosophies of language often fall short, embedded as they are within the Patio of Objects. By inscribing his poem in the space and sound of the Vèvè, Brathwaite and Mackey insist that we need to realize that in America there circulate other understandings of language and Word which we can place ourselves in solidarity with as we think the Word otherwise, from the ground. While an author like Clarice Lispector does not so deliberately inscribe her writing in these alternative genealogies of reading and writing as Brathwaite does, as we begin to unpack how incongruous the weight of her words seems to be with the Western tradition of the letter that came to colonialize America, it is useful to keep the Vèvè in our heads because it offers us another point of departure for thinking the weight of words, one which in conjunction with Lispector’s and Roberson’s own words, can direct us to the ground.

* * *

140
As Brathwaite suggests in his insistence in the above epigraph that this inability to find the right word unhinges everything, including previous conceptions of himself, this decolonization of language is no easy task. It is not just a matter of finding a better word, a new word to fit those drifting continents of feelings, but it must actually be to make language work and mean otherwise, and that this means also making ourselves otherwise. Or to say this another way, language is at the heart of the colonial question because how we write and speak the world cannot be separated from how we make it, and so the struggle to remake language is at the kernel of the struggle to decolonize ourselves and our world.

Decolonizing language through language involves all of the anguish, intensity, and tension that I find impossible not to perceive when I read Lispector’s writing, a tension which I understand as generated between wanting to speak a language that affirms the totality of an untotalizable existence that is a life lived-in the world, yet having the tools of a language which works to affirm another kind of existence completely, an existence underwritten by the language we are continuously cut from life by. As Pizarnik says above: "Palabras. Es todo lo que me dieron. Mi herencia. Mi condena. Pedir que la revoquen. ¿Cómo pedirlo? Con palabras."

Or, as Brathwaite puts it in another moment of his conversation with Mackey: Liberation from language, through language, is “complex” in that -- because of the coloniality of power -- we cannot simply opt for another language, side with the Mother
as Brathwaite describes it, decide to speak the feminine -- but also must wrestle with, come to terms with, the Father, reposition ourselves in relation to His-story -- never able to eliminate it entirely in order to tell our story. As Kusch might say, we need a language that, in the same breath taken, negates History to affirm the totality of an untotizable existence buried under the floor of the Patio of Objects. And in all this -- because of all this -- the recognition that, words are worth fighting for.

Just as Mackey and Brathwaite, Lispector and Roberson, wrestle with the Word, becoming exasperated at times -- “I must be careful” said Roberson, “I must set the precarious words. like rocks. without one snowcapped mistake” -- this chapter, then, is my own wrestling with the Word in order to articulate the connection between my writing, language, and the ground. It was brought about by a desire to understand and better explain the weight I perceive in Lispector’s and Roberson’s words, to think through what it could mean that a word could become heavy with the world -- to think, in short, how it is that a text or a work of art might be said to live. Because while it is perhaps easy enough to envision how a piece of artwork can fall off the wall and into the three dimensional space of the world, activating the mysterious indeterminacy of the world as space-thing in the fall, as do Lygia Clark’s Bichos, it is more difficult to grasp

---

8 ConVERSations with Nathaniel Mackey, 111.
how a book or a dissertation chapter might claim to be similarly heavy or alive, its
structures of meaning -- its weight -- activated by the ground.

I was also hoping that ideas -- such as the concrete materiality of abstraction, or
the figurative of the unnameable, or a book named Água viva (Living water) -- that came
up in working with the writing of Lispector, and which only seemed like peculiar
paradoxes when seen from the Patio of Objects, might be elaborated when language is
considered from the ground. My own wrestling with the Word, then, is an attempt to
articulate or account for the stuff -- the words -- out of which the dissertation is made,
explaining how, like Lispector's A hora da estrela "this isn't just a narrative, but above all a
primary life that breathes, breathes, breathes."10

Such an exploration of language is not intended to be an abstract or merely
theoretical observation about the way language works but rather emanates from a
concern about the relation to the world that language helps us make. It is desire for an
otherwise literacy or way of reading the world and word than we are taught in the Patio.
It is about trying to understand the potentialities of words to make and hold deep
meanings -- to hold the inside them the weights of the world -- and in that way as being
about more than the continuation or disruption of life on the Patio, but as about being
actually able to help us make our world otherwise from the ground.

*   *   *

10 Lispector, A hora da estrela, 17.
What my wrestling with the word involves is first a negation, a taking a look at the sign from above, or the idea of Word in which meaning is structured by what man pretends he can know about the world, generated through a totalized circuit of representation, in the visions of the world seen from the City as a Patio of Objects, a foundation for word and world which underwrote the project of colonial capitalism in America. This is an understanding of Word in which language is a thing only of humans, and words are empty and sharp, reinforcing man’s separation from the world and his mastery over it.

I start with the sign from above because I am writing this in the University as a student of literature and I am trying to work through the tools I encountered in this context, thinking with Brathwaite about the relationship between my formal education, my navigation of that educational system through my study of American literature, and legacies of colonialism -- and in part to figure out what has made it difficult for me to say and be understood in this context that a word could be heavy with the weight of the world. I think that this representative regime of the sign – including many critiques of it – persists in the way the hegemonic academy approaches the study of American literature, because – and whenever – it reads literary texts from what Walter Mignolo helps us call the lettered city side of the letter, a regime of literacy that inscribes the words of these texts and the worlds that they write within the visible visions of the Patio. It is to this approach that I am my interlocutors work otherwise.
In the second half of this chapter I move to affirmation, attempting to break with the lettered approach to the letter and think about what language might look like from the ground. Here, following the dancing feet of Roberson's poetry, is my elaboration of the sign to below, or a seminal understanding of language in which the meaningfulness of the Word rests in the impossibility of knowing or capturing chaos, in the untotalizable totality that is the world that the human never pretends to master or stand above. Here, language is not just of humans but also of wind, of water of trees, words that carry the world inside them. Here, when we write as part of the world, from the ground, Word is of the world, and lives, a heart that beats with the weight of the world and the meanings of a life lived-in it.

La Barra del Bar: The Sign From Above

The locals of Héctor Libertella’s novel *El árbol de Saussure: una utopía* (2000) sit at the bar of a bar of their town, elbows resting firmly on the bar top, and gaze out the window at a tree in the center of the plaza as they drink their beers.

With their elbows resting on the metal bar top, the patrons of the ghetto look with a blank look out at the only tree in the plaza, without imagining that the bar where they are gathered comes, incidentally, from "bar."

Reflected in their eyes is not a tree as we usually think of it, but merely a trunk with branches and leaves: something which says: here I am (here I am).

As they drink, they look out. And as they look out they don’t know that this figure of the tree is determining their point of view -- it silently distributes them in their seats.11

Divided almost in half by the barra of the bar, their stares are blank, and elbows above the bar, it is as though their gaze seems to emanate exclusively from above it, providing a kind of table-and-up, heady, view of the plaza and its lone tree. “As in grammar” writes Libertella, playfully incorporating elements of the Saussurean linguistic system into the distribution of the people at the bar, "they are each one sitting on their stool according to a syntax...Which is to say, distributed in a small family of words.”

Distributed along the length of the bar they look out at the tree, what Libertella calls “Saussure’s tree,” standing there in the plaza, reduced to a sort of cartoon caricature; it does not speak, simply asserts its mute and brute presence.

From the barra del bar which evokes the split between signifier and signified, to the way the locals are distributed along the bar, to the muteness of Saussure’s tree, Libertella is having a bit of fun here by depicting what it might be like for the world to be organized according to or seen through the lens of the Saussurean sign system. Yet it is more than that: precisely in that image he provides of the men with their elbows above the barra del bar, gazing absently out at the world, is Libertella’s insistence already in the stakes of such a vision, that this is not just a theory about language but a way of seeing the world from the City as Patio of Objects: we only need to sit down with the locals and our elbows and gaze out at that plaza to inhabit its consequences.

____________________________

12 Ibid.
For Libertella the outlook does not look good. The barra del bar cuts the world like the bar that runs through the Saussurean sign, dictating a horizon of possibility and being for the locals in which -- echoing the arbitrary joining of signifier and signified in the Saussurean system -- the production of meaning and value seems only arbitrarily attached to the material world. The fisherman casts his net into the high seas, but his goal is not to fish. He only casts his net so an architect standing nearby can admire it, measuring the empty spaces in the net. What does take on value is dictated by the market. The town is not just a town but a "ghetto" because its inhabitants are distributed over a void according to a system of identities and differences, a system that mirrors the values of the market where identity needs difference, difference is reduced to the dominion of identity, and identity is simply the magnification of the self.13

One of the reasons Libertella is interested in this vision of the world -- and another reason he is interesting to me here --, is because, in addition to being a writer, he is also a literary critic, and -- writing from Argentina -- he is concerned about what this vision means for the study and writing of Latin American literature. "What does it mean for literature this fact of a writing that recognizes itself on one hand in the market -- in a familiar, tribal frame -- but on the other hand cannot acknowledge the place each one assigns to him or herself in each one of them?" he writes in El árbol de Saussure.14 Here we can connect the critique he is making of the Saussurean sign system to the questions he

13 Ibid., 60.
14 Ibid., 55.
asked much earlier, in the 1970s, relating the problems he sees with the Saussurean sign to a particular set of concerns that we share -- about the frames through which we approach American literature and the realities that they tend to reproduce.

Writing from Argentina during the "Boom," a historical moment in which Latin American literature has ostensibly "made it" into History, the world stage, through a number of narrative strategies theorized by Carlos Fuentes in *La nueva novela hispanoamericana* (*The New Spanish-American Novel*), Libertella writes *Nueva escritura en Latinoamérica* (*The New Writing in Latin America*). In it he critiques Fuentes’s vision as Saussure’s vision, one in which Latin American literature is rendered meaningful only in terms of the matrix of the market, its values produced through a grid of identity and difference dictated by a dependence on a still colonizing capital and separated from the stuff of life (of intimate life, for Libertella) illegible to such organizational systems.

Libertella, then, sets our scene by providing the image of those men sitting at the barra del bar, staring blankly at Saussure’s mute and brute tree. Yet to get to the root of those problems – to understand how they got to be Libertella’s problems, and expand them to consider why they become problematic for my own concerns with language and ground -- I need to dig a bit deeper and further back.

