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Forms of Solidarity
Georgina Colby

On 9 April 1989, over 400,000 women marched on Washington in the March for Women's Lives. Barbara Kruger's *Untitled ('Your body is a battleground')* (1989) is perhaps the most lasting image from the protest. Made directly for the purpose of protesting for liberation from legislation that prohibited women's reproductive freedom, Kruger divides a photograph of a woman vertically, half in black and white, half in negative, light and dark reversed; an aesthetics of conflict. The futura bold lettering stamped across the woman's face in the manner of a censorship campaign announces the subordination of women to their bodies. Crucially, Kruger's red, white and black palette aesthetically aligns the women's march with another historical moment: the Russian Revolution. Paying homage to avant-garde works such as Alexander Rodchenko's *Books* (1924), the Soviet poster art designed to campaign for worker education, Kruger imbues her feminist protest with the aesthetics of political revolution.

Kyoo Lee's 'What'd Barbara Say Today?', one of the 67 works that comprise *Solidarity Texts: Radiant Re-Sisters*, places Kruger's *Untitled ('Your body is a battleground')* (1989) above *Untitled ('We don't need another hero')* (1987). Lee's solidary appeal to Kruger from the contemporary moment is set in red font, continuing the revolutionary colour palette. The voice of poem transposes Kruger's feminist dissent to the context of Trump's inauguration; the President becomes Kruger's boy-child clenching his fist to flex his bicep, an unnecessary 'hero'. Here, I take Lee's work as a starting point to explore what solidary writing might mean in this moment of socio-political crisis.

Solidarity, the term that collates the texts written for the Women's March on Washington, 21 January 2017, is highly contested in recent feminist studies. When Kruger campaigned in 1989 identity politics dominated leftist theoretical discourse as the key to tackling social injustice. Since the 1990s, feminist theorists have called identity politics into question. Alongside this critique the notion of solidarity has been redefined.

Jodi Dean is at the forefront of rethinking solidarity. In her 1996 study, *Solidarity of Strangers: Feminism After Identity Politics*, Dean theorises 'reflective solidarity'. Reflective solidarity moves beyond conventional ideas of solidarity, which, for Dean, rigidify identity categories, and fall privy to four fundamental problems of time, exclusion, accountability, and critique.¹ Dean argues that a shared experience with previous generations cannot be assumed. Therefore the tendency of conventional solidarities to underpin unity with historical contexts of core values particular to a specific group is a questionable temporality. Conventional solidarities are exclusionary, 'limited by their construction in terms of "us" and "them"'.² Issues of accountability are tied to such exclusion. The demand for loyalty to a particular group results in a failure to take account of the needs and experiences of those outside the group, and an accompanying neglect to acknowledge the possibility of injustice. Bound to the limitations of a homogenous group identity, conventional forms of solidarity are threatened by questioning and critique, as criticism of the histories and values that are the foundation for the group might become a catalyst for disintegration.

Reflective solidarity by contrast 'builds from ties created by dissent'³, offering a form of solidarity that resists becoming 'yet another exclusionary ideal' through respecting 'the historical conditions of value pluralism, the ever present potential for exclusion, the demands of accountability, and the importance of critique'.⁴ The *Solidarity Texts* create new and necessary forms of textual solidarity through experimental composition that aesthetically voice components of reflective solidarity.

In an untitled solidarity text, M. NourbeSe Philip ruminates on poetic form as a vehicle for thinking through the political crisis. Comparing Obama to the sonnet: 'controlled, passionate and, like all good poetry, revelatory', Trump, Philip suggests, might be a limerick. Yet she also remarks that perhaps there is no poetic form in existence for Trump, perhaps 'he calls for a new form.' Philip's metaphorical deliberations extend more widely to a structural analogy with the office of the President:

Am also thinking of how poetry may help in trying to understand what we're all facing regarding the impending inauguration of Trump. For instance, what happens when the content of the poem overwhelms, cannibalizes perhaps?, the form, which itself can be considered an integral aspect of the content? Am thinking of the office of the President as the external and pre-established form, like a haiku, and wondering what happens when the form cannot contain the poem, when, in fact, the poem seems intent on consuming the form. What strategies do we, as poets, employ (implore?) to bring the poem "under control? Should we?

I would like to take Philip's question regarding poetic strategies as a prism through which to address the imbrication of form with resistance in the *Solidarity Texts*, and the relation of such resistance to a textual form of reflective solidarity. When positioned in relation to Philip's idea of the President's office as 'the external and pre-established form' that is subject to being devoured by the content (the President), the *Solidarity Texts* emerge as an innovative form, inseparable from content, intersubjective, inclusive, that offers an alternative politics of form and a textual site of political resistance.

