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Playwright Joyelle McSweeney on the Influence of Leslie Scalapino

by [A 2Paragraphs Contributor](#) in [Personal Stories](#) | September 20, 2013

*Joyelle McSweeney won the inaugural [Leslie Scalapino Award for Innovative Women Playwrights](#) and her winning play, **Dead Youth, or, the Leaks** ([Litmus Press](#)) will receive a staged reading at the [New Ohio Theatre](#) in New York, directed by Fiona Templeton, on Monday, October 14, at 6:30 PM. Here she discusses her play, the pandemic violence it seeks to emerge from, and the influence of Scalapino's work.*

“*Dahlia's Iris* is a novel with interior streamers streaming off it.” Leslie Scalapino's impossible geode or rogue gland of a novel begins by exuding this proposition about itself, enacting an impossible self-complication, a beautiful immersive conundrum we can also reach up and touch. I am drawn back to [Dahlia's Iris](#) for its continually in-folding structure, for the new surfaces this in-folding paradoxically keeps exposing. This perverse, inverting topology is evident at every level—Scalapino's characteristically assertive statements which boldly convert to questions; the intervention in the text's interior by the intellectually impatient author; the imbrication of genre with genre; and, most intriguingly, the way a seemingly solid character like Detective Grace Abe can house another character inside her: “suddenly there was a man who had been a marine dead who was in her. [...] she would feel the presence of his

activities, ‘ghosts of actions she had done’ which were apparently his, or hers.” Grace treats/responds to this marine’s past and interior violences by ingesting various toxins and by burning the surface of her body. She converts her body to the legible surface of his (hidden, obscene) plot.

This enigma of Grace-and-the-marine continually reasserts itself in my mind, especially in our current psychotic national environs in which armed citizens carry violence through the system like a toxin which occasionally erupts, becomes exterior, and attests to violence-overloads in the national and international grids. Mass violence, domestic violence, corporate rapacity, environmental collapse and general predation, all these violences move so easily through the system that it is as if violence itself is the organism, the rest of us its habitat. Or maybe violence is a humanism. My play *Dead Youth, or, the Leaks* attempts to stagger out amid this omniviolence and flash a little brain stem, a little ass. It borrows from Grace-and-the-marine one possible configuration of survival: a kind of ‘soluble personhood’, an anti-binary or zonal body which allows characters to be alive-and-dead, male-and-female, singular-and-plural, self-and-not. On a rogue containership piloted by Julian Assange and teen pirate Abduwali Abdukhadir Muse, beneath the gaze of an ambivalent deity, the DEAD YOUTH ford anthropocenic seas/attempting to sail out of Historee.

—**Joyelle McSweeney** is a poet, critic, and professor at the University of Notre Dame. Her most recent books include **Salamandrine: 8 Gothics**