

# READING EXPERIMENTAL WRITING



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Colby, Georgina, editor. *Reading Experimental Writing*. Edinburgh University Press, 2021.

## On Joan Retallack's *Memnoir*: Investigating 'the Experience of Experiencing'

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be prepared to admire and overcome your lagoon of objectivity and false mergers of the past.

Heinrik Marchand, *In the Past, Into the Future*

### I. 'every one then is like many others always living'<sup>1</sup>

What draws me to Joan Retallack's *Memnoir*, a poem that originated in response to *Chain Magazine*'s issue devoted to memoir/anti-memoir, is that I see in this work an antidote to the limitations that I associate with being categorically or generically memoir. In her 'Guest Editor's Notes' to this issue, Kerry Sherin writes,

One can see in these texts the political and psychic stakes involved in self-representation and the ongoing negotiations of subjects . . . . Across the differences, there is a consciousness of language as the inter-me-diary.<sup>2</sup>

This snippet of the introductory note hints at a focus on another incarnation of 'memoir', a version that calls into question the traditional idea that, 'like writing a poem, memoir is reliant upon the persistence of memory . . . the way in which the demands of the past contrive upon the present, to unlock certain truths'.<sup>3</sup> In contrast to Sherin's sense of 'language as the inter-me-diary', Jill Bialosky sees memoir and memory as typically intertwined, the emphasis being on memory's ability to 'unlock certain truths', truths that are intimately the writer's to uncover. She continues,

in shaping the narrative of memoir, one relies on belief in the intuitive nature to uncover the hidden narrative of the past, what gives memoir (and poetry) its intimacy and tension? I will argue that it is the persistence

of memory; the way in which an experience persists itself on the writer and wills it into consciousness. It is this persistence that wills the narrative to life.<sup>4</sup>

Bialosky does ultimately say that poetry and memoir cannot (and should not) be linear; the bulk of her piece focuses on the way that poetry can go beyond the autobiographical or confessional in its dramatising of memory. Despite this gesture towards the non-confessional (the anti-Plath or Sexton), Bialosky is still exploring the idea of the poem as representative of its writer or at least of a topic close to the writer, familiar, some form of truth, however exaggerated and fragmented.

What use is the subjective past forcing its hand on a poem's (and poet's) present? To tell one's own story is to tell a story always in motion, always affected and in conversation with what Joan Retallack describes as 'the mess of the contemporary'.<sup>5</sup> Instead of 'delving into the past to resurrect it', through *Memnoir*, Retallack problematises the project of recounting one's past, inviting us into a lively conversation that engages tense(s) through collapsing the divide between personal/private and public, and interweaving the flood of one's own experience with the flood of information we are all privy to by virtue of participating in the contemporary. Instead of privileging one perspective and one individual's memories, Retallack asks us to consider the reality that no memoir is singular, because we, as humans, are not singular – our experience is shrouded by our interactions with others and the world we contribute to and live in.

II. 'they are conducting life and that makes their composition what it is, it makes their work compose as it does'.<sup>6</sup>

The root of 'memoir' is 'mem', which, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, means something closest to 'mindful' but is often defined as 'to remember' and used as an abbreviation for 'memoir, memorial, or member'. 'Noir' is defined as 'black'. The phrase 'film noir' became popular in the mid-twentieth century, with the advent of 'noir films', and is used to describe movies that are 'gloomy and fatalistic in character . . . [also] urban, morally ambiguous, anti-heroic' (*Oxford English Dictionary*). In titling her poem *Memnoir*, Retallack playfully hints at problems inherent in the genre of 'memoir' (as well

as 'antimemoir'), while also indicating that her piece enters into this dialogue – one that acknowledges that the ideas we choose to express in writing are limited, despite any illusions of completeness that the work might convey (i.e. a short story). No memory is perfect, which means that by nature, a memoir is part fiction and part unfinished, not unlike a mystery that goes unsolved.

The book opens with a 'conversation' between 'Mem' and 'Noir':

Mem: What's our relation to the past?

Noir: Same as to the future.

Mem: Then what's our relation to the future?

Noir: You don't want to know.

Mem: In other words the jig is up.

Noir: In other words the jig is up.

This opening engages the notion that the past is never past tense, and does so by way of a humorous riff on Socratic dialogue. In her process note, Retallack writes, '*Memnoir*, like all the work I do, comes out of a perforated self – permeable, in conversation, not wanting to finish a story about a self that must be in motion for the I to believe in the I as a vital principle.'<sup>7</sup> The work's title is in itself literally 'perforated' into two voices, pushing what appears to be 'simple' language to go beyond any easily articulated relationship between past/present/future. 'Mem' and 'Noir' become their own voices, they engage in a conversation about our/their relationship to time; yet the questions asked are never 'resolved', and the dialogue becomes a language game in which 'Mem' plays the part of inquirer and by the end 'the jig is up'. That playful closing phrase usually connotes that something unknown is revealed, yet here, repeated twice, the only thing that becomes clear is that questions of this nature lead to continued questions.