Philip's poetic-political analogy associates the fragility of the office of the President with the rigidity of conventional poetic form. Like conventional solidarities, pre-established forms demand adherence to certain norms inherent to their structure. The risk of decomposition appears on the horizon if the structure is not adhered to. The *Solidarity Texts*, a collection of individual texts, each taking a different experimental form, is comprised of handwritten texts, collages, a film, performances, poems, pieces of experimental writing, an essay, statements/ruminations, a letter, an election map, poems in Arabic and French and their translations, and cartoons. In the diversity of multi-modal forms the *Solidarity Texts* offers a structural reflection of the historical conditions of value pluralism. Content is in harmony with fragmentary form, rather than in tension. As with the plurality of forms, the plurality of voices form a collective community, yet resist the problematic reductions and exclusions that accompany the structural unity of conventional solidarities. Reflective solidarity, Dean comments, 'conceives of the ties connecting us as communicative and open'.⁵ The openness of reflective solidarity bridges identity and universality. A similar openness is at work in the experimental form and content of the *Solidarity Texts*. Each text in the collection

is unique and independent, yet part of an intersubjective assemblage in which each component is connected through resistance to the political climate in the U.S.

Spaces of Accountability

As a textual site, the collection opens up spaces of responsibility. Reflective solidarity gestures to '*a mutual expectation of a responsible orientation to relationship*'.⁶ Emphasizing 'how a "we" is constituted through the communicative effort of different "I"s', Dean highlights the way in which 'responsibility' stresses our accountability for exclusion. In the *Solidarity Texts* multiple texts offer different aesthetic inscriptions of responsibility, opening up and gesturing to numerous 'orientation to' relationships. Rachel Blau DuPlessis's collage combines typed text, scraps of grey, brown and orange tissue paper, a newspaper cutting, and photographic material of broken concrete and an iron bridge. The materials frame the poetic lines, which voice the social responsibility of poetry as 'the continuation of thought / by / *external* memory' / mirroring a force back inside / in the body a chamber of social knowing / and acknowledgement / inside the vibrating body of mind.' The use of italics stresses the discord between the external socio-political environment and that of the poem. In the centre of the piece, following these lines, a fragment of a newspaper article cites Chad Dion Lassiter, performer and president of the Black Men at Penn School of Social Work: "How do we become so adjusted to injustice?" The aesthetics of the collage preserve Lassiter's voice and social critique as unmediated and distinct. The subsequent lines invoke a communicative yet non-homogenous collective: 'The poet among others / confronts this / translates / from what is unknown into what is / barely known. / The nobility in trying to read the signs.' An insistence and appeal against post-truth politics follows: 'it is therefore important / not to lie about what one sees / anywhere.' These lines, like those above them, are in tension with the dense fragments of material that push the words to the left of the page. The concrete that eclipses the image of the iron bridge in the right corner of the page has a crude aesthetic weight that subsumes the poetic lines and accentuates the smallness of the newspaper font. Here the text and Lassiter's voice speak out from oppressive material conditions, in an act of pained resistance.

A number of the texts explicitly appeal to solidarity. For Dean, action and solidarity are inseparable, and attention to the contexts in which appeals to solidarity are made is essential. Articulating the ethical position of reflective solidarity, she states: 'Generally we call on another to stand by us over and against an "other" who seeks to oppress us, or who fails to recognise and include us.' By this definition: 'reflective solidarity refers to the exclusion of exclusion: we are connected through our struggle against those who threaten, denigrate and silence us.'⁷ Brenda Hillman's '2017 Inauguration Protest for Laynie' directly invokes this form of solidarity. Above a photograph of the collage comprising female figurines and numerous photographs of women, Hillman states: 'Being white and having a job that allows protest without threat - both are forms of privilege. When i get to the capital, i'll walk for women who have no privilege, who can't be there; some asked me to march for them & i'll pin their names inside my coat.' The collage visually accounts for differences and visually inscribes intersubjective recognition.

Solidary perspectives

In Hillman's work, and in other solidarity texts, one finds the perspective of that which Dean terms 'the situated hypothetical third':

The stress on "situatedness" tells us that the person who moves is embodied and concrete. Her physical movement into and out of groups gives her a perspective from which to evaluate group norms and expectations. Adopting the perspective of a situated third enables solidary bound members to discard the elements of homogeneity and isolation from other groups characteristic of conventional solidarities as they bridge the gap between insider and outsider. The emphasis on the "hypothetical" nature of this perspective reminds us of our limits. Our solidary reflection may never enable us to fully include the voices and experiences we exclude. Nonetheless, we take accountability for our exclusions, attempting to include excluded others in our "we."⁸

The perspective of the situated hypothetical third moves throughout the *Solidarity Texts*. Pronouns are never ascribed to a particular homogenous group but instead take communicative forms and bridge identity and universality. This perspective and the appeal to solidarity (in the reflective form, solidarity is always an appeal not a demand) are manifested in the poetic voice of Kate Schapira's 'Focus poem for direct action':

The starlings came over. They're here now.
They fill a place. They make a crowd.
They can teach me, though we are very different people.
I will be part of a crowd moved by the world,
I will lose my way. My way will change
toward what I learn. My way will change me.
Remember to let it change you.
The world and I will wheel and turn.
We inhabit the air together.
And later we lie on the ground, all world.
Remember to dwell in this with me.
I will remember to dwell in this with you.

