

DODIE BELLAMY

“CRIMES AGAINST GENRE”

FROM *ACADEMONIA*

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I love cheap Chinese restaurants, places whose stark white walls and overhead fluorescents drive away hipsters. My latest favorite is Home Menu, on Mission Street, which has excellent mixed vegetables and tofu. Here among the poor and the working class, and the occasional retro-punk couple, I can sit by myself at a table for four, sip scalding tea from a plastic water glass, write in my journal, and nobody pays any attention to anybody else. The window box beside my table is filled with orchids, gracefully bending stalks of magenta, yellow, and white. Having killed every orchid ever given to me, I'm impressed by some unknown somebody's green thumb. I lean over and touch a flower. The petal is waxy and stiff. Plastic. My gullibility embarrasses me. I look up at the fish by the door, goldfish and angelfish the size of my hands slither about in a tank whose water is so tinged with algae it looks like green smog. I'm sure the fish are real, though the delicate water fern they're slithering around, that's up for grabs. I write in my diary, “artifice and big fish in a small pond: this place reminds

San Francisco New Narrative writer Dodie

Bellamy says she has a friend who will tell anybody who wants to listen how he fisted Foucault. This is precisely why we love Dodie Bellamy; each sentence she writes, almost each sentence she speaks,

completely exults in the inversion and entanglement of categories that most of us only theorize about. Rancière can talk about these things; Bellamy lives them in both her quotidian and her writing, which are not separate either. Her novel *The Letters of Mina Harker* flung this exultation into a zone few of us had ever experienced.

She says, quite frankly, of her discoveries in writing this book, “I've taken the writing to a new level of formal pyrotechnics, I've finally learned how to weave in high theory

with the embarrassingly intimate and grotesque, how to shift at lightning speed from subject to subject, to toss subject after subject in the air and to catch them all again before they thud to the ground—no thud thud in my writing, none at all.”

Bellamy keeps reiterating herself as our most necessary mentor because her politics have a pulse, not a niceity.

me of the poetry scene.” *You are so clever* I think, and I smile. On a ledge beside the Coke machine sits a porcelain statue of Quan Yin, the goddess of compassion. From her head radiates a halo of tiny flashing green and red lights. Very Vegas. Quan Yin says to me, “Be kind in this essay. Don’t spend all your time complaining and whining about your injustices.” “Okay, okay,” I say to Quan Yin as I get up to use the restroom. When my urine mingles with the toilet water it turns lime green. *Artifice* I whisper to myself. *Small pond*.

I moved to San Francisco for no good reason. I was such an ingenue in the early 80s, imagining myself as a sort of female Kerouac, penning great poems in coffeehouses, having deep conversations with like-minded spirits who would declare me a genius, fucking lots of cute writers who would spout Yeats as we lay tangled in wine-spattered sheets listening to fog horns and gazing at the Golden Gate Bridge from the picture window beside our bed. As soon as I met real poets, my fantasy crumbled. I was not adored. I did not find a freespirited lifestyle, but determined professionalism. Language Poetry had gained institutional control of many venues the Poetry Center, Intersection, Langton and poetry readings were no longer poetry readings, but “literary events.” Theoretical chops and non-linearity were de rigueur. Many a misguided wannabe came a cropper by refurbishing their nature poems, confessional poems, drug poems with references to Derrida or Deleuze and Guatarri. Some of them cut all verbs from their lyric poetry others wiped out pronouns or switched person, from first to third to first, erratically, spastically. I remember one

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event where a woman read nothing but collages of words drawn from seed catalogues. “Hyacinth.” Pause. “Pistila.” Pause. “Floribundas.” After a half an hour of this I felt like the room was filling up with petals, toxic petals were pushing out all the air, suffocating me. I could sense an awkwardness and alienation sweeping through many different factions of the poetry scene, akin to mass hysteria, but stilted. The queers writing “new narrative” held their own, breaking open narrative conventions, but never throwing out the pieces. And, more importantly for me, they worshipped sex. Theirs was a brave position in those days. Narrative, let alone sex, was seen as reactionary, highly suspect but if we could gussy it up with enough theory and fragmentation, we too might get invited to read at those thrillingly exclusive literary events. Like the goldfish and angelfish in Home Menu’s tank, the language poets and the queer narrative writers, despite their obvious differences, slithered beside one another in the same self-contained world that took itself deathly seriously.

