

**WHAT MAKES POETRY HAPPEN:
THE EROTICS OF LITERARY ACTIVISM
IN AN AGE OF INTERNET VIRUS**

David Buuck and Juliana Spahr, *An Army of Lovers*. City Lights Books, 2013.

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In a testy debate between first generation Language poet Ron Silliman and G2 poet and theorist Steve Evans, who was born in 1965 and received his PhD from Brown in 2000, that took place on the Buffalo listserv as reproduced in *poetics @*, a collection of contributions from the site's early years selected by Joel Kurzai, we notice a skepticism on the part of G2 members—here represented by Evans, now a tenured Professor of Poetics affiliated with the National Poetry Foundation along with his partner, the poet Jennifer Moxley, and Charles Bernstein student Ben Friedlander at the University of Maine—that linguistic disruptions may be commensurate with political sabotage. In the thread I am citing from *poetics@*, a rather pedantic discussion on the etymology of key words such as “fury,” “motivation,” and “experiment” morphs into a debate between Silliman and Evans on generational differences in motivation for experimental writing (57). Centering around the relation of politics to aesthetics in the Silliman-edited anthology of Language writings *In the American Tree* (1986) versus key poetics statements by G2 poets in *O-blek 12: Writing from the New Coast* (1993), Silliman claims *o-blek 12*, offered a “return to the lyric” that “represents precisely the draining of the ‘social’” from “the concerns of G2.” Provoking Evans’s response, Silliman asserts, “there are no literary devices in [*New Coast*] that you cannot already find in *The New American Poetry*, *In the American Tree*, or *The Art of Practice*” (58). Silliman speculates that the lack of new technical means among G2 authors to find a poetics that is critical of “existing social relations and evoking potentials for social transformation,” “may actually represent a much more complex ensemble of social phenomena, that may well include grave doubt over the possibilities of collective action” (59). Evans, in turn, is skeptical about how the “‘tyranny of the signifier’ (a phrase that is laughable today but which articulated aspirations for social change for some people in the 70s-80s)” may relate “to anti-capitalist struggle.” He is, in short, unconvinced about the move from “linguistic to social action” (60).

Alluding to comments by Silliman from *The New Sentence* (1987) such as “Let us undermine the bourgeoisie” and “Writing itself is a form of action” while wrestling, in the wake of 9/11, with W.H. Auden’s observation in his elegy for Yeats that poetry “makes nothing happen,” G2 author and activist Juliana Spahr recalls:

The question [of what poetry makes happen] led us somewhere, it led us to think that we could fracture English’s power by fracturing its syntaxes, by stuttering through its words but then it stranded us there. It didn’t lead us to alliance. It let us think that we could do it alone, just with words.

In spite of her skepticism about the political project of Language poetry—Spahr and her Bay Area colleague David Buuck in *An Army of Lovers* (2013) imagine literary activism in ways more sanguine than one hears in comments by Evans on behalf of G2 poets in the testy debate with Silliman in *@poetics* that I outlined at the start of this paper. In spite of abject failure to manifest social change through a ludic poetic act in “A Picturesque Story About The Border Between Two Cities,” we will notice how Spahr and Buuck in “An Army of Lovers,” the title work to their 2013 collection, represent their avatars—self-styled “card-carrying Bay Area poets”—expressing hope after hopelessness about the potential to reimagine poetry as a progressive social genre (125). As was the case with Spahr’s “Poetry in a Time of Crisis,” the pair are consciously writing in the midst of a U.S. led “War on Terror” typified for the text’s main characters by an Internet littered with images of military interrogations and sounds of incarcerations that foretell “the coming crackdowns” (132). Unquestionably, Spahr and Buuck are influenced by a contemporary political world characterized by what Spahr in her 2002 essay describes as a time of perpetual crisis in which the United States was bombing someone somewhere throughout her stint in graduate school at SUNY Buffalo in the 1990s and during the composition of her scholarly work, *Everybody’s Autonomy*, in the early 21st Century.¹ But *An*

1. Spahr recalls, “I began the book [*Everybody’s Autonomy*] during the Gulf War because I remember watching the coverage to avoid beginning writing. I finished rewriting it while we were bombing Belgrade. When I realized this, I felt a momentary hope that I had been writing during unique times, that I was writing in a time of crisis. But as I thought it over, I realized I had done no writing at any point in my career when the U.S. was not bombing someone. I wrote this paper, for instance, during the bombing of Afghanistan and the continued bombing of Iraq. Even my sometimes home was being bombed: as I wrote this as the U.S. military was practicing their bombing skills on the Makua valley on the North Shore of Oahu. I could go on. I’m living in New York City this year. Somewhere around 3,000 people died in the World Trade Center while I watched from a street corner in Brooklyn. But that is nothing. Some 72,000 have died from AIDS in New York City since 1981. There is, thus,

