



Deleuzian Refrain, and the Quotidian Intimacy in the Glocalized Context in Juliana Spahr's *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs*

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Abstract:

In *Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari describe refrain as a kind of ecology where “members of the same species enter into rhythmic characters at the same time as different species enter into melodic landscapes”. Bertelsen and Murphie further develop the

idea of how the refrain constructs a space called 'existential territories'; refrain also weaves these territories together on the 'plane of composition'. Spahr's *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs* is both a protest poem and a love poem addressed to everyone with lungs. The use of refrain and repetition form an existential territory that expands to engulf both the local and the global space, while simultaneously connects the personal with the political. The following article would try to shed light on how Spahr's use of the Deleuzian refrain deterritorializes the inhabitants of a space by positing a connection between the subject of the poem, which is a collective, to everything that shares the same space on a global level. The article would further inquire into how global politics becomes a part of intimate spaces where the quotidian also serves as a space for ethical accountability, and in doing so, Spahr's art reaches what Guattari has termed "dissensus".

Keywords: Refrain, intimacy, glocal, politics, deleuze.

Juliana Spahr's *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs* (2005) contains Spahr's own developing notion of what Jonathan Skinner has termed the 'ecopoetics' albeit encased inside a lyric style. A number of scholars contend the lyric has had the privilege of referring to the Romantic subject, that is to say, the lyric style of poetry is not rooted in and runs parallel to the political discourse. However, Spahr somewhat subverts this rigid idea of the lyric conforming to the depoliticized realm of dealing with the subject matter; the slogan 'the personal is political' has gained momentum especially in the face of the rising global crises that not only threatens the environmental balance of the world, but also painfully encroaches upon the rights of those inhabiting the world. Arguably, mobilizing the mass about the crisis, and making them conscious about the fact that how personal choices too have consequences on the political plane which, in turn in a cyclic manner, constructs the identity, the subjectivity of the people have helped in making the 'personal is political' into what it is today. In other words, the

personal, the quotidian can never be independent of the political and vice versa, has solidified its place into the discourse of everyday, of every aspect of our lives, and Spahr dives deep into and takes this conversation further by establishing and highlighting the connection each being shares with the whole world, ranging from the microcosmic plane to that of the macro-cosmic. The 'connection' starts not only on the personal subjective level, which, more often than not, is devoid of active participation in the ongoing global crises, but Spahr also defines and establishes, or rather reminds us of this preexisting condition, precisely in connection with other things, from micro to macro ecologies, from macro to micro, and everything in-between. The 'in-between-ness' in Spahr is never enclosed on itself, missing a successor, rather the 'in-between' is also a space that shares a connection to other not in-between spaces. Comprising of two prose poems, *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs* contextualizes and addresses the immediate political tension, the global crises, while simultaneously invoking accountability on the personal level, and weaving a poetics of and a space for global intimacy. Spahr's is a political lyric which is not on the same trajectory as "nature poetry" of which she was "suspicious...because...it tended to show the beautiful bird but not so often the bulldozer off to the side that was destroying the bird's habitat" (*Well Then There Now* 69). The subject of this lyric is collective devoted to both the politics of global crises and addressed to the plurality of 'Beloveds' which also makes up the collective subject of the poem. One of the devices that Spahr employ in the prose poem is the refrain that is reminiscent of Deleuze and Guattari's formulation and conception of "territorial refrain". My article would try to look at the territorializing and the deterritorializing that eventually work towards involving a *poesis* of both nature, and the 'bulldozer' that gets crumpled under the weight of aesthetic and commitment to nature writing as means of escapism at the cost of sacrificing that which is politically quotidian, as opposed to confronting that which lead up to the catastrophe, in the

first place. This article would further inquire into the spaces made intimate through Spahr's new kind of poesis using a lyric voice.

