

Introduction. Alice Notley is almost never alone in her poems, and even when she is, she treats individual consciousness as dialogic: not a stream of associated words or a palimpsest of sensory experience and memory, but a continuous rehearsal of internal conversations.

Though her writing has changed in both style and subject matter since she started publishing in the 1970s—moving from fragmented lyrics toward lengthy experiments with narrative and epic—Notley has consistently peopled her work with the voices of others. The earlier poems are full of remarks made by her family, friends, strangers, and television personalities; the later poems feature conversations with loved ones who died (her brother, her father, two husbands), fictional characters (who often seem to be adapted from myth or genre fiction), and herself.

Moreover, her essays repeatedly return to the subject of voice: the voice scored for the page, the exclusion of women's voices from literary history, the poet's voice in performance, and the voice as an instrument of shared understanding.

That's all to say that the question of voice in Notley's work is not only a matter of recognizing a distinctive authorial style, or of representing polyphony; it's a question of what voices do, what effects they provoke, and how these effects feedback with each other, in poetry and in life. There's no one answer to this. After all, Notley has written a lot of books—around forty, depending on how you count them. These vary dramatically in form and content. For example, *Waltzing Matilda* contains short lyrics, collages of transcribed speech, and a long interview with the painter

George Schneemann; *In the Pines* consists of noir-ish narratives, fragmented verse, and autobiographical prose.

And aside from the sheer formal variety, Notley cultivates inconsistency: often, almost as soon as a poem takes a position, another voice within it (or the same voice from a different perspective) proposes the opposite, or changes the subject. That's not to say her work is toothless: in fact, it's strewn with admonitions, warnings, and invective. Her feminist, environmentalist, and anti-war positions are neither polite nor superficially uplifting—though their directness is perverted by dream logic, fantastical asides, and experiments with genre.

By design, there's no center to her writing, and it would be anathema to the work to pretend to have found a key that opens all doors. In that spirit, this is a partial catalogue of functions of voice in Alice Notley's poetry.

As the poet's voice. When writing about other poets, Notley occasionally ties the sound of their lines to their reading voices.

On Steve Carey:

He has a deep beautiful voice, from deep in a big chest. It's the voice...that all his poems ride, they're conceived for that sound, fluid, changeable, playing...¹

On Anselm Hollo:

Hollo's reading voice is one of *the* voices of our poetry times, unforgettably deep and rich, capable of exquisite pacing. ²

On Gertrude Stein:

Stein's sentences are a letting out of a shining ribbon of voice. Stein on recordings reads with absolutely no tone of voice. She is presenting you with a voice so whole that it is an abstraction, or ideal, without nuance."³

Of course, Notley isn't saying that poetry springs unmediated from the person of the poet, but she is suggesting that the physical and performative particularities of a person's voice come through in their poems, sometimes as defining features of the writing. In her own work, she often declares her aim to evade stylistic and ideological precepts, to write in a way that can't be reduced to either received ideas or to her own person. In the poem "I Went Down There," she expresses this aspiration adamantly, but wistfully, with regards to voice:

I want to
sing in a voice you don't own, that you've never
heard and judged. I don't want to know where it
comes from, even though it comes from me. I
don't want there to be anything to say about it. ⁴

It's the repetition of "I want to" that's wistful—the passage feels less like an aesthetic declaration and more of a yearning for an impossible independence, for the voice to free itself from both culture and personality. But the phrase "I don't want to know" inevitably suggests a barely disavowed knowledge lurking behind the desire to dodge commentary—the knowledge that there is always something to say about the voice (and, by extension, about both poetry and the person), no matter how stridently one denies it.

In this push and pull between autonomy and context, there's a coincidence between Notley's interest in voice and her desire not to talk about voice. She seems to posit that voice is one (though perhaps not the only) element of poetry that cannot be converted into knowledge. It's too particular; there's nothing to judge or compare it to. One surely knows that voice comes from a person and is related to their way of speaking and being, but that doesn't answer any questions, and, more profoundly, it might not even pose any questions—it's just a sound, a vibration.

As the poem's voice. Notley's essays often return to an apparent contradiction, repeatedly insisting both that the voice of poet can be detected in the writing and that the voice of the poem is separate from that of the poet as a person.

Take, for instance, her comments on Joanne Kyger's voice:

I can't imagine any reader not hearing it: that her poetry is vocally sculpted is its most overwhelming characteristic...In Kyger's poems the voice bends the words, but Voice is not a pseudonym for Emotion or Character, Voice is very close to being Voice.⁵

Notley ties Kyger's poetic voice to her person, but then suggests that her particular voice is superseded by a more primary or universal Voice.

She makes a similar claim about her own poetry on the first page of *In the Pines*: "The only thing you need to know here is whether or not you can stand my voice. Of which there is surely no such thing."⁶ Here, the voice is metaphysical—everything and nothing at once.

But in other texts, she considers these questions formally, focusing on the technical construction of poems rather than their philosophical implications. For example, in her essay “Voice,” she makes a hard distinction between the poem’s voice and the person’s voice:

...a poet’s poem voice is not at all the same as a poet’s person voice. The voice of the poem isn’t interested in the poet at all. The voice of the poem is interested in the articulation and outcome of the group of words it’s generating: that is to say, it seems to have come into existence just a moment prior to the poem, and though it doesn’t exactly cease with it since it reverberates so, is really only for the poem.⁷

The poem’s voice is specific to the poem (to the degree that it seems to exist only for the poem), and it “isn’t interested in the poet at all.” Produced by diction, it’s a structural effect that can be used to represent the speech habits of the writer just as it can be used to plot the inflections of a fictional character, or to abstract the text until there’s no recognizable speaker, only a Voice.