Army of Lovers is also implicitly in conversation with Cold War social-psychoanalytic theories put forward in what the poet Robert Lowell in “Memoirs of West Street and Lepke” termed “the tranquillized fifties” by authors such as Herbert Marcuse in *Eros and Civilization* (1955) and Norman O. Brown in *Life Against Death* (1959). Marcuse and Brown combined Freud and Marx to indicate the efficacy of libidinal release as agent of social transformation, as well as explicitly influenced by the queer liberation movement of the 1970s—in an interview Buuck comments that the book’s title stems from that movement’s phrase: “an army of lovers cannot fail.” Decade-long friends, Spahr and Buuck follow the psychoanalytically-oriented Leftist cultural critics from the 1950s and radical sexual liberation movements from the 1970s listed above as part of a cross-decade long distance call for a non-commodified, polymorphically-perverse release of energy to create the structure of feeling necessary to contest political repression. Cast in hypnotic prose reminiscent of Ginsberg’s incantations and Whitman’s parataxis, Spahr and Buuck advocate for non-normative sexual practices as expressions of social protest in ways imagined by liberation theorists such as Marcuse and Brown. The task is to challenge the commodification of desire via corporate sponsorship of entertainments that eroticize militarized behavior such as the notorious extravaganza that takes place during half time of NFL’s Super Bowl, an example of Bread and Circus type eroticism referenced in *An Army of Lovers*.

An Army of Lovers is a series of five interrelated (even overlapping) experimental fictions co-authored over a three-year period by Spahr, a SUNY Buffalo Poetics Program graduate and Berkeley based author, theorist, anthologist, and tenured professor at Mills College and Buuck, an Oakland based poet and editor who has served as an adjunct professor at Mills. Born in 1966 in the Southern Ohio town of Chillicothe that she has described as “in the middle of nowhere” and “dirty because it had a barely regulated papermill because nothing else was in the town,” Spahr co-edited with Peter Gizzi the “Technique” section of the two volume twelfth issue of *O-Blek, Writing from the New Coast*, a published outcome to the “First Festival of New Poetry” held at SUNY Buffalo in the Spring of 1993 which Silliman, in the heated exchange with Evans I cited above from *@poetics*, claims lacks new prosodic stylings (132, Rankine and Sewell). She has also edited and authored books concerning radical pedagogy as communal endeavor—*Poetry and Pedagogy: The Challenge of the Contemporary* (with Joan Retallack) [2006] and *Everybody’s Autonomy: Collective Reading and Connective Identity* (2001). In such books she critiques the potential “complicity between

constantly crisis. We cannot say that unique, or interesting, times arrived on September 11.”

normative reading and passivity of thought” (159) and also imagines the literature classroom as “a communal act of resistance, a utopian dissident space” (110) that Alan Golding suggests may be a forum “of metaphorical anarchism in which ‘decentralized self-governance is the norm’” (Golding 24). “Once reading is recognized as dependent on community, and on the relationship between readers and works as a form of community itself, reading turns into a force that can be manipulated and used as a tool of resistance to respond to the inhumanity of slavery,” she states in a part of *Connective Reading and Collective Identity* concerned with the writings of Frederick Douglass (3). In the first story in *An Army of Lovers*, the lengthy “A Picturesque Story About The Border Between Two Cities,” two “mediocre poets” and metamorphic Bay Area figures, one called Demented Panda (the male who lives in the comparatively underprivileged Oakland with his dogs, and thus loosely the avatar for Buuck), and Koki (a female bird-like character and mother who lives in the toney city of San Francisco, and thus loosely the mask for Spahr), convene regularly one summer at a mass transit station park-like area. They meet on a public space located equidistant between two cities known—in a nod to Gertrude’s Stein’s infamous comment that there is no “there there” in her home town of Oakland—as “Here” and “There”—to perform one such “communal act of resistance.” They plan to collaborate on a creative project concerning the relation of politics to art in a time when poetry “was an art form that had lost most, if not all, of its reasons for being” (9).

“A Picturesque Story” is told in a droll, ironically detached voice that remains sympathetic to the main characters’ struggle to create representations that could help bridge differences in Bay Area communities that border each other and yet appear far apart in terms of economic profile and racial makeup. Speaking as members of an in-group to other affiliates, the narrators’ poke fun at their characters’ procrastination stemming from a hypersensitive awareness concerning motives, tendency to gossip about other poets, fear of potential exclusions of disenfranchised persons, and a frustrating predilection for saying “to themselves what they did not want to do” even while repeating the ironically comforting mantra that they struggle against doubt to establish “that through the collaboration they might figure out what it meant to be a poet in a time and a culture where poetry had lost most if not all of its reasons for being” (14). The narrators also report that the duo’s project, eventually brought forth through the Demented Panda’s trancelike incantations, turns into “a right proper big final mess” (26). Instead of his spell converting the “picturesque story into poetry” with sensitive renderings of the homeless population that now inhabit the transit

space and a rehearsal of the area's prehistory, when human tribes and animals shared the ground for 3,000 years, Demented Panda literally conjures up a massive outpouring of shit that bubbles up and out onto the park area from the subway's underground tunnel (26-27).

