

TraVerse Babel

A Proposal for a Thesis in Creative Writing

Department of English

Bar-Ilan University

Shoshana Sarah Kreinziin

326-999-406

Adviser: Dr. Marcela Sulak

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Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Aims and General Description	4
Conceptual Background	5
Shape of Project	10
Bibliography	11

Introduction

Langston Hughes once declared, “A poet is a human being. Each human being must live within his time, with and for his people, and within the boundaries of his country” (“Draft Ideas” 5). Hughes also wrote in his essay “200 Years of Afro-American Poetry,” that it is almost impossible for young poets in America not to write racially if they are black, similar to his argument in “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” a response to Countee Cullen’s desire to be a poet, not a *black poet*. Robert Bone noted, “Because the Negro American writer is the bearer of two cultures, he is also the guardian of two literary traditions.” Perhaps this is a compromise between Cullen and Hughes. Bone’s description of twoness echoes W.E.B. Du Bois’ double-consciousness. Indeed, all writers write—whether unaware or consciously— within the context their inherited culture and its history. Yet, much has changed since the Harlem Renaissance in at least one regard: The experience of many of today’s writers, African-American or not, is not about the fixed coordinates of a nationalist literary tradition; rather, we are driven by global literary influence, a “world republic of letters” (Casanova) and multiculturalism. What is my country? Who are my people? Am I of my times? How are hybrid/ multicultural identities, multilingualism, global literature, and cross pollination to be taken into account? The matter is no longer black and white. Beyond the Cullen-Hughes debate, beyond the double-consciousness there is a ‘multi-consciousness.’

Aims and General Description

TraVerse Babel will be a hybrid documentary project consisting of interrelated documentary poetry, lyric essays, and memoir that will explore questions of home, identity, language and the tension among them. Documentary poetry is a mode that recounts events in an attempt to be factually accurate. *TraVerse Babel* is predominately documentary, and comprises several avant-garde sub-genres such as flash essay, dictionary poems, 'pseudo-fiction,' and interview transcripts in a mix of hybrid styles. The framework of the text will evoke the idea of the Tower of Babel—after its fall; in resistance to boundaries, *TraVerse Babel* will move in and out of genres to reflect the experience of fragmented/ hybrid identity pieced together into a mosaic.

Conceptual Background

Babel represents multicultural/multilingual individuals: the ones who cannot answer the question “Where are you from?” simply (Iyer), the ones who need to mix languages for their ideas to be complete (one of the meanings of Babel is to mix or confuse, referencing the Tower of Babel story). The use of the word “Babel,” in the title of *TraVerse Babel*, rebels against the numerous attempts from society to impose a narrowly defined identity externally—through language. In *TraVerse Babel*, I cite examples of the societal forces that imposed on my identity, as an African-American, forcing it into a type of displacement, or deracination, long before there could have been any awareness of the process. Predecessors on this issue from the African-American context include Zora Neale Hurston, particularly her essays “How It Feels to be Colored Me” and “Seeing the World as It Is,” and Du Bois’ *The Souls of Black Folks*; both provide a springboard for addressing how perceptions of African-American identity change as constructed by outside forces. In *TraVerse Babel*, I argue against the attempts I have experienced to compartmentalize my identity and refuse a defined set of boundaries (Maalouf, qtd. in Cassar 19). Identities are unstable—made up of all the elements that have shaped and continue to shape it, and the pieces added to the mosaic of who they become as a result are tesserae (Cassar 19), the tiles used in creating a mosaic. Glued together, the tesserae form the cultural mosaic or Babel.

This perspective on identity is in alignment with the politically fractured identity represented in Craig Santos Perez’s *from Unincorporated Territory [saina]*, a book which documents the diluted Guam culture and fading Chamorro language under American colonization. Perez’s text is primarily in English, yet there are traces

of Chamorro and Spanish, and he does not ‘do the courtesy’ of translating as Cassar does, giving agency to a people whose voice has been eroded in assimilation; it is a form of resistance as a “translated man” (Casanova 257). Like Perez, *TraVerse Babel* includes the use of other languages, to a small extent, such as Hebrew. While this may seem to exclude certain readers, *TraVerse Babel* represents remaining authentic to all of one’s parts, all of the tesserae. In the end, as Perez says, “words show evidence of how we are made.”

The politics of language are inextricably linked to understanding the influences on identity-formation. In *White Papers*, Martha Collins examines white privilege as it shows up in language, shaping her understanding of the world. Under Collins’ influence, *TraVerse Babel* examines the privilege that comes with being a native speaker of the *lingua franca* English; being a native English speaker can be likened to being white—advantageous and ‘unearned.’ Patricia Ryan’s talk “Don’t Insist on English!” was the impetus to thoughts on English as privilege.

