

LISA ROBERTSON  
NILLING

PROSE ESSAYS

ON NOISE, PORNOGRAPHY,  
THE CODEX, MELANCHOLY,  
LUCRETIUS, FOLDS, CITIES  
AND RELATED APORIAS



BOOKTHUG

MMXII

FIRST EDITION  
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The production of this book was made possible through the generous assistance of  
The Canada Council for The Arts and The Ontario Arts Council.



Also issued as: ISBN 978-1-927040-32-4 (EPUB)

LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES CANADA CATALOGUING IN PUBLICATION

Robertson, Lisa, 1961-  
Nilling: prose/ Lisa Robertson.

(Department of critical thought; no. 6)  
ISBN 978-1-897388-89-1

I. Title. II. Series: Department of critical thought; no. 6

PS8585.03217N55 2011      C814'.54      C2011-904775-6

PRINTED IN CANADA

## Untitled Essay

a discovery that speech is never simply single  
– Clark Coolidge, *The Crystal Text*

Sometimes “here” has no walls. There are some pieces of corrugated cardboard, a square of tarp and a sleeping bag, a deck of cards for Solitaire. Or, following the movement of thinking, a woman escapes the confinement of identity, moving into the open of language. The most temporary membranes serve as shelter. Amongst these membranes, speaking begins, plays its tenuous continuities near and in spite of the accreted institutions that compel anyone to obey, violate and buy, to be situated by identity’s grid. But speech is never simply single. Value moves between us or is foreclosed. The conversations are conditioned by profoundly ancient and constantly reinventing protocols – protocols we enliven, figure, and transform with our bodies and their words, by beginning. This beginning is what anyone belongs to.

Discourse improvises, unmoored to any stable geographic or architectural foundation. We citizens constitute ourselves according to the movement of subjectivity in language. At the same time, we are administratively identified by shared, conventional borders, and a historical concept of collective and individual rights or those rights’ withdrawal. This linguistic tracing of subjects fleetingly coheres in vernacular speech as that speech configures itself at any living juncture with another speaker. Language, the historical mode of collective relationship, is also the aptitude by which humans innovate one another as subjects: The ego is the one who linguistically addresses another, and it is only through this address that each, in a reciprocal entwining, may fashion herself as “I.” In this co-movement of significance between individual and society, each person comes into an awareness of herself as a speaking being within the society of language. No binary is implicated. Neither individual nor instrumental, the linguistic aptitude accompanies the beginning of humans as a collective nature through which each subject, uttering “I,” “you,” “we,” emerges and survives or perishes. Any subject is supported, spoken, and carried or disallowed and foreclosed by others, in a matrix of reciprocity, empathy and power that conditions the very possibility of embodiment. As soon as she speaks and names, the political subject emerges. Her agency is a verbal

one; architecture and governance can only interpret, fix or abstract the fluency of the linguistic given.

Because of the shared primacy of this linguistic beginning, and because political space is an effect and an historical accretion of linguistic circulation, I'll propose a prosody of the citizen, where the term "prosody" describes the historical and bodily movement of language amongst subjects. This movement of the discourse of prosody away from the technical conventions of measure, towards the movements of a generative *immateriality*, contributes to an interpretation of the domestic sphere that's aligned with the shifting vectors and intensities of embodiment. A prosodic thinking of politics will carry Hannah Arendt's statement concerning the polis into the domestic sphere also: "The only indispensable material factor in the generation of power is the living together of people. Only where men live so close together that the potentialities of action are always present can power remain with them...." In *The Human Condition*, Arendt, following Aristotle, argues that *polis* is the exchange of speech, and arises anywhere and each time this free exchange takes place. In Arendt's thinking, it is the beginner who is the guarantor of political freedom: the beginner, born into speech, speaking in the world, to other beginners. The human social beginnings – of birth, of speech – define the shared condition – natality, in Arendt's coinage – and ensure that action reveals the improbable yet always renewing freedom inherent in collective life. Without speech, she argues, action would lose its subjects and become violence. The presence of subjects, beginners always, is antithetical to violence, because the discourse that inflects subjects also dismantles the tenure of authority. This necessary alignment of speech and action in the subject ensures that embodied political speech cannot be subordinated to a simplistically communicative and instrumental role, a means to an end or a violence, but carries with it always a revelatory, innovatory and transformational agency. Through speech, the citizen acts and freedom articulates its claim on subjects. The subject begins in the co-movement of speech. Natality and prosody are terms that underscore the necessary vitality of this movement,

