



The Responsibility of Writing

Michael J. Shapiro and Brad Evans in conversation

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ABSTRACT

Mike Shapiro: My review of your *How Black was My Valley* for the journal *American Book Review* has left me with issues and questions I was only able to introduce given the journal's 1500-word mandate. Because the diverse narrative threads in the book have captured my attention, I want to initiate an essay-length conversation that will bring out aspects of the book's form in order to give it the critical attention it deserves. Your stunning introductory paragraph sets a tone – literally I said in my review – because “black” is the book's central tonic in a text in which a literary “tonality” provides the books structural coherence.

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I want to begin by quoting the paragraph and then situate it by quoting work in which I explicitly apply musical tonality to literary texts, Thomas Mann's four-part *Joseph* novel and his *Dr. Faustus* in order to initiate our conversation.

How Black Was My Valley's opening passage:

Black is the colour of the story of my life. Looking back,
I now see it has worn me far more than I wore it. It is a
melancholic bind holding forgotten communities
together. It is the open wound — a devastating loss of innocence
still cutting deep in these long-abandoned lands. Black is Home.
The colour of my childhood. Deadly poor, yet still full of
memories of love. Black is the tone of this tremendous fiery
earth, which was once sung by choirs of promise who previously
gave hallowed voice to this darkened world. Black is the suffering
of my forebears and neighbours, too many lives taken too soon.
Black is the cavernous depths now flooded by primordial waters.
An infernal abyss, which still proved better than nothing at all.
Black is the colour of an ecology of suffering, where nature has
reclaimed what life never could. Black is the feeling of an
atmosphere of misery, of dark forebodings and a darker comedy,
laughing out of scorched forests unto the final, the last,
suffocating breath. Black is the abiding memory of a permanent
depression, as certain as the shadows that set over these fated
lands. Black is the colour of the faces of ghosts, whose ancestral
rhythms have been corroded by the dust of time. Black is a
memory of pitiful sorrow. The colour of defeat dressed by those
living within mountains of the mind. But black is also the story
of the forgotten poets of a history. Those whose words have
made the earth tremble and weep.

The musical poesis of that passage brings me back to what I learned about the way tonality can shape a literary text while writing a chapter on Thomas Mann novels, in particular the one most influenced by Schoenbergian atonality- his *Dr Faustus* – which came to mind when I observed the way Chantal Meza 's images in the book responded to you musically figured poesis.

As I put it in my chapter, "Early in his *Doctor Faustus*, Mann's narrator, Serenus Zeitbloom, who has begun his literary account of the life of the composer, Adrian Leverkühn (the novel's protagonist who sells his soul to the devil in exchange for 24 years of musical creativity), introduces the musical idiom that is to pervade the novel. In contrast with a mere song – Mann's characterization of the narrative of the world of his *Joseph* story – Zeitbloom refers to the "tonality of life."¹ Thereafter the modernist musical idiom shaping the novel delivers its atonality, a dissonance-infused micropolitical sensibility...

Where a Wagnerian framing of the *Joseph* tetralogy shapes a more or less progressive narrative that moves toward reconciliation – as Mann...has stated, "the diverse musical parts of the work produce a blend, "a musical fusion [which] imagines everything human as a unity" – his *Faustus*

1 Thomas Mann, *Doctor Faustus*, trans. John E. Woods (New York: Vintage, 1999), 10.

is more Schoenbergian, a compositional strategy (as Adorno explains) in which “the rational organization of the artistic processes of production is broken up into disparate entities.”²

By late in the novel [the protagonist/composer] Leverkühn’s composition, the *Apocalypse*, which strikes the fearful Zeitbloom as a “pandemonium of...infernal laughter...the mocking laughter of hell,” is Schoenbergian, with its rhythmic upheavals and counterblows...a dreadful mayhem” of alarming sounds, a musical commotion that appears as “a reprise of the Devil’s laughter.”³ And importantly, from the point of view of what Schoenbergian form does, the work (explains Mann through his narrator) produces an “emancipation of dissonance from resolution, so that dissonance achieves absolute value, as can already be found in some passages in late Wagner [and in terms of its egalitarian metaphorical implications]...every cluster of sound can prove its legitimacy to the system.”⁴

It strikes me that the mood you advance in *How Black*, which delves ever deeper into a dystopic contemporary Wales, is similar to the sequence I derive from the way Mann progresses from his Wagner-influenced tonal structure in his *Joseph Quartet* to a Schoenbergian musical idiom in his *DR. Faustus*. Does that account resonate with the compositional process in which you (and Chantal) were engaged as your book emerged?