* * * *

What is the sign from above? The organization of language and world that Libertella has such a problem with has a long history in the West, originating, as Mignolo argues, in the Renaissance and characterized by what Foucault painstakingly articulates in *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Science* as a "representative" ordering of the Word and world which came to be the dominant episteme of seventeenth century Western Europe. As Foucault demonstrates -- based on an analysis of philosophical texts of the time such as the *Logique* (1662) and *Grammar de Port-Royal* (1660) -- this is an epistemic regime in which words came to be seen as separate from things, no longer murmuring the sweet secrets of God's universe as they had previously (under a more tripartite understanding of the sign), but lifted up out of the world into domain of man's knowledge, representing men's thoughts about the world back to themselves in a binary structure of signification.\(^{16}\) The relation of the sign to the signified now resides in a space in which there is no longer an intermediary figure to connect them: what connects them is a bond established, inside knowledge, between the idea of one thing and the idea of another. "The *Logique de Port-Royal* states this as follows: the sign encloses two ideas, one the thing representing, the other of the thing represented; and its nature consists in exciting the first by means of the second."\(^{17}\)


\(^{17}\) Ibid., 63-4.
It is this order to which, as Foucault points out, Saussure returns to articulate his own binary theory of the sign. And it is also this order, which as Ángel Rama argues, served as “the cultural dimension of the colonial power structure” in America, emerging as dominant in Western Europe at the same time as colonial capitalism began to take hold more firmly in the Americas, underwriting the regime served by these forces – the regime of what Rama calls the “lettered city” -- the “cities, the societies that were to inhabit them, and the ‘lettered’ interpreters of them” -- at the center of the imposition of the Old World project in America. 18 And so -- because we are concerned with the perpetuation of this project for thinking American literature, the perpetuation of colonialism through the perpetuation of this order -- it is this order which we should elaborate and refer to when we say the sign to above. To summarize then: When I say sign to above I mean the way language (and its problems) is understood as representation, a particular understanding of language which emerged in the Renaissance, became dominant in Western Europe in the seventeenth century that Foucault reads, and which took a firm hold in the Americas through colonialist capitalism and the cementing of the regime of the lettered city.

As Foucault notes above, what underwrites the production of the sign as meaningful in the representative order is man’s knowledge about the world -- "a bond established, inside knowledge, between the idea of one thing and the idea of another" --

suggesting already through the inscription of the sign *inside* knowledge that this is an order which entails an elbows-above-the-bar circuit of the production of meaning. But how does this work? The sign -- and here drawing directly from Saussure's understanding of it, but also considering Foucault's articulation out of the seventeenth century order -- is constituted as meaningful unit of language through the arbitrary unification of signified -- what Saussure calls "sound image" and what Foucault above calls "one thing representing," helping to stress that this is an *image* of sound, not just sound -- and signifier -- what Saussure calls "concept" and what Foucault calls "one thing represented," helping us stress again that this 'concept' works through connection to a representational matrix.\(^{19}\)

In other words, and because the sign is tied to a representational grid which works to establish meaning through a system of identities and differences, language here is not understood as nomenclature, the assignment of names to a set of independently existing concepts or things but rather exists as a system of "reciprocally defined" or conditioned terms" in which meaning is produced differentially, by "set[ting] up an arbitrary relation between signifiers of its own choosing on the one hand, and signifieds of its own choosing on the other."\(^{20}\)

The production of meaning through the sign within this grid is essentially arbitrary on all levels, based not only on the arbitrary unification of sound image to concept, but also the rather arbitrary construction of a set of recognized signifiers or "sound images" on the one hand and signifieds, or "concepts" on the other. As Jonathan Culler explains, "Not only does each language produce a different set of signifiers, articulating and dividing the continuum of sound in a distinctive way, but each language produces a different set of signifieds; it has a distinctive and thus 'arbitrary' way of organizing the world into concepts and categories." And we start to understand how it could be that within this order, the sign is swept out of the world of God and into the domain of man's knowledge -- because we see -- and as many have pointed out -- that this is a language that makes meaning in what seems to be an entirely conceptual circuit, through the matching recognizable sound image to recognizable concept, never seeming to touch the thing it is referring to -- the referent, or the world. This is Foucault’s Don Quixote trying to make the world fit into the forms of his book whose pages are sealed off from the stuff of the world. What this conception of language in its most vulgar form evokes -- and we have already seen Libertella parody it through the men staring blankly out from the barra del bar at the mute and brute tree -- is that that there sits a layer of language as representative of man's truth about the world, and the world somehow sits apart from these units of meaning.

21 Ibid., 33.
"Language is form and not substance” stresses Culler, echoing Saussure’s own insistence that to produce meaning "mind breathes life into a substance which is given." And we can also see then the power this order of language can wield, how, as Ángel Rama explains, this order of signs and language, seemingly hollowed out and hovering above the world through its connections to man’s truths, served the colonial project in the Americas by aiding the imposition of an ideal city -- "imagined through a constellation of literary texts, maps, and state documents" -- on a material city, reinforcing and shaping its reality. A colonial and Creole regime that would and did use the written alphabetic word to colonize territories, peoples and the imaginaries within them, could only be operating from a place of enunciation that would allow it to imagine America was some sort of blank slate, a barren land and ignorant peoples that could be shaped through the European ideas and ideals imprinted upon its material reality.

*   *   *

Yet the thing to stress here is not really that this order of the sign is strictly conceptual -- this isn't really even true -- but that it is representational. It is for this

---

22 Ibid., 57, 55.
23 Rama, The Lettered City, 15.
24 Within the Saussurian system, for example, as Culler and Saussure’s student Émile Benveniste have pointed out, the human is firmly in a world. There is an implicit place for the referent to play a role, as in the famous example of Eskimos having many different words for snow; or in the idea that, although Saussure was primarily interested in the synchronicity of language, there is also a place for History, because both concepts and sound images do change over time; or as when Rama argues that,
reason that its meanings are underwritten by and reinforce a life lived in City as Patio of Objects, the world produced by the forces of colonial capitalism. Meaning is not only produced according to man’s knowledge, but rather according to a certain understanding of knowledge, god, truth, and world -- a representational understanding -- that Foucault calls ”rationalism” in that it is characterized by ”the disappearance of the old superstitious or magical beliefs and the entry of nature, at long last, into the scientific order,” evoking the lowered horizon of the Renaissance perspective, floor of the City as Patio of Objects laid over the ground. It is the production of meaning underwritten by an understanding of the world as visible vision that tries to exclude all uncertainty, reduced to what man can know about the world well enough to be able to articulate it as concept or image. In other words, the problem is not the conceptual circuit itself but that the concepts and ideas about the world define themselves in relation to what can be known and seen about this world sufficiently to form an image or a concept, the overall schema into which the thing fits illuminating what it can come to mean, life and meaning -- in the words of Lispector -- illuminated only from the perspective of Western death.

as modernization and democratization happen in Mexico, meanings change as a more popular vernacular is folded into the regime of the lettered city.

"My interlocutor and I produced different noises," says Culler laying out an example of how this system works,

yet we want to say that we have produced the same signifier, used the same sign. The signifier, then, is not the same thing as the noises that either he or I produced. It is an abstract unit of some kind, not to be confused with the sequence of sounds. But what sort of unit is it? Of what does the unit consist? We might approach this question by asking how far the actual noises produced could vary and still count as versions of the same signifier. This, of course, is similar to the question we implicitly asked about the signified; how far can a color vary and still count as brown? And the answer for the signifier is very similar to the answer for the signified. The noises made can vary considerably (there is no essential property to what they must possess), so long as they do not become confused with those of contrasting signifiers.26

What is eliminated in the representational production of the language, in the name of a smooth production of meaning, is what Mackey might call its discrepant foundation in a creaking world.27 The world becomes homogeneous and uniform, a world of the smooth substitution of one thing for another, as tone, sound, body, are smoothed into the concept 'bed.' Anything that doesn't fit into this previously conceived sound image is resolved into the signifier it most closely resembles or dismissed as meaningless sound. There is no room for indeterminacy, for a crickety and noisy world to speak meaningfully. How is there room in this conception of language for language as music, or chirp of bird, full of intonations and meanings that open other worlds through their frequencies? For a tree or the wind to be heard?

26 Culler, Ferdinand de Saussure, 37.
27 Nathaniel Mackey, "Wringing the Word," 40 - 58.
Illuminated here in this understanding of the word is the world of the *polis*, the lettered city of colonial capitalism, and eliminated as meaningful is the world of the *cosmos*, those visions of the invisible, that world of shadows and sparkles, those worlds of mirrors as puddles on the ground that bring the sky to the earth which are conjured into being through the words of Roberson’s poetry and Smithson’s mirror displacements.

Language in the City as Patio of Objects is exclusive to the domain of man and his progress. Just as we saw the vanishing point on the horizon as a distant future which robs the body of its the present by placing it along a road of life that is directed towards the lowered horizon of the Renaissance perspective, here in the inauguration of a representational order and its peeling back of words away from things into the space of man’s thought is a paving the way for the later modern problem of that divide between man and world, man and body, ideal and material and a language – on its way to becoming its own object – that can never traverse it. This is an understanding of man’s existence as progress linked to language as abstraction from the world through its linear, sequential organization in an alphabetic writing that pulls language into "the general domain of analysis, thus allowing the progress of writing and that of thought to provide
each other with mutual support.”  

And so it is within language itself, exactly in that fold of words where analysis and space meet, that the first but endless possibility of progress arises. In its root, progress, as defined in the eighteenth century, is not a movement within history, but the result of a fundamental relation between space and language...Language gives the perpetual disruption of time the continuity of space, and it is to the degree that it analyses, articulates, and patterns representation that it has the power to link our knowledge of things together across the dimension of time. With the advent of language, the chaotic monotony of space is fragmented, while at the same time the diversity of temporal successions is unified.  

We begin to see how, within this order of the sign, because its meanings are produced in a thought system founded entirely within the visible visions of the world, an imagining of the world underwritten by the forces of colonial capitalism which needed this kind of world to thrive, there is no room for the word to become heavy with the affirmations of the totality of an untotalizable existence that constitutes the weight of the world. The sign is pushed into a circuit of signification that operates over the void of a tomb akin to the one of Miguel Angel’s Moses (1509) that Kusch evokes to describe art’s entrance into City as the Patio of Objects. In the Western tradition of books and literature, the representative regime of language encloses it in the same dead and separated circuit as “art” – a circuit which only serves to reinforce our human separation from the world.

* * *

---

28 Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 112.
29 Ibid., 112 - 113.
What is crucial to insist upon here is not just that meanings are gained and lost -- but that how we even understand what meaning is -- what language is -- is embedded in the place of enunciation from which we approach the production of meaning. As Mignolo points out, language, as well as reading, writing and the book and are not predetermined entities which work in the same way for all peoples but rather are embedded in a set of cultural and material practices which influence how they are understood and also the network of meanings that are produced within them.  