nativity from the point of view of the recognition of embodied subjectivity as incipiently ethical, and prosody from the point of view of the linguistic traversal and elaboration of that subjectivity.

Arendt's refusal to define the shared condition of the political subject in terms of mortality was a powerfully implicit critique of Heideggerian ontology, and of the claims of the eschatology of the Church Fathers on European thought. Now the need to align political thinking with life and beginning, rather than with a theological end-thinking, becomes increasingly urgent in the present escalation of state-sponsored, economically determined violence in its many guises. Arendt's defense of nativity as *the form of life* inflects current discussions around biopolitics, where citizenship is before all else a *co-embodied* belonging. The citizen's body, in its charged relationships to other bodies, is the temporal matrix and radical mediator of politics. Each body, each birth, each coming into speech, bears the radically unquantifiable potential of co-transformation.

The domestic sphere, that urgent foundation for nativity, will here be considered in terms of a mediating skin, rather than in terms of a private interiority conceptually opposed to a social outside. This mediating condition will be inflected temporally, rather than spatially, since its limit is less structurally architectural than flexibly transformative: the taking in and preparation of food, of erotic encounter, of various modes of work, of reproductive labour, of the production of an affective surplus and the constant re-initiation into a freshened verbal motility – the *domus* is the place of rhythmic protection of the vulnerable body, while sleeping, in illness, age, and childhood, often while eating and washing, while resting, while talking and working. So the domestic sphere isn't private just as the body and its modes of conviviality, reproduction and care aren't private – it expresses a complex temporality that includes coded information from the past as it moves always in the light of the polyvalent and self-inventing present. In terms of subjectivity and temporality, the domestic sphere emerges as an embodied vector that breaks open, floods the habitual

containment of the public-private binary. In this shift away from a spatial metaphor of the domestic, a displacement of power occurs. The time of the body is generative, commingled, gestural, enacted; in a temporal interpretation of the domestic, power innovates itself as an improvised co-embodiment. In this sense, ecology rather than economics might provide the circulatory model of a mutually embodied and temporally vulnerable power-in-relationship, as long as one considers ecology in terms of complex processes of disequilibrium and emergence instead of a harmonized closure. Systems of integration, mutuality, rejection, dispersion and synchronous transformation, rather than a structural semiotics of bordered exchange, characterize domestic activities and interactions. Across these constantly shifting melodic thresholds, the flow of spoken language, from birth-cry to digital transmission, evades spatial containment, and rhythmically innovates the time of our collectivity. This collectively spoken time is the sole incubator of subjectivity.

In *De Vulgare Eloquentia*, Dante developed a poetics of the vernacular – the collectively accessible speech of the household and the street, distributed unilaterally rather than intentionally acquired via a disciplined pedagogy of grammar, and transformed in open bodily exchange, irrespective of social position, gender or rank. “The vernacular,” Dante says, “[is] the language which children gather from those around them when they first begin to articulate words; or more briefly, that which we learn without any rules at all by imitating our nurses.” A vernacular is not structured according to a valuing hierarchy or an administration of history; it is improvised in tandem with the rhythmic needs and movements of a present tense yet tradition-informed body among other bodies, each specific. There is no *general* vernacular; it is intrinsically grammarless. Vernacular speech can only ever begin and can never achieve closure. Refusing spatial propriety, it crisscrosses institutions. In Dante’s definition, it is what’s spoken by women and children, thus it is the first, and natural language: “The whole world uses it through its diverse pronunciations and forms.” As a generator of temporality, the vernacular overdetermines any bounded



circulation concept or singularity of origin – it moves every-which-way continuously, so an excess or an innovation may erupt at any point, initiating various kinds and intensities of political consequences that can never be predetermined.

