

Out of the Garbage, the Collage of Me: Alice Notley's *Culture of One*



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*I am building this culture out of will
and language and garbage*

Alice Notley has been writing poems about the destruction of the world for a long time. *Culture of One* is yet another of her gorgeously conceived book-length poems that make it unequivocally clear she has devoted her imagination to mapping the stubborn tenacity and slow erosion of myths sanctioning the destruction that characterizes the present. “We’ve sold off our planet’s endowment” Notley exclaims in bitter mockery, “as well as our species’ inheritance—Keep doing it! Convert the dance of grace into // excrement. The whole planet, an amalgam of magnificent // selloffs” (133).

Notley is adamant that patriarchy created this sad state of affairs; there’s no denying this is a central claim of her work. The cultural and psychic landscape Notley has struggled through as a woman poet is living proof of the misguided histories leading to the disastrous present, and her work angrily inhabits the ideas, stories, and lies that have put this present into place. However, the world she traces—which is of course *this* world—is in the midst of transforming. For Notley, something like feminine difference is coming into view.

Intertwining ambient feelings, surreal stories, mythic characters, and densely rendered quotidian details, *Culture of One* is at the center of this transformation.

Notley has crafted a compelling persona to occupy this center; it is representative of feelings large and miniscule, ideas important and disregarded. This paradoxical stance allows each poem to trace a fault line where myths of patriarchal triumph have begun to crack. Her voice emerges from these reluctant, jagged openings in order to beat the biases of greatness on its own terms, but also to bring the disregarded into the realm of value. In “Iron Stairs,” the scene is a poetry reading, and Notley begins earnestly to read her work: “I’ll tell you / *my* poem out here on the porch in the dry warm Western / air” (99). But another poet is already on the cultural stage, the woman’s proper role is identified, and the lasting effects of male supremacy become clear:

But you’re not the real poet,

someone says. The real one’s that dead blond guy, singing
and playing the guitar, in the dark Roman amphitheater. You,
have to take care of us....

I remember when he shut me up in old stones. The tale
bores you, but you’re still in the rock, my ladies: etched and
stressed in sexual posturings. (100)

Set against these pervasive and inert depictions of femininity is the life of Marie, a woman who lived at the town dump with her four dogs in Notley’s hometown of Needles, California. Marie is a collagist; garbage is her medium. She is making a codex, a vast calligraphic collage. Marie represents the disregarded feminine, and therefore its potential value for another future. “Marie is the truth,” Notley writes, “Treating her badly—an older / woman—is the world’s delight” (139). Marie’s life in the dump and her work as an artist represents the possibility of imagining a new world without abandoning the damage that has been relegated to the categories of the used, old, and obsolete.

Notley’s ambition to write the world anew has consistently emerged from disregarded quotidian—a woman’s life as a “wife,” for example—which she manages to register through an “American”

voice—casual, humble, and uncertain, but also somehow completely assured and grand. This voice announces the possibility of a new order and Notley’s call to bring it into being. In “Language of Mercy” we hear her synthesize registers epic, mythical, and quotidian: “Someone is singing to me; I supposed it’s a prayer or invocation / Birds gather in the mesquite tree, confessing to existence” (11).

Clearly Marie is a figure for Notley, and her codex—“[a] story linked by jeweled colors / and letters”—represents how the poet views her own work (52). “Her search for a new way / to live, her determination to create a cell of beauty / and meaning around her—despite being in a dump—/ is mine” (139). Notley herself is a collagist, and *Culture of One* brings that part of her artistic practice into thematic focus. Marie’s work is an opportunity to indulge in her talent for creating poetic surface layered with variegated colors and textures. In the book’s eponymous poem, she explains, “Marie made things in the gully: she made her life, sure, more than practically / anyone else did, but she wrote things down on paper discarded in the dump and / she made figures out of wood and rocks and cord and burntness and whatever” (10).

