Julia Fiedorczuk

"All of the Bees in a Hive Are Having Imagination": An Interview with Brenda Hillman

Brenda Hillman has published chapbooks with Penumbra Press, a+bend press, and EmPress; she is the author of nine full-length collections from Wesleyan University Press, the most recent of which are *Practical Water* (2009), winner of the *Los Angeles Times* Book Award, and *Seasonal Works with Letters on Fire* (2013), which received the International Griffin Poetry Prize for 2014. With Patricia Dienstfrey, she edited *The Grand Permission*: *New Writings on Poetics and Motherhood* (Wesleyan, 2003), and has co-translated *Poems from Above the Hill* by Ashur Etwebi and *Instances* by Jeongrye Choi. Hillman teaches at St. Mary's College where she is the Olivia C. Filippi Professor of Poetry; she is an activist for social and environmental justice. Hillman's poems draw on elements of found texts and documents, personal meditation, observation, and literary theory. Often described as "sensuous" and "luminescent," her work investigates and pushes at the possibilities of form and voice, while remaining grounded in topics such as geology, the environment, politics, family, and spirituality.

Large parts of this interview were recorded in Berkeley in March 2016, the conversation was continued through e-mail over the period of several months.

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Julia Fiedorczuk: I would like to start with a question that's been on my mind for a long time. How does being a woman relate to one's work as an avant-garde poet? Are women poets allowed to be experimentors? Is there a specifically feminist or feminine kind of experimental poetry?

Brenda Hillman: My interests in experimenalism and innovative writing have always involved more than features of style or affinities with movements, they have always had to do with my experiences as a woman in western culture. I don't think there is a "feminist" style or set of styles but there are styles that correspond to women's expreriences and most recently this is true in experimental writing by women. Since the 70s in the Bay Area, women have played important roles in the development of the literary scene but we have also been trend-setters in breaking open form, in what is included in poetry. There were important women's presses and publications started by women, including *How (ever)* and Kelsey Street Press. When I came to Berkeley in the mid-70s I thought a lot about writing in relation to the "outsider" traditions, and my experience as a woman writing poetry, especially as a young mother, felt "outside."

It seems to me that avant-garde movements have tended to betray women. They promised to open things up for experimental women poets but never kept the promise. There seems to be an assumption that if one is a woman, and if one writes poetry, one should at least write in a way that "schoolgirls can understand"—to use a phrase from your poem.

I gravitate toward the poets who are rocky in relation to official avant gardes, like Michael Palmer. Very often groups that are self-proclaimed avant-gardes like Surrealism, Objectivism, Black Mountain School, Beat Poetry are understandably organized around friendship groups and common interests; in each of those groups there are usually only a few woman poets—Denise Levertov for Black Mountain writers, Lorine Niedecker for the Objectivists. Barbara Guest was a friend of many of the New York School poets. I don't think Emily Dickinson would have belonged to a movement; I tend to like iconoclasts like C.D. Wright and writers who cut across the categories with anarchistic irreverence because I like impurity and odd combinations.

Art movements have been primarily boys' clubs. The Beat movement included a few women—Joanne Kyger, for example—and those poets did not mean to be exclusionary or sexist or unkind to women or anything—that's just how things were. Duncan was close friends with Levertov, she was one of his main correspondents, but his social circle was primarily male—Jack Spicer and Robin Blaser etc., and they were all great writers, so I'm not faulting that. It's just that literary history is based in part on the neglect of the work of women and minorities, and only later do we discover the important voices of women and minorities that were busy making art throughout history. The last few decades have been a major watershed. I always say to the younger women friends just to remember it took a lot of people to beat back the underbrush so you could walk more freely. I'm glad all of this loosened up after the 80s but there is still a lot of work to be done.

You edited a book of essays on poetry and moderhood. Can one be a mother and a poet, or is there a conflict between those roles?

