LEAKY CULTURE 2: Elisa Gabbert

written by Jake Levine | March 21, 2016

The Self Unstable /// Elisa Gabbert and The Poetry of Immanence

> *Poetry entails stepping outside of comfortable notions about ourselves and our world, facing the possibility of our own dissolution—which can take many forms, but most often involves the shattering of a stable sense of self-identity.*[i]

Zombie apocalypse. Ecological apocalypse. Alien apocalypse. Clash-of-civilization-end-of-world-sandy-race-car-mutant-filled action sequence death flame guitar wielding dystopia. And Zika virus. And Ebola. And Trump. Although my teachers told me I should do everything I could to stick out, individualize, and market myself, the internet and the movies show me that when the world ends we'll go out together, holding hands. As Slavoj Žižek points out, it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism[ii]. Come on poetry friends, grab my hand and

> *Ring-around-the-rosie,*
> *A pocket full of posies.*
> *Ashes! Ashes! We all fall…*

Whereas people once dreamed of collectively building a better world, it looks as if now all we do is imagine our collective death (this might be especially true at this moment in American poetry). After all, it might be more manageable and certainly less stressful planning for a zombie apocalypse than keeping up with the news of the current election cycle. Or who is shit talking who or taking shits on who on twitter on facebook. Or, sometimes I think, perhaps planning for a zombie apocalypse is actually the best way to prepare for this election. Or the end of art. Whatever. However, as the saying goes, there is poetry everywhere, even in the dark times….. people are singing. But before we go on to Elisa Gabbert's book, perhaps by way of introduction it is best to begin with popular cinema. Because if we are talking about the end of the world, there is no better example of how this feeling of immanent death is delivered than through the Hollywood marriage

between the forces of our own destruction (accumulation through dispossession as typified by big budget studios), and the symbolic regurgitation of the delusion that everything is okay and will be okay (technology or nasa or iron man will save us from ourselves). So let's go Han Solo and begin with two recent examples.

The films *Interstellar* and *Ant-Man* share what every Hollywood movie seems to necessarily have these days: an all at stake, do-or-die mission where failure means the end of the world (or life as we know it). Both films explore literal, scientific time-space compression in their own ways. In a non-metaphorical allusion to the effects of the corporate world, *Ant-Man* is about a guy who shrinks to the size of an ant (instead of becoming a bureaucrat, he is just shrunk to feel like one). *Interstellar* is about an ex-astronaut who ventures outward into space to attempt to find a habitable planet humans can escape to after the earth has suffered some unexplained blight where oxygen is running out (again, the allusion is that it is not the future where oxygen is depleted, but in the present air-sucking deathfuckplex of precariat life in ~~late capitalism~~ this new gilded age). Ironically, through their reliance on technology and science, both characters face a similar crisis where they are transported into a nether world beyond conceptual space and time. Scott, the guy who wears the ant man suit, in order to save his daughter (and the world), is forced to shrink to the size of a subatomic being inside a quantum world. In the 2014 film *Interstellar* directed by Christopher Nolan, the protagonist Cooper, played by Matthew McConaughey, enters a tesseract after jettisoning himself and his robot friend into a wormhole. It is there where 5th dimensional beings allow him to communicate with his daughter in the form of a ghost who relays a message through the repeating tick of the broken hand of a wristwatch. Over the course of what we can assume to be many decades, Cooper's daughter cracks the message and unlocks the scientific theorem for space-time travel that allows her to rescue her dad. Scott (Ant-Man), in order to beat his nemesis Yellow Jacket, shrinks to the sub-atomic world (a place which bears an uncanny resemblance to the CGI void in *Interstellar*). Floating in the ether, in a moment of Harry Potter magic wand flying dragon bullshit, Scott has a stroke of genius and uses an enlargement disc (WTF?) to restore himself back to normal human size. In both cases, it is both Cooper and Scott's fatherly love (veiled within the blurry language of pseudo-science fiction/comic-book arithmetic) which is the tool they use to cheat time, space, physics and their bleak destinies. However, was their destiny so bad? Is the 5th dimension, the abyss, something we must avoid?

When Heidegger claimed that thinking lies closer to poetry than science by 'an abyss of essence', by trying to represent the repressed, condemned, latent material that exists outside our waking, manifest reality, we might as well say he is describing the subatomic quantum world of *Ant-Man* or the 5th-dimensional world of *Interstellar*. With neither beginning nor end, suspended in a blurry world filled with unrecognizable shapes and concepts, a chaos to the naked eye, poetry peels back the illusion that language, and thus thinking, is immaterial. This is why Heidegger, in a draft inspired by Rilke, talked about the draft of poetic thinking as that which "withdraws from us, draws us along in its very withdrawal." Poetic language writes not from the known, but peels back layers of what is known, revealing that which you find

the most unthinkable, alienating what you find the most intimate (language itself). Hence the idea that poetry reveals. And science discovers. Fed-ex delivers. Music carries us away.

