Both Sides of Silence

Heather Bowlan

Palm-Lined with Potience
by Basie Allen
104pp. Ugly Duckling Presse 2022

Banana [_____] / we pilot the blood (The 3rd Thing)
by Quenton Baker and Paul Hlava Ceballos
90pp. The Third Thing 2022

Virgil Kills
by Rolando V. Wilson
282pp. Nightboat Books 2022

It's pretty unfashionable to get down with Lacan these days; that probably has something to do with the whole project of psychoanalysis, i.e., grounding the unconscious/subconscious in Eurocentric, elite, misogynist dogma. But I happen to think that Lacan had one theory with real radical potential, moving beyond his earlier concept of jouissance (essentially, ecstasy or "excessive vitality") into feminine jouissance.

Briefly: There are experiences that are impossible to put into or contain with language—they break through the symbolic order (i.e., language) and into what Lacan called the Real (i.e., all of human experience that can't be captured in language). This category of experience is what he termed feminine jouissance. The symbolic order—language as we're taught it, the limits of written and spoken communication as they're regulated/enforced—is/has been a White Dude enterprise. So as Lacan conceived it, feminine jouissance was a concept to cover the inexpressible.

In Lacan's original conception, probably unsurprisingly, these experiences were those of (white) women, the group most obvious to him as not (white) men, and who he conceived of as absolutely Other, with all of the problematic connotations of that term. Women could never be "whole" within the symbolic order, and so their experiences would always exist outside of it. And so I'd like to take liberties with this theory, especially given the expansion and complication of what constitutes *feminine* since Lacan outlined feminine jouissance in the early 1970s.

For writers (humans!) living in what we might consider the liminal space of capital-S-Society, the idea of breaking through, of rejecting narrative, linear order—written language, even—might offer new opportunities to access and document the complexity, nuance, and viscerality of our own negated, rejected experiences. (After all, even Lacan viewed language acquisition as a more or less traumatic experience.)

Three new collections actively engage in this testing and rupture of language and literature, pushing the Real into focus, each with a distinct approach and energy.

The boundaries between texts are explored in *Banana [_____] / we pilot the blood*, two poetry collections joined into one book, threaded together by common themes of imperialist trauma and other intertextual strategies, including visual art and critical reflections by other contributors. In *Banana [_____],* the approach is collage from (literally) hundreds of texts, and in *we pilot the blood,* erasure is the method, with both challenging the elision of experiences by dominant, colonial narratives by using those narratives as their starting point.

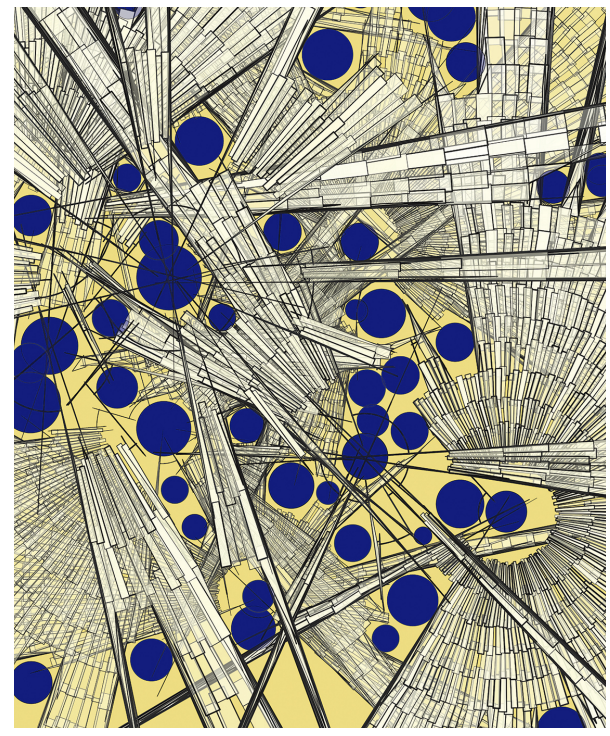
Ceballos's weaving of historical texts, first-person accounts, and more, results in a new document, centering the experience of banana workers, their constant and active resistance. In one sequence, the repetition of the word "banana" shifts the poem into the space of litany, with its insistent reminder of the product that is privileged above the stories being shared, inserting itself into the poem, dominating the poem, with a footnote to a source text for every line:

> to banana
> be banana
> a banana
> domesticated banana
> object banana
> overripe banana
> as banana
> an banana
> empire banana

The poem is paired with fragmented images of banana workers always presented out of context, as slim vertical strips for example, with faces never visible and just enough context to understand the image as representing a person, who is then reduced and reduced, to a hat and a bunch of bananas, or a strip of leaves with the worker completely absent.

It's not an exaggeration to call Quenton Baker's project, *we pilot the blood*, a stark contrast to *Banana [_____]*. Rather than the accumulation of language and imagery in rejection of a predetermined narrative, nearly all of every page in *we pilot the blood* is blacked out—not nearly, but clearly with a marker, clearly done by hand. The result is, as the critic Christina Sharpe points out in her remarks, that some words are partially visible, so there is no "clean" revision or true erasure of the past.

