

#RECURRENT ROUNDTABLE: A Conversation w/ Joe Milazzo, Jason Snyder & Jordan Okumura

written by Entropy | March 7, 2016



#RECURRENT is a series that seeks to reconstruct, reimagine, and expand on existing narrative spaces through the publication of innovative novels that both carry on the legacy of the novel as an important, historical & unique literary structure, and also reimagine the novel as an interface that continues to transform and stretch the limits of language and narrative.

This roundtable brings 3 authors into conversation with each other: **Joe Milazzo**, author of [Crepuscule W/ Nellie](#) (Jaded Ibis Press, 2014), **Jason Snyder**, author of [Family Album](#) (Jaded Ibis Press, 2015), and **Jordan Okumura**, author of [Gaijin](#) (Civil Coping Mechanisms, forthcoming 2016).

How do you see your own book in relation to the series title #RECURRENT? How does your book imagine the traditional form of the novel and also reimagine it?

JOE MILAZZO: *Crepuscule W/ Nellie* is explicitly engaged with literary Modernism and early Post-Modernism—in the latter case, the French *nouveau roman*. If I read my own book with as much disinterest as I can muster, I also perceive it as being engaged with notions of the returned repressed. The Modernist aesthetic, now reduced to a style, yes. But also the characters in the novel. Nellie and The Baroness are anti-M. Bovarys, in a sense. They both refuse to be read, much less to read themselves, as social metonyms (more properly, synecdoche). For isn't this one of the dirty secrets of the novel here in the West? That the feminine has routinely served as both the image of and receptacle for our collective anxiety about how culture, while our invention, always exceeds our control?

What I mean to highlight here is how the male protagonist in the novel has been, even at his most abject and absurd, just that, a figure in complete possession of his desires. And whose fate is this protagonist's to materialize via the resolution of his conflicts? Women, even when at the

center of the novel, have not typically exercised such freedom to want. Which is not to say that I view *Crepuscule W/ Nellie* as a corrective. However, in making this story occur again, and in an expressly novelistic way (understanding here the novel's long and complicated entanglement with notions of the documentary), I hoped I might be able to explore problems of agency without "interrogating" or "critiquing" it. As I may have written elsewhere: to effect a re-imagining of the present via the forging of a past that never was but could have been.

We do absolutely read novels for their ability to entertain us. But, whether we acknowledge as much or not, we have also been conditioned to look to the novel as a kind of diagnostic tool. The present is a chronological phenomenon history cannot yet narrativize. But we do expect that fiction can represent our sense of "history as it is happening" and in such a way as to reveal experiential truths. This being another way of saying that we expect a kind of transcendence from the novel... well, at least Authors-with-a-capital-A (most of them male, by the way) make bank by writing op-eds about how this is what the novel can and should do. What is perhaps most recurrent about *Crepuscule W/ Nellie* is how it accepts the inevitable failure of such designs. How it manages to make that failure necessary for the novel reaching any sort of conclusion whatsoever.

JORDAN OKUMURA: *Gaijin* is a difficult narrative to talk about. In part, it is its own telling. I find it easier to speak near-to this work than directly about the work. *Gaijin* is an attempt to uncover a language that could speak the story of a daughter, of the pull between skinnames or races, of the violent myths that led the narrator to water. A daughter's quest to unveil this language that she has longed for since birth. The story began as a deep bone ache in the archaeology of a family's story. When she was born, she already had been threaded into a fabric of myths, of the momentum of the stories that began before her. I needed to find a way to write the body without disappearing, without the body becoming un-daughter.

For me, I was searching for that point of rupture, when the die was cast. The story became tongue and breath. It is here I reimagine the marrow of her story. Where she began so long ago. This excavation.

Traditional narrative form could not tell this story. Time is different in *Gaijin*, space is experienced in different ways, and at different distances. Sometimes on the skin, within the movement of water, or in the space of uncovering the language itself. I feel that the blending and the blurring of lines, of distinction, are more a becoming, born out of stillness.