But what about a poetry that doesn't work like poetry. I mean a poetry of denial or refusal? In the age of the internet, like Baudrillard's hyper-real, the poet is caught within either the aesthetic desire to transcend perceived reality or to become the site for the disclosure of truth, but because the real is now interwoven with the virtual, both romantic and aesthetic traditions seem harder to pull off. Hence all the self-reflexivity of postmodern poetics, the questioning of what a poem is, what a poem does, etc… So, if traditional poetries of the past were marked by transcendental moments based on a supposed authentic or genuine reality, do "blank affect" poetries communicate the desire to experience a traditional transcendental experience in a virtualized world where that experience is no longer possible? Is there not something romantic about that kind of nostalgia? The trajectory, in this sense, is the same for both blank affect poems and poems of affect. They work in different ways, but the best of both kinds of poetry reveal that even in a moment of verisimilitude, of revelation, when one foot of the poem steps from the void past a threshold, it reveals the nothing that exists on the other side of contemporary life. As Kim Yi-Deum (who is not a blank affect poet) writes in a poem from her latest book *Hysteria*, " For a while beside the glass jar filled with anise candy / Looking at the show window, I am single layered. / There is no me inside me.[iii]" With no reality to transcend, the poetic exhibits a kind of nostalgia for nostalgia, a desire for genuine desire. Beyond objectification and performance is a transcendental "lack", an absence which is the image of thought. But how is this different from philosophy?

We must remember that it was Plato that wanted to expel all the poets from the polis. This is because poiesis reminds people of the materiality of language, and it is hard to do the thinking when annoying poets grab the thoughts and start beating each other in the head with them. However, through Freudian denial, it is this Platonic gesture of exclusion that is proof that poetry and philosophy are always mixed. When poets beat themselves up with the thoughts, that doesn't mean there isn't thinking, it just means it is not always goal oriented. However, this doesn't resolve the fact that the two are always separated, that poiesis (the celebration of being (in place)) and dianoia (the path of argument (moving toward a goal) are seemingly at odds with one another.

Unlike Plato, who refuses poetry, or Heidegger who believes poetry is like the verisimilitude of a truth found in nature, Alain Badiou thinks of philosophy and poetry as being separate, but always intertwined. Poetry, for Badiou, is the site for a production of truths, through a deposition where it resists narrative and image, resists making sense through meaning, and thus invites interpretation. This "deposition operates through the de-aesthetization of the poem, the separation between the presence of the idea, which the poem captures, and the pathos of bodily affection which the poem discards… what is renounced … is all that seems to concern the poem's relationship to language"[iv]. A poetry that does this, which discards pathos

(affect) and turns toward logos (logic) does not work like a key to meaning, but rather like an operation for truth. It is a poetics of rationality, and like Badiou's truth, it is undecidable, indiscernable, generic, unnameable, numerous. Gabbert's *The Self Unstable* is not like "My life" (Hejinian) but a book that is more like "a life".

Language poetry like Hejinian's, played with language to instruct their audience to break out of familiar, patriarchal, traditional, and historical ways of reading. However disjointed the language, the speaker itself seemed to be coming from a place of authenticity, from a place of stability. Even in conceptual poetics, behind the work was always the hero who puts restraints on the language, embarks on the journey of the de-stabilizing project. Here there is no break with the grammatical or semantic structure of language. This is why *The Self Unstable* is an example par-excellence of so much so-called "blank affect" poetry: it denies pathos, the lyric, imagery, and traditional poetic devices without engaging in a conceptualist project. In this sense, it is like the opposite of the new sentence. It is an impersonal, anti-lyrical "artistic configuration" which creates the emergence of the event for the production of truths. It is a poetry written on the plane of immanence. Not a project, but an image of thought.

Like Cooper in *Interstellar*, Gabbert's poems are messages from the abyss that she is there, but unlike Cooper's message, these are not distress signals. The fear of the abyss is the masculine anxiety of surrendering a phallic order of knowledge (tradition) to a vaginal world (the abyss is symbolized in both *Ant-Man* and *Interstellar* as a hole (read vagina) that one falls into and immediately wants to get out). Tradition will make us fear the abyss, just like in the movies how Scott and Cooper fear being stuck outside of time, lost in space. However neither of them was really lost. Like a poem they were returned. Returned to the state of an infant inside the womb.