What follows this dialogue is a book that makes careful use of the page as unit, while intermingling 'cultural as well as personal memories'. Retallack begins, 'it's said that it happens even in nature e.g. during the/childhood the mother might have (had) a taste for film/noir and take(n) the child along'.<sup>8</sup> The difference between this and something like, 'my mother loved film noir and often took me to the movies with her', is striking. Retallack's rendering alleviates the reader of the biases that come along with personal anecdotes, and instead opens the text up to the reader. In his Introduction to *The Business of Memory*, Charles Baxter writes, 'You may possess

subjectivity, you may even be a subject yourself, but it is sometimes considered to be in bad and somewhat narcissistic taste to say so.<sup>9</sup> Baxter focuses on the problems the genre of memoir raises – that one person’s recounting of his/her own experience is self-indulgent (to a certain extent). Retallack combats this particular problem of genre by doing away with the quasi-omniscient ‘I’. In its place we find ‘it’s said’, ‘the mother’ and ‘the child’. ‘The’ indicates a specified subject while also leaving the subject itself undefined, general and even transient.

This opening stanza, ‘it’s said that it happens even in nature e.g. during the/childhood the mother might have (had) a taste for film/noir and take(n) the child along’,<sup>10</sup> is a hypothetical sentence fragment, yet the reader still becomes attached to the idea that ‘it happens even in nature’. The action is not happening to any one person, but is rather a linguistic experience to be shared. As Retallack notes in her ‘process note’, ‘This isn’t about owning a self, or having a story to tell, though narrative strands weave in and out of chance-developed configurations’.<sup>11</sup> In other words, what this poem asks of its reader(s) is to rethink the nature of the act of ‘memoir’ so that individual experience encapsulates an awareness of the experiences happening around us, and releases the idea of ‘experience’ (as a singular noun) from the constraints of being owned by any one person (reader or writer).

Memoir should involve not only the personal, but what surrounds the person. The poem continues, several pages later,

this voltage through the body is brought on by the senses  
senses strictly speaking in logic nothing is accidental the  
world divides us into seekers after facts seekers after gold  
dig up much earth and find little<sup>12</sup>

Here, the senses are directly engaged; but these senses are not an individual’s specific five senses, but rather senses as a larger part of the way one interacts with the world. We are introduced to different variations of ‘seekers’, ‘after facts’ and ‘after gold’, the latter preoccupied with material, currency, and therefore destined to ‘find little’. But the lack of punctuation in this excerpt also creates a connection between these two ‘seekers’, that perhaps both ‘find little’. For Retallack, what is central to ‘escap[ing] the prison house of language’ is ‘through our unintelligAbilities’.<sup>13</sup> In other words, the normative hunt for capital (either through money or data) is predictable and

unimaginative – it is no road for a true ‘seeker’ to take if that ‘seeker’ seeks real ‘investigative engagement’.

Retallack's 2007 essay ‘What is Experimental Poetry and Why Do We Need It?’ begins with the following epigraph (attributed to Genre Tallique):

Critique of the appropriative *we* makes way for an inclusive *we* of human responsibility acknowledging the shared origin and destiny of every form of life on the planet. A planetary pronoun is inherently experimental. No one knows what its force might be. The question is how to deploy it in consequential synergistic projects (thought and living experiments) that compose new value coordinates for *we*.

With its emphasis on ‘*we*’, this passage underscores the importance of the unintelligible as part of the project of resisting narrative and composing (or proposing) an alternative route that acknowledges and negotiates the problem of privileging any singular (‘I’) ‘form of life’. The ‘*we*’ is ‘appropriative’, inclusive in its grammatical definition, and presents new possibilities for a collective subjecthood when rendered ‘planetary pronoun’. Just as Charles Baxter identifies the problem of subjectivity, Retallack via Tallique proposes a new grammar that refuses the memoir-induced phenomenon that Baxter describes as ‘the public realm dies as everyone turns inward’.<sup>14</sup> As Retallack's essay begins, the reader sees that the thought experiment of the text, the essaying of the essay, is to explore how ‘languages of description may need to change under pressure of new angles of inquiry into how complex interrelationships make sense’.<sup>15</sup> Instead of the public turning inward, Retallack offers a different ‘angle of inquiry’ that emphasises ‘complex interrelationships’ instead of first-person tunnel vision. ‘This voltage through the body is brought on by the senses,’ and these senses are interconnected, transmuting, as the surge of voltage travels through ‘*the* body’.

Midway through this same essay, Retallack writes, ‘During the second half of the twentieth century, many of us came to the idea of uses of language that are not only in conversation with the surprises, unintelligibilities and most intriguing messes of the contemporary moment but enact interrogations into its most problematic structures.’<sup>16</sup> This concept of the potential of language (particularly the experimental language/use of language of some poetries) to create agency in the unknown is central to how I read *Memnoir*. Instead

of telling a predictable story, predictable in that it follows the one-author conventional narrative trope, Retallack opts to multiply perspective(s) in order to introduce the unknowability of the future into a dialogue of present and past, a dialogue that enacts 'investigative engagement' with what language might make possible.

