

A Close Reading of kari edwards' *Bharat jiva*

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kari edwards' *Bharat jiva* explores a relentlessly critical, passionate and agonized relationship with transcendence. On the one hand the book is concerned with a utopian narrative of dismantling structures of power in language, especially in situations where these structures represent essentialist remnants of the body in writing or the violence done by the process of gendering people. Yet at every turn the writing wounds itself in advance to ward off an easy escape to the bourgeois, the reified, or the assumption that there could be a solution or answer. There is no answer, only process moment-to-moment, the writing thrashing about in the hope that somehow one of the buckles in the Christianized straightjacket of western thinking will come loose and permit escape, and the writer in turn scoffing at the idea of escape itself once that possibility appears.

The immersion in this unending dialectical process of agony, yearning, and more agony makes edwards' book a challenging read. Never in any previous book has the poet worked himself into a space this fraught, conflicted, or bleak. The book begins with the following phrase: "even when issues arise and obedience can not be secured by the bludgeon, the bludgeon remains."¹ From the start there is a flat-out denial of optimism or hope as a way of knowing; instead, it is literally axiomatic that the bludgeon (presumably power, manipulation, warlike impulses, the juridical) cannot be eliminated.

Where are we located? Who is saying these words and in what situation? What explains the strange pathos in this "even when" axiom that confronts us? Are we watching the spectacle of someone self-destructing? In some ways it is courageous or righteous, like standing up to expose a wrong. In other ways, it is as if a premodern poet (turned prophetic) has returned to reintroduce the truism to modern poetry via the backdoor of theoretical language. The floating voice making this pronouncement at the beginning of the poem is our entire world; we have no reference outside it. The floating voice is our location. As much as it claims to liberate us, it also entraps us; readers presumably cannot disagree with it yet or form their own opinions given the phrasing.

This is edwards' forceful claim; she was relentlessly opinionated and the writing, from the start, dares you to disagree. Yet it's hard to formulate a disagreement, because edwards is as hard on herself as everyone else. On the next page, there is a similarly definitive statement: "it's time for wholesale suicide and redundancy of never going back." This line has an overbearing pathos which is both utterly bleak and somehow gleeful, as if the voice that speaks it is world-ending, but in its destruction of the world, there's also a hint of triumph. An alternate possibility is that this line refers to the destruction of the Ego or the self. One might ask, why do both of these readings of the line seem so compelling and simultaneously available? The nature of dilemma begins to become clearer—there is a conflation happening here between language and world, and the self is merely a symptom of this relation.

On the next page, the writing is anthropomorphically "longing for another wrong reason lost place" like an implied desiring voice, followed by "those hollow tidbit power carnival acts with its elaborate cotton candy sand for a two tier body system." Despite its relentless resistance to the gendered body, the text is still inhabited by odd remnants of voice as a figure for the body.² There is an overlap between this

trace of the “two tier body system” inhabiting the voice, and the world constituted by and within the language. edwards’ voice, not unlike Whitman’s floating speaker, is a synecdoche for the world. When it wounds itself, the reader therefore feels implicated. This process is endless and inescapable because the two main objects that anchor/center the writing, the body and the self, are not coincidentally the very things the writing is attempting to dismantle: “seeing no reflection in this quasi-nationalistic killing spree and humorless body camp’s claim to an address.” Yet, for someone who detests the “humorless body camp,” this poet sometimes sounds an awful lot like Whitman through the performatives she uses: “for convenience sake, I accept pasteurized culture in plastic buckets discovering, I wink, I blink, close my eyes for another compliance conflict.” Location and action are subsumed within a voice constantly insisting it’s not a voice. In this book, edwards’ writing is therefore anchored to the very source of its oppression. Its resistance is by implication eternal; it can never get away.

While holding this complex series of counter-negations in the mind, what the writing can do with in-between time of waiting is to improvise expressively and expansively using noun-images, participles, syntax as musical notation, and other tools. This book consistently employs long breath phrases that string together nouns in a way that blurs the world under examination: “against the rules of suddenly perceiving enormous episodes knotted in inexorable reason, begging cat affection and flash formulas.” This clustering together of nouns reminiscent of Beat writing forms plural abstract language-images in edwards’ work. These lyrical abstractions don’t so much reify actual object as generate blurred, temporary formations. This blurring extends to the use of logic too, “never anything always more” in audacious and relentless uses of “both/and” thinking.

Meaning is skewed and closure avoided through the use of punctuation as a form of musical notation. Many passages consist of a single sentence interrupted only by commas: “for an otherwise indeterminate seat in someone’s heaven by undoing the done, must be done for the sake of slash, state, replanted, reworked, broken down homeless exclusive...” The way the syntax changes and intensifies lyrically here, breaking down into a staccato repetition of past participles, avoids the closure of the sentence, in the process holding at bay the voice it would conjure through the presence of recognizable speech acts. edwards’ affinity for past participles is important to the writing here because of the way it evokes a tone of disgust and a spatial sense of entrapment or futility. Unlike the past participles of Keats which lushly ornament the things described, evoking a melancholy plentifulness, edwards’ use of past participles more often dramatizes the endlessness of reification, mediation, and the always-already bludgeoned.