The coeditor of our book *The Grand Permission*, Patricia Dienstfrey, is one of the founders of the women's press at Kelsey Street, and one of the things we say in our introduction to the book is not that poetic form influenced our experiences raising children, or that raising children determined our poetic forms, it is that they occurred in the same decades, as parallel experiences. After Plath and Sexton and others paved the way, for the first time it was all right for women to put their own issues of body and experience in their poems. They didn't have to stick to traditional domestic subjects; women poets who chose to write about historical events or other forbidden subjects were freer, and we were also free to use abstraction, formal invention and to identify as rule-breakers. On the one hand there was more allowance for domestic material in poetry, and on the other hand, women were suddenly not limited to

traditional presentations. Many of our contributors were women who didn't really write using traditional subject matter and wanted to write about interesting formal choices in relation to their parenting. When we put our book together we got several "no's" from prominent poets; one said she didn't think poets should have children, because "Art and motherhood do not mix." Another wrote that she never included her children or household matters in her poetry because she didn't want to be thought of as a woman poet who wrote that way. And in the process of our editing, we came across a male editor who said if he saw a note that a woman is a mother in her bio, he closed the book. It took women poets of several generations so much effort to get to where we are, especially as experimental poets; some were afraid of losing their rights even further, and so they were wary of these topics. Adrienne Rich and Lucille Clifton were real rule-breakers in that way, including the subject matter of women's bodies and women's work. But a lot of the younger women poets are now including motherhood and family life, gender identification issues (lesbian motherhood) as topics of their experimental poetry and I feel we showed the way. Some of the older experimental women poets in our volume—writers like Kathleen Fraser, Fanny Howe and Alice Notley—pointed to the ways in which their experimentalism and their mothering overlapped. Things are freer now. I think of the work of the younger poets like Rachel Zucker and others who are cutting across boundaries. And we never wanted to be told that being mothers meant you couldn't be a full practitioner of poetry.

Your poetry cuts through the dichotomy between experimental or avant-garde poetry, on the one hand, and the more lyrical or confessional, sometimes even narrative, political poetry, on the other.

In connection with what we were just talking about, I didn't like being told what I could or couldn't do in my poetry—whether it was the then avant-garde having suspicion of subjectivity or subjective states or the general distrust of abstraction and theory in the broader poetry cultures. It just felt too much like Junior High School. When I was a kid I had a very rocky relationship to being categorized and I didn't want to be bossed around. In the 80s, I got bored with some of the seemingly restrictive conventions of narrative autobiographical poetry, so I looked for women models for stuff I wanted to do, particularly in experimental environmental writing. I looked toward writing with freer play and reference and always felt poetry should sound like the experience that made it, which for each writer is different, not a set of rules.

In America it's conventional to think there has been, since modernism, a binary between one kind of poetry versus the other kind, but then they disagree on what terms constitute the binary. Perceived binaries can be tracked in all kinds of ways—between more expressive kinds of poetry, including apparently autobiographical, sometimes narrative work, versus a more material-based kind of writing, most recently Language poetry and the fallout of that. Or some people

use the words "mainstream" vs. "experimental" loosely without being able to say what they mean. Some talk about "cooked" and "raw," a more "polished" poetry vs. more process-oriented, hybrid kind of writing. I am interested in the way these arguments are set up but it all gets too rigid for my own practice. These categories probably represent not just a search for aesthetic definition but also a need for purity that artists do not enact as a practical matter and now they mostly have outlived their usefulness. The twentieth-century versions of this in the U.S. might have come out of the resentment of the dominance of T.S. Eliot. I think I was drawn to SF Renaissance writers like Robert Duncan because they muddied the divisions, and included emotion, politics and formal freedom.

Do you think about language as arbitrary and alienating, or rather, as continuous with the material world? Your writing is both sophisticated and sensuous.

