

POEMS

THE CITY SHE WAS

Carmen Giménez Smith

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A BRIEF TEACHING GUIDE
FOR
THE CITY SHE WAS

POEMS
BY
CARMEN GIMENEZ SMITH



BY
J. MICHAEL MARTINEZ, © 2012

I am compelled to continue writing as I am compelled to continue working as
I am compelled to hold my son to my body when he is hot with fever.

—from *Bring Down the Little Birds*,
Carmen Gimenez Smith



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And the other one, the one inside me, unformed and unknown,
still a mystery to fall in love with....

—from *Bring Down the Little Birds*,
Carmen Gimenez Smith

BIOGRAPHY

Carmen Giménez Smith is the author of a memoir, *Bring Down the Little Birds* (University of Arizona, 2010), three poetry collections—*Goodbye, Flicker* (University of Massachusetts, 2012), *The City She Was* (Center for Literary Publishing, 2011) and *Odalisque in Pieces* (University of Arizona, 2009)—and three poetry chapbooks—*Reason's Monster* (Dusie Kollektiv, 2011), *Can We Talk Here* (Belladonna Books, 2011) and *Glitch* (Dusie Kollektiv, 2009). She has also co-edited a fiction anthology, *My Mother She Killed Me, My Father He Ate Me* (Penguin, 2010). She is the recipient of a 2011 American Book Award, the 2011 Juniper Prize for Poetry, and a 2011-2012 fellowship in creative nonfiction from the Howard Foundation. Formerly a Teaching-Writing Fellow at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, she now teaches in the creative writing programs at New Mexico State University and Ashland University, while serving as the editor-in-chief of the literary journal *Puerto del Sol* and the publisher of Noemi Press. She lives with her husband, the writer Evan Lavender-Smith, and their two children in Las Cruces, New Mexico.

INTRODUCTION

*I thought, everyone depends on me for certain pleasures.
I'd like to be released into the city but I'd be eaten whole.*

—“My Fire and Fever Fussy”
Carmen Gimenez Smith



Trying to situate Carmen Gimenez Smith's work for this introduction I realize how I am situating myself. Tracing points of influence for a writer is much like finding constellations at night. Reading and re-searching Carmen's work, I realize, as those who created our astrologies centuries ago, finding Gods and Goddesses, heroes and heroines in the needle-point lights at midnight, I more project my own mythologies onto immeasurable space in order to map the incomprehensible than discover those myths inherent to the dark. Reading *The City She Was*, I realize Carmen's poetry is that night-space horizon to me. If this introduction is to be cartography, I may only be able to communicate certain facts concerning its immeasurability.

Carmen Gimenez Smith is a mother, a daughter, a wife, a lover, an editor, a poet, a nonfiction writer, a fiction writer, a woman, a girl, powerful and vulnerable, guarded and strong, a Latin@ who says her "white" husband is more Latin@ than her. All this to say, Carmen is vitally

human.

What is this “human” she lives and practices? “Homo sapien” translates to “man who knows.” This definition puts a finality to the known and implies such hierarchy in the perception of what the world may be. And, for the sake of this introduction’s brevity, I’m ignoring the gendered category of “man.” After inhabiting Carmen’s work, I want to revise the term and say “person-making” or “the personhood that forms.” This is what Carmen Gimenez Smith does in the work: a constant revisioning of a person in all her capacity. The work recognizes a dialectic working outside of terms like “complete/incomplete”, “finished/unfinished”; as opposed to placing a limit on the known, Carmen’s poetry offers an epistemology where there is no end/finishing in the cultivation of the human, the person, the city we are becoming.

What strikes me as unique to the generation of writers Carmen Gimenez Smith helps lead is how they see the poetic as already situated in a concrete social. It is not purely theoretical or conceptual, practicing a 21st century regurgitation of 19th century politic-free aestheticism. Nor does the poetic make those staid post-structural arguments about

literature's subjectless subject, the signifier's freedom from an "oh so" oppressive signified. It isn't, as so much work is these days, employing a quaint surrealism and ironic pop culture reference as a substitute for the demands of a relentless psychosocial investigation. Rather, her poetic situates the reader in the complex of, what sociologist Pierre Bourdieu calls, the social habitus Bourdieu states:

the habitus, systems of durable, transposable dispositions....principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively "regulated" and "regular"¹

The habitus are those systems of dispositions, behaviors, approved actions, unspoken customs that operate within and regulate the various vectors of our society; vectors, in the US, often marked by lines of monetary wealth or divisions of race. Carmen Gimenez Smith recognizes these intangibles. In her previous work, *Odalisque in Pieces*, one poem's voice, identified with knowledge of the cumbia, subtly identified as "ethnic," visits a solemn art gallery with other woman in her family. The art on the walls are of European origin. This family of women

¹ Bourdieu, Pierre. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge; 1977 pp. 72.

are loud, appreciative, and raucous. They certainly don't abide by that unspoken mausoleum ethic of silence governing such galleries. Gimenez Smith writes, "I worry terminally that people notice knowing that people / notice and so hoping that people realize there is little I can do to change it ."