Furthermore, whenever edwards’ noun-groupings show up in this torqued series of participles, there is something comically offhand, almost Ashbery-like, about the way in which they are introduced: “ready to receive remains built for death, ready to receive the flatly desolate superficial deeply commissioned intellectual offer of suggestive actions.” There’s something in the use of tone here I like very much which belies the radical linguistic clustering taking place, as if to say, oh, you know, that flatly desolate superficial deeply (etc.), the one we always refer to. In this way, in kari’s poetry, the unrecognized or unformed object can show up radically in the background as an *entre-nous* nickname that doesn’t exist yet, a position we’re peripherally aware is there but which frustrates us by not having overtly entered discourse.

Perhaps what I'm drawn to in this reading is implicitly a self-portrait. I'm aware that Edwards probably did not read a lot of Ashbery, and she once declared to me over brunch in Brooklyn that she never considered Whitman or his "body electric" to be influences. There are some of the many acts of projection that can happen in the process of reading. Close reading Kari's poetry or reading it in detail is difficult because though it is located partly in a voice and partly in language, it attempts to reject the idea of a coherent speaker in the psychological sense, and this move implies a corresponding rejection of "identity." Things which are "personal issues" or "at stake" for the writer such as dyslexia and transgenderism are seen as always already political and public, and they are woven in among other content in a holistic way. In this sense, Kari has managed to bear witness to these "personal issues" while consistently delaying or staving off the experience of objectification or being reduced to a particular identity. I identify with this political use of subjectivity and as a reader and writer I am drawn to a similar space of gender and identity flux, which makes me read Kari's work with a great degree of empathy. She has escaped the category of "professional tranny," the apologist or cheerleader for an identity within the writing itself. She has instead used language to create a volatile, utopian space where all assumptions are up for grabs and where many potential narratives could be happening. A problem with talking about one's "identity" in the "identity politics" sense is that ultimately one does not create an identity but that identity is imposed upon one by others. Edwards' work carries this dilemma further by engaging in constant acts of self-recreation and self-negation as forms of self-mastery.

This reading situation is further complicated by the fact that Edwards' writing was generated through such a process of reading, reaction, and projection. She would often write by appropriating the words of other poets and rewriting or revising them repeatedly, like building up paint over a surface until the original image was no longer visible. The subject or content of her writing tended to become the act of revising and rewriting words, a narrative of thought process in the contextual moment of composition. The original thought in the borrowed text which had once provoked in her a reaction of passion, engagement, or revolt was nearly eliminated. It began to take on the status of a third text hovering in the background, an unreachable original to which the imparsable abstractions on the page refer.

Kari, your molecules are vibrating. When you mention the people, you seem to mean not the "confessional body" of the people prior to language, but something ecstatic within and itself, nameable up to the point of a roving hoary zone, what you appropriately call "itinerant bodies in mechanic flux, preaching freedom beyond flesh pamphlets of authority, concealed in blind devotion."

The large D&G imprinted on the frame of my customer's fashion sunglasses presupposed a difference in seeing to the first power and seeing to the second power as she turned over the books in my booth to look at either the price or the list of blurbs on the back, rabbit duck, recreating this intention as a credit card number points us to a sea of inherent value, a "throw of the exotic" joy of dice thinking

"broken into pieces." Her boyfriend who frowned squinting at my academic service profession within the bounds of an ambiguously flip of the wrist flurried. "When we mean the people," we cannot recover intention, you indicate, Kari, which is the tragedy of "scream representatives, now incarcerated in a rationalistic shadow land," beating me up with the prince tool. When someone has your hooks in them,

a tractor beam of appearance in you#
"history that merges extruder merchandising with wholesale lots of intermittent dung," I am the poem.
Hello I am "continually attending purgative settlements," as when the prelinguistic face begins to intrude
upon language awareness that they don't really see you at all, but rather the word "you" and some pelican
gaze

remarks, hey, fish and small krill about to surface, my training having headed in the trick direction.
I learned the gestures of my elders and what they evoked by it in this grip, this utterance "to denote the
heart," in which to reveal ourselves moment-to-moment work of consciously flux, mixing "a sudden and
delicious fractal

indifference to the written line" with "exploding stigmata, tracer bullets and the shit of
the dead." I can tell you're in pain, that we've been beaten up as much threatened me to my face to keep
writing poetry, he turning then because I caregrafted onto my legroom some distrust, sneeringly now on
the other side of "fail safe dams." Brecht complained