The starting document is a Senate document on the 1841 revolt of enslaved Africans on a ship named



Places of Conflict by Kenny Vaden. Generative R 2022

Creole. Perspectives of the participants in the revolt were not included in the public record, but with the erasures, Baker rejects the official record to expand and complicate the meaning of the event.

The heavy silence of the blacked-out space amplifies the handful of words, often isolated on their own lines or even corners of the page, so that the spare language—and all that's unsaid—points to the unspeakable and unknowable of the revolt. On one page,

> wreck of our pleased hands
> facing on the page opposite:
> they could not kill the sunrise in me.

Reducing this moment to horror, hope, bravery, desperation—the text won't allow it. The silent/silenced black space absorbs any simple explanation or dismissal. To quote the critic Christina Sharpe, who reflects on each of these projects in the book: "The poets' labor is toward the imagining and revealing and making visible and tangible… something else."

The book itself must be inverted and started from opposite covers to read the separate texts and accompanying remarks, with the result that the collections don't seem to lead one to the next, as with an anthology. Instead, Hlava Ceballos and Baker's projects stand alongside each other, making use of the object of the book itself to reject elision or conflation as "political texts."

We're certainly invited to find points of convergence or difference, perhaps most overtly by the same two (similar but distinct) paintings by Torkwase Dyson (from her *hypershapes* series) marking the beginning and end of Christina Sharpe's essays for both collections. As Sharpe remarks, these paintings, also exploring liberation, weren't composed in response to either text, but selected by her to resonate with them ("vector and foil"). Again, a kind of collaboration by association, sharing space rather than privileging one narrative over another.

Poetry and visual art share space, too, in Basie Allen's debut collection, *Palm-Lined with Potience*, which explores the various spaces and relationships grounded in growing up on the Lower East Side, meanwhile using the space of the poem to ensure the reader is engaged and invested beyond the language on the page.

Periodically throughout the poems, lines, tangled lines, and parabolas appear next to or within the text, inviting us to draw connections or infer complications. Take the semicircle curving around the text of "The Origin of White Guilt"—emphasizing the solipsism evoked in lines such as "sprawling air like salt-fire flames crying / onto an oily coal for atonement."

Or the vertical line straight through both pages of "Elegy," gesturing towards a permanent division, a striking out, while the poem itself is full of those prosaic, corporeal moments that come with intimacy: " I hate / you think lotion does / the same thing as lube"

The poem references and pays homage to other writers and artists and musicians, from Ma Dukes to Frank O'Hara to the Fugees to El Lissitzky to Cy Twombly, poems reaching beyond the page to create a web of invisible dialogues. And in "An Ongoing Portion of Colored Numerals," Allen uses color as reference points to push against being defined or othered by race, evoking at first "gelatin silver," then "less soft velvet yellow," finally "dried bird-of-paradise brown…" moving the reader beyond colors that might be clearly described with language to the margins of written description.

Perhaps the most constant and most intriguing extratextual experiment involves an ever-present symbol, a circle with shading. It could be a celestial body, a totem, a cylinder; its presence has no stable connotation, and in fact, there's a poem pushing against any tidy definition, "An Answer for Jimmy Symington":

> it is here
> where I have learned
> to write on both sides
> of silence—

Perhaps Ronaldo V. Wilson, in *Virgil Kills*, is writing on both sides of silence. In this book of stories, the line between lived and dreamed experience is deliberately blurred, as characters, locations, timeline, and Virgil's self-perception—as a Black Flipino man, as a gay man, as a writer, as a professional success—are constantly in flux. In the fluidity of the dream state, this is both an internal and external instability.

> *I think it makes sense.* This is something Virgil would like to say, in all honesty, to himself, but it seems that this is too often complicated by his experiences, layers of which sit atop one another.

Identity as a shifting point of reference weaves through the stories—we might call them reveries, remnants, vignettes, litanies. Casual and deliberate racism among Virgil's colleagues in the writing and academic communities, and with his lovers, all a shifting group thanks to the transience of an academic path, connect back to past memories of an equally transient childhood, a haunting evocation of disassociation as defense mechanism. Focus on the details, identify the referent, avoid the moment.

It might almost be too cute to talk about feminine jouissance in connection with *Virgil Kills*, since the ineffable is in many ways the throughline, particularly in the context of sexual encounters and the limits of connection. Sex isn't the point of the protagonist Virgil's wanderings, but it's a keystone.

Virgil relentlessly analyzes events as they happen and returns to them again and again; often presenting new information, or shifting signifiers (family members, in particular Virgil's father, have an abundance of names depending on the memory). The result is a disorienting and compelling collection of scenes and momentary epiphanies.

> What is the difference between the outside and the inside of the dream can only be explained in the pitch darkness that fills the room in the vision of blue and black. Menacing, this threat manifests as black, nylon luggage, and in it, power cords, flash drives, and speakers that shake as he looks at them. These things are not permanent, yet they are there. What in this material is his? What surfaces does he own?

The impermanence, the incompleteness of language—recognizing the limitations, toying with or violating them—offers opportunities for readers to expand our ideas of written art, of whose writing is art, of how we accept and reinforce categories that we are given as we sift through experience to find what's real (or Real). These three books will challenge you, or at the very least remind you, to consider the boundaries you're given and who gave them to you.

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