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Self Construction: Bibliomancy, AWP in Portland & Nipsey, Part 1

Mike Sonksen · Wednesday, July 24th, 2019

A widely quoted axiom is that success is where opportunity meets preparation. The combination of hard work, living intentionally and studying your craft culminates into the process of self construction. The process of self construction is something that the great science fiction writer Octavia Butler wrote a lot about. Both Octavia Butler and the late legendary Los Angeles hip hop artist Nipsey Hussle became who they wanted to be against all odds. They constructed themselves meticulously and knew exactly what they were doing.

This 2 part essay connects the dots between Self Construction, Bibliomancy, the AWP conference in Portland in March of 2019 and Nipsey Hussle. The essay is an omnibus account that discusses self construction, books as synchronicity, serendipity, the technology of the self, Foucault's Heterotopia, poets in Portland, Experiments in Joy and Funk as Testimony along with Octavia and Nipsey.

Part 1: Bibliomancy

Bibliomancy is defined as “foretelling the future by interpreting a randomly chosen passage from a book, especially the Bible.” All book lovers at one time or another have opened up a book randomly to a page to see what it says. Bibliomancy takes this idea further to use the words that are first seen as a message to clue you into that moment or where you are at the time. Another way of interpreting the idea of bibliomancy is to use the words of books to help make sense of the world around you. [Books](#) have always helped me find my way to become who I wanted to be.

Throughout my life the books that I have come across at specific moments have always provided a certain insight or guidance that I needed at the time. Call it serendipity, books and I have always been in synchronicity and this is why I have always put so much stock in books. In the context of this essay I am using the term bibliomancy as books being a guiding source to provide constant insight.

It was in this spirit that I travelled to Portland, Oregon for the annual Associated Writers Program (AWP) conference. My new book just published, *Letters to My City*, so I was scheduled to do a reading and also to participate in the massive book fair that takes place at AWP over the course of three and a half days. AWP is a dizzying festival of books with hundreds of readings, panels and

more books than you can ever even look at.

AWP is so overwhelming that if you do not have a gameplan or a strategy to survive it, you can be left dazed and confused. There are so many great readings and panels and many of the best ones are happening at the same time, so you have to be centered and selective about what you see. The all out festivities can create a fear of missing out if you get too caught up in it. The first time I went in [2012 to Chicago](#) I had a few key encounters which made the trip extra special. Before I ran into Luis Rodriguez at the [Tia Chucha Press](#) booth, I felt disoriented. I had a really good long conversation with Rodriguez and it set the rest of the conference in a great direction.

Fortunately in 2019 I was there with a lot of good friends and good books and this made the trip extraordinary. In the spirit of bibliomancy and AWP, this essay will also include quick snapshots of several books I came into contact with throughout the conference. I also want to talk about Portland, some interactions at the conference and what happened when I got back to LA.

Synchronicity in Transit

My flight out of Los Angeles International Airport was at 6am on Wednesday March 27th. As serendipity would have it, the great writer and professor from CalArts, [Tisa Bryant](#) was coincidentally sitting next to me on the plane. She offered some incredible book recommendations and we talked about teaching college, Los Angeles, Boston and poetry movements. Bryant came to rise as a member of the seminal group of African American Writers in Boston, the [Dark Room Collective](#).

Founded by Sharan Strange and Thomas Sayers Ellis in 1988, this group of writers included future United States Poet Laureates Tracy K. Smith and Natasha Trethewey and great poets like Major Jackson, Carl Phillips, Janice Lowe, John Keene and several others along with Bryant. Bryant told me about how they hosted readings in a salon style on Sunday afternoons in a house in Cambridge that many of the writers lived in.

The reading series evolved quickly and even began to incorporate live music, workshops and art exhibits. Bryant reflected fondly on the era and how it shaped her development as an author. The growing series became a mythical event that hosted over 100 writers over five plus years including Elizabeth Alexander, bell hooks, Alice Walker, Cornelius Eady, Martin Espada, Yusef Komunyakaa, Derek Walcott and Ntozake Shange. It was incredible to hear first hand stories from Bryant.

It was true synchronicity to sit next to her because I had recently read her essay about Octavia Butler in the book, [Radio Imagination](#). The essay, "Hand of the Teacher," is about how Octavia Butler formed herself through reading, affirmations and goal setting. "Through this autodidactic method of world-building science fiction, she surreptitiously created a world of possibility for herself," Bryant writes, "treating her own desires as she would those of her characters: setting goals, identifying obstacles and resources, taking action, assessing outcomes before the next venture." Octavia Butler willed her success into reality through this process.