The use of a 'lyric' voice may go against the very idea of eco-poetics, something which Spahr has undertaken, and the social function it performs, by marking precisely its departure from what one associates with the term 'lyric'. A few critics characterize that which is lyrical as something that defines and privileges the de-politicized romantic discourse at the turn of the twentieth century. Marjorie Perloff defends this criticism by asking to reinstate the arguments within larger poststructuralist debates surrounding authorship and the subject. This distinction, or rather the defining of, opened up further dialogues about Language poetry. Without diving into the lyric/Language debate, this paper would employ the terms interchangeably, rejecting the lyric/Language dualism following Spahr's rejection of the same as expressed in *American Poets in the 21st Century: Where Lyric Meets Language* (2002). The intimate connection that the poet shares with her collective subject and what the subject shares with each other in collectivity could be seen as "the relation between agency and identity" because it is a "relation between the poet, a real person with 'history, biography, psychology,' and the reader, no less real, no less encumbered by all this baggage. In poetry, the self is a relation between writer and reader that is triggered by what [Roman] Jakobson called contact, the power of presence" (Silliman 373). This, in turn, creates what Deleuze and Guattari in *What Is Philosophy?* called a universal "plane of composition" (185). This plane of composition addresses a posthumanist subject, that is the collective, using language to both construct and deconstruct the subject. The posthumanism's subjects not only refers directly to the identity (which is multivalent and contested) of the human subject, but also carefully takes into consideration that of the *otherised* non-human, the addressal of which requires a reworking of a language that has been, for the most part at least, anthropocentric. Any required radical change in the use of language demands investigation into the meaning of subjectivity

in the first place, which will in turn, equip language with the tool best suited for addressing the non-human, transgressing beyond the metaphors and metonymy. It goes without saying that the posthumanist subject is complex. Rallying for the effectiveness of the language that poetry employs, Heather Milne has argued that poetry is capable of contextualizing the complexities that arise out of the posthumanist subject, and its use of language inquires into the meaning of subjectivity.

The first part of the prose poem, "Poem Written After 9/11" immediately situates or tries to establish a connection between the addressee and the microelements:

There are these things:

cells, the movement of cells and the division of cells

and then the general beating of circulation

and hands, and body, and feet

and skin that surrounds hands, body, feet.

This is a shape,

A shape of blood beating and cells dividing. (3)

Spahr leaves no space that falls outside this connection that she tries to establish, almost to the point of suffocation. Not only the subjects of the poem inhabit the space, the spaces, in turn, also inhabit the subjects. The colonial quest was justified and initiated for claiming 'untouched' space as their own which also established a connection with the outside; space establishes contact; space also distinguishes itself from other space using difference and relationality. Similarly, the spaces which the subject occupies shape the subject and their identities, the opposite that the subject and their identities also construct and shape the spaces around them are equally viable and true; this process repeats itself ad infinitum employing the means of difference and relationality, the very foundation of constructing space and the bodies that inhabit those spaces. The space which is a politicized entity shapes bodies which can never escape the body politic. The above-mentioned excerpt from the poem fits perfectly

the concept of the refrain as developed in *Thousand Plateaus*, as something that begins with building a space that engages territorial animals, space where "[m]embers of the same species enter into rhythmic characters at the same time as different species enter into melodic landscapes" (320). The next few lines of the poem that immediately follows have a very trance-like quality about it, a repetition that is chanted over and over again, gradually expanding its circumference to move from the unit of the body to the body to the community to eventually the world:

as everyone with lungs breathes the space between the hands and the space around the hands and the space of the room and the space of the building that surrounds the room and the space of the neighborhoods nearby and the space of the cities and the space of the regions and the space of the nations and the space of the continents and islands and the space of the oceans and the space of the troposphere and the space of the stratosphere and the space of the mesosphere in and out. (8)

Spahr's opening refrain puts the reader immediately into motion, displacing them, taking them on a journey that spans from the isolated space of a room to the outer layer of the atmosphere shared by all inhabitants of the earth. That which is kept in motion cannot achieve either a panoptical vantage point or a distance from which to reflect on what is being said of the other; being in motion inevitably suggests being a part of that subject that is being talked about. This shifting of space, shifts the body into a new space which also reconstructs the identity of the body which, in turn, refigures, reevaluates, reconsiders the new-inhabiting space. On the other hand, "Poem Written After September 11, 2001" shifts the focus from the individual to the universal so that the readers of the poem transcend their immediate space, out of their immediate concerns to also consider other distance spaces, to establish the connection between the intimate, personal space to that of the global.

