Tracking Voices from "Elsewhere": Entering the Counter-U.S. Poetics of Faye Kicknosway

Rob Wilson

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I have already published essays in Hawai'i and in Canada focused on the strange heteroglossia and other-voiced cultural uncanny coursing through Faye Kicknosway's poetry.[1] Far from the U.S. apparatus and its lyric fame-making modes, Kicknosway makes a fresh, estranged antivoice and highly original poetry, taking risks in form and de-habituated technique as she goes on writing about the American dispossessed in a chameleon-like dramatic style that dispossesses her of prior authority and judgment, and voids "the lyrical interference of the ego" in Charles Olson's Maximus sense.[2]

As is clear from her ongoing project in creating an unselved poetics,

1. See Rob Wilson, "Beyond the Confessional Ego," *Brick: A Journal of Reviews* (1988): 59–60; and a review of *All These Voices* in *Literary Arts Hawai'i* 84 (spring 1987): 14–15.
2. Kicknosway has even (at times) taken on a new name, "Morgan Blair," as if in flight from the U.S. lyric name-making apparatus, admitting to me that she does feel that the "Short Takes" poems included in this *boundary 2* portfolio are written under the sign and name of the poet "Faye Kicknosway."

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Kicknosway is open to otherness, increasingly so. Her casual comment to me back in 1987—that "following set patterns makes you small; the goal is to become bigger"—ought to be used as a pedagogical mandate by more than poets. Talking to her here and there over the years in Honolulu, I am always struck by the purity, singularity, and depth of her answers on conceptually difficult matters of audience, form, convention, and the ruses of the American poetry scene. She knows what she is up to, goes her own way, and remains tough-minded yet willing to share this crafty and spiritual knowledge with male and female, old and young, dumb and smart. I, for one, benefited immensely from some detailed information she gave me on the Language poets when I was refunctioning them in local Pacific contexts in the late 1980s, and she connected this countercanonical work to the writings of Henri Michaux, the machinic William Burroughs, and the mongrel mix of Peter Handke. Her "wonder boy" writing students in Hawai'i, who have gone on to some national fame in varying genres—Justin Chin, Lois-Ann Yamanaka, and Zack Linmark—lovingly credit her with the terror and ecstasy of a pedagogy that dismantled them of habit and easy convention, hence that dragged strange voices out into the public as writing performances.[3]

Kicknosway's work in the poetry scenes in Detroit and San Francisco has been carried over the Pacific and stimulated, provoked, and benefited writing faculty and students in Hawai'i immensely, in an island scene that runs the risk of smallness, policed and pampered regionalism, and tame closure. She works to open up her audience in form and style. Her mode of speaking and teaching, her mode of writing outside the lyric apparatus, can be discontinuous, antihabitual, and metaphor laden, but the transnational space of U.S. counterpoetics needs a woman poet of such talent, risk, strangeness, singularity, and generosity.

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Under the dying patriarchal paradigm of the confessional poem, Robert Lowell voiced the therapeutic lyric *ego* of the 1950s in all its tor-

3. For a caustic and funny portrait of Kicknosway as Zen-cold mentor to an exciting new wave of Asia/Pacific writers, see Justin Chin, "What I Hid and What Was Found," in the "Lucky Break" special issue of *ZZYVA* edited by Howard Junker (fall 1999): 30–31: "She was a tough broad in a mid-Western writerly way, and quite intense. . . . It was also to be the turning point of my life, the start of my life as a writer" (30–31). See also Justin Chin, *Mongrel: Essays, Diatribes, and Pranks* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999); Lois-Ann Yamanaka, *Saturday Night at the Pahala Theater* (Honolulu: Bamboo Ridge Press, 1993); and R. Zamora (Zack) Linmark, *Rolling the R's* (New York: Kaya, 1999).

mented self-capture—monologues of language that went on crazed past midnight, venting miseries and inner poisons that willfully eradicated traces of other tones and other voices. The keynote of such an (antidialogical) voice remains, say, the ill-spirited, toxic lover in "Skunk Hour": "I myself am hell; / there's nobody here—."

Kicknosway's *All These Voices: New and Selected Poems* is accurately entitled. Gathering brutal chapbooks, small-press broadsides, as well as some of her poems from 1972 through 1985, *All These Voices* builds up a hothouse panorama of voices obsessed not so much with the poet's own self-therapy as with some kind of lucid self-effacement into the tormented language of others, "all these voices" comprising finally, Spicer-like, some expanded notion of selfhood. Her poems are indeed other-directed, rockingly embodied, voiced with outrageous stylistic exactitude and plenitude. As Edward Hirsch warns on the blue-marble cover of this thin, elegantly produced book from Coffee House Press, "Their calling is urgent, and we ignore them at our peril."