Elisa Gabbert

From *The Self Unstable* (Courtesy of [Black Ocean](#))
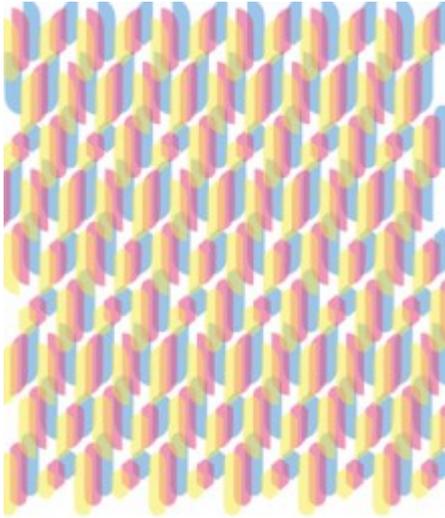
THE SELF UNSTABLE

ELISA GABBERT

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Memory comes first, then identity shortly after, at age 7 or
8. I wanted to be pretty, and now I am. Did wishing make
it so? That I am *I* is less shocking than its opposite, that
you are *you*. One day in my 20s, sitting in a cold car, I
realized the self is universal, there is only one *I*—again, the
thought arrives, but no longer seems profound.

*

Kittens are cuter than babies, an indication that they're
using us for propagation at an advanced level. Our
enemies are better for our art than our friends. Forgive me
if I fabricate tension. Forgive me if I'm only capable of
incomplete and indirect apologies. This is a negotiation,
but I've got the weaponry.

*

Don't just be yourself—build your personal brand. The self
is unstable. It might not be found by the search engines.
It might be rejected. The self regenerates every five or six
days. A consistent brand, a coherent self. Consider the
interface, testing for usability. Even crows have a sense of
self, and the accompanying self-esteem, self-loathing. The
crow is self-reflexive, self-defeating. How dejected is the
crow.

*

Animals can think about thinking, a grand failure of
evolution. The best experiences involve no thinking at all,
much less self-reference, much less an endless/strange
loop. Whatever you do, don't start thinking about

thinking.

*

Crows can tell one human from another, but we are
unable to distinguish among various crows. This is
mischaracterized as a paradox. Humans may be racist, but
crows can't read, and robots can't really dance. All species
evolve toward overspecialization. If you find anything other
than food or sex interesting, it's signaling.

*

Satori is the first step toward "seeing your self-nature." This
probably involves avoiding mirrors. I met a woman who is
writing a novel about goodness. I told myself, "Be thankful
for your enemies; they make you more yourself." I know
nothing about Buddhism. I believe I am good. To have
enemies is a coming of age. Do I want to be loved or
misunderstood?

*

Whether humans or dolphins are more intelligent is
academic. The common gray squirrel and zebra mussels
are winning. Technology has advanced to the point that
our generation could theoretically live indefinitely. This
too is academic—asteroids, the switching of the poles, zebra
mussels in the pipes. The technology will be destroyed.

Interview:

JL: A few years ago, with Mike Young, you put
together a compendium of 50 craft moves in contemporary poetry for HTMLGIANT
(in the better days of HTMLGIANT). When I first read it, I thought it was

genius, and still to this day I use it with students when I teach workshops. Anyway, it takes a lot of reading and a lot of study to begin to recognize and identify craft techniques. How did you originally become a student of poetry? Were there any poets in particular or poems that you remember pulling you closer to the dark side?

EG: Thank you Jake! I love hearing from people who use that list as a teaching tool. Probably the first poet I loved, as a child, was Shel Silverstein. Are his books translated into Korean? I was always able to write verse in perfect rhyme and meter, which must have come from reading Shel Silverstein and Dr. Seuss and nursery rhymes and such. I kept reading poetry as I got older, but I don't think I ever truly connected with a poet until I discovered Anne Sexton when I was 15 or so. I had tried reading Plath first, and liked her, but her poems are so chilly, and Sexton's are so *hot*. I don't just mean that they're sexy, but that the emotions are so much closer to the surface. They're less controlled. I wouldn't still name her as a favorite, but it was very important for me to read her when I did. Probably the next poet to completely blow my mind was Anne Carson, who I read (and saw read) in college.

JL: They do have Shel Silverstein in Korean! They have the giving tree! I looked it up. Although I don't know how it would translate. It would be very hard to capture the magic I think. But maybe not?

In *The Night Sky,* Ann Lauterbach talks about getting paid for poetry as the first time she really felt about herself as a poet. For you, when was the first time you felt like you were a poet?