The Technology of Self Construction

"It's through her words," Bryant avers, "that she makes new realities manifest, and she clearly believes in her powers, despite or perhaps because of the goad of ever-present doubt. Here, too, reading Octavia Butler makes me understand her as a community of one: congregation, preacher,

student, mentor, teacher.” Butler did indeed make these realities manifest in her storied writing career. Bryant mentions that Butler’s essay “Self Construction,” explains further how the mastermind science fiction writer constructed herself.

Chatting with Bryant on the plane about teaching students and her own rise as a writer was inspiring. She also mentioned an essay by Michel Foucault, “Technologies of the Self,” which is kindred thematically with Butler’s process of Self Construction. I had been in the midst of teaching a class called “Knowledges,” and this spirit of Self Construction is a topic I always talk with my students about it. Following my return from Portland, I used Bryant’s essay on Butler in my class and excerpts from Foucault’s “Technologies of the Self,” as the class and I spoke about the process of self construction.

Getting off the plane, both Bryant and I boarded the high speed train from the airport into Downtown Portland. It was fast, efficient and inexpensive. I had been preparing to get a Lyft from the airport into town but the train proved to be a superior option and a fraction of the cost. We were in Downtown Portland within 30 minutes and it was just past 9am.

A light rain was falling and it was cold but not unbearable. We saw the great science fiction author Nalo Hopkinson walking on the street near the convention right after we got into Downtown. (Some have said that Hopkinson has picked up the mantle from Octavia Butler, so this was even further synchronicity.)

Portland is a beautiful town. Nonetheless, like so much of America and the world at large it is a city of opposites or as Foucault would say, a heterotopia. Before talking about Portland’s landscape and built environment, let’s talk about the masses of people and chaotic spirit of the AWP Conference.

AWP is a massive free for all. There are so many incredible readings and illustrious authors at every turn that you want to go see every reading and often times many of the best are happening simultaneously. As I waited in the line at Registration midday Wednesday, there was already a long line of people queuing up to get their badges and start the festivities. I ran into some authors from [KAYA Press](#).

Heart to Heart in Heterotopia

A few of the folks from Kaya Press were bringing boxes of books into the convention hall. I was chilling at a desk next to the door and I briefly spoke with Neela from Kaya and Tanzila Ahmed. Ahmed hosts the popular podcast “[GoodMuslimBadMuslim](#),” and writes award-winning essays.

A poet and professor from North Alabama University was with them and his name was Jason McCall. We started talking and he told me that he thought AWP was like “Summer Camp for writers.” He mentioned that it’s easy to catch that fear of missing out or get caught up trying to see all the famous authors.



His solution is to stay grounded in the present moment. McCall prefers the small reunions and good conversations that happen organically. He doesn’t believe in chasing the accolades or trying to be in with the cool crowd.

Jason McCall had an easy way about him and we had a good time chatting while the building began to fill up with more and more writers from across America lining up to enter the conference. He gave me one of his award-winning books, *Two-Face God*. The poems in this collection interrogate the masks we all wear and how “there is no space in this world without duality, without the glossy surface and the hidden darkness.”

McCall’s effusive spirit personified a welcoming vibe and his energy reminded me to enjoy each moment and not to worry about trying to see every author or be too concerned about networking. A few minutes after he walked away, I read some of his poems and they were as warm as he was. One of my favorites in particular was a villanelle called “One Time for Woodley Park.” The poem pays homage to his parents, his childhood community and a place he spent a lot of time in his formative years, Woodley Park. In 19 lines he covered so many moments and created a powerful poem. Here are the final seven lines:

*Made it to college because mom and dad made me Clark
Kent, saved me from a doomed manual labor/minimum wage sphere.
Lets run it back one more time before it gets too dark.*

*Not even mad about the break-ins and black eyes—a shark
is a shark. No name on the bullets, so no use for fear.
I left, but I ain’t never leaving Woodley Park.
Lets run it back one more time before it gets too dark.*

McCall’s poetry emits the same warmth he does in person. Our conversation was the second interaction I had on the trip after sitting next to Tisa Bryant and his good vibes were a positive omen for the rest of the journey. I liked his teaching philosophy as well. He spoke about advocating for his students and telling them about the realities of the world awaiting them after college.

City of Pearls

Shortly after we spoke, I met another poet, Sham-E-Ali Nayeem from Philadelphia. I met her through Taz Ahmed. Nayeem told me about Philadelphia’s Poetry community and how she has spent time equally in Pennsylvania, the United Kingdom and India. Her work connects the dots between cultures and continents.