Later, describing a friend accompanying the family, she writes, "She's brown too, but that suggests: look / at those people with their ways, their food, like when people assume / I like spicy food. I don't." In the lines, Carmen Gimenez Smith calls into consciousness the behavior, the ethic one should hold when visiting these institutions of art. The 'speaker's' native habitus, that of her family and friends, operates differently than the one governing the gallery. The speaker is on that bridge between habitus and how she feels guilty for her family. She knows some will assume her likes and dislikes, class, her 'personhood' by her skin color.

On the cusp between habitus, two different epistemic systems governing how one is disposed to receive and act in the world, the speaker is called by her mother's "familiar and animal call: ¡Lizi, mira esto!" This call,

“which, like a scent,” gives the speaker “a chance to tingle in this most public place.” The speaker feels in her body the pleasure of family, the call of the familiar, of being known and knowing. The play of language with the term “public” as “pubic,” and it receiving a “tingle”, the poem offers, among this gallery’s ethos of silence, an erotics of the aesthetic: to physically feel the mystery of art and have no social shame in exulting in this bodily pleasure. It is not a stretch to say (and I know she would approve) Gimenez Smith’s aesthetic is more Bataille and de Sade than the logical rigmarole of a Kant and Hegel.

The body and its surface, how we mask it or act out roles is a concern of Carmen Gimenez Smith’s *The City She Was*. In “The Walk,” she writes, “she makes her way through/ the imperfect city and discovers/ how the world is people/ with hand puppets...”. And, shortly thereafter, in “The Museum of Lost Acquaintance,” she writes, “We’ll puppet voices and mug shots, and you can forgive and forget. We’ll bury our past.” “The Walk” and its allusion to how sexual desire has such ability to control us, and the “speaker/s’ use of performance in “The Museum” to rewrite and recover a dark past point to how “personhood” may be malleable, but this malleability is, often, born out of a pursuit of grace. Heinrich

von Kleist, in his essay “On the Marionette Theatre,” writes:

these puppets have the advantage of being for all practical purposes weightless. They are not afflicted with the inertia of matter, the property most resistant to dance....where grace is concerned, it is impossible for man to come anywhere near a puppet. Only a god can equal inanimate matter in this respect².

Here, Kleist’s character argues that people are burdened by the need to rest, the needs of the body. The puppet, however, needing no rest, performs its dance perfectly without the movement being soiled by any other purpose (sexual desire, past history, etc.). Each movement of the puppet is a self-contained meaning unto itself. These movements, together, become a state of purity, of grace. I think Gimenez Smith correlates the plurality of various social masks we wear (or, if you will, the subjects, personhoods, speakers in the poem) to a comparable state of grace. Each persona, each subjectivity we perform, like puppets, are their own purpose; and their impulse, self-contained, is to Be. The movements of these various subjectivities culminate in, to some ears, a

2 Heinrich von Kleist. “On The Marionette Theater.” Trans. Idris Parry. *Southern Cross Review*. < <http://www.southerncrossreview.org/9/kleist.htm> > 12/29/2011.

discordant and paradoxical tone. This is where the contemporary existentialist would stop and claim “no meaning” exists, or that the signified is unrelated to the signifier. But I think, and I find this in the compassion of Gimenez Smith’s poems, there is a higher harmony beyond the discordant fugue of personhoods performed in *The City She Was*.

Carmen Gimenez Smith’s compassionate aesthetic has antecedents that may help explain her music. In his *Defense of Poetry* Percy Bysshe Shelley proposes a potential historical continuum that resolves itself in the utopia always present within human imagination. Poetry, the expressive mode of utopian vision, unleashes this divine within humanity. Shelley’s conception of metaphor is the key conceptual ingredient sparking the flame of this always already present mystical totality within human life. As the “legislators” channeling poetry’s messianic power (metaphor), poets lead debased human consciousness to the purified awareness flowering at the end of his utopic vision of history.

