

Genre-Queer: The Open Self and Open Genre in the Poetry and Poetics of Walt Whitman, Lyn Hejinian and Kazim Ali

Of Kazim Ali's book, *Bright Felon: Autobiographies and Cities*, Ali writes, "the 'genre-queerness' of that book...is specifically related to the idea that life-writing should follow the patterns of a 'by-the-book' formula...that a life fundamentally can't be 'queer'."¹ *Bright Felon*, published in 2009 by the Wesleyan Poetry Series of Wesleyan University Press, is a book of autobiographical poetry which on all levels of form, structure and language resists the notions of poetry, prose, memoir, autobiography, gender and self as fixed. Depending on who is reviewing or reading the book, its genre changes. The book is referred to as poetry, prose-poetry, "part memoir, part travelogue"² or, as on the back of the hardcover itself, "Lyric Essays." Thumbing through the pages of *Bright Felon*, I see none of the large blocks of text associated with essay writing, but instead a wild mixture of long sentences that spill to the next line, combined with short, broken phrases. The focus is clearly on sentence and line, not on paragraph. Surrounding and splintering this focus on sentence however, is the at times purposefully ignored structure of the chapters. Each chapter is written about a different city Ali has lived in or visited and the chapters themselves move from most to least recent, in effect telling the narrative backwards. These structures and the formal mode of time in the book as a whole are continuously bent and exploded, intentionally giving the reader no fixed timeline or space for the narrative to operate in. Ali rejects any of the above definitions of the book or what genre it inhabits, calling it instead, "genre-queer."

Lyn Hejinian, Walt Whitman and Kazim Ali all wrote literary autobiographies which invoke their poetics and challenge conventional notions of form, genre and self. In this paper I will examine the interconnectedness, differences and implications of the

openness argued for in Whitman and Hejinian's poetics. I will apply these theories to Kazim Ali's *Bright Felon: Autobiography and Cities* to show how this book incorporates both Hejinian and Whitman's contrasting views of an "open text." I argue that the writing within and creating of a queer genre, creates a space that both embraces a queer self and refuses to deny it of its alterity. An autobiography that is poetry, prose, essay and poetics is also an autobiography that is none of these. This continuous creation allows for the narration of a self that is both other and not-other, an expansive self whose identity is not fixed even as it is queered.

The structuring of this queer self, which is both centered and de-centered, both enters and is entered, creates a fluid boundary between self and other. In this is located one of the political ramifications of these works. Questioning of the positioning and of the boundaries between self and other leads directly to the means in which one interacts with and conceives of others. Writing which creates an unbounded self existing in an unbounded space automatically questions the boundaries that exist between people outside of the page and usurps the authority of these set boundaries. Throughout this paper, I will identify moments in Lyn Hejinian and Walt Whitman's poetics, which, through insistence on doubt and openness, allow for a similar interpretation of space and self. I will be looking at poems within *Bright Felon* as well as the book as a whole, because I read *Bright Felon* as a series of poems which interlink to each other. The structure of the entire piece is implicated and tied to the inner-workings of each individual poem.

Ali began investigating the intersections of genre and gender when asked what to label *Bright Felon*: "It occurred to me that both gender and genre are external labels in

which social context is at stake.”³ Ali previously referred to his writing as “trans-genre” or “trans(gressive) genre,”⁴ “drawing from, of course, transgender theory.”⁵ These terms “delineated the quality of moving from the anarchy of language and structure/form possible in poetry to the frame of intention offered by the essay.”⁶

The term “genre-queer” sounds and looks extremely similar to the term “gender-queer.” Ali decided on the term after reading *GenderQueer: Voices Beyond the Sexual Binary*, a book of essays and personal accounts edited by Riki Wilchins, Joan Nestle and Clare Howell.⁷ In describing, *Bright Felon*, Ali rejects the labels “lyric essay,’ ‘prose poetry,’ ‘flash fiction,’” as “cop outs” and uses “genre-queer” to locate the “queer space...that lives between genres.”⁸

With the term, “genre-queer,” Ali explicitly challenges the parameters of genre and gender. Ali states that he is multiply queered, not only by his sexuality but because he is a Muslim in the United States and “God-obsessed in a secular society.”⁹ *Bright Felon*, as both autobiography and exploration of the process of creating the identity of a queer person, could not be told within a rigidly controlled genre. Instead, with *Bright Felon*, Ali creates a text which inhabits the spaces of poetry, prose and poetics and in doing so shatters the definitions of these terms.

Throughout this paper, I will use the term “queer” to express not only non-hetero-normative sexualities but as Ali writes, “a queer space...that lives between the genres.”¹⁰ I will use this term to express the position, both in terms of writing and self, of alterity, in-between-ness and ultimately a dissolving of binaries into something which is boundless. I will use this word to describe a space and self existing in many spheres at once; tethered to none, thereby creating its own arena. I will focus less on the sexuality of

these authors and more on the desires implicit in the texts for interaction with language, self and others.