Her book, *City of Pearls* examines the dichotomies of her birthplace in urban India through short pithy poems. Postcolonial meditations on the landscape of her youth that she continues to visit. Nayeem’s poems seamlessly reconciles family, place and memory. Poems like “Finding Home,” “Seeing Ourselves,” “Channeling,” “Heaven Lies At the Feet,” “An Everyday Occurrence,” “Beginning of Something,” “How We Would Change,” “Strangers On the Train,” and “All the Things We Never Say,” each tug on the heartstrings.

It was surreal to read her short, dense poems while looking around Portland. The binaries spotlighted in her poems matched what I was seeing. The imagery within her work is incredible.

*Where skyscrapers are
Built over burial grounds,
Where bodies of resting loved ones
Are dug up and put in museums,*

Displacement even after death

Nayeem's evocative book somehow perfectly coincided with the landscape of Portland. The more I thought about it, it was obvious that so many cities around the world have skyscrapers over burial grounds, especially in North America. The title of her book also connected even more to Portland because one of the city's best known districts is the Pearl District.

Moreover, Portland's Pearl District has also hosted in its own process of displacement. The Pearl District is now filled with luxury high rise condos and it was once factories. Portland has a deep working class history, yet I saw luxury condos being built almost everywhere I looked in the Downtown vicinity.

Brown at the Edges with A Chewy White Center

Writer Matthew Stadler describes the Pearl District in his essay, "Brown at the Edges with a Chewy White Center." Stadler eloquently explains: "In 'the Pearl' the city has piggybacked its vision of urban livability onto a grid of disused warehouses and empty lots. As in other North American cities, urban living here seems to hinge on a notion of historical preservation that gets tricky when the past begins to run a little thin. What happened in the Pearl? There was a railyard and then there were warehouses. The garbage dump might be older and richer in history than these ramshackle buildings but warehouses suggest artists and artists suggest a whole cycle of change that can imbue a city with the emblems of urbanity."

Stadler's account perfectly captures the Pearl District and Portland at large. In the same way that Washington D.C. was described by George Clinton and his band Parliament as a Chocolate City, Portland is definitely a Vanilla City and like Stadler notes in his essay's title, "brown at the edges." I found his essay in Daedalus Books, a used bookstore a few blocks west of the Pearl in a massive 500 plus page anthology called, *Reading Portland: The City in Prose*, edited by John Trombold and Peter Donahue.

Stadler's essay painted a bigger picture that illuminated contemporary Portland but also corroborated with Downtown Los Angeles and other big cities across America in how History is used as a commodity to sell real estate. His essay also further reinforced the connection I was seeing between the Pearl District and Sham-E-Ali Nayeem's *City of Pearls*.

Portland has a reputation as a green paradise and was also once an epicenter of the logging industry. The nickname "Stumptown" came from all the chopped down trees and stumps throughout the city. Despite the Stumptown moniker there are still thousands of trees in all directions across Portland.

The lush forest of Douglas Fir surrounding Portland and also spread within the city juxtaposed against industrial landscape and the legions of homeless camped out across the grid form a surreal urban mosaic. Obviously this condition is not unique to Portland, my home Los Angeles has more homeless than anywhere in North America, but these issues of contrasting class conditions define the urban world at large whether it's in the Pacific Rim, Europe or southern India.

What is a Heterotopia?

This sort of juxtaposed opposites within an urban landscape are what Michel Foucault calls, "Heterotopia." On many of Portland's trash cans, I saw an image of a hypodermic needle with a

diagonal slash through it. One of our LYFT drivers told me that though the city has always had an Opioid problem, it is now worse than ever. Another LYFT driver told that every month 3,000 more people move to Portland. That explains all the condos being built.

One of the nights in Portland I went to watch F. Douglas Brown read in an event at Daedalus Books. While there I found a few books that I bought. The first one was the anthology noted above and the second one was *Portlandness: A Cultural Atlas*. This book is in the spirit of Rebecca Solnit's *Infinite City* and Heyday Books, *LAitudes*. All of these books utilize thematic cartography to show multiple maps and revelatory essays of the cities they are covering. Solnit's *Infinite City* presents 20 different maps on San Francisco and *LAitudes* does a similar treatment for Los Angeles.

Portlandness's dozens of maps of Portland go a long way in spotlighting the city's countless sides. One of the most poignant interpretations is based on Foucault's Heterotopia. The section is called, "Heterotopia: The Columbia Slough." As the chapter states: "The nineteen-mile-long collection of brackish freshwater channels and wetlands sitting along Portland's northern edge known as the Columbia Slough has been pivotal in the ongoing effort to define Portland's identity."

