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Radical Feminist Poetics

Belladonna* at Twenty Years

RACHEL LEVITSKY, JAMES LOOP AND RACHAEL
GUYNN WILSON

Abstract: This dossier introduces and celebrates the work of Belladonna* Collaborative—a radical feminist press, reading series, and collective—on its twentieth anniversary. Included in the dossier are two documents from recent Belladonna* events: the first is a partial transcript of a conversation between poets Bernadette Mayer and Stacy Szymaszek, and the second is an introduction by Rachel Levitsky to Belladonna*'s first Lesbian All-Stars reading. The documents are prefaced by a brief headnote on the mission and history of Belladonna*.

Keywords: radical feminist poetics, poetry and activism, New York City literary history, lesbian writing, women, queer, intersectional

The year 2019 marks the twentieth anniversary of the Belladonna* mission to promote the work of women* and feminist writers who are adventurous, experimental, politically involved, multiform, multicultural, multigendered, impossible to define, unpredictable, and dangerous with language. Belladonna* is committed to publishing and building literary community among women-identified and LGBTQIA+ authors who write off-center, producing work that is political, critical, situational, intersubjective, performative, or

witnessing—work that reaches across the boundaries and binaries of literary genre and artistic fields, and that questions the gender binary.

Belladonna* is a feminist avant-garde collective founded in 1999 by Rachel Levitsky as a reading and salon series at Bluestockings Women’s Bookstore in New York City’s Lower East Side. In June 2000, in collaboration with Boog Literature, Belladonna* began to publish commemorative “chaplets” (defined as ten-to-fifteen-page chapbooks of unfinished, recent writing or work-in-progress) of the readers’ work. The series continues today and has reached over 250 chaplets. Belladonna* began to publish full-length books in 2009.

In celebration of this twentieth anniversary milestone, we present here two documents from Belladonna*’s recent archive. The first is a transcript from “Epic Voices: Bernadette Mayer and Stacy Szymaszek on the Long Poem and Daily Writing,” an event curated by Rachael Guynn Wilson (Belladonna*) and Paolo Javier (Poets House) that took place at Poets House on March 9, 2019. The second document is Rachel Levitsky’s introduction to the first Lesbian All-Stars reading organized by Belladonna* and hosted by Sarah Schulman for “First Mondays: Readings of New Works in Progress” at Performance Space New York. This event took place on March 4, 2019. These two documents give a glimpse into the radical feminist politics and poetics that Belladonna* works to advance through its programs and publications.

The documents have been lightly edited by James Loop and Rachael Guynn Wilson. Recordings can be accessed in full at Belladonna*’s PennSound page at writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Belladonna.php.

FROM “EPIC VOICES: BERNADETTE MAYER AND STACY SZYMASZEK
ON THE LONG POEM AND DAILY WRITING”

By Bernadette Mayer and Stacy Szymaszek

B: So we should start talking right?

S: I think that’s the idea.

B: Should we talk in English?

S: Psychically communicate . . .

B: Okay, we’ll be teleporting. We’ll be telekineticking. Okay, what should we say?

S: We actually did this already. We had a fifty-minute conversation on the telephone.

B: That’s true. It’s too bad we didn’t record it.

S: We wanted to recreate it because it was so wonderful, but we're doing something totally new here. In terms of an entrée into "daily writing," one of the things I'm really interested in is your work on food, and I'm wondering what you had for breakfast.

B: Oh, I had one of those really traditional New York City diner breakfasts: scrambled eggs with . . . I said home fries but they were really hash browns, and bacon, and a not-so-acceptable-by-the-diner-owner cup of peppermint tea. And you?

S: That sounds delicious.

B: Yeah, it was good.

S: Avocado toast and some sweet bread and coffee.

B: Oh, how trendy.

S: Very trendy, I know. Well, I'm a visitor to New York City.

B: Exactly. You're allowed to be that way.

S: It's more like what they had across the street from the Airbnb.

B: So, I wanted to harangue Stacy. I read in your book that you say poets don't really bother with grammar. And I feel very strongly very pro-grammar, so I'd like to hear your answer to my harangue.

S: Are you going to pinch me?

B: No, you told me not to pinch you.