Brad Evans: Before responding, I would like to express my sincerest gratitude for engaging the text and initiating this wider conversation. My work remains infinitely indebted to you in ways that I hope we can explore as the conversation develops. As a start point, I would like to briefly ruminate on Faustus and the idea of the devil’s laughter. Living in a place marked by tragedy can often feel like dwelling in a wicked abyss, where you feel any kind of escape will require a selling of your soul. Yet one of the strategies of survival that occurs as you continually make pacts with the devils who you appreciate had the pact signed the moment you were born, was precisely to turn laughter back upon itself. Such humor points to something intimately bound up with the tonality of the black, call it a dark comedy if you will that unapologetically brings its own tragic verse into the world?

If I am being honest, I think this is the first book I have managed to write that allowed my voice to sing out. When I was growing up, there were a few moments when I climbed to the top of the highest mountain in the valley and cried out, imagining my words travelling down the vale until they made their escape over the hills. The romantic in me likes to think they somehow found their way back onto those pages. What I do know for certain is the writing of this book followed a different rhythm. It flowed from my fingers in a way that felt more natural yet strangely more uncertain, as if my subconscious was leading somewhere, which I now see makes it more liberated.

Of course, I didn’t set out to do this and maybe that’s the point when considering the writing process? Should we begin with the idea of wanting to adhere to some poetic style, the chances are it would end up being a mimesis or copy and it would soon run the risk of becoming too formulaic. Maybe what this suggest is a poetic exposition cannot be chosen, but it chooses us? That we are in that sense always ghost writers, who cut into pages lines that reveal secrets that are always just there beneath the surface?

Mindful of this, I do want to thank you for the way you’ve framed this because it’s made me realize what I have always aspired towards. Namely to write in a way that reveals in all its abstract splendor *the colour of language and the rhythm of the prose*. We know the greatest books take us on a journey. Melville understood this better than anybody. And such journeys are impregnated with the flows of life, they carry us onward and leave us on the shores of an entirely different time.

I do speak of the pandemonium and chaos of a land that’s has been thrown into statis, which when you live through it is no contradiction at all. I have tried to do justice to this, by speaking in a language that I know I pushed further and felt more at ease with writing than anything I have done previously.

² Adorno, *The Philosophy of Modern Music*, 45.

³ Mann, *Doctor Faustus*, 397.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 207.

Yet to invoke the terms of one of your recent books, I also note how the best authored sentences are punctured. The literature that most inspires me does not simply carry us away on free flowing rivers or makes us dance with the words so that we intimately become one with the text, but it is exhausting too as the atmosphere takes hold. I am thinking here of the kind of aeriality Gaston Bachelard had in mind, but also the sense of exhaustion presented by Gilles Deleuze when he insisted that we simply cannot wake up one day and decide to be a new subject. We need to pause. And we need to close the pages for a while because the weight of the words feels too much to hold.

These pauses, which I hope are present as well, I feel are akin to silences in music. As Claude Debussy once argued, “Music is the silence between the notes.” He would also master the abstract coloration of tonality. Who could not listen to *Clair de Lune* and not imagine a world of flowing color that immerses the body as it also drifts away? Pauses, like silences, are not separate but a defining part of the narrative. Or as Mark Rothko would say, “Silence is so accurate.” That which is in-between is where the real magic lies – or perhaps where the secret that gives unimaginable life to a text exists? I shared things which I have never shared before on those pages. Yet it’s a book more populated by the secret than anything else. Perhaps that’s also a defining element of poesis?