Well, knowing the primacy and importance of language doesn't mean you can't acknowledge there is experience that is non linguistic. I am drawn to Wittgenstein but also to Theosophy, magic and to naturalist guides to local animals. I'm interested in the fact that a little lizard has experience and can't call it experience. Language and its sign systems are of course arbitrary—otherwise we couldn't have a thousand different words for "tree," all of them equally beautiful—and at the same time, we have to recognize that language flirts with abstraction in a different way than paint, or music, or sculpture; each word when we use it has something to do with reference and meaning and does not remain purely abstract. There is so much energy, great beauty, outside of language. In this way, it is different from the note of middle C, played on the piano. When I say "as," a very generous, amazing word that means thousands of things, it means in context in very different way from what a musical note means. So our words have got to be both: referential and non-referential. Stein was a big influence on women poets and feminist poetics, including me; Steinan poetics helped many poets from the beginning of the twentieth century play with language, and that helped a whole strain of invention, collage, nonsense sentences, making language playful—it was very magical. I feel the same about Baudelaire and Rimbaud and Mallarmé. They helped the unconsciousness of the poet fight for its rights in the nineteenth century. And yet, what brings people to poetry, even as children, is often a deep feeling about the world that couldn't be satisfied without that kind of intense linguistic expression. In my case, I find myself searching for meaning for experiences that seem otherwise unmanageable, especially in the dire times of emotional distress or of political upheaval.

I know you practice meditation and trance. Could you talk about the impact of these practices on your writing?

I started doing trance in the early 80s. It was Jungian therapy-patterned on the work of Carl Jung. In each session we would do hypnosis. I did it for about 14 years and

I worked through a lot of things in my writing and life where I would be stuck—for instance in my poetry. In Jungian therapy you talk to certain archetypal figures—I can do it on my own now. I set the timer on my phone and I sit for a couple of hours. There are so many aspects of your mind that you don't know unless you pay a visit to them.

So trance is a kind of dialogue?

Actively dreaming has to do with asking a question and looking for an answer. The Jungian writer Maria Von Franz is amazing on the subject of active imagination. In my sessions I usually ask a question—and then I go to this active dreaming space. You might think that you know in advance the answers that you are going to get but it is not true. Since childhood I have made my own little rituals and spells; I am always trying to navigate experiences on multiple levels, so it never seems the exterior world or action is completely detached from the interior world of images. I found this particularly useful in moments of stress in a public action; sometimes these mini-trances are active invitations with the figures from dreams. Poets have to bring more imagination to things. But it's good not to confuse this kind of poetic behavior with the sort of work that needs to be done in political or social justice work; dreams cannot change systems or laws, they can only accompany this change. I have been reading the letters of Rosa Luxemburg, and an especially inspired by her letters from prison.

The theme of the imagination fascinates me. You write about the imagination as something that is material, natural. Once again, it cuts through these fundamental dichotomies—matter/ideas, body/mind, things/words.

It cuts across so many things… How can we say, for instance, that bees have no imagination? Imagination is maybe also a collective entity. All of the bees in a hive are having imagination. They don't have language the way we do, but they have a collective enterprise. There is no certainty about how many kinds of material there are, and the majority doesn't have to rule.

You write: "If bees can detect ultraviolet rays, there are surely more possibilities in language and government. The possible is boundless" (Practical Water, 33). That, too, has to do with the imagination, right?

People think humans are the highest order, better than non-human animals. I disagree. I think we are not higher, we are beside, and bees are just as important as we are though of course they cannot control our destiny and we can control theirs. So you can do ritual practices and things to bring you together with the non-human, including bringing letters of the alphabet outdoors. And if you think about the imagination as a huge collective enterprise in which we all participate and not just

one species, I think it makes possible more boundless ideas about what's possible. So far we are not working very well with the non-human animals. I think one of the areas for opening up hope is in the mental power: the power of the mind we know very little of.

Do you think that practicing the imagination like you do—through trance, poetry—is a way to communicate with the non-humans?

Yes, I do. I am enchanted by the non-human nature and the elements and the many conceptions of them in human society. There's a range of thought about this. There is a range of materials. I had worked on a tetralogy of books about the elements. *Seasonal Works With Letters on Fire* is the fourth book—the fire book—and it began when Bob [Robert Hass, JF] and I were driving, it was October, and I saw pumpkins in the field—and I was just overwhelmed by how beautiful they were. And I looked out there and I thought—each of those pumpkins, they are having an experience, their own experience. There are seeds inside of them, and they are all white and they look like eyes inside the pumpkin. And it has nothing to do with me. They are not involved in my life. They don't need me. It was beautiful. I began to think of the fiery energy in all things, how it is alive apart and in relation because I have become more of a witch over time, a pagan worshiper. At the same time, this does not obviate the need to see the world with other models as well, like the fact that the pumpkin were possibly being raised by agri-business, and were the workers receiving fair wages. We are committed on all these levels. Donna Haraway and Angela Hume Lewandowski have written beautifully about this.

