



FRANCESCO

LITSTYLE SPOTLIGHT

INTERVIEW

BY

CHRISTOPHER JOSEPH MCGOFF

LEVATO

"I VIEW MY DOCUMENTARY WORK AS PART ARCHAEOLOGICAL PRACTICE, EXCAVATING LANGUAGE THAT MIGHT OTHERWISE BE HIDDEN AND BRINGING IT TO LIGHT, AND PART ACTIVISM IN THAT I USE THAT LANGUAGE TO SUBVERT OR RESIST THE DOMINANT DISCOURSE."

CHRISTOPHER JOSEPH
MCGOFF:

How did you become interested in poetry in particular and wanting to develop as a working poet-artist?

FRANCESCO LEVATO:

How far back should we go? My earliest influence in poetry was actually from an independent comic book I used to read as a teen. It was a series titled Samurai, from Aircel Comics. The issue in question intercut panels of the main character doing kata with a sword and panels of a Bauhaus-esque punk band on stage--running through the comic in each panel was T.S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men." As a punk, and martial artist, and a tragically dramatic teen the combination really struck me. I was also an art student and so the blending of visual art with poetry resonated with me. As for Eliot in the comic book, that was the first time I had encountered poetry that engaged in sociopolitical critique, and that had a major impact as my visual art tended toward that mode. "The Hollow Men" led me to Eliot's other work and to "The Waste Land" which was a foundational work for me, its palimpsestic layering of reference material, the complexity, that I had to research beyond the poem itself. My work has since been informed by a lineage of complex, layered, socially conscious work, e.g., Muriel Rukeyser, Charles Reznikoff, Mark Nowak, to name a few.

C M :

Reznikoff's *Testimony* is brilliant, and I recommend it to anyone interested in documentary or conceptual poetics. But to switch back to your multimedia projects, I am curious how this early interest in comics translated into that work. More specifically, how the principles of drawing and animation inform your writing projects, and how they informed the design of your video game.

F L :

The poetry-based videogame, *Semi-peripheral (3D)*, was an experiment (as is much of my work). Prior to that piece, I was working with experimental poetry and film, utilizing multimedia performance aspects, where I unpacked my poetry films and mixed them live on stage using club VJ software. My interest in poetry and film started as a way to install poetry in an art space. At the time I started experimenting with the two modes, I was an interactive media designer (for a living), and I started using the tools I worked with on a daily basis to create my first poetry films, really just animated text and stills produced in Adobe Flash.

I'm always pushing at boundaries with my writing and influenced by work outside of poetry. For example, the formal structure of an earlier series of mine, "Variations on Want," was actually inspired

by an experimental puppet theater performance of “The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari” put on by Red Moon theater in Chicago. The whole stage was a giant wunderkammer and scenes unfolded simultaneously in different cabinets along with a disembodied voice over and another layer of text scrolling across digital displays. I loved the polyvocal nature of the experience and wanted to find a way to evoke a similar experience on the page.

The videogame came from another set of unconnected influences. The first was the installation art of Christoph Büchel, whose work I encountered while researching for my long documentary poem “War Rug.” Büchel does these amazingly complex, and huge, installations that span multiple rooms and floors. Each room is packed with objects that are symbolically linked to others in the space and to the overall theme of the larger installation. The result is this chaos of symbolic objects that imply narrative through their juxtaposition.

Then a second influence actually came from an archaeology blog I follow. One post was talking about a recent project where researchers were using a 3D videogame engine to recreate archaeological sites. It started me thinking about how I might use a 3D game engine to create a sort of immersive poem. That project then spawned a much larger videogame, still in progress, based on my manuscript Arsenal/Sin Documentos, from which the poems in FIVE:2:ONE come from.

C M :

One of the reasons why I was drawn to your poems is their alignment with documentary poetics. Joseph Harrington’s Tracking Teaching monograph, which is a dossier of practical and theoretical ideas about docpo featuring poets such as Alli-

son Cobb and Kaia Sand in conversation, Philip Metres, Donovan Kūhiō Colleps, and others, places emphasis on the preservation of memory, which to me suggests questions concerning epistemology. Mark Nowak calls docpo a “modality” which “participates in the social field” in a short essay over at Poetryfoundation.org and connecting this with Harrington’s introduction to his Tracking/Teaching monograph, which seeks the rewriting and reclaiming of the archive as an aid to the preservation of memory, implies docpo as a mode of investigating methodologies concerning epistemology, among other notions. With this and your poems in mind, do you see them as making an epistemological intervention through poetic discourse?