Looking back on my previous writings today, I do have a sense of acute failure insomuch as I know I didn’t do justice to the colour of language. Of course I was inspired by the works of Deleuze and his insistence on questioning how to reimagine the political, especially in his books on Kafka and Francis Bacon (which I actually think are Deleuze’s most political texts). What I have taken most from him, among others including yourself, is how the real enemy to be confronted is the triumph of technical language, whose own absolute value inevitably leads to the greying of existence. That’s another pact with a devil. But as I have learned, overcoming this is no easy endeavour, especially given the ways academia is policed.

To that end, I have to mention the undeniable influence Chantal [Meza] has had on my thinking and general approach to life. It was important to include her art, not only because I wanted to depart from the figurative tonality of typical history books that so often succeed in stripping the human away. I have no doubt the book would have felt and even weighed differently, were the art replaced with maps and photographs, which sought to snapshot or definitively represent some historical truth. But her contribution was so much more than to provide artistic accompaniment. While Chantal was the one who properly encouraged me to write the book, until she came into my life, I see that my aesthetics of thought was too academic for its own good. I thought about Deleuze’s notion of how we think thinking. But didn’t properly imagine it. And I certainly didn’t get anywhere close to touching it with my words. They may have been evocative, but I feel they always failed poetically. So it took an artist to guide me into a darkness so I could witness again and learn to write in a different style that made so apparent the technicities of thought still binding me.

MS: Brad, I am intrigued by your expression, “my voice to sing out.” I want to pursue the way voice operates in your book. Knowing that you have recently celebrated your 50th birthday, a remark by the composer/vocalist Ray Charles is especially *a propos*: “singers don’t reach their full potential until 50, because a whole life shows up in the voice.” Two things occur to me about that. One is as Charles implies, the self is Bergsonian. i.e., it’s durational (an effect of the years through which you have been involved in self-fashioning); the other is the genre within which you decided to “sing.” You chose a non-fiction bio-historical genre. *How Black* is thus what Jacques Ranciere’s refers to as unavowed fiction (implying that the fiction-nonfiction boundary is ambiguous). What comes to mind is a contrast between your *How Black* and Raymond Williams’s decision to compose his return to his Welsh valley town as a novel. The protagonist of his *Border Country* (1960), Matthew Price is also an academic, who had, as the novel reports “been eight years a university lecturer, in economic history.” In the Foreword, Dai Smith picks up the novel’s locutionary strategy. Quoting the from the novel’s early moment of self-reflection in which “Matthew muses to himself about who his, “The man on the bus m the man in the street, but I am Price from Glynmawr,” Smith goes on, “Raymond Williams spent his lifetime working out how not to betray that individual essence whilst at the same time understanding its wider and connected cultural being I believe he showed the way best in his fiction.”

Contemplating the options, I don't see a great difference between your and Williams's choices. Whether one is aiming to disclose social history by composing either an auto-ethnographic bio-history or a novel, the protagonist in each is less a subject than an ideational persona, or what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as a conceptual persona. Commenting on the implications of Deleuzian philosophy, Edward Mussawir writes "The person is not a 'subject' but a device or contrivance...[a character that provides] a profoundly aesthetic account of the masks that define civil and juridical existence." As for fictional examples, James Snead puts in this way in his characterization of Faulkner's Joe Christmas in *Light in August*. "Joe Christmas is an idea rather than a person, a character who remains almost completely opaque...[he] avidly resists the properties and effects of written imprintation." And Maurice Blanchot makes a similar case for the protagonist Ulrich in Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*. He suggests that Ulrich is an ideational device "a living presence that becomes a thought." With that as provocation, what can you add about how you crafted your voice and what you thought about in making the selection of a genre to host it?