Both the Columbia and Willamette Rivers run through Portland and they intersect at the northern edge of the city. (These rivers are also why Portland has been called "Bridgetown" because of the many bridges over the rivers, especially the Willamette.) It makes perfect sense that the area where these two rivers meet would be an axis of the city's identity and also past, present and future.

Before going further into this, the book explains Foucault's Heterotopia further. "For philosopher Michel Foucault," the authors write, "*heterotopia* (other-place) is a space outside the orderings of society, which nevertheless reflects all existing social spaces. Heterotopia mirrors the space around it, juxtaposing utopian and dystopian relationships and exposing the messy realities that undergird space and place."

The Columbia Slough epitomizes a heterotopia because it "is a space born from utopian dreams and dystopian nightmares of human society, where 'natural' restoration and preservation efforts clash with the industrial and economic engines powering much of our existence. This is also an important place in the daily lives of many people and animals. This place is rain and gravity, algae and soil, Army Corp of Engineers pump stations and asphalt, and turtles, snakes and raccoons."

These opposites were visible all over Portland and really just about anywhere in our contemporary world. Nonetheless, Portland is still greener than most cities and there is a real beautiful landscape within its built environment. There are several vantage points across the city where Mt. Hood comes into view. Mt. Hood is a part of the Cascade Range, the 700 mile chain of mountains extending from Mt. Lassen in Northern California through Oregon, Washington and British Columbia. (This is also why many call the Pacific Northwest region, Cascadia.)

Though Mt. Hood is 50 miles southeast of Portland, it is over 11,240 feet tall and one of the tallest mountains in the Pacific Northwest. Home to 12 glaciers and snowfields, it is shaped like a perfect cone projecting an iconic image on par with Mt. Fuji and the underrated Mt. Baldy in eastern Los Angeles County. Mt. Hood towers over Oregon and rightfully so.

It is precisely this natural beauty that is making Portland grow rapidly. It is one of the fastest growing places in America. Throughout our four days there, I saw a lot of construction, especially condos. I saw quite a bit of those along the eastside of the Willamette River, close to the

convention site. Some of the condos were high rises. Not as tall as the ones I see being built in LA or the ones I saw being built in Miami last summer, but kindred to the luxury condos coming up all over America right now.

Experiments in Joy



One of the most memorable nights in Portland was a reading at the Native American Student and Community Center at Portland State University on Jackson and Broadway in the southern section of Downtown Portland. The omnibus reading had over a dozen poets including Rocio Carlos, Rachel McLeod Kaminer, Douglas Kearney and Gabrielle Civil. The performance space was large enough to hold a few hundred people and the large glass windows provided a perfect vantage point to see the trees and skyscrapers in the immediate area. It rained for much of the evening adding further to the mood and ambience.

The reading was closed out by Gabrielle Civil reading from her new book, *Experiments in Joy*. Presenting work blending performance art, poetry and nonfiction, Civil opened the room up with a grounding exercise. She asked everyone to stand together in a circle. Well over 100 people circled up and repeated a few mantras she shared about honoring ancestors and distributing energy:

*We pull strength down from our ancestors.
We pull energy up from our ancestors.
We pull ourselves down further into the ground.
We take power from each other and bring it to ourselves.
We take power from ourselves and bring it to each other.*

The room embraced this exercise and the collective recited these mantras in unison as Civil ushered everyone along. Her message was unifying and after nearly three hours of poetry, it was the perfect activity to get everyone back on the same page. I bought Civil's book afterwards and while reading it, I was further inspired by her mission. Her short essay, "Aesthetic Crossings," expresses her desire "to crack open this space." She writes about the different genres and aesthetics of poetry and how she wants to help her "students to be fearless and open." Furthermore she exclaims:

*I want my students to understand
that if they are willing to be open and work hard,
they can receive incredible insight and access
to different worlds of poetry.
I want my students to encounter poetry all together
I want my students to know that it all belongs to them.*

In a further case of synchronicity, Civil teaches at CalArts with Tisa Bryant. Civil's mission of empowering and elucidating her students definitely aligns with Octavia Butler's idea of self construction and self determination.



In the final pages of Civil's book is a "Playlist." A three-page list poem composed as a set of instructions the piece includes lines like, "Are your hearts open?" "Are you clearing the path?"

