

An Introduction to Reading Carla Harryman

by Laura Hinton

One of the founders of the West Coast Language School of Poetry in the 1970's, Carla Harryman remains one of this movement's more enigmatic writers from a critical perspective.¹ The author of 15 books of poetry, prose, and essays, as well as 10 works of poet's theater –all of which have seen 24 staged productions to date – Harryman is nonetheless one of postmodern American literature's most original multi-media "Language" artists. She also has worked as a collaborator in art exhibitions,² as a theater director (and poet's play actor),³ and as a screen-writer for experimental cinema. Co-editor (with Amy Scholder and Avita Ronell) of a major posthumous volume on the writings of Kathy Acker, Harryman is known for a performative kind of hybridic prose that Acker helped to popularize. And Harryman also is known for her unusual, playful and cross-genre theoretical essays, including those in critical volumes like *We Who Love to Be Astonished* (University of Alabama Press), *The Grand Permission* (Wesleyan), and, most recently, her own new collection, *Adorno's Noise* (Essay Press). Harryman's "poetics" in all their incantations and multiple genres exist at the edge of literature. They make

¹ As a major member of Lang-Po, Harryman is a participant in the multi-authored experiment in autobiography, *The Grand Piano*, of which five of ten volumes have been published to date (Mode A, 2006-2008). *The Grand Piano* locates its project in both Language writing and other new poetry scenes emerging in San Francisco from 1975-1980. During this period, Harryman published her first books of new genre writings, engaged in performance art experiments, and staged experimental plays, including Frank O'Hara's *Try Try*.

² Her interest in cross-disciplinary collaboration has resulted in several exhibitions, including a solo exhibition at the Cranbrook Art Museum, *Chairs of Words*, which she developed in collaboration with graphic designer, Peter Hill.

³ She is a founding member of the San Francisco Bay Area Poets Theater (1979-1986); and has since that time written for, collaborated and performed in, directed, and produced numerous works for performance. Her plays have been performed nationally and internationally, with recent bilingual performances in Montreal, Germany, and Austria.

us ask: What *is* literature. They are conceptual works of art.

Yet as formidable and impressive as Harryman's experimental work is, it has received only spotty attention from critics in academic journals. This special section in *How2* is an attempt to examine the implications of Harryman's work – from different perspectives and in different multi-media formats. One reason, perhaps, that Harryman's work has received less than an appropriate level of attention from the canonizers of contemporary literature and poetics as a field is that her work is difficult to assess by readers and interpreters. It's as if the conventional literary markers of "voice," "narrative," "lyric" and "image" seem missing, or distorted, or transformed. I would argue that these literary elements, indeed, are present in Harryman's writing. Yet they never remain "stable" or singular or hierarchically constructed enough for literary critics to probe and plunder – both of which we literary critics love to do. Harryman's work is purposefully evasive of this "academic approach to reading –in which "meaning" and "form" all too readily can become an intellectual exercise and an academic-industry commodity, to be hawked in university-press books and college classrooms. I will quote myself here in a recent essay in *PMC* when explaining Harryman's failure to fit in to the mainstream – even sometimes the "postmodern" mainstream of contemporary literature: Harryman refuses "to be typecast ... [she creates] hybrid writings that challenge and cross over formal representational modes, sometimes engaging collaboratively with other artists and media in the process."⁴ If literary studies through the university system is organized around and sometimes burdened by our current understanding of "the disciplines" (and the "the departments" that host their fields of study), Harryman's active engagement with truly hybrid forms of writing and the arts makes it both multi-dimensional and interdisciplinary at its core.

⁴ Laura Hinton, "To Write Within Situations of Contraction: An Introduction to Carla Harryman's Inter-genre Writing," *Postmodern Culture* 16.1 (September 2005), 2nd paragraph. Chris Stroffolino has also written an essay that discusses the complexity of Harryman's cross-genre writing, for *The Dictionary of Literary Biography*.

Whether it be Harryman's arresting and hybrid formations of "the novel," or a prose short story interspersed with (or becoming) theory, or a work of poet's prose that is neither prose nor poetry but "new genre" (as Harryman's own *cv* lists some of her publications), or a work of theater that is also poetry and a musical performance, Harryman's writing rejects location and internal placement. That is, within the text itself, there is no "master narrative" that fits from literary culture, which can identify and consolidate its value to a reader.

This resistance to cultural genre markers and that form of identity makes it, in turn, sometimes difficult for a reader to find his or her own identification within a given Harryman work. We readers, after all, are used to submerging our own identities into that of a character, or a poetic "voice," or even a genre itself (although the latter may happen more unconsciously). It's not that identification is not possible in reading Harryman's work. It is. Harryman's work is profoundly political, engaged with the emotional life of humans in society, in families and other relationships, within economic structures, within the confines of cultural belief structures of all kinds. But the persona or entities with whom the reader might identify are pluralized – and we begin to see their *dramas of identities* as eternally shifting and mobile. This pluralizing effect can disorient us. But it *should* disorient us as readers, make us ask questions about the reading-writing processes and procedures, make us ask: What are the rules of this particular game? Instead of readers of the plot or readers seeking their own identification in what we only believe to be "human" characters like ourselves, are made to ask questions about why we want that – and what, precisely, we want when we read a work of poetry or fiction or watch a performance play. We are asked to become readers of the conceptual, and to find "ourselves" enunciated *within the performative hybrid structure of the text itself*.

This is the beauty and hardship of reading Harryman – the strange work involved, the

challenge to identity through art. Our *How2* section on Carla Harryman's writing may not clarify the reading process one bit. We don't really intend it to. But we do hope it will make the argument that the experience of reading Harryman is worth the exceptional intellectual effort it demands.

Collected together here are all previously unpublished written and oral texts, including three critical assessments of Harryman's work, by Christine Hume, myself, and Jill Darling (who writes a critical-review of Harryman's just released *Adorno's Noise*). Renee Gladman offers a new interview with Harryman, in which Harryman maps out the aesthetic-conceptual basis behind much of her work, and noise artist Austin Publicover offers four experimentally enhanced voice recordings of Harryman reading her writing (and offers a written introduction to these recordings). Finally, we provide a complete bibliography of Harryman's considerable work, including both publications and performance pieces, a bibliography which only continues to grow as we speak, with the release of *Adorno's Noise* and other performance works on the horizon.

I thank Alan Golding and the Louisville Conference on Post-19th Century Literature and Culture, which hosted my panel on Carla Harryman's writing in February 2008, thus generating some of the materials that would become essential for this special section. Alan's enthusiasm for Harryman's work sustained that particular project, and so has Redell Olsen's sustained this one. At *How2*, an international internet forum, it is not always possible for us to meet our editorial colleagues in person. We live in different countries seas apart. So when I finally met Dell one sunny London spring day in a café in Bloomsbury almost two years ago, I found it magical to discover our conversation turning (for two hours) to the topic of Carla Harryman's work. This

special section is the result of these intertwined experiences, and the stunning contributions of Carla Harryman herself. Carla provided reams of information over two years' time, responded to countless e-mails and phone calls, and -- dashing in and out of New York, which she sometimes does -- she trailed such luminous intellectual energy that this special section just had to take place.

-- Laura Hinton

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