

Lisa Samuels

Withness in kind

I always sink into the hollow spaces between the fractured text. I gush out from the hollow and get dispersed with other things that have also gushed out from the hollow. The dispersed things break once again. This doesn't mean that the text of my body, the text of my language is prophetic or mysterious. If it were mysterious, I could never do the work of fracturing the space of the real.

—Kim Hyesoon, “Space” (translation by Don Mee Choi)

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Withness names sustained closeness with the event of one's interpretive reading, where “event” designates a complex including the work – book, lingual weaving, movement piece, poem – and the context and the interpreter/s articulating response. Withness turns away from potential power and distance stances of exegetical criticality and towards an attention with the engaged art event, an attention that does not seek to be somewhere other than in relation. Some interpretive systems or critiques have a telos directed away from the reading event at hand. Such a telos might well be valuable, even necessary, in some distanced criticality. Withness is simply different; it's a staying-with. In doing so, withness engages the relation of creative and critical work. Typically presumed to be one of diremption rather than isomorphic difference, that relation hovers, for this essay, in its generative egalitarian energies.

I started thinking about withness as focused on the beginning of a thought: I wanted to experiment with a deliberate turnaround from treating thought as beginning in resistance. Resistance was possibly how I learned to recognize thought, and it's a bearing that appeals to anti-authoritarianism. Yet “thinking against” a work, especially in academic or public-intellect criticality, sometimes posits interpretation as needing to respond correctively, or in a complementarity of lack. For example, someone reads a work or attends a performance and feels compelled to write back when they disagree (corrective) or when they feel that the work or performance has left something out (complementarity of lack). This stance can associate with contrastive distinction, a term for describing how a work is not like this or that prior work, especially insofar as it treats of similar materials or topics. In its judgmental forms, contrastive

distinction characterizes many critical procedures, which is understandable for cultures that value presentations of “new” material that is often considered to supersede “old” material. Perhaps it characterizes many modern developed-country critical cultures, given several ideational histories. Such histories include science-inflected work testing ever “better” hypotheses; progressivism (either trying to improve something or assuming that change ideas are *necessarily* improving, an assumption allied in turn with Discovery Narratives); and property ideas which hold that something is owned in a way that precludes others from owning it.

Contrastive distinction can be helpful when it’s in dialogue, when it shows its demurals without prejudice toward the work under critique. A problem arises when the “new” critical argument seeks to be necessarily equated with *improved* material. Can we have a changed conversation about the performed meaning of a work, a conversation without assuming that newly-appearing work – whether “creative” or “critical” – needs to improvably supersede others, prior or potential? Can we have interpretation without power-claims? At this point we’re considering the aesthetics of works rather than their ethics; it’s understandable when interpreters wish to condemn unethical aspects of an art work or a critical response, even granting that ethics is not an entirely neutral perfusion of elements, beyond obvious examples of cruelty.

Which brings us to the journal’s issue theme, kindness. This essay considers how kindness can be constative in witness procedures relating to an art work. Among its potential practices, that is, interpretive kindness can co-support the response and the work: hover othernesses alongside each other. Be with in otherness. The term constative helps this essay demur from the effacement of the subject implied by the term altruism, especially in its use to describe a best kindness. To be interpretively *with*, in the perspectives of this essay, is kinder than to disappear. In witness, constative kindness involves a fostering re-framing that exponentializes the artwork’s potential by adding to its dimensions with other kindred dimensions. Thus kindness, here, evokes and generates difference within and in relation to the honoured “same” – the body – of the interpreted work, relinquishing urges to improve, replace, or correct.

Another issue associated with a corrective stance is exegetical hermeneutics, which value getting something *right* because of the trailing residue of canonical versus heretical interpretation in what’s become, over centuries, “arts and humanities.” As a term, for example, “close reading” (pronouncing “close” like a *close* [\\'klōs], an enclosed area such as a clearing in a forest) names a disciplinary habit of reading to stabilize elements of an imaginative work, and to stabilize or even to “close” (pronounced as in closing a door) an interpretation of those elements. The habit of close reading has most often been a putatively clarifying one, like authoritative spectacles designed to focus and freeze-frame a reading in relation to an interpreted work, keeping very separate from the critical reader’s body acting with the work, breathing around it, touching its forms. With different proposed values, witness wants to stay with the work it’s responding to. Its value is the opposite of critical distance. It wants critical closeness.