Dante reversed the values of the vernacular and the language of institutional tradition – governmental, economic and religious. This reversal opened to a recognition of the politically transformative agency of vernacular speech. He called grammar “secondary language” and the vernacular “illustrious,” claiming for it the aesthetic and political position conventionally reserved for Latin, the hierarchically structured grammar of authority. Part of his substantiation for this reversal of value was aesthetic; he observed that Provençal lyric poets sang in the vernacular in royal courts, and that lyric songs, *canzone*, are the most widely copied, transmitted and reproduced. Another part of his revalorization was political in the popular sense; all people, of any class or gender, speak and sing and seize a vernacular; at any point in history, a received potentiality of living language has situated us as human. For Dante, the vernacular of lyric, whose “sweet new style” was turned from the incipiently wandering language of women and of exile<sup>1</sup> by the Stil Nova poets, was a matrix of potential

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- 1 In *Shards of Love: Exile and the Origins of the Lyric*, María Rosa Menocal discusses the origin of troubadour lyric in pre-1492 Anadaluia, where for eight centuries Christians, Jews and Moslems lived an intensely hybrid peace. The popular song-form of early medieval al Andalus was called the *muwashshahat*. These multi-lingual songs enacted lovers’ dialogues, using rhyme, a device never before used in Arabic, Hebrew or Latin. Each song included a *kharja*, or refrain, composed in a vernacular that, until recently was not recognized as such, but was assumed to be a nonsensical and musical gibberish, not a semantic contribution to the verbal meaning of the poem. This *kharja* has now been recognized, according to Menocal, as a transcription of the oral dialect spoken commonly by women, *Mozarabic*. So the *muwashshahat* is a diglossic, high/low, bastard, and doubly sexed song form, and is now hypothesized to be the mother of Troubadour and Provençal lyric song, with its rhyming motifs, conversational structure and presentation of the love dynamic as an oral exchange between sexes, not a singular state to be

resistance, radical mobility, and human dignity. Written during Dante's own exile from Florence, *De Vulgare Eloquentia* seeks to consolidate a vision of a unified national language by claiming an exilic vernacular as the exemplary speech of the citizen. In this sense, it is a deeply conservative text, a precursor to the imposition of standardized national languages carried out much later by European colonial regimes throughout the world, through control of education, print media, health and healing practices and other quotidian know-how. At the same time, *De Vulgare Eloquentia's* textual radicality unties its own political will, revealing in its ambivalence how vernacular counter-language is at the core of collective resistance and political self-invention.

Now language and money circulate using the same medium, a grammar which is digital, horizontal and magnetic, and politically determined. Maybe all language will be eventually administrated as an institutional money: a contained and centrally monitored instrumental value. On the other hand, the digitization of value could mean that language in its vernacular expression can infiltrate and deform capital's production and limitation of social power. If it is to be the latter, then vernacular language's magnetism will reorient the polis.

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represented in a unified language. In contrast to the extremely rich translation culture surrounding medieval Arabic and Hebrew philosophical, scientific and other high-culture textual forms, *muwashshahat* were not translated; there is little material evidence to prove the routes of transmission from the Iberian peninsula, across the Pyrenees mountains through the Languedoc region, the centre of the great heretical counter-tradition of the Albigensians and Cathars, and from there, into Provence. But the *muwashshahat* were popularly sung in the common speech, so their formal traits were mobile, adaptive, and, Menocal posits, foundational to the vernacular lyric tradition of late-medieval Southern Europe. This moving vernacular tradition was also the generator of that other traveling form, the sonnet, and has become the contemporary western lyric poem in just these few centuries.

## Colophon

Manufactured spring 2012 by BookThug in an edition of 500 copies.  
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