“What are you working with? Why?” “Are you listening to each other?” “What world are you building?” “Who is holding your energy?” “Do you take a moment each night to look at each other and breathe together?” Are you ready to experiment?” “Are you open to joy?”

Civil delivers joy live and direct with her work. She is an emissary transferring joy to her readers and listeners. She was the perfect person to close the reading. She definitely helped everyone in attendance to leave with more than they came with.

Walking After the Rain

After the nearly three-hour reading, rather than taking a Lyft back to the convention area, I walked north along Broadway with my longtime friends Chiwan Choi and Peter Woods. It had stopped raining about 30 minutes before.



The air was brisk but refreshing and we walked through the wet streets reflecting and laughing about the past, present and future. It was one of those frozen moments and a pocket of time unto itself. The walk was only about 15 blocks and just over a mile, but it was enough to feel exhilarated and refreshed.

We also enjoyed the walk because we are all old friends. Chiwan and I met in 1997-98 at an open mic we both read at every week. We became friends after reading together all the time and a few years later in 1999, I coincidentally moved in right across the street from him in Koreatown. Chi and I have continually crossed paths even during the few years he left to NYU for grad school because he would always read with us when he was home on break.

Chiwan is a great editor and he helped me craft my manuscript. I originally had sent him a document almost twice as long but we cut it down to 200 pages and he helped me streamline it. He also suggested I change the title to Letters To My City.

Peter Woods and I have also known each other for over 15 years. From this time, we have thrown dozens of events together in every pocket of LA from the Last Bookstore to Art Walk to Avenue 50 to West Adams. Chi and Peter are two of the partners in Writ Large Press, the Publisher of my book. Our walk was extra special on that wet night also because my book finally came out. The three of us started talking about my book almost a decade ago. Here’s to friendship and enjoying simple moments like walking with old friends after the rain.

Another great moment in Portland was running into my former student Monique Mitchell in the book fair. Monique was my student a decade ago at View Park Accelerated Charter High School and her poetry was so compelling that many of her classmates started writing more because she inspired them so much. She radiates the joy Gabrielle Civil writes about. Seeing her in the middle of the book fair made my day.

Monique was working the table for the Get Lit Players, the Los Angeles based Poetry Troupe that mentors high school Poets to memorize classic poetry and then write their own response poems that they share at schools and literary festivals nationwide. Monique is one of the teachers of Get Lit. A decade ago she was one of the Get Lit Players herself. After graduating from Manhattanville College in New York, she came home and eventually got a job with Get Lit Players teaching poetry and mentoring the teens in Get Lit. She has performed her poetry in London and Australia

in addition to all over America. Not even yet 27, she has already accomplished so much. Monique is a bright light and it always makes my day to see her.

I only attended a few author panels this time around. The most inspiring one I saw was, “Against Witness: Developing Accountability & Participation in Poetry.” The participants included Angel Garcia, Julia Bouwsma, Sara Borjas, Mia Malhotra and F. Douglas Brown.

Brown wrote a manifesto poem that summarized his stance on this topic. The piece titled, “The Funk as Testimony,” interrogates the idea of how poetry addresses tenuous situations and how teachers can be more accountable to their students. Brown advocates for a deeper commitment than just witness. What’s more is that he applies this to himself. The poem concludes:

These turns, thes voltas by its technical, craft term—

*Switches us (and them) from Camera to Heart work. This,
Work tells us none of us can be beyond reproach, and so I’ll end*

*By telling you I am writing this while in front
Of mirror, standing with these four questions:*

1. *In the face of erasure, how have we learned to keep ourselves and those we love safe?*
2. *How am I questioning privilege (especially my own) and ensuring equality for the voiceless?*
3. *When the time comes, how will I use my words as a means to actively effect change?*
4. *What lessons have been offered to me that I need to pass on to students or our loved ones in general?*

*Four questions I ask you,
But that I’m really asking myself.*

Brown’s testimony inspired the crowd and left me contemplating my own teaching practice. His work is always thought provoking, especially his latest book, *Icon*. I almost forgot to mention I did a reading with traci kato-kiriyama and several poets from Cincinnati on my second day in Portland. I shared a few poems, including my “Ode to LA Women Writers.”

I spent a lot of my time at the conference book fair with fellow authors like Janice Lee, Michael Seidlinger and Rocio Carlos. We ended up selling all of my books that Writ Large Press brought to the conference and I really enjoyed the many conversations I had with so many people. I stayed in the moment and tried to take it one conversation at a time. Portland is a beautiful city and I definitely plan to come back. Flying back to LA I was tired but inspired.

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