F L :

I view my documentary work as part archaeological practice—excavating language that might otherwise be hidden and bringing it to light—and part activism in that I use that language to subvert or resist the dominant discourse. The poems from Arsenal/Sin Documentos use the language of the State against it, documenting how the state constructs the Latin American body.

An important note here: as I was preparing for this interview I tried to access “With Liberty and Justice for All: The State of Civil Rights and Immigration Detention Facilities,” the original document used for the construction of the poem “The Maggot Allegations,” and found that it had been erased from the public archives at the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights website (if you search the site it still appears in the results, but clicking the link results in a “page not found” error). For me, this reinforces an essential function of documentary poetics; the preservation of important public documents in the face of systematic institutional erasure.

“In the context of my work, the role of poetry in such a system is to turn the panoptic gaze back onto the system itself, laying bare the underlying mechanics of power, toward holding it to account. “

C M :

In the poems I note a kind of friction between reading the documents as both public policy and poetry. They rub against one another, which could be productive for examining the poetics of violence. Can you talk a bit about the form of the poems?

the poems tend to be informed by my understanding of Olsen’s “Projective Verse,” in that I try to embody the breath on the page. To that end, I use intra-linear space more often than punctuation and will often isolate an image I want to linger with surrounding white space, like in the poem “Issue #1—Re-identification of an Individual’s Race and Ethnicity,” where the end of the first line, “Hispanic/Latino,” is suspended above the isolated second line “While this part pertains to ethnicity, to avoid confusion / the word need not be mentioned.”

F L :

As a poet, I feel responsible to respond to the sociopolitical landscape which surrounds me. Weaving the personal and the political is something I appreciate in poetry, but have yet to be able to do it in my own work to a level I’m satisfied with—I’m thinking here of work like C.D. Wright’s Rising, Falling, Hovering.

The form each poem takes, in part, emerges from the source document and language within that document. The erasures of the CBP Use of Force Policy, Guidelines and Procedures Handbook in the series “Policy,” from Arsenal/Sin Documentos, for example maintain the original text of the handbook in light gray so that the language I excavate from that text can be read in the context of a rigidly structured discourse that authorizes escalating physical harm to migrants who resist authority. Other structural elements of

C M :

The notion of the space on the page surrounding this appropriated language seems to echo how public spaces are more now than ever subject to surveillance by institutions and by ourselves. I was watching the PBS Newshour and heard a writer suggest that the collection of biometrics is being utilized in conjunction with facial recognition technologies. In the interview, he suggested that we not judge these kinds of developments and wait to see how they turn out. His reason being that they could help us in positive ways. His point is granted. But what caught my eye was his insistence that the police would benefit because they could hypothetically make better determinations on the job. The implication being

that somehow these new technologies, which are essentially changing the concept of privacy and how we move and behave within public and private spaces, will help solve racial biases. This implication seems to be a lynchpin for programs like those that the US Government has instituted for screening purposes, which then become coded in the reports you draw from in the collection of poems. To me it promotes distrust not only of others but of ourselves, which gets carried over in to how we negotiate social spaces.

There's a certain odor of distrust in the two poems "The Maggot Allegations" and "Nature and Quality of Intrusion." The latter appropriates a case file from the Anastacio Hernandez-Rojas suit against the US, where Rojas died while in the custody of immigration officers during an altercation in which he had already been restrained. "The Maggot Allegations" is appropriated language from a case brought forward concerning allegations over the quality of sustenance in detention centers. Given the implications addressed in my earlier comments, and the way in which our surveillance technologies are helping to neutralize the concept of privacy—something we seem to be okay with—how can Poetry capture the negative of such a relation and foreground it so as to reflect the absurdity of our inculcation in this self-surveilled order?

F L :

The heightened state of visibility, as examined in my poetry, is related to the asymmetries of power Foucault discussed in *Discipline and Punish*, specifically his thoughts on Jeremy Bentham's panopticon.

Briefly, the Panopticon is a building designed for the control of a population through a sys-

tem of visibility (surveillance) and the simultaneous denial of visibility, which acts as denial of agency for that population. The building consists of a central guard tower around which is positioned a series of cells; from the tower, imprisoned individuals are in full view of guards, but the position of the cells prevents the imprisoned from seeing those surveilling them. Control is enacted through continuous surveillance, or the threat of surveillance as one cannot know whether or not a guard is present in the tower; the imprisoned behaves as if surveilled and is implicated as an essential component of the very system of control in which they are captive.