Over the past twenty years, narrative has become not only acceptable, but almost trendy in the fishbowl of experimental poetry and I’ve found personal acceptance among a community of like-minded fish both locally and beyond. Through them I’ve gained confidence in my writing. I play around a lot formally, but accessibility has always been important to me. I’ve worked hard to create a user-friendly experimentalism, with lots of narrative candy and humor, a sort of avant-garde lite. I’m good at demystifying elitist intellectual concepts I could explain Lacan to gradeschoolers. Teaching seemed like a natu-

In the fishbowl analogy for poetry community, the role of poet is to trump other poets, beat them to the sprinkles. I wish I could believe that Dodie is simply wrong. But the hierarchical paradigm traditional to the academic sphere becomes, even outside academia, the sign of a ‘successful’ scene. In a recent issue of the London Review of Books, which has been closely reporting on the state of higher education in the UK, a pseudonymous professor in the comments section describes how now the term community has been corporatized—the ‘we’ of the university community is the corporate projection of a consumer image and is administrated as such.

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The statement rings ominous. Imagining she is entering the sacred clearing, she is about to discover the truth in a statement the Vancouver artist Lorna Brown made about academia: that institution is all doors and no entrances. We want to shout from the sidelines—Dodie! Don't go in there!

...looking for love in all the wrong places...

The covertness that holds authority together is a bad pastiche of discretion. The Committee would have no power if it didn't leak its secrets. Here community is the group that unites to market its own sincerity convincingly to those it will limit as outsiders.

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ral for me. I didn't have an MFA, didn't go to Brown or Iowa, didn't even know how to pull together a syllabus, but puffed up with self-importance, I decided to enter the academy, a move that I imagined not into the mainstream, but more of a leap from fishbowl to aquarium bigger sure, but still cozy, accepting. Since the mid-90s I've taught part-time in a handful of schools and applied for perhaps a dozen tenure track jobs. At first it was great. I found my interactions with students meaningful, and the ingenu part of me felt she was making a difference, giving back. I was doing good work, getting positive evaluations, I'd found my niche, and things would get better and better, everybody would love me, want me, rush in to hire me. But then I realized, with a shock, that powerful people in departments I was teaching in or applying for work in didn't see me as sweet open-minded Dodie, but as a dangerous pervert, more for my formal weirdness than anything to do with content. How do I know this? The way anybody finds out anything in the hush hush rarefied realm of academia through "promise you won't breathe a word" whispers from friends on hiring committees. Perhaps even more alarming is how I've seen students in graduate writing programs whose work doesn't fit the parameters of traditional genres treated as criminal.

I borrow the trope of "crime" from Joan Retallack, who gave a talk at Naropa summer 2002 called "Writers Readers Performers: Partners in Crime." Though her talk focuses on John Cage-inspired procedures for introducing chance into art and writing practices, Retallack begins by addressing genre policing:

We intuitively know that everyday life doesn't conform to the simple outlines of well-made genres. In fact any event (and I include the acts of writing-reading, performing on or off the page in this active category) is surprising largely to the degree that it transgresses its own generic expectations. When it really does this, going beyond the calculated surprises of an artful plot, or screamingly censurable subject matter, it's instantly recognized as a crime by those who police aesthetic expectations.

Retallack talks at length about how surprise both in and outside of art delights us. It keeps things interesting, makes us feel engaged, alive. I'm reminded of a *Twilight Zone* episode I saw as a child. This guy dies, and now that he's dead, every wish he has is granted. He can have anything he desires fancy cars, women and the women do whatever he wants them to do, down to the letter. It's like paradise, he's in charge of every relationship, no questions asked, no struggle. He's a gambler so he places bet after bet, and every bet wins. But what's the fun of gambling, he soon realizes, if you always win? Boredom hits big time and he longs for someone, anything he can't control. And then he discovers that he hasn't died and gone to heaven like he thought. No, it's just the opposite he's been condemned to hell! Hell is an eternity of no surprises. "Traditionalists," as Retallack calls them, obviously haven't seen this episode of the *Twilight Zone*. In our messy, complex world, traditionalists long for continuity, coherency, "for harmony, for smooth transitions, for the grand, clean sweep of self-assured narration, for the life that is the well-made story that is true to the life." By aligning itself with "multiplicity, mongrelism,