The poetic device used here to induce trance is certainly the refrain. The meditative quality of the repeated chants not only points to

tranquillity, but it also associates with it an escape from, a running away from. Could it be that the repetition does not only point to a sense of calm to establish a connection but also points to the surrounding storm, displacement, deterritorialisation? The repetition bears with it the aura of chaos, and the refrain is like Deleuze and Guattari's refrain, in that it "carries out a kind of deframing following lines of flight that pass through the territory only in order to open it onto the universe, that go from house-territory to town-cosmos, and that now dissolve the identity of the place through variation of the earth" (*What Is Philosophy?* 187). The fact that with the inclusion of each new phrase in the face of global connectedness points towards a posthumanist subjectivity that births a "non-unitary subject" that "proposes an enlarged sense of interconnection between self and others" (*Transpositions* 35), or a "body without organs" (*Thousand Plateaus*). Subjects construct identity in relation to each other, and Spahr points out the global connectedness that gives identity to the subject. There is no doubt that this is an oversimplification; Spahr does not construct the shared connected identity, the organic whole, the "body without organs" simply to sustain a wholesome meaning, thereby falling into the trap of 'nature writing', rather she quickly reminds the readers that this deep shared connection of everyone with lungs is doomed from the beginning, that the air is full of toxic particles, and that everyone breathes in the polluted air which has been inside of everyone, and that toxic air mixes with the other suspended dust particles, with sulfur, with sulfuric acid, with minute silicon particles, the amalgamation of which everyone breathes in. Following the 9/11 attack, the inhabitants of New York breathed in the air full of toxins, the "everyone" is the quotidian ecological subject that transposes its subjectivity beyond that of Manhattan to envelope the rest of the planet's spaces, which as we have already seen, are interconnected with everything. The calamities could never be restricted to a single space and to the bodies that occupy that space, like the ripple effect it stretches towards the most outer layer.

Spahr addresses the collective subjectivity using the endearing term 'Beloved' in its plural form. The political consequence that everyone has a stake in reaches the pinnacle in its concluding line: "How lovely and doomed this connection of everyone with lungs" (10), 'lovely' because the depth of interconnectedness on a global scale, across space, has never been achieved before or made clear, which perhaps tries to do away with the alienation of individuals; this is not to say that the poem vouches for the idealistic, Romantic idea that establishes a relational connection, and thereby, a shared identity, rather, I propose that, the poem suggests the connection is 'lovely' precisely because the alienation is also a by-product of political consequences which affect everyone, and therefore, also connects everyone into a non-binary unitary collective. Happiness feels more intense when shared with other people, grief and sorrow lightens when it is shared with other people. The negative excesses of living which is partly a symptom of capitalism works by alienating the individual; the poem establishes solidarity across the global plane even for alienation. Perhaps this connection is lovely because the alienation is felt in collective, and this poem initiates and provides a language for addressing precisely that. This connection is also 'doomed' prophesizing for a bleak future as the connected lungs breathe in the aftermath of wars. The wars however do not refer to the events that took place in the now distant past; to assume something similar would be an act of blatant ignorance. The threat of war, of a global crisis hitherto unimagined impending on us, loom large: contrasting this with the previously mentioned possibility of solidarity across the global plane that requires something as simple as that of breath creates a menacing effect, bringing to the light the inevitable devastation. In the subsequent refrain, Spahr asks the Beloveds a question that had lodged itself as a prerequisite between the lovely and the doomed: "Beloveds, what do we do but keep breathing as best we can this/ minute atmosphere?" (26) underscoring the context of terrorism and the war against terrorism by reinstating the global intimacy. Although the lines express a kind of acceptance of the things as they are, it also

highlights survival in its purest form; however, it is left suspended in the air as a question, as something that is not definitive, and is also a kind of inquiry waiting to be addressed and answered by Spahr's audience. The writer makes visible her space and as someone who exists in this connection with other things by directly addressing her beloveds and readers; moreover, by posing a question with a possible instruction for survival, she further builds the global solidarity. Amidst it all, the question of survival makes itself pertinent, and the solution that Spahr provides seems to also be a question in itself in the face of an imminent crisis that threatens existence with its permanence.

