Transatlantica
Revue d'études américaines. American Studies Journal

1 | 2019
Gone With the Wind* after *Gone With the Wind

Interview of Alice Notley

David Reckford

Electronic version
URL: https://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/13862
DOI: 10.4000/transatlantica.13862
ISSN: 1765-2766

Publisher
Association française d'Etudes Américaines (AFEA)

Electronic reference
David Reckford, "Interview of Alice Notley", *Transatlantica* [Online], 1 | 2019, Online since 01 June 2020, connection on 04 May 2021. URL: http://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/13862 ; DOI: https://doi.org/10.4000/transatlantica.13862

This text was automatically generated on 4 May 2021.

Transatlantica – Revue d'études américaines est mise à disposition selon les termes de la licence Creative Commons Attribution - Pas d'Utilisation Commerciale - Pas de Modification 4.0 International.

provided by OpenEdition
View metadata, citation and similar papers at core.ac.uk
brought to you by CORE

Interview of Alice Notley

David Reckford

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This interview took place in Alice Notley's apartment in Paris, in June 2018.

1 Alice Notley is a major American poet of our day, who has been living in Paris since the early 1990s, when she moved there with her second husband, the English poet, Doug Oliver (1937-2000), because Paris was where his professorial career was taking him. At that point Alice Notley was finding New York less amenable and was keen to go somewhere else. When he died in 2000, Alice Notley was sufficiently settled into Paris to remain there.

2 Although she is a Parisian now, Alice Notley was also a key figure on the Lower Manhattan poetry scene particularly of the late 1970s and the 1980s. Her first husband, Ted Berrigan, was an equally charismatic figure among an influential group of downtown poets. In this interview, she mentions other New York Poets (John Ashbery, James Schuyler, Frank O'Hara, Kenneth Koch, Ron Padgett, Eileen Myles, Anne Waldman, Joe Brainard, Allan Ginsberg, and Bernadette Mayer). Her children, Anselm Berrigan and Edmond Berrigan are both New York Poets of a younger generation.

3 Alice Notley's poetry has evolved through many phases and experiments, as her output continues to be strong, and is increasingly studied academically. Among the most powerful moments in her work are the ones marked by her teaching poetry workshops in New York and her self-publishing the book, *Parts of a Wedding* (1986). Also, just before leaving New York, she realized the ambition of writing a feminist epic in a book-length poem, *The Descent of Alette* (1996).

4 Since then, her poetry has continued to flow and evolve. The Indie rock group *AroarA* put music to her fascinating piece, *In the Pines* (2007). Her book, *Coming After* (2005), collects a series of sensitive essays she wrote about her own poetry and that of others from her poetic *milieu*.

5 Alice Notley is an extraordinary reader of her own work, which, in the last year, she has read in the U.S.A. (Providence, R.I., and Brooklyn, N.Y.), in the U.K. (Birmingham), and in France (The Pompidou Center, Paris).

Alice Notley, *Polaroid photo taken in Needles*, CA, c.1985, courtesy of the artist, re-photographed by Daesong Kim.

6 David Reckford: Among the physical, cultural, and intellectual environments that have formed your particular sensitivity, there seems to be several strong and contrasting places. These places are continuously operating as presences in your poetry, particularly the Needles of your youth, in California, the Lower Manhattan in the heyday of New York School Poetry, and the Paris of today. There are others of course, but could you begin by speaking around those atmospheres?

7 Alice Notley: I'm from the desert which I found intensely attractive as nature, and it's my nature really—I haven't been back in six years but I love *that* nature. One's not overshadowed like in forests elsewhere, but it's particularly harsh, and hot: the Mojave goes up to 120-125° [Fahrenheit], sometimes. There weren't a lot of cacti where I lived, but there were a lot of bushes. My poems are full of creosote bushes, and athel trees which are extremely ugly trees that somehow got there, who knows how, maybe by way of the Colorado River which goes right by where I grew up.

8 DR: Such natural presences are important. In New York, the poets you met were mostly all from somewhere else (except for a few of them like Bill Berkson and Kenward Elmslie). Poetry itself can be thought of as that which comes from afar. In the case of John Ashbery, there's a poem called "Syringa" (1977) with an Orphean motif. Orpheus is a stand-in for poetry. It so happens that there are many of those trees, syringas, in Rochester, NY, where he's from. In fact, the strong memories of starting points, including the vegetation, you just evoked link you to your New York School entourage.

9 AN: I don't remember that poem, "Syringa," but John tends to pick things out: he used to keep lists of his titles and then he would decide to write the poem of that title. That was one of the first things Ted [Berrigan] told me about John: he kept a list of titles, like "Civilization and Its Discontents," then he would decide, "Ah, that would be a great title for a poem," and then later he would check his list and pull that title out.

10 When I was a young poet, I couldn't figure out what to title anything, and I discussed this with Ted, who said: "You should write to Ron Padgett and get a list of titles," which I did; he just made up all these titles for me. Since I had all these poems without titles, I just randomly assigned Ron's titles to the poems that ended up in *For Frank O'Hara's Birthday* (1976). There was one called "How Green Was My Hair Brush?" which was a "Ron" title. "Lipstick," "Queens, 1947" these were things he just wrote down on this list of possible titles.

11 It was a collaboration of sorts, though I generally do not collaborate; I really hate it. However, New York Poetry authorized one to draw from others, taking a bit from this one, and from that one, which I did for a long time. I think all poets do that; it's also something out of the tradition of folk music. When I was becoming a poet, folk music was popular; Bob Dylan was getting started; and he was that kind of magpie. Early on, I understood that was something you could enjoy doing out of folk music.