The most important aspects of Lyn Hejinian's poetics for this paper are found in and around the terms "xenia" and "open text." In the essay, "Some Notes Towards a Poetics," first published in 2000 in *Fence 3*, Hejinian writes: "I espouse a poetics of affirmation. I also espouse a poetics of uncertainty, of doubt, difficulty and strangeness."¹¹ Inseparable from moments of delight in language are instances that jar, confuse and unsettle both reader and poet. These poetics are inherently "contradictory, dispersive and incoherent while sustaining an ethos of linkage."¹² Though her poetry includes moments of strangeness, they are not meant to be moments of alienation because the linkage between reader and word, comfort and discomfort, is a means of connection. She characterizes this linkage with the "figure" of *xenos*, a Greek word which is the root of the seemingly contradictory English words "guest" and "host."¹³ It is the space where these two words meet, in a "guest/host relationship," that her poetry inhabits.¹⁴ This relationship, called *xenia* appears solely within "an encounter, a mutual and reciprocal contextualization"¹⁵ wherein both the guest and the host come into existence by meeting each other. It is important to note that "*xenia*" is also the title of a book of poetry Hejinian translated from the Russian with Elena Balashova written by her friend, Arkadii Dragomoschenko. The book, *Xenia* was the result of a "friendship that developed between the two poets" as "over the years, both struggled to learn the other's language."¹⁶ Through multiple instances of *xenia*, Hejinian became Dragomoschenko's translator and "introducer of Americans to the new Russian poetry."¹⁷

For Hejinian, “every encounter produces . . . a *xenia*.”¹⁸ This encounter is especially important in acts of speech, Hejinian argues that it is the reason for speech: “We tell in order to become guests and host to each other and to things—or to become guests and hosts to life.”¹⁹ *Xenia*, this moment of strangeness, is the means in which we connect to life outside of our selves. Only through a moment of foreignness can we meld with others, in this moment “the foreigner proceeds. . . and becomes . . . a guest”²⁰ I argue that this space of *xenia* is a queer-space: it both exists between and outside the dualities of self and other, either/or, and inhabits a borderland that is also definitively its own space.

Hejinian seeks this moment of *xenia*, this creation of a queer-space, in order to interact with the world in her poetry, poetics and politics. The Atelos Project, which she founded in 1995, is “devoted to publishing, under the sign of poetry, writing that challenges the conventional definitions of poetry.”²¹ The motivation behind this project is that such conventional definitions “have tended to isolate poetry from intellectual life, arrest its development and curtail its impact.”²² All of the work published by the Atelos project “is involved in some way with crossing traditional genre boundaries,” in effect, creating *xenia* between genres, readers, text and reader’s expectations of that text, writing in, what Kazim Ali would call, genre-queer.²³

This movement towards *xenia*, recognizing the interaction with others as essential to life experience, is prevalent in Hejinian’s political work as well. In her poetry as well as her political action, “language is being used to negotiate the boundaries between public and private life and to join them.”²⁴ In an introduction to the Solidarity Reading in April, 2010, before reading her poetry, Hejinian spoke about her work with the Solidarity Alliance, a group she founded that unites faculty, students and union groups to resist the

cuts to educational funding and tuition hikes on the University of California campuses. She notes the value of “making common cause” with groups that are “very diverse and often conflicting,”²⁵ arguing that through these meetings and linkages, progress can occur. For Hejinian, the question of how poetry and politics relate to one another is a “vexed and complicated one.”²⁶ Her desire is not to answer this question but to keep asking it and keep enacting its possible answers in her life and work.

Hejinian explains the concept of an “open text” in her essay “The Rejection of Closure.” As compared to a “closed text” where “all the elements of the work are directed towards a single reading of it,”²⁷ an “open text” is a piece of writing or means of writing in which “all the elements are maximally excited...ideas and things exceed (without deserting) argument that they have taken into the dimension of the work.”²⁸ The verb “exceed” is especially important to Hejinian’s concept of an “open text”; the ideas in the work of art are not fully contained within the work, the work is open to multiple interpretations and reader participation. Because the ideas and the meaning of the language used are not fully contained within the work, the work is not fully under the control of the author. This rejection of the authority of the writer over the reader, rejects, “by analogy, the authority implicit in other (social, economic, cultural) hierarchies.”²⁹

“Open texts” emphasize process and one of the structural devices that Hejinian believes “may serve to ‘open’ a text”³⁰ is creating limitations prior to writing. The writer determines at the onset what the writing process will be and lets these decisions shape the writing. This choice foregrounds creativity and chance while resisting “reduction and commodification.”³¹ For an example of this process-oriented writing, Hejinian cites Bernadette Meyer’s *Midwinter’s Day*, which was written during one day: in this instance,

the author stopped writing “because one has run out of units...not because a conclusion has been reached nor ‘everything’ said.”³²

Hejinian’s own book, *My life*, follows a strict, process derived structure. The first edition, written when Hejinian was 37, consists of 37 sections containing 37 sentences. *My life* expands as Hejinian grows, in the next edition, written eight years later, she added eight more sections and eight sentences to each section. In 2003, she published, *My life in the nineties*. These continuous additions insist that Hejinian is making no conclusions, and the imposed structure, made “by a prior decision...gives the impression that [the work] begins and ends arbitrarily.”³³ The language within the books remains extremely open to interpretation; through the use of hypotaxis and repetition, “meaning is set in motion,” postponing “the completion of thought indefinitely.”³⁴ The structure reflects the body as it ages, but the language’s refusal to be closed allows for unending interpretations, thereby creating an expansive and unfixed expression of self even within the confines of a strict structure.