### III. 'Can you please by asking what is expert.'<sup>17</sup>

'Curiosity and the Claim to Happiness' is what appears to be the title of the first 'section' of 'poems' of *Memnoir*. This is followed by the unattributed epigraph: 'Studies have shown that the brain/prefers unpredictable pleasures.'<sup>18</sup> This header is the only one in the book that does not consist of some modification of 'Present Tense', and one that points towards the importance of curiosity and the 'unpredictable' as potential heroines in this intervention into points of view. In *Art as Experience*, John Dewey writes, 'Experience occurs continuously, because the interaction of live creature and environing conditions is involved in the very process of living.'<sup>19</sup> Dewey asks readers to shift their focus to the process and/of experiencing that underlies the making of a work of art, instead of focusing on the finished artwork alone. Retallack's emphasis on challenging both the tenses of one's experience as well as the reliability of any one point of view mirrors Dewey's assertion that experience is omnipresent and ever important. Retallack writes,

without the carefully constructed container  
story: is story possible: can a life even a portion  
of a life be contained in a story: would songs  
be better to repair the brain<sup>20</sup>

Could a story ever be true if it is the product of a 'constructed container', a vessel isolated from interaction with the other stories around? Where should a story live? Is it possible to even pinpoint this kind of relation if all stories are intertwined, participating in a Venn Diagram of overlapping relations? By using only ':' as punctuation here, this questioning of relationality is underscored – a colon signifies some kind of comparison – ratio or proportion – a possibly mathematical moment that one should supposedly know a solution to, yet sometimes won't. In her review of *Memnoir*, Redell Olsen writes, 'and this is a poem which challenges the location of

a here and now where we “don’t want to know” our relationship to the past or future’.<sup>21</sup> It is a poem that asks ‘is story possible’, and then follows by suggesting that other mediums might be ‘better to repair the brain’, like the often improvisational associations of song.

IV. ‘In second second time time to be next next which  
is not convincing convincing inhabitable that much  
that much there.’<sup>22</sup>

In a 2011 *HTMLGIANT* post,<sup>23</sup> Alexis Orgera writes, ‘Locating the “I” within the space of real or imagined experience is the task of poem-as-memoir. Taking facts and making them new, turning language on edge – whatever you want to call it, the truth remains that language becomes the memoir.’ Orgera also specifies that sometimes ‘my syntax and rhythm overrides my content’. Although this shows that the kind of poem-as-memoir Orgera is proposing is interested in the work that language can do and not necessarily in a linear autobiographical story, she still emphasises the ‘I’ of the piece. In *Memnoir*, the word ‘I’ only appears ten times (the poem itself is thirty-eight pages long). This signifies the way that Retallack’s project complicates and remedies the first person persona that normatively connotes some kind of hypothetical ‘truth’.

As Alain Leahsdottir writes in *Fragment & Personhood*, ‘too often writers see the absence of a first person narrator as a signal that the text is being transmitted by some disembodied voice. Rather, the opposite is true.’ The first ‘I’ in *Memnoir* appears on the first page of the text: ‘fiction is/precisely what they now call non-fiction too get a bit too/personal i.e. Eurydice my dark darling don’t worry I can/bear your not looking at me she cri(ed) out’.<sup>24</sup> In this moment (the second stanza/paragraph on the page), the reader is instantly involved in the text – we’re involved in a conversation of genre trouble (fiction/non-fiction), the question of the place of the personal is raised, and an example is offered in the form of the Orpheus/Eurydice myth. When the ‘I’ appears, the body it is referring to is transient – is it Orpheus who is saying ‘Eurydice my dark darling . . .’ and then Eurydice becomes the ‘I’, responding ‘I can/bear your not looking . . .’? Does the ‘I’ belong to the writer or narrator of the poem? It’s the lack of punctuation coupled with where the line breaks occur that creates this fluidity of signifiers. The sensation this wandering pronoun



creates is one where nothing is easily definable, not time, person or place. To return to Retallack's process note – 'This isn't about owning a self, or having a story to tell, though narrative strands weave in and out of chance-developed configurations.'<sup>25</sup> What's important here is the continued emphasis on 'a self that must be in motion for the I to believe in the I as a vital principle'. In other words, to claim that there is a reliable self when the world around us is constantly in flux is to deny the reality of 'experiencing what we are experiencing'. Or, as Grant Matthew Jenkins proposes in *Poetic Obligation: Ethics in Experimental American Poetry after 1945*, 'rather than emphasize the said, one must seek the saying'.<sup>26</sup> By stressing the 'saying' rather than the said, Jenkins demonstrates the way that writing must reflect the transience of the world it grows from; in other words, the 'I' of these texts is never reliable, never stable, and never should be either. I'm reminded of John Cage's 'History of Experimental Music in the United States',<sup>27</sup> the importance of 'giving up control so the sounds can be sounds' – only here I would say that what *Memnoir* does is remind us of the importance that we give up our normative reliance on an omniscient 'I'.