EG: I think I always felt like a poet, but there was a definite legitimizing effect of publishing my first chapbook. Having an object in print to hold when I did readings, something with value to sell (even if I didn't really make any money) made it feel more "official." Having a full-length book doubled it again, and a second book, etc. I experience poethood more as a series of levels than a binary, apparently.

JL: I like this idea. Like being nominated for a major prize is like receiving a brown belt. It is interesting. I also like it when critics say things like "This is Poet X at the height of their powers." Reading things like that makes me think of poets as a type of Jedi warrior. Or maybe is it that all Jedi warriors want to be poets?

When you say that you always felt like a poet, just from reading your columns you seem to have a very concrete sense of the role the poet plays in society. Recently, an article you wrote about gender representation caused a big storm. Right now there seems to be an identity politics war going on in the American poetry scene, and I think that may or may not be part of the same war going in society. I was talking to my Korean poet friend, Kim Kyung Ju, about the role of the poet in society the other day. I mean there seem to be people like Franz Wright or Louise Gluck, for instance, who can just kind of go on writing poems like the world never changes. Then there are people like Claudia Rankine or, even I daresay, Vanessa Place, who put contemporary political issues at the center of their work. And maybe now, because of the

rise of the MFA program, there is real money and real power at play, so the stakes are higher… and the internet gives everyone a voice, even the marginalized, unpublished MFA student. In some ways I feel like what is going on is good (calling out Vanessa Place, Kenny G), and on other days I feel like there might be a witch hunt thing going on (Bruce Covey rape accusation). Concerning society, what do you think the poet's role is/ought to be?

EG: I'm not sure I think the poet has any particular role in society, or any obligation to effect some kind of palpable social or political change in the world. Politics matter to me, personally, so that bleeds out into everything I do — what I talk about both offline and online, and what I read and write. But I don't think it's *necessary* to be overtly political as a poet or any kind of artist. If you're making poetry that has clear political content but it's completely boring and obvious and not thought-provoking, I don't see any value in that; you could do something in politics as a career and likely make more of a difference.

Overall, I'm excited by all the anger I see about race and gender every day now. It feels tied in with some clear victories — the Supreme Court decision on gay marriage, getting the conservative flag taken down. There's a sense of "finally getting through" in the moment. As for the witch hunts, that feels like a separate issue to me — the social shaming/mob justice/vengeful righteousness thing that happens is not at all unique to the left or "identity politics." It can start from anywhere.

JL: In terms of form, your first book seems move inward, toward the personal, whereas your second book projects outward and is really philosophical. You also switch from a more traditional lyric form to the lyric essay. How did you and your work evolve and change? How did you end up deciding to use the lyric essay for the second book?

EG: It was almost by necessity. I had started a job as a copywriter, and writing prose all day for work made it very difficult to code-switch, as it were, back into lines. It was like I just stopped thinking in poetry and started thinking in sentences. Rather than not write, I decided to devise a form that would allow me to arrange sentences into interesting short pieces. I was inspired by a few works of prose by poets that I admired (Maggie Nelson, Sampson Starkweather, Julia Story). I think the shift from poetry to prose ended up changing the content of the work too, but I also see the shift from more interior/personal to more philosophical as a result of getting older. I wrote my first book in my mid-twenties, when I was going through some very intense emotional, identity-shaking stuff. Despite the word "unstable" appearing in the title of the second book, my life had certainly gotten more stable. Perhaps that allowed for a level of philosophical distance.

JL: I follow your twitter feed from the Spork Press account (I don't have a personal account). Recently you had some posts about getting rejected like "After 10+ years in this game, I've earned nothing if not the right to be bitchy about rejections, who's with me!" First of all, I'd like to say that I'm with you. Secondly, there is a lot of hyperbole and parody and mediocrity

in publishing. There are also a lot of fantastic things going on in America, notably with small presses not affiliated with universities (for instance Birds and Black Ocean). As someone who is now established and has a following and popularity within the poetry landscape, are there some kind of institutional questions we have to ask about the production of poetry? I mean out of all the people I've interviewed for this series, like Sampson Starkweather and Noah Cicero and Don Mee Choi, and even Richard Siken, the only person I think who has a job related to poetry is Matthew Dickman. Considering, in my opinion, the 10 writers I've interviewed are 10 of the most exciting voices in poetry today, with multiple books, why is only 1 getting any kind of substantial amount of money from poetry. The MFA/creative writing market is booming right? Also, why are many of them, despite being established and important voices, still faced with rejection?