To further elucidate Hejinian’s theory, I will look to the means in which these concepts of “xenia” and “open texts” are enacted in Kazim Ali’s, *Bright Felon*. Though I would not argue that *Bright Felon* is a book of “Language” poetry, I see many of Hejinian’s theories explored in this text especially in terms of process, structure and openness.

Excavating the spaces of memory around Rhinebeck, New York, Ali writes “At the Laundromat, I sit washing clothes, reading *A Border Comedy*./ If only.” Which leads the reader to ask: If only, what? If only borders were a comedy, a space for humor, for doubt, instead of restriction and violence? If only borders themselves could be

eliminated? If only the blurring of borders between genres, lexicons and selves could exist in life as it does in Hejinian's *A Border Comedy*? Ali does not clarify these lines but in them he focuses the reader's attention both on the language of the work, through a reference to Hejinian, and to the ways in which borders operate within and outside of the text. *Bright Felon* is full of such seeming non sequiturs, which in actuality investigate the notion that digressing from the narrative, as Hejinian writes in *A Border Comedy*, "teach[es] one to digress," to open.³⁵ The space created by genre-queer is all about boundaries; both by defying their relevance and allowing for those who exist between, outside or on them.

As Hejinian argues for in "A Rejection of Closure," Ali determined the structure before beginning to write *Bright Felon*. Ali made the decision to divide the book into sections based on cities he had lived in "before there was even a sentence of text."³⁶ The choice of the book's narrative structure, "to start at my present moment and work my way backward," came before he began writing, as did "the constraint of writing at least five pages on each city."³⁷ Within these structural restrictions is language and narrative open to interpretation thereby exemplifying the struggle to have form "make the primary chaos (the raw material, the unorganized impulse and information...) articulate."³⁸ By writing within these seemingly arbitrary constraints, Ali's work implies that "the words and ideas...continue beyond the work."³⁹

Throughout Ali's work, is the insistence that the reader holds a "broken story." This is not a failing however, but a success, in Ali's words, "Always in the broken story there is more to tell."⁴⁰ These words put further emphasis on the role of the reader, it is the reader's choice to put the story together again, in whatever way the reader sees fit or

furthermore to allow it to remain broken, glittering and reflecting though not whole. A broken story that proclaims its own brokenness is one that does not need to be fixed. Instead it is one that can remain open, inhabiting an unfixed, queer space.

An important aspect of Hejinian's definition of an "open text" is that the text "invites participation, rejects the authority of the writer of reader."⁴¹ In the "open text," the writer "relinquishes total control and challenges authority as a principle and control as a motive."⁴² From the first poem in *Bright Felon*, "Marble Hill," Ali invites the reader to participate in the interpretation of the work by interrupting the beginnings of a narrative with the phrase "Any pronoun here can be misread. He can mean you can mean I."⁴³ A similar moment occurs in the poem "Beacon," after a series of lines containing the pronoun 'you,' Ali writes: "You could be he or I could be."⁴⁴ This statement completely disrupts any notion of the text as fixed, as containing one meaning. The statement that "any pronoun here can be misread" does not state that every pronoun can be misread or even provide clues to which pronouns can be misread. The phrase "He can mean you can mean I" further jars the reader, one thinks they are receiving a code for how to read the piece, but the code itself is garbled, open to multiple meanings and perhaps endless readings.

These lines also call into question the ability of pronouns to name or explain a self, an argument that has an important place in a queer text. These lines create the space of *xenia*, where the guest meets and merges with the host, where he merges with you and I. By challenging the veracity and validity of pronouns within the narrative, Ali challenges their role outside of writing and their ability to enclose and describe the self. Through allowing for the fluidity of pronouns within the text, Ali argues for their fluidity

outside of literature and in the conception of self and others. Ali's work presents not only for a fluid concept of gender but of the connection between self and others. If "he can mean you can mean I", where does the self end and the other begin?