JASON SNYDER: *Family Album* does, in its way, depict and deconstruct the tropes of the coming-of-age novel, in particular those in which dysfunctional familial dynamics are central to the young protagonist's emerging awareness of the greater world. But in centering on a 12-year-old as he navigates his family's decision to adopt a second child, the narrative is shifted to a stage of maturation necessarily antecedent to that of a *Bildungsroman*, in effect prefiguring its possibility. So, in a way, *Family Album* depicts more the potential development of the faculties necessary to embark on a coming-of-age narrative, and how that development may be subverted by a kind of

parental training that is aimed at implicating and indoctrinating the son into the pathologies of the family. This makes it less a book of revelation, reconciliation, or redemption – as many traditional novels about familial dysfunction are – and more about Matthew’s nascent awareness of himself as the performance of being a son in light of pathological narratives being imposed upon him, and the processes by which he processes this inscription.

This act of processing is likely the site of the book’s sense of recursion. The writing of the book, which took a long time in large part due its need to train me how to embody the positions necessary to perform the act of writing it, dealt predominantly with navigating the narrative residue of coinciding the performance of evoking or creating a narrative with the performance of interpreting it from a perspective inside the narrative. This too may inflect the book toward the kind of recurrence the #RECURRENT series seeks.

What does “experimental” mean to you in the context of the contemporary novel?

JM: I’m not sure, honestly. I fear that “experimental” has itself calcified into a genre. Knee-jerk (so-called) transgressive content; a prose style that, on one level, elevates the discontinuous and, one the other, bends yet dare not break classic Hemingway-Carver notions of the spare, well-crafted sentence; separation of the dramatic unities from affective “pay-offs”; an unquestioning fealty to omniscience, even in narratives which are ostensibly limited in their point-of-view: these all seem to me to be conventions of this genre. The larger question is how and why these conventions have arisen. My issue with them as conventions is that they feel reactive. Whether consciously or not, when I encounter these tropes in contemporary fiction that presents itself as experimental, I can’t help but feel the assertion of an authorial singularity, an authority that would insist on the oppositional (as in, resisting / putting up resistance) quality of the present novelistic project. To me, the experimental is instead concerned with plurality and the construction–however makeshift–of alternatives. Alternatives to what? To the relationships that have traditionally been the concern of long-form narrative: how human beings relate to time and all that the passage of time entails (e.g., history); how human beings relate to all that is not human; how human beings relate to their own subjectivity; and how human beings relate to one another. What is possible within the scope of these relationships, and how can an invented story help us to understand what consequences may result from a realization of these possibilities? I stand with Ursula K. LeGuin on this front; given the state of our world, and our humanity, we are rather desperately in need of such alternatives. I suppose, then, that I’m advocating for a rather philosophical approach to experimentation in fiction, something much more indebted to possible-world theory than any given artistic or explicitly literary tradition.

JO: I don’t want to say that traditional voices, or experimental, have or have not lead me here. Or beyond. Or where I may fall within tradition. All I know for sure is that I found a genealogy, an echo, in the spaces created by certain writers. Carole Maso. Helene Cixous. Doug Rice. Clarice Lispector. And many more bone writers. Each led me to another sound, another touch, that felt like home. Just the whisper of a story I could tell. Finding a way to

speak to ghosts, beyond the abrasion. I read alongside them until I began writing my own words within their pages. Their deep beginnings.

That narrative line that traditional sentences experience, fail the narrator and her desires. This breath and movement that I find in these works are more aligned with Lispector, Maso, and Cixous. All of their sentences live differently. Break and bend and breathe. Exceeding that which a sentence can contain.

I also want to say that I wrote with a level of honesty that terrified me. I did not only watch the wound open, I dug into it. Not an honesty that is the recording of facts, but the honesty of the body as paper, as voice, as the dream. Bloodletting. I spilled all the nakedness I could into this manuscript. It was the ache of the body writing itself toward solace that scared me the most. I continue to write toward solace. Will always be writing toward.