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collisions of perception, intention, desire,” the avant-garde disrupts these longings for order, and frightened traditionalists turn nasty. From my own experience in various creative writing departments, what Retallack calls a “constituent need to erase difficulty” is expressed in strange ways by hiring committees and in department meetings. One shaken department head told me how when he suggested hiring an experimental fiction writer (a.k.a. Dodie), a more conservative colleague launched into an obscenity-filled tirade. “Everyone was shocked,” he confided. “It’s just not proper to use *those* words in a departmental meeting.” This sort of passionate frenzy suggests an origin that is not rational or even conscious a rage that can only come from some deep Freudian cess-pool of terror. But what’s so scary about a bit of babble spicing up a narrative? My theory is that genre policing comes out of a panic over identity and ambiguity. God-damn it, we want to know which orchid is plastic, which orchid is real, and we want to tell the difference between orchids and people and human urine and lime green disinfectant. Imagine Julia Kristeva in front of a hiring committee. Before the abjection of a blurred genre the traditionalist feels faint. As when death infects life, when poetry infects fiction, identity, system, order is disturbed. The text stretches out before us, spasming and bleeding.

The bureaucrats of academia are poorly equipped to recognize revolutionary potential... or, wait; they are superbly equipped to recognize it and, like a kind of intellectual bomb squad, are charged with suppressing and dismantling precisely such dangers. This could be a scene from The Balcony.

For my experimental writing workshop at CalArts, one student, complaining about all the theory we’re reading, wrote in his class journal, “I just saw Ben Marcus read last week, and people attempted to ask him about his theory in his writing. He put his hands in his pockets and said, ‘I just try to get the story out and then figure

out what it's about." I scribbled in the margin, "Sounds good but I don't believe him." As we learned from Foucault, invisible assumptions are the most insidious:

Order is, at one and the same time, that which is given in things as their inner law, the hidden network that determines the way they confront one another, and also that which has no existence except in the grid created by a glance, an examination, a language; and it is only in the blank spaces of this grid that order manifests itself in depth as though already there, waiting in silence for the moment of its expression.

The "fundamental codes of a culture" govern language, perception, exchanges, values and hierarchies. These categories are so ingrained they seem transparent, inherent. Thus whiteness is not a race, but the neutral ground against which all others are judged. Students are taught that it is natural that novels have a narrative arc, that all description must support that narrative, that characters are consistent and yet must change somehow by the end. And characters must always, always have something at stake. Genres are inherently distinct and each shapes itself around the appropriate subject matter. Thus it is natural that fiction is fictional, i.e., made up; that creative nonfiction is factual (although it is allowed a little bit of leeway, the way Hollywood starlets are expected to lie about their age); that poetry builds to an epiphany. And all these forms have a sort of generic Teflon that protects them from overt sexual content. Sex if it belongs anywhere is outcast to the degraded arenas of trash novels and porn. It's natural for all novels, trashy or great, to follow the three act struc-

"In the grid created by a glance, an examination, a language..." Remarkable. A vast matrix of subjection resides in the glance—rigid, overpowering, and irreversible. This is the glance that begins the doomed hiring interview. It is the opposite of seeing.

I love this! What a gift from the English Department. Poetry is what is monstrous, polluting. My ideal is reinforced.

ture of screenplays. The three act structure has been integral to stories all the way back to the Greeks. Act I Set Up. Establish characters, place, and premise. Act II Confrontation. Characters Struggle towards their goal. Act III Resolution. When I told this to Kevin Killian and Drew Cushing they argued with me, “No, it’s *five* acts, like in Shakespeare.” “No,” I huffed, “it’s *three* acts, as in *Jaws*. You two are so old school.”