BE: There are several important points raised here that I feel are so integral to both the writing process and also the historical conjuncture we find ourselves in today. I agree fully on the temporality of finding one's voice. The duration you speak of reminds me of Deleuze's insistence philosophy is only possible with the passing of age. What I think he means by this is while we may know the pain, the suffering, and the tragedy of existence as we live through their arrival from a very young age, it is only with time, and an appreciation of being-with-time – especially the time of the tragic, we have the requisite insight to properly make sense of what's been experienced. Hence, while we do seem to be in a moment today where there is an overt fascination and indeed coming into power of the kinds of immanence Deleuze once imagined as revolutionary, I never for a moment imagined Deleuze felt immanency would be divorced from history, from struggles of the past, from the capacity for a sustained and deeper reflection. Such a reflection is defined by the time we live, and it cuts across time, which I guess is what I tried to work out in the opening chapter of the book as I take a train journey back up the valley, which is less really about space than attending to the time of the valley. A time that is now marked by an intense stasis, you also carry within you like some stowaway.

The second point concerns *the return*. Related to what I just said, I find this is perhaps the point of an unavoidable tension or contradiction. I don't deny in the book that I am continually marked by contradictions. That to me is one of the defining features one must accept the moment we realize we are marked with the shame of being poor. How does one return, knowing the return is haunted by the escape you sought so hard to achieve? And how does one recover again something from the wreckage of the past, looking for something to rekindle in the corrosiveness of the post-industrial rotting of a society? If I am being honest, I am probably quite a romantic at heart – as much as I think Nietzsche was also a romantic. Romanticism for me however means nothing without the tragic. Perhaps that's the greatest legacy of Dante, whose own journey was also about confronting the intolerable and asking deeper questions about what it means to be human. I appreciate the Divine Comedy is overlaid with sacred themes, but at its core is an incommensurable darkness that grows from a wilderness of doubt. How does one deal with this if not through the kind of unavowed style you mention? After-all what could positivism possibly say about this other than further explaining away the human?

In terms of the idea of conceptual persona, what I have really tried to do in the book is attend to what it means for my own situatedness in this drama of the history of a valley, but also give the drama itself a more poetic framing. Firstly, in terms of my own life, it's funny but when I read Deleuze's thinking on this it resonated so much precisely because it wasn't just as theory, on the contrary it's one of the most empirically enriched ideas in all his corpus. From a young age, I always imagined myself occupying the elsewhere. A life, a future, a promise, they all existed beyond the valley. But what was I to do stuck in the body that I was, in a place that felt it was holding you firmly within? The poor know how to dream, not just because we tend to live in some deadened time starved of ambition. Dreaming is survival. We are constantly reconceptualizing our lives, imagining what it would be like to live as others live, constantly undoing the very idea of a fixed and authentic self. That is what I take to be a conceptual person, which also I believe poses a direct challenge to one of the more prevalent notions in identity politics today. To become unavowed I believe, means a constant undoing, which in turns means to make a cut from the body as much as theory. Hence, I profoundly disagree

with the notion that some put forward today which suggests the closer we get to the body, the closer we get to theory. Subjectivity is a void and the body a constant de-subjectivizing explosion that constantly pulls away from the idea of the self – however much we try to curate this. Or at least the one thing that writers from my background may understand is that there is no narrative arc to life. There is no linearity, and if there is a truth to be written, its messy and complicated.

Bringing this back to power, it is here I really need to acknowledge my debt to your work, especially the book *War Crimes, Atrocity and Justice*. What I took from that superb and methodologically challenging text was the importance of giving a literary account of oneself as one is also immersed within regimes for power, which also thoroughly depend upon literary devices. As I looked back upon the valleys, I saw a litany of literary injustices. Injustices to the myths that held people together, injustices to truth of what was allowed to be said, the truth of who was allowed to say it and in what style, injustices to culture and injustices to the imagination. That is why in the crafting of my own voice as you put it, the narrative collapses in places between history, personal testimony and fables was crucial. My encounters with the Zapatistas of Mexico had already shown to me the power of fabulation, which again was also there I believe in Deleuze's book on Kafka. What troubled me, I guess, was when the peoples form the lands, I was born romanticized the past, they did so in a highly technical way, by continually reviving the spirit of industrialization and the revolutionary battles for rights and power. I am not saying this is unimportant, but there is a need to go further – to excavate from the past the radical poetic spirit, which is woven deeper in Celtic history and continues to make its appeal to subjugated peoples the world over. There is a great deal of talk about the need to decolonize the curriculum today; yet too often that translated into improving the numbers without properly addressing the styles for writing we deploy, which means as we learn to craft ourselves, we must do so in a way that is mindful that the very crafting itself doesn't slip into another form of technicity and rote formulas. My reading is this ambition is precisely what you have sought to achieve in your pioneering work notably since the 1980s onwards?