The repetition of these ideas and others throughout *Bright Felon* is another example of implementing literary techniques to create an "open text." "Repetition," writes Hejinian, "challenges our inclination to isolate, identify and limit the burden of meaning given to an event."⁴⁵ In an "open text" instead of unifying the text or creating a lulling effect, Hejinian argues that "repetition disrupts the initial apparent meaning scheme."⁴⁶ Throughout *Bright Felon*, Ali uses repetition to further disrupt any fixed interpretation of events and language. The anecdotes he repeats are sometimes contradictory, or provide further information without further clarification. Stories from the Quran or other Islamic texts are repeated but appear conflated or with different endings, making the stories meld and the characters' pronoun's meld with the narrator's "I." In the first line of the book, the reader is told that "Paradise lies beneath the feet of your mother,"⁴⁷ but the narrator does not know whether this often heard line is scripture or *hadith*. Later the line reappears, not with any clarifications of its origin, but instead with a complication of its meaning: "Paradise lies beneath the feet of your mother or does Paradise lie at all."⁴⁸ The wordplay here, where the word "lie" could mean dwelling, telling untruths, or existing, delves into the materiality of language. Like the jokes in Hejinian's "Rejection of Closure"—"Why did the moron eat hay? To feed his hoarse voice"—this language "delights in the ambiguity resulting from the discrepancy" of language.⁴⁹ Finally, in "Barcelona (An Epilogue,)" are the lines, "Will you find paradise that lies./ Mother who lies at the bottom of the sea in the night I will find you,"⁵⁰ which

further expand and multiply the ramifications of the language used. The reader is never given a closed interpretation of these lines but can instead play with the words themselves and in doing so open further interpretations of their meaningfulness.

It is essential to look not just at individual lines and sections of *Bright Felon*, but at the text as a whole. Throughout the book, Ali asserts that the narrative is told backwards. The implications and the means in which this is carried out is mentioned throughout: referring to a previously alluded to anecdote, Ali writes “A part of the story I haven’t gotten to yet. Though it was already years ago”⁵¹ and later “Drunk year, stone year, tell it all backwards so what’s before comes after.”⁵² The book is broken into sections, but the apparent structures of the book continuously fall apart and complicate themselves. Within each chapter are allusions to other places which have often not been mentioned yet. While going backwards through life, Ali goes forward through the conception of self, the reader receives more information about the choices made and the circumstances of events in the beginning of the book even as temporally we retreat previous to them.

By the end of the book, the narrator knows more than at the beginning though the events of narration happened before this self knowledge. In this way the narrative is further complicated: time is reversed but in the proposed backward movements the narrative also reaches forward refusing in each section to stay within the boundaries imposed by the text. The form, seemingly rigid and arbitrary, continuously rattles itself and calls into question the possibility of a linear narrative. In doing so, the form of *Bright Felon* becomes, as Hejinian calls for, “not a fixture but an activity” something which is

fluid, active and moving, which while articulating the chaos of life, does not deprive “it of its capacious vitality, its generative power”.⁵³

On a syntactical level, the sentences within *Bright Felon* reflect this activity of form. Almost all of the lines in *Bright Felon* are finished with a period. This gives a halting and at first closed feeling to the lines. The periods, however, occur even when the line reads syntactically as a question or when the line breaks mid-clause, creating an incomplete sentence, for example with: “What tongue is yours./...Are you a Muslim or will you love.”⁵⁴ and “What willful or wander waited.”⁵⁵ These call into question both the authority of punctuation to determine sentence structure and the desire to create a complete sentence. Instead of enclosing a complete thought, the periods act as walls that bounce the reader back into the words, asking the reader to reengage and reinterpret them. The reader finds themselves in a hall of mirrors, the periods wrapping the text in its own reflection, while challenging the ability of that reflection to depict reality. Even those lines which seem to speak directly to the lines above or below, due to their isolation from each other (each line is separated by a double space) and the periods at their end, the apparent hypotaxis is debatable. There is little enjambment in the piece, each line exists like a separate planet orbiting on the page, linked perhaps to the lines directly before it or after it, perhaps to lines chapters away or chapters not yet written, or singular unto itself like an asteroid cast into space: “Did I learn myself then.”⁵⁶ “What shores are these.”⁵⁷ “Now waterfront.”⁵⁸

In addition to and in communication with his poetry, Ali writes articles and essays that engage directly with the current political climate of the United States. In his newest book, *Orange Alert: Essays on Poetry, Art and the Architecture of Silence*, Ali writes

about such varied topics as the killing of civilians in Iraq during the Clinton Administration and a bomb-scare which resulted after he dropped a box of old poetry manuscripts by the garbage to be recycled.⁵⁹ Through these essays, Ali engages directly in the politics that his poetry alludes to: through emphasis on a queer self, he questions validity of violence enacted on others in the name of ensuring one's one safety and the role of fear of others in furthering this violence.

I will now move to an analysis of Walt Whitman's poetics in terms of the creation of an 'open text', and an application of these poetics to a reading of *Bright Felon*. For Whitman, his move into experimental poetry coincided with his increasing radical politics.⁶⁰ Though Whitman did not publish *Leaves of Grass* until he was 37, he had been writing journalism for over a decade. Previous to the free verse of *Leaves of Grass*, he also wrote fictionalized accounts of his own life and moralistic, sensational temperance pieces, notably, *Franklin Evans; or, The Inebriate*, which sold more copies than all of the editions of *Leaves of Grass* combined.⁶¹ But as Whitman's politics became more radical, so did his writing. Instead of focusing on polemics against slavery, he began creating a new form which would address the extreme consequences of alterity, while seeking a means to overcome the separation between self and other. In the notebooks which contain rough drafts of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman writes: "I go with the slaves of the earth equally with the masters/And I will stand between the masters and the slaves,/ Entering into both so that both shall understand me alike."⁶²

