

# Does This Begin Anywhere: (some issues in) language as feminist practice

*FRANCES RICHARD*

LANGUAGE

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RICHARD

Does this begin anywhere?

How does this begin?

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Someone I know made an art work, and I started to write about it. That was a while ago, and now I'm revising. That particular work is not the point anymore, because I am trying to think about white women making art—including the art that is feminist practice—that seeks to reckon with racism.

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In these works of art—in this feminist practice—

read: in white women's so often insufficient attempts to reckon with racism—

White women (artists/writers) (feminists) exercise authorship and enjoy autonomy. Yet appear so often (still) steeped in (our) arrogance, ignorance, entitlement, (still) worthy of endless (at times contemptuous) attention. Meanwhile the voices and bodies of people of color are ventriloquized as fictions; appear as devices for this presentation of white women's autonomy and authorship.

(White patriarchy looming behind it all as the force of the owner-father, coercion of the charming narcissist, warmonger.)

This is the situation.

But if this situation—the complicity of white women in slavery, lynching, minstrelsy, redlining, locking up the toddlers, calling the cops—if this situation cannot be inculcated without being enacted—like, you can't lay blame without re-inhabiting the thing you're laying blame for—then we are in a closed loop. Admission of complicity has to be a starting place. But if admission of complicity means constantly recommitting the violation, then we are positing a world that admits no redress, no respite from violence, no responsibility, no reckoning. No compassion. No human subject coexisting with human subject.

The long, extremely painful American history of progressive white women exercising what they (we) intend as radicality in ways that leave women of color and their kin silenced—violated, tokenized, exoticized—this long, extremely painful history is not interrupted. It is enacted as uninterrupted even as it is divorced from the real bodies right there reading the writing, looking at the painting, watching (or recording) the viral video, listening to the speaker (or speaking) at the podium.

(White cis-heteropatriarchy looming behind us all to figure the owner-father, charming narcissist, warmonger.)

The situation is reconsolidated as spectacle, shown to be fixed even while it circulates endlessly.

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Using the word *bodies* (“real bodies”) to mean LIVING PEOPLE is a means of emphasizing the fact that human beings are present, right here, in the vibrant matter of (our) corporeality, in the excruciating

immediacy of historical, social, yet singular existence. Alive in matter. Lives are conscious matter.

One-at-a-time, each-embedded-in-time, nontransferable organism-life, inside-one-skin consciousness-life, mind-grappling-with-the-theory-of-other-minds.

(I am avoiding saying “individual.” “Individuals” seem like buyer-monads that have *choice!* in ads.)

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It's capitalism, stupid.

And if we are so stupid in the face of an It so total, how can we resist? We can't resist. We are too stupid, and have no bodies—not present-in-vibrant-matter ones, that is. Etc.

Painful to imagine this situation made any more sclerotic/hypertrophic than it is already. Why write about it if I'm not sure words will help? But “silence is like starvation, don't be fooled.” I want to do what lies in my power to resist it, the white-supremacist world-as-the-choice-to-murder ad.

What does it mean “to want” in such a circumstance? To want as a wish—as if resistance-in-clarity were bestowed by the spirit-mentor who hands you a lightsaber, carries you across the tesseract.

But stay alert for creeping entitlement: “I want it!” Veruca Salt in the candy factory: “*Daddy! I want an Oompa Loompa now!*”

(Toxic white masculinity looming behind it all in the wallet/fist/discourse of the owner-father, charming narcissist

who trains up narcissists to covet ownership, warmongers.)

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Thinking of Duriel's performance in which she imagined a Black woman cooking in a slaveholder's kitchen, adding ground glass to the meal. Feeling the visceral *click* of I-have-passed-beyond-*rage* that leads to procuring the glass, waiting for the moment unobserved, stirring it smoothly, a sparkling dust, into the spoonbread batter. Perhaps no act of consciousness is more important than identification—visceral, sparkling—with those who suffer and resist.