In an essay in *Poets and Writers Magazine* from 2000, Spahr expressed a sanguine view of non-sponsored collaborative poetry projects as a genre ripe for anarchic social interventions. In "Metromania: Poetry, Academy, and Anarchy," she argued that because U.S. poets "are not economically indebted to a governmental or to a non-governmental organizational structure, they are free to write a poetry that is politically engaged (that poetry has a political as well as an aesthetic role is assumed by the majority of these grassroots schools of poetry) [25]. We must remember the story under discussion is composed in the aftermath to the 9/11 attacks and about a decade into the resulting War on Terror that has animated Spahr lyrics such as "poem written after September 11, 2001" (2005) in which she encourages a deconstruction of dualistic thinking based on her perception that all human beings quite literally share the airy space that surrounds our bodies. The raw sewage Demented Panza has brought forth thus manifests Spahr and Buuck's pessimistic appraisal of the relation between poetry and political action in a present moment in which, as Spahr and Joshua Clover have stated, "more poets were arrested in California this year [2012] than in any year in recent memory (if not ever)" (Red, White, & Blue). Even the well-intentioned collaboration of two post-Steinian/post Language oriented Bay Area avant-garde poets' has become implicated within a degraded and degrading American imaginary characterized by greed, pollution, violence, and exploitation.

The raw sewage symbolizes the radical poets' desublimation of the environmentally destructive and interpersonally repressive political unconscious characteristic of a late capitalist surveillance state. Spahr and Buuck indicate that Demented Panda's conjuring of shit is also a way for them to address how social relations have become eroticized and how erotics have become commodified when Demented Panda's performance morphs from shit into a big budget dystopia comparable to a Super Bowl celebration. After the raw sewage burns, the transit site, bordering the city of haves and the city of have nots, metamorphoses into an amusement park complete with Ferris wheel, skimpily clad dancers, a sugar and fat laden food court, and a dj spinning musical discs repurposed from military hardware. Understandably frustrated, Demented Panda interprets his conjuring as merely in service of a terrorist police state. He considers his creative act to be a late capitalist version of a Roman Bread and Circus theater complicit with "the swiping of

debit cards and tapping of persona identification numbers, the cash registers ca-chinging, the barking and the breaking, the whimpering, the crying, the screaming” (36). The site then morphs into displays of U.S. power during the Bush (and, later, Obama) War on Terror including interrogation rooms and holding cells “funded by the Department of Homeland Security for counterterrorist efforts, holding 2,438 protestors in a nearby warehouse rented for this very purpose” (33). Once more, however, Spahr and Buuck perceive no critical space outside the consumerist-military-big media nexus from which to protest abuses of human rights as the site morphs into an academic conference “on politics and aesthetics” (33) and then “a board-room meeting on tax-deductible philanthropic donations to nonprofit arts organizations” (33):

[T]here’s no audience, since all this was happening now and everyone was knee deep in it, not just watching but as embedded participants. Even pointing and gaping was participation. Even taking cellphone photos for documentation was participation. Even standing perfectly still and doing nothing was participation (34).

We may read the story as a sobering indictment of creative spasticity in a period characterized by governmental clampdown on civil rights, media surveillance, and an octopus-like culture industry that absorbs dissidence and repackages rebellion into fashionable neo-bohemian stylings characteristic of James Dean’s, Jack Kerouac’s, and Miles Davis’ appearances in Gap advertisements for khaki pants. Progressivist constructive intent undoubtedly has produced destructive outcomes in this story, but the narrative may be read more productively as a contemporary expression of the anarchic tendency found in modernist avant-garde movements such as Italian Futurism and English Vorticism in which energy, violence, and deck-clearing new creation are yoked together. (In “Metromania: Poetry, Academy, and Anarchy,” Spahr argued that because of its “do-it-yourself attitude [...] [p]oetry is currently our most anarchist of art forms. By anarchist I mean self-governing and decentralized” [24].)

In the collection’s fifth and final story, the titular “An Army of Lovers,” Spahr and Buuck return to the polluted transit center to check in on Demented Panda and Koki in the aftermath to their creative debacle. In spite of their desire to make art together in the spirit of “collective possibility,” each acknowledges the obvious problem: “Their collaboration was clearly not working and had not been working from the very beginning” (123). The first part of the story is, then, as one might expect, characterized by expressions of self-lacerating guilt, futility, and anger. Even counter-cultural

artists invested in collaborative resistance are part of the ecological problem rather than spokespersons for the solution to what Spahr, in her essay on poetry and politics with Clover, calls “changes in how society is arranged regarding things like jobs and debts and jails.” Each admits their environmental footprints “require 24.5 acres” to “sustain their first-world lifestyles” (124).