V. 'It's snowing but no matter we will get  
there in the taxi.'<sup>28</sup>

[Tracking the word curiosity throughout the book.]

VI. 'She is one being the one she is being.'<sup>29</sup>

Beyond asking readers to reconfigure our relationship to the 'I', *Memnoir* also 'throws us into a dilemma about our location of the tense of the writing: present, past, future?'<sup>30</sup> Many of the book's subheadings are permutations of tenses: 'Present Tense: Choice', 'Present Tensed', 'Present Tenses', etc. In the very form of the poem, we're asked to rethink our relationship to time and memory – 'it is that that is the problem with the timing that it is/always off while it can not be off at all'.<sup>31</sup> This creates a contemporary rendering of Gertrude Stein's idea of the 'continuous present', which Retallack describes in her 'Introduction' to *Gertrude Stein: Selections* as the 'invention of a continuous present experienced in the pulse of her words was part of her project to register a new time sense peculiar to her era'.<sup>32</sup> *Memnoir* creates its own time space sense, as well as a new way to challenge

and interact with the reliability of our own relationship(s) to memory. In 'Composition as Explanation', Stein writes, 'the only thing that is different from one time to another is what is seen and what is seen depends upon how everybody is doing everything'.<sup>33</sup> In this statement, Stein foregrounds the importance of 'composition' (the active act of composing) as what is important, the contemporariness of our noticing. Referring to Stein's 'How Writing is Written', Retallack states, 'it is the business of the writer to live one's contemporariness in the composition of one's writing'.<sup>34</sup>

'... the world is/bright too bright gnomic present tense tensile everything/happening all at once the world is full of its own mute history ...'.<sup>35</sup> Not only do tenses and speakers fluctuate in this text, but 'everything/[is] happening all at once', meaning that the inertia is never that which is known, that we never become inert because nothing is inertly known.<sup>36</sup> The contrast between 'too bright' and 'present tense' and 'mute history' point to the importance of pushing ourselves (as poets and readers) to the boundaries of both language and memory. As Stein concludes 'If I Told Him' – 'Let me recite what history teaches. History teaches.'<sup>37</sup> There is no reciting of what 'history teaches', there is no point of view that is privileged, there is no history that is objective. As Redell Olsen writes, 'the only possible hint of escape is the potential for knowledge – to go on discovering the plots, the codings, the clues that swerve the reader into multiple modes of attention and engagement with the poem and the world in and around it'.<sup>38</sup>

What Olsen alludes to is the experience of reading *Memnoir*, the fact that while the text displaces the reader as far as time, place, story, it is also full of vibrant descriptions that bring the reader viscerally inside the work. Retallack writes,

otherwise one could ask at any moment e.g. in what story  
does an uninvited goddess walk in and roll a golden ball  
down the hall or why not enjoy the story of lovers in the  
same vein from different centuries but in the same story  
from different worlds but in the same story I write down  
my dreams this is probably not one of them ...<sup>39</sup>

Beginning with 'otherwise', this passage presents a sequence of mythic 'otherwises' in the guise of 'story'. Laden with possible clues like the repetition of 'in the same story', the reader is propelled forward, struck by the clarity of the 'goddess' (who is 'uninvited') and 'a golden ball' alongside the swerves that occur in each line.

There is no legible ‘same story’, and perhaps this is the important ‘coding’ to crack. The stanza that precedes this one ends, ‘the soul is inwardness, as/soon as and insofar as it is no longer outwardness; it is *memoria*, insofar as it does not lose itself in *curiositas*’.<sup>40</sup> The effect of this is that ‘otherwise one could ask at any moment’ becomes framed by echoes of classical rhetorical thinking specifically of *De Inventione/On Invention* (attributed to Cicero), which presents the ‘proper materials of rhetoric’. ‘*Memoria*’ is Latin for ‘memory’, but seems to represent something between (or both/and) memorisation and improvisation. Translated by C. D. Younge (1853), *On Invention* offers the following ‘divisions’ of rhetoric (or oratory): ‘Invention; Arrangement; Elocution; Memory; Delivery’. Memory is described as ‘the lasting sense in the mind of the matters and words corresponding to the reception of these topics’. Memory in this context is almost the orator’s ability to embody language, to have a facility not only with written speech, but to also have an internal repository of references and quotations to draw on when impromptu speech requires it. In contrast to *memoria*, *curiositas* (Latin for ‘curiosity’) involves the desire to explore, learn something, follow one’s interests. It makes sense that ‘the soul is inwardness’ when ‘*memoria* . . . does not lose itself in *curiositas*’ because *memoria* hinges on what already exists inside one’s mind and *curiositas* involves active engagement with one’s environment and all the experiences it has to offer.

