

Dear Jess

I am not quite sure if you and L have journeyed across the continent, and arrived to Waldron by now. I have never been there, but heard you talk about the whales and the apples and the beaches and the birds. There is something just so unimaginable about that place to me. It seems distant but near, astray but home. What will you feel like when bringing L there? I don't recall if the two of you have been there before, but even so, this summer your wanderings appear different. This summer, every wandering seems deviant.

This place is love. It is absence of place.

(Edmond Jabès)

I write to you this time to ask if you would like to talk to me.

I have been thinking lately on what it means to talk to one another, to utter words, to articulate thoughts in a shared space. On what bodily acts we perform when we participate in dialogue, and how rooms in which we execute them are organized, directed, choreographed.

There is a writer called Sara Ahmed who says that bodies acquire orientation by repeating some actions over others. She states that gatherings—whether a family assembling around a dinner table or a group of people congregating in space to engage in a shared political matter—are not neutral, but directive. When gathering, we are required to follow specific lines.

Lines are both created by being followed and are followed by being created. The lines that direct us, as lines of thought as well as lines of motion [...] depend on the repetition of norms and conventions, of routes and paths taken, but they are also created as an effect of this repetition.

(Sarah Ahmed)

As we know, lines can take many forms. Vertical, horizontal, circular, straight, bent. If we follow them; if we line up, we most often know where we are. We find our way when we turn both this way and that, we know what to do in order to get to that place or this. We are oriented; resided in space.

Desire is constituted in the space between bodies.

(Rutvica Andrijašević)

I think the first time you and I really spoke must have been at that lesbian wedding, in a loft space in Queens with a view of Manhattan skyscrapers. I had just moved to New York and felt so new; I found no way when I turned neither this way nor that. C had asked me to be her date and I was unsure of what a date meant in your language. You came with P who I only knew as the actor masturbating with a crystal in that queer feminist porn.

Sara Ahmed teaches me that in landscape architecture unofficial paths are described with the term desire lines. Those are imprints on the ground, where people have deviated from the paths they are supposed to follow. Leaving their marks, hollows in the ground, alternative and unexpected lines appear. "Such lines are indeed traces of desire, where people have taken different routes to get to this point or that point." Ahmed calls the accumulation of those lines 'queer landscapes', shaped by paths we follow when deviating from the straight line.

I think of desire lines and of lines of desire, accumulating into a queer landscape, when I think of that wedding night. We—gathering—were lesbians from near and far—rehearsing a ceremony that was never intended to be ours, but claiming it as if it had always been. We assembled, we ate, we cheered, we danced. Somehow, I think of that evening as one when we both followed straight lines—lined up—as well as one when we strayed off—bending. Somehow, that night and perhaps every night, we were both oriented and disoriented.

Space is a pressing matter and it matters which bodies where and how press up against it.

Most important of all are who these bodies are with.

(Elsbet Probyn)

Then, the question could be; what difference does it make what we are oriented toward? And what has all of this to do with my desire to talk to you?

Once I spoke on a panel on the topic of a ‘feminist language’. The room was small and crammed with people, lined up on rows of chairs facing the front of the room where two other speakers, two moderators and I were placed. We, invited speakers and moderators, talked vividly for fifty-five minutes. I do not recall very much of our conversation, but what I do remember was the last five minutes of that hour. One of the moderators asked if there were any questions amongst the audience. A woman raised her arm. The moderator made a gesture, declaring her right to speak out. The woman was furious. Her point: When we had gathered to talk about something called a ‘feminist language’, we had done nothing but to reinforce a hierarchy in-between those worthy of talking and those only of listening. For fifty-five minutes, five of us had possessed every space of articulation available in that crammed room, in order to provide five poor minutes for the rest of the sixty or so present. Her anger brought an uncomfortable energy to the room. Some grinned, some wriggled, some sighed. The moderator, quick in mouth and talented in argument, smiled to the woman and simply declared: This is a panel. If you would like to participate more interactively, I would recommend you to attend one of the workshops later this afternoon.

This moment stuck with me. It posed a question, still ringing in my head: Why do we so rarely break away from norms and conventions concerning how we talk about breaking norms and conventions?

Sara Ahmed asks us to think about the ‘habit’ that can be found in the ‘in-habit’, when she states that public spaces take shape through habitual actions of bodies.

The body is habitual not only in the sense that it performs actions repeatedly, but in the sense that when it performs such actions, it does not command attention... In other words, the body is habitual insofar as it trails behind in the performing of action, insofar as it does not pose ‘a problem’ or an obstacle to the action, or is not stressed by what the action encounters.

(Sara Ahmed)

For Ahmed, it is not so much the bodies that acquire the shape of habits, but spaces that acquire the shape of the bodies that ‘inhabit’ them, which makes some people feel in place, or at home, and not others. Hence, orientations affect what bodies can do – they are straightening devices.

Phrased differently: spaces are oriented around the normative body, such as the straight body, the white body, the male body, which allows that very body to extend into space. This is the starting point, the point from which the world unfolds.

If we return to the room of the panel, a room of knowledge production and reflection, such lines, orientations, and habits become most noticeable. When we enter such a room; designated for artistic and political dialogue and termed as a ‘panel’ or a ‘seminar’ or a ‘lecture’, we know exactly which and what to ‘trail behind’. The room is organized according to linguistic acts, such as to speak or as to listen, and depending on which of these acts you have been assigned – prior to entering the room – you know what lines to move your body along with; what choreography to follow. Where to walk, how to sit, when to speak, how to be silent. When talking, you are expected to be clear and concise, to stick to the subject, to not be too personal or too explicit, to wait on your turn, to be engaged but not to be too emotional. Rules are rigid, choreography strictly hierarchical.