Anthropologist Mary Douglas defines the unclean as “matter out of place... that which must not be included if a pattern is to be maintained.” In her book *Purity and Danger* Douglas examines the various strategies cultures have for dealing with categorical anomalies. When confronted with a specimen that bridges two categories, a culture will often interpret it as one category or the other. Douglas gives the example of monstrous births, which threaten the line between human and animals. In one culture, monstrous births are labeled as baby hippopotamuses, and order is restored. New Narrative threatens the line between theory, fiction, and autobiography. This confusion is reduced in some English Departments by simply calling it poetry. Another strategy for dealing with anomaly is to physically control it, such as killing twins at birth. Obviously, it’s not practical to kill experimental writers, but they can be vetoed on hiring committees. Similarly, students who write autobiographical fiction are ousted from fiction classes and into creative nonfiction classes. It’s hammered into fiction students that first person narration is weird, fringy. A close third person point of view is preferable to first person, but an omniscient third should be everybody’s goal. One should

never tell anything, but show show show. It is the sign of novice to use flashbacks in a novel rather than following the story in “real time” from beginning to end. All stories should have a subplot and some sort of triangle. This is imperative. Even if there are only two characters a triangulist will claim the conflict is about Mary, Joe, and Mary’s better self. If there’s only one character, the triangulist will find conflict in the relations of Mary, her self, and society. The goal of most MFA programs is to turn out students well-groomed and disciplined as dogs from a dog training school. The anomalous is often labeled as dangerous. Should an experimental writer sneak into a department, she can be accused of corrupting the students, and a Holy War can be waged against her. By avoiding the anomalous specimen, a group thereby affirms and strengthens the definitions to which it does not conform. Leviticus abhors crawling things therefore noncrawling things are approved of. One MFA student I know who’s writing in nonnarrative paragraphs was told to either give it a recognizable narrative or give it line breaks. Thus it was affirmed that paragraphs must have narrative, and that nonnarrative text must have line breaks. Over and over I’ve seen students criticized for using the present tense. They don’t have a clue any more than I do why the present tense should be avoided, why it’s necessary to affirm that fiction takes place in the past. The rules go on and on. Dialogue should never move the plot forward, dialogue should always be about something other than what the characters are talking about, never begin a story with a quotation. Every story has a top story and a bottom story. In an illustrated

children's book about monkeys escaping from a zoo, the bottom story is the placement of the bananas as they shift from frame to frame. The real meaning lies in the bottom story not with the monkeys but in the bananas. Writing is serious business. Writing is a science with precise protocols to follow.

I sit in Dolores Park Café trying to plow through the stack of CalArts course journals. The journals are intense, emotional, and I feel I have to honor that by adding lots of little comments. It's taking me forever. One student writes, "In writing there is freedom. The only place to be truly free. An epiphany. Writing is perfect freedom." My heart goes out to her. I hope she still feels that way ten years from now. I truly do. I wish there was something I could do to assure she feels that way in ten years. I'm reminded of a comment I recently wrote to a precariously talented woman in another program. "Please, please do not let graduate school wipe out your instincts, which are really strong." I get this image from an ancient TV documentary of little animals that hatch on the beach what were they, baby turtles? Crabs? (Details have always been a problem for me, as I tend to abstract things to the point of incommunicability.) So there's thousands of whatever, little things, hatching on the shore and then there's their race to the ocean as an army of predatory birds swoop down and pick them off one by one. Gulp gulp gulp. Only a tiny percentage of the babies will make it to the water. It's horrifying. In the classroom I sometimes feel less like a teacher and more like Dr. Van Helsing, fighting for the students' souls. Of course there's that nagging fear that I myself am not

pure, that all teaching is unclean, that I probably have fucked up some of them with my stupid comments, like it's inevitable. I remember working with this one guy whose writing was a mess. Whenever I read one of his stories I felt like I was in the middle of a Fellini movie, nothing was ever prepared for, characters appeared out of nowhere and did the most bizarre things. It was really hard to tell where you were in time or space, what was dream, what was supposed to be "reality." I loved this Fellini tendency of his and believed if he pushed it, his work could have been amazing. But what service would I have done him to push him further into Fellini when it was clear he was trying to do Spielberg? I guess my point is that pushy experimentalists can do just as much damage as "traditionalists." A few summers ago a student came to me in tears because another teacher had told her she had no interest in reading her (the student's) work because it wasn't postmodern enough. Since then I've avoided the label "postmodern" like the plague. It's a stupid word, don't you think?