This here that Culler refers to as the production of meaning is meaning produced through the grid of language seen from the Patio of Objects. It is the production of meaning firmly understood from the perspective of what Mignolo helps us call the lettered city side of the letter.

God’s metaphor of writing, according to which his words are dictated to men, is so well known that we need not press the idea further. Less familiar to scholars dealing with similar topics are communicative situations across cultures in which agents are, so to speak, on different sides of the letter. The Mexicas had a set of concepts to outline their semiotic interactions, and their negotiations with the spoken words, written signs, the social roles and functions afforded to such activities. They also had an articulation of the social and religious functions of spoken words and written signs that could hardly be translated to Western categories (e.g. philosopher, man of letters, scribe, or poet) without suppressing (and misunderstanding) their activities, given a context in which the conceptualization of semiotic interactions is based on a different configuration of the reading and writing cultures. On one side of the dialogue, the agents were members of a learned culture in which the ideology of the letter and the book was equated with learning and wisdom. On the other side, the participants were

---

members of a society in which wisdom and learning were deposited in the body of the elders (*huehue*), and looked at in the sky and in painting and transmitted in oral discourse (*tlatolli*).  

As Mignolo describes, when you apply the lettered city side of the letter understanding of language to practices that do not understand language in the same way, you not only fail to understand the meanings that are being produced, but you impose your apparently neutral frame upon other practices.

This isn’t a question of relativism, of simply picking up a new framework through which to understand the world as though we operate in some kind of neutral playing field. It is a question of the coloniality of power and its relation to the production of knowledge and life. Literacy, or the ways in which we read, write and understand the world, cannot be separated from the way that we live our lives or organize the world. And so to impose the lettered city side of the letter is also to impose the way of life and the world that underwrites it. As Mignolo points out, “the spread of Western literacy, then, did not only take the form of reading and writing. It was also a massive operation in which the materiality and the ideology of Amerindian semiotic interactions were intermingled with or replaced by the materiality and ideology of Western reading and writing culture.”

---

31 Ibid., 107 - 8.  
What is problematic, then, to me, are the ways in which that this particular lettered perspective and understanding of language seems to persist as the dominant framework through which to approach and frame the study of American literature in the academy.

First there are the ways in which understandings of language as lettered often implicitly structure the horizons of American literature, inscribing it firmly within the regime of the Patio. For example, in Ángel Rama's analysis of the *Lettered City*, he does wonders to illuminate how the regime of the Letter works to symbolically underwrite the imposition of a colonial capitalist project. But he also adopts this particular understanding of the way language works as the way language works in the City, such that anything that counts as literature must also be working this way. We see this in the way he divides the analysis into the "lettered" and the "unlettered" in which those with the "letter" are those that operate within this Western European understanding of language and those without it are everyone else who may speak other languages but become folded into production of meaning in the City through literacy. Semantic shifts in the meanings of words can occur as a more popular vernacular is folded into the regime of the lettered city such as when modernization and democratization happen in Mexico, but they can only be folded into the basic representative structure of the letter,
the world, then, still seen through and inscribed within the visible visions of the Patio, which idealizes the ideal City (Europe) and in which the "material city" and the natural world always lurk somewhere outside the horizons.

The problem is not with Rama’s text in particular – his project was not to investigate these horizons but rather show how they are produced. But what it does show is that when we approach the study of American literature from the City as Patio of Objects we end up with American literature as the City as Patio of Objects. Seen from the lettered perspective, American literature – except, sometimes, its often racialized or gendered ‘exceptions,’ put into their own separate anthologies, courses and professionalized specializations, difference, as Libertella would put it, refracted through a matrix of identity – is something we read through the lens of History, as a static object whose meanings are produced within a representational frame, read in relation to what it might illuminate about that world of men whose visions and dreams rests firmly on the floor of the Patio. It is, we might say with Mignolo, an idea of (Latin) America and its literature which inscribes it in the world founded by those original letrados, and continues the project of the Creole elite by organizing the study of texts and authors into Historical periods and categorizations – the Nation-State, modernity, post-modernity –
as though the march of their intelligibility were in time to the march of a colonial capitalist world.\textsuperscript{33}

Yet when seen from the Lettered City perspective there is so much which can only be remarked as strange, unruly – frankly, \textit{weird} -- about American literature. It never seems to fit these terms, the letter never quite able to prop itself up, enforce itself against the realities in which it finds itself writing, the idealized European forms it tries to impose upon reality almost inevitably deformed. Take José Eustasio Rivera’s \textit{La vorágine} in which the regime of the letter disappears with the protagonist into the sounds of the jungle. Or Jorge Isaac’s \textit{María} in which the protagonist, in London studying, can’t make it back home in time to consummate his relationship to María, detained in a long detour which the book’s narrative also takes through the jungle. Then there are many attempts to explain these derivations, reinforcing them as derivations from a capitalist colonizing norm. Doris Sommer argues that it is María’s ethnic Jewishness that prohibits the consummation, the fictional founding of the Columbian Nation-State.\textsuperscript{34} It is Romanticism, says Jean Franco now speaking about Latin American literature more generally, but a very peculiar breed of it, one which must account for the fact that Nature in Latin America is not the idyllic pastoral spaces of an industrialized

\textsuperscript{34} \textit{Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America} (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1993).
Europe but untamed and horrific. It is existentialism, says but ultimately not a Sartrean one says Benedito Nunes about Lispector’s nausea. It’s modernity but a peripheral one says Beatriz Sarlo. “Ideias fora do lugar” says Roberto Schwarz. Yet don’t these attempts to explain – even celebrate -- these differences always ultimately inscribe Latin American literature back to lettered regime of the metropole, framing them as exceptions, lags, oddities, against a lettered norm?

Could’t these exceptions, these lapses into ‘noise,’ actually be a signal that something else is also going on here, pulling on these texts, that there is a life -- an existence -- a world – here that is dropping out of these matrices or organization, that we might explode out into if we approached these texts from a different perspective, pulling them not centripetally into the void of History, but instead out into the centrifugal forces of life. Isn’t this not the very possibility of America that Kusch so relentlessly theorized?

Of course, there are plenty of challenges to the representative order of the letter, especially in the realm of literary studies where the poetic structures of literature itself present challenges to the transparent emptiness of language inaugurated by this regime, bringing us close to what Foucault calls the "raw being of language," an order of

---

35 Historia de la literatura hispanoamericana: a partir de la independencia (Barcelona: Ariel, 1997).
38 Ao vencedor as batatas: forma literária e processo social nos inícios do romance brasileiro (São Paulo: Livraria Duas Cidades, 1992), 11 - 31.
meaning in which world is book and signs murmur the secret similitudes of universe’s truths.\textsuperscript{39}

Take for example the materialist approaches to language and literature that have emerged in the wake of post-structuralist critiques of the representative regime, such as the one Libertella himself undertakes, invoking a "materialist eye" and a counter-archive of writers like Osvaldo Lamborghini and Germán García, to reach under the table-and-up regime dictated by the "Historical eye" of \textit{barra del bar} to locate the production of value in the intimate zone of the desiring body that sits underneath.\textsuperscript{40} Or Juan Pablo Dabove’s \textit{Nightmares of the Lettered City} in which he articulates how the desiring bandit bodies of \textit{Los de abajo} work to deterritorialize the regime of the letter’s meaning even at the height of modernizing Mexico.\textsuperscript{41} Or Jean Franco’s argument in the \textit{Decline and Fall of the Lettered City} that -- in the wake of neoliberal globalization and a realization, after years of brutal dictatorship or State-sponsored repression, that the promises of both capitalist and communist modernity have failed – the regime of the letter has collapsed, literature’s meaning to be read in the immanence of shattered monument, irreparable ruin.\textsuperscript{42} Or -- remember -- Silviano Santiago’s reading of Lispector, in which he noted that the peculiar opacity of Lispector’s writing -- "um mergulho na matéria da palavra" ("a

\textsuperscript{39} Foucault, \textit{The Order of Things}, 44.
\textsuperscript{40} Libertella, \textit{La nueva escritura en Latinoamérica}, 15 - 16.
\textsuperscript{41} \textit{Nightmares of the Lettered City: Banditry and Literature in Latin America, 1816 - 1929} (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007).
\textsuperscript{42} \textit{The Decline and Fall of the Lettered City: Latin America in the Cold War} (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2002).
diving into the material of word”) -- situates it firmly outside of History and inside the productive density of its own meaning. "Literature is literature,” he said, "there you have most simple and most enigmatic formula with which to learn the meaning of Clarice’s inaugural lecture.”

But couldn’t it be that these critical challenges to the representative order of the letter also linger within the Lettered City? What the embrace of this kind of materiality signals, at least to me, is that there is still a divide or split between human and world to be jumped over while never interrogating the line that divides them in the first place. In these accounts, Saussure’s tree might make a little noise, or a scribble on the page, but it is still brute in some important way. This is symptomatic, I think, of a greater problem -- which is not only with the representative regime itself but also with the fact that the representative regime is still being approached here from the place and the order it was designed to reinforce: the City as a Patio of Objects. The unstated assumption that underwrites these operations is still that language is representational, that it is a thing of humans who set out to master the world, and so perhaps the most we can do is celebrate its productive failures, the impossibility of this mastery and the undoing of the subject who wielded its force.

The ethical consequences of such approach to me begin to be captured in Timothy Morton’s own wrestling with the problem of eco-mimesis. Morton diagnoses

43 "A aula inaugural de Clarice Lispector," 232.
the problem perfectly, but he cannot seem to find a way out of it except through the
deconstruction of an idealized Nature. He ends up calling his book *Ecology without
Nature* and turning to the power of "radical kitsch," the resistance of banal objects, the
ability to raise consciousness through art -- critical questions -- juxtaposed frames -- the
estrangement of the gap between content and frame -- an ironic distancing which
produces critique and awareness of embeddedness.44 He says that the "ecological
thought" provides a kind of groundlessness in the sense of a firm foundation for the
subject has been eradicated when one realizes one's interconnectedness to the world.45

Yes...But.

But...What if not all language were representational discourse? What if, instead
of starting from a point of language as mastery, instead of starting with the subject as
*ser*, our very starting point was the place of the impossibility of language to master the
world? A language spoken not from firm floor of the Patio of Objects but from a feeling
of ground as an earth that quakes. What then could language mean and make? Who
could speak it and how would those who spoke it be configured differently in relation to
each other? What knowledges would it contain? What worlds?