I see this in Carmen Gimenez Smith’s plurality of subjects in *The City She Was*. The multiplicity of masks is the multiplicity of the city. The “She” in the title is the focal point wherein these masks, these pup-

pets all perform. This multitude, this legion, allows, in its discordance and paradox, a secular sacred space where one may, as she states in the titular poem, “assemble some ending of mine/ as a vision or refusal,” a space to forgive or forget. And, in her poem “Bleeding Heart,” this sacred hollow is the body. She writes, “all of us bleeding in and out like it’s breathing,/ or kissing, and because it is righteous and terrible and red.” This erotics of the body, the vision-space where the multitude exists, not as one, but as something beyond number, is the grotesque/ beautiful where one may find an ethics true to a life as it is lived. This ethics/aesthetics is outside social morality at times, a puppet of the ideals a person may wish they could be or do. It is grotesque and bloody, a reality more vast than any clandestine abstract hope. It is as physical as the kiss offering a utopia just as it bites or, as she states in “The Sceptic”, a kiss “presenting me to/the idea we are/ both far away/ and right upon it.”

Carmen Gimenez Smith’s *The City She Was* is a book of paradox and body, of beauty married to difficult realities. Foremost, it is a work whose aims are to present, in unconditioned compassion, the risk of being human amidst the chaos of personhoods we all are . Its aim is, in other words, to love.

THEMES

We deforest, we slay with biting humor, and wait for what is offered in return.
It's what we vow because we're caught in each other's complex web.

—“Division”

Carmen Gimenez Smith

The City

The term “city” is etymologically derived from the latin civitas. Civitas means the body of citizens, the state of citizens. The OED states it was only later in its usage that the term began to refer to the place occupied by those citizens. “The City She Was” thus refers not to the physical location the “she” may occupy; rather, it connotes the multitude of citizens “she” once was. This is to say, the “she” was, and possibly is, multiple personhoods. “Personhood” or the “self” is thus made, is an art. This art of personhoods emerges from a complex interplay of socio-political forces i.e. the modern city.

Self/Personhood

The City She Was communicates the many ways contemporary personhood may be pluralized. If the “self” or “subject” is many, then the question is how this “self” is many. Carmen Gimenez Smith doesn’t appear to offer any single answer. Rather, she offers the fetishes of the 21st urban city: the internet, narcotics, the modern flaneur, television, advertisements, self as a history of occupations i.e. the Vita.

In the poem “Pills,” the “self” is identified with the narcotic it consumes: one softens the “soul cartilage;” another allows the speaker to love veritably everything; finally, the pills both dull and amplify the speaker’s intimate relationships until it is revealed that even relationships are just another form of inebriate, another tranquilizer.

The poem “Vita” takes the phrase “curriculum vitae” for its literal definition. Rather than its popular definition of listing an account of one’s career, as the OED states, “curriculum vitae” literally means “the course

of one's life." Carmen Gimenez Smith in this poem does a catalogue of intimate moments of the "self" in question. The "self" or "personhood" employs their own life, the roles she has played, as the catalogue of a document normally employed to demonstrate one's capacity for future employment. The "self's" experiences are documented to validate and justify the objectification and auctioning of the "self."

The vita or the pills become modes for the "self" to acknowledge itself, to become self recognizable. Carmen Gimenez Smith states, "the city depends/ on being the most something." The city or, as stated, the "personhood" needs a form/object to identify itself with in order to become itself a tangible thing. Gimenez Smith writes, "Longing brings me to the bar." Longing, desire, the need to fulfill an absence—it is this drive of desire to overcome some primordial lack that constitutes the "self" or "selves" of each citizen of the city. As such, the subject gains significance from the disparate elements it is composed of.

Carmen Gimenez Smith makes this primordial lack explicit when she writes in the titular poem, "Loneliness hides/ in a corner to tell me/ about the troubles he had/ finding a place to park his self." Loneliness is itself a citizen of the city. It occupancies the speaker of the poem,

becoming her or his lover. The various objects, be they pills or lovers, fulfill the lack of “self” and become identified as the “self.” However, as she has written, these are temporary puppets in constant need of reincarnation to fulfill this ever present void.

Disguises

The flaneur in “The Walk” introduces another major theme: disguises. She wanders the streets pursuing “an elixir,” i.e. a pill, a curative of her sadness. The flaneur discovers in her walk “how the world is people/ with hand puppets”. The citizens of the city mask themselves in layers of fantastical skins. As Gimenez Smith states in “The Grand Tour, “I want to be the thinking I invented last night,/but I’ve already run out of disguise”. Here, the speaker distinguishes herself from her “thinking.” There is the knower and then there is known. The speaker is not her “thinking.” She is prior. Her thinking is another mask to put on.