Still, by what self-comforting sleight do I align myself with the heroine-avenger in this scene? If I am in the house at all, am I not upstairs—uneducated, perhaps; mad, perhaps; maritally raped, perhaps; certainly without the vote; whatever—but still the white lady whose behaviors have pulverized the glass and filled the vial, grain by grain? This Black woman cooking, stirring, did not need to scheme for a ride into town and an unlikely transaction with the druggist. The mistress filled the vial there at home, day by day, grain by grain, as she passed from room to room. What is fed back is her own precipitate; she's eating her own substance.

Retch of the spirit at feeling, in some shard or tremor of its enormity, this inheritance from and complicity with her.

Remembering when I first heard the term "Miss Ann," as in "Mister Charlie and Miss Ann," the slaveowner and his wife. Who taught me that? I was young. Recalling the shiver of contempt and hatred in the

name. Maybe I could hear that tone even in print, in some novel I don't remember, that I was reading above grade-level in some corner without talking to anyone.

And now, right on schedule, I think, wait! If it is, say, the 1840s when Duriel's heroine is doing grim freedom-fighting, then my ancestor is not sitting in that dining room. She is somewhere in the west of Ireland figuring out how to sail away from famine; she is in the west of Russia somewhere figuring out how to leave the lord's land and get to Vienna, where in a couple generations she will figure out how to leave Hitler's land and get to Chicago. *How the Irish Became White... How Jews Became White...* Sure. But, I repeat: by what self-confirming sleight can I remove myself from the terrifying history named Miss Scarlett Daisy Ann?

The sickly violence named Miss Scarlett, which is active right now in the world I live in as #BBQBecky and #PermitPatty and Ivanka Trump and Sarah Huckabee Sanders and the fifty-two percent of white women who voted for Donald Trump in 2016.

*White Lies: Race and the Myths of Whiteness* by Maurice Berger ends with this sentence: "I will always be watching myself."

Language is the means by which I watch myself.

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#BBQBecky and #PermitPatty are the white women in Oakland and San Francisco respectively who recently (late spring, 2018) called the police on a group of Black neighbors barbecuing at Lake

Merritt—this is a park in central Oakland where people barbecue every weekend, five blocks from my house—and on an eight-year-old girl, a Black child selling bottled water on the San Francisco sidewalk “without a permit.”

#BBQBecky and #PermitPatty are my problem. I am watching myself watch them. I am staring at their sickly violent behavior and can’t understand it, but I can’t...conjure myself away from what they did. If a white woman like me doesn’t try to deal with white women like them, who will? They are my problem. I don’t know how to deal with this problem I have.

The woman in the MAGA hat in the Facebook photograph shrieking into the face of a brown-skinned teenager holding a laptop at the “Families Belong Together” march: If she is not my problem, whose problem is she? Her malice is poisoning everyone, including her. I don’t know how to deal with this.

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Another one in the news today.  
#PoolPermitPaula

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Let’s not forget #YaleLoungeYanqui, who called the police on her fellow graduate student, a Black woman napping in a university lounge with her laptop and research materials beside her.

Or #StarbucksStasiSargeant, who called the police on two Black men waiting in the café for a colleague.

Or #SchoolTourStasiSargeant, who called the police on two Native American teenage boys on a campus tour at Colorado State University.

Or #SubwayStasiSargeant, who called the police on a Black family eating submarine sandwiches in her franchise—a group including children aged eight, twelve, and thirteen.

Or #SuburbanStasiSargeant, who called the police on Representative Janelle Bynum (D), who represents that very same police-calling constituent in the Oregon State House, and was canvassing door-to-door in her reelection campaign.

Or #PsychoDrunkWhiteLadyWhatIsWrong-WithYou, who was filmed pushing herself onto the hood of a car on a suburban street and trying to act out a “citizen’s arrest” on several members of the Mexican family whose car it was, while she harangued them about drugs.

Or #PsychoDrunkWhiteLadyWhatIsWrong-WithYou, who was filmed haranguing Black and Latino fellow passengers on a public bus, and then striking the person filming her, while someone called out to the person being struck, “Don’t do anything!” and to the person accompanying #PsychoWhiteLady, “That is your mother! Please! Grab your mother.”