So, although the reader becomes ensconced in the possibilities of the ‘uninvited goddess’, we are also piecing together what kinds of modes or wagers the text invites us to participate in. As Olsen writes, ‘[Retallack] avoids the fixity of the still, the *known* meaning, and therefore value, of a word, a sentence or scene; definitions are not only always “otherwise”, but lead in alternate “other” ways to reveal a faulty structure leaking narrative in all directions.’<sup>41</sup> The effect of the ‘leaking narrative in all directions’ is one that exudes interrelationships across unexpected words, from e.g. to e.g., culminating in the experience of ‘another example of the way in which a form might not/reflect a purported fact or facts’.<sup>42</sup> Here the form might be story, narrative, memoir – all forms that are up for negotiation and reconsideration through *Memnoir*. Retallack continues this stanza, ‘I drop(ped) the tendency/to begin sentences with I long ago she claims . . .’.<sup>43</sup> ‘I’ as signifier of what one expects of memoir is directly undone – but undone by being ‘drop(ped)’, not via decisiveness.

VII. 'I know I know I know you.'<sup>44</sup>

A litany of quotation:

... fiction is/precisely what they now call non-fiction too get a bit too/  
personal i.e. Eurydice my dark darling don't worry I can/bear your not  
looking at me she cri(ed) out i.e. hoping it/(was) true <sup>45</sup>

... in the same story I write down/my dreams this is probably not  
one of them <sup>46</sup>

... I have a confession to make I have not/answered my mail my  
telephone my email my calling my/God my country my conscience my  
desire to <sup>47</sup>

... I drop(ped) the tendency/to begin sentences with I long ago she  
claims <sup>48</sup>

e.g. one thing I try not to understand she says is how/gravitation  
works or from where the force of attraction/comes or the smile the smile  
in which the body makes this present felt ... <sup>49</sup>

... I beg that you unravel the fates of/my Eurydice too quickly  
run ... <sup>50</sup>

among the things I live by she says i.e. along with some-/thing a  
woman once (said) in a London cab ... <sup>51</sup>

is there any way to staunch the flood toward the smarmy/margins I  
once want(ed) to demonstrate this to be the/case but my margins (were)  
much too wide to contain the proof ... <sup>52</sup>

VIII. '... it is the detection that holds the interest and  
that is natural enough ... '<sup>53</sup>

The first appearance of the first person, 'I', in *Memnoir* appears in the context of a genre critique ('fiction is/precisely what they now call non-fiction') that swerves into a revisiting of the story of Eurydice. Both fiction and non-fiction verge on the 'too personal', meaning too self-centered/self-centric, the project of (a) *Memnoir* being to call into question what one does with subject (note the lack of article, lack of specificity). '... fiction is/precisely what they now call non-fiction too get a bit too/personal ... '<sup>54</sup> What does one do with the 'too personal'? 'i.e. Eurydice my dark darling don't worry I can/bear your not looking at me she cri(ed) out'.<sup>55</sup> Is Eurydice both speaker and subject here? The line break between 'I can' and 'bear' separate what might be dialogue. It might be Orpheus calling out to Eurydice, 'my dark darling don't worry'. However, who is the 'she' who 'cri(ed)

out after saying “I can/bear your not looking at me”? This moment creates a collapse of perspectives right at the start of the poem, pushing readers (who are also viewers) to suspend disbelief, or rather the belief that we might know the story of any Eurydice, through twists of minimally punctuated lines.

Ovid’s rendering of ‘The Story of Orpheus and Eurydice’ (in *Metamorphoses*) begins with Eurydice’s descent to the underworld and Orpheus’s subsequent plight to rescue his wife, ‘whose growing years were taken/By a snake’s venom’.<sup>56</sup> The scenario is cinematic – woman meets a tragic death (too early) and her forlorn husband fights for her return. He wins – the ‘man’ always does in these mythic stories, as long as he exercises self-control in their return to land – ‘Turn back his gaze, or the gift would be in vain’.<sup>57</sup> Eurydice might very well utter her support for Orpheus ‘not looking at me’ – but he does, and she’s gone. In Retallack’s initial rendering of this tale, there is no Orpheus on this page. In fact, there is no trace of Orpheus here.

There is a ‘she’ repeated far more often than ‘I’, often in the company of ‘I’. For example, ‘. . . I drop(ped) the tendency/to begin sentences with I long ago she claims’.<sup>58</sup> The ‘I’ here exists in multiple tenses – past and present, drop and dropped – and the ‘I’ is spoken by ‘she’. This moment is preceded by ‘another example of the way in which a form might not/reflect a purported fact or facts’.<sup>59</sup> With an emphasis on ‘form’ and ‘fact(s)’, both ‘I’ and ‘she’ are rendered questionable or question-worthy. Nothing is what it seems here, and the ‘she’ might play the role of both detective and femme fatale.

