

Some Notes on a Fall in Los Angeles

By Litia Perta

It is a cold night in the end of October 2009. Los Angeles is nowhere in my mind, nor is it anywhere in the future of my possibilities. I funnel with my friend Simone, bulky in down jackets scarves hats, into a modest lecture hall on Washington Square. The Institute of African American Affairs at New York University is hosting a series of panel conversations dedicated to E?douard Glissant. This one is the first: on opacity.

I have followed Simone here, likely resisting being out, mostly to be with her, somewhat to see Glissant, and also our recent boss at a Bard summer teaching gig, the poet and scholar Joan Retallack. Joan blows it open that night: articulating a view of what she identifies as Glissant's "ethics" — one not based on the Judeo-Christian metaphysical (colonial) notion of understanding (putting yourself in an other's shoes) but instead configured around the radical notion that ethics must stem precisely from *non*-understanding, from not being able to reduce or render transparent the experience of others. It is from this place that I extend belonging and care to the beings I encounter: because I cannot know, because I cannot understand. This tears me open and the space that's left in the torn up place feels like breath.

A number of other panelists speak after Retallack and it's a long time before Glissant crosses the stage. The night is the darkest blue: his scarf, his jacket, the air, the cold. I bundle my body into our scarves, into Simone. He speaks in French when he arrives at the mic. He is tall, elegant, slow moving, but not with age, something more like ground. I understand nothing. And still, something about integrity and together-being enters into me that night. That was the first and only time I saw him speak, on an unexpected night in New York City less than two years before his death.

I have had the strange experience of being across the world and feeling more at home on streets where I cannot read the street signs — something about the foreignness I habitually feel inside me matching up with actually being foreign somewhere and so being treated that way, from the outside in. When I am here, I pass constantly as if I belong but, inside, I am far from belonging. This may be part of why Glissant's opacity haunts me. There is something about not being assumed to be familiar, not being assumed to be understood, that offers space. The pressures of transparency, the violent legacies of "understanding" that are ubiquitous (and for the most part un-critiqued) here, hurt.

I return again and again to his words,

...perhaps we need to...Displace all reduction. Agree not merely to the right to difference but, carrying this further, agree also to the right to opacity that is not enclosure within an impenetrable autarchy but subsistence within an irreducible singularity. Opacities can coexist and converge, weaving fabrics. To understand these truly one must focus on the texture of the weave and not on the nature of its components. For the time being, perhaps, give up this old obsession with discovering what lies at the bottom of natures. There would be something great and noble about initiating such a movement, referring

not to Humanity but to the exultant divergence of humanities. Thought of self and other here become obsolete in their duality. [i]

A together-being predicated on the right to opacity rather than the insistence on exposure, transparency, what we think of as "understanding." I carry this around with me like an ember that waits to catch.

Seven years later, it is the Sunday after the election and I am at a yoga class in Hollywood. We come here every Sunday, the four of us: Jess and our two friends who also moved to L.A. from Brooklyn. We attend this class like church and marvel at how we have gotten used to a shiny, improbably bodied, clientele practicing in a space big enough for the teacher to have to wear a Madonna mic to be heard.

The week has been one of nightly street protests and extra office hours scheduled to accommodate the numbers of students who come to see me, afraid of deportation, or losing their DACA eligibility, or their loved ones. I have nothing of comfort to say to them so mostly I just listen. My email inbox is full of messages from former students and some friends hoping I can shed light on this week, these results, help them to understand something I am increasingly thinking "information" cannot hope to help us understand. I have nothing wise to write them either and so my inbox sits swollen with missives, untended.

It is on this rattled morning that the yoga teacher divides the room in half and asks us all to re-orient our mats so that each half of the class faces the other, a narrow space between. As the class quiets, she invites us all to keep our eyes open and look into the eyes of the person we see across the room, to look around and into the eyes of all the many people who flank us on each side. I am surprised how hard this is, how habitual it has become for me to erase the reality of the tens of people who come here every Sunday just like I do. Their faces are hard to look in.