No one was there with a cell phone, of course, to record the actions of Carolyn Bryant Donham—who was twenty-one years old in 1955 when she told a lie about Emmett Till—a lie taken up by her husband and his half-brother as a “motive,” a hot glitch in their volition that allowed them to set out one summer night to kidnap,

terrorize, and murder a fourteen-year-old. Carolyn Bryant Donham continued to harbor her lie until 2017, that is for sixty-two years.

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“I *want*.” To deal with this problem that I have. What lies in my power. To watch myself.

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Hearing “to want” as Veruca/white-girl announcement. “I want to make art” can fall into this category.

(“White-girl” as modifier to anything implies cutesiness, ignorance, petulance; a moral vulgarity. “White-lady” as modifier implies the same, as cutesiness desiccates to brittleness.)

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There is also “to want” meaning lack. “I [lack] to see clearly.” As if to see—and, in seeing, to understand where one’s power-toward-justice lies—as if that inability were marked by a blah empty space, a vacuum-suck, aporia. Lack, then, reads as the failure of being-tried-and-found-wanting.

Like, I tried to see clearly, but then Scarlett, Becky, Patty, Paula, Carolyn, Ivanka, Sarah reared up and acted ugly, and I failed to see.

And there is lack caused by malformation, a born-without. Like, I wanted to see—to understand, with the least possible distortion, what my job-toward-justice is—and I couldn’t understand. I was too baffled, stupid; didn’t have it in me. I couldn’t figure out how to use language to

get Scarlett, Becky, Patty, Paula, Carolyn, Ivanka, Sarah to become less terrifying. It was too hard, and I gave up.

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Doesn’t lack = desire, though? Subjunctive, potential, oriented to future striving and never flowering in present realization. To want = longing, sunk in a bruise-penumbra that seeps out from the fact of being human; primally flawed; weird conscious animal using language; incapable of consistently deep right action or right speech or right understanding in this vale of stupid narcissistic humanness.

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Yet some people manage not to be murderous craven narcissists, is the point.

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Talking with Duriel:

Is it right to tag the aggressors with meme-monikers, and to leave those they have harassed in peace without citing their names? The boy at the pool is fifteen years old, and while his mother has spoken publicly, his name has been kept private. He is a minor, a kid who happened to go swimming. To be at the park on Sunday, or to have a rest while studying, or to wait for a colleague, etc., is simply to go on living. In an important sense, the malevolent calls to the cops have nothing to do with these people whose days were disrupted—these members of communities whose lives, given that police were coming, could have been jeopardized. Why should their names be tied to those sordid projections, those caprices and depredations?

Janelle Bynum is an elected official, a public person—and Carolyn Bryant Donham is also, alas, public in the ways that history makes someone public. But shouldn't the folks in their car or riding the bus be able to travel in normal anonymous peace?

On the other hand, as Duriel says, “naming can bestow/be perceived as bestowing dignity/personhood, while folks left unnamed come less into focus.”

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That's right.

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Oaklanders responded to the incident at Lake Merritt with a Sunday-afternoon picnic en masse called “BBQ'n While Black.” Among its organizers was a first-grade teacher in the public school system. Her name is Logan Cortez.

The child selling bottled water was raising money for a trip to Disneyland. Her name is Jordan Rogers.

The Yale graduate student's research considers links between migration and identity formation, particularly among millennial first-generation Americans, along with the role of media such as film and textiles in the preservation of culture. Her name is Lolade Siyonbola.

The two Philadelphians whose business meeting at Starbucks was prevented settled with the city for one dollar each, with the stipulation that the city also donate \$200,000 to a program supporting youth entrepreneurship. Their names are Rashon Nelson and Donte Robinson.

The boys on the campus tour, ages nineteen and seventeen, had driven seven hours to CSU from their home in New Mexico. The older brother plans to become a music therapist; the younger brother wants to be an animator. Their names are Thomas Kanewakeron Gray and Lloyd Skanahwati Gray.