Here, in structure and content, Whitman is challenging the divisions between both people and genres. He writes in free-verse, which, removed from the structures of meter and rhyme, exists somewhere between prose and poetry, between speech and song. The

content, too, envisions a queered space. At a time when the United States was dividing itself into two ever more distinct sides, Whitman refuses to accept this dualism and dwells in the space *between* master and slave. This both denies the boundary between self (Whitman as a white man and more obviously a “master”) and other (the slaves) and activates a space where both coexist. That in these early drafts the poet “enters” into both master and slave, both self and other, reveals both an eroticism essential to Whitman’s poetics and the beginnings of the all encompassing “I” of the poet in *Leaves of Grass* who enters into all and who, in turn, is entered into by all.

The otherness and experimentation found in the structure of *Leaves of Grass* rejects the current authorities of the time, who dictated that poetry must be metered and rhyming. This, as Hejinian would argue, creates an implicit rejection of other authorities, namely those who place the soul above the body, men above women and whites above blacks. The content of the text rejects these authorities explicitly throughout: “I am the poet of the body,/ And I am the poet of the soul”,⁶³ “For me mine male and female,”⁶⁴ and the lines in which the poet cares for a runaway slave,⁶⁵ or admires black people at work equally as he admires whites.⁶⁶

The *Preface* to the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, though written in prose, exhibits a similar multiplicity of genres as found the poems themselves. The language alters between vernacular, poetic and journalistic. The sentences are long, often without conclusions, or written in fragments. Series of ellipses connect disjointed thoughts or refuse to conclude statements. Just as his language does not side with one lexicon or another, so, when writing about the future of poetry, Whitman creates no rigid prescriptions. He insists that “the great poet has less a marked style and is more the

channel of thoughts and things...and is the free channel of himself.”⁶⁷ The great American poetic works of the future, are just that; they exist in the future and have yet to be written. Though “the expression of the American poet is to be transcendent and new,” Whitman proclaims that the poems he speaks of exist “where there are now no solid forms.”⁶⁸ He writes that the future poetry of America will be “indirect and not direct or descriptive or epic”⁶⁹ and he concludes that American poetry, like the nation that it comes from, “rejects none, it permits all.”⁷⁰

This refusal to dictate the course of poetry, to prescribe what will constitute a poem, represents the utmost in openness. Whitman’s poetics deny fixed notions of normalcy and instead embrace the idea that there are endless ways in which to live: “The messages of great poets to each man and woman are, Come to us on equal terms...we affirm there can be unnumbered Supremes.”⁷¹ This insistence on multiplicity and the continuous contradictions within Whitman’s work explicitly undermine a closed reading of the self and triumph a queer space marked by fluidity both on and off the page.

That Whitman’s poetics are open is not to say they are completely without concepts or frameworks. Most important in his poetics is that this multiplicity is filtered through the poet, a body/soul/self that is deeply personal as well as expansive. Throughout Whitman’s writing is the merging of the self with divinity, poetry and nation. He writes that the United States itself is “essentially the greatest poem,”⁷² American poetry “incarnates its geography and natural life,”⁷³ and the American poet spans between the coasts, “from east to west and reflects what is between them.”⁷⁴ A poet must write with “perfect, personal candor,”⁷⁵ must “dismiss whatever insults [the poet’s] own soul”⁷⁶ but in doing so, the poet is absorbed by both poetry and nation. The poet’s flesh

“becomes a great poem”⁷⁷ and the poet’s greatness is judged by whether “his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it.”⁷⁸ Through this double absorption, the poet becomes a poem and the poem becomes flesh. The nation becomes the poet and the poet becomes the nation. Becoming a poet constitutes both the loss of a strictly defined self and the gain of all the poet wishes to absorb. This interexchange between poet and subject, self and other, creates a queer space that allows for a queer self that defies the boundaries designated by a closed society.

Yet, despite these open poetics, there is throughout Whitman’s work the contradictory desire to enclose. This is seen both in his preface and in his works of poetry; no doubt, he was aware of these tendencies and writes in the final edition of *Leaves of Grass* “Do I contradict myself?/Very well then I contradict myself, (I am large, I contain multitudes.)”⁷⁹ While the first line’s indulgence in contradiction bring to mind Oscar Wilde, an admirer of Whitman who visited him twice in 1882,⁸⁰ they also suggest a strong embrace of openness. No subject or text can be closed if it admits that it contradicts itself. However, the final lines introduce another contradictory element: that of containment. Yes, the self is multiple, but at times it is also contained.