To our surprise, however, the last movement of the story shifts in tone from abject despair to prophetic hope as the speakers’ rally-the-troops of lovers with exuberant speech acts:

So let’s put to it and clear the streets of cars and billboards and ATMs and past-due bill notices, discovering in every intersection a dance floor, pulsing with unleashed beats and feedback loops of crooked laughter, in harmony or disharmony, from each according to their skillz and to each according to their booty. All this with hunger in our hips, such palpable lust not for bodies but for togetherness and whatever might yet quiver beyond the law. (133-134).

What prompts the sea change from shit-producing despair to sexy carnivalesque prophetic hope? In a word, breathing. For Buuck and Spahr, author of *This Connection of Everyone With Lungs*, breathing is imagined, not as a sign of inspiration to prompt the announcement of a Post Romantic lyric speaker’s “voice,” but rather as a decidedly Non-Western and Non-MFA program sponsored meditative practice that transports the main characters into a quite literally refreshing experience of being part of (rather than a part from) the ebb and flow of life that is shared by humans, animals, plants, and, in a metaphoric sense, the cosmos.² Demented Panda and Koki attend to breath as an expression of an intuitive connection to ecological rhythms that indicates a post-humanist perspective on the potential for community building and resistance in the face of “the coming crackdowns” (132).³ After literally “brush[ing] themselves off” and “breathing deeply,”

2. As Kimberly Lamm argues in “All Together/Now: Writing the Space of Collectivities in the Poetry of Juliana Spahr,” this connection of everyone with lungs thematizes the undoing of the “spatial and imaginative impasse of ‘both sides’ [in a political struggle] by following the rhythm of the breath’s migrations as it links the interior of the body to ever-wider layers of space.[...]In unpunctuated lines that render the world’s continuous, quiet, but incantatory rhythms, Spahr builds an argument for recognizing the collectivity of spaces we already inhabit and the connections already threaded by the body’s necessary breath” (134).

3. As Jon Kabat-Zinn, physician and founder of (MBSR) the mindfulness-based stress reduction program at the University of Massachusetts, writes in “The Power of Breathing: Your Unsuspected Ally in the Healing Process,” a section of *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness* has written:

Poets and scientists alike are aware that our organism pulsates with the rhythms of its ancestry. Rhythm

the half human-half animal pair shrugs off despair at imagining themselves, as did early and mid 20th Century bohemian avant-gardists, as standing outside the culture they loathed. “Ready now to move through the world with a tenfold increase in interest in it” (128), the pair resolve, in the words of William Carlos Williams, to “begin to begin again” through improvisational speech acts. Reviewing their prior acts of destructive composition as a necessary, even therapeutic, creative cleansing of a bankrupt cultural imaginary, they come to regard their prior activities as if they had performed an exorcism (or, more literally, a massive bowel movement that followed a period of creative constipation). Having hit bottom, the pair submits to a leap of faith into what Spahr in a critical study refers to as “collective autonomy” through willful speech acts in which prior associations with their culture are deemed to be null and void:

[A]midst the glitter and ash, they spoke as one and declared, with tenfold determination together and to each other, let us come together now, let’s now let’s, let’s all out the animal inside us that bucks for peace and fucking, and then let’s brandish our pirate flags and set to it. Let’s clear the fields of all that hinders and hounds us, declare all contracts made in our name but without our consent null and void, and then charter illicit transport for all those who crave elsewhere and otherwise. What comes out of you or me comes out of all of us, which is why we want to dance with you in common sluice without shame or hesitations (129).

One hears in the above passage echoes of Whitman (“what I shall assume you shall assume”), as well as the zany Eastern energy of Allen Ginsberg that animated the oral anti-war protest poem “Wichita Vortex Sutra” (1966) via reference to the yogic practice of chakras, the Haight Ashbery hopefulness of a Freak Flag Nation from the Woodstock era as well as the 1983 heavy metal phallic call of Quiet Riot to “cum on feel the noize,” and the destabilizing repetitions and rhythms of Gertrude Stein. Involved participants in a corrupt society, the pair, now working under the sign of Freudian sexual liberation as neo-Marxist historical intervention, call for a quite literal (in a sexual sense) coming together of currently factionalized poetry tribes ranging from pricey “Flatulent Arts programs” to “those that collect

and pulsation are intrinsic to all life, from the beating of bacterial cilia to the alternating cycles of photosynthesis and respiration in plants, to the circadian rhythms of our own body and its biochemistry. These rhythms of the living world are embedded within the larger rhythms of the planet itself, the ebb and flow of the tides, the carbon, nitrogen, and oxygen cycles of the biosphere, the cycles of night and day, the seasons. Our very bodies are joined with the planet in a continual rhythmic exchange as matter and energy flow back and forth between our bodies and what we call “the environment.” [...]//One way this exchange of matter and energy happens is through breathing. With each breath, we exchange carbon dioxide molecules from inside our bodies for oxygen molecules from the surrounding air. Waste disposal with each outbreath, renewal with each in breath. (39).

the thick ideolects of Internet” culture (131). Writing in a frenzied rush of expanding breath groups reminiscent of definitions of the poem as action field in what Charles Olson, in his 1950 essay on projective verse, described as a “high energy construct,” the authors call for a quite literal inspirational action. Deeply embodied participants are encouraged to ingest shreds of the currently factionalized and disempowered poetry world to produce a fertilized heap, not of broken images, as T.S. Eliot would have it in “The Waste Land,” but rather of a generative composted composition. And then, in a revision of the expulsion of shit in the first story I addressed, to take “from our excrement making new poems or anti-poems” (131).