JS: At its best, I think the term *experimental* may signal that a given novel is a test of the limits of what we know to be fiction, and not just in terms of the book as presence, but in the act of its writing, and its reading. That the book may evoke and even embody a certain set of questions regarding what is possible in the guise of fiction, and what this possibility and its construction and reconstruction through reading marks in us. Or that a given novel is in some way extant "proof" of a network of ideas in the form of a text, one that remains exploratory even in its presence – i.e., in the realm of the experiment rather than the conclusion – because that network of ideas is ultimately unrealizable by its nature, leaving the book to probe the texture of the act of writing, its hidden structures, and expose this through its reading. At its worst, the term *experimental* is probably deprecatory, even pejorative – "no need to consider this; just tinkering here!" – and in a way that circumscribes its reception with a preemptive barricade that cloisters the work as some kind of "subcultural" artifact, one that has no business entering the cultural conversation at large.

Lately I have been thinking about writing in terms of those unsettling moments when you are made simultaneously aware of a sensation or action and your capacity-to-sense or your capacity-to-act. Like when you are a little bit stoned, and cold, and have that sudden, overwhelming, paranoid awareness of your coldness as something isolated and profound. It is almost like extreme presence inflected by a kind of pre-history of pure potential. This is what I think about the kind of writing that may be labeled *experimental*, even retroactively so, that stirs me. It is a kind of writing in which the various and often overlapping processes and faculties involved in writing reveal themselves alongside or within the act of writing, often at the moment of writing itself. In which this act becomes momentarily saturated with the disorienting awareness of the capacity-to-write, influencing the outcome of the writing in a way that encodes this saturating awareness and ghosts it in the product of this process, allowing its reading to no longer be something prescribed but an opportunity to surface the structure and texture of what has been written through interpretation and reconstruction that is itself often saturated with an unsettling awareness of the capacity-to-interpret and the capacity-to-reconstruct.

All of your novels are debut novels. Can you talk about your experience in writing this particular work and the process of publishing it?

JM: For a variety of reasons, *Crepuscule W/ Nellie* may very well end up being both the first and last novel I ever publish. I can live with that accomplishment.

It took forever to compose *Crepuscule W/ Nellie*. Basically, I had to grow up and grow out of my ambitions in order to open myself to what Nellie, The Baroness, John, Neenah, Frank et al. had to tell me. Whatever the novel achieves I owe 100% to listening.

That *Crepuscule W/ Nellie* exists in the world (as opposed to “merely” within my imagination) and might participate in conversations regarding race, representation, the imagination, aesthetics, etc. is to me a constant source of wonder. I never thought this novel would be published. Until Jaded Ibis expressed an interest in it, I had given up on the manuscript ever becoming a book. In my opinion, the many agents and editors who rejected *Crepuscule W/ Nellie* could not look past two perceived issues: 1) jazz = aging, shrinking niche audience (to quote Bud Grossman from the Coen Brothers’ *Inside Llyewn Davis*: “I don’t see a lot of money here.”); 2) why is this white guy writing about black lives? (I’ve had ostensible readers express similar / related reservations to me since the book’s publication.) Sure, maybe I should have attempted a novel more grounded in my own personal experiences; maybe I should have written what I know. But that was never a choice that my own experience as a reader and a (perpetual) student of The Novel ever really offered me. And so I made the writerly choices that I did, and surrendered to both the faith and the doubt that those choices would in turn make the most virtue out of my interests, proclivities and artistic values.

I have much more to say on this matter in the novel’s “Afterword,” one my editor pressed me to write. I’m glad and grateful that she made me embrace my discomfort the way she did, for, the more the book embarrasses the Author in me, the better novel it becomes.

JO: *Gaijin* started as a single line I wrote in a creative writing workshop with Doug Rice at CSUS. “We are stones in each other’s shoes, Grandpa.” One of those lines that beads like sweat, barely there. You can only feel the weather changing, the barometer fluctuating. It began to bleed and thicken and dig, and I found I couldn’t help but write it, again and again until the line became a story, until I had rubbed the skin raw with it. I believe the only way I could have written *Gaijin*, was as if no one was ever going to read the story.