Yet is closeness always kind? Is witness *kind*? It is, arguably, being *in kind*: drawing together with and fostering the otherness of what’s encountered. That is legible as a constative angle of kindness. In “Ethics of the infinite,” philosopher Emmanuel Levinas distinguishes saying from the

said: “Language as saying is an ethical openness to the other” (65). This ongoingness of saying, its anti-teleological gerund activity, is for Levinas constitutive of ethical articulation. Extending that intertextual relation, withness is theoretically unending. One of its tasks as an interpretive strategy is to show its designs in a temporary frame – an essay or performance, for example – that can be said to stay conceptually open when the frame is removed.

If withness has this kind of ethical “saying” movement as part of its practice, then *recurrence* is a way to describe that movement. In contrast to habits associated with (though not necessary to) close reading, recurrence wants to activate elements of an imaginative work without stabilizing them, to approach and re-approach without desiring an end goal. In that sense withness recurrence is something like the opposite of telos. Not to have a reading encounter to get somewhere else, but to have an encounter that stays in relation to the continuing otherness of the work and of one’s engagement. Recurrence also invokes the spelling “re-currents” as in the circulation of fluid, its always-reoccurring movement, and the circulation of electricity, also ongoing given circuitry to be so, and thus recurrence links with my theory of membranism. Which matters because withness, too, posits ongoing awareness of one’s embodied interpretation with the body of the interpreted work.

And yet if recurrence were to be the simple opposite of telos, one could think that recurrence were just like telos in reverse. So as usual I need more languages. One useful polydimensional image of attention involvement is what I call Peirce’s Cave, derived from an interpretation of philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce’s essay “Continuity” (1898). Though the present essay’s space and aim limit my description, put briefly I construe Peirce’s Cave from his vivid portrayal of sensorily-transacted conceptual ongoingness, a portrayal he offers as a way to imagine his theory of continuity. Peirce illustrates continuity as sensory (haptic, olfactory, non-ocularcentric i.e. completely dark) bubbles that crucially cease to exist as finitudes when they’re fully engaged. I discuss Peirce’s Cave in a different essay (“Wild dialectics”); here Peirce’s unbounded continuity helps me draw an image of withness recurrence. The act of withness reading – reading in a wide sense, including experiencing sculpture and hearing soundwork – maintains aspects of continuance that are repeatedly close with the event/work being interpreted. If withness touches on alterity ethics in reading response, its recurrence touches on guiding attention streams, whether dialectical currents or something else, continually back toward the work being read. The drive is to get as close as possible to a constative empathy with the work of one’s art encounter. In that empathy is also an ethical move to disrupt an approach by way of power.

The word “power” indicates an ethical reason, the word distance a structural reason, motivating withness. Withness strives to undo a stance toward the work that presumes a need to clarify or correct. Instead, the ethically-motivated posture of withness is to co-illuminate, to consider the same dimensions from close-difference angles. As the movement aspect of withness, recurrence wants to activate, as though touching again and again various coordinates of a dimensionalized geometry, the parts of a work in order to sense and articulate what a reading illuminates. To adapt Peircean terms for withness recurrence: one shifts abductively within continuities of relation. In this sense critical withness and recurrence replace telos with circulating whirl. The closeness and hovering of withness might make withness sound too complicit with and

insufficiently perpendicular to the work being interpreted, as in “what’s the point; what are we doing here?”