44 *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Harvard University
worse, because we're losing the ground under our feet at the exact time as we're figuring out just
how dependent upon that very ground we are. We find ourselves pinned to the void. Schizophrenia is
a defense, a desperate attempt to restore a sense of solidity and consistency."
When Lispector articulates the secret roundness of words, calls her book *Água viva*, when the voices that speak in Pizarnik’s poems are the wind and ancient forests, silence, when Roberson graphs his poems visually through ritual structures, when poetry works like a Vèvè or the sweep of a broom to conjure up the ghosts and gods -- we could say the authors of the dissertation are giving us the chance to think the word in relation to a different axis of relation to the world than that proposed by the Patio. They are in some critical way giving words a kind of love (as Brathwaite puts it), stepping through the holes in the regime of the Word that identified by post-structuralist critiques of language, and into the elaboration of a world and word on the other side of the mirrors. They are making the word heavy, loaded, dimensional, sacred -- living -- thing, that carries inside it not simply the dense materiality of its own meaning but all the inscriptions of a life lived in the world.

"There would be no point in seeing Mondrian as the destroyer of surface, plane and line if we don’t connect to the new space built by his destruction," wrote the signers of the Neoconcrete Manifesto, and here to me they were making a comment on Mondrian’s search for something like the ‘raw being’ of painting -- respecting what it was trying to do in terms of escaping a regime of representation. But also recognizing its limits for their own projects. The painting was still firmly on the wall. We could say then that we are after a different kind of response to the problem of representation that these

authors are giving us a chance to think -- one that delinks from approaching the problem from the lettered city side of the letter and instead tries to think about the language from the ground, building an-other way to the making of the world through language: the below of the sign.

I think back to the barra-del-bar and a table-and-up conversation I had with a professor who was trying to get his head around ‘estar.’ Sympathetic, but not understanding it. And me unable to explain it. And later I think -- remembering Clarice Lispector’s provocation to the reader in the Hour of the Star -- "Whoever lives knows, even though you do not know you know. In this way, you know more than you think you know, and you are playing dumb" -- of course there was no understanding it there. For in the way we were talking there were only empty forms whose meanings were generated by History, the stuff of two heads talking, elbows resting above the barra del bar, speaking concepts whose meaning is negotiated, formed, in relation to other concepts, cut off from the stuff of life. We talk about the world as an ‘it’, as though it were a thing, that we can theorize and discuss. It is out there. We are two heads talking.

There is another sort of knowledge we need to bring into speech here, in order to be able to approach the question of language and the meaningful making of words, what I am understanding to be their worldly weight. A knowledge that is anchored in what our bodies in the world sensing otherwise know. Not, I clarify, the body as my body or

\[ ^{47} \text{Lispector, A hora da estrela, 16 - 17.} \]
the body, but a body of a person who is-in the world, that is seventy percent water, that responds to the movements of the moon, a body that is the reason I intuitively, because I am part of the world, know about the life that drops out of the Lettered City, the totality of an untotalizable existence. A body that assures that sacred and animate weight of the Word -- its complex resurrection-- lies contained not within the sphere of some representable truth but grows like a seed from the place where ideas connect to a life lived-in the world.

To activate that body-in-the-world’s knowledge in the production of meaning, we can’t just look under the barra of the bar but instead must leave it. We walk out into the plaza and onto the ground.

*Leaving the Bar: The Sign From Below*

The Word lives when meaning is made seminally (Kusch), through grounded poiesis, no longer resting on the representational void that is the Patio of Objects, but rather in the quaking place of world as indeterminate space-thing pressing in and weighing it down. When we think about the Word as living, we pull language’s dominion away from man who uses it to reinforce his domination of the world, producing a dead knowledge, sealed book, that rests on the smooth floor of the Patio, and into the domain of a world which speaks. When we write as part of the world, we produce text as living water that speaks of a life lived-in the world, a grounded depth of meaning that rests word in the noisy, rickety foundations of world.
We begin to dance.

* * *

is it there
isn't there a place
in a movement stayed
with a pin of point
in the mover

(Ed Roberson, from "Formula for the Poem Dance, 15")

Asks Ed Roberson, and his poem dances on this spiraling axis, this "Formula for the Poem Dance" a formula that inscribes the poem into a ritual structure of a dance on the ground, conjuring a living world that we also begin to move -- dance -- in relation to.

Figure 15: Ed Roberson, "Formula for the Poem Dance," *Etai-Eken*, 1975.49

Figure 16: Ed Roberson, "Kokopelli: hand-drawn illustration," 2010.

Our dance begins with a vision that Ed Roberson has of the world which is a cosmovision that begins to crystallize as he comes to write *Etai-Eken* -- the title of the collection of which "Formula for the Poem Dance” forms a part. A vision of the world emerging, as he tells it, out of experiences – growing up in the black church in the US, sacred spaces encountered in Peru and Ecuador, a motorcycle trip across the US in which he took part in American Indian ceremonies, furious readings outside of the Western poetic tradition he had learned in university -- that he is starting to connect and

---

50 From: Ed Roberson and Kathleen Crown, "'Down Break Drum': An Interview with Ed Roberson," *Callaloo* 33, no. 3 (Summer 2010), 670.
put together in conjunction with his own way of seeing and standing in the world. That I am starting to connect and put together in conjunction with my own way of seeing and standing in the world.

I began to put all of that together in *Etai-Eken*...In the now no longer foreign ethnographic writings, people could say that they had seen spirits walking or had been possessed by spirits, or people could say they had seen characteristics of certain gods in this life, or people could say they had heard the magical voice or the voice of God. It dawned on me that I could say the same thing from having grown up in my particular culture....I saw how you could make meaning, by charms and ritual intent, of all the common things that are solely your own. Some of those rituals are poems that are really prayers; they’re charms, magical things, spells that bring to life.

Roberson inscribes his dancing words onto the ground in part through image, through the concrete arrangement of the words on the page in the form of image -- "graphing ritual structures" Roberson calls it.

You know the American Indian figure of the humpbacked flute player, Kokopelli? This…figure…is reversed and Africanized, a jam on Kokopelli. You have the four cardinal directions, then on that the Kokopelli facing the other direction. This is the head, this is the seat, this is the horizon, with the sun-up and the sun-down. It’s more like the African trickster Eshu with a saxophone.

And here in "Formula for Poem Dance" words are arranged according to his own riff on the American Indian figure of the humpbacked flute player, Kokopelli. Here and as in Braithwaite’s "Vèvè" is writing otherwise, writing as ritual, that this image, the cosmovision -- the world -- which it activates, inscribes Word within. Meaning is made

---

51 Ibid., 666.
52 Ibid.
53 Ibid., 663.
54 Ibid., 670.
otherwise, Kokopelli dancing in relation to the horizon of the life -- sun-up and sun-down -- that drops out of the Patio, a structure of meaning, a dance, that gets its affirmative weight from a life lived-in the world.

We go back to the poem, down to the feet of Kokopelli, the dancing feet, and we find the nervous system and the brain. A potted mind makes potted language Roberson seems to say, suggesting that we are in the space not just of poiesis, a making of the world, but a poiesis which is grounded, language made through a mind and body routed through the earth. Kokopelli, dancing this dance, the poem, dancing this dance, is standing on the ground, dances on the ground and what he speaks are words heavy with the weight of the world our feet see.

"The name…was the title of the book from the Dani language glossary in Matthiessen: etai is 'song, singing' and eken is "seed," so its seed of song,"\textsuperscript{55} says Roberson. "The idiomatic use of etai-eken is the same as black musicians' use of soul, something has soul.\textsuperscript{56} And in "Formula for a Poem Dance" we see that Roberson's song has soul -- lives -- because it dances. Like in a salsa in which you do not sit passively and watch the musicians sing and play, this is not a song or a Word that stands alone: \textit{el baile es parte del canto} (the dance is part of the song). In "Formula for a Poem Dance" song meets dance to produce Word as grounded incarnation, not the Word as flesh of a transcendent God which inscribes meaning in a world beyond this one but Word made

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 668.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.
heavy by routing the weight of God through a dancing body that writes the meaning of the song out of and into a life lived-in the world.

Grounding language is to dip it like Kokopelli’s dancing feet into the world, grounding poiesis by filling up the making of Word with the weight of the situated and always shifting landscape, the indeterminate world. This is a writing – a movement -- of body-in-the-world that is inscribed into the practice of the woman sweeping the sand each morning who Brathwaite does not understand at first. Is her writing in the sand simply an allegory, he wonders, still approaching the act from the framework of representation, somehow a symbol of the Sisyphean task of clearing something that can never be cleared, an allegorical comment on the underdevelopment of the Caribbean? No, he finally realizes.

So she's in fact performing a very important ritual which I couldn't fully understand but which I'm tirelessly tryin to...And then one morning I see her body silhouetting against the sparkling light that hits the Caribbean at that early dawn and it seems as if her feet, which all along I thought were walking on the sand...were really...walking on the water...and she was travelling across that Middle Passage, constantly coming from where she had come from -- in her case Africa -- to this spot in North Coast Jamaica where she now lives...That was my "answer" to my quest/ion. The "meaning" of the Caribbean was in that numble and repetitive ritual actio(n) which this peasant woman was performing. And she was always on this journey, walking on the steps of sunlit water, coming out of a continent which we didn't fully know how to understand, to a set of islands which we are only now barely coming to respect, cherish, and understand. 57

57 Brathwaite, ConVERsations with Nathaniel Mackey, 32 - 34. Emphases in original.
Here the sand, the dance, the poem are filled with history and with the cosmos, what writing as sweeping conjures into being and puts us in relation to. To sweep the shore, to read the poem, is to feel the weight of the water, the toes in the sand, the weight of the past, of the ancestors, the whispers of the sea.

Broom sweeping water and sand creates what Lygia Clark, making a maquette of a home in which the walls move, calls a living architecture, home not as fortress in the City as Patio of Objects but as the web of a spider, moving in the wind and easily swept away by a rain storm. For the construction of an architecture out of sand water body history, is an architecture which conjures up an indeterminate and hostile world and opens up a space to be in relation to it also celebrates existence in this world by rendering it meaningful, a sort of symbolic shelter to carry you through the day in this world, grounding action here, on just this side of that. Hallelujah cries Lispector.