The process of getting *Gaijin* published was frustrating. The manuscript in the form that it was at that time was conditionally accepted under a press that kept me in a stasis for at least a couple years. When it finally came to the point where I was given the revisions to move the manuscript forward, I was asked to inject it with genre, to manipulate the bones. To reimagine the organic nature of the story, to change the craft. It was heartbreaking. I couldn’t imagine changing this book that way. It would have changed me. It would not have been my story. I pulled the book.

Being brought into the fold of this press, a group that truly cares about the novel and the writer, was a gift. Is a gift. I was being read by writers that felt like kin, write beautiful offerings of light. Since this is my first book, I don't know how rare that process is. But, Janice Lee and Laura Vena were as protective and genuine as I could have hoped editors would be.

Revising the novel was the hardest part. Opening and closing the sutures, letting the bone touch air. Janice and Laura allowed all this wonder and disruption within my revisions. I could not have asked for a more loving process.

JS: *Family Album* began with a simple premise: To write toward one of the more emotionally complex and profound moments I can remember experiencing as a child. At first, the aim had been simply to render this moment, to convey its feeling and complexity. Several years into the book training me how to write it, the aim shifted from rendering it to rendering its due. I can only say this now, though, with hindsight. At the time, the book was a wound I had little choice but to live inside.

From that first inkling to the book's acceptance for publication at Jaded Ibis spanned about sixteen years, the last two to three of which with the completed manuscript in hand. I had spent thirteen or so years writing the book, essentially in the dark, with just one or two people having read maybe half of what the book would eventually become. So for me, the process of finding a publisher carried with it an oftentimes paralyzing confrontation with publication's essential task: to make a book public. Faced with this rather basic fact, I became that much more acquainted with a certain kind of ambivalence I often feel running through my core, and it made even the act of submitting the manuscript borderline unbearable – like a secret act some hidden part of myself had to steal away to do at a weak moment along the edges of my day. Ultimately, I'm grateful for this self-transgression, and very grateful to Janice Lee for finding a home for *Family Album* with her #RECURRENT series, and for helping *Family Album* live a new life, outside myself.

JOE MILAZZO: Jordan's response to this last question prompts me to ask: what was the compositional seed or kernel of your novel? Looking back on your book now that it has been completed (or, after Valery, sufficiently abandoned), how do you see the entire structure of novel contained within that primary expression?

JM: My grandparents' piano, itself more a piece of furniture than a musical instrument, is largely responsible for *Crepuscule W/ Nellie*. That is, the novel itself sprang from a desire to render that object phenomenologically, although I did not know enough to contextualize my descriptions of the piano's dimensions, finish, action, (de)tuning, history and associations in those terms then. But was there a way to play that piano via language? (I have no pianistic abilities of my own.) By virtue of being the first piano I remember encountering, my grandparents' upright and its dark Southern desuetude is every piano I ever encounter. It's the sound, if not the mass, I

imagine lived only for the length of certain countless recordings—the trace of a piano whose life lasted no longer than the time it takes to make a discographical entry—and the piano that, in one of my many abandoned short stories, plays an impossibly ravishing progression of chords as it plummets from the roof of an apartment building to the deserted pavement below. It's also the infamous urine-saturated Five Spot piano that Cecil Taylor lamented having to play... but on which Thelonious Monk made some of his most joyous music, both in the company of John Coltrane and, later (for Riverside Records), Johnny Griffin, Ahmed Abdul-Malik and Roy Haynes. But it is not, ultimately, the piano in *Crepuscle W/ Nellie*: the piano at which Nellie herself stands and ruminates. Rather, that piano, as I read it, is the one my mother always wished she could have anchored in our own listing, cramped living room. I tried to study that piano, a true ghost, as closely as I could my grandparents' piano. And I could never have imagined that "family piano" without my grandparents' piano, itself not-so mute testimony of how familial orbits change as children grow up and establish the patterns for their own homes elsewhere. Looking back, I realize that, through no virtue of my notes themselves, I never really had to estrange myself from that piano. That piano was always welcomingly eerie, in the way that all the stories of the immediate family that existed before your own arrival in the world are. And I never had to worry whether that piano's resonances might fade into cliché—cliché being, after all, ultimately a matter of some privacy.