Though Notley’s poems often seem to be mimetic of her own voice, some aspire to a kind of voicelessness, or Voice. That’s the case with the poems in *Benediction*, a dense book written while her husband, the poet Douglas Oliver, was ill. The poems include both desperate hospital scenes drawn from life and extended, abstruse meditations on cities and consciousness. Throughout the book, there are half-finished words and misspellings; these don’t connote stuttering or vocalization, they are specifically textual:

but wouldn't you like to be conscious? but
all those whims of yours pretending they explain thi this
blaze blinding voice and
you can't even expal explain the liquidity of the voice that is
conscious or uncon
because explain is a con a con ah riv
you are as here as the dazed dead is.⁸

The quickness of thought and philosophical admonishment (or is it closer to prophetic warning?) are recognizable from other Notley poems, and the dissolution of grammar and semantics is a familiar part of her style; she's been agilely working with the fragment for decades. Early books such as *Alice Ordered Me to Be Made* and *Songs for the Unborn Second Baby* are replete with moments where the grammar degrades just as meaning starts to emerge, though overall the writing remains colloquial and idiomatic. But the poems in *Benediction* pretty clearly do not attempt to reflect the voice of the poet as a person. They construct an abstracted voice which includes aspects of the voice of the poet only in order to break it apart, so that it seems like the poem has its own voice or, rather, so that it reads as the manifestation of a collective voice that's thinking and grieving together, with or without the poet—even if there's no suggestion of a specific collective.

As a bodily effect. Since the sound of a person's voice is bodily (lungs, esophagus, vocal chords, tongue, lips, teeth, nose, knowledge, memory), the music of the voice on the page inevitably suggests a body, or bodies. This is true whether or not it's an imitation of a speaking voice, a thinking voice, or a voice specific to the poem. Even at their most obtuse and

intellectual—and some of them get very obtuse and intellectual—Notley’s poems conjure the sense of people talking and moving through the world. Often, they reference the body and deploy familiar vernacular turns of phrase. But even when her voices seem to come from nowhere, the specificity of the diction and vocabulary (always idiosyncratic and seemingly personal) creates the impression that the lines could be spoken by real people, and perhaps even particular real people, with their particular real bodies.

As vernacular.

As the sound of a coterie. Notley’s earlier work was written in the context of a social scene where ideas circulated between writers (and artists and musicians). As is the case with any tight-knit literary scene, the second-generation New York School writers tended to sound somewhat like each other—they shared a city, influences, and common cultural reference points. But most importantly, they shared daily conversation, read and published each other’s poems, developed a style together.

Because of this, there are certain techniques, tones, and mannerisms common to these writers: Ted Berrigan, Bernadette Mayer, Anne Waldman, Steve Carey, Dick Gallup, Joe Ceravolo, Eileen Myles, and of course, Alice Notley. Others too. It’s easy enough to stack up descriptors that broadly characterize their work—quick, jumpy, urbane, pop, neurotic, declamatory, prosaic. And though description does not explain away their styles (they’re somewhat structural, somewhat ineffable, like all styles), each of these writers’ work is clarified by the characteristics they hold in common.

In an essay on the great and underappreciated Edwin Denby, Notley draws out his influence on their scene, and in particular on Ted Berrigan. In discussing Denby's poem "Trastevere: A Dedication," she notes formal devices which Berrigan picked up on and imported into his own writing:

The first and last two lines of this poem were important ones for Ted. They are respectively

"Dear head to one side, in summer dusk, Olga"

and

"As laughing Olga, feeding through the window cat-shadows
Then reading, then sinking into slumber, too does"

These lines contain small effects that Ted tried to achieve over and over in the early 70s: the delay of Olga's name until the end of the first line, and the delay of 'too does' till the end, in the closing lines, but with the inversion of the two words from normal speech order.

In the first line Edwin is following a precise order of perception: one sees, then names, but cannot see her without affection, so though she, Olga, is seen first as unnamed she is still 'dear.'⁹

This passage provides a glimpse into the intricacy of influence in small circles: writers teach each other how to order words to produce patterns of perception and thought. Grammatical structures migrate from one poet to another; form is mobile.

Notley's observation about how the phrase "too does" functions as an inversion of the "normal speech order" is a

perfect example of how a small formal decision (that could easily go unnoticed) can illuminate a style. It's slightly off-kilter, but the line is still very much tied to speech—one recognizes the rhythm and tone of the vernacular in a distorted form. Though second-generation New York School writers are known for chatty poems, they don't usually try to create the illusion of natural speech—rather, they use elements of what sounds like natural speech as materials for collage.

You can find these little disruptions to the vernacular all throughout Notley's poetry, too.

From "Waltzing Matilda":

All I can say is it's too pretty damned
bad. Bless Ringo's heart he just got
on an airplane & came there.¹⁰

From "Pure Weather":

So does your garden grow
pumpkinish blossoms, strawberries steam red.¹¹

And a short untitled poem from *At Night the States*:

Toward him your dreams are
Without their powers
Toward you they seem to deliver
His love as if from where.
There is no Where.
There is no his.¹²