How is the transformation from abject defeat to prophetic hope against hope possible? It must be said that Spahr and Buuck are by no means blind to the contradictions and paradoxes implicit in a representative of a tenured avant-garde such as Spahr attempting to rupture the cultural imaginary from within the academy. In September 2014, Spahr has, for example, been embroiled in a well-publicized protest against Mills College, her tenure home, for firing adjuncts in the English department who had begun to unionize—Buuck being one of the unionizing adjuncts! Spahr and Buuck’s gambit is that their call for a non-discriminatory form of sexual liberation and desublimation of ego could resist wholesale commodification as in the Demented Panda’s initial version of a sugar-shocked strip club party. Their repurposing of wretched compositional refuse would not produce political change by itself, but rather they might create through incantatory speech acts the interpersonal conditions, embodied environment, and energetic mindset necessary to rally the troops—the army of lovers—to enter a frame of mind, body, and spirit capable of mustering the sheerchutzpah to resist enchainment:

we will feel equally loved and replenished by acts of care, wit, and the soft caressing of skin and pelt, just as we will have to have found new words for cumming as we rewire our erogenous circuits such that we find sexual bliss with works of art. That’s right, we want art that makes us wet and driven, driven to flail and whelp and court failure in our impulse to action, again and again, failing with ever more grace and cunning, until futility becomes the magic that when dissolved beneath the tongue of all those ready to bark leads to ever more fruitful inquiries, for our bodies are bored by answers, which is why we wish to striate and rejuvenate the questions, even if in our questioning some of us are led to then ask how might we refuse this, refuse all of this. (139)

Critiquing America as a site comparable to a Super Bowl Half Time Show that commodifies and sexualizes a violent and competitive behavior such as professional football, Spahr and Buuck take a page from Cold War Era

20th century liberation social theorists such as the *Eros and Civilization* of Herbert Marcuse and the Norman O. Brown of *Life Against Death*.⁴ They reconfigure the, in Marxist terms, alienated labor of expressing desire as it appears as a re-presentation of excrement and revision it in the passage above as a performance of libidinal energies that could, in the future, produce a community with potential to resist repressive regimes.

All five stories in *An Army of Lovers* reflect tensions felt by G2 authors between creative representation as anti-absorptive conceptualism and as meaning-bearing commentary on a U.S. imaginary characterized by the War on Terror. “What We Talk About When We Talk About Poetry,” for example, is a straight-out funny and yet telling parody of a Raymond Carver “dirty realist” short story. As in a typical Carver story, a tense conversation delivered in raw flat language takes place over a gin-soaked evening at a working class kitchen table. Here, however, the common subjects of Carver—infidelity, bankruptcy, alcoholism—are recast in terms of debates among two couples—Mel and Terri; Laura and Nicky—Bay Area poets and creative writing instructors who dispute the potential for Leftist poetry such as Louis Zukofsky’s *A* and Muriel Rukeyser’s “The Book of the Dead” to perform social work by documenting injustice in esoteric verse that, Mel laments, no one reads “but a bunch of white guys in Buffalo of whatever” (72).⁵ While Mel “wouldn’t call [Zukofsky’s poetry] political” because “it’s

4. In a preface to *Eros and Civilization*, reviewer Robert Young notes that Marcuse assures us that: “Their protest will continue because it is a biological necessity. By nature the young are in the forefront of those who live and fight for Eros against Death... Today the fight for life, the fight for Eros, is the political fight.” Young continues: “Marcuse argues that ‘the irreconcilable conflict is not between work—(reality principle—life without leisure) and Eros (pleasure principle—leisure and pleasure), but between alienated labour (performance principle—economic stratification) and Eros.’ Sex is allowed for ‘the betters’ (capitalists...), and for workers only when not disturbing performance. Marcuse believes that a socialist society could be a society without needing the performance of the ‘poor’ and without as strong a suppression of our sexual drives: it could replace ‘alienated labor’ with ‘non-alienated libidinal work’ resulting in ‘a non-repressive civilization based on ‘non-repressive sublimation’”.