JO: I'd like to be able to say that there is a seed, an origin, a root, that somehow allowed this story to evolve. But I think the only honest thing that I can say is that the text has always been a flicker of light, an excavation, always beginning. The text has been a mining, toward a deeper language for both myself as a writer and for the narrator. In a way the writing felt like a return, to the body, skin, blood, and bone, tethered inside and around trauma. What it means to live inside a dream where you never see your own reflection. It still feels that way. There was a story somewhere in my writing that had a gravity and I did my best to move towards it, with honesty and with care. Earlier, I mentioned that the novel began as a single line, "We are stones in each other's shoes, Grandpa." I suppose that this is where the book began to surface in language and image, where the story became alive on the page. Where the book became more than just a body song, but a vein outside the body. That such a simple line could bleed a book, could begin to unearth toward beauty and toward rupture. The narrator could not have one without the other. How do you write about pain and desire, the family myth, as well as generational and personal loss? How do you bring the body back? This manuscript still lives, changes, and terrifies me when I hold it – in the ladybug that always has one wing untucked, in the hand of a stranger on the narrator's back, in her father's face as he ages into her grandfather. The writing for me was a haunting, but became a home inside of the language that I found there.

JS: What triggered my initial interest in pursuing *Family Album*, as I mentioned, was the memory of a certain moment in my childhood, or more specifically the surfacing of an emotional texture that overwhelmed me at a particular moment in my young life that, in being able to clearly revisit this texture in memory many years later, surely, in some way, has marked me.

Emotions can be a kind of concatenation of seemingly unconnected perceptions and responses to events, as well as an almost illegible site for the stirring of hidden and often conflicting systems of meaning. So my writing toward this moment, as I came to realize many years into the act of doing so, became both the breaking down of this emotional texture, in hopes of teasing out some of the seemingly unconnected perceptions and responses to events woven into it, and the building up of a system, in writing, for exploring the process of concatenation by which emotional texture may be made – the ways in which one might process what takes place around them and within them at an age when self-consciousness begins to play a significant role in how they process what happens to them in their lives. In other words, writing as a kind of working toward the “compositional seed” in hopes of finding, and ultimately conveying, its kernel. So, as I see it, the structure of *Family Album* isn't so much contained within that initial seed; it's more the product of the process of writing, fiction's labor, that took place in and toward the aftermath of inspiration.



Joe Milazzo is a writer, editor, educator and designer. His writings on music and experimental sound practice have appeared in *Copper Press*, *Paris Transatlantic Magazine*, *One Final Note* and *Bagatellen*, the latter for which he served as Editor-In-Chief. Milazzo's literary criticism has been published in *Electronic Book Review*, *The Dallas Morning News*, *The Collagist*, and *HTMLGIANT*. His fiction and poetry appears in *Drunken Boat*, *Black Clock*, *Antennae*, *Super Arrow*, *H_NGM_N*, *kill author*, *Exits Are*, the anthology *Dirty : Dirty* (Jaded Ibis Press), and elsewhere.



Jason Snyder is the founding editor of *Sidebrow Books*. His fiction has appeared in *New York Tyrant*, *Sleepingfish*, *American Letters & Commentary*, and *Harp & Altar*, among other publications. He lives in Portland with his wife and twins. *Family Album* is his first novel.'



Jordan Okumura currently lives in Sacramento, California where she supports her writing habit working for two trade news publications in the fresh produce industry. She is a graduate of California State University, Sacramento where she studied English and Creative Writing. Jordan has been published in journals that include *Gargoyle* and *DIRTY:DIRTY* by Jaded Ibis Press.