12 DR: That's what Ted Berrigan was about: taking things from here and there, picking them up, and making them his own.

13 AN: He had no trust in his own ability to write things out, while he had faith in his ability to find things. But every time he quoted somebody he misquoted him or her without even knowing it, so he always made the texture his own. His poems are totally him; his voice is unique; his sensibility is unique; and he was always basing it on something else; he wanted to be like Frank [O'Hara] intensely, but there was no way he could be like Frank. You know Frank was this little gay guy and Ted was this big, butch, working-class guy from Rhode Island; they were both from New England so there may have been something that he caught off of Frank's voice as a vibration, or of Frank's way of behaving in the world (I never met him; Ted once gave me permission to call him Frank). Frank had a characteristic, manly idea of existing in the world despite what you might call his "femininity," and I think that Ted understood it as something like being a Jimmy Cagney or something from the movies: Ted knew how to take that stance.

14 DR: A forward rush towards things.

15 AN: Yes and a certain way of being cocky, which was very Irish, you know, a certain way of being witty, sort of a blunt kind of wittiness.

16 DR: Indeed, Berrigan and O'Hara were both Irish names.

17 AN: Yes, they were the two Irish of the set.

18 DR: The conversation has veered far from Needles, which I hope we will return to, as we evoke various social spaces that seep into the poems. There's a poem where you talk about meeting Ted's mother. Was she of an Irish sort?

19 AN: Peggy was great and, yes, Irish. Ted's father worked for the Tip-Top Bread factory and died when he was fifty of a heart attack, after being laid off due to mechanization. There were four kids, including a couple still at home. Peggy went to work at two jobs for ever; then there was a point where Johnny, the youngest, had to leave home, and

she had a nervous breakdown, which was when I met her. Ted had left Sandy; I was living in sin with Ted, which Peggy didn't seem to mind at all, as she liked me a lot. One day she took a lot of pills in a quasi-suicide attempt, when I was there, and then she just had to be rescued from this life of working a lot, not having enough, and too little company. She wound up in a nursing home, the life and soul of the nursing home: a great Irish lady.

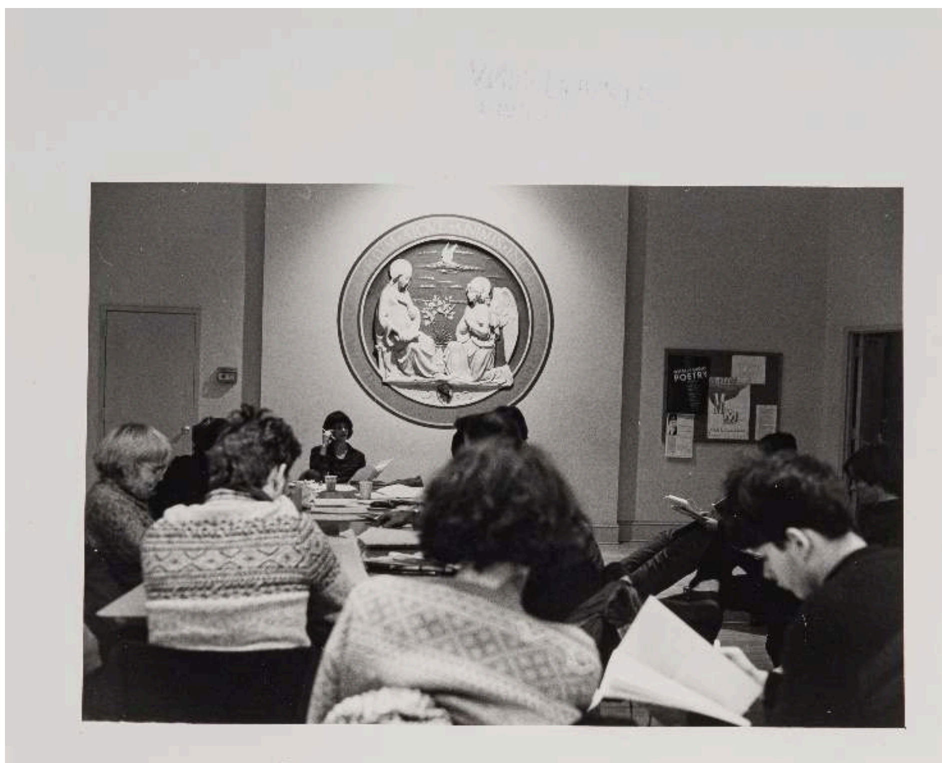
20 DR: Eileen Myles is another poet who comes from an Irish, working-class, New England background and lost her father.

21 AN: She lost her father younger than Ted lost his. Eileen was twelve. Her mother was Polish and her father Irish.

22 DR: Like Ted Berrigan and Anne Waldman reading at Saint Mark's church their collaborative poem, "Memorial Day" (May 6, 1971), that episode of Public Access Television, June 16, 1977, where you and Eileen Myles read together must count among the great New York School moments still on record.

23 AN: We were children then, basically. She was in my workshop. I was her teacher, though I'm not much older than she is, about four years older.

Photographer unknown, *Alice Notley teaching a workshop*, Saint Mark's Poetry Project, c.1980, courtesy of the Alice Notley, re-photographed by Daesong Kim.



24 DR: But she came already with a great talent, right, she started out extremely strong...

25 AN: Yes, and she hasn't changed much. She's made few changes to her approach to the work. She made one change when she worked for James Schuyler, and she adopted a version of his short line, though after that there's little change, except a few years ago, when she started putting in spaces between thoughts: in a new way she created some disjunction she had never had before. She distrusts change.

26 DR: In her *Paris Review* interview (2015) she says that she learned from John Ashbery never to complete a thought, which is a rich idea.

27 AN: I don't think that's true of her poetry though, and I don't think that's what John did exactly.

28 DR: I think he interrupts the thought, but the thought he interrupts keeps going.

29 AN: He has complete syntactical thoughts, then he interrupts things at the conjunction. The conjunctions are the most mysterious places in John's work.