5. Marilyn Hacker writes: “The young Rukeyser was an enthusiastic Socialist, and it was through the magazine *New Masses* that she first read about the tragic situation in Gauley Bridge, West Virginia, where miners hired to dig tunnels in the mountains were falling ill and dying in large numbers of silicosis. There was considerable evidence that the mine owners knew of the danger, but had failed to provide adequate health protection, and had even widened the scope of the operation, as silica, the disease-producing substance, was a profitable unexpected byproduct of the tunnel operation. In 1936, Rukeyser, now 22, went to West Virginia with a woman photographer friend. She conducted interviews with miners, white and black, with their wives and children, with mine employees. She collected documentary evidence — transcripts of congressional hearings, stock market reports, medical interviews and diagnoses, and the testimony of a social worker who came on a humanitarian mission. From all of this, Rukeyser composed a book-length poem, the multi-sectioned,

all jumbled,” overly formal and abstract, and “no one knows what he did it for” (75), Terri defends the emphasis in *A* on love and labor: “In the poem, love is part of the resistance to capitalism. It’s about labor as well as love. Labor gets defined by love, a love that is care and attention to the processes of work” (75). Terri’s comments on how Zukofsky attempts to translate alienated labor in acts of affection resonate with Kiki’s and Demented Bear’s attempt to reimagine commodified eroticism into a form of resistance comparable to Herbert Marcuse’s and Norman O. Brown’s advocacy of Eros as a stay against civilized complacency.

No story in *An Army of Lovers*, however, concerns the impact of New Media on a G2 author engaged in online multimedia conceptual projects with political themes more than one of two stories in the collection entitled “The Side Effect.” Before turning to *that* version of “The Side Effect,” however, let me mention that the other story in the collection entitled “The Side Effect” (let’s refer to it for clarity’s sake as “TSE2”) may usefully be paired with “A Picturesque Story About The Border Between Two Cities” as well as with “The Side Effect” story that I will be commenting on in detail below. Like these other tales, “TSE2” involves the viral impact on a main character (in this case a male performance artist) of a militarized cultural imaginary. He wants his performance art to work through his lack of affect, “inability to get up and be out in the world,” and to heal a viral infection that he and a faith-healer named Laura, who also appears in the other version of “The Side Effect,” regard as stemming from the illness of late capitalism, a diseased way of life which is said to have “leaked out of his face” (109). In performance pieces he isolates himself in a room in which he imitates the physical shapes of prisoners in tortured positions (“his source for each pose had been a series of photographs that had been found on the Internet, photographs taken in an overseas military prison called ‘The Hard Site’” [113]. “Not sure there could be a remedy for what ailed him, at least not as art or writing,” the outcome to his creative efforts is uncertain, but suggests emancipatory hopefulness. He plans a collaborative piece about “the small historically unimportant plot of land” reminiscent of the transit station described in “A Picturesque Story,” creates a special vegetable soup that possesses curative properties, and writes a story in which he masturbates, spits on lovers, shifts genders, becomes an international arms dealer, and, as in “An Army of Lovers,” imagines unbridled eroticism as a means through which “we could build a bottom-up, participatory structure of society and culture,

multi-voiced ‘The Book of the Dead’, published in 1938 in her second collection, *US 1* (the first, and not last, book of American poems to be named for a highway). (Poetry Daily Prose Feature: “Marilyn Hacker profiles Muriel Rukeyser”)

a two-and three-and more-way affair, about erect and sucking participation. [...]For motherhood and fucking exists as necessary paradigms of creation, ones where anyone can be an artist-lover and anyone can succeed” (121).

In the other version of “The Side Effect,” a female author, political activist, multimedia sound artist, and professor (remind anyone of Spahr!) receives a tick bite while plugged in to “the websites, blogs, status updates, voicemails, the photos and video” at her college office (41). The tick bite, and the Lyme disease it carries, are made especially infectious to humans because of Nazi-influenced U.S. experiments “that had been relocated after the war to an island off the coast of Lyme, Connecticut” (42). The bite, which leaves irritating nipple-like sores that ooze puss on the main character’s body, symbolizes, in a cyborg update to William Burroughs’ theory of language as a virus —“You will encounter a resisting organism that forces you to talk. That organism is the word,” he stated in *The Ticket that Exploded* (1962) —her embodiment of upsetting sounds and images, which the character has downloaded from the Internet to create her compositions. She has, in effect, become a conductor that carries New Mediated cultural disease:

she felt like the circuitry of all her machines and the various websites that she had been scanning, the ones that connected the anaplasmosis, the babesiosis, the ehrlichiosis, and the Lyme disease in ticks to the militarized mycoplasma fermentans incognitus, as well as the ones that showed chilling images of the torture to which the nation in which she currently lived was subjecting citizens of other nations, were all coursing through her blood, her nerve meridians, and her intestines, until she was quivering with some sweet sick feeling” (44-45).⁶

Ironically, the tick bite is a literal form of viral bugging intimately related to her embodiment of web-based access to contemporary political trauma, but the main character, as if part of a closed circuit, consults the internet for medical information to heal her disease. From a website, she learns of the “specialist” named Laura, a New Age type homeopathic alternative healer