The family eating in the Subway in Newnan, Georgia, had traveled from North Carolina to celebrate their grandmother's 81st birthday. The parents' names are Felicia and Othniel Dobson.

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And what of Becky and Ann? Do meme-monikers shield the actual women who felt the urge to broadcast through their own flesh the tractor-beam of the carceral state—to dial up some powers-that-be with this trivial viciousness, this tattletale fuss that, historically, tracks in blood where it walks? In this sense, if not-naming can protect freedom and peace, then shouldn't these white women be named?

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Naming—like the rest of...this—carries the poison of the history of American slavery.

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So I'll just choose. I won't name these white women (except Ivanka and Sarah, who are public figures), because I don't want their individuality echoing too loudly. I don't want you, reader, to think about some private aspect of #YaleLoungeYanqui instead of Lolade Siyonbola and her dissertation.

I might be wrong here.

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Still, if I believe that language is an act (and do I? yes—though, really, we should pause to try to understand what *an act* is...), then what lies in my power has to do, at least in part, with how I use language.

How I listen, what I say to people, what I say to myself, how I read, how I teach, what I write, how I wield the act of naming, how I watch my consciousness articulate and thus perform itself. This is intimately related to how I understand my feminism.

The I watches the I that is another, etc.

Of course, “the abyss also stares into me”

Etc.

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Each time I take a day or two away from writing this, I imagine particular people whom I know (Black and white, female and male, bosses and students, family and colleagues and acquaintances and friends) disapproving of it, correcting me, reprimanding me in varying tones of sternness or distaste for how I’ve gone wrong.

This constant pre-envisioning of the feelings of those who might not be or are not now or have not been pleased with me, this constant tropism toward the imagined servicing of judgments levied on me: I associate this with my internal white girl.

(I was taught to dread—and to expect, and certainly to service—such judgments by the white men I loved most.)

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And let’s consider now that species of self-consuming lack and weakness practiced in particular by Veruca and Scarlett. Dreading judgment, but for a reason; the fountain where we dip up in our gracefully curved pitchers the crystal poison nicknamed white women’s tears. Which means, as I explain it to myself, that white women are taught to hate and doubt them(our) selves and to exhibit that self-hatred/self-doubt so convincingly, so elaborately flirtatiously ostentatiously implicitly—and then to demand approval as a balm for that self-hatred and self-doubt, and to demand it so compulsively—stridently fetishistically manipulatively—and inter-generationally—that the master (masquerading as the white men we love most) will indeed approve, smile, pat us (me), agree with us (me), yes, you are hateful, I doubt you, you are stupid, you are weak. But you do a good job demonstrating it, so you may hold my tool for awhile and live in my house. And then he goes to kill someone else instead.

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Mastery’s toxic shame-bond with abjection.

Mastery’s hysterias of power.

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Versus unmasterful abjection and its simple unsqueamish chore, which is re-acceptance of the corpse and hence the ghost. Which, then, if we are lucky (fearless deserving tender wild wild matter-of-fact desublimated animal arisen) will reintegrate eventually as normal flakes of matter floating. “Those who have died / Have never, never left / The dead have a pact / With the living—”

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The heroine in the 1840s kitchen is named Sarah.

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To write or read or speak or hear is not *exactly* the same as living in one's own single body. Though they are not divorceable. To read or write or hear or speak is to take into and put forth from one's single body a cultural force—language—that has gathered through uncountable adjustments across time, through other bodies—with all that this implies about identification and inheritance, as well as blockage and incomprehension. I am uncomfortable with statements regarding the purpose of art, but I think I can say that I understand art, writing, as a zone or implement for working—puzzling—testing—watching—naming—feeling the contours of aporiae like these.