30 DR: In your work, there's something in the interstices between thoughts that's both intriguing and active. The sense of something escaping is well illustrated by your poem, "Where Leftover Misery Goes," among others. That particular poem is in your selected poems, in *Grave of Light (2006)*, and it was presented upright on the page, but it was published in a review called *Chain (2000)* and in the *Best American Poetry* series *(2001)* where it was horizontal on the page. That unusual, horizontal format was probably done to fit the long lines in. I thought that that printing added something, though: I enjoyed turning the book to read the poem.

31 AN: This poem was later published in *Reason and Other Women (2010)*. To quote: "If it's a spiritual offense does it as wrongdoing take place more in more in the second leftover/ as a leftover and is the significance of the double now that I might be might the /one who offends ..." Have you heard it read? I'll read a part of it:

Alice Notley, "Where Leftover Misery Goes" in *Grave of Light*, Wesleyan University Press, 2006 (p. 292-293), reproduced with permission of the author.

WHERE LEFTOVER MISERY GOES

if its a spiritual offense does it as wrongdoing take place more in more in the second
leftover
as a leftover and is the significance of the double now that i might be might the
one who offends in other circumstan or that it takes two to make an offense but how
was i used and why were the others not usable was it because they were always too
selfinvolved to be exploited. oh keep this mostly masked as always these events are of
the sort are replayed shadow in the second world or perhaps in the overlap the
border was it a spiritual offense and did it take place more in the mind than in any
outside it surely does now. it only takes place in my and keep this masked keep it low
shes awaiting attention acceptance as exceptional her face corroded i have to avoid
her like poison but i have to keep remembering shes poison there is a machine that
allows memory to be memories to taken into the futur i have to remember shes pois
and that isnt a known a universally accepted fact that shes poison to me wants to
poison me and make me hers of her emotional her emotional camp make me live of
the camp of she thinks but she is poison shes acting like she isnt and i can barely
remember the last time i was poisoned and now in the now in the second world there

is no linear time no many years past and i dont know when they last said in the first
world accept her poison bu because its only you dont bother us on the cold wintry
avenue in your coat lined with papers another wild looking night darker than the last
one which was purple this ones deep navy with slivver moon behind a raggy cloud in
this wind the buildings are dangerously high and here and there a gold lights tossed i
didnt see the two strangers my former fr is that possible strangers until i suddenly did
staring at me but the real point is that i'm not them nor her i'm not the double and i
want to be hard about this i am only the double as i must straddle two worlds but i am
th not the double who did wrong to me i am not thee there is no key for the brilliant

32 That gives you a sense of the sound. There are different paces and reading styles possible; the performance can be different each time. When I was writing such pieces and reading them they changed a lot; but it was about trying to get how the mind works, which meant I was writing generally as fast as I could while still keeping self-control, which is why I allowed all these part-words to come in. Then I figured out how to write them, so they enter the text. There was pleasure in working with that discovery.

33 DR: I think for the reader those part-words can function to foreground an elsewhere. If we compare them with painting, they work like the "zips" in Newman's painting. You know Newman makes these large, abstract works.

34 AN: I met him once, Barnett Newman, right before he died. His "zips" are like obelisks; they're like sculptures inside the paintings.

35 DR: Right, like dolmens.

36 AN: Like dolmens—yes, something like that. They're beautiful. I always liked his paintings.

37 DR: Historically, painting is central to cultural New York and to New York poetry. In the serious, reflective poem, "Your Dailiness" (1971), you mention finally understanding Willem de Kooning's painting, *Excavation*, in a Chicago museum. For your work, from that angle, the place to start would be the collages you make, *your* visual art. For instance this collage that you put on the cover of *Grave of Light*.

38 AN: Would you like to see the real collage? It's small and a bit fragile. The designer of the cover made an extract basically, making it wrap around the book cover, which was an attractive idea.

Alice Notley, *Untitled*, 1998. Mixed media collage, 8.5 x 9.75 in. Courtesy of the artist, re-photographed by Daesong Kim, April 2018.

39 DR: It seems to be an inspired collage. First, the way the fan that tapers at the top disorients the view, because the fan is supposed to open up, not reduce.

40 AN: Well, I broke it. I had it for a long time and it started to break. This is typical of what happens when I make a collage. I applied pressure so that the brokenness would have the shape I wanted; then I think I made the back part separately and decided to glue the fan on it. It always felt to me like I was enacting ideas that visual artists had normally, that I was figuring it out. I knew that I was also doing something like what they used to talk about in college: the taking of two disjunctive things then the jamming of them together: that was part of our critical education at the time; in fact, John Ashbery would have had it too, probably, though he was twenty years older than I was.

41 DR: He has said that he started doing collages in his twenties and continued throughout his life.

42 AN: We were all doing them. It seemed that people like Joe Brainard were doing important, high-art collages and we could follow along without any pretention to be creating masterpieces. There are others over there. Those are the ones I'm working on right now, which have to do with my poetry of the moment.

43 DR: Yes, those are full of imagery: evidently, they have all kinds of signification. To come back to this one, I read it as a kind of *danse macabre* because there's something resembling skulls going on here with the top of the fan supports. Particularly the middle one.

44 AN: That photo in the middle is me at age ten, I think. I made this in about 2005. I've always had trouble getting materials here. There's no garbage. I mean sometimes there's a lot of garbage but not usable garbage and so it takes me a long time to get anything made. That piece is from a postcard of a painting of Notre-Dame and evil spirits flying out of it. And that other one was something I just picked up from the

sidewalk. It's filthy; I don't remember how I got that torn princess; but that bird was in a book; you see that phrase there marks what I was barred from: so the thing to see is that I'm in jail and they won't let me into the "Hôtel des Grands Hommes." Which is the Panthéon.

45 DR: It's also what André Breton mentions, in his book, *Nadja (1963):* staying at the Hôtel des Grands Hommes with his surrealist friends, who won't get into the Panthéon either.

46 AN: No, I tore this out of *Le Monde*.

47 DR: It's incredible because, I just re-read *Nadja* recently. Have you read that book?

48 AN: I read it when I was about twenty-three, in English. I didn't know any French; I had no French when I came here, basically, in my late forties.