In the second of the two poems "Poem Written from November 30/2002 to March 27/2003" first localizes the subject, and then ventures on to exploring the connectedness and the intimacy through the form of a protest poem because, as Spahr explains, "...I had to think about my intimacy with things I would rather not be intimate with" (13). Essentially, the second part of the poem accounts for the complicity of the Laconian 'I' and also a collective comprising of the 'I's with the help of intimacy as means of "conceptualizing connectivity" (Milne 210). The subject with an agency here becomes what Braidotti has termed a "posthuman nomadic subject" who must "account for her own location both in terms of historical temporality and geographical specificity" (*Metamorphoses* 2). It is perhaps a norm and very easy to conceptualize intimacy in terms of a shared bonding, veiled from the outside gaze. In this sense, whatever is intimate, is personal, falls outside the scope of the world, thereby, it exists in such a vacuum that annihilates the very existence of political consequences, or power relations affecting the outside. This is far from true in Spahr's case because as Pratt and Rosner argue, intimacy can never exist outside of "relations of power, violence, and inequality and cannot stand as a fount of authenticity, caring, and egalitarianism" (2). Spahr proclaimed "we must approach out politics with as much devotion as we approach out beloved" (Bettridge), and the poem acts as a manifesto that

brings to the collective attention the connection, which then builds up towards devotion. The 'I' of the poem addresses the plural 'beloveds' as opposed to the conventional singular of beloved. Perhaps we, as readers, have been conditioned into associating the endearing term 'Beloved' with the subject of our affection which, more often than not, is anthropocentric. 'Beloved' also lights up the image of personal relationships that is not shared globally, and certainly not with the cohabitants of the spaces that surround us. However, by constructing and employing over and over again the collective plural of 'beloveds' to refer to 'yours' and 'yous', the poet collapses the individual into the collective, thereby an individual consists of the multiplicity of individuals. Spahr's 'beloveds' are not only the lovers and the cohabitants, but also every other subject who share a connection with others through the simplest act of breathing via their lungs.

The second part of the poem at its very outset immediately begins the weaving of connection, this time situating it in a broader ecological setting:

Beloveds, the trees branch over our roof, over our bed, and so realize that when I speak about the parrots I speak about love and their green colors, love and their squawks, love and the discord they bring to the calmness of the morning, which is the discord of waking. (15)

The discord of the morning inside a habitat shared with parrots, with the beloveds, a space so intimate that seems to be nestled where accountability cannot reach, where the contestation seems to be stemming only from the screeching of the parrots that disharmonizes the tranquillity of sleep, of quietness. Soon the discord makes its departure from being limited to a single space to engulf the global space in that now the scene is interspersed with snippets from popular media and news channels. Derksen had argued that many texts have turned to the news for its semantic content, and Spahr's poetry, in part, also weaves the contents easily found on the news seamlessly into its narrative. The name of a musician is aligned with

the other pressing issues such as homelessness, coups, bombing in Kenya, etc. The asinine priority of popular media performs the function of not only distraction but also downplays issues sidelining ethical accountability. The 'Beloveds' feel inclined to keep away from or avoid confrontation with the mobilization of American military forces on an island in the Pacific, but could there ever be an escape from "the beach on which we reclined is occupied by the US military" (67)?

Spahr transposes the global politics on to the most intimate space—the bed: "We wake up in the night with just each others and admit that even while we believe that we want to believe that we all live in one bed of earth's atmosphere, our bed is just our bed and no one else's and we can't figure out how to stop it from being that way" (30). The bed does not act as a refuge from the global politics, as an abode of slowing down and unwinding, but that space also comes laden with, defined by the global politics.