about Lukács and his pals: "Production makes them
uncomfortable. You never know where you are with production...You never know what's going to come
out. And they themselves don't want to produce. They want to play the apparatchik and exercise control
over other people. Every one of their criticisms contains a threat."³ This is the model of criticism I am
opposed to,

and probably you, "a speculative utterance falls forth and returns a full figure fist to speculative
nonexistence existence, falls and returns a response to and from, to form a roaring sky, screaming." Which
would be followed by a wink. O poets, "omnipotent great military spring of happiness enacted in the year
of law against bettered locals," I see and name you

over the rooftops of the yawp you might abandon,
"snuffed out," service worker at the end of the period of US dominance turning over the back of the blurb
in the narrative to mistake the price for always signifying "lost time lost longing," perhaps our most loved
most exaggerated mythic dimension. Which is why I'm offering ten free downloads of "a people knowing
their own strength

cast as day laborers" which at least offers something to look forward to to something to
look. Spring has a catch in its mechanism "an ever present moment to monumental discomfort pull a kit's
string tantrum." All this pointing and laughing, delirious, horrified, "toxic to any living substance." The
poet-critic, by way of contrast, may repeatedly model dissent through an inductive approach to reading
which may then provoke or contribute to further creative output, conversation, or community.

D&G say
"there is no ideal speaker-listener, any more than there is a homogenous linguistic community." D&G also
say "Knee and Calf-Length Kilts, Long skirts and cropped blazers, ruched dresses, relaxed tartan shirts in
cotton, flannel, and chiffon." So we're stepping out from behind the podium to tackle paper Marxism head
on. Here, balance this copy of the manifesto on your head. Now place one foot directly in front of the
other, heel-toe heel-toe, "she sang beyond the genius of the sea,

the water never formed to mind or voice,"
Perhaps it is actually true that "there must be a dawn somewhere flashing quick not plagued by decay and
too many billowing words." We think you're incredibly handsome, a voice interrupts, but advise raising
your self-esteem a little first

before you hit the catwalk. When Situationists get in my face like that at a

poetry reading, "I wink, I blink, close my eyes for another compliance conflict, pledge of allegiance," which in a way is preparing to have an encounter, extra work, like I've put together a comprehensive plan to cook breakfast or I've got an exciting new initiative for brushing my teeth. This poem isn't bad for a nightlife,

creating parallels between terrorism and merely being upset as I let the pan handle scald me, redistributing blood, "consuming theory intoxicated pain covered with campy fiction," you would like that, it's needed. "I am eating the exhausted of cars," this I which is also "beyond attempting to speak a victim's own mythological motif." Sacrificial, so the rest of us can flood in to fill the human territory in between, a kind of trampoline of mimesis stretch between your expectations

and "the real real remains of the day's passive aggressive shallow denial of death's constant face." But the open hands and the sympathies of those who reach us with their words, their readings "at the intersection of wounded traffic," you complete me in fragments, a constant barrage of gesture "who under terror of gasoline / will meet the leopard and attack the trainer," because we are open the other,

a weakness and a strength.

Because in this passage,

"you cannot do anything for us or me or them,"
rage rises in abject tautology.

Because we never finished that sentence
about the people, in public language
or in textual commentary,

a sentence which hangs there,
suspended over a chasm
in a gag reaction
buffeted by hostility wave
particle disappearances
peeling back the corner to
reveal constructedness
in a frontal cortex of musk
blanched by stone
compartments, implying
permanent oppressed
leg irons without bodies
shifting the voice
already undone by gravity.

irritated by scenery
to exchange a weekend
for the work ethic
to avoid disappointment

with overwhelming stage
direction participle
liberation lockdown
seared into dust
carried along by tumble
weed folk manifest
collusions into gravesite
a dead spring we all
contribute to without
trans-ending, inside a
body which is everywhere
and nowhere, a kind of
loathing for our
role in overthrowing
its assumptions.

I blink, it disappears
leaving a pious social joy
echo devouring its own
tail shifting lunacy
banging against the wall
again and before
all pain and flesh
denying an exit from the
cell in which we
constituted changing
yoked to how the pronoun
we hurt ourselves with once
an egoless ego
an antimimetic mimesis
deploying unfulfillable desires
staging failure in blazes
a hurt model theorem denial
exposed revealed unmade

Notes

1. kari had asked me to be a reader for the original manuscript of *Bharat jiva*. I have written this article based on a draft of the book she sent to me for commentary on 7/21/06.

2. I derive the “figure of voice” concept here from Tenney Nathanson’s book *Whitman’s Presence: Body, Voice, and Writing in Leaves of Grass*. New York: NYU Press, 1992.

3. Adorno, Theodor et al. *Aesthetics and Politics* (Radical Thinkers). New York: Verso, 2007.

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