6. Burroughs writes: “The ‘Other Half’ is the word. The ‘Other Half’ is an organism. Word is an organism. The presence of the ‘Other Half’ is a separate organism attached to your nervous system on an air line of words can now be demonstrated experimentally. One of the most common ‘hallucinations’ of subject during sense withdrawal is the feeling of another body sprawled through the subject’s body at an angle...yes quite an angle it is the ‘Other Half’ worked quite some years on a symbiotic basis. From symbiosis to parasitism is a short step. The word is now a virus. The flu virus may have once been a healthy lung cell. It is now a parasitic organism that invades and damages the central nervous system. Modern man has lost the option of silence. Try halting sub-vocal speech. Try to achieve even ten seconds of inner silence. You will encounter a resisting organism that forces you to talk. That organism is the word.” From: *The Ticket That Exploded* (1962). (Wikiquote)

and, one might argue, Foucaultian critic sensitive to the relation of New Media and biological warfare, who informs the main character that “what’s in you is not you. But the militarized mycoplasma fermentans incognitus is in your spirochetes and it will always adapt and mutate, will always be one step ahead of you” (50). In spite (or because) of her infection—“Something was changing inside her, something she could not name, as if the tick bite were taking on a life of its own” (48)—the now quite literally girl gone viral web artist seeks to compose a sonic composition—repurposed from upsetting web reports concerning military incarcerations, endangered bird species, and disputes over water rights that have become privatized—in which her goal is for a “digital sample cut and pasted into a sound piece” (47) to represent, as if a postmodern version of T.S. Eliot’s “Objective Correlative,” her jumbled “seeing, thinking, feeling” (47) about traumatic subjects. Her goal is not so much to document political crisis and environmental disaster in the tradition of Rukeyser in *U.S. 1* and Charles Reznikoff in *Testimony* as to *embody* trauma. Fearing legibility would contain real terror, she refuses to deflect interpretations of the “music” through a theoretical or ideological lens. She does not want listeners to intellectualize the sounds they hear in her Burroughs-like cut-ups of web-based material by “thinking the right proper political thoughts in the head but not the messy ugly things that stir in the belly or resonate in the inner cavities of a right proper North American body faced with the implications” (46). As with “An Army of Lovers,” Spahr and Buuck refuse to accept representations that detach artist, viewer or, for that matter, representation itself, from an implication in the larger cultural crisis. That larger crisis is made manifest through sounds and images she collates from the web and in the oozing, blemished body of the viral, shame-filled artist who suffers from a tick bite that has mutated because of “alliances between Nazi and U.S. military germ warfare technologies” (48). She is indelibly intertwined with the web as a form of linguistic contagion. As was the case in Gordon’s *Inbox* and Jena Osman’s call for a poetics that mixes Bernstein’s absorptive and anti-absorptive modes, Spahr and Buuck’s character puts together her sonic collage out of digital samples that move in and out of comprehensibility. The New Media composer wants to deconstruct governmental discourse that is intended to make atrocity legible. “She watched testimonies at various government hearings, listening to the cadence and lilt of each voice as much as to the details and the evasive language, the tortured syntax required to reduce what had been done by all of us to the fault of a few” (46). As in George Orwell’s “Politics and the English Language” (1946), Spahr and Buuck’s New Media sound artist is sensitive to how euphemistic language masks agency for misbehavior.

From this point of view, Language poetry's anti-absorptive, materialist ethos precludes audiences from disentanglement with atrocities found on the web through rejuvenation of feelings that exceed understanding.⁷ The New Media artist also wants to develop intimacy with her audience even though the sounds of a "jail-cell door being slammed shut" and "of keys in metal locks, of military-issue mops beings sloshed around inside half-filled buckets" are in fact "indistinguishable to the computer, just bits of data to be processed" (47). We recall William S. Burroughs' decision around 1959 to follow visual artist Byron Gysin (and, implicitly a long line of early 20th century collage artists ranging from Picasso to Joseph Cornell to Gertrude Stein to Romare Bearden to T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound) to work in cut-ups to acknowledge how conventional language locks in limited perspectives on subjectivity. This is so even as language is viral. Like a disease, language infiltrates a body from outside the self but becomes a definitive aspect of subjectivity. Contracting a virus as she is plugging in to her machines in cyborg fashion, the New Media artist embodies trauma via images and sounds in ways that, paradoxically, imply actuality through her diseased connection with an "outside" world of political violence that she internalizes via a computer screen.⁸

Infected by a disease interrelated with web searches at the start of "The Side Effect," the tale's last movement nonetheless registers a marked shift in the main character's association with New Media reports about incarceration, torture, and violent death stemming from the War on Terror and its

7. "Burroughs reportedly believed that 'Word and image locks' and 'association blocks' lock the mind into conventional patterns of thinking, speaking, acting, and perceiving things." This led him to use a variety of techniques for breaking out of the virus's control including cutting and folding word groupings to form such gems as "The great skies are open. Supreme bugle burning flesh children to mist." From "What did William Burroughs mean when he said 'Language is a virus?'" (Ask Yahoo)