Confusion sparks through my brain like Quan Yin's electrified halo. Quan Yin started out as male, then sometime between the 8th and 11th centuries, she switched to female. There are lots of theories about how and why this happened, but nobody really knows. I think it's fitting that the goddess of compassion has a bit of the freak about her. As the Kinks sang in "Lola," "Girls will be boys and boys will be girls. It's a mixed up muddled up shook up world." 1970. I remember my girlfriend Janis, stoned out of her mind, in her faded apricot corduroy pants, cigarette in hand, mouthing these words as

Best to assume that all teaching is unclean, and proceed from there. This levels the playing field, enabling the schoolmaster to be ignorant and positioning "the totality" as the object of one's critique, with ourselves and the classroom located firmly within its logic.

she danced in front of the jukebox at Fred's Pizza, where she waitressed. Fred, with his pot belly and red face, was always trying to get her into his truck and kiss her. "Fred," she'd laugh, "you're barking up the wrong tree." She did kiss some guys, sometimes we'd fuck one or two of them in the same room. Still we considered ourselves monogamous. Everything in "Lola" is off-kilter, between categories, indefinable, a world "where you drink champagne and it tastes just like cherry cola. C-O-L-A. Cola." "Lola" was our anthem, two baby dykes in the middle of nowhere in Indiana, barely post-Stonewall. Wherever we looked, nothing reflected us, defined us. We had to make it up on the fly. Our relationship was a torrent of high anxiety and instability. We were always looking for some structure such as monogamy to corral our incredible freedom, to impose a specter of normality. If we could only figure out what normality was. Writing for me has always been a way to worm my way back into that freedom, that incendiary in-between state, to court anxiety, instability, glorious fuckedupness.

The semester I taught at CalArts I stayed with friends in Topanga. One evening I was hanging out in their kitchen, sharing a couple of bottles of wine, and Lamar and Jim were entertaining me with stories of all the people they knew who knew Charles Manson. (Manson lived in Topanga in the late 60s.) Lamar prompts Jim to tell me about the sister of his former business partner. Jim says, "Oh yeah, well my partner's sister invited the entire Manson family to her home." Jim spreads his arms and looks from side to side to emphasize that there are a lot of them. "So they're all sitting there, and

Angela Lansbury walks in and takes one look at them and says, “You’re out of here.” “What does Angela Lansbury,” I scream, “have to do with this story?” Jim pauses, then says, “Angela Lansbury was my partner’s mother.” He looks at me perplexed, as if anybody would know that. I love this anecdote, the way it starts out as a friend of a friend tale and morphs into pure tabloid. ANGELA LANSBURY IN MANSON LOVE NEST. If he submitted this story to a writing workshop, Jim would be told to set up Angela Lansbury. I’d probably tell him that myself. Remember, first you establish characters, place and premise *then* you push them into confrontation. Characters can’t just pop up out of the shadows, out of like nowhere. But this predictable intervention would be wrong. It’s Lansbury’s disjunction, her rupturing of the narrative that gives it energy, that brings the delight of surprise that Joan Retallack talked about at Naropa all those summers ago. It was the week of Kevin’s and my wedding anniversary Anne Waldman appears saying this is Naropa’s first wedding anniversary. We’re in a hotel bar, the Boulderado, and Anne buys us a bottle of champagne. Bubbles all around.

I’ve been reading *Andy Warhol’s Blow Job*, Roy Grundmann’s book-length analysis of Warhol’s 36-minute film in which a stationary camera remains focused on the head of a man who is presumably getting a blow job. Grundmann asserts that blow jobs are popular in movies because so much can be implied, left unseen. “The partner who moves down the anatomy invariably exits the frame the realm of what is deemed representable without disturbing the viewer’s connectedness to the overall

act.” In the prim salaciousness of filmed blow jobs, that which is deemed not representable calls the shots. It’s a tangible invisibility, the antithesis of out of sight, out of mind. While the cathartic power of the unseen is certainly rich, exhilarating even, my goal as a teacher and as a writer is to pull back the camera, widen the frame, and thus expand “the realm of what is deemed representable.” Or at least make people aware of the politics of representation that what’s seen, what’s hidden is not neutral or natural that each time we sit down to write, even the silliest bit of fluff, we are making choices, important choices, about how the world is organized/ranked/diced to smithereens. Every time we sit down to write we are voting on what’s permissible and what isn’t.