The class is sweaty and deep and something steadies in me throughout its movements, muscles proving to be a more easeful space than mind. The invitation throughout is not to look away, to try and regard the other, to allow ourselves to be seen inside our seeing. I think of Glissant and practice extending care, respect, witness, not because I do understand where the face across the room is coming from as it cries but precisely because I cannot know. When we are finally on our backs and the lights go dim, the teacher invites us to place one hand on our bellies and one on our hearts.

I have done this so many times. But on this morning, the little being that has been growing in me for some twenty-odd weeks makes its movements known for the first time. Just at the place where my hand holds my belly, two clear thumps come through like fist bumps from some fluid other side. Tears come instantly and I try to remain quiet, hold myself on my mat rather than run to Jess who is some mats away to tell her what I've felt. The moment leaves me overwhelmed by the shockingly strange joy of making life, of coming to sense the other that is within. I have never felt anything like this before and I feel it first with my palm to my belly, knowing the feeling only because I feel it from the outside in.

I know this child's entire genesis, know every detail of how it came to be in my belly and so in the world, and I can tell the story stretching back for decades. And yet when I commune with its being, I am profoundly aware of how little I know. We are often asked whether we know if we are having a boy or a girl. We fumble our way through answers, try and explain how, why we do not know. In the doctor's office on that morning, left alone with the ultrasound machine beeping as it readied to see what usually we cannot see, it felt invasive to ask this little body to render itself transparent to us. Never mind that we know well that sex is not determinative of gender, that it doesn't really tell us the answers to the questions people ask. The being in me has shared what feels like some key harmonies of its nature: we have heard the word *friend* come to us distinctly, as if from somewhere else. And in what has been revealed, there have been no details of body or gender or where this spirit will fall on the massively complex spectrum of human being.

And I am awed by the notion that we all begin this way: we all begin as the other within. While our parents may avidly seek information about our bodies, our health, in hopes that through this they might understand something of us as early as possible, there is a world of being that unfolds only in time and whose unfolding is in no way a revelation. And so the strange paradox: there is a plethora of information about each of us, our bodies, that *is* known and we also inhabit the uncanny space of beginning as the unknown other within. Sometimes I think we are borne of the opacity of which Glissant speaks: "...opacity that is...subsistence within an irreducible singularity."

The night after the election I am drawn, along with tens of thousands of others, to L.A.'s City Hall. The throng is thick already and we enter the crowd near two men who wear Mexican flags as capes and wave flagpoles in the night air. Their faces are painted red and they chant in Spanish through a tinny, mechanized bullhorn: "¡A-anti-anti-capitalista! ¡A-anti-anti-capitalista!" The mood is serious and joyous at the same time as the plaza fills to brimming with people holding hand-made posters and masks, climbing bus stops to hold up their banners, scaling scaffolds to share their signs. There are babies in parents' arms and children walking shyly near their families and it seems like every possible stripe of Angeleno has come together here this night. Out in the street I am aware of how much more affected by the election results so many of these bodies will likely be than my own. The crowd starts to move and a march begins. I see no police at all after passing the initial barricade and the mood is so unlike street protests where I'm from that I find myself fascinated, and quiet.

There are people as far as the eye can see both in front of us and behind, the street full of bodies, chanting, making their voices heard. We snake through streets downtown where restaurants have hired valets to park their patrons' cars. Valet workers join in the chanting to gather with us, even if only for the time it takes for everyone to pass. Customers inside the restaurants get out of their seats and crowd in doorways or out onto the street to chant for a few minutes, smiling and with us, despite being mid-dinner. I have the feeling that I am out for a night walk with my whole city and for a purpose. I'm not sure I have ever felt so clearly the street as the commons as on this night when the momentum of thousands of protesting bodies and the gravity of this moment seems to pull people out of their evenings and unabashedly into the collective.

The march is long. We flow through countless streets downtown and into other neighborhoods.

When the masses of people block cars at intersections, drivers and their passengers blare their stereos, climb onto the roofs of their vehicles and chant with us, fists in the air. When we turn through Little Tokyo, a group of sushi chefs on an upper floor comes to the window to cheer us on, knives held high above their heads. People in apartment buildings lean out their windows to join the chants against the incoming political swell that none of us is sure we can prevent. I keep thinking of Fred Moten and something he answered when an elderly man at a talk years ago asked him how we were going to "figure all this out." He said increasingly he thought it was about what happens when we *gather* to figure things out — it's the coming together that opens radical possibility, the nearing, the contact, the touching-upon that is the important act.