That poem “didn't it rain” says Roberson, articulating his own sweep, "That’s a spiritual!" "And I was pretty much possessed by the poem by the time I finished writing it. And it still happens when I read it. It’s a song of joy, almost, but it’s a possession, a spell, because by the time you get to the end of it has wrapped you within itself -- well, me at least."58

* * *

Kusch helps us call these sweeping inscriptions -- the poem dance, grounded poiesis -- seminal thinking, a production of meaning which draws its weight from a life lived-in-the-world, rather than from the representative circuits of History -- a notion evoked in the very figure of Roberson’s Kokopelli, whose dancing-body-in-the-world generates the arrangement of words on the page.

Drawing a distinction between discourse and anti-discourse, Kusch locates seminal thinking firmly in the realm of anti-discourse. While discourse is the realm of science, affirming what is knowable, anti-discourse rests in the indeterminate.

El decir supone un discurso. Pero el existente vive sobre la indeterminación de un universo que se le escapa, su discurso se anula con lo contrario, el antidiscuro. El antidiscuro de "la mesa es marrón" es la posibilidad de que no sea marrón. Esta contradicción supone mucho más de ella misma.59

(Saying supposes a discourse. But one who exists lives in relation to the indeterminacy of a universe that escapes him, and his discourse is annuled with its inverse, anti-discourse. The anti-discourse of "the table is brown" is the possibility that it is not brown. This contradiction supposes much more than can be seen in this example.)

Kusch finds anti-discourse in the realm of popular speech and also in American literature, but specifically in literature or an art that draws its urgency from the llanto, from what is cried and what is unknown and terrifying about the world, what situates singer as part of the world. Anti-discourse is the stuff of the blues.

"My blackness in this country is my place where crying beings" says Roberson, explaining how his poetry emerges from this place, a place to which you arrive after stepping over the mound that sits at the entrance to the American Indian sweat lodge.

That is as close as outsiders can get to a translation of that word that describes the figure of the mound. You have to step over that mound to get to the place where crying begins. This is supposed to be sweat, but it is also crying, because your body cries when you sweat, yet. And it all cleanses you.  

Roberson’s poetry emerging from the space of crying that is the American Indian sweat lodge, and I see how once you step over the mound, as Roberson puts it, or shed yourself of your overly humanized humanity as Lispector might say it, you also shed yourself of the story we in the West tell about language, the one Foucault tells in the *Order of Things*, the one where language figures as that which starts out in the world but lifts itself up from it, sucked into the space of man.

For that is a story of language whose very possibility of speech is underwritten by the birth of the Patio of Objects and a Western man who sees himself as separate from the world, and that is pulled into question only with the possibility of meaningful speech itself. Yet when we consider language from the ground -- from the sweat lodge, from what Roberson calls the place of blackness in America, then -- then we see that this is not the only story of language but only the story of a language called discourse. For if we speak from the ground then the impossibility of separation between man and world

60 Ibid., 670.
is our very starting point, what we’ve always accepted as impossible, and it is in the
tight embrace of this very impossibility that makes possible the meaningfulness of our
speaking otherwise. This is anti-discourse and the otherwise genealogy of language and
literature that it activates. “This is the word of someone who can’t,” wrote the narrator
of Água viva. “I don’t direct anything. Not even my own words. But it is not sad: it is a
happy humility. I, who live to the side, am to the left of who enters. And the world
shakes inside me.”

The difference between literature as a counter-discourse as conceived by
Foucault and what Kusch conceives of as anti-discourse seems to be precisely in the
dimension of grounded poiesis, for while counter-discourse negates discourse,
grounded poiesis moves us into the realm of anti-discourse and Kuschean affirmation,
because it can appreciate the feeling of the world pressing in giving worldly weight to
those meanings that proliferate through a body that dances-in-the world.

*   *   *

when you are               your nervous system
when you are               potted in your brain
in                         your body
your world                 potted in the earth
to look out                 of your mind
to look into               your works
to look at
  to look                 blossom
out into                  (at

61 Lispector, Água viva, 34.
A potted mind makes potted language, says Roberson’s Kokopelli again, and a web of possible meanings proliferate, blossom, flower in the multiple combinations of words that can be put together by his dancing feet, moving in relation to the music and the ground: "when you are -- in -- your world potted in the earth -- to look out of your mind -- potted in the earth of your mind -- blossom -- at the same time."

Not then the seminal inscribed in the regime of the logo-centric Word, meaning as telos which read Kokopelli’s flowering gestures as expressive extension of his -- Man's -- needs. Nor some sort of understanding of man's expression emerging upward from ground as organic essence. Not seminal and seed as container of DNA or a blueprint for the organism that it will create. And finally, not seed as semen understood exclusively as that which spreads itself, the seed of Man as origin of creation.

Rather something more like the seed that Mackey talks about -- "a fonio seed, the tiny primeval seed the Dogon call po."

It is said the seed grows by turning. Inside, while germinating, it first spins in one direction, then, after bursting, that is, after the emergence of the germ, it spins in the other direction, in order to produce its root and stalk.62

---

62 From a Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate, 371.
Seed, then, as po, roots shooting out one way and flowers another, to produce a meaning that germinates in the ground. Feminine and masculine. The seed, seminality, as meaning which embraces, that can hold as true -- irresolvably complementary opposites -- the totality of an untotizable world.

Not just the star but the thick black root of the star, says Lispector. Because "there exists a thing that is more ample, more silent, more deep, less good, less bad, less pretty. Although this thing also runs the risk that, in our clumsy hands, it becomes transformed into ‘purity,’ our hands thick and full of words." The seminal, then, understood in the sense of the light of a star, a meaning that will blossom, flower, but only also if it carries the weight of world.

For the star that is falling is not star at all says Roberson, but a falling meteor. And we make our wish upon a burning piece of matter that, as it is rapidly eviscerating, produces this glow, this light, this spark of writing a bug in the night that lights. What gives the image its vision its depth is to find the point where words and world hit to produce that light that spark, because that spark of light also contains the matter of what is burning. For the Word must always carry that weight, conjuring the thinkable but also the unthinkable, what shines and what does not shine.

---

63 A paixão segundo G.H., 101.
64 Ibid.
65 "Down Break Drum," 651.
And so, insistently, seed. Seminal. Because, it seems to me, seed helps to insist upon the vital connection between form and life, grounding the making of meaning in the world, the radical root of what Lispector was getting at when she said she could never understand the separation between the two. The form of life is life say Lispector and Clark, and this is what keeps it alive.

Which is to say also that if we have here a language, a meaning, a flower structure that is shifting, rhizomatic, in its ability to proliferate meaning, to insist upon the ground is to refuse to forget that the rhizome is a root that grows somewhere. Perhaps without a Father but not without parents and ancestors.66 A dancing body, turned away from the four cardinal directions but unfolding in relation to the horizon of a world of sunrise and sunset in which the language of the dance is inscribed.

We say, with Glissant: we do not forget that the poetry that we produce is humble, always in relation -- to the world, to History, and to other life.67 For, we add, if this is a language feminine in its desire to break with Logos, it is not one that pretends it can knock over walls, inscribing its meanings in the universalizing difference produced by an-other economy of desire. Complex liberation says Brathwaite. On this broken ground, says Brathwaite. In contrast to Hélène Cixous (reader of Lispector): "as there are

66 ConVERSations with Nathaniel Mackey, 111.
67 Glissant, Poetics of Relation.
no grounds for establishing a discourse, but rather an arid millennial ground to break.”

And what we proffer up from this broken ground is sand and water, laden with the weight of a pluriversal truth activated by the sweep of a broom.

A seminal structure of meaning is flower as blossom of Kokopelli’s feet, unfolding Bicho to illuminate the window in all its specificity.

* * *

When Word is seminal, inscribed in grounding poiesis, the labor of writing does not unfold in an alienated circuit of History but on the ground. Poem is born from and into the world.

"E é bom escrever” (“It is good to write”) writes Lispector,


(it’s the stone passing at last...It doesn’t hurt at all. Because I am living the mystery. Eternity before me and after me. The symbol of this mystery is this rock that they stole for me in Vila Velha, Paraná: she is from before the appearance of man on earth. 1360 millions of years. The silence that must have been in that uninhabited time. The silent energy. Of time that always existed. It will never end...I also have another stone, even older: geologists came to the conclusion that

---

68 “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Signs 1, no. 4 (Summer 1976), 875.
it comes from the time when the Earth was formed. Brazil is quite old. Its volcanoes are now extinct. I interrupted writing for a moment to grab that rock and enter into communion with it.)

Writing is conceived as an inscription in the world, a kind of birth, the passing of ancient rock through body into world. What is born carries the weight of this rock, is this rock. Writing is born into not little history, the circuit of meaning that removes it from the world, marking birth with a date and time that inserts it into a linear chronology of overly humanized existence. But into big history, into a world which began before humans were even a part of it, when Brazil was not the thing of Nation-States but of now extinct volcanoes.

"Pedra passando em fim," says Lispector, suggesting in her inability to control the passing that there is a peculiar passivity to this kind of writing, difficult to put a finger on from the perspective of the Patio where there is an understanding of writing as a labor that originates a writer who is separated from the world -- that problem of eco-mimesis again, in which, even in talking about the rocks we push them farther away into the space of the representational page, externalizations of ourselves.

"Regarding which came first," writes Lispector in her short story “O ovo e a galinha” (“The egg and the hen”),

foi o ovo que achou a galinha. A galinha não foi sequer chamada...Ela não sabe se explicar: "sei o que o erro está em mim mesma"..."não sei mais o que sinto" etc. / "etc etc etc" é o que cacareja o dia inteiro a galinha.70

(it was the egg which found the hen. The hen wasn't even called to the task...She doesn't know how to explain it: "I know that the error is in me somehow"..."I don't know anything more than what I feel." etc. / "etc etc etc" is what the hen clucks all day long.)

The egg is this mysterious living thing that the hen gives birth to, creates. And the process of creation is one in which the hen goes pluck pluck plucking about her daily life. The key is to write distractedly, almost so that this life can overtake you, because if you focus on the egg too much you'll trap it. Pedra passando em fim.

"I can point out certain poems where you're sitting in a parking lot and there it is, and you can't get rid of it," says Roberson,

You have to live with it for a couple of years before you can get it straight. "Ask for 'How High the Moon'" that's the Grand Union parking lot on Route 1. I looked up and there it was. That first stanza came from trying to deal with all the things that were happening in that moment of seeing the moon. All that figure of the 'jelly umbrella' came at one time. All I had to do was read for a pencil and envelope out of the glove compartment. You're "blown away" in sixties terms. But then there's the question of where did that come from?