Yet the conditions of any encounter always preclude utter identity, which is part of the point of the Kim Hyesoon epigraph at this essay’s start. Another Peircean context for withness is an adaptation of his term secondness: the radical closeness of withness is akin to lingering in the relational encounter of secondness. Such lingering is not an overt part of Peirce’s vision for secondness, which describes the dynamic theoretical zone where firstness meets another firstness, arising meanwhile and necessarily within the thought conditions of what he terms thirdness, also called continuity. Withness, then, describes a move, an expansion not offered as an improvement, within the imaginal possibilities of Peirce’s tripartite figure for being (firstness), relation (secondness), and generality or continuity (thirdness). The point of imagining secondness here, having emphasized the continuity of Peirce’s Cave, is that withness involves recurrent *encounter*. The mutual non-contiguity of secondness supports a description of withness as not about becoming one with the art being considered. Neither the art nor the interpreter needs to unify in order to stay with. The interpreter does not need to become of the same kind in order to foster kindred, empathy-oriented, readings. Again, kindness can be constative. Secondness is a reminder of the value of continually recognizing the otherness of oneself as interpreter, of the interpretive processes, and of the work being accorded attention.

In this complex encounter, withness also seeks to democratize, to treat with fostering entropy, the values accorded to so-called creative and so-called critical work. Such democratization can be seen as bringing everything into the status of primary text, recognizing that neither creative nor critical work has a position of superiority in relation. That recognition is another point of starting this essay with the Hyesoon epigraph. As the interpreter becomes a text in engaging a text (using “text” as a moniker for different kinds of signs), what Hyesoon terms “fracture” is also the context of openness, in which withness co-operates. In this sense withness is part of efforts to undo the epistemologically bracketed status of the creative and the relegated secondary status of the critical, which usually comes back to haunt its desired other by behaving as though it sees more clearly than the creative. Withness is part of efforts that many people make to understand art-involved sign systems as co-indexical, as co-relational.

Withness can be critiqued as both insufficiently separated, from a point of view that values what it calls critical distance, and excessively close, from a point of view that values singularity, the firstness, or unbreachable and non-paraphraseable being, of the art work. The latter point is especially clear when we consider the radical singularity and strange arising of any subject, work, and context. It takes an effort to hold that singularity and arising in the same breath as the urge to critical withness. That effort reflects a tension between default (elemental) and deliberate (socially constructed) cultural organizing: by default, events arise and we act with slippage among us. Deliberately, we turn toward each other and configure how to behave, how to be habitus beings. Amidst these slippages, withness is a critical social effort worth making. It shines a light on kindness as one aspect of the articulation of deliberate community: one accepts the granular facts of radical singularity as contiguous and entropic rather than separating.

Withness is one conceptual tool in the context of a different and heretofore dominant criticality that supposes the virtue of distance from the examined work or that understands such distance to be unavoidable. We cannot *be* that other, we cannot ontologically or otherwise perfectly accord with or perfectly become something other. For that matter, we often study events or works that we don't want to get too close to. Withness wants to pull the strain as close as possible to the interpreted work without pretending that distance is not part of our nows and histories, but insisting that critical relation can be with, and can perceive in particular ways by being so.

The possibilities of *witness* reside within both the word (wit[h]ness) and concept of withness: reading as witnessing, the documentary resonance of our interpretations. The testimonial timeliness of withness is myriad. It includes the body rights movement, global upheavals of migration and refugees and transnational identities, aspirations to unbuckle the hold that capital product values have on living values, the efforts and effects of indigenous and gender studies mapping intersectionality into present history, our attunement to earth rights, our pandemic empathy. All these events have us witnessing each other, and parts of our responsive tarrying can be – arguably many parts already are, as with documentary work – carried out as withness.

My initial thinking about withness arose about a decade ago, and I gave withness talks in the US in 2014 in relation to Laura Riding (for the Modernist Studies Association) and Leslie Scalapino (for a Naropa gathering). Looking around while composing this essay, revisiting materials and extending outward, I find evidence of others thinking along the same lines then too. And why not: retexting is as old as any discourse making. Yet it's a curious matter, if it is the case that withness-type readings were burgeoning during the last decade. For they are still received with contention, as I experience in responses to my discussions of withness. They remind me of responses to my doctoral work on deformative criticism in the 1990s. There's an expressed sense that a reading ought to conjure dispassionate ideation, make a new product, and lead somewhere else, and a vague misgiving that withness isn't adequately new or "original" in its results.