Language/body aporiae are social. Art is social. I feel weird about having written “arisen,” but when I took it out it caused a tiny wound in the sentence, so I put it back. *Arisen* not implying transcendence but as mist or fog drifts in those updrafting morphing rags with their affinities to ghosts. With the *a* and *n* and *i* sounds of an animal passing normally into breath, carbon dioxide.

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Word-processing insists on turning that *i* to I. Precisely not that.

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I *want* my understanding to be adequate. I *want* these statements to have traction on some condition felt as fact.

Sure. And if I/we have to pause so long to think through what it might imply to *want*, and don't have time to puzzle about the nature of an *act*, then good luck with knowing what a *fact* is.

Deaths are facts.

White Americans are not well-positioned, historically, to decide what is and is not racist. White Americans are not well-positioned, historically, to talk about their feelings regarding whiteness. White women are not well-positioned, historically, to handle even the master's tools, borrowed from the polished, locked, glass-fronted cabinet and hastily snuck back before their absence is discovered. Let alone slipping down to the forge in the middle of the night, night sounds rustling from all directions in the dark and chilly dew arising in the woods, to make up out of need some previously unimaginable hammer or camera or word.

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Then I talked about it with Brian, and re-wrote the same thoughts.

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White-supremacist-capital-violence-spectacle presents itself as a vampiric total system. You cannot exit from it, and you cannot be a subject within it. All your moves, whatever they are, are instantly recuperated by it, to inflate its airtight fascist ad.

The white woman who covets power in this system therefore offers herself as the system's avatar, its agent. Class versions: 1) Surly, aggressive, rumpiled; 2) Nicey-nice, passive aggressive, sleek; 3) Surly, aggressive, sleek.

In each case, she demonstrates, consciously or unconsciously, surly or crying, that vampire spectacle exists. She gets on the phone and calls the cops and says, "It exists; I am inside it; its purpose is to choke." She runs to tell the manager and says "It exists; I am inside it to feel safe and right." She stands at the podium with the cameras on her and announces, "It exists; I am inside it; we're airtight."

To do this, it must be that she empties out. Somehow she becomes all mirror/vampire/money—no soul, by which I mean she doesn't remember that she's an instance of ubiquitous animal existence. Because she fears that? So she chooses instead to demonstrate how master-spectacle fills every space of consciousness with profit-vacuum, hate-performance; provides the content of every "self" and all "speech"; vacates the differences between types of *want*. This spectacle has no theory of other minds; it is all one mastermind. No theory of bodies either, except as tokens moved around by bodiless mastery. She defends with tears her "personal expression" premised on the fantasy of access to everything. (*Daddy! I want...!*) She gets on the phone and shrieks to make the bodiless master come and kill someone, so that she can feel the rush of power that comes with being separate from the body getting killed.

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She roboticizes herself, so that the power of white supremacy can drive her around like an armored vehicle to police its borders, parks, sidewalks, swimming pools, universities, restaurants, voting cycles, streets, busses, money. And she aggrandizes herself by driving the robot, hopping into the armored cab and driving it around to do her bidding.

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Suppose you say, "I am in the master's house and I hate it and it's awful and I'm baffled." If that's all you can say, what good is it?

Let's say that we—some Americans, some feminists, some artists—say: No. *Please*. (In the tone of: spare me your elaborate and time-consuming explanations.) (But not completely escaping the tone of: I beseech.)

Suppose we contrive to say some other, more embodied, more potently swerving things—suppose we figure out what the new hammer is made of—*surely the hammer is partly made of language*. Is it important, then, that we also kill the master avatar and his daughter wife spokeswoman mistress? People like to say, "Burn it all down!" But the will to kill and burn is already at the core of the problem, no? *Unkill*. Grab your mother.

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"I [lack] to see clearly" meaning: lack is the tool I have on hand with which to watch, to see.

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It is time to tear the bouncy house down, with or without the master's tools, and to turn to the language of unmaking, unbuilding, undoing, refusing capital's vertiginous techniques of litigious accusation and criminalization.