Kicknosway comprises a cast of other "voices" (hardly secret monologues for any stagecraft Prospero-voice ego, as occurs even in great confessional sequences, such as Frank Bidart's *The Book of the Body* or Ai's *Sin*) that range from street crazies on Housing Project Hill in the wilds of her native Detroit to the equally splayed reaches of upper-middle-class Hollywood, certain Shakespearean voices of capitalist solitude, or the ego-machine of desire and romantic rage deployed insatiably under Capital.

As the student voice flattens out King Lear's tragic project of ego grandeur ("Book Report") to an American working-class scale:

> He quit his job as king
> and took a larger job
> as a crazy person.[4]

3

Beware, dear mongrel reader: These are not happy, blithe, carnivalesque, up-with-poetry voices but deeply pained American voices, stretched, flayed, tense with coke, sauced, lost, banal, weighed down by humiliations of poverty, street jive, daily mutual abuse. Beyond such ego confinements, however, such "local" voices get surpassed by deeper voices of some more

4. Faye Kicknosway, *All These Voices: New and Selected Poems* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Coffee House Press, 1986), 117. Hereafter, this work is cited parenthetically by page number only.

lyric madness, some more visionary-hungry voice in "Faye Kicknosway" straining out of language structure, beyond the lure of material heroin and back.

Yet her language functions here repeatedly not so much as self-expression as *self-capture*, voice becomes another structure of leaden finitude and material containment as the transpoetic languages of *Who Shall Know Them?* have made hauntingly apparent vis-à-vis the languageless and impoverished subjects of the rural depression-era United States resituated as a contemporary condition.[5]

Consider the well-off actor's voice in "Breakfast at Santa Barbara"—so coked out on male power, greed, misogyny, contempt of other needs as to block out all openness and otherness (this elegant Hollywood sleaze is speaking to a once-loved woman, but speed-freak-like annihilating any possibility of her speech, never mind pools of tenderness to leak in):

> "I don't know why we had to meet: we could have handled this by phone. I haven' t read any of the mail I've gotten from you. Not any of it. I haven' t even opened it. I never open it, just tear it up and throw it away. I don' t want to hear from you. Your letters are deadly, anyway. Only asking for money. And the paper is the wrong color. And you should type, your handwriting isn't at all legible. I'm very nervous here. I don't want to be here. I only came because you said it was important. I don' t see that it's so important. I never even screwed you, I never even saw you with your clothes off. I'm probably the only man in Southern California who hasn' t screwed you or seen you with your clothes off. And I have to pay. It was the best contract you ever had. You're rich." His male voice of Capitalist greed remains locked in a solipsistic, self-wrought hell: "My god, this is a horrid place. It's wretched. I want to get out of here. I want to get out of here." (126–27)

(*Here* is more the language of self-capture than a function of expressing any "place.")

More language-poem-like in its rage and reach beyond the social or normative syntax of the ordinary Americana scene, Kicknosway makes an ordinary household cat, in "The Cat Approaches" (1979), take on visionary dimensions of derangement, enchantment, transformation, as if some

5. See Faye Kicknosway, *Who Shall Know Them?* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1985). As Anaïs Nin wrote in a blurb for this strange work on the "vulnerable and alive" voices of Walker Evans that motivated this voice-decentered dramatic work, "Kicknosway is a marvelous creator of new mythologies, new moods, new metamorphoses."

temple god with tools of acid fire and ontological grandeur magically *approaches*. Keen to the body's fund of performative energies, Kicknosway's lyric language mounts and mounts, lifting the cat object into some language realm of deification worthy of the great religious poet Kit Smart, singularly honoring his rapt cat-god, Geoffrey, like some tiny acid-head Jesus. I can barely stop quoting the poem, so exacting and Lorca-like is its ecstatic grammar:

> the cat
> approaches, and my life
> discharges small green islands of meat
> and blood, small blue faces knit
> from the rags feeling cannot absorb. the cat
> approaches, licking the tiny pockets
> of its grief. the cat
> approaches, its winter arms burning,
> its soft flesh burning. the cat
> approaches and it is windows and photographs;
> it is dwarves
> coming loose from paintings, skin
> coming loose from the heart. the cat
> approaches and its fur is stiff and spiney, and it chews
> its whiskers with its leather teeth. the cat
> approaches and its red hooves
> dig my heart open. (79–80)