What might withness readings look like? Retexting is at least partly related: retext is in direct engagement with, re-making or re-shaping, the specific materials of prior works. Cento poems, for example, whose appropriative ingredients are reallocations of lines from external sources. Dante Alighieri retexting Virgil and Harryette Mullen ("My honeybunch's peepers are nothing like neon") retexting Shakespeare ("My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun") swerve their sources honorifically and politically without exact resemblance. Perhaps retexting is part of a more general category; perhaps it features overlapping similitudes with aspects of withness. As Mark Amsler explains in *Affective Literacies*, using for example Abelard's reordering of extant texts to compose *Sic et Non* (circa 1120 CE), retexting forms part of the historical evidence of creative makings as remakings. Yet re-makings are typically not set up as withness interpretations. They are other things, performance moves recognizable as partaking of prior instances of those moves, texts that hanker after precursors, like Selina Tusitala Marsh's "Fast Talking PI" (2012) imitates the form of Anne Waldman's poem "Fast Speaking Woman" (1975), like Robert Glück's fiction *Margery Kempe* (1994) beckons, through almost complete difference,

to the medieval visionary text *The Booke of Margery Kempe* (circa 1440 CE). Kempe's book itself is the result of a collaboration with its unnamed scribe, whose textual empathy might be considered close to translation – from Kempe's telling to the scribe's writing – and, even, close to an act of witness.

Potentiality archives can foster the growth of witness makings. Motion Bank, out of Germany, can be seen to encourage the perception of choreographic signatures in relation to retexting in dance: one may go to the “bank” and pick up signatures to replay. This archive availability could lead to witness movement work, were one to find a choreographic signature and stay, and stay, in kind with it to make a responsive work that shadow-replays, that builds out sympatico variations with, the energies of the starting signature. Motion Bank's first building phase was 2010-2013, again indicating some time-specific 2010s intensity of interest in repurposive archiving. The present essay is ad hoc in these speculations, resistant to presumptions of totalizing, yet there are many cultural ponderings that come under the zeitgeist light of retext and witness, approaches that encourage the making of pastiche works and open software, for example, as well as repurposive and communal work.

The poet Vahni Capildeo's communal performance texts in response to the poet Martin Carter are a good example of witness. Capideo's 2019 book *Skin Can Hold* devotes a long section, titled “Astronomer of Freedom” (69-98), to the collaborative performance work she began in 2014 (another example of witness zeitgeist) with Jeremy Hardingham, Paige Smeaton, Hope Doherty, and others. The section sets out a poetics of that Carter-response work that includes explicitly witness-sounding language:

...immersive experiments became the context for events including reading of full texts alongside what I call ‘syntax poems’ gleaned from them. The syntax poems offer traces of a way of being *with and inside* Carter’s poetry. They are not the kind of independent verbal artefacts called responses or reworkings. (71, emphasis in original)

In a deformation-like beginning, “Astronomer of Freedom” sets out the starting poem from Martin Carter, “I Am No Soldier,” and then provides examples of six collaborative syntax poems that draw from Carter’s words and topical energies. These syntax poems feature looping, treating, echoing, altering punctuation and layout, and stutter-torquing anaphora. The number IV syntax poem comes across as overtly deformative: it “simply” culls, pulls a few choice words (43, in 14 lines) from Carter’s poem (519 words – I counted – in 61 lingual lines and 6 interlinear blank lines) to lay emphasis upon them alternatively, to draw out and sing certain of the Carter poem’s words. The start of syntax poem VI, too, is procedurally deformative: using only the first words of each Carter strophe, it sings:

Wherever . . .
O . . .
But . . .
There . . .
It . . .