49 DR: In that book, the heroine is a true medium who can look at someone's face and know things, and at the end she is taken off to the asylum; André Breton then rails for two pages about how misguided asylums are, which makes your collage seem to be broaching the question of clairvoyance in terms of surrealistic, poetic culture.

50 AN: Well possibly…I take in a lot of things that I don't know about, or that I don't remember. I think it's just all out there. Which is something that John Ashbery would probably have agreed with, in a way. You know that quotation from a Paris Review interview (1983) that everything is this underground river and you can just draw from it any time you want to. He could write any time he wanted to; I'm like that too.

51 My current process is to write in the morning. I'm working on arcane things at the moment which I find hard to talk about. I actually feel bad when I don't write, like yesterday, but I always have something going on. Sometimes I have in-between projects and that is a tough situation; because, I usually don't write as well then, indeed, I never quite know what to do at those moments. I use the collages to go on without thinking with words.

52 I do write down my dreams, though I haven't been dreaming much lately; but I've been doing that for years. I started noticing my dreams before I met Ted [Berrigan], but he used his dreams, and I just started doing it more after I was with him; then, after he died I did it even more. At a certain point I wrote them down every morning; sometimes I do it more than others. At the moment, it feels like there's not much going on there; because it's all going on at the surface actually. I've mostly dredged it all up, and I know how to get to it without dreaming. However, when you dream you get more, particularly images, which I don't have enough of right now.

53 DR: The disturbing political and historical moment we are experiencing could disrupt many *collective* dreams. How, in your view, did humanity get itself in such a predicament?

54 AN: Complicated as it is, I can sketch it out: basically, everything is just too dense on the planet, which has been a decision made and a byproduct of technology. All the political problems are based in history. The incentives to engage in selfish, destructive action are as strong as they always have been. My collages actually reflect the situation of overabundance. They are a grappling with it as a kind of a design problem. Ultimately, I am expressing a desire to run into the desert and get some space, the space everybody needs around themselves and unfortunately are not getting. We know how inane the decision was that everybody would have a car, completely destroying the planet.

55 DR: There was a pop song in the 1960s by the Three Dog Night, “Joy to the World,” which went: “If I was the King of the World, I’d throw away all the cars,” thus broadcasting the idea. Can we talk a little bit about the pop culture that figures in your work?

56 AN: When it’s around me, I take it in. It’s not around me much now. I don’t know anything about French pop culture at all; I’m necessarily estranged from American pop culture, but I do sometimes know what’s going on in music. For example my poem “In the Pines” has been set to music by AroarA, who are two members of the Canadian, indie group, Broken Social Scene, Andrew Whiteman and Ariel Engle, who’ve done something mesmerizing; also, my son Eddie is both a poet and an indie musician: I know about some indie people from about 2000, not so much after that. I could have a conversation about Royal Trux: a very chaotic indie group, sometimes awful, sometimes amazingly brilliant.

Cellophane-covered CD. AroarA. *In the Pines*, Montreal: Club Roll, 2012. Courtesy of Alice Notley, re-photographed by Daesong Kim, April 2018.

57 DR: Now I heard you say that the cadences for *The Descent of Alette* emerged from Monteverdi. Is that right?

58 AN: I actually listened to Monteverdi to get the cadences that were before *The Descent of Alette*: particularly in “White Phosphorus” (1988) and at the end of “Beginning with a Stain” (1987). However, I don’t know what I was listening to when I was beginning to write *The Descent of Alette*. “The Man in the Long Black Coat,” (1989) by Bob Dylan influenced the sound of the first two parts, which I wrote last.

59 DR: With your interpolation of popular culture into epic poetry, I would expect you to be a household name here in France.

60 AN: I do not expect to be well known in the universities because that context tends to be too academic, and generally French poetry is in a bad place. Indeed, French poetry

has had some weird times, where it got so abstract. Of course, we salute their past: all the greats, Guillaume Apollinaire and Pierre Reverdy, and some well-known others. I'm closely influenced by them, and working with Apollinaire at the moment. My book *Désamère* (1992) features Robert Desnos and uses patterns from the *Lais* of Marie de France. After the war, that tradition was exhausted. French poetry was aimless, became philosophical, though now there are some younger poets that are starting to put the concrete back in, but slowly; I discussed it with French poets a few years ago, who confirmed for me that French poetry became abstract out of trauma from World War II, the occupation, and everything, authors being too traumatized to speak concretely. They ran away into abstract poetry: that makes a lot of sense to me.

61 Then generations of people had to have to deal with the bad behavior and figure out how to talk about it. Now there are all these plaques in my neighborhood saying: "Here 300 French school children were sent to the camps." I woke up one day. Doug [Oliver] had died, and it was 2001. I went downstairs. There was a piece of paper on my door that said: "in your building there were two Jewish children who were taken to the camps; we are going to have a ceremony for the unveiling of a plaque on the rue de Chabrol. Would you like to come?" I didn't go. I wrote a poem about it in *Alma, or The Dead Women* (2006). I dreamed about the children afterwards, you know, there were children being chased in this building. It's possible I'm living in the apartment of someone who was taken away to the camps.

62 I am furious about people calling their speech against Trump "the resistance." However, I have a poem, which happened to be written before Trump was elected, in an anti-Trump-type anthology that's coming out because I figure any place I can get a poem published is an occasion to seize.

63 DR: Your attitude towards staleness in the academic world, your sensitivity towards these questions of history and politics, indeed your measure and courage for speaking out reminds me of one first-generation New York School poet in particular, Kenneth Koch.

64 AN: He was a good friend. I was one of his friends in Paris. But I met him—I met everybody—around 1968. I knew him in New York, where I saw him from time to time; but after I moved here, he sought me out. He would fly to Paris, find me, and we would have dinner; also, he had a group of Paris friends. One year at a big Thanksgiving dinner, I sat next to the poet Michel Deguy; many of his friends in Paris were met for instance when playing tennis. So, there were people from all different professions at the table, a few Americans and some artistic people—but not that many. I was influenced by Koch, particularly by the period starting with the second "The Circus" (1971). Do you remember when he wrote the second "The Circus"?