S: Well, the context of me saying poets don't care about grammar was in a therapy session. My therapist admonished me for something I said with bad grammar, and he said, "You should know, you're a poet." And I was like, "Being a poet . . ." So, yeah, the context was a little bit specific. It wasn't a nuanced conversation. I was like poets maybe have a different approach to grammar. Not that poets don't care. I was being a little flip.

B: You were indeed. I mean if anybody knows anything about grammar, it would be a poet.

S: I was saying we know how to break the rules.

B: Yes, so that you can't say "People have to get on this particular line with less than fifteen items," right? Weird. I saw the word "shrunken." Do you feel that that's a word?

S: Shrunken?

B: Shrunken.

S: I think it's a word.

B: You wouldn't just say "shrunken"?

S: I don't think I'd say "shrunken," but I think it's a word.

B: It sounds awkward, right? I always think words like that might exist if you're writing a poem and you need an extra syllable. So you can say "shrunken."

S: Have you seen this? Have you seen "shrunken" in a poem?

B: No, I saw that word in *The New York Times*. They used the word "shrunken," and I thought, well, either I'm too old or they're wrong.



Bernadette Mayer and Stacy Szymaszek in conversation at Poets House on March 9, 2019. Image credit: Stephen Motika.

S: Something we discussed that I'm curious about is what is a long poem, and we tried to decide on a definition of what a long poem is, and I was curious, because you'd mentioned Poe. In "The Poetic Principle," Poe says, "If, at any time, any very long poem *were* popular in reality, which I doubt, it is at least clear that no very long poem will ever be popular again" (1999, 175). He didn't think that there could be a long poem. He didn't think that the poem, a long poem, could be sustained in mood and form. And also, that the epic as a long poem could only be formed of smaller pieces that could be read in one sitting. So I'm wondering when you wrote *Midwinter Day*, did you have Poe in mind?

B: I had read Poe, and I was aware of his statements about the long poem, but I didn't think of *Midwinter Day* as a long poem. Weird. Poe also said that you have to write a poem in one sitting, so if the poem is too long to fit into your writing it in one sitting, then it's not a long poem, or it's not a poem. I don't know—that's weird. I think it depends on what kind of drugs you're taking. I'm not advocating the taking of drugs, but if you were ready to go along for, say, two hours, you could easily write a poem like *Midwinter Day*. Don't you think?

S: In two hours?

B: Yeah!

S: Let's talk about *Midwinter Day*. You wrote it in one day?

B: Yeah.

S: Were you thinking about Poe at all when you were planning *Midwinter Day*? I don't know where I read this, but you said you did two weeks of prep.

B: Yeah.

S: Like rehearsal, which I'm fascinated by. So you rehearsed to write *Midwinter Day* for two weeks by getting attuned to your dreams and how you wanted to record them.

B: Yes, I wanted to be able to be really good at remembering dreams, and that's something you can do in advance. The other thing I did was collect the newspaper and go to the bookstore and find out the names of all the best-sellers. So a lot of the lists I could do in advance or afterward. But in the midst, I had this great trick: I put a tape recorder in the closet so that I could, in the midst of doing things, go into the closet and talk to the tape recorder. So that was partly my scheme. Then the last part, part 6, is the time that I would normally write anyway, so I just wrote the whole time, that section. That was a great pleasure.

S: So you don't think of it as a long poem. Do you think of it as an epic?

B: You know, I don't know if I ever thought about it at the time. I was very interested in time frames, and it seemed like a lot of them come up: the day, the year, the hour, the month, would come up as a time frame, so it was an obvious thing for me to do. But exhausting.

S: In terms of the creation of the work, did you do it in one sitting? Like, was it true to the Poe statement?

B: Oh, sure, the frame of it. I mean, other things that were filled in before or after were the names of articles from the newspaper and whatever I could get from the bookstore.

S: Did you also use photographs in your process?

B: No. So how about you? Did you feel a time frame was involved?

S: Yeah, I've been very attracted to the year-long book: *Hart Island, Journal of Ugly Sites*, and *A Year from Today*. Pretty randomly when I began writing I knew that I was starting a project instinctively. So this book happens to be April 2014 to April 2015 just because I started writing it on April 2nd. It's fairly random, but I'm attracted to the 365-day constraint.