I...
O...
(85)

As a creative witness to Carter, these syntax poems are an example of withness in action. In the notes after the syntax poems, using the plural pronoun to include the performers who worked with Capildeo, the text says “We felt that the short lines were voluminous” (91). That might be paraphrased to mean that the short lines had the potential to be and conceptually already were more than they were, and could be drawn out sympathetically in withness extensions and variations. Such potentiality honouring indicates how the overt manifestation of internal *difference* – an instantiation of felt potential as something other-than even as it’s also-with – is a constitutive feature of withnessing.

Characteristics of deformance are present in the critical angles of “Astronomer of Freedom.” Its withness is also legible as deformance insofar as *Skin Can Hold* (on pp 71-75 and 90-98) explains its syntax poems and the collaborative performance work in overtly critical – hermeneutic, heuristically exportable – terms. Even as it also insists on what I would call its withness energy, its hovering: “Our working materials . . . [are] not given as a definitive guide or academic interpretation” (96). As withness readings, definitiveness is not part of the interpretive ethics of the syntax poems. The collaborative nature of the work in this case is legible as a version of withness that expands the urge to stay with by keeping the reading self open with other reading selves. Intensifying the ingredients of openness with the interpreting and interpreted other.

In a work time-coincident with the start of Capildeo’s Carter collaborations (2014), I gave a withness talk-performance for a conference at Naropa (a US learning institution). Working with Leslie Scalapino’s book-with-images *The Dihedrons Gazelle-Dihedrals Zoom* (2010), I played a recording of my voice reading two excerpts from *Dihedrons* while I also spoke about the book’s configurations and showed an enlarged slide of one of its images (a black and white etching by Kiki Smith: see Fig. 1 below). The delivery featured oral re-transmission alongside reflective commentary alongside visual co-presentation, to bring creative and critical reading into simultaneous present occurrence. I was conscious of performing, in part, an honorific re-mix from *Dihedrons* in that multi-dimensional public reading. I was also conscious of bringing into a public sensorium a conversation between Scalapino and me, a conversation partly written in (unpublished) manuscript forms, part of which I’d seen and partly not. The conversation had been cut short by her death in 2010, hence that example of withness was unfolding temporally close to my grief. I had already written two pieces on Scalapino’s work, one published, one as yet unpublished, and Leslie and I were literary friends when she was alive. She brought out my first poetry book *The Seven Voices* (1998) with her O Books imprint, and we performed and presented together. Perhaps art-friendship was part of why I thought to articulate withness at that time, and why I think of it in terms of kindness here.

Capildeo’s collaborative work with Martin Carter’s writing, as a differently committed set of withness illuminations, comes out of a shared history and experience of Caribbean realities and a desire to perform the intensity of Carter’s work multi-modally: “to re-present Carter’s world-work in ways that would be recognisable to readers who have grown up with his words and are

linked to his region, yet which those entirely unfamiliar with it would be free to enter" (73). In the honorific stance we can perceive in these text-present and unheard performances ("unheard" because the Carter and Scalapino examples cannot be fully performed in codical or online pages), witness finds part of its source in an illuminating confluence of post-structuralism and post-colonialism. Or, as I prefer to call it, epicolonialism, since we remain in propinquity with the colonial, whose evidences and ideologies are far from "post."

In terms of post-structuralism, witness is a quite literal strategic application of, for example, the "writerly" (*scriptible*) traced in Roland Barthes's *S/Z* (1970). Witness brings together a belief in the absolute freedom of imagining a work – bearing in mind the ethics of Nietzsche's "extra-moral sense" ("außermoralischen Sinn," from his 1873 essay) – with the absolute need to cherish the continually reborn other. Bringing things forward in their illuminative complexity is one aspect of our scholarly acts, and witness might be seen as more on the scholarship than on the critical end of academically-homed practices. Perhaps witness is another version of the argument that scholarship is always also critical, theoretical: never neutral. Scholarship makes room in kind for the works it responds with.