65 DR: Yes, the 1971 poem about writing an earlier poem of the same title, a characteristically clever poetic ploy. You and Ted published it in your review, *Chicago (1974)*.

66 AN: I started to be quite influenced by him at that point, and I think I influenced him in the writing of the book *New Addresses: Poems*, published in 2000. *New Addresses* was influenced by my autobiographical book that almost won the Pulitzer Prize, *Mystery of Small Houses* (1998), getting him to dredge up *his* past, bravely.

67 My poem "The Prophet" (1981) is based on his poem "Some General Instructions" (1971). Which gives you bits of advice and instructions. My favorite is how to cure an

octopus: you go fishing, get an octopus, and you beat it against a rock. He gave everybody permission to be funny. Also in my poem "Disobedience" (2001), I got the title in a dream about him. About two-thirds of the way through the book there's a dream that has to do with a poet that has written a poem called "disobedience": the poet was Kenneth in the dream, but, such is dream logic, it was really me.

68 DR: Your humor, in poems like "The Prophet" (which asks hilariously, "Does a hippopotamus get the shakes?") is slightly less well known than your readiness to tackle political subjects. Indeed, you are often spoken about as an engaged poet, like your late husband, Doug Oliver. Were you and he on the same wavelength politically?

69 AN: I learned a lot from him on that level. He was my political education really. In fact, he had a whole career as a journalist, and knew how to research, to inform his opinions, and to look at events without a preexisting opinion: thus, I learned how to do that from him, though I find that few today are so intellectually honest.

70 DR: Was the teaching of poetry workshops something that connected you to Kenneth Koch?

71 AN: His weren't poetry workshops: he taught undergraduate courses at Columbia. In fact he taught the same undergraduate classes for years and years, refusing to teach graduate students because—he said—they couldn't learn anything, were already set in their ways. He taught some writing: one writing class, and one civilization and literature class.

72 As for my teaching at the Saint Mark's poetry project, I gave assignments from week to week and I made the students bring in those rather than the poems they wrote on their own, to hold discussion without my having to criticize them too much. Instead of second-guessing their style, we could talk about the way they handled the tasks. I would give a task often based on traditional forms, or I would get an idea for a subject; and sometimes I used Kenneth's books, because he was writing all those books then about teaching in nursing homes and to groups of small children.

73 DR: Did you like doing it? Did it influence you?

74 AN: Well, you learn a lot from teaching, at the beginning. The first workshop that I taught was a crucial one for that generation actually. Eileen was in it, as was Bob Holman. There were various famous people now that were in it like Susie Timmons. At the same moment, at Saint Mark's, Bernadette Mayer, Anne Waldman, and I taught poetry workshops. We were all born in 1945, and despite a certain competitiveness at first, became good friends.

75 DR: Speaking of Anne Waldman somehow makes me think of the presence of Native Americans in your work. You have a poem called "Cherokee" (2006). And there's a poem called "This Kind of Paradise" (1986) where the Hopis suddenly appear in a bureaucratic Food Stamps Office. I was wondering about your thoughts on Native Americans.

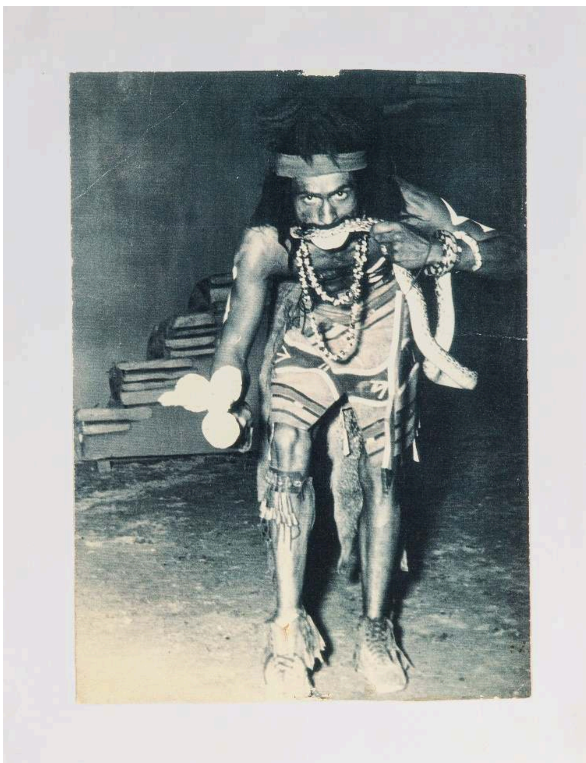
76 AN: Well I grew up in the Southwest. I grew up among Native Americans. There was a tribe in my home town, the Mojaves. I grew up with the Mojaves, going to school with them. I have some Cherokee Blood, perhaps one-sixteenth Cherokee. My parents were from Arizona. And they participated, when they lived in Prescott, AZ, in an organization which did Native American Dances every year, called "The Smoki," which my father was in, and which had been instituted by the businessmen in Prescott in the 1930s. They wanted people to come and put the dances on, trying to help preserve

them actually (there were about fifteen or twenty Indian Tribes in Arizona). The Indians said: “No, we won’t do it, but we will send people to teach them to you.” The tribes then would send the people to Prescott, and every year they would teach these businessmen dances.

77 For three or four years my father danced the Hopi snake dance with a live snake in his mouth. They would go out in the Hopi pueblo and get whatever snakes there were around, and a quarter would be rattlers, but in Prescott, they only used bull snakes. Somewhere, I have a photo of my father with a snake in his mouth and every year that he did it, he got a little tattoo of a star on his hand; and my mother danced the year she was pregnant with me the *Hopi Corn Maidens Dance*, and she taught me the song later, and my father taught me the chant for the Apache Dog Dance. So I grew up as friends with Native Americans, and imbued with certain things; I was also attuned to what had happened, without knowing fully, because there was a kind of sadness among the Mojaves in my town, along with immense curiosity and interest among some Anglos. My mother was always curious and interested.