Everywhere in the counterpunching or radiolike poetics of Kicknosway, the American crazed self ("voice") does speak, or, more exactly, is *spoken* in repetitive structures and tones of his or her own self-wrought captivity. "What you hear is what you have heard from," preached Jack Spicer of alien "Outside" voices that can empower poetry like some Orphic radio possessed:[6] Kicknosway has heard one hell of a lot—heard with maximal clarity God's forlorn and nasty plenitude, while she has walked over the burned-out ruins of higher individualism and Motown street grandeur in Detroit.

Kicknosway is a multitude of American voices, crazy and ecstatic or just dirt-poor "messages" from God, fleshed out and bespeaking that other-haunted idea of a more dialogical poetics challengingly embodied up ahead

6. See "The Practice of Outside," in *The Collected Books of Jack Spicer*, ed. Robin Blaser (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Black Sparrow Press, 1980), 271–329.

of us in the cold war era by Spicer in *Thing Language* (1964): "The poet is a radio. The poet is a liar. The poet is a counterpunching radio. . . . And those messages (God would not damn them) do not even know they are champions."[7]

Over and over, as in her recent small-press chapbooks, *The Violence of Potatoes* (1990) and *Listen to Me* (1992), both published by Ridgeway Press in Roseville, Michigan (although working in the Asia/Pacific context, she keeps her ties to and wins respect from the Detroit language-writing scene), Kicknosway achieves a poetry of haunting negative capability, *emptying out* the ego, listening to the language messages of others with a mnemonic keenness that is downright spooky in its range of voices and tones. Her voices recall the master lyrics of the urban-flesh warehouse of Walt Whitman's "The Sleepers," or the crazed-to-prophetic voices of Bob Dylan's "Jokerman" or "I and I" in *Infidels*, or in Leonard Michael's toxic *Going Places*.

At times, yes, the voices can seem locked in proletariat language limits, hellholes of subjugation, repetitive platitudes I knew too well in the Northeast, but such is the structure of each private hell, egos immune to redemption. These are not wrens or larks come to visit the poem at daybreak, but "all these voices" demand urgent witness, human rejoinder: "i have. and your ears are wrapped / in phlegm" (74–75).

Yet the poems trace, too, some lyric *beyond*, an Outside, some "voice" of scope and reach pushing beyond any therapeutic selfhood or erotic confession of the ego, as all the lurking chakras of the body kick in to get voiced, as in "She Wears Him Fancy in Her Night Braid" (1983):

> Mr. Perfect:
> do
> right: dust, bake;
> keep myself still and he's
> mine. The Promise.
> He's walking up my blood
> and I'll blink him from my eyes
> into the street,
>
> into the passage the truck makes
>
> towards my new home. . . .

7. See Jack Spicer, "Sporting Life," in *Collected Books*, 218.

This poem's night-braid title, in context, transmutes into a startlingly *literal* utterance:

> A face without response
> he walked from Sergeant Street,
> from Madonnas and chestnuts,
> from a father shooting pigeons.
>
> Polak. Slav.
> Immigrant, new man to this country.
> My mother baked him bread.
> My grandmother wore him fancy in her night braid. (133–34)

Kicknosway has the warehouse eyes and Arabian drums of a genuinely gifted poet. Having moved from Wayne State University in Detroit to the island of Oahu in Hawai'i in 1986, she labors with fresh energies as "Poet in the Schools," on red alert in the tourist-dense streets of Honolulu. I, for one, am grateful that Kicknosway, with her hard-won stylistic gifts and large-heartedness, is listening to "all those voices" floating through Waikīkī and Detroit and on Mars—with uncanny exactitude and some kind of, yes, poetic egolessness that Spicer or Lorca had intended as counter-American poetics.

What follows is a portfolio of recent work, "Short Takes," which she described to me recently as a form that works as twisted into patterns that are "funny and deadly and filmic," with an "unfinished quality" that "fits what I wanted to do at the time—spit it out." She is also working on long poems, in which she speaks to and from inside the works of Shakespeare, and another to and from Whitman (recall Spicer's mode of writing "after Lorca," meaning as/against/after/from), like a dead man walking through our transgendered eyes and speaking through our deformed canons of U.S. poesy.