There’s not only “wood and rocks and cord” in the codex, but letters, chosen and utilized as visual shapes. Letters for Marie are magical, pulsating with life and full of feeling: “Marie paints on the page // a golden bleeding A” (141). Marie is attentive to the sounds letters demarcate and make recognizably audible, but also to the sounds and meanings that fall to the side of each letter’s place in the alphabetic system: “Nothing has ever been of use, except the sounds between letters, where all / the vibrations of being alive are kept” (16).

The visual materials in the codex also register the reverberations of the spiritual in the material: “Black ink / bird shapes resemble thin pigeons—souls” (138). Drawn from piles of refuse, the texture of the codex represents the world’s corrosive violence:

Marie’s new page

is red paint with the bottom of a broken bottle glued
on—the glass once clear, now bluish from the sun,
a round shape with a jagged crown, beautiful

but dangerous. (138)

Marie is at the center of a swirling, kaleidoscopic narrative she shares with a constellation of mythical characters. There is Mercy, an act and a personified feeling. Singular in purpose but diffuse in form, Mercy manifests in various ways: “There is always the sound or color or feeling in which I can arrive” (3). Mercy is a manifestation of a Hindu goddess Tara. Her multiple arms represent her endless generosity, and are crucial to feelings Notley wants her poetry to evoke: “And the arms reach out through the hum / of the poem and soothe you, completely” (121). Mercy’s attention to suffering is also the most important part of Marie’s codex and its ambition to create another way of living: “My culture, a culture of mercy / a living codex” (35). Eve Love is a rock-and-roll singer addicted to heroin, methamphetamines, and cutting her thighs. She sings apocalyptic love songs—“Never be the species we / once were. You won’t recover from this loss, my lovers; / you won’t be there...” (90). Eve represents an aspect of Notley’s poetry—its deathly inspirations and angry critiques—exposed to WalMart’s mapping of the world: “I am not only an image: I can kill / you with Love / the dangerous cancellation / of your store-bought soiled nation” (63). Talking about her performance with Marie, Eve Love says, “It was like channeling half the / cemeteries on the planet” (97). There’s also Leroy. He works at the town Buy Rite, and is Marie’s sometime lover. Leroy gives Marie food and water, but is also a pathological liar: “He told everyone Marie was some sort of witch or crazy person—/ he meant she too was inventing the world, and they / were in competition” (19).

The central idea Notley’s book is competing with and arguing against is the deep-seated and pervasive claim that women are crazy. The cruel chicks—a perverse hoard of girls led by a red-necklace girl called the “Satanist”—represent the raw and angry enactment of that assumption in the lives of girls. These girls rub feces on Marie’s house, repeatedly burn it down, and murder her dog Tawny by feeding her glass. “Everyone in town knows you’re / dirty!” shouts one of the girls when Marie discovers her dog spitting up blood (109). The cruel chicks are aggression and rebellion perverted by their devotion to the father and a sexuality premised on violence and exploitation: “We’re the mean girls,” they say: “We will be fucked to pieces in the future, / we have gathered bird feathers to decorate our emotions. That is, / we’ve killed a hummingbird and pulled out its feathers” (50). Notley’s poetry is too motivated by anger to

repress or cancel out something as potent as aggression, and the cruel chicks possess a vibrant and dramatic mythological force that suggests they could transform into a less destructive collectivity. In “Muslin,” Notley describes their wild approach: “The girls come at dusk wearing red paint // on their lips and cheeks, shouting they are Satanists; one / has red paste jewels in her hair” (39).

The characters in *Culture of One* blur and transform into each other, refracting different parts of Notley’s imagination. Even though she now lives in Paris, exiled from Needles (her home culture) Notley writes: “I couldn’t stop being Marie—or Eve Love—even in Paris. I couldn’t stop being Mercy, or Leroy” (27). These figures emerge from Notley’s love of, lucid attention to, and investment in language. They are collaged parts of a “me” that Notley glues together in her poems and holds onto as a defense against a corrupt world that gives women an early expiration date and insists that their visions of the world are dirty and crazy, belonging only to the garbage dump of culture. The last poem of *Culture of One* is titled “Marie Alone in Meaning.” The poem’s single line: “It means that I make perfect sense” (142).