78 When we moved to Needles, there had been a “cry house” which was a place where the Mojaves would go to cry when somebody died, and there was now this pile of boards: my mother was completely fascinated by the “cry house,” thus she would use that phrase; one of the first stories I wrote on route to the University of Iowa’s Writers Workshop for an MFA as a prose writer was about Needles, concerning a white man who goes to the cry house to cry. I felt I knew what the cry house was, and had ideas about it: I knew how to use regional things. I’ve always taken up that ambient context in my poems.

Photographer unknown, *Alice Notley’s father doing the Hopi snake dance*, c. 1945, courtesy of the Alice Notley, re-photographed by Daesong Kim.



79 DR: Where leftover misery goes... Can a poem be like a dance?

80 AN: Probably, I wouldn't dance, but Anne might.

81 DR: Apart from what happens during the performance, can writing poetry be like a dance?

82 AN: It's not a dance; it's a pattern of sounds: it's in my voice which I think is sometimes better than singing, when I say the poems. I think I know how to do things with my voice that are entirely musical. There's that magical phenomenon with small children, before they get to be about four, where, if you start singing, they suddenly look at you, hooked. I've noticed it with my granddaughters. I can do that with my speaking voice in poems. Actually, when I read *The Descent of Alette*, high-school students get similarly entranced. They really like *The Descent of Alette,* because it's like a video game.

83 DR: Yes, right, on one level, shall we say? When I read *The Descent of Alette* I am tempted to treat the quotation marks between phrases as breath-markers like on a musical score.

84 AN: You don't have to breathe between them. It's more like a pause between metrical feet. And it's influenced by dactylic hexameter. It's from Homer. And Virgil:

> Arma virumque cano, Troiae qui primus ab oris
> Italiam, fato profugus, Laviniaque venit:

That's the opening of the *Aeneid* and the opening of the *Iliad is:*

> Μῆνιν ἄειδε θεὰ Πηληϊάδεω Ἀχιλῆος
> οὐλομένην, ἣ μυρί᾽ Ἀχαιοῖς ἄλγ᾽ ἔθηκε ...

85 DR: Also referring to the *Aeneid*, you speak about Dido in *Songs And Stories Of The Ghouls* (2011): she is a female character who suffers a kind of erasure, despite being the great queen of Carthage.

86 AN: The whole book is about her, actually: she and Medea keep coming back. In the middle section, which is in prose, there are three people: me, Medea, and Dido, my gripe being that she founded a city, Carthage. Aeneas founded a city, Rome. The whole point of the *Aeneid* is to take away from her the founding of a city, and transform her into this love suicide, and to rob her of her power.

87 DR: And ambition.

88 AN: Yes, and that is effectively what the *Aeneid,* which is certainly a splendid and beautiful poem, does. It emasculates her.

89 DR: Right, that's a strong, colonizing streak in Western culture.

90 AN: Virgil was just this poet and he had to contend with Augustus Caesar.

91 DR: You quote the powerful, assertive voice of Marianne Moore in a poem.

92 AN: She was great. I quoted from *Songs for the Unborn Second* Baby (1979). "Death is for a moment, beauty is for all time," about World War II and people being away at the war.

93 DR: To pursue with craft questions: in the *Norton Anthology of American Literature* (1979), in talking about Marianne Moore, they say: Pound writes with the phrase, Williams writes with the line, H.D writes with the image, Wallace Stevens and Gertrude Stein write with the word, but Marianne Moore writes with the entire stanza, and I was just wondering if there was a unit that you use?

94 AN: I use all those units and I am aware of how they overlap. That's why my poetry works so well. I've written so much in my life that I've become able to control it all; and when it feels like I'm letting go, I'm not. It's deliberate, in order to find something out. But people often say that Marianne Moore writes with the whole sentence. I think that

is what she said, because her greatest influence was Henry James: she takes his sense of the sentence and turns it into those stanzas.

95 For me, Williams mostly writes by the word. The word, the line, and also the stanza. Then he writes poetry in the variable foot which is a huge influence on my later work. I learned everything from the variable foot from "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower."

96 DR: Well I think of Williams as a kind of Calder mobile waiting to enter into movement.

97 AN: He *is* focusing on the foot; and he's probably also aware of the foot when he's doing the short stanzas. But it goes "Of asphodel, that greeny flower I come my sweet to sing." It's a long line that can take in short lines, which I did in *Alette*. That's what I've done ever since in different ways. Though I didn't know I was being influenced by him again when I was doing *Alette*. I figured it out afterwards.

98 DR: Frank O'Hara was strongly influenced by Williams, and you in turn take a lot from O'Hara.

99 AN: Frank caught how great *Pictures from Breughel and Other Poems* (1962) was. *Pictures from Breughel and Other Poems* and *The Desert Music and Other Poems* (1954): that book is fantastic; he caught the new line, which he refers to in one of his letters.

100 DR: What do you think of Gertrude Stein and of the kind of permutations she does: almost like rolling things around in your mouth?

101 AN: Well, that's what a lot of us got from her; I'm heavily influenced by Gertrude Stein, having had two Stein periods; in the second one in the mid-1980s, I figured out a thing about repetition: that, if you repeated, you could pause long enough inside the repetition to figure out what to say next, which she was probably doing constantly. I've never thought of her as a poet: sometimes I think she doesn't know anything about poetry at all. But her writing exerts intense attraction.

102 I re-read *Wars I have Seen* (1945) a couple of years ago because she was being bashed in the States again: they were underlining her Vichy connections in order to make her into a kind of villain, without any regard for how difficult it must have been: a lesbian living with another lesbian, in her sixties, in a country that wasn't her own country, Jewish, thus a prime candidate for the camps. I certainly would've used anything to keep from being sent. In that sad, beautiful book, there's so much irony, whereas some literary critics take everything at face value. It seems nobody has any sense of tone of voice any more.