In his introduction to *The Philosophy of Film Noir* (2006), Mark T. Conard defines the genre first technically – ‘the constant opposition of light and shadow, its oblique camera angles, and its disruptive compositional balance of frames and scenes, the way characters are placed in awkward and unconventional positions within a particular shot’<sup>60</sup> – and then thematically. Conard lists tropes that include: ‘the inversion of traditional values and the corresponding moral ambivalence . . . the feeling of alienation, paranoia, and cynicism; the presence of crime and violence; and the disorientation of the viewer’.<sup>61</sup> Part of the language game of this text is the way Retallack collapses the familiar into new terrain – memoir joins with film noir to set the scene for a stage where memory and movie are their fictional, perhaps interchangeable, silhouetted, hypothetical selves.

Suppose *Memnoir* proposes an alternate use of the first person. Suppose the ‘I’, the first person is never singular and the subjective is perhaps a continual surprise. Part of the appeal of the noir genre

is the investigation, the experience of losing oneself into a line of inquiry because it feels imperative, the desire to know.

*Cue: Various shadows. Artificial lighting. Perhaps the location is unspecific, perhaps it is smoky, perhaps there's a fedora shielding the anti-hero's face.*

Towards the end of the book, the first person seems to reflect on the idea of narration. 'among the things I live by she says i.e. along with some-/thing a woman once (said) in a London cab . . .'.<sup>62</sup> The reader is left to imagine 'the things I live by', never specified by 'she'. This stanza closes, 'if you don't/know what you want you'll just be used s/he says in the/made-for-tv-movie no more alarming than relatively/tasteful vampire assaults'.<sup>63</sup> The plot thickens as 'you' is in danger of being 'used'. Then suddenly we are on television, but the text is not episodic, rather feature-film length and equipped with the stigma of being palatable enough to watch in the 'family' room in one's home. The following page presents a lexical romp of descriptors that reverberate with Hollywood echoes – 'why refuse entertaining irony dry wry humor display/of imaginative aerodynamics emotional hydraulics . . .'.<sup>64</sup> These lines could read as film review, boasting 'dry wry humor' and 'imaginative aerodynamics'. Drama is everywhere here, but the feeling is not conveyed through linear storytelling. Instead the reader continues to link association to memory to language in a recursive process that undoes meaning making as it continues to be remade.

*Establishing Shot: Language is its own detective story. An adventure in voice-over where plot never stands alone. A dance number takes a dark twist only to find the leading lady stuck on a storyboard again. Emphasis on lighting, nostalgia, a hummingbird from where the force of attraction comes.*

When the first person appears for the last time, the reader becomes engaged in a meta-poetical moment: 'is there any way to staunch the flood toward the smarmy/margins I once want(ed) to demonstrate this to be the/case but my margins (were) much too wide to contain the proof . . .'.<sup>65</sup> Given that the text appears in prosaic blocks on the page, pushing up against the margins, rather 'smarmy/margins', one might read 'I once want(ed) to demonstrate this to be the/case' as a reflection on the craft of the text in the reader's hands. 'Want(ed)' is both past and present, hinting that this experience of 'margins much too wide' is ongoing, as is the tension surrounding 'proof'. Although the text seems to be narrating its own physicality, the language used is visual, cinematic – we see 'the flood' and imagine, as the stanza progresses, 'the figure crossing the vacant lot the ungended/silhouette

intersecting a collector's fact'.<sup>66</sup> The action here, a shadowy gender-ambiguous being moving across an empty asphalt expanse, turns reading into seeing and syntax into bodies.

*Dolly Shot: The camera moves alongside, the camera always moves alongside, never with. Maybe we're moving towards a dimly lit building, maybe it's a smoggy street corner, maybe there's a car or an interrogation room or even a woman lounging in a hotel lobby.*

Beyond the thinking that *Memnoir* sparks around time and memory, fiction and autobiography, Retallack also crafts a book that pushes the reader out of any predictive gendered assumptions. In her recent essay 'Alterity, Misogyny & the Agonistic Feminine',<sup>67</sup> Retallack draws our attention to the work of S. M. Quant, who proposes, 'Despite the fact that gender identities are in increasingly complex conversation with biology and cultural construction the reductive force of patriarchy, with its sidekick misogyny, remains the catastrophic constant.' Unlike film noir, or the revisionary potential of memoir, *Memnoir* refuses to accept 'patriarchy' as 'catastrophic constant'. Instead the figures that inhabit the text are 'ungendered/silhouette', 'she', Eurydice and even Archimedeia (Archimedes + Medea, scientist + enchantress), the latter being an intervention on a masculine name. Sure, there are 'boys' and 'too many Sinatra/movies', but the voice of the text refuses 'to be dominated by default masculine values'.<sup>68</sup> In fact, the text upturns the idea that one should ever accept any default situation or dynamic. The experience of *Memnoir* argues that masculine/feminine divides are as false as the image of the vampy femme fatale, and that it is through language that an alternative 'form of life' (to paraphrase Wittgenstein) becomes possible.