B: Yeah, constraint. I have never tried to write a novel without any 'e's, but I think that's one of the greatest constraints I've ever heard of. Maybe there's somebody in this audience who would do that. I think it would be fun to write it in English. Because when Perec wrote a novel without any 'e's, he wrote it in French, and then somebody translated it into English, also without any 'e's, which I think is an amazing thing to do. Maybe fun, but frustrating, I think. Don't you?

S: I can't imagine that the translation is very accurate.

B: Well I never checked, actually. But it does not have any 'e's.

S: I'm also interested to know if you think of *Utopia* as a long poem.

B: I never think of *Utopia* as a poem. I think of it as a prose book. It's kind of a hodgepodge.

S: You wrote that book when you were the director of the Poetry Project.

B: That's right, I did.

S: You left your work journals behind when you left the post [at the Poetry Project], and now they're at the Library of Congress.

B: Oh, I heard about that!

S: They're very interesting, and I'm wondering if there's a relationship between the work journals and your writing—particularly of that book, but also any of the writing you were doing as director.

B: Well, was there? Did you read them?

S: Yeah, there seems to be a relationship, but I was wondering what you think.

B: Well, it's interesting. Maybe working at the Poetry Project makes you feel more involved in political reality. And also, in terms of *Utopia*, I met John Fisk at the Poetry Project, and he was doing the sound there and helping to record the readings, and I tried to get him to help me write *Utopia*. So he says to me "just use the almanac." I wanted him to write about the heads of state of various countries, and he said just use the almanac. I thought there would be something more interesting that could be there. But now *Utopia*, which is going to be republished at this time, is full of the heads of state of all countries of the world in 1984.

S: There's this quote from *Utopia* that I wanted to read: "I had been wanting to keep a journal of one week of living in New York and every detail of everything that happened at work, home, and in the community, to see if recording everything about living in the city would be illuminating, funny or useful, because it would be about money, work, politics and sex" (1984, 13). I love those themes and how you deal with those themes in your work and journal. And I would add food. So much food!

BELLADONNA* LESBIAN ALL-STARS

By Rachel Levitsky

I woke this morning from a dream in which I confronted a powerhouse of a woman, a leftist activist—not someone I actually know from real life—who was against the word "feminist" for its harm and inexactitude. I insisted to her that, at its core, it was liberatory. What I said to her in my dream was, "Feminism means to fight the rude linearity and constraint as what it means to be a woman." Well, ideally, or maybe that is one thing it means.

I've been dwelling on what I would say about the word and the identity category of *Lesbian* and why I wanted to be blatant and name an event Lesbian All-Stars, once again like naming the Belladonna Series "Belladonna*," accidentally, probably subliminally, gliding against the language-material of

pornography, while doing something else, if not entirely other, than what is it. I am rereading Cherríe Moraga and Amber Hollibaugh's conversation, "What We're Rolling Around in Bed With," and want to say, at bottom for me it was this: that when I was once romantic with a cis man and hibernating in order to not offend or confuse most of all my own sense of the meaning of the word *Lesbian*, I grieved over the loss, literarily and politically, of how personally I rely on what I roll in bed with to build myself politically, literarily. Does *Lesbian* insinuate an essentialist category, does it exclude, does it harken from an idea that becomes universal via planetary colonial webbing? I think so. And yet those webs, can they be useful and conversant with decolonialized and nonbinary forms of expressive bodily resistance? (I was having a conversation with Raquel Gutiérrez last night, and we talked about the potential capaciousness of the word.)

Probably more to the point than this preface so far is that, after twenty years working with the project of Belladonna*, on my way toward some sort of, at least, for the most part, retirement from the project, I want to move my utopian hope that it'd also be a queer training camp for those who needed it from a secret wish to an archival banner: so maybe "All-Stars" is some sort of photo bomb, so that the drives of mine that are Lesbian would present in the archive as Lesbian in form, and thank the goddess for your enthusiasm for this event, it is amazing.



Belladonna* author Pamela Sneed reads at the Lesbian All-Stars performance at Performance Space New York on March 4, 2019. Image credit: Alexandra Egan.

The first reader will be Raquel Gutiérrez, then Ru Nina Puro, Gail Scott, and Pamela Sneed, and we'll be kicking off the second half with a recording by Camille Roy, who couldn't make it tonight.