Created by the world, the "I", the "you" and the "we" in these lines embody the perspective of the situated third and seamlessly traverse identity and universality. "We" is not assigned to a particular group but a global collective without the constraints of a homogenous group. The idea of a 'crowd' in the context of a poem effectively resists problematic ideas of homogeneity often attributed to the word. The starlings 'make a crowd' and are able to teach the voice of the poem 'though', the voice states, 'we are very different people'. The voice of the poem subsequently becomes 'part of a crowd moved by the world.' The "we" is communicative here. As in reflective solidarity 'it avoids the exclusion of individual difference.'⁹ The single use of enjambment: 'My way will change / toward what I learn' opens up a space of transformation and possibility which is then continued in 'My way will change me. / Remember to let it change you.' The possessive determiner 'my' is inflected by change. Rather than the idea of fixed behaviour of an individual, the habitual 'way' is

opened to constant change. It is both a path and self-conduct, fluid and unfixed, capable of changing the 'I' and, reciprocally, open to being changed by the 'I'. Places tend often to be attached to homogenous group identities. The "we" of Schapira's poem inhabits not specific named places but the non-specific air, which has no fixed place and is shared by all living beings.

The perspective of the situated hypothetical third is also found in a different form in the voice of Rosamond S. King's *Rock / Salt | Stone*, and the "you" to which the poem is addressed. The poem unequivocally appeals to the political responsibility embodied in solidarity:

another day

sometimes you just get tired
carrying all the things in your hands
all the people on your back and
you stumble
keep going
you cannot fall you
cannot cannot

fall

think of the people
men and women who thought your back was strong
cutting their feet on the earth's stones
babies rolling into the mud

Here there is a literal distance between the second person plural being addressed and the men and women experiencing political suffering. The solidary relation is one of responsibility and accountability and it defines the tone of the poem. The voice of the poem, prior to the ethical plea, moves in to occupy the position of the second person plural in a tone of Jamesian sympathy and understanding: 'sometimes you just get tired / carrying all the things in your hands / all the people on your back / and you stumble'. The plea that follows is a fervent appeal to solidarity:

you cannot fall you
cannot cannot

fall

The repetition of 'cannot' and the use of the space of the page create emphatic insistence. The isolated unstable 'fall' that looms alone abstracted in the ninth line and threatens to break apart the poem is negated by the cohesion and length of the lines that invoke and account for the men and women depending on the support of the plural subject of the appeal. The final lines structurally retrieve the poem from disintegration in a poetic act of accountability.

Anne Boyer's 'SONNET FOR SILVIA FREDERICI' adopts a more critical voice of accountability, one that is a different form of appeal to solidarity, calling into question the second person plural addressed:

HOW MANY CHILDREN WOULD YOU CARE FOR IF THEY DIDN'T
HAVE TO BE YOURS?
HOW MANY MOTHERS, SISTERS, BROTHERS, and LOVERS WOULD
YOU LOVE IF THEY DIDN'T HAVE TO BE YOURS?

HOW DO WE END THE TRAGEDY OF OUR ATOMIZATION?
HOW DO WE END THE TRAGEDY?

Boyer's use of majuscules lends urgency to the feminist critique and amplifies the poetic voice. The element of reflective solidarity that embodies critique emerges here. Importantly, the poem's questioning and critique is a central voice in the heterogeneous collection. The forms of questioning that arise in the collection, in poems such as Boyer's and Blau DuPlessis's, in line with reflective solidarity, appear as 'characteristic of the bonds holding us together'.¹⁰ This reflective spirit is embodied in the collection's plural structure, and stands in contrast to the pre-established poetic forms that M. NourbeSe Philip aligns with the office of the President. The *Solidarity Texts* as a whole responds to Boyer's call to end the tragedy of atomization, in its resistance to homogenous group identity, and the connections created through experimental composition between the universal (the collection) and the particular (each solidarity text). A new democratic poetic form emerges in the *Solidarity Texts* that manifests reflective solidarity, and offers an active feminist protest to the existing political climate.

¹ Jodie Dean, *Solidarity of Strangers: Feminism After Identity Politics* (California: University of California Press, 1996), p. 26.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 28.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 30.

⁶ Ibid., 29.

⁷ Ibid., 31.

⁸ Ibid., 33.

⁹ Ibid., 32.

¹⁰ Ibid., 6.