In 'The Difficulties of Gertrude Stein I & II', Retallack observes, 'we intuitively know that everyday life doesn't conform to simple outlines of well-made stories. In fact the story as story is radically surprising only to the degree that it transgresses its own generic expectations.'<sup>69</sup> The essay then looks to Stein's foray into detective fiction, *Blood on the Dining Room Floor*, as a work that in its design is a 'small but complex system that cannot by its own constituting rules arrive at a logical terminus'.<sup>70</sup> The same can be said of *Memnoir* – the text's playful urgency prompts genuine investigative reading. While Stein's novel is critiqued because of its generic illegibility, *Memnoir* refuses generic expectations – nothing is certain in the world of this work, and that is why it is important – the composition of the text provokes dialogue through its composing. To quote Retallack on *Blood on the Dining Room Floor*, 'the



more you can't find the object you're looking for, the more you're learning about the language coastline itself'.<sup>71</sup> The 'language coastline' is what pushes the reader's imagination to the brink, challenging memory to rewrite itself given the contemporary moment of remembering.

IX. 'And how do you like what you are.'<sup>72</sup>

*Memnoir* concludes with the line(s), 'watch your prize as it flies out of your hand/into the air'.<sup>73</sup> Appropriately, by ending on this image of watching, there is no conclusion. The poem ends looking outwards at that which is unpredictable, but pleasantly so. It is also important to note that the book really concludes with a list of 'Sources', including multi-genre authors like Ovid and Hans Blumenberg, further cementing that this text is truly a conversation or dialogue between texts, individuals, histories and time.

the preceding is much too or not sentimental enough  
     to accommodate the experience of the child is fatally  
     wounded i.e. the house is a mess the streets are littered  
     with trash the lawns are littered with trash the grass is  
     dying shrubs are pruned to look like gum drops grass is  
 mown to look like Astroturf replaces the grass up the stairs<sup>74</sup>

In this excerpt, Retallack paints a portrait of a landscape, or scenario. But the portrait is not site-specific, nor experience-specific. It seems as though a specific place is being constructed, but this is a space that can be read as universal, just as the questioning of 'too much or not sentimental enough' takes into account that each reader will experience sentimentality differently. Additionally, the word 'accommodate' indicates that the experience to be explored is not pre-determined, but rather always in flux, therefore requiring 'the preceding' to be flexible or 'accommodating enough'.

The end of this particular excerpt reads,  
 . . . I have a confession to make I have not  
 answered my mail my telephone my email my calling my  
 God my country my conscience my desire to<sup>75</sup>

By moving from a landscape in the process of disarray to 'I have a confession to make', the piece shifts into a possible critique of the reliance on things that preoccupies most experiences today. Rather



than simply acting and interacting, we are all bogged down by the sheer number of responsibilities we feel to the various devices that allow us to be monitored or trapped into a specific routine of commodification. Retallack writes, 'A noticing, questioning, inventing of constructive ways of being a non-destructive part of our world is essential – to my mind – to combat conservative smugness and the destructiveness that comes out of a greed for *MY security*, *MY nostalgia*, *MY preferred stability*.'<sup>76</sup> In presenting a litany of what is 'not answered', Retallack seems to present a way of achieving this mode of 'being a non-destructive part of our world'. Does the solution to 'destructiveness' lie in 'not answering'?

Towards the conclusion of the poem, Retallack writes,

just finish the damn story and be done with it stop  
according to some acceptable convention of stopping<sup>77</sup>

In this shift from 'not answering' to 'stopping', the expectation for written forms to have some semblance of closure is questioned. On the one hand, we experience the familiar desire for 'something to be over', the 'just get it over with' kind of phenomenon. But, on the other hand, the 'stop' depends on 'some acceptable convention for stopping'. 'Poethically' speaking, nothing ever really stops, but rather the past, present and future are all in a continuous dialogue with each other. So, this moment in the text serves as a commentary on the problem of thinking a 'stop' is possible but we know it is not in the 'continuous present' of *Memnoir*.

The book concludes with 'watch your prize as it flies out of your hand/into the air'.<sup>78</sup> The image of a 'prize' drifting off into the sky is one that is familiar, like a red balloon full of helium drifting into the clouds. But, here, it is the 'experience of experiencing all that's pointed out' that precedes this panorama.<sup>79</sup> Our 'geometries of attention' have been redesigned and we just watch the prize drift off, as if it is part of our 'unnoticed actual condition of the life'.<sup>80</sup>

## Notes

1. From *The Making of Americans* by Gertrude Stein, as excerpted in *Gertrude Stein: Selections*, ed. Joan Retallack, p. 100.
2. Spahr, Osman and Sherin, *Chain* 7, p. 7.
3. Bialosky, 'An Essay on Poetry and Memoir'.
4. Ibid.
5. Retallack, *The Poethical Wager*, p. 28.