8. Christopher Land writes on the relation of language as a virus and the fictive construction of identity in Burroughs cut-ups: "As a theory of language the word-virus functions to indicate the absolute Otherness of language. Language is something that comes from outside the human whilst simultaneously being taken as a key line of demarcation that separates human beings from other animals and from machine, as evinced for example by the Turing test (Plant, 1997; cf. Searle, 1984; Fellows, 1995). In this sense language is an Other that produces human being. More importantly, it is language that produces self-identity and the concept of the coherent self or 'I', itself a linguistic construct. Without this identity, and without language, 'one' quite simply isn't—the 'I' does not exist—a point that is reinforced by our characterisation of pre-linguistic children as 'infants,' a word deriving from the Latin *infans*: 'not speaking' (Easthope, 1999: 34). In this sense Burroughs is close to Nietzsche whose critique of Descartes was that he mistook a 'grammatical prejudice', the need to posit a subject of the statement for an ontological verity (Nietzsche, 1989: 24; 1994). For Nietzsche the 'I' of the subject was itself produced by language and the structures of grammar. For Burroughs this notion is developed in a more vividly material sense as 'the word' is seen to inhabit the human subject as a physical infestation or infection."

blowback. Her perspective turns in response to news about a woman from her hometown. This other woman, a doppelganger who travelled a path not taken by the main character, grew up in a mining town comparable to the West Virginia area about which Rukeyser in “The Book of the Dead” wrote of miners who contracted lung disease at the infamous Gauley Bridge site run by the Union Carbide Company, which hid information about the safety risks of sillicate from employees. Unlike the main character, who escaped the drudgery and dangers of a mining town by entering the (until the genetically modified tick bite) comfortable life of professional culture worker, her fellow townswoman escaped by joining the military. No longer detached from world news, the diseased artist imaginatively reconstructs the townswoman’s history, tracing her life from teenaged attendance at pep rallies where, in a yearbook photo, she performed a thumbs up sign, and hanging out in the school parking lot with bad boys in Motley Crue t-shirts, through to her learning to follow orders as a “Specialist First Class,” and her pregnancy. The New Media artist also wants to record “the sound of the zipper on the body bag in the photo,” presumably containing the woman’s corpse, a casualty of the War on Terror’s blowback to hooded beatings, batons crashing on bodies and walls, and prison doors slamming shut that the main character has represented through in sound collages. The townswoman’s sad fate kindles in the main character a desire to create a different type of composition, one that would in its frenetic juxtapositions of sonic equivalents to the militarized woman’s thumbs up at the high school pep rally, as well as the sounds of arena rock anthems and the “flag ceremony” (presumably signaling the return of the woman’s body bag) connote a hyper-masculine society (football games, rock concerts) that transforms ordinary citizens into military agents. In an act of anarchy and sheer anger at the futility of her project, however, she chooses to “burn it all down, leaving only the sound of photographs melting into glitter and ash” (60).

In “Poetry in a Time of Crisis” (2002), the short essay based on a 2001 MLA convention presentation, Spahr argues for “public declarations of collective culture and connective agency,” that is, “[m]ore outward turns” (133). In an essay on Spahr’s poetics, Kimberly Lamm echoes Spahr’s emphasis on public writing she states, “Spahr’s own poetry is full of outward, inclusive turns, and calls attention to the collectivities that emerge through connective agency” (133). Unquestionably, Spahr and Buuck continue in *An Army of Lovers* to advocate for a collaborative textual engagement that pushes readers in the direction of building communities and participatory culture. Whether it produces piles of shit or Dionysian delights, poetry in *An Army of Lovers* does indeed make stuff happen. One also notices a decid-

edly *inward* turn in “The Side Effect.” I’d argue the turn towards encouraging a rejuvenation of feeling, registered in the speakers’ desire for audiences to “come on feel the noize” is connected to Spahr’s observation in “Poetry in a Time of Crisis” that while poetry cannot by itself change everything (or even anything) through the verbal magic that unfortunately leads Demented Panda to quite literally stink up the joint, poetry can change the “brain.” Changing the “brain,” Spahr continues in her essay, might change the direction of our “feet.” She not only refers to alterations in prosodic scanning devices, but suggests how such alterations in how we move our prosodic feet—say from Augustan formalism to Olsonian action fields—, may, in ways still uncertain, but which cognitive theorists may yet explain, simultaneously manifests, enacts, and encourages writers and readers to go-go in other directions.⁹

[*Works cited in this review-essay can be found at our online companion: <http://ndreview.nd.edu>.]

9. In “Poetry in a Time of Crisis,” Spahr writes: “But now to the question, is poetry enough? And the answer is of course not. Poetry is only one part of enough. The part that changes the brain. In an email the other day New York poet Allison Cobb claimed she was paraphrasing Charles Bernstein as she wrote “the fact that poetry won’t stop violence is not a reason not to try.” I want to tweak her paraphrase a little to something like the fact that poetry hasn’t led all that many poets into action doesn’t mean we shouldn’t ask where our poetry leads us finally. If poetry changes our head, and I think this is irrefutable, how does it also change our feet?”