

Advancing Feminist Poetics and Activism: Belladonna "Gathering": 09/24/09-09/25/09: Panel 2: *Lacrimae of the Medusa*; or, Cixous (33 years later) and Crucifictions: Let's Talk about Sex (Again): Panel Talk by Bhanu Kapil

Chair: Laura Jaramillo **Panelists:** Dodie Bellamy, Kass Fleisher, Bhanu Kapil, Laura Mullen **Description:** This panel will explore how womens' experimental writing re-inscribes female subjectivity and desire, how we ride the boundaries, borders, inter-species-genre crossings, body spaces through Cixous' *Laugh of the Medusa*.

LIBERIA, INDIA, COLOMBIA, SERBIA: *ia*: [An aesthetics of non-violence. Notes for the book to come.]

1. "Most of all, don't go into the forest." – Helene Cixous

The sexual story I came here to tell is the story of a woman who is "absolutely disposable," which are not my words. They are ancient words. They are for a woman who, in a forest, in the "dark continent" Cixous imagines, encounters, the woman encounters: a militia. The encounter is an abyss. It's extremely difficult to forgive what happens next. The sounds that are made are neither radical nor symbolic. They are not defensive. They don't come from the mouth or even the throat. They don't exist at an intersect of "orality and inscription." It could be said that nobody made these sounds because the woman, as she was, no longer appears on the earth. The sounds she makes and does not make are deep sounds. I can't distinguish whether they come from the body of the man or from her: the low sounds that come from the core are below "voice." Then out comes the blade slipped from the belt and after this, nothing. If not nothing then an image. If not an image then a color, the colors red and black, broken down and distributed on the jungle floor until they too are reabsorbed and no longer exist.

2. "By night as well as day, the murdered dead send their red corpses, back by the hole in time and have their dripping wet cloths taken before the room where we think in their direction, we think in vain, our thoughts cannot un-murder them, and we too fell wet." – Helene Cixous

The sexual story I wanted to write made me wet, so wet that I did not write it. The pages were wet. I could not write on them. In fact, I did anything rather than re-trace/re-purpose the dots and flecks of the body, its film of organ meat stretched on a leaf, the eye, a bone, the white fluid between the cells of the brain, back to the body. I went to the cinema. I went to India and lay down next to the border of Pakistan, a few feet away from the Wagah checkpoint, then stood up again. I went home. When I did write, I filled my books with parallel images of feral, monstrous, and contemporary life that substituted one form of violence for another. Only then, when I'd exhausted the primal and

metaphorical events of autobiography, did I think in the direction of an atrocious act and its aftermath.

But when I sat down to write, the surface of the book, a book that could not be written and thus not begun: the book: refracted its contents: the ink lifting off the page to float like a slick in the air. An indent on the page where the writing had been. No. I am trying to describe a not-writing that wasn't a fragmentation. It isn't - wasn't - rupture. Rather, it felt like trying to write on something that *wasn't there*, as if the bonds of the paper, its basic grasses, culled from a landscape, had started to loosen.

3. "It is necessary to release this body and strike half this heart with the other half, and if there's courage keep quiet and kill ourselves. And we bury ourselves inside ourselves, this is the hardest." – Helene Cixous

Where is this body, a body with a heart broken into two pieces, the four valves throbbing in the dirt? Where does this body appear, in Indian-writing-in-English, the diasporic writing that might release it? Where is the writer with the courage not to write about herself ever again? And where is the atrocious act, an act of ingestion that by-passes the mouth and goes straight to what comes after, the waste? A body waste produced not by war-time but by the time that unfolds after it, the secondary, economic or trans-generational war for territory.

In investigating the book as a form exceeded by its contents, content that kept splitting whether it was written down or not, I formed an ancillary question, which is Cixous' question: How do you write again in a way that will make it possible to love again? How do you write about territory/terror, engaging trauma in its most modern form: with the aim, as in intimate relations, of discharging it from the nerves? Is it contrary to an avant-garde poetics to consider the possibility of a "healing narrative," of a "language" - Cixous - that "heals as much as it separates."

4. "And on these trembling, endless journeys, you met up with groups of women and children, tribes and families, individuals, whose tense faces, eyes turned towards another space and feverish step indicated that these women too cannot live without the support of nurturing beings." – Helene Cixous

Earlier this year, I visited Leslie McAllan's Transperonal Psychotherapy graduate seminar at Naropa Univeristy in Boulder, Colorado, where I also teach, to give a talk on trauma and narrative. I described my project "Schizophrene" as "the book that can't be written," a text of an impact received by a woman's body that does not survive that impact. A black or brown woman's body in the story I had come to tell. I wasn't sure why I'd been

invited to the class, beyond my cross-cultural presence, and felt weirdly alone and stupid as I began my strange narrative of writing and decapitation, writing and evisceration.

Then Monica spoke up. Monica introduced herself as a trauma therapist with roots in Ecuador, living now in Boulder, and she said: "Perhaps it's not possible to tell the story because it's precisely the story that floods the nervous system, triggers the traumatic response, kicks you out of the 'book.' The book is your body, in the way you link these stories with the physical activity of writing. Writing *and* what's cut open, right? I think you're being invited by this work to imagine a way of creating it that is not a story at all, not even images. How can you stay with the sensations instead; let your art be made out of these sensations?"