TraVerse Babel is indebted to *The Balloonists*, by Eula Biss, which was my first encounter with the lyric essay form. Biss’ skillful use of the object-image set next to a conversation-based narrative, in her chapter called “The Black Box,” was the inspiration for the lyric essay “The Points of a Compass.” Her snapshots of nonlinear memories, which characterizes the rest of the book, influenced the formation of another lyric essay “Not on the Map.” Lyric essay is an ideal form for documentation; because there are no expectations of a linear narrative, it accommodates the selectiveness of memory. Joy Harjo’s memoir *Crazy Brave: A Memoir and A Map to the Next World: Poetry and Tales* further impacted my understanding of what is possible

in a text; her memoir combines non-fiction, fiction, Muscogee folklore, and poetry into a narrative that refuses to adhere to a single genre. Playing on the boundaries of fiction and truth, Mary Ruefle's *The Most of It* made me question what fiction is, and the flip side of that question, what, then, is truth/non-fiction. Through Harjo and Ruefle, I learned that the boundaries between genres can be permeable.

Written in response to the courses Jewish American Literature and Jewish Arts Seminar, my lyric essay "Blewish," recontextualizes Baldwin's "Question of Identity"—the idea of being "without a tradition"—and Harold Bloom's "Anxiety of Influence." The term "Blewish" is a portmanteau of the words Black and Jewish, and refers to the similarities of themes and tropes between African-American (Black) literature and Jewish American literature, such as choosing between traditional cultural norms versus assimilation. *TraVerse Babel*, particularly in "Blewish," explores the idea of home, in America, as "the place where questions aren't asked," (Baldwin) juxtaposed with the sense of homelessness one can feel in a foreign country (Rilke); yet, conversely, foreignness can be considered an element of the American experience of home, as *Notes from No Man's Land: American Essays* points out— Americans "always leave. We are a migrant people, a people of diasporas and exiles" (107). In *TraVerse Babel*, in which setting/location has a double meaning, Valeria Luiselli's *Sidewalks* was particularly influential: The stories themselves are centered on where the speaker is geographically and 'where the speaker is' within an emotional landscape.

The genre of found poetry reflects the straying between influences of varied sources in *TraVerse Babel*. I was first introduced to found language poetry by Rae Armantrout's "The Way," which begs the reader to differentiate between the process of

writing the poem versus the experience of reading it, while recognizing that each “find” is a choice. In the found language poem “The Process,” most of the text is composed of statements I transcribed at the Translation Conference held at Bar Ilan University. Translation is a metaphor for a meta-poetic process. In retrospect, even the idea to find language for poetry at an event on translation may have been under the subconscious influence of Walt Whitman as “untranslatable” from “Song of Myself,” and Cassar, who writes macaronic poetry with translations.

In *TraVerse Babel*, I invoke Whitman as a poetic father to my ideals of universality, and engage him directly responding to lines from “Song of Myself.” There is a simultaneous desire to be at home anywhere and overlook difference—like Whitman’s universality—and yet, this desire is joined with a lament that I am still restricted and know on a very self-conscious level universality can never be fully realized, as much as I want it to be. *TraVerse Babel* explores the hidden costs of trying to ride the fence between belonging ‘everywhere’ and ‘nowhere,’ and if there is such a thing as being free from narrow restrictions when it comes to the idea of home; I play with the “Latitude of Home” (Dickinson): the tension between the definitions of latitude as ‘free from restrictions’ versus the restricted and defined geographical locations, because home must ‘take place’ somewhere.

From another perspective—in which one is the origin of several—dissembling becomes an aesthetic itself, as with Whitman, who breaks apart his specific self in order to become universal. Though whether this is possible for the gendered and for minorities is debatable, *TraVerse Babel’s* ideas on home and identity pan out from the specific—an African-American living in Israel—to a universal experience relevant to a

population of 220 million (Iyer). My “Kinsmen of the Shelf” (Dickenson) are formed from a widely cast net into an amalgamation of Black/African-American, Jewish, and American tradition, but by no means are limited to these three.

Shape of Project

*There are stories that don't know how to tell themselves,
so they dissemble/disintegrate;
they can only be caught by the tail in pieces/snapshots/tesserae.*

TraVerse Babel will be an interconnected hybrid documentary project. Sections will be divided according to 'objects of obsession'—the map, the compass, and (the Tower of) Babel—which will reappear and be cross-referenced throughout the project. Each section includes different genres. *TraVerse Babel* will be an amalgamation of genres and interrelated themes, so that in each reoccurring section any of the themes: home/origin, fragmented/hybrid identity, belonging/outcast, location/dislocation, or multilingualism/*lingua franca* may be touched upon. *TraVerse Babel* will be create a text unified in its themes across the genres.

While, map sections will focus primarily on the themes of home/origin, and belonging/outcast; compass sections will focus on location/dislocation; and Babel sections will focus on fragmented/hybrid identity, multilingualism/*lingua franca*. The autobiographical information will be nonlinear, traversing childhood memories; the disintegration of a marriage; the history of slavery and its cultural consequences; being an African-American living in Israel; being a non-Jew with a Jewish name; the effects of being multilingual; and being the partner of an interracial/intercultural (second) marriage. Just as each of these subjects appear and reappear in different contexts in my life, so too will they appear and reappear in *TraVerse Babel*; the reader will be occasionally anchored in the chronology of events by specific dates or locations.

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