In terms of epicolonialism, inasmuch as US race work is an effort to shift out of colonial relations, some of poet Duriel E. Harris's work also evinces witness. Harris was part of my aforementioned 2014 Naropa panel, titled "Withness: thought-start in creative-critical practice"; and here is another art friendship that started in multi-modal poetics. Our panel also included poets Megan Kaminski and Marthe Reed. The panel proposal describes Harris discussing her "Thingification" performance as engaging "ritualized refusal as an interrogation of the radical embodiment and radical disembodiment engendered by thing-ification, here taken as the annihilating force at the core of all oppressions (Scarry, Césaire)"; Kaminski speaking to a "poetics of permeability (absorption and embrace) ... dissolving boundaries between self and other" in her practice and in writings of Melissa Buzzeo, Renee Gladman, Bhanu Kapil, and Sherwin Bitsui; and Reed addressing "the with-ness of dissonance: poetics of observation, intimacy, and documentary in Whalen, Berssenbrugge, Santos Perez, and her own practice, mind/body at play in the human/other-than-human wilderness." Our panel's ethos, in relation with the Dis/embodied Poetics conference we joined at Naropa, was one of gathering and supporting, of encouraging each other in kind and with kindness.

Duriel Harris composed a follow-up piece, "Let Us Consider Sarah: Notes Toward Withness, Affect, Making, and the US Imaginary; or, You Better Work Bitch, This Is Flesh This Is The Prize" (2015), which brought together some of our panel thinking with more insights into her solo show *Thingification*. Harris reflects on the part of her *Thingification* performance that gives voice to a 19th-century "mammy" slave figure she calls Sarah, depicted in an historical caricature drawing:

In live performance, the interior of the book, turned out such that the mammy—a determined fiction awakened and animated by the song in scene one, emerges, embodied. Mammy's racialized exaggerations arousing Sarah, the ghost of a formerly enslaved woman, who forces her way into presence, speaking a truth long held silent during her life in captivity.

Out of the pictorial graphemes of Sarah, a historical depiction, really a representative caricature, of actual persons, Harris renders present voicedness and co-embodiment. In a way that underscores the constatives of witness's kindness, Harris is being with. Her kindness in embodying the different personas in her solo show demonstrates that "kind" is not limited to warmth in its closeness. To channel such a mammy figure is to feel hurt as well as to honour and commemorate. To be kind is also to be in kind, to make as kind, to form kindred percepts drawing on the beautiful and the difficult.

3

At this moment of writing, I'm listening to my earlier recording from Scalapino's *The Dihedrons Gazelle-Dihedrals Zoom*. The recording has two overlapping strands, and the talk-performance itself thus featured three interweaving audio aspects, since I was also speaking a set of points distinct from the *Dihedrons* recording. In geometry, a dihedron is a figure formed by two intersecting planes; dihedrals are the angle between those two planes. In Scalapino's book title, the compound word *Gazelle-Dihedrals* puts a land animal in the angle. Similarly though not identically, in my construction of that critical witness performance I felt my humanimal capacity interposing with the prospects of Scalapino's references. Her book title also brings temporal movement in relation with its appositive compound noun: the animalized geometry verbs to "zoom," both as a photographic lens close-focuses and as an entity performs a very fast running, swimming, or flying movement. In the updates that change always summons, which is part of the context-sensitivity of the dynamics of art, we can also now read the verb as referring to the interactive digital platform Zoom. A platform whose apparent simultaneity and closeness both delivers and forestalls, in our pandemic digitality, equalities of intimacy and communication.