The poem "Footnote," (from my book *Arsenal/Sin Documentos*), is constructed from language found in "Test To Collect Biometric Information at Up to Ten U.S. Airports ("Be-Mobile Air Test")," a notice by the U.S. Customs and Border Protection in *The Federal Register*. The "test," as designed, was a panoptic "entry and exit system that records the arrival and departure of aliens, verifies the aliens' identities, and authenticates aliens' travel documents through the comparison of biometric identifiers." This collection of biometric data was targeted at a specific class of "alien" and was meant to render visible that class to the surveillance mechanism of U.S. Customs and Border Protection. Such visibility to authority functions as a system of control, much like Bentham's central guard tower.

In the context of my work, the role of poetry in such a system is to turn the panoptic gaze back onto the system itself, laying bare the underlying mechanics of power, toward holding it to account. Bentham, later in life, envisioned a system to counter the oppressive potential of the panopticon, wherein authority would be surrounded by, and so visible to, its subjects who would

then interrogate and hold it, also, to account.

C M :

How did your reading of these documents inflect, if at all, your poetic choices? In "The Maggot Allegations" your line break of "You can bet" from "that the facility was never in any danger" suggested to me how to think through how we decide to arrange (re-present) documents like these so as to suggest slippages in logic or reasoning. Should the poet engage in the flattening of authorial affect? Are the tools of poetry sufficient to address the self-assured language of the state?

F L :

In using state documents for the construction of poems in *Arsenal/Sin Documentos*, I sought to expose the rhetorical function of those documents in the coding of migrants as other and to examine the material consequences of such othering. Interrogation of my own positionality was a specific part of that process, and so I wouldn't term the use of such documents in my own work as a "flattening of authorial affect." I view documentary poetics, a lineage within which I locate my work, as critically ethnographic in nature in that it seeks to represent the lived experience of a specific population towards critiquing the sociopolitical context within which that population exists. As such, my work in this project was informed by critical ethnographers like D. Soyini Madison, who reminds us in her book *Critical Ethnography* of the importance of interrogating a researcher's positionality, as "it forces us to acknowledge our own power, privilege, and biases just as we are denouncing the power structures that surround our subjects."

I am a child of immigrants and this positionality informs my work. However, I also occupy a po-

sition of relative privilege as an academic, which affords me the time, resources, and access to the materials necessary to produce a documentary project such as *Arsenal/Sin Documentos*. Additionally, being a white male affords another level of privilege. As these spheres of positionality and privilege can affect the interpretation and representation of the subjects of my project, I worked to construct the poems in it from the institutional source texts responsible for shaping the dynamics of power surrounding the embodied experience of migrant subjects, rather than attempting to represent that experience in my own words.

C M :

The last poem in the series we're publishing takes a clear antagonistic approach to labor by delineating the definition of "person" versus "worker," and implies a subject/object split where the interests of capital are clearly defined with personhood whereas the worker solely exists only already subject to such persons. What is your hope in what individuals understand about this work, and the struggle with how to read your poems as poems in relation to the language as utilized by the state?

F L :

My hope is that the poems will be read in relation to the language utilized by the state, as they appropriate that language for a specific purpose—an unmasking of, and as resistance to, the institutionalized power of late capitalism wherein that language simultaneously constructs migrant bodies, through legal mechanisms, as both threat and commodity; with the attendant material consequences to such bodies. This work is informed by Michel de Certeau's concept of strategies and tactics. For de Certeau, strategies are associated with disciplinary power structures

like institutions, of which nation-states can be considered. These hold power and determine the environment within which individuals must function; within the environment constructed by the “U.S. Border Security, Economic Opportunity, and Immigration Modernization Act,” used for the poem “Definitions,” migrant workers are defined by/confined to the product of their labor, whereas full personhood, and its attendant rights, is granted to corporations or any legal entity engaged in business activities. Individuals, within such a power structure, can subvert the plans of the institutions through use of tactics; in the scope of the poem, and my project, the appropriation of the state’s own language, its subversion and redeployment against it, is one such tactic.

Footnote

Integrated, automated
under these federal statutory mandates,
certain aliens may be required
to provide fingerprint scans,
photographs, facial and iris images.
Entry and exit,
a system that records arrival and departure,
verifies, authenticates,
a physical characteristic,
an attribute collected, compared
against a previously collected identifier,
in accordance with, as used in this notice,
a person.

Note: the text of this poem is taken from “Test To Collect Biometric Information at Up to Ten U.S. Airports (“Be-Mobile Air Test”),” A Notice by the U.S. Customs and Border Protection on 07/28/2015, *The Federal Register*.

The Maggot Allegations

1.

You can bet that the facility was never in any danger
of receiving even one Michelin star.

But the complaints being made by detainees, are not nearly the kind you'd expect
if the facility had been serving maggot-ridden food:

Too many sandwiches and no condiments. Too many onions,
they smell up the food & tray. They serve the same food all the time.