EG: I think with journals and lit mags, editors are just inundated with such huge numbers of submissions, plenty of good stuff gets rejected. What is weird to me is that so often the stuff that does get published is totally bland and mediocre. This might be the result of multiple editors needing to agree on what they accept. If there's a poem that one editor loves but another editor hates, it gets thrown out, and possibly replaced with a poem they both just think is OK. Then you end up with a journal full of just OK poems. I imagine book contests work the same way, since there is usually a panel of readers before finalists get to the judge. Further, when you're reading full-length manuscripts, you're almost looking for "mistakes," so you have an excuse to stop reading. Again, it's a way for bland manuscripts that don't take many risks to "rise to the top." Like, "This book isn't mind-blowing but at least it isn't egregiously wrong and won't offend anyone."

Academia is kind of a separate issue. I know that, because I have a corporate, non-academic, non-poetry-related job, I highly value being able to work at my own pace, publish wherever I want, and not have to worry about what my department thinks. I don't have to consider the political implications of my every move in the poetry world. Some of the independent small presses publishing really exciting work may not carry as much weight with university English departments. I know they often want faculty to be publishing with established university presses if not major New York presses. So there's just friction happening at a lot of levels.

JL: A lot of your new book acknowledges that growing older means accepting things like conflict, lines like "Be thankful for your enemies; they make you more yourself"… "To have enemies is a coming of age." But also, simultaneously, a lot of paradox. "I don't want kids, but there's nothing else to do." "I'd rather make the wrong choice than make the right one and not know it." I think a moment which captures the tension that a lot of the book is wrapped in is when Brandon Shimoda appears in a poem, throws his ice cream cone in the trash, and says "this is boring." A lot of the book wrestles with forces of alienation that are a result of existential crises. Turning thirty. The (endless) war. News. Celebrity. Death of the natural world. Death of narrative. Anyway, the list is long. *The Self Unstable,* tonally and also in content reflects the kind of drawn-out misery of the decline of American capitalism/empire/civilization. Like all our

society's dreams were dead before we were even born. Anyway, regarding our conversation of politics earlier, your second book, at least to me, really captures the generational apathy/discontent of living in 21st century America. Maybe that could also be a part of getting older, but do you think it's something you wanted to capture when writing this book? Or do you think it just happened subconsciously?

EG: I think it was subconscious. I'm an atheist, and I don't have kids, and every now and then I get this sudden feeling of pointlessness. An unmooring — I literally think, Wait, what is the point of all this? Luckily, it passes. There is no point to life but to live it: be happy sometimes and sad other times. Then die.

JL: I find that the process of reading *The Self Unstable* is a lot like reading Joe Wenderoth's "Letter's to Wendy's" in that each poem is like a vignette, but each vignette is connected with the others. I have to put the book down for awhile in order to process some of the poems. I wonder, did you write each section separately or in batches? Or did you write long poems and then separate them later?

EG: I wrote, at most, one of the pieces at a time. Sometimes I only wrote one or a few sentences, and then strung the little half-poems together later on. It was slow going, though I did an exercise one month where I tried to write one every day. In the end, I wanted it to be the kind of book you could either read front to back all at once, or just pick up and read one or two starting anywhere, like a bathroom book, and have it function either way.

JL: The last question is, what's the best or most surprising or gratifying thing that has happened to you as a result of poetry?

EG: There's not one particular moment that stands out. But whenever I meet someone and they tell me they have read and love my work, that's when I feel most grateful/gratified. I will always be surprised when someone has heard of me.
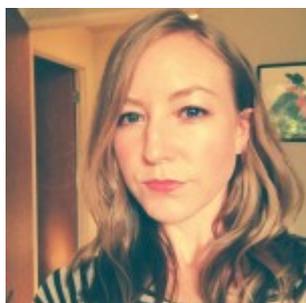
Elisa Gabbert is the author of *The Self Unstable* and *The French Exit*. *L'Heure Bleue, or The Judy Poems* is forthcoming in 2016 from Black Ocean. Recent poems and essays have appeared in *Jubilat, Harvard Review, Threepenny Review, The Smart Set, The Butter*, *Catapult,* and *Electric Literature*. She lives in Denver.

[i] P.83, Mayers, Tim. *(Re)Writing Craft: Composition, Creative Writing, and the Future of English Studies*. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh, 2005. Print.

[ii] Thompson, Peter, and Slavoj Žizěk. *The Privatization of Hope: Ernst Bloch and the Future of Utopia*. Print.

[iii] My translation

[iv] Hallward, Peter. *Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy*. London: Continuum, 2004. Print.