I think that by imagining other species we can have more freedom and beauty in our lives and this imagination helps us live more ethically. And we can also empathize. To think that other species have their own experiences is a way of expanding our life and also a way to free us from our own murderous ways. Whenever I get very stressed I think about foxes in Tilden Park or in the hills beyond that, or the woodrats under their piles of sticks. They are there, doing their thing. I think there is an animistic kind of relationship that we can develop. Sometimes I think everything has some kind of sensation that we can't understand. That's part of what inspired the book and what the poems are about—the non-human life we have no access to as human agents.

I came across a new poem of yours in the last issue of Poetry magazine. The title is: "Describing Tattoos to a Cop." Does it describe a real experience?

Yes. There is a wonderful organization called 350 org. They were doing a demonstration in Washington DC against the Keystone Pipeline. The extraction process of fossil fuel and the dangerous transport of oil are very important issues. Bob and I heard there would be a protest at the White House and we decided to go, knowing we were risking arrest. It was a high visibility affair because it was the first

time Sierra Club was doing civil disobedience. It was on Ash Wednesday 2013. And so we were arrested and booked. And when they book you you have to tell them about your tattoos—so I described my tattoos to the policeman, who had tattoos too.

At the beginning of the poem you talk about the worms—perhaps this is an example of what you just talked about, imagining the non-human entities, what they are doing, while we humans are having our demonstration. It is important to acknowledge this perspective, to understand that we and our affairs are not alone. A really moving moment comes when the speaker actually seems to empathize with the policeman—and it is the tattoos, these markings on the body, that make some sort of empathic identification possible. I see this as a comment about poetics—the markings on the body become a kind of language which constitutes grounds for communication—even in conflict.

I was a little stuck: there is a lot of police-hating around. And I do have problems with law enforcement right now; I perceive we are living in a police state with regard to minorities and protest. But this young officer was so clueless and was trying to be helpful. I felt I could not cross the gap of our difference—differences of goals and class. I was a white woman coming out to protest, to be arrested. My job was not at stake. He was a young man having a day of work. It is important to see how we can get real about white privilege in the environmental movement. Yet poetry can be empathic in ways that political treaties can't. I think it is right to protest and to remain conscious that sometimes we can cut across the divisions.

Poetry as non-violence?

I think we start with the assumption that we can use non-violent tactics. If we harm other humans, we lose. But on the other hand I personally feel more and more anger and I understand increasingly that violence is being done by the State to the working people on a daily basis. When I think about the exploitation of workers I do not feel non-violent and yet I value each human life. I do agree with what you said about non-violent qualities of poetic imagination. I started off as a complete pacifist and I still believe in non-violence as a starting place in interhuman relations. When it comes to the corporations murdering human beings, there is a limit to my tolerance. One of the poems in *Seasonal works with letters on fire* is about Monsanto ["The seeds talk back to Monsanto"]. You know Monsanto sells the seed that can only grow once—they will never grow again. They sell African farmers these seeds and make billions of dollars. They have to sell them every year—they are called terminator seeds. It is a one-time use. This is violence to humans: a corporation like Monsanto acts violently towards people in Africa. American government knows about it and tolerates it; they even make special acts of Congress to protect Monsanto; so yes, in response to this there is anger in my poetry. Systemic violence is at the very center of our woes, and can't always be dealt with by the victims in non-violent ways.

In the face of this, poetry does seem quite useless?