103 DR: There are some lines from your poems, wrought like those in Stein, that one could carry in one's head all day and it would color that day; for example, "that thinks but not only on words" is one; "all that's left of the old world are beautiful voices," is another that might change one's day. "I went down there" is simple, but it is rich.

104 AN: That was below that bed: the voices were calling to me from below the bed. I thought that they were voices of dead French people, but they just came from everywhere; the voices came for that poem. I had just been in the States. My mother had broken her hip. She was 88—had just got back up—and I was so inspired by how she got back up that I wrote that poem; I also wrote "Blinding the White Horse in Front of Me" (2016) basically in the same spurt of energy.

105 DR: Another is "How near Assyria is."

106 AN: That's from "In the Pines" (2007).

107 DR: Let's see, "arrive the exactitude of pitch the tune in words alone"; that's "In the Pines" too.

108 AN: Yes, towards the end of number fourteen, the last one.

109 DR: "I wouldn't be able to take the journey if I couldn't hear the poem."

110 AN: "I wouldn't be able to take the journey if I couldn't hear the poem" that's all based on folk songs and not those lines, but I was writing "In the Pines" while I was doing the Hepatitis C treatment, where the drugs would depress you, but once a week you would have to take a shot which, they didn't tell you, would get you high for a half hour before you got sick. I would write during that high, meanwhile I would listen to Bob Dylan tapes. They were the CDs that my son made and sent me; there are a lot of miss-hearings of Bob Dylan songs, as well as just a lot of folk songs that I already knew, in that work. One of the lines in that particular poem is actually straight from Dylan, which I finally just say: "I know no one can sing the blues like blind Willie McTell." I'd been quoting from the song all the way through in the whole poem.

111 DR: To go on with my list: "We are secretly holding the ghost dance," "take care of the pines where we sleep," "I have the Antlers she."

112 AN: Ah, that's from *Songs and Stories of the Ghouls* (2011), from "the lady with antlers"; that was strange: I fell asleep, dreamed of being a woman with antlers, then when I woke up I opened *Le Monde,* lo and behold, there was a picture of a model with antlers on her head and she was in a fashion show that day on the runway—she was wearing antlers: it was a premonitory dream.

113 DR: Yes, that brings me back to what I was saying earlier about André Breton's Nadja who sees things before they happen next and is just carted off: the status of mediums becomes a metaphor for the status of poetry in society.

114 AN: To quote Jack Kerouac, "avoid the authorities." If you have the talent you have to avoid them.

115 DR: Also I'm coming back often to that poem, "In this Paradise," about the food-stamp office.

116 AN: I was there. That was written in the Food Stamp Office in 1985.

117 DR: It's a beautiful indictment of bureaucracies and their inhuman treatment.

118 AN: It was definitely weird to get food stamps. The first time I went there I was completely humiliated by the people working there. Everyone who went there was either black or Hispanic. There was a black woman at a desk when I went in who said, "What are *you* doing here?" I just sat down and replied, "I'm a widow; I've got two children; I know it's been a year and a half since my husband died; I'm trying to stay at home as much as I can and I have a part-time job" (I was working for Allen Ginsberg at the time). "I would like some help." Whereupon, she just totally melted. The others were like me, though Hispanic and black. I had this education, so I could have been doing something else but did not want to, was animated by a desire to write poetry, which is truly valuable: I was writing people's culture for the future.

119 At that stage, Allen Ginsberg, a really fine person, was extremely supportive. I had met him in 1969, then we stayed friends. I used to substitute teach for him, sometimes, at Brooklyn College. He came around when something bad happened to us. I gave a talk on his poetry last month, in New York, which I wrote during the cold snap, when it was too cold to go out for three days. I just sat in here and wrote about Allen and the

international aspect of his work. I picked ten poems at random to see how dispersed they were based on my working theory that they had a wide geographical scope. Then I found all the spots around the world in them and talked about them as being set in the world as a whole, saying that was a fitting poetry for now, when we're all crossing borders all the time: spanning geography is the main event today, because there are so many people. He spent two years in India, which changed everything about him.

120 DR: He was deeply inspired by the Hindu tradition, which was brave and opens the culture up. Anne Waldman says that one thing she learned at that point was that the Hindus say "carry your enemy on your shoulder." That's a counter-intuitive idea. I was wondering if your poems that address completely despicable people might be a case of carrying the enemy on the shoulder.

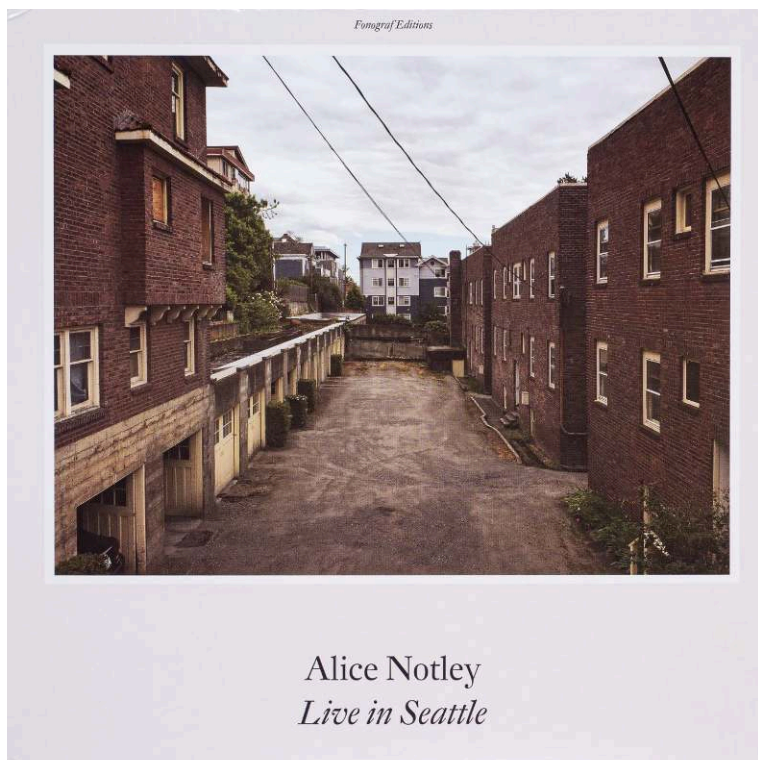
121 AN: No, never: when I address enemies, I am not carrying them on my shoulder; I'm being intensely annoyed by them. I wonder about it later, but actually it always seems like it is justified: I think the people that I mentioned in *Alma or The Dead Women* deserve to be there, having their names engraved in that particular way. There are passing moments that needn't be dwelled upon, but if you're going to go to war against a couple of countries, I think you merit an accusation of doing just that.