Would like to have cheese and jalapeño peppers, and tomatoes/salsa
added to the scrambled eggs. Rice – over/under cooked.

Want more coffee. Too many eggs. Cups & spoons –
not properly washed. Want more than just white bread for sandwiches,
want more tortillas.

2.

I suspect that if true, it was not maggots but rather the larvae of pantry moths.
I speak from experience when I say that pantry moths are hard to get rid of.
For what it is worth, they are less likely to carry pathogens than houseflies.

3.

As the report puts it, “One individual testified to have seen maggots in food while visiting.”

Here's what Ms. H. actually stated before the Commission—
that somebody else saw the maggots:

(continued)

*She had heard the complaints about food and couldn't believe her eyes
when a detainee brought her a napkin with a scoop of oatmeal, rice, beans
and when she opened up the napkin, it had squirming live maggots.
And this is what detainees were expected to eat.*

Ms. H. appears to have heard the story from a Commissioner S.

who in turn heard it from Ms. C.

Even if the statement was true, and accurate in terms of firsthand observation,
that would still not answer the question of where the napkin full of food came from.

Did the detainee who presented it to her take it off his own plate?

Or did he get it from another?

If he got it from another detainee, where did that detainee get it?

It is odd that food that requires cooking—like oatmeal and rice & beans—
would have live, squirming maggots in it; one would expect them to be cooked.

It is also odd that oatmeal and rice & beans would be served together
in the same meal. Is it possible this food was taken from the garbage pail
instead of from a plate?

We *can*, ask these questions, but have probably arrived too late to get answers.

Note: the text of this poem is taken from the dissenting statement of Civil Rights Commissioner Gail Heriot in the United States Commission on Civil Rights 2015 Statutory Enforcement Report, "With Liberty and Justice for All: The State of Civil Rights and Immigration Detention Facilities."

Issue #1–Re-identification of an Individual’s Race and Ethnicity

The first part of the question asks whether or not an individual is Hispanic/Latino.

While this part pertains to ethnicity, to avoid confusion the word need not be mentioned.

The second part of the question asks an individual to select one or more races from the following five groups:

American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black or African American, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, and White.

Note that an alternative such as “some other races,” or “race unknown” is not an option.

Note: the text of this poem is taken from National Forum on Education Statistics, Race/Ethnicity Data Implementation Task Force. (2008). *Managing an Identity Crisis: Forum Guide to Implementing New Federal Race and Ethnicity Categories* (NFES 2008-802). National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U. S. Department of Education. Washington, DC.

Nature and Quality of Intrusion

Here, it is undisputed that A was unarmed, no contraband was found in his possession, and he was placed in handcuffs for all encounters with defendants.

Taking as true that D kicked A's ankles,
A told F about his medical needs which D and K were aware of,
D and K permitted the intrusive beating of plaintiff
by P and N with batons even though moments earlier
they indicated that all was well.

L also participated with D, K, P, and N in beating and kicking A,
and holding him on the ground with their body weight
pressing on his back and neck.

V then tasered A, even though A remained handcuffed, face down,
and as the video and civilian witnesses attest, passive
but for crying out for help.

S and B acknowledge that they restrained A's legs after he was tasered,
and they then ziptied an unresponsive A's legs.

...

Standing in the shoes of the “reasonable officer,”
the court asks whether the severity of force applied
was balanced by the need for such force

considering the totality of the circumstances,
including (1) the severity of the crime at issue,
(2) whether the suspect posed an immediate threat
to the safety of the officers or others, and (3)

whether the suspect was actively resisting arrest
or attempting to evade arrest by flight.

...

*We don't know what would have happened had they just left him alone,
not tasered him, gotten him to a hospital in enough time*

I think that is the cumulation of all the factors player – played a role,

And I – it's difficult to – to eliminate or separate the factors completely. . . .

And just as in many – many questions that deal with multiple –

either multiple injuries or multiple complex physiologic processes,

we cannot separate and remove any of those processes from the ultimate effect

because they play some role, they – they cause some effect

which may have been sufficient to – to cause the ultimate effect.

So I – I believe that just cannot be separated.

Note: the text of this poem is taken from *Estate of Anastacio Hernandez-Rojas et al v. United States of America et al.*

DEFINITIONS

In this section: The term “person” means any natural person or any corporation, company, firm, partnership, joint stock company or association or other organization or entity (whether organized under law or not).

The term “worker” means an individual who is the subject of foreign labor contracting activity.

Note: the text of this poem is taken from the *U.S. Border Security, Economic Opportunity, and Immigration Modernization Act*.