Rene Descartes’ famous argument for the self, cogito ergo sum, “I think therefore I am” is here rebutted by Gimenez Smith. In fact, “The Grand Tour” implies that monarchy and economic/cultural imperialism begins at this level of the conception of the self or subject. Gimenez Smith writes, “We get sexy over island domination./ The island is inside us: the birth of empire,/its crooks and its courts”. Gimenez Smith

implies the Enlightenment, its philosophies of subjectivity, are part and parcel of cultural imperialism, empire. She wants to step outside of this categorizing of the “self” or “subject”

In “The Endangered You,” Gimenez Smith offers an alternative to the Cartesian Subject. She writes, “The you is irrelevant but still always in reach because I seldom do things without an audience.” Here the “you” could be argued to be the “self,” one of the many disguises one puts on in order to be known. This is deeply related to empire. As poet Guillermo Gomez-Pena writes:

I believe in multiple identities. Depending on the context I am Chicano, Mexican, Latin American, or American in the wider sense of the term. The Mexican Other and the Chicano Other are constantly fight to appropriate me or reject me. But I think my work might be useful to both sides because I’m an interpreter. An intercultural interpreter¹.

In other words, the “self” is only an object of perception, a “you,” when

1 Gomez-Pena, Guillermo. “Columbus at the Checkpoint: Guillermo Gomez-Pena Redis-covers ‘America.’” *The Village Voice*.

it is performed for a very particular sociopolitical community. Carmen Gimenez Smith re-navigates subjectivity always in and through its community. In the act of languaging language, she distributes the sensible “self” or mask in a highly historicized and placed situation. This art of the “self” is dependent on social and political networks and dynamics. The “self”, “subject,” “personhood” is only ever a puppet, an existential performance “[w]e’re inside”.

Naming

The power to name, to authorize recognizable form, is as old as myth—Adam in the Garden, to say Abracadabra and open the hidden mouth of the mountain. Carmen Gimenez Smith critiques and remodels the name, language, in *The City She Was*. In “Civilizing Mission” language is the tool the colonizer uses to enslave the colonized. Gimenez Smith writes:

As they came around me like a cloud with dictionaries, he said, you're daughter to Aporia. they bound me to this telling my hair.// He whispered in my ear the definition of hermetic and urged I should change my sense of the hermetic....They gave me names to consider. They suggested Kitten.

Here, naming and language become the tools of the master indoctrinating his particular master narrative. In addition, languages are employed

as tools of gender authority. The masculine, the male is identified with fixed definition. Carmen Gimenez Smith looks to free language, where, as in “Redaction,” “the letter might give off secrets: acid imbalances that detonate.” She looks for the place between where words become their opposite. She writes in “These Halting Pliants”:

I am blameless but not blameless
 I am pristine but not pristine
 I am hugged but not hugged....
 I am policy but not that nervy.
 Peninsula but not district.
 These halting plaints remain basis
 for the teeming discord I am,
 a patient with a gram of mutiny.

Here, the speaker is again reiterating the difference between Being and Having i.e. between the knower and the known, between mis-identifying an object or action as the self enacting or perceiving an object. In language, it is this gap between that liberates the feminine or the “self” from the masculine master narrative, its colonizing. In this gap, Car-

men Gimenez Smith acts as mutineer. She writes in “Malaprops”:

I shift names and add emphases. I revise decisions; make no into yes in the hopes I might change the brutal and torrid. Do I muddle the story? Do I make the plot a Rorschach? This wall’s pulsing with alteration because I’m always saying in flashes thrown up behind my back. I complicate, I derange. I make such dramatic diction shifts that the wall’s gypsum just fumes and smokes with red tag violations.

STUDY QUESTIONS

I was disappear and come back,
disappear then come back

—“Let Down My Bucket”

Carmen Gimenez Smith



- What are some other possible themes for the book as a whole?
- What binds the poems to their sections?
- Why does the author use so many different and unusual forms for the poetry?
- How does the form of the poetry inform the content or semantic intention of the poem?
- Should or shouldn't one read ethnicity/gender or the other possible political identities of the author into the poems? If so, why? If not, why not?
- How many personhoods, or roles, can one person have?
- If the self/personhood is in flux (flux itself), how does a community form?
- How does law operate and perform the task of dispensing justice?
- How does capitalism feed upon identity's lack?
- How do relationships (romantic or otherwise) begin?
- If 'lack' is the state of the "self," is "lack" all one can offer to the

Other?

- How does one satisfy desire?
- What do pills do for the speaker, what role do they perform?
- It is implied that empire is the core of the “self” (if understood as the Cartesian subject). However, what are other possibilities for the “subject” or mask of “self” can there be?

You'll have eternal decay stiched into
your binding, my invocation, manifesto,
my weighty xxoo.

—“To My Book”
Carmen Gimenez Smith



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