I think it's very far from useless; I concur with Williams that it is a different kind of news that can save lives, but I also think we can't ask poetry and art to do too much. We can ask it to accompany us in our resistence to injustice and oppression. Art accompanies, and it is also its own world. Seeking justice and political resistence is beside art—it doesn't exclude art but we can't confuse one thing with the other. We should ask poetry to do what it can do, which is a lot, but it should not be mistaken for the work of getting bodies in gear against the oppression we see around us. Art and poetry can give people a sense of being spiritually connected in so many powerful ways we've been talking about. Imaging the animals, imagining other human beings, imagining the cop—instead of being brutal. It gives us deep spiritual gratification to be involved with language on such a bountiful level. But of course it won't change the violent system on its own. However, in the process of changing the system, we need a lot of poetry to keep us going. I want to say, wake up, artists, it may be the end of the world. You will not be in your chambers for long.

I know you study lichens. Where does that interest come from?

Lichens resemble similes and metaphors, because they are about two or more things coming together, fungus and algae and it turns out there are also other elements too—perhaps yeasts—that enable the symbiosis. In simile and metaphor, things come together. And in lichen it is a layer of algae and a layer of fungus, sandwiched on to each other. There is no root system. It is a good figure for metaphor, the way it works.

I fell in love with lichen because I love the way it looks, and there are so many kinds. In California there are 1200 kinds of lichen. And there are very few people that study them. They are not as popular as, say, wildflowers.

Not as "pretty"?

Well, Kant makes the distinction between the beautiful and the sublime, and I've always preferred the sublime, which allows a very wide range! But lichens with their ruffly edges and many different shapes to me are some of the most attractive life forms on earth. They look like consciousness.

If in lichens we see that matter composes meanings (like metaphors), in your work we see that meaning is material. I'd like to ask you about Loose Sugar a bit—could you talk about the sources of this book, the procedures it uses?

I had been reading early second- and third-century gnostic texts for a while, working on what I thought were the "problems" of light and dark, male and female, spirit and matter, had been working on two books Bright Existence and Death Tractates,

to address a kind of feeling about non-existence, that it is really a strength, not a weakness. The study of these texts and that writing led me to the study of medieval alchemy, and the alchemists; they were always experimenting with elements, as I wanted to do in my poetry. I was also thinking about sex and the origin of sexual feeling in adolescence, the body and so on. At the time of that writing, the first Gulf War was starting, so it turned into a book about alchemy, sex, war, and after a while, depression and the emergence of language, my mother's language. So the book has many sections, each with a different form.

Western thinking usually separates spirit from matter.

Maybe it is because I'm older but I feel things are more and more embodied and immediate. So that you sense the presence of the invisible world where you are. I grew up in a Christian family, which had a very faraway sense of heaven—heaven was something else. And now I have a more immediate sense of other entities and existences being folded in like egg whites into a soufflé, that it is very close by and abides in an available but mysterious way. This particular experience is way less isolating. It is possible that there are many forms of matter that we haven't yet experienced.

In fact, we don't know what matter is—not even scientifically (think about gravitational waves…)—there are so many things we don't know, it's silly to pretend that we do. I feel impatient with people who are making simple divisions or making fun of spirituality. In America it is very hard to be politically engaged—to practice radical left-wing politics—and to recognize that neither rationality nor irrationality offers the whole picture. I like that there's a group of Oakland mystical poets—some of them are my friends, Melissa Mack, Sara Larsen, David Brazil and many others—who are very politically active and do not opt out of spiritual affinities. CA Conrad is a really terrific poet doing a lot of work in this area. One of my most admired writers is William Blake, who ascribed to spiritual and folkloric presences and also made up his own combination. It's not as if because you like blue you can't also like green. I like science, I am very politically engaged but I also like the practices of folklore and magic, which I consider a different realm of investigation. I think of the Christianity I grew up in as a kind of folklore I happened to participate in a using a different model from science. This ability to engage with different models of experience, different types of knowledges helped me through a very demanding childhood. Did Jesus actually heal people so that they got well? Did he come back to life after being killed? I don't know about levels of literalness for these stories, and I don't care much about that, as long as you don't hurt others with your experience of cultural tales. I always give the example of George Bush saying that Jesus told him it was ok to invade Iraq, and then I say, well, actually, Jesus told me at the same time it was not ok. The literal, physical aspect of these miracles doesn't matter; these are metaphors with wide parameters. What matters is that we live on a very limited level and poets have never liked that.