6. From 'Composition as Explanation' by Gertrude Stein, as included in *Gertrude Stein: Selections*, ed. Joan Retallack, p. 219.
7. Retallack, *Memnoir*, p. 158.
8. Ibid. p. 3.
9. Baxter, *The Business of Memory*, p. vii.
10. Retallack, *Memnoir*, p. 3.
11. Retallack, *Memnoir*, p. 158.
12. Retallack, *Memnoir*, p. 8,
13. Retallack, *The Poethical Wager*, p. 64.
14. Baxter, *The Business of Memory*, p. viii.
15. Retallack, 'What is Experimental Poetry and Why Do We Need It?'
16. Ibid.
17. From 'Scenes from the Door' by Gertrude Stein, as included in *Gertrude Stein: Selections*, ed. Joan Retallack, p. 166.
18. Retallack, *Memnoir*, p. 3.
19. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, p. 36.
20. Retallack, *Memnoir*, p. 8.
21. Olsen, 'Review of *Memnoir*', p. 24.
22. From 'Patriarchal Poetry' by Gertrude Stein, as included in *Gertrude Stein: Selections*, ed. Joan Retallack, p. 229.
23. Orgera, '(Eggs and Bacon): The Poem as Memoir?'
24. Retallack, *Memnoir*, p. 3.
25. Retallack, *Memnoir*, p. 158.
26. Jenkins, *Poetic Obligation*, p. 18.
27. John Cage, 'History of Experimental Music in the United States' (1959), in *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1961).
28. From 'A Movie' by Gertrude Stein, as included in *Gertrude Stein: Selections*, ed. Joan Retallack, p. 172.
29. From 'Orta or One Dancing' by Gertrude Stein, as included in *Gertrude Stein: Selections*, ed. Joan Retallack, p. 114.
30. Olsen, 'Review of *Memnoir*', p. 24.
31. Retallack, *Memnoir*, p. 11.
32. *Gertrude Stein: Selections*, ed. Joan Retallack, p. 6.
33. Retallack, 'Alterity, Misogyny and the Agonistic Feminine', p. 215.
34. Ibid. p. 15.
35. Retallack, *Memnoir*, p. 11.
36. Here I'm paraphrasing/referring to Retallack's 'The Difficulties of Gertrude Stein' (2003, 145) in which she describes Stein echoing her teacher William James with regard to the relationship between knowing and inertia.
37. Retallack, 'Alterity, Misogyny and the Agonistic Feminine', p. 193.
38. Olsen, 'Review of *Memnoir*', p. 24.
39. Retallack, *Memnoir*, p. 5.
40. Ibid. p. 4.
41. Olsen, 'Review of *Memnoir*', p. 25.

42. Ibid. p. 22.
43. Ibid. p. 24.
44. From 'Fourteen Anonymous Portraits' by Gertrude Stein, as included in *Gertrude Stein: Selections*, ed. Joan Retallack, p. 195.
45. Retallack, *Memnoir*, p. 3.
46. Ibid. p. 5.
47. Ibid. p. 19.
48. Ibid. p. 22.
49. Ibid. p. 25.
50. Ibid.
51. Ibid. p. 29.
52. Ibid. p. 33.
53. From 'What are Master-Pieces and Why are There So Few of Them' by Gertrude Stein, as included in *Gertrude Stein: Selections*, ed. Joan Retallack, p. 312.
54. Retallack, *Memnoir*, p. 3.
55. Ibid. p. 3.
56. Ovid, *Ovid: Metamorphoses*, p. 325.
57. Ibid. p. 236.
58. Retallack, *Memnoir*, p. 22.
59. Ibid.
60. Conard, 'Introduction', p. 1.
61. Ibid. p. 2.
62. Retallack, *Memnoir*, p. 29.
63. Ibid.
64. Ibid. p. 30.
65. Ibid. p. 33.
66. Ibid.
67. Retallack, 'Alterity, Misogyny and the Agonistic Feminine'.
68. Ibid.
69. Retallack, 'The Difficulties of Gertrude Stein I & II', p. 145.
70. Ibid. p. 151.
71. Ibid. p. 155.
72. From 'Identity A Poem' by Gertrude Stein, as included in *Gertrude Stein: Selections*, ed. Joan Retallack, p. 305.
73. Retallack, *Memnoir*, p. 38.
74. Ibid. p. 19.
75. Ibid.
76. Retallack, letter to Brenda Iijima, <[https://www.asu.edu/pipercwcenter/how2journal/vol\\_3\\_no\\_1/letters/retallackijima.html](https://www.asu.edu/pipercwcenter/how2journal/vol_3_no_1/letters/retallackijima.html)> (last accessed 11 July 2019).
77. Ibid. p. 35.
78. Ibid. p. 38.
79. Ibid.
80. Ibid. p. 32.