Scalapino is a writer who is very skeptical about the possibility of one event speaking for another. I take this to be one reason she asserts an absolute non-relation between writing and lived experience. For Scalapino this non-relation, this radical singularity and separateness, also meant the importunity of a critical approach to her writings, which she views as speaking themselves entirely, with an adequacy that needs nothing other than observation. I take her stance seriously, yet I also know that no-one is a flat witness to other makings. Every event interacted with becomes another version of itself, as this essay's Hyesoon epigraph suggests. The witness reading of *Dihedrons* reflects a stance I also take seriously: a desire to act in writing that engages constitutively and artistically, without presuming objectivity, with a work of art. If we do not have dialogue, then we have parallel streams of action that are not permitted to mingle because the integrity of each forestalls mingling. Individual integrity is a good that helps people break out from following. But if event integrity treats dialogue as presumptuous or exclusively other and separate, that won't do, for me; that silos us, and we are siloed enough already. The course of the particular can meet other courses without traumatic dissolution or presumptive falsity. Otherwise we are encouraged to be lonely, disrupted and separate.

Another way to put this is that witness moves beyond hovering in radical singularity to a belief in the efficacy of differential community. Peirce, who seems to be this essay's guiding

philosophical angel (I'm also re-reading Édouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation*), wrote about the necessity of a community of thinkers to test the possibility of overlap in modes of thinking and in specific views (see his essay "Some Consequences of Four Incapacities," 1868). His communal emphasis has been differently taken up across the subsequent 150+ years of considering how to live thinking inside the physical and political realities of split atoms and atomized consumers and intensified individuality. And also how to live thinking inside the global, which Glissant's ethics of opacity so saliently addresses.

(here I let the recording play for a while)

The unheard sonics that accompany this essay perform with the polyvocal dihedrals and with the images that co-perform *The Dihedrons Gazelle-Dihedrals Zoom*: fourteen images (two appearing twice: from Jess Collins, Masami Teraoka, Margaret Hofbeck, and Kiki Smith) open the 111 subtitled parts to exponents of representation: the artists and the images are joined with Scalapino's language. The "Author's Note" indicates that the images are meant not as inspirations or subjects of the writing. Instead they are reportedly chosen after the writing to be "linked to passages of text that show the same reality" (vii) or, in one case, to show what the author was visually remembering at the time of writing. The book draws the images into a collaborative field of composition with the words: we can see them as graphemes that dimensionalize, because they "show the same reality as," the words. They are similar in kind, though constatively.

Consider the image opposite the one-page section titled "Gemsbok" (Fig. 1) from Kiki Smith's *Spinster Series*, made in a "two plate, double printed iris" process. The drawn lines are white signage on a black background, the contrast vivifying both extremes and also inverse mirroring the coterminous black words on the white page. The simultaneities of the etched lines relate with the exponentializing visions of the words and also with the body of the reader joining the text in the performance of reading. The girl-and-woman stance is beside and with, simultaneously, the spinning wheel and its threads: literally, the arm image is etched as by her side holding the skein and also as reaching further over to touch the spun thread. The simultaneous-time etched spinning threads are filaments holding, and being held by, and being spun out from the hair of the female image.



Fig. 1. Kiki Smith, *Spinster Series 1* (2002) from *The Dihedrons Gazelle-Dihedrals Zoom*.

These images overtly associate with fate, the spinning wheel that looms out destinies put into motion with words re-threading their inversionability and self-emission. Yet the depictive simultaneity undoes the habitual univocality of fatalism because no one thing has to be; no option undermines the other posited options. Staying with simultaneity, the naked girl image mixes as and with an older lined-faced female image. Alongside are the rubbings of the palimpsestic possibilities of also-versions of the image(s): cloudy omissions of rubbed-out white.

The nearby words say nothing about a spinning wheel. The image embodies whiteness spinning while the lingual “white ice” slips “the base runner.” The base runner and “the gelechild” are running and freezing in the horizon plane of the nearby words. Meanwhile “Cromorne,” the last part of the book, is declared to be “happening at the same time as events in the main body of *The Dihedrons Gazelle-Dihedrals Zoom*. Throughout simultaneous with the latter’s extended stream” (131). Curiously, it is possible to think of Scalapino’s presentation of diremptive simultaneity – that is, one part of a book claimed as happening in the same zone as another, separate, part of the same book – as a feature of a work that might invite further otherness simultaneity. That is, as open to withness readings at visual-image and at lexical levels. Perhaps

the overt lexical intertextuality of Scalapino's declared compositional process for *Dihedrons*, its writing-through of *Random House Webster's Unabridged Dictionary*, intensifies the legibility of its openness to fractals of the semiotic real.