MS: Responding to your remark about not slipping into rote formulas: In earlier work I have referred to what I termed "the dilemma of intelligibility." Noting for example Foucault's remark about the essence of his work – assessing the forces through which one is coerced into telling a truth about oneself and "at what price," – I suggest that his main concern is to challenge traditional ways of treating the concept of truth and go on to say that the remark ends with a simplistic economic metaphor ("at what price") to refer to the political fallout from coercive truth-telling impositions. I add however that were he to try and destabilize the language of political consequences in the same sentence, the intelligibility of his main concern would be compromised. In short, in the process of defamiliarizing some "rote" expressions, one has to fall back on others because to challenge aspects of familiar intelligibility one has to do it intelligibly. To recur to a Derridean expression, intelligibility suffers if one tries to put every expression "under erasure" at once.

Thinking about the issue more recently, I found myself quoting a remark by one of the narrators, Marie Sophie in Patrick Chamoiseau's novel *Texaco*, who laments the French literary patrimony that haunts her thinking as she looks for words and compositional strategies with which she can construct an alternative collective subjectivity to the one France has imposed on Martinique's postcolonial creole society. At one point she ponders the possibility of writing words that break with the stasis of "the things written before"; "is there such a thing," she asks an interlocutor in the novel, "as writing informed by the word, and by the silences, and which remains a living thing, moving in a circle, and wandering all the time...without losing a unity difficult to put into words." Among the novel's lines of flight from French literary domination is a turn to the "ruses of the character Br'er rabbit featured in the stories of Joel Chandler Harris who in the second half of the nineteenth century collected folktales of Southern African Americans told from the point of view of "Uncle Remus," a fictitious old slave telling stories to a young boy from "the big plantation house."

As I followed your text, I saw a similar disinvestment, a struggle to write in a way that honors your connection with your Welsh roots with a language and compositional style that sheds much of your IR disciplinary inheritance. Is that process recorded in the trajectory of editing the earlier drafts or was it incubated in outlines and shaped by conversations, and/or influenced by particular literatures before the writing was underway?

BE: What I think is at stake here is what we might call the time of the text. From which time do the words that haunt the pages appear? While I have believed it impossible to say with any degree of certainty when any intellectual project began, as I dwell on the authorship of, *How Black was my Valley*, I am forced to revise my thinking and a number of underwriting propositions. For this book can be dated to an exact moment *in* time. I know this to be true because I have two digitally time stamped photographs to verify my claim, which feature my wife walking up a mountain in the village I grew up in having really questioned by life there. Of course, what it speaks of reaches much farther back into the history of a people as you suggest. And no doubt, it would take a number of subsequent moments that were just as informative so that I would eventually have the confidence to confront the darkness that needed to be written. Or at least, as I see it, I now appreciate there are defining moments in the life of an author when they are not just sensitised to something of importance; but the gravity of its final reckoning weighs so much it becomes impossible to do otherwise. If the truth of a book is inseparable from what we might call “a life” and if this life we are so quick to question truly is a journey marked by the profound moments and happenings which shape us, then while we may not always know the destination, we can trace when an abstract idea becomes one with the naked ambition to get close to the truth of a time that now so preoccupies our very sense of being in the world.