Speaking of the master's tools: Let's look, in closing, at an anarchitectural aphorism that still resonates. Audre Lorde's famous statement that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" is more important now than ever. I think that in our engagement with this sentiment in the past, we have emphasized the master's tools when we should be thinking about dismantling the house. Mostly, when this great line is used, it is to underline the idea that we need distance from dominant rhetoric in order to produce subversive ideas. But the more we focus on which tools to use, the less likely it is that the house will ever come down. In the speech in which Audre Lorde originally said that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house," she was not only critiquing patriarchy, but also taking aim at what she called "racist feminism." Pointing to the fact that she was often called to attend feminist conferences as a woman of color appearing alone, among white women who had hired women of color to take care of their kids while they were at the conference, Lorde comments: "For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. And this fact is only

threatening to those women who still define the master's house as their only source of support."

—Jack Halberstam, *Unbuilding Gender: Trans\* Anarchitectures In and Beyond the Work of Gordon Matta-Clark*

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I have a hard time with "we." To be honest, I have a hard time with "I." Both difficulties make things called "political" confusing.

Going on, though, anyway, inhabiting [lack's] body. Writing with whatever weird uncertain language [lack] invents, down at the abjection-forge in the fantasy of night, in dew and rustling, not knowing what the hammer of unmastery looks like or how it hefts in the hand.

In doing this, I/we are doing nothing more (are doing less) than uncountable ones before, ten zillion times more forthright and courageous, who have spent their blood minds muscle words dream lives love lives paychecks ingenuity attention to their kids health elders futures trying, trying to cook up aesthetically startling justice-ways to re-vivify the zombification. And life for them ain't been no crystal stair. They got so sick at heart, and laid their bodies upon the wheels. Etc. Who are you/am I to indulge despair?

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I urge each one of us here to reach down into that deep place of knowledge inside herself and touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives here. See whose face it wears. Then the personal as the

political can begin to illuminate all our choices.

—Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House”

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS & WORKS CITED

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*Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory*, directed by Mel Stuart (Warner Brothers, 1971). Veruca Salt was played by thirteen-year-old Julie Dawn Cole.

Duriel E. Harris, reading and improvisatory performance in the Hearts Desire series, curated by Angela Hume at Omni Commons, Oakland CA, June 14, 2015. Sarah’s ghost features in Harris’s ongoing one-woman show *Thingification*, while her living self/imagination features in Harris’s book *Amnesiac: Poems* (Rhinebeck, NY: Sheep Meadow Press, 2010).

“Silence is like starvation. Don’t be fooled. It’s nothing short of that, and felt most sharply when one has had a full belly most of her life. When we are not physically starving, we have the luxury to realize psychic and emotional starvation. It is from this starvation that other starvations can be recognized—if one is willing to take the risk of making the connection—if one is willing to be responsible to the result of the connection”: Cherríe Moraga, “La Güera,” in *This Bridge Called My Back*, ed. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria E. Anzaldúa (Boston: Kitchen Table Press, 1983).

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“Whoever fights with monsters should see to it that he does not become one himself. And if you stare for a long time into an abyss, the abyss stares back into you”: Friedrich Nietzsche, Aphorism 146, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future* (1886), trans. Judith Norman (New York and Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

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Jack Halberstam, “Unbuilding Gender: Trans\* Anarchitectures In and Beyond the Work of Gordon Matta-Clark,” Arcus Prize essay (*Places* journal, <https://places-journal.org/article/unbuilding-gender/>, 2018).

“Don’t you fall now— / For I’se still goin’, honey / I’se still climbin’, / And life for me ain’t been no crystal stair”: Langston Hughes, “Mother to Son,” first published in *The Crisis*, December 1922.

“There is a time when the operation of the machine becomes so odious, makes you so sick at heart, that you can’t take part; you can’t even passively take part, and you’ve got to put your bodies upon the gears and upon the wheels, upon the

levers, upon all the apparatus, and you’ve got to make it stop...”: Mario Savio, sit-in address on the steps at Sproul Hall, University of California, Berkeley, December 2, 1964.

Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (New York: Ten Speed Press, 1984).