Of the Lesbian geniuses about to read, I'm newest to Gutiérrez's gorgeous tapestries of poetic expanse. Like the poems I love, and the poems and proses of all of the work you'll hear tonight, Gutiérrez's poems cover a Borges-like, one-for-one expanse. The complex terrain of the original, complicated, hard, aspirational, and beautiful is met in like and in condensed lyric. These are songs. And amid all that they do and cover—giving poetic language to the material objects and lithe mediations of the constant transitional in the life of a Chicana working-class butch activist facing off and in the cultural-industrial complex—they are all also love poems, and I trust them, and love them.

Ru Puro is a long-time member of the Belladonna* Collaborative. This year their first book came out, *Each Tree Could Hold a Noose or a House*, and it is a marvel. I will reveal to you all that I am only able to read a few pages of this book at a time, because they cause so much to happen in my body, my grieving body, and they are miraculous because though what they do is converse with that grief and tease it out, they de-reinscribe it—in other words, these are healing works, which, through their presence, invite me to be present to my own disaster skin and move within the very world we are in.

Ru and Raquel are first-time Belladonna* readers/chapbook authors: a book-event thing we've been doing for nearly twenty years, the collection of which I used to call "the block" and now I call "the pantheon." It is with gaps, but also a map for researchers into what was really happening for us in our lives and in our language: in-process, current, hot.

Camille Roy and Gail Scott and Pamela Sneed are certainly—to quote ourselves at our ten-year anniversary—elders^t of the project and of feminist radical letters. Each has been an elder to me: Camille for her deep, trembling scenes of Lesbian raunch and desire and pain that is trusting the language to carry it, which in her work—her plays, and prose, and poetry—it does. And she has a pen name, which I didn't realize until knowing her for many years, which is seriously punk.

Gail Scott, a collaborator through our conversations and making—a heroine who wrote *Heroine*, the novel—not only leads us at the forefront of what is possible within the form of the sentence and the novel, she utilizes the sentence to do what the modernists demanded of poetry, that it be the news, but in prose so dense and full of libido—she's our journalistic Joan of Arc. And Pamela Sneed has for us, for these thirty years, been our model of courageous activist witness, cataloguer of what is really happening, and in a consistently driving and vivid poesis. Where is the BS in the story that we need but is coming at us in forms we can't decipher: check in with Pamela.

In her amazing dog memoir, *Afterglow*, Eileen Myles writes: “Any culture that suppresses the lesbian will die” (2017, 73). As you will see tonight, this is absolutely true.

Rachel Levitsky is the author of *Under the Sun* (2003), *NEIGHBOR* (2009), and the poetic novella, *The Story of My Accident is Ours* (2013), as well as numerous chapbooks, most recently, *Hopefully, The Island*, part of an ongoing collaboration with the artist Susan Bee. In 1999, she founded Belladonna*, which is now Belladonna* Collaborative. She teaches writing at Pratt Institute, Naropa Summer Writing Program, and lay institutions in NYC. She can be reached at belladonnaseries@gmail.com.

James Loop is a poet. His writing has appeared or is forthcoming in *Brooklyn Rail*, *Hyperallergic*, *Lambda Literary*, *Prelude*, and elsewhere. Performance and installations have been presented at Mathew Gallery in NYC and the Material Arts Fair in Mexico City. He lives in New York and is Project Manager of Belladonna* Series. He can be reached at belladonnaseries@gmail.com.

Rachael Guynn Wilson’s critical and poetic work has appeared or is forthcoming in *apricota*, *A propósito de nada / Apropos of Nothing*, *Brooklyn Rail*, *Cleaver*, *The Distance Plan*, *Elderly*, *Evening Will Come*, *Jacket2*, *Kenyon Review*, *Textual Practice*, and elsewhere. She is a co-founder of the Organism for Poetic Research, is a member of the Belladonna* Collaborative, and teaches at the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan. She can be reached at belladonnaseries@gmail.com.

NOTE

1. *The Elders Series* was created for Belladonna*’s ten-year anniversary. It was conceived as a limited-edition series of eight books published in the span of a year, with each book curated by a different writer inviting contributions from one or two writers who inspired her—resulting in an anthology and a conversation between the guest curator and the elder(s) she hosted. See www.belladonnaseries.org/the-elders-series.

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