I am thinking of this and of what it means to walk together, chant together, come together to make the street the commons as we approach the place where many gathered will file onto the freeway. A few blocks before we reach the highway, the Metropolitan Detention Center, L.A.'s federal prison that is housed in an eerily pristine white spacecraft-like building, looms high into the reddish night sky. From several blocks away we all begin to notice something. Somehow through the inhuman slits this prison excuses for windows, all up and down one side of the building, lights are flickering on and off. The prison holds women and men as well as an untold number of non-criminal undocumented detainees who await deportation. No one around me knows whether the design of the prison has an open floor plan that might allow people on one floor to communicate with those on another. Somehow though, the entire building is flickering at once, people on every floor joining together to join with us.

Marchers quiet and stare upward, awed by the silent protest coming from inside the prison's walls. We pool around the building. Someone starts a chant, "We see you! We see you!" and then "El pueblo unido jama?s sera? vencido." Thousands and thousands of bodies gather tightly around the building, surrounding it on all sides. And then there is drumming, loud and unmistakable: the people inside are banging rhythmically on the windows, keeping time with our chants. Because the building is deceptively designed to make the windows seem larger than they are by virtue of stone slats that surround them, it creates a natural amplification of whatever sound is generated on the surface of the windows themselves. The people inside are using one of the very things that limit their freedom — unforgivably tiny windows — to join in the protest they are forbidden to attend.

That building looming over the highway downtown, the meanness of its tiny windows, comes often to mind. I return again and again to the exercise of extending care, consciousness, belonging, to the unknown others within that space who managed to make action out of light. What would it take to remember ourselves always tied to one another, through walls and across borders — these boundary lines drawn so that power can separate us and hold fast? That night I go home thinking of this kind of border and also of permeability and of collectives, and of how strong it felt to be thousands of bodies together in the streets.

This has been a wordless time. I've written some entries in an otherwise much neglected journal but mostly because I feel like I should, like I should mark observations about this time or record things so that I remember, never once because I felt moved to write from some word-making inside place. This is the first time I've sat to write a more formal piece and it has been awkward, halting — each word fumbling and hard won. Close friends have asked me if I'm worried or if I miss the language I'm used to producing that mediates and describes my experience. The

answer is an easy no. I have never felt more, never felt more synthesized idea-feelings than I do now. It's like some kind of strange logic from the universe is suddenly available because of this prolonged period in a fundamentally transformational space where there is a being in my belly, forming, but not quite fully here — where my body is no longer quite my own, but not fully given over to the little other within.

I have no way of tying all this up into a bundle that could be of use to someone else; and I am still very much in the darkness of learning to feel my feet on the ground as a shared being, a host of sorts, to this other that is growing and will, soon, pass through me. Without clear words: I am still opening to how this condition of connectedness is always present, has always been there, long before this little being's quickening.

And there is something there too about how forcefully this connectedness can be (has been) taught away. Over and over these days come the words of Audre Lorde: *our feelings were not meant to survive. Our feelings were not meant to survive.* I hear it again and again, keep it with me, return to it over and over. When I search back to find their context, I see:

For within structures defined by profit, by linear power, by institutional dehumanization, our feelings were not meant to survive. Kept around as unavoidable adjuncts or pleasant pastimes, feelings were meant to kneel to thought as we were meant to kneel to men. But women have survived. As poets. And there are no new pains. We have felt them all already. We have hidden that fact in the same place where we have hidden our power. They lie in our dreams, and it is our dreams that point the way to freedom. They are made realizable through our poems that give us the strength and courage to see, to feel, to speak, and to dare. [ii]

There will be no easy ways through.

And in this cosmology, amplifying feeling, pleasure, hope, possibility — these become radical acts, because *our feelings were not meant to survive*. The faster we learn to feel again the connectedness from whence we all began, the safer we will be. That interbeing, the fact that my life depends always already on others who are outside of me and who I do not choose, this fact must be repeated, remembered, shared, restored. My existence depends on you who are outside of me. I am praying that you treat me, with love, as the other that is within.

– Los Angeles, 2016