Most times you know when the poem is happening; you can feel it. Odd to say, most times I can feel it in my eyes -- if that's possible. You don't have to be a believer to understand getting the Holy Ghost, getting the spirit. Experience translates clearly into spiritual systems; for me, it translates into poetry. If there's any heightened experience to it, it's when you discover afterwards that 'uh-oh, you've got to work with this."

Seed takes hold, flowers into poem, because perception is grounded: writing as tomar conta, a vision or way of seeing in which perception falls down to earth, becomes weary with the weight of the world, pregnant with poems.

71 "Down Break Drum," 662.
“We ate lunch quickly, in his house,” writes José María Arguedas describing a lunch he had with Carlos Fuentes. “He had to return to the machine. They say the same thing happened to Balzac and Dostoievski. Yes, but as a disgrace, not as a condition they were proud of. As though they wouldn't have written what they wrote in other circumstances? Who knows. What else were they going to do with what they had in their chests?...There are writers that begin to work when life conditions it, with a provision not so freely elected but conditioned, and then there are those of you who are of the profession.”

On the ground there is a writing which is this thing, this life, that overtakes you. It makes your chest – your body – heavy with its weight, demanding to be written in the name of this same life, evoking the Andean cosmovision Javier Medina describes

The andean concept of work is based in an animistic cosmovision. Man knows himself to be part of a living, sacred, animate cosmos and of the mother earth. The cosmos is whole, not divided by the opposition matter - spirit; nor disintegrated by the contradiction religion - technology and the divorce between ethics and economics; not divided by the separation of man in relation to work and his alienation from what he works to produce...Due to this animistic character, work, in the Andes, does not violate the natural world and even less the worker; it does not lead to the undignified treatment of life, nor to the abuse, mistreatment or the exhaustion of the earth, nor to the over-exploitation of its fertility and wealth, nor to wasting or consumerism. It produces frugality. For this reason, from the andean perspective, man is not understood as *homo faber*

72 El zorro de arriba y el zorro de abajo (Buenos Aires: Losada, 1971), 30. All translations of this text are my own.
(created in the image and resemblance of his God faber) but as homo mayeuticus; he who helps Mother Earth give birth.\textsuperscript{73}

Embedded in the radical root of that seemingly passive pull of perception down to the ground is an ecological -- cosmological -- vision of world and work. For here, when we write or makes art from the ground as "part of a living, sacred, animate cosmos and of mother earth" our labor does not transform the world into an externalization of ourselves, a reified object of the Patio. Rather through grounded poiesis we create life-in-the-world.

We can write about the trees and the stars without pushing them away as in eco-mimesis because they are no longer out there, and us in here, subject versus object, person versus world. This is no longer an elbows and up kind of conversation. Here we have life-in-the-world producing art as life-in-the-world. Art as celebrated, sacred, cultivation of corn.

"E me faz sorreir no meu mistério" ("It’s that it makes me smile, my mystery,") writes Lispector,

O meu mistério é que eu ser apenas um meio, e não um fim, tem-me dado a mais maliciosa das liberdades: não sou boba e aproveito. Inclusive, faço um mal aos outros que, francamente. O falso emprego que me deram para disfarçar a minha verdadeira função, pois aproveito o falso emprego e dele faço o meu verdadeiro inclusive o dinheiro que me dão como diária para facilitar a minha vida de modo a que o ovo se faça, pois esse dinheiro eu tenho usado para outros fins, desvio de

\textsuperscript{73} Javier Medina, "La Buena Vida occidental y la Vida Dulce amerindia," in \textit{Suma Qamaña: La comprensión indígena de la Vida Buena} (La Paz: GPD, 2008), 34 - 35. Translation mine.
verba, ultimamente comprei ações na Brahma e estou rica. A isso tudo ainda chamo de ter a necessária modéstia de viver. E também o tempo que me deram, e que nos dão apenas para que no ócio honrado o ovo se faça, pois tenho usado esse tempo para prazeres ilícitos e dores ilícitas, inteiramente esquecida do ovo. Esta é a minha simplicidade.  

(My mystery is that to be merely a means, and not an end, has given me the most malicious of the liberties: I am not stupid and I take advantage. I even do wrong to those who, frankly. The fake job they gave me to disguise my true function, well I take advantage of the fake job and out of it I make my real job, even the money they give me daily to make my life easier so that the egg can be made, well this money I have used it for other ends, diversion of funds, recently I bought Brahma stock and I am rich. And all of this I call having the necessary modesty to live. And also the time they have given me, that they give us just so in the honored leisure time the egg can be made, well I have used this time for illicit pleasures and illicit pains, completely forgetting about the egg. This is my simplicity.)

Not art work, says Smithson again: earth work: “Ovo sobre azul.”  

* * *

"When our feeling is charged with all that we learn of the world through all of our senses, our language is charged with this information, and my how it buzzes!" exclaims José María Arguedas. Language is not an empty object, the sealed spaces of Don Quixote's pages folding back on themselves, but carries in it the inscriptions of a lived life in the world. Água viva, Lispector calls her book, and in so doing inscribes its words onto another side of the letter, onto the ground. The book is not a dead interlocutor, containing the reified and dead truths of God or science, but what is

74 Lispector, "O Ovo e a Galinha," 132.
75 Ibid., 126.
76 El zorro de arriba y el zorro de abajo, 18.
known by a living body in the world. It is a living thing and speaks to you in and from the circuit of life seen by life. "This isn't just a narrative, it's above all primary life that breathes, breathes, breathes." 77

In an earlier version of the manuscript, as if she is still not sure of how to infuse the book with this kind of life, Clarice writes in the margins, with an arrow indicating that it should be inserted into the text,

Preste atenção. Agora vou abrir as cortinas para uma irrupção que é uma ruptura no seio do tempo: irromper é atirar, é propulsão que estoura a carne dos instantes, estripando-a. Prestem atenção: dou uma pirueta solta no ar e - vai começar agora assim. 78

(Attention please: Now I am going to open the curtains, to create an interruption that is a shattering break in the heart of time: to interrupt is a shooting thing, the propulsion that bursts the meat of the instants, eviscerating it. Attention please: I do a flying pirouette in the air and - it's going to start now like this.)

And then later, in the published version: "This book scratches my heart. Red drops splatter on each page. To rest I'll go back to the "meal." / By which I mean to say that my house is not metaphysical. A bad meal is not well received." 79

Written not on a body, as Severo Sarduy would have it, 80 but with a body grounded, sweeping broom, it is as though the text becomes heavy with gestures, the sounds, breaths, silences that animate it like Lispector's pirouette, jumping into it,

77 Lispector, A hora da estrela, 17.
78 Lispector, Obje(c)to gritante, 23.
79 Lispector, Água viva, 71.
shaking it up and causing its gelatinous words to vibrate with the time of life:

"propulsão que estoura a carne dos instantes estripando-a."

"Texture is a good word, a good place to begin talking about Etai-Eken," says Roberson, "Visual texture, musical texture, texture of dense, deepened forms and subjects...I had already begun to look at multiple voices and internally polyphonic sentences and how to structurally graph those sound constructions on the page to enrich the written line."81 And he shows us how in his poem “there is a way you can draw” you can read a building shaped like an "E", with three light well wings that stretched to the back, the light in airshaft the tunnels, and the hymns of church bells which rang which rang off at the strokes of noon. A building at Film Graphics, where Roberson used to work, an ad agency in one of Pittsburgh’s landmark office buildings, the Oliver Building.82

81 "Down Break Drum," 663.

82 Ibid.
"I used to love to sit and listen to how the building would change the sounds of the church bells, actually change the tune of the hymns. The poem tries to deal with these kinds of changes as movement or transformation of object, the E shape, into a symbol, the thunderbird; it tries to deal with the architecture as an X spot that, with swirling, turns into the Native American swastika, then into the

---

E of the thunderbird’s wing shape. Give me your pen again. See the progress? X marks the spot; when you rotate it, then it’s a swastika; speed up and draw out the arms in one direction, an E. Then take that flying E, rotate it and it becomes a thunderbird. That’s what’s in here.”

Text, then, that acquires texture, the dimensions of, the feeling of, a quipu, the Mexica method of recording that Mignolo describes, a tactile rhythmic method which worked to produce meaning, record memory by tracing figures in space, weaving colorful threads changing direction, positioned next to one another, woven knots of weaving threads of life.

A depth -- a dimensionality -- related to a way of being and writing the world -- invisible to hermeneutic frames of the Spanish colonizers, approaching the practice of quipu writing from the lettered city side of the letter and seeing only a flat writing like their own. A kind of writing here too, then, whose meanings cannot be frozen into the hermeneutic depths of representation, but cannot either be fully appreciated as corporeal trace on the representative page. A kind of writing that carries the depth of meaning of grounded poiesis, a horizontal depth, a grounded depth, an accumulation of worlds embedded in the written word.

A book, then, that we might approach as though it were truly alive, as a kind of elder, a living being in whom the world has come to write itself. A book then, which, like an elder holds inside it a living knowledge, recorded in its body, “a treasure trove”

84 Ibid., 666.
of “living memory” that carries in it all the embodied wisdom of a life lived-in the world.86

* * *

"You know it,” says Lispector again, "because you are alive.” And, because this is seminal knowing, one whose truth is predicated on its vital connection to a life-lived-in the world -- not a kind of knowing which pretends that it can stand above the world by gaining some sort of objective omniscience over it, insert it into a totalizing table – it is precisely in what the Patio would see as the limits of this knowledge that constitutes the profoundity of its depth.

Grounded depth is in the heavy weight of the things Yacochay carries, sedimented inscriptions of life-lived-in-the world, the pull they make on meaning towards the material mystery of the world.

Yacochay

De lejos debes venir
tagüita del Yacochay;
más allá de los terrones,
del Colchiquin, más acá.

El mimbreral y los sauces
contentos te ven llegar,
con tu mensaje de cumbres
jugando en el pedregal.

Altas barrancas te guardan,

86 Ibid., 116.
pocos ojos te verán...
¡Los míos, afortunados
te besaron. Yacochay...!

Aromas de yerba-buena
te saludan al pasar,
y el juncal se estira largo
cuando se siente cantar...

(Atahualpa Yupanqui, "Yachochay," 88-9)  

(Yachochay)

From far you must come
fond waters of Yacochay
past the clods of land
of Colchiquín, but here.

The wicker bed
and the weeping willow trees
happy see you arriving
with your message of peaks
playing in the rocky ground.

High up ravines protect you
few eyes will see you...
Mine, fortunate
kissed you. Yacochay...!

Aromas of spearmint
greet you as you pass,
and the
reed bed stretches long
when song is felt...)