Can we think about poetry also as a form of knowledge, or wisdom?

Of course. With the arrival of postmodernism and the use of the internet, research, elemental and conceptual poetics, poets are free to use all kinds of materials in their poems—documents, lyric meditation, beauty, ugliness.

Poetry does help you to slow down. It brings you into contact with your intuition in very different ways. With the physical world. But also words. Learning about various words, the roots of words. All the Indo-European languages come from the same common words. So that kind of knowledge—the knowledge of the self, of society, the language people use.

Jan Zwicky says the metaphor is a tool for learning.

Jan Zwicky is right about almost everything; she is a very cool poet. Metaphor is like diplomats from countries that don't get along who are forced to sit at a negotiating table, two opposite points of view can converse—this is like metaphor. They have no choice but to get along because they are in the same place. You are totally different from me, so how are we in the same phrase? You know. That's metaphor. The central paradox of existence is that very unlike things have to get along. It's really true. So there are many different kinds of knowledge, many different layers of knowledge in poetry.

Do you feel like you belong in a particular place on earth? The lichens you talked about at the beginning come from your garden.

In a physical sense, I think of the West Coast—the West in general, including Arizona—as home. It has a particular Eros, a particular life-force. I love the plants, the species. But I also love the free thinking in the West. So both biologically and sociologically I am connected with the West. But in a bigger sense I think of a place as the site of consciousness, the site of the poem. Wherever you put the poem is your sense of place. *Pieces of Air in the Epic*, for instance, is a very European book—written at the beginning of the Iraq war. We were in Berlin, and I was thinking about the whole world, the whole universe, as my place, because air was the matrix.

Another way to think about the place is the location of language. The site of the poem is language—your place is always with you in this way: it is your human mind and consciousness. But I do really feel terribly homesick when I am away from the West Coast (especially the bay area)—especially because so much of the rest of America is crazy. Yes, there is a sense of place. I was very strongly influenced by the male poets of the west: Gary Snyder, Robert Duncan, Kenneth Rexroth, Robert Hass. There was another poet in the SF Renaissance, less known, Richard O. Moore. He was quiet, he didn't self-promote but his work is very interesting. I hope when I die my place will be everywhere and if people read my work that it will have application for lots of people, not just Western writers.

Since March 2016 when we started working on this interview, the world has experienced much turbulence. And just last week Americans chose Donald Trump as their new president. How do you think this choice is motivated? What are your greatest concerns at this moment?

There has been so much written already about the global populism that is happening on the right and on the left. Since there was a lot of thought that Clinton would win, it appears the bourgeois left in the U.S. hadn't been listening—to the real class and cultural divide and the complaints over the decades from the white working class—complaints that led many to support a right wing candidate who is utterly unqualified to be a world leader. He doesn't even read. He has to have his children brief him on stuff because he's so ignorant and wants to remain so. But this has been going on a long time. Trump is the small mark on the surface of the skin that indicates great distress underneath. Economic lives of people are not getting better, if you don't belong to the upper 1%. Rather than choosing a candidate like Sanders who would address corporate and banking malfeasance, they have chose candidate who won with a combination of racist and misogynist bullying, as well with bravado, falsehoods and demagoguery. It's frightening. I am made hopeful when people care and have energy. I am very far to the left of most liberal agendas. I would like, of course, to see a non-violent economic revolution in my lifetime, where people aren't disenfranchised and brutalized and imprisoned by the corporate state. I'm most worried for our Muslim citizens, our black and brown citizens, for women's reproductive rights, for the 8 million species that are not human. As for what poets can do—the same thing we should always do: get our work done; organize; socially and politically involved. Unless we have young children or old parents or are sick, we need to resist this ignorance and selfishness, be on the lookout for vigilante brutality and resist oppression. The environment will suffer more under Trump, but the dire situation obtains as long as we're run by the corporations and the defense industry. We need to organize resistance; in the process, I think we can make a lot more connections with the non-human and the good forces through our art. At least I hope so!