The first edition of *Leaves of Grass* was written before the Civil War and addresses the U.S.A. as a united nation. In the essay, “A Backward Glance O’er Travel’d Roads,” which acts as a postscript to the final edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman writes that without the years spent on the battlefields and in the military hospitals during the Civil War, his book “would not now be existing.”⁸¹ The carnage that Whitman witnessed while caring for the wounded both on and off the battlefield during these years gave full proof of the consequences of a divided nation, as the United States was, “though only in

her early youth, already to the hospital brought.”⁸² After the Civil War, the trauma of these events lingered and, referring to the U.S., Whitman wrote that “the fear of conflicting and irreconcilable interiors, and the lack of a common skeleton, knitting all close, continually haunt me.”⁸³

In these lines I see the key to Whitman’s contradiction between openness and containment: the body. In describing the Civil War, Whitman personifies America as a woman who, though she is young and therefore should be healthy, is brought to a hospital. He expresses his worries about the future of the country by saying that its interiors are "irreconcilable" and that it has no "common skeleton." Herein lies the dilemma: a line may explode beyond the page, meter be broken, the words themselves fall apart, but the body, through which Whitman experiences poetry and asks readers to do the same, must stay whole to stay healthy. During the Civil War he saw the acute devastation caused by division to the body. While searching for his brother who enlisted, he reports seeing piles of amputated limbs, “a heap of feet, arms, legs &c under a tree in front of a hospital.”⁸⁴ His intimate relationships with former Confederate soldiers, especially Peter Doyle to whom he remained close all his life,⁸⁵ may be read as evidence of attempted union between the warring sides of the nation, self and other, within his own body. Though Whitman was an abolitionist and a Unionist, in these relationships, he took the stance of the “I” in his poetry, attempting to stand behind all sides, while taking none.

Whitman’s continued insistence on wholeness is rooted in this knowledge of the body, but the contrary ideas of openness and fluidity are founded there as well. For, just as the body must be whole, so must it be porous, open to receive and to expel, just as the rivers in his poetry which as fluid conduits both allow in and let out water.

Whitman's poetry contains long lists of American geographic sites and categorized people. Writes Byrne R. S. Fone, these catalogs “do not add to definition” of the United States and its peoples; instead, “they destabilize and even destroy it, constantly admitting dubiety about the possibilities of defining what they list.”⁸⁶ In the very structure Whitman uses to attempt to define his subjects, he expresses the inability to define them. In “A Backward Glance O’er Travel’d Roads” Whitman writes, “in my opinion, no definition that has ever been made fully encloses the name Poetry.”⁸⁷ Even cursory readings of his poetry find the connection between the flesh and poem, the soul and the body. From this statement one can also conclude that no definition has ever been made that encloses the self. At the end of his life, despite attempts to create a unified whole, to keep perfecting his work unto his deathbed, Whitman willingly relinquishes control both as an author and a critic, writing that the “strongest and sweetest songs yet remain to be sung.”⁸⁸

Towards the end of *Bright Felon*, Ali writes that he finds comfort in the Muslim concept that there are 104 books of God, “only four of which are know” and he writes that the *Song of Songs* is one of these unknowns, “somewhere unrevealed as such.”⁸⁹ Whitman’s influence is prevalent throughout *Bright Felon*, especially in the emphasis on questioning authority, personal record and the body. The openness and experimentation of the form of *Bright Felon*, further connect it to Whitman, who, of *Leaves of Grass*, wrote that he considers its theory “experimental” and its most definitive quality that of “suggestiveness,” because he “round[s] and finish[es] little.”⁹⁰

Whitman tells the poet “re-examine all you have been told in school, or church or in any book...and your very flesh will be a great poem...not only in its words but in the

silent lines of its lips and face and between the lashes of your eyes.”⁹¹ Throughout *Bright Felon*, Ali interrogates the doctrines he learned as a child. In the poem, “Marble Hill,” Ali writes, “Says the Quran, ‘This is the Book. In it there can be no doubt.’”⁹² On the very next page, however, are the words: “The Arabic line ‘This is the Book. In it there is no doubt’ can also be read as ‘This is, no doubt, the Book.’”⁹³ In the essay, “Poetics of Islam,” Ali further investigates this discovery: “Growing up under the shadow of such an authoritarian dictum,” that there is no doubt within the Quran, “I continually wondered at my own doubts...Only last year...I read a new rendering of the same verse: ‘There is no doubt this book is a guide for the faithful.’”⁹⁴ Doubt has an essential place in Ali’s spirituality and his conception of himself as a poet. Ali argues that this doubt is foundational both to Islam and poetry: “Islam as a system of belief, like poetry itself, incorporates doubt and questioning into its ‘fundamental’ fiber,” because at beginning of organized Muslim belief “you had to make a choice.”⁹⁵ (Here, Ali refers to the choice that divided Sunni and Shia’ Muslims.) Ali emphasizes the uncertainty foundational to Islam through the required pilgrimage to Mecca, which leads the faithful to a circling of a space which “like every mosque—is empty inside.”⁹⁶

Through his insistence on doubt and rupture as central to Islam and poetry, Ali questions whether these beliefs were ever fixed, thereby inserting fluidity into the very warp and weft of faith. This further destabilizes the notion of a fixed self, opening space both within Islam and poetry for that which is queered. As a queer, Muslim, Indian, American writer, Ali’s work continuously redefines these terms and expectations.