---

“I preferred Água viva, a thing that bubbles. At the source,” said Clarice about Água viva.\(^\text{88}\) And like Atahualpa Yupanqui’s poem in which the words bubble, carrying with them like the water, the life, the algae, the scent of the yerba-buena, Lispector’s text glimmers, sparkles, shines, acquiring a strange but now familiar dimensionality -- what Lispector calls a “secret roundness” -- produced because its song seems impossible to extricate from the world -- “islands, canals, oceans” -- that it carries within it, the concrete materiality of its abstractions inherent in a language, in a life, that can never be separated from life.\(^\text{89}\)

And it makes sense now, approaching the text as a living being whose depth of meaning is always inscribed in its life lived-in the world, why Lispector could recommend flying high above the Água viva. As Smithson did with his artworks, attempting to see in the Jetty from an airplane, as he puts it, what the Nazca Indians already knew when they made their mounds. Or how it could be that, as Jolene Rickard described, the seemingly abstract design of the pine on the wampum belt looks quite similar to, discovered thousands of years later, the molecular structure of that tree.\(^\text{90}\) How when you look into the Word, it seems to crack open into the material specificity of the world. The same way that if you looked at one of those drops of water in Atahualpa’s poem you would see that it carries all the things the scents the textures of its

\(^\text{88}\) Clarice Lispector, quoted in Benjamin Moser “Breathing Together/Introduction,” xiii.  
\(^\text{89}\) Lispector, Água viva, 34.  
\(^\text{90}\) Jolene Rickard, (Untitled paper presented at Duke University, Indigeneity / (De)coloniality / @art workshop, May 1, 2014).
journey, written into its being. The macro inscribed into the micro, the micro inscribed into the macro. “In none of this,” insists Lispector, “does the abstract exist. It is the figurative of the unnameable.”

For if in the Patio abstraction is a universalizing gesture, here its concrete materiality comes from its inscription in a life-lived-in the world. ”Behind what is behind thought” as Lispector would have it, is a knowledge that cannot be accessed inside the circuit of representation in which abstraction captures essence but never the concrete materiality of a life lived-in the world. But only from a ground in which zooming out is only to realize our own embeddedness in the world, the concrete materiality inherent in any abstraction -- what a body world sensing otherwise -- seeing otherwise -- intuitively knows.

Yes, it is possible to see something that means something to you, and find that sign deepening or extending its meaning inwardly. Sometimes if you see a sign that means something to you, it just takes you over. You see something like I saw at the parade, you just freeze. They are signs, or points where things – ‘aha’ - - come together. I caught myself doing it, and then once I had all the things laid out, I was able to see what was happening at the parade and sense its organic connection to the tradition, history. When the possession occurs in the voudoun ceremony, there’s a shift in the drumming, and sometimes also a shift in the drummer. There is a shift that signals a possession, the gods entering the body. I think in the drumming it’s called the ”breakdown” the shock of something like your whole body feeling itself seeing. All the peripheral vision is opened into that.

---

91 Lispector, Água viva, 81.
Seen from the ground, the sign, the meaningful unit of language, explodes out-word, into the world it is inscribed within.

* * * *

The smooth floor of the Patio shifts, gives way, opening up to rest the Word on the rickety foundations of a world in which language is no longer only of human beings, but of Yacochay, of living water, the stuff of living beings that speak the truths inscribed in their bodies, lives lived in the world. The tree in Libertella’s plaza no longer looks the same as that mute and brute tree seen from behind the barra of Saussure’s bar. It is the tree seen through the eyes of José María Arguedas, encountered in the city of Arequipa.

El pino de ciento veinte metros de altura que está en el patio de la casa Reisser y Curioni, y que domina todos los horizontes de esta ciudad intensa que se defiende contra la agresión del cemento feo, no del buen cemento; ese pino llegó a ser mi mejor amigo. No es un simple decir. A dos metros de su tronco poderoso - es el único gigante de Arequipa --, a dos metros de su tronco poderoso, renegrido, se oye un ruido, el típico que brota a los pies de estos solitarios. Como lo han podado hasta muy arriba, quizás hasta los ochenta metros; los cortos troncos de sus ramas, así escalanados en la altura lo hacen aparecer como un ser que palpa el aire del mundo con sus millares de cortes. Desde cerca, no se puede verle mucho su altura, sino sólo su majestad y oír ese ruido subterráneo, que aparentemente sólo yo percibía. Le hablé con respeto. Era para mí algo sumamente entrañable y a la vez de otra jerarquía, lindante en lo que en la sierra llamamos, muy respetuosamente aún, 'extranjero'. ¡Pero un árbol! Oía su voz, que es la más profunda y cargada de sentido que nunca he escuchado en ninguna otra cosa en ninguna otra parte. Un árbol de éstos, como el eucalipto de Wayqoalfa de mi pueblo, sabe de cuanto hay debajo de la tierra y en los cielos. Conoce la materia de los astros, de todos los tipos de raíces y aguas, insectos, aves y gusanos; y ese conocimiento se transmite directamente en el sonido que emite su trono, pero muy cerca de él; lo transmite a manera de música, de sabiduría, de consuelo, de inmortalidad. Si te alejas un poco de estos inmensos solitarios ya es su imagen que contiene todas esas verdades, su imagen completa, mecíéndose con la lentitud que la carga del peso de su sabiduría y hermosura no
le obliga sino le imprime. Pero jamás, jamás de los jamases, había visto un árbol como éste y menos dentro de una ciudad importante. En los Andes del Perú los árboles son solitarios. En un patio de una residencia señorial convertida en casa de negocios, este pino, reñegrido, el más alto que mis ojos han visto, me recibió con benevolencia y ternura. Derramó sobre mi cabeza feliz toda su sombra y su música. Música que ni los Bach, Vivaldi o Wagner pudieron hacer tan intensa y transparente de sabiduría, de amor, así tan oníricamente penetrante, de la materia de que todos estamos hechos y que al contacto de esta sombre se inquieta con punzante regocijo, con totalidad.

Yo le hablé a ese gigante. Y puedo asegurar que escuchó y guardó en sus muñones y fibras, en la goma semitransparente que brota de sus cortaduras y se derrama sin cesar, sin distanciarse casi nada de los muñones, allí guardó mi confidencia, las reverentes e íntimas palabras con que le saludé y le dije cuán feliz y preocupado estaba, cuán sorprendido de encontrarlo allí.

(The pine of one hundred and twenty meters of height that is in the patio of the Reisser and Curioni house, and that dominates all of the horizons of this intense city that defends itself against the aggression of the ugly cement, not the aggression of the good cement; that pine came to be my best friend. This is not a simple thing to say. Two meters away from his powerful trunk -- he is the only giant in Arequipa --, two meters from his powerful, very black, trunk, you can hear a noise, typical of what sprouts from the feet of these solitary beings. They have trimmed him until very high up, almost up to eighty meters, the short trunks of his branches, are stepped in the heights, and he seems a being that touches the air of the world with each of his thousands of branches. From up close, you can’t really appreciate his height, only his majesty, and hear that subterranean noise, which apparently only I perceived. I spoke to him with respect. He was for me something extremely intimate and at the same time of another hierarchy, connected to what in the sierra we call, with a great deal of respect, ‘foreigner.’ But a tree! I heard his voice, which is the most profound and charged with meaning that I have never heard in any other thing or in any other place. A tree of this kind, like the eucalyptus tree from Wayqoalfa of my hometown, knows how much there is below the earth and in the skys. It knows the material of the stars, of all the types of roots, and waters, insects, birds, and worms; and this knowledge it transmits directly in the sound that its trunk emits, very close; as music, as wisdom, as consolation, as immortality. If you back up a little from these immense solitary beings it is their image that contains all of these truths.

---

93 El zorro de arriba y el zorro de abajo, 38.
the complete image, rocking slowly with the charge of the weight that the
wisdom and beauty not force upon them but imprinted there. But never, never in
all of the nevers, had I seen a tree like this one while in an important city. In the
Peruvian Andes the trees are solitary. In the patio of a stately residence
converted to a business office, this pine, very black, the tallest my eyes had ever
seen, received me with benevolence and tenderness. The entirety of his shadow
and his music spilled out and showered my happy head. Music that not even the
Bachs, Vivaldis o Wagners could make so intense and transparent with wisdom,
with love, so dreamily penetrating, with the matter of which we are all made,
and that the contact with this shadow stirs up with piercing delight, with totality.

I spoke to that giant. And I can assure that he heard and stored in his
stumps and fibers, in the semitransparent sap that sprouted from his cuts and
spilled out without ceasing, without distancing itself at all from the [stumps],
there he stored my confidence, the reverent and intimate words with which I
greeted him, and I told him how happy and worried I was, how surprised I was
to find him there.

Arguedas and the tree speak to each other based upon their shared position as
living beings in the world. Language is understood not as a system of differential signs
circulating above a representational void but as a set of signs whose meanings are
inscribed in the world. The tree is an elder, a living being, its body a treasure trove of
knowledge accumulated through a root system that goes far under the earth and
encounters worms and dirt and soil and the ancient material of fallen stars, of a branch
system through which the wind moves, which witnesses storms, feels the heat of the
sun. And Arguedas approaches the tree, speaks to the tree, not as head talking but from
the place of his body-in the world – “de la materia de que todos estamos hechos” -- a
body that is water, mud, earth. Body-in-the-world speaks to body-in-the-world and the
marks of the encounter, the conversation, between these two living beings is inscribed
there as well. What underwrites and structures meaning is not the Patio of objects but life lived-in the world.

To call this anthropomorphizing nature is to assume that language is man's and that Nature was something different than man that could not speak to begin with. "But how can nature have rights" asks the interviewer, if it does not even know how to speak?" asks the interviewer. And the man being interviewed says, in response, "you, sir, do not know how to listen." To assume that Arguedas's tree could only speak through a humanizing ventriloquization is to approach the tree from the Patio, not from the ground. "That pine came to be my best friend" says Arguedas, and "this is not a simple thing to say." Arguedas is not reading the tree for an objective truth about the world, nor does it speak that truth to him through some sort of alternative, indexical, system of signs as does the forest in Eduardo Kohn's *How Forests Think*. This is another hierarchy. Arguedas and the tree are-in the world and it is from this place that language emerges.