That woman, in the end of our panel on the topic of a ‘feminist language’, performed her body in a way that posed a problem. When questioning the format of our dialogue, a panel, her body did not only deviate from lines familiar in such a room, but also it commanded attention. It did not ‘trail behind’. And when things came out of line, the effect was uncomfortable, awkward, queer. In order for things to line up, the queer moment had to be corrected.

Silence is a form.

(Claude Royet-Journoud)

...pauses in language can be apprehended as the key to new forms of knowledge and new forms of revolt.

(Caroline Bergvall)

If we instead return to the room of that lesbian wedding, one evening in a loft space in Queens with a view of Manhattan skyscrapers, I think I remember your bodily acts more than I remember your words. I cannot recall you speaking very much that evening, but I reminisce you had a way of listening that was rare. Already that evening I think my learning from you began. A skill of speaking through silence, remaining in the blank gaps without the rush to move along—one I am far from mastering. Your eyes all present, your questions plentiful more than your answers, your sentences constructing bridges. A lack of words, tangible breaks, opening up to unknown meaning.

“The writers task is to lure the words on to the page” Rosemary Waldrop writes in her book *Lavish Absence*, and, she continues, “they are willing and even eager to go there, but on their own terms.” Later, after that evening, I learned you are a writer. And I came to wonder if maybe your gaps of quietness, your acts of listening, are such of luring; of collecting and composing words. Later, in that same book, Waldrop writes that poetry is the body-minded language; that the body of the word has its reasons that our reason must follow, that poetry reminds us that words have bodies, that language is, in part, part of the physical world. Echoing Edmond Jabès she writes, repeatedly, “Your body is a book of thoughts that cannot be read in its entirety.” “Your body is a book of thoughts that cannot be read in its entirety”. Your body is a book of thoughts that cannot be read in its entirety.

I want a body I can live in

(Jess Arndt)

If we began instead with disorientation, with the body that loses its chair, then the descriptions we offer will be quite different.

(Sara Ahmed)

For the occasion to which I am inviting you to talk to me, I would like to talk about all and none of this, and especially about how one—we—can talk in other ways, when we talk to one another. Can we, and if we can how can we, take other directions when gathering for artistic and political dialogue? If we intentionally choose not to ‘trail behind’ modes of conversations oriented around the normative body, the ‘here’ from which the world unfolds, then what spaces can we generate?

What happens if the room is organized differently? If points for seating or standing are shaped in deviant formations; if bodies are choreographed not to sit or to stand but to walk or to lie down or to dance; if we are to discuss while eating or while cooking or while playing a game; if the dialogue lacks a moderator or if every one is asked to moderate; if lines are refused through proposing a room without guidelines or if lines are emphasized through explicitly rigid rules; if we must interrupt one another when we talk or if we are prohibited to talk at all?

Can we, and if we can how can we, document such an event, again in ways unfamiliar? What would happen if everyone present would document the event while it takes place; if documentation can only be based upon ones memory; if the outcome of the event must be described before the occasion itself has taken place; if documentation must only be analogue, if hearsay can be the only source; if documentation can neither be text nor images but only audio?

How would we move, perform our bodies, in a room choreographed to such skew lines? Would we become disoriented, and if so what directions would we take?

*Like ruins, the social can become a wilderness in which the soul too becomes wild, seeking
beyond itself, beyond its imagination.*

(Rebecca Solnit)

*The hope of changing directions is always that we do not know where some paths may take
us: risking departure from the straight and narrow, makes new futures possible, which might
involve going astray, getting lost, or even becoming queer.*

(Sara Ahmed)

My purpose of posing all these questions is not to find a path to answers. Rather, I long for the simple act of how to go looking for it; of how to travel according to a map with the desire to get lost; of how to explore possible and impossible modes for artistic and political dialogue. In the company of you—and a communion of likeminded—I would like to stage a collective attempt to translate these questions into an unfamiliar mode for how a room, bodies and linguistic acts can be organized, designed and choreographed. The effects of disturbing the order of things are uneven; things might even get quite uncomfortable. Yet discomfort allows things and bodies to move. When talking we might fail, and when doing so we might also gain.

*if body is as metaphor sticky – if body is always deep but deepest at its surface
– if analogy does not as flesh wither*

(Imri Sandström)

...at the archeological site – surface first, and they surface so vividly and so compellingly that I acknowledge them as my route to a reconstruction of a world, to an exploration of an interior life that was not written and to the revelation of a kind of truth.

(Toni Morrison)

I am not quite sure what we would talk about, on the occasion of talking that I am inviting you to, but I am guessing you might have suggestions. Just as when you talk, you write in ways that I am unfamiliar to; routes I do not master to wander. Your language is often a one of fiction – I have no idea of how to write fiction. Toni Morrison claims that fiction is, by definition, distinct from fact, but emphasize that to her, the crucial definition is “not the difference between fact and fiction, but the distinction between fact and truth”. Because “facts can exist without human intelligence, but truth cannot”. You recently let me know that your stories of fiction attempts to deal with the human container, and when you write them you engage in an excavation of self, as in an excavation of language. Your true experience is that our – your – bodies and minds do not match – that “between our interior and surface – distrust happens, blooms”. I think I would like you to tell me more about this, about how your words of fiction is a route to the revelation of a kind of truth, maybe one that I do not possess. One of disorientation and discomfort, one of memory of the nerves and the skin of the human container, one about how hard it is to find an easy home, when “trying to talk about things (feelings, bodies) that exist between forms”.

Love,

Lanna