122 DR: Anne Waldman was an important figure with the [St. Mark's] poetry project.

123 AN: I wrote an essay about her work in a book of essays called *Coming After* (2005), and I have essays in it about her and Joanne Kyger, Ted Berrigan, Lorenzo Thomas, Frank O'Hara, and some others.

124 I also have a vinyl record, it's like one of those jazz albums. Like somebody live in some city. Miles Davis live at Birdland or something. This guy is doing vinyl records of poets and he's done a series including one of me and one of Eileen [Myles].

Alice Notley, *Live in Seattle*, Portland, WA: Fonograf Editions (Octopus Books), 2019. Courtesy of Alice Notley, re-photographed by Daesong Kim, April 2018.



BIBLIOGRAPHY

ASHBERY, John. "Syringa." *Houseboat Days*. New York: Penguin Books, 1977.

ASHBERY, John. "The Art of Poetry: John Ashbery." Ed. Philip Gourevitch. *The Paris Review Interviews vol. 4*. New York: TPR, 2009, p.174-202.

BAYM, Nina. and Laurence B. HOLLAND. "American Literature between the Wars, 1914-1945." Gen. Ed. Nina Baym. *Norton Anthology of American Literature*, Fifth edition, vol.2. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1979, p. 911-1772.

BRETON, André. *Nadja*, in *Œuvres complètes, tome 1*. Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de La Pléiade, 1988, p. 643-753.

DYLAN, Bob, "The Man in the Old Black Coat." *Oh Mercy*. New York: Columbia Records, 1989.

KOCH, Kenneth. "The Circus" (1971). Ed. Ron Padgett. *Kenneth Koch Selected Poems*. New York: American Poets Project Library of America, 2004.

KOCH, Kenneth. *New Addresses*. New York: Knopf, 1998.

MYLES, Eileen. "The Art of Poetry No. 99: Eileen Myles." *The Paris Review*. New York: TPR. vol. 57, no. 214, fall 2015, p.34-121.

NOTLEY, Alice and Ted BERRIGAN, editors. *Chicago European Edition #3*. Essex: Chicago Editions, June 1974.

NOTLEY, Alice. *Alma, or The Dead Women*. New York: Granary Books, 2006.

NOTLEY, Alice. "Blinding the White Horse in Front of Me" in *Certain Magical Acts*. New York: Penguin Poets, 2016.

NOTLEY, Alice. "Cherokee." *Alma, or The Dead Women*. New York: Granary Books, 2006.

NOTLEY, Alice. *Coming After*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005.

NOTLEY, Alice. *Désamère*. Oakland: O Books, 1995.

NOTLEY, Alice. *The Descent of Alette*. New York: Penguin, 1996.

NOTLEY, Alice. "Disobedience." *Disobedience*. New York: Penguin, 2001.

NOTLEY, Alice. *For Frank O'Hara's Birthday*. Hastings: Reality Street, 1976.

NOTLEY, Alice. *Grave of Light*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2006.

NOTLEY, Alice. *In The Pines*. New York: Penguin, 2007.

NOTLEY, Alice. "This Kind of Paradise." *Parts of a Wedding*. New York: Unimproved Editions, 1986.

NOTLEY, Alice. *Mystery of Small Houses*. New York: Penguin, 1998.

NOTLEY, Alice. *Parts of a Wedding*. New York: Unimproved, 1986.

NOTLEY, Alice. "The Prophet." *How Spring Comes*. West Branch, Iowa: Toothpaste Press, 1981.

NOTLEY, Alice. *Reason and Other Women*. New York: Chax Press, 2010.

NOTLEY, Alice. *Songs And Stories Of The Ghouls*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2011.

NOTLEY, Alice. *Songs for the Unborn Second* Baby. New York: United Artists, 1979.

NOTLEY, Alice. “Where Leftover Misery Goes.” Robert Haas, Guest Editor, *The Best American Poetry of 2001.* New York: Scribner Poetry, 2001, p.120-124.

NOTLEY, Alice. “Where Leftover Misery Goes.” *Chain 7*, Memoir/Antimemoir; Summer 2000, p. 147-151.

NOTLEY, Alice. “White Phosphorus” (1988) and “Beginning with a Stain” (1987). Alice Notley and Douglas Oliver Editors, *The Scarlet Cabinet.* New York: Scarlet Editions, 1992.

NOTLEY, Alice. “Your Dailiness.” *165 Meeting House Lane*. Chicago: “C” Press, 1971.

STEIN, Gertrude. *Wars I have Seen*. London: B.T. Batsford Ltd., 1945.

WILLIAMS, William Carlos. *The Desert Music and Other Poems.* New York: Random House, 1954.

WILLIAMs, William Carlos. *Pictures from Breughel and Other Poems.* New York: New Directions, 1962.

INDEX

Subjects: Reconnaissances

AUTHOR

DAVID RECKFORD

Université Paris Nanterre and École nationale supérieure des beaux-arts de Paris