Many authors (as I am sure you can relate) are simply compelled to write, even if the reason why is never certain. Why do we turn ourselves into writing machines, knowing many of the sentences we write will languish? Will these words even be read? Maybe we do just write for ourselves so that we can make sense of the nonsensical? To expel from within something, anything, which makes us feel that there must be some kind or a kindly something to it all? But even if that were true, being compelled to write surely is not enough? There needs to be the intention and commitment. Writing, I believe, as the songwriter and poet Nick Cave rightly pointed out, is a “blood and guts” affair. Writing at its best is also a creative process. But we also know that writing is perilous, dangerous, painful, and doesn’t promise anything in return. That is the contract. Failure is the default. The overwhelming possibility of never being read, never seeing the light of its time the likeliest outcome. Writing also requires asking of one’s past – a ghostly or haunted time that now exists unto itself, in ways that doesn’t gloss over the complexities, nor shy away from seeking to undo everything which one holds to be true. Writing in this way is a kind of self-immolation. It brings a creative destruction to time as much as its call to the future can be beautifully married to a reimagined past. This doesn’t mean the purpose or role of the author is solely to produce what the world may deem to be the “new” and the “original”. To write is to ignite a much deeper sentiment in the lowliest cortex of the troubled soul. Such an appreciation, I believe, points to the humanness of writing.

But as you say, this is a struggle. I was always torn between styles when writing the book. But I now see that within those tears is where depth is truly allowed to reveal itself. This might be a novel way to rethink Deleuze, away from the fold and over to the tear, with all its messy and fibrous (dis)entanglements. Maybe the book had to be the way it was because I was torn writing it. Had I tried to conform to one particular style, I would not have had the words to express what needed expressing. Being-torn as such is perhaps a wonderful condition of possibility for writing, for it does allow for the very kinds of “scintillating leaps of the imagination” which Foucault once sought to aspire.

In terms of the last question, I would actually like to put that back to you. It was upon reading your work that I realized there was another way of thinking and writing the international beyond the reductivism of positivist account. At what point did you realize that was a possibility? And how would that shape your own conception of time?

MS: That point took place over 50 years ago as I was preparing to teach a course in the “scope and methods of political science after having read texts in linguistic philosophy – in particular by J. L. Austin, H.L.A Hart and Ludwig Wittgenstein (along with Michel Foucault’s Archaeological investigations) – and seeing a very different potential for instruction in the philosophy of social sciences from what one obtains from reading the texts of the Vienna Circle (especially those of Rudolph Carnap for whom language is a domain of logic), I shaped the course to look at language as a living archive of political history. Using an empirical inquiry as a jumping off point for instruction, Morris Rosenberg’s *Society and the Adolescent Self Image* in which he develops

measures of self-esteem (based on a series of survey questions) and treats its correlates to explain difference, I oriented the course toward a different approach to concepts. Rather than following empiricist social science protocols, based on deductive and inductive logics, which mandate procedures for turning concepts into measurements, we looked at the way concepts emerge historically within diverse discursive formations. Among what we learned is that among other things self-esteem was invented as an attribute of selves in management-oriented discourses connected with governance issues (part of what Foucault treats as the management of “populations”) and in counter-political discourses associated with critiques of inequality.

The next step in my dissident epistemological journey took place as I began heeding the histories of the places where I grew up and where as a teacher/scholar I was working. In short, I began to recognize a radical entanglement between autobiographical time and historical time as it has been manifested in the trajectory of life worlds I have inhabited (a connection that M.M. Bakhtin theorizes in his treatment of the modern realist novel), i.e., I began to figure my scholarly life as a *bildungsroman* and began letting that reality emerge in my compositional style. It is a narrative thread that I see as the dominant one in yours *How Black...*

Now that your life world itinerary has you embracing two quite different cultural milieux, Mexico and the UK, how is that affecting the way you are constructing yourself as a scholar? To what extent was it already present in *How Black...* and where do you think will it be taking you as your writing/thinking proceeds?

BE: I have been thinking a great deal about the concept of the world of late. And I think you are right; this has a great deal to do with the multiple worlds I now appreciate I am occupying. In many senses, the experience of the valleys was largely singular inasmuch as the lived reality there was homogenized by the lived reality of poor white folks. It was only really when I left the place that the concept of difference made any sense. But that concept of differences was also very much bounded to a well-known historiography, which had been epistemologically well rehearsed, from the history of socialist struggle, onto the rivalry the Welsh felt and still project on occasions towards the English. When difference was acutely felt, it was largely measured through the simplest material items: – I speak in the book about this experience, for example, through the material spectacle of poverty of the football boot.