"Silence," writes Mackey,

as John Cage, Pierre Macherey, and others have pointed out, is unacknowledged sound. The Calibanic gesture is one of sounding silence, plumbing sounds that would otherwise not be heard. Brathwaite's thematization of silence is part and parcel of his thematization of the Word, for silence is meaning and sound

---

suppressed by a linguistic-cultural regime calling itself 'the Word': We find his recourse to the figure of silence accompanied by images of hyperaudition, another aspect of qualitative audit. These images report a heightened auditory perception of the natural environment, implicitly critiquing the constricted hearing regulated by the "Word," an order of relative silence in which "men make noises / louder than the sea’s voices."96

To listen from the ground is to hear the world in what the regime of the Word figures as silence. Admitting that human beings are not the origin of language and meaning, but rather, as Lispector puts it, "stand somewhere off to the side, to the left of who enters."

"When I acquired the faculty of understanding such things" Atahualpa Yupanqui remarks about learning to listen to the wind "I liked it."97

When language lives-in the world, we hear meaning, unfold world, not only in sound-image but in sound, in the polyphonic frequencies, chirps of bird, that open out into the worlds the beings that speak them inhabit. This is not the dead language of the letter, music understood through the frame of the concert hall, where its separation from life fits noises into representational concepts, communicating "bed" but of a creaking, rickety world that José Martí hears when he puts his ear to the floor of the forest in the middle of the night.98 A language which has not ceased to live in the forest, as Pizarnik says, spiraling those who can hear it out of Patio and onto the ground. A language in

96 Nathaniel Mackey, "Wringing the Word," 55.
which, if you tune your ear just right, you can hear the weight of the world in the subterrean song of a tree.

* * *

In the beginning was not the Word. The world is not the book Foucault makes it out to be, and it never was. It cannot be wrapped into man’s knowledge or the words of a monotheistic God: the world is the totality of an untotalizable existence which will never be fully captured by the Word. "Anti-discourse has in this sense the virtue of a constant re-nourishing because God will never concretize all of the possibility of chaos."99 This is not a language which fails because it has built itself out of a knowledge that sits over the void of the Patio, pretending that it can master a world that it will never master. But a humble language which builds itself out of what is not known, lives when its meaningful weight rests in an indeterminate and mysterious world that it would never pretend to fully express.

Ouve-me, ouve-me o silêncio [writes Lispector] o que falo nunca é o que falo e sim outra coisa...Quando digo “água abundantes” estou falando da força de corpo nas águas do mundo. Capta essa outra coisa de que na verdade fala porque eu mesmo não posso.100

(Listen to me, listen to the silence in me, [writes Lispector] what I tell you is never what I tell you but something else. When I say “overflowing waters” I am talking about the pull of the body in the waters of the world. Catch this other thing that actually talks because I cannot even catch it. Read the energy that is in my silence.)

99 Kusch, Geocultura del hombre americano, 289.
100 Lispector, Água viva, 30.
Algo caía en el silencio [writes Pizarnik] Mi última palabra fue yo pero me refería al alba luminosa.101

(Something fell in the silence [writes Pizarnik] My last word was I but I was referring to the luminous dawn).

And what is not expressed is still there, conjured, in this heavy silence, the Great Salt Lake between-the-lines of Smithson’s Jetty.

To hunt something says Bichi, riffing off of Ted Hughes, you might think you are persecuting it, that you are powerful above it, but to hunt it you engage in relation to it, you have to study it, understand it and the life that breathes breathes breathes flaps rainbow flaps through it. What you catch is a life, not a totalized meaning. Every day, says Guillermo, I take out my guitar and I play it but some days it turns from a tool into an instrument and it is then that I hunt the idea and I make music.102

So writing is the method of using the word as bait: the word fishing for whatever is not word. When this not-word - between the lines - takes the bait, something has been written. Once whatever is between the lines is caught the word can be tossed aside with relief. But here is where the analogy stops: the not word, in biting the bait, incorporates itself. The key is to write distractedly.103

Word as bait conjures world and makes egg.

*  *  *

103 Lispector, Água viva, 22.
And I trace, then, on the cement floor, the chalk outlines of Brathwaite's Vèvè. I dance with Kokopelli, against the four cardinal horizons, towards the sun-set, sun-rise. And I go fishing.

The fish which I catch, that breathes on the end of the hook which it confused for a fly and I hold in my hands as its body trembles reflecting sun a subtle rainbow off its scales as it breathes flaps breathes. And all you, both who have caught the fish, can do is stare at it in with this sort of amazed awe and say, with the utmost respect, "Qué lindo bicho." ("What a beautiful creature.")
Coda: To See The Earth Before the End of the World

People are grabbing at the chance to see
the earth before the end of the world
....................................................................
If I have a table
at this event, mine bears an ice sculpture.
Of whatever loss it is it last as long as ice
does until it disappears into its polar white
and melts and the ground beneath it, into vapor,
into air. All that once chased us and we
chased to a balance chasing back, tooth for spear,
knife for claw,
locks us in this grip
we just now see
our own lives taken by
taking them out. Hunting the bear,
we hunt the glacier with the changes come
of that choice.

-Ed Roberson, from "To See The Earth Before the End of

The constellation of American artist-stars, philosopher-stars, Lispector-stars
whose voices and lives and works come into this dissertation – Rodolfo Kusch, Clarice
Lispector, Ed Roberson, Lygia Clark, José María Arguedas, Alejandra Pizarnik, Nancy
Holt, Robert Smithson – do not feel the world in the same way as Kant. They feel the
world pressing in and pulling down, the heavy feeling that emerges from a compromise
with a quaking and alive earth. And they make their art and their writing from this
feeling.
What they bring to the table, then, of the event that is our global ecological crisis that Roberson is referencing in the poem above is something like his ice sculpture, which will melt and then evaporate and become something else: an awareness that the earth is bigger than the small human world in which we live, is bigger than us, and that we must find a different place of balance with it, step out of our relation of domination to it, and make our poetry and our lives from that other place.

And that to say this is to radically reconfigure what we Patio dwellers once knew about the world and our relation to it. Because what it means is that we are no longer operating in relation to the world through the lenses and apparatuses and frameworks underwritten by the smooth floor in the City as Patio of Objects, but rather we are standing on a ground that moves, a living earth that quakes beneath our feet and that we are seeing and making the world from this quaking place.

It is not that any one of the writers or artists in this dissertation offers the solution to the problem of a world that makes itself by negating the world. But I think that, out of their own lived experiences and struggles to make the world otherwise they offer those of us who are looking little interventions -- the *Spiral Jetty*, the *Bicho*, a book that is living water, a poem that is Kokopelli dancing in an-other horizon of meaning making – as ways of thinking about and articulating a being and making the world through art, from a quaking ground.
And so they come together in this loose coalition – this motley crew – that I have begun to stitch together here in this dissertation – of attempts to sail the ship that is the making of the world from the earth. Because, although the violent machine that is the colonial matrix of power does not cut all of them or us in the same ways, I think it is useful to see how a collection of different authors, writers and thinkers in different relations to the colonial capitalist project across the Americas work to opt out of the order it imposes to make otherwise Americas from the ground.

An art of the ground is not an art of catharsis: it is a heavy art, of tears and anguish and the beauty of living in the radical indeterminacy of a hostile world, and you need not only art but others – an archive of voices and struggles and efforts – to make it through the day.

It is in this way that what I’ve started here I hope opens up in alliance and solidarity with efforts to consider American literature not through the hegemonic frames of History – that story of American literature that starts with Creole or colonialist independence and culminates in the bleak world theorized by post-modernism, where, as Fredric Jameson puts it, it is more possible to see the end of the earth before the end of capitalism.¹ But instead tries to see into the Americas a set – a coalition – a motley crew - of literatures and lives that have been resisting this project since before it even began over five hundred years of capitalist colonization ago. This is an American literatures

that may be driven apart by History but comes together in its visions of the cosmos, an American literatures in which there is a quaking alive earth, there are stars up above, a moon in the puddle below.

*   *   *

Jorge Rolli, Kusch’s friend, recounts how, in the patio of the house in which Rodolfo Kusch lived in Buenos Aires, on the Cangallo street, renamed Perón street, but remembered as Cangallo (because such names of revolutionary significance do not die), there were some Jacarandá tree saplings in a pot in the corner. Rolli comes to notice them, sitting there in the corner of that patio as he is visiting Kusch in the final days of his friend’s life, Kusch dying of cancer.

The Jacarandá tree is a tree that grows and blooms with these trumpet like light-blue-purple flowers that seem like purple clouds in the sky seen from below. It is a beautiful tree, a tree that is native to Argentina, and in the spring after a storm, its flowers fall to the sidewalks and they decorate the puddles with splashes of purple.

And Jorge Rolli recounts how, upon his friend’s death, he took those saplings from Kusch’s patio and put them into his own, where they grew, blossoming into the practice of his everyday life and struggle.

The seeds of that Jacarandá tree have sprouted in me as well, into my own life and into the purple-celeste flowers that are the writing of this dissertation.
To the reader, if you are searching for a way out of the Patio, I hope this dissertation project might offer something like the seeds of that Jacarandá tree as well, and that it will sprout in you the possibility for a world-making and a thought-making that can emerge from the place that you might come to know or recognize and inhabit as a feeling the ground as an earth that quakes.

For, as Sun Ra and the members of the Archestra whisper to me over those tracks deep into the *Lanquidity* album, tracks which I have played often, on repeat, loud, as I have written this dissertation: "There are other worlds -- there are OTHER worlds -- IN THIS WORLD -- THEY have not told you of."²

---

Bibliography


woundsdecolonial-healings/.


Rickard, Jolene. Comments given at the "Indigeneity / (De)coloniality / @art," workshop Duke University, May 1.


Rolnik, Suely. “Molding a Contemporary Soul: The Empty-Full of Lygia Clark.” In *The Experimental Exercise of Freedom: Lygia Clark, Gego, Mathias Goeritz, Hélio*


Biography

Jessica Eileen Jones was born in Norristown Pennsylvania, May 30, 1981. She holds a Bachelor’s of the Arts Degree in Urban Studies from Brown University (2003), and a Master’s Degree in English and American Literature from The Pennsylvania State University (2007). She has published an essay entitled "El espectro descolonial de la izquierda argentina, 1955 - 1976," in Pensamiento argentina y la opción descolonial, ed Zulma Palermo (2010); and an article "Spatializing Sexuality in Jaime Hernandez’s Locas," in Atzlán: A Journal of Chicano/a Studies (2009). During her time at Duke she has received the Graduate School Summer Research Fellowship (2012), the Academic Year Foreign Language and Area Studies Fellowship to study Brazilian Portuguese (2009-2010), a Summer Foreign Language and Area Studies Fellowship to Study Brazilian Portuguese in Rio de Janeiro (2009), and the James B. Duke Fellowship (2008 - 2013).