Similar to Whitman’s assertion in the essay, “A Backward Glance O’er Travel’d Roads” that *Leaves of Grass* is “an attempt...to put *a Person*, a human being (myself)...

freely, fully and truly on record,”⁹⁷ of *Bright Felon*, Ali writes “I tried as hard as I could to tell the story of my life the only way I knew how.”⁹⁸ From this statement, I do not think Ali believes that he is incapable of writing a conventional memoir in either clearly delineated poetry or prose, but rather that a story in such a form would not be the story of Ali’s life. Any attempts to de-queer, to normalize Ali’s life would deny the validity of Ali’s experiences as a multiply queered person. The drive of both *Leaves of Grass* and *Bright Felon* is similar. *Bright Felon* expresses an intensely personal and unique narrative, one that, like *Leaves of Grass*, is directly shaped by the sexuality of the author and the social conditions of the narrative’s locations.

On one level, *Bright Felon* narrates Ali’s process of coming to terms with his body and its desires despite the social ramifications of these desires. Throughout the book, the body is a conduit for desire and language, and a means of representing space. Like Whitman, Ali makes direct reference to the body as an inhabitable space, “your back is a nation,”⁹⁹ and writes in erotic language that ties the experiences of the body to bodies of water, “his body, the memory of him...lying against me or inside me, making a space in my skin like the depression in earth after the boat has been pulled back into the water.”¹⁰⁰

The emphasis on the body is relevant in narrative content as well as language. Ali narrates his rejection of his sexuality and his attempts to fit himself into the restrictions of his family through the attempted destruction of his body: “Came pushing food away and allowed myself to shrink and shrink, to become thin and long like a bone or like Brancusi’s wing.”¹⁰¹ Ali further expresses the repression of his sexuality as not being able to speak or to write and when he is able to write, he does so on his own flesh, “I wrote

long letters on my arms and ankles. How the body pulls long to look for a poem.”¹⁰² The body pulling for a poem is also the body pulling for itself, for a mean to express itself expansively. As in Whitman’s writing, the ideas of self, body and poem are merged and the body described in these poems is porous. Just as in Whitman, the images of rivers and moving bodies of water which, “do not embouchure where they spend themselves more than they embouchure into him,”¹⁰³ are integral to *Bright Felon*. Throughout the narrative, Ali interacts with the rivers moving through his cities, as he looks “backwards...through the stretch of his body”¹⁰⁴ ending finally in Barcelona, where the mouths of rivers open to the sea. Neither exclusively masculine or feminine, the body in *Bright Felon* both enters and is entered: “Everything leaked from me out onto the ground and then back in. Out and then back in.”¹⁰⁵

In *Bright Felon*, through the reexamination of what Ali had been taught and by delighting in a porous body, Ali’s flesh incarnate in the book becomes a poem. The narrative and language moves, as Whitman writes, like a body, “backwards as well as forward slueing.”¹⁰⁶ As in Whitman’s *Preface*, the reader sees Ali’s body, eyelids and lips, in the lines of the poetry, the desires of the body merging with the desire for speech. The refusal to dismiss the body’s desires merges the poet with poem, creating a text which reads as flesh.

Writing about the self stretches it outside the body, but Ali refuses to leave the body behind in a quest for an expansive self. Like in Whitman, the use of the erotic in *Bright Felon* is a doubling back, the writing is an attempt to create an expansive self, but it does so through exploration of the senses, by ultimately refusing to deny the body, no

matter the pressures to do otherwise. In this way, the book incarnates a queered body existing in the queered space of an expansive genre.

Though both Hejinian and Whitman call for open writing and texts, it is important to note that they do so in vastly different ways. Hejinian focuses on openness in language and form while Whitman focuses on expansive content and unstructured verse. Despite their means, both writers create a space within their works for an expansion both of the self and concepts of alterity.

In terms of the intersection between politics and art, both Hejinian and Whitman state that how this is enacted varies from work to work and from writer to writer. Hejinian says “there is nothing that degrades an aesthetic literary creation in it becoming political and likewise in a work that is not ostensibly political, there is nothing irresponsible or denying about it.”¹⁰⁷ Whitman writes that “the attitude of great poets is to cheer up slaves and horrify despots” but that the poet should do this indirectly: “Come nigh them a while and though they neither speak nor advise you shall learn the faithful American lesson.”¹⁰⁸ Though Whitman himself often strays from this notion, he argues that the “lesson,” should be contained within the form and images of the poetry and not stated explicitly. Hejinian posits that artists might look to the tales of *1001 Nights*, and write in a way that teaches or reeducates, but like “Sharazad does, which is not to explain or explicate the tales that she tells, she just tells them.”¹⁰⁹ For Hejinian and Whitman, poetry is the space for the mind to encounter and imagine freedom, and to challenge hierarchies, but it is not the space that necessarily prescribes how this freedom should come about outside of the text.