I’m reminded of the fable of the blind men and the elephant. One blind man feels the elephant’s leg and says the elephant is like a tree. Another blind man feels the elephant’s trunk and says the elephant is like a snake. Another blind man feels the elephant’s ear and says the elephant is like an angelfish. Yes, I’ve brought back the fish so I can wrap up this essay, neatly, like a package, that I, Dodie, hand to you, the reader. Goldfish/angelfish. Poetry/prose. Even experimental poets enforce the division. Where do I fit in? A few winters ago I was in Maine, and Steve Evans asked me if I had written any poetry, and I said that my book *Cunt-Ups* won the 2002 Firecracker Award for poetry. Steve replied, “I thought in that book you were writing outside of genre.” The word “outside,” when applied to me, always hurts my feelings, but let’s climb out of my complexes. To not just blur genres, but to write totally outside of them it sounds like

Fish wrap. Bellamy's self-awareness is a deft example of positioning "the totality" as the object. She never suggests that dealing with life, this life, involves establishing a position outside of or in opposition to it. Here we are, together. The challenge is living this way, and still finding ourselves in revolution.

Even in one of those hotel room interviews at the MLA?

a wonderful utopia but is it possible? What kind of marginality is that, free-floating outside the social order like David Bowie's Major Tom? Doesn't genre infect everything we write or think? Back in the mid-80s when I left poetry for prose, it wasn't a gradual transition, but a dramatic gesture like all my gestures back then. I would tell people I had abandoned poetry. "No more poetry!" I declared, and I meant it. I remember Bob Glück my teacher once saying to me that *The Letters of Mina Harker* wasn't so much a novel as a book of lyric poetry. *Yeah, sure Bob*, I thought. But perhaps he's right. Perhaps New Narrative for some of us, at least was really about poetry as ruse, a spin-doctoring to pull off what was verboten in the San Francisco scene narrative poetry. After teaching creative writing for a decade, one thing I know for sure a fiction writer I ain't. The shredded enjambments I learned to perform in San Francisco have so little in common with what's taught to fiction students, I might as well be writing on a different planet. While pondering this I stumble upon Ron Silliman's blog. Like a prophet from another dimension, Ron appears on my computer screen, professing to love categories. "You can't discuss something," Ron writes, "until you have a noun around which to put some language." I read this and huff, *these guys, they've always got to pin things down, to label them, lock them in neat little boxes beneath nonreflective glass*. But then Ron goes on to talk about places of categorical slippages. "Thingee, widget, doodad, whachamacallit there are more than a few great synonyms for those intermediate phenomena in our lives that are not quite this, not quite that." That line nudges me out of whining mode

and makes me smile. Dear Ron thank you, thank you for giving me a handle keep up the good work XOX your fan, Dodie.

Imagine yourself on an academic hiring committee, imagine yourself one of those frightened, pinched creatures desperately clinging to order, you can feel the chaos right outside the windows, pressing in. You sit there, hunched over the brown laminate conference table and you're presented with a choice a widget or a Stegner. The glass starts to creak as the chaos pushes in, closer. The Stegner you know what he'll do, nothing's unpredictable about him he has an MFA from Columbia, a glowing recommendation from Tobias Wolff during his campus visit he asked you enthusiastic, engaged questions about every book you've ever published, including that rare stapled chapbook published in Dubuque back in 1976, which he's sure will be a collector's item, some day the Stegner will help you beat back the chaos, which is now banging against the windows BOOM BOOM BOOM! And then there's the widget, whose "novel" you could only get through ten pages of, you couldn't understand a word of it but nevertheless found yourself, strangely, physically aroused the widget, this messy libidinous loose cannon, god knows what she might do, something crazy, like throw open the window you have a vision of swirling psychedelic apocalyptic smoke rushing in and your heart races, sweat pours from your brow in streams, you clench your desiccated tenured hand into a fist and hurl it at the table. "No widgets," you snarl. "Never!"