The refrain of "birds and their bowers" expands to eventually include the military aircraft that populate the nearby airbase:

And because the planes flew overhead when we spoke of the cries of birds out every word was an awkward squawk that meant also AH-64 Apache attack helicopter, UH-60 Black Hawk troop helicopter, M2A3 Bradley fighting vehicle, M1A1 Abrams main battle tank, F/A-16 Hornet fighter/bomber, AV-8B Harrier fighter jet, AH-1W Super Cobra attack helicopter and that soon would mean other things also, the names of things still arriving, the B-2 stealth bombers from Whiteman Air Force Base, the B-52 bombers that are now in Britain. (67)

The space of the bed is invaded by the names of various military weaponry so much so that the beloveds' speech about the birds and the bowers end with bombing aeroplanes currently based on another continent. The listlike names of the warplanes completely obliterate the discordant squawking of the parrots and now the beloveds only and now the beloveds only wake up and all they can hear is murmur of impending war. The subsequent references made to the intimate

touches, and intimate spaces, in general, are being talked about only in terms of military metaphors:

*When I reach for yours waists, I reach for bombers, cargo,
helicopters, and special operations.*

*When I wrap around yours bodies, I wrap around the USS
Abraham Lincoln, unmanned
aerial vehicles, and surveillance.*

*When I rest my head upon yours breasts, I rest upon the USS
Kitty Hawk and the USS Harry S. Truman and the USS Theodore
Roosevelt.*

*Guided missile frigates, attack submarines, oilers, and amphibious
transport/dock ships
follow us into bed.*

*Fast combat support ships, landing crafts, air cushioned, all of us
with all of that. (75).*

Milne comments, “Spahr leaves the reader to ponder the ways in which sexual intimacy and global politics implicate one another. Pairing the global and the intimate in this manner helps to “expose patterns that recur when gender, sex, and the global imaginary combine” (213). To conceptualize global and identity politics, and the distinction between the self and other, Spahr deploys the metaphor of skin. Skin is something that constitutes a body, and also something that creates a barrier, restricting the 'other' to the outside, and importantly, it is also a site where intimacies flourish.

“February 15, 2003” brings the cosmic refrain noticed at the start of the poem back. What started out as essentially the listing of connection, of beings, of connections among those things and beings, of the politics of intimacy which is embedded in space, now performs the function of with a call for a potential “geopolitical resistance” (Chisholm 141). The connection that everyone shares with their lungs through their breath and air now burns. That which burns outside, a product of both terrorist and military warfare, has successfully invaded and affected the connection, made its way into

every nook and corner. The burning of the outside deterritorializes the home abode. Spahr does not leave the space of her poem at the brink of breaking down, grey and ashy, rather the ending, for Spahr, also aligns itself with a sense of hope through the politics of intimacy, reminding the reader once again of the cosmic connection everything with lungs share:

*Beloveds, before all my hope is burnt up, I should also remember
that eleven million people across the globe took to the streets one
recent weekend to protest the war and this gave us all a glimmer.
(58)*

Instead of blindly accepting the atrocities committed by the nation-state bodies or simply dismissing it as something that happens to 'other' people, protesting because of the shared connections on earth is what brings us back to our immediate spaces which are also politically embedded which dares to "confront the vertiginous Cosmos so as to make it inhabitable" (*Three Ecologies* 67).

In *Chaosmosis*, Guattari posits, "We cannot conceive of solution to the poisoning of the atmosphere and to global warming due to the greenhouse effect, or to the problem of population control, without a mutation of mentality, without promoting a new art of living society" (20). As the *Beloveds* of *This Connection* expand their perceptual horizon to include each and everything that constructs the global, as people take to the street to protest as a collective against the military invasion of Iraq, Spahr's art achieves the global "dissensus" of Guattari, assembled with the hope of a new dawn to rebuild the glocal by means of establishing the interconnectedness of things. Spahr's poesis, although resists the lyric/Language dynamism, problematizes the humanist lyric subject by engaging into a debate of understanding the multiplicity of subjectivity which occupies multiple spaces, and experiences intimacy accordingly; Spahr's refrain expands to take into consideration the quotidianness of every day ordinary people finally to transform them into a part of ecologies, in its broadest sense, overcoming mental passivity, to form, at last, existential territories. Displacing the depoliticized

narrative, and building solidarity and intimacy on a global scale, Spahr's poetry situates the readers in a space shared by other cohabitants which prompt the readers into inquiring into the consequences of global politics, and how it infringes upon the personal and thereby, rethink the crisis that threatens the very existence and works towards annihilating the connection that everyone with lungs share with each other.

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