Ali's, Whitman's and Hejinian's work all express expansive selves through open language, structure and genre. Their lives, as well, reflect an activism based in the arbitrariness of the divisions between people. Neither Hejinian's, Whitman's or Ali's poetry are polemics, yet their works are deeply political. They are not manifestos or guidebooks for a set of political actions, but rather spaces in which the reader might imagine a broader sense of self, a self that defies the boundaries laid upon it. This space, created through both language and structure, sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly, is inherently queer. It posits a queered position, where multiplicity, fluidity and difference are not only allowed but embraced. These poetries and poetics, written in genre-queer, place an emphasis on a queer space, which, in turn, allow for a queer self; one that is expansive and that blends the boundaries between self and other. In creating this space in their writing, these writers allow the reader to imagine how it might exist off the page, while leaving its enactment completely in the reader's hands. By asking, as Whitman does, "Who need be afraid of the merge?"¹¹⁰ these writers allow for an expansive self that merges self and other in the intimate, exciting, and protected space of a personal reading, allowing for the extrapolation of that queer space onto the world.

Notes:

¹ Poetry Society of America, Q&A: American Poetry, Interview with Kazim Ali: http://www.poetrysociety.org/psa/poetry/crossroads/qa_american_poetry/page_10/

² Poets.org: Books Noted: Bright Felon: Autobiography and Cities
<http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/21556>

³ Email correspondence with Kazim Ali, December, 5, 2010.

⁴ Kazim Ali's Facebook Group Page:
<http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=10294801098>

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- ⁶ Correspondence, 12/5/2010.
- ⁷ Correspondence, 12/5/2010.
- ⁸ Correspondence, 12/5/2010.
- ⁹ Ali, Kazim, University of Colorado, Boulder: Poetry Reading, November 15, 2010.
- ¹⁰ Correspondence, 12/5/2010.
- ¹¹ Hejinian, Lyn, "Some Notes Towards a Poetics." American Women Poets in the 21st Century: Where Lyric Meets Language, ed. Claudia Rankine & Juliana Spar, Wesleyan University Press: 2002, pg 235.
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- ¹⁸ Hejinian, Poetics 236
- ¹⁹ Hejinian, Poetics 238
- ²⁰ Hejinian, Poetics 236
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- ²⁵ Lyn Hejinian, Introduction to Solidarity Reading, April 1, 2010, University of California, Berkeley: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i2Lfltpxts8>
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- ²⁸ Hejinian, Closure 43
- ²⁹ Hejinian, Closure 43
- ³⁰ Hejinian, Closure 43
- ³¹ Hejinian, Closure 43
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- ³³ Hejinian, Closure 47
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- ³⁶ Email Correspondence with Kazim Ali, December 9, 2010.
- ³⁷ Correspondence, 12/9/2010.
- ³⁸ Hejinian, Closure 47
- ³⁹ Hejinian, Closure 47
- ⁴⁰ Ali, Kazim, Bright Felon: Autobiographies and Cities, Wesleyan University Press: 2009, pg 7.
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- ⁴² Hejinian, Closure 43

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- ⁴⁴ Ali, Bright Felon 17
- ⁴⁵ Hejinian, Closure 44
- ⁴⁶ Hejinian, Closure 44
- ⁴⁷ Ali, Bright Felon 1
- ⁴⁸ Ali, Bright Felon 60
- ⁴⁹ Hejinian, Closure 49
- ⁵⁰ Ali, Bright Felon 95
- ⁵¹ Ali, Bright Felon 7
- ⁵² Ali, Bright Felon 57
- ⁵³ Hejinian, Closure 47
- ⁵⁴ Ali, Bright Felon 96
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- ⁶² Notebook with trial lines for *Leaves of Grass*,
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- ⁶³ Whitman, Walt, *Leaves of Grass (1855)*. Whitman: Poetry and Prose, Library of Congress, College Editions: 1996, pg. 46.
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- ⁶⁵ Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* 1855, 35
- ⁶⁶ Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* 1855, 37
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- ⁶⁹ Whitman, Preface 8
- ⁷⁰ Whitman, Preface 26
- ⁷¹ Whitman, Preface 14
- ⁷² Whitman, Preface 5
- ⁷³ Whitman, Preface 7
- ⁷⁴ Whitman, Preface 7
- ⁷⁵ Whitman, Preface 19
- ⁷⁶ Whitman, Preface 11
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- ⁸⁸ Whitman, Backward Glance 672
- ⁸⁹ Ali, Bright Felon 89
- ⁹⁰ Whitman, Backward Glance 657
- ⁹¹ Whitman, Preface 11
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- ⁹⁴ Ali, Kazim: "Poetics of Islam." *XCP* 20 (2008):
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- ⁹⁷ Whitman, Backward Glance 671
- ⁹⁸ Poetry Society of America, Q&A: American Poetry, Interview with Kazim Ali
- ⁹⁹ Ali, Bright Felon 61
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- ¹⁰² Ali, Bright Felon 59
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- ¹⁰⁴ A, Bright Felon 66
- ¹⁰⁵ Ali, Bright Felon 73
- ¹⁰⁶ Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* 1855, 37
- ¹⁰⁷ Hejinian, Introduction to Solidarity Reading
- ¹⁰⁸ Whitman, Preface 17
- ¹⁰⁹ Hejinian, Introduction to Solidarity Reading
- ¹¹⁰ Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* 1855, 33