An experimental work of writing might be called writerly, in Roland Barthes's terms; and we might wish to say that writerly strategies can be interpretive in addition to being constitutive, can resemble deconstructive and deformance and other co-performative strategies brought to any type of text. In Scalapino's *Dihedrons*, the multiple signs occur with each other, not self-withitnessing so much as simultaneity and polytransfiguration. Though it isn't far-fetched to read Scalapino as putting her art and Kiki Smith's art into a conceptual *ex post facto* withness relation, since the images are said to be "linked to passages of text that show the same reality" (vii). A withness reading is an in-kind performance brought to an otherness by another otherness. Maybe withness can be the tactic of a detail moment, a breath inside other responses to a work of art.

Such a co-articulation is not the same thing as reading aloud a text on some significant day, such as a publication anniversary, though one could view that as an embodied mirror withitness, and as a kindness and honouring. Nor is it quite the same as the ready re-enlivening of told language in oral histories or other adaptations of known material such as performance or re-enactment – but this category comes closer, since such re-enlivening always performs difference with the given materials. Barthes's resignifying of *Sarrasine* in *S/Z*, as I've suggested, seems legible as critical withness. As these comments mean to indicate, withness is a critical bearing more than a delimited set of procedures. Maybe withness also resembles, without being identical to, the work of translation. The kinds of trans-media, intertextual, and intra-text connecting we see in the *Dihedrons* book, and in the 2014 withness reading of it, call to mind the emphasis on the in-between of translation theory. Withness interpretation can be a kind of swerving translation in relation to the engaged art work. The comparison is especially vivid with regard to current experimental translations generated in groups such as Outtranspo, an international group that includes the academic Lily Robert-Foley, whose critical-creative works can be seen as intersecting with withness impulses. Robert-Foley's book *m* (2013) writes through and around Samuel Beckett's *L'Innommable/The Unnamable* (1953). Self-described as a "poetry-critique-collage," *m* is another zeitgeist example of how the 2010s were making space for interpretive work that bears family resemblances with the motives of withness.

In writing this I realize that my response to attending the choreographer Tru Paraha's work *blackOut* (2018) was also written in withness. In place of assessing the performance, the "review" records a felt version of experiencing it, beginning with what reads like withness discourse: "Describing a multi-dimensional kinetic work that unfolds over a set time invariably runs up against the limits of description. The answer to 'the meaning of the work' is, arguably, the work. So a response like this one is not the work but seeks to be in descriptive relation to some of its chances." In that case, withness can arguably be read as in the frame of descriptive criticism, beckoning to Gertrude Stein's approach to being "acquainted with description." To be acquainted is to be in familiarity with, without being necessarily in the family or friendship or workshop group of what you're describing. Stein's own practices of swerving from discursive norms toward intimate interiorities of what's being described – as though a meal were to be

explained by citing only the sounds of its ingredients – is an example of phenomenologically-oriented withness. To take encounter *as a work* and to redistribute its elements as an art is a version of documentary criticality very close to the guts of withness. For us to be acquainted is also to be in humanimal relation: in the wet electric of thinking as we respond with each other's work, we can hear the word withness as having “wetness” in its enounced and operative resonance. The wetness of sweat, eyes and ears, the beating heart and pulsing mind reading works in kind, to co-multiply the otherness of their being and our being with them.

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LISA SAMUELS works with experimental writing, multi-modal art, and relational theory in transnational life. Her many books include *Tomorrowland* (2009), *Anti M* (2013), *Symphony for Human Transport* (2017), and *The Long White Cloud of Unknowing* (2019), and her theories of deformance, autography, and distributed centrality have wide circulation. A new poetry book, *Breach*, and a Serbian translation of her novel *Tender Girl* will be out in 2021. Lisa is Professor of English & Drama at The University of Auckland.

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