5. "To leave death behind you, you have to run very fast straight ahead with the lightness of a deer, be yourself the swiftness and lightness...she felt her teeth quiver. She leapt."
– Helene Cixous

The class broke for ten minutes, to resume with a second speaker, Elizabeth Lozano, a Colombian scholar visiting from Loyola University: a self-described "global feminist" working at the intersection of violence, non-violence, and gender. I was curious, surprised already by the setting, the language of sensation that overlapped unexpectedly, precisely, with a book I'd started reading that week, Elizabeth Grosz's *Chaos, Territory, Art*, and decided to stay. When I returned to the classroom with a lukewarm chai, Elizabeth, this other Elizabeth, was sorting out the technology. Setting up her power point presentation, she put on some Colombian salsa and said: "This music just wants to make me burst out dancing. I don't know if I am going to be able to help myself from bursting." It is hard to explain how alive this person was. Who then spoke on her work as an international witness in the community of St. Jose de Apartado, where the people who live there resist, through non-violent means, the "killing, re-killing, and superkilling" that have dominated life in their country since the massacres of the 1940s.

Territory/terror: "It's not just that we're going to kill you, we're going to tell you we're going to kill you first. Then, we're going to cut your body into little pieces, because we know that your body is sacred to you, that it represents the earth, and your relationship to the earth, who is like a mother to you." These were Elizabeth's expressions, describing what it's like there every day, the domination of corporate paramilitary and military alliances, and how an act of resistance might look like this: if someone is killed, beheaded, their body chopped up with a machete, the entire village "goes into the jungle, looking for the pieces of the body, and then they bring them back. It's a celebration, it's saying, this blood is life, it's spilled into the earth, and now we've gathered the body and we'll bury it rejoicing that from this life is going to come so much growth." A "symbolic

burial." Integrated power versus the power that comes from threat, in peace studies discourse. She described a man who met a paramilitary soldier in the jungle, on a small path, and when the soldier began to tell him, I'm going to kill you, this is what is about to happen to you, I'm going to cut your arm off and then...the man gave a prepared statement, that everyone in the village had vowed to give in this situation, when it came. He said: "It is not in your power to kill me. You can kill me, but the order is not coming from you. It's coming from God. God has given that order. I follow God's orders, and so do you."

Elizabeth described the stones, gathered from the jungle's periphery, and placed around the roots of a tree in the center of the village, each one representing someone who had died and whose body parts had not been found.

6. "Tell me what you know about dismemberment." – The Vertical Interrogation of Strangers

As Elizabeth was speaking about body, jungle/ground, and divine feminine as linked by the cellular matter of blood, the blood a kind of milk, I thought of the Hindu goddess Parvati, chopped up by her father in the world's first honor killing - or one of them - and left on the ground. Shiva, her lover, found her and slung her body parts around his neck, draping them over his shoulders. He retreated to Mount Kailash and sat in a kind of ruined trance for a long time until, one day, unable to tolerate the pain of having lost her any longer, he stood up and flung the pieces of her body to each direction. So that, in modern India, to recreate the body of the goddess, to make that body whole again and to integrate it (through the physical effort of pilgrimage, through meditation, through opening yourself to the vibration of place) with yours, you go, in a lifetime, to all the places -- in India, Pakistan, Nepal and Tibet -- where the parts of her fell. Vulture Peak is where her ear is, I think. In Kolkata: her eye. Her big toe. And so on. I have visited her eyes, her ears, her tongue and her heart. My blood ties flood me, sometimes, and I want to go to where her stomach is, and her nose.

Elizabeth: "Do me a favor. Don't drink Coca Cola ever again. Don't eat Chiquita bananas. Whatever you do, don't eat a Chiquita banana. If you want to support peace and non-violence in Colombia, don't drink that coke."

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Notes for the book to come. Strategies from Cixous mixed with language from Lozano's presentation, and the concept of an ecstatic pilgrimage:

1. "To make the stones speak, on which there is nothing more inscribed, this must be done. Otherwise it is true that none of the dead that have been lost shall ever survive." – Helene Cixous
2. It's not language that heals, it's narrative.
3. Tell the truth of what happened. Document the grief of those who no longer have a place to be.
4. Don't give birth.
5. Participate in communal work.
6. Don't manipulate or give information to any of the parties involved in armed conflict.
7. Keep walking.
8. Open yourself to the vibration of place.
9. Write with a fury that comes from another kind of power.
10. "Don't hit a black woman." -- Colombian salsa.
11. Allow the body to be transformed not in place, but in time.
12. Keep asking the question: What happens to people and communities when war enters their lives?
13. Images are not enough. Juxtapose images and histories, histories and jungles.
14. Create a place to survive.
15. Are you sick and tired of running away?
16. Bear witness. Make a T-shirt that says: "I am an international witness. You can't kill me."
17. Don't collaborate with the violent members of your community.
18. What are the numbers of violence?
19. Don't eat Chiquita bananas.
20. Don't run away!