Mexico has been a place of fascination for me for over two decades now. And it was only really when I spent some time there at the close of the Millennium that the idea of difference as something radically anterior to oneself really made sense to me. A great deal of this owed to my encounters with the indigenous Zapatista communities, which taught me a great deal about my own inherent prejudices and misconceptions. Prior to arriving in Chiapas, for example, I was a card-carrying liberal cosmopolitan theorist, who truly felt it was my right and duty to change the world. What I since appreciated was how I was really setting myself the task of trying to change *their* world, which I had zero right to undertake. But Mexico is so much more than indigeneity. There is a strange magic and mysticism to the land, which is seemingly impossible to tame. It's a world of many worlds, constantly colliding yet somehow cohabiting in an uneasy and yet dynamic tension. There really is no place on earth like Mexico. Given its magic and allure, not to mention the way it assaults the senses, it therefore seemed only fitting that I ended up marrying a Mexican abstract painter. And not unexpectedly, Chantal has taught me more about art and aesthetics than any book I have read on the subject.

There was a beautiful interplay between Frida Kahlo and Andre Breton when she mischievously responded that she didn't know she was a surrealist until the Breton told her she was one. There is so much originality that colors life and paints existence in Mexico it's hard to do justice to it in words. While the color is important, I do however want to push this further and consider a deeper meaning on difference. Through Chantal's work, I have become increasingly focused on the concept of the void. In so many ways, I look upon the black valley as a void. That doesn't mean it's empty. As Chantal continually reminds me, the colour black is not the absence of colour, but the totality of all possibilities. This is what I think Derrida was reaching for when he started thinking about difference. Differences is not about simply marking, symbols, colours or lines that we can identify as being qualitatively different. It's precisely an opening onto something that is radically undecidable. Difference thus becomes a kind of infinite potentiality, both void and abyss, where the quest for truth always somehow evades us, even though we must try and fail and Beckett understood all too well.

I do see *How Black* as a book which fails. I embrace this because only then do I think it does some kind of justice to the void into which the lasting and sometimes fleeting conceptions of the world that we give to ourselves fall to earth. This raises a crucial point for me. Thinking again with Deleuze, what does it mean today to find reasons to believe in *this* world? I do struggle on occasions when people ask me, what is the future for the valleys of South Wales? It is hard to find something meaningful to say when you appreciate the weight of history that is absently weighing down on broken shoulders. But the same could be said for post-industrial communities across North America too. Mindful of this and as a means to close this very generative conversation to which I am very indebted, what do you think is the role of the author today as we try and come to terms with the brutal legacies of colonization, while also trying to speak in open and welcoming ways to poor white communities, which the forces of contemporary fascism are evidently being parasitic upon?

MS: Thanks for the prompt: The primary role I see for authors is to be both receptive to oneself and attuned to reader reception. As regards the former, Michel Leiris provides an apropos model. Treating ethnography as a literary problem, his inquiries construct a reflexive subject /writer who treats the cultural objects of his investigations in terms of how they turn him toward his own locus of enunciation and thus encourage self-reflection. As for latter, I take instruction from Henry Threadgill's autobiography of his life in music, in which he explicitly evokes the phenomenology of reception that his songs solicit. He remarks that "For the listener, they function as a spark. The language is meant to spur your own thought process as you listen ...you need to start with this material I've thrown in front of you and figure out your own reaction...you're in the equation: your ears, your blood pulse, your own sound world, your own predilections, now what do you have?" I thus see writing as a responsibility to encourage the work of thinking. Threadgill's collaborator in his autobiography, Bent Hayes Edwards puts it well in an analysis of the Threadgill composition titled "Jenkins Boys, Again, Wish Somebody Die, It's Hot" (slave only got a day off when a funeral was to take place). It's "the mark," Edwards suggests, "of a particular time and place that has been dislodged into a broader horizon of implications associated with that heat." As regards the reception that this event in Threadgill's musical historiography encourages, Edwards adds that "The only hint of the history of plantation labor here is the way we're forced to work on this phrase."

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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