



The Transformation

Juliana Spahr

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Poetry. Juliana Spahr has lived in many places, including Chillicothe (Ohio), Buffalo (New York), Honolulu (Hawaii), and Brooklyn (New York). She has absorbed, participated in, and been transformed by the politics and ecologies of each. This book is about that process. THE TRANSFORMATION "tells a barely truthful story of the years 1997-2001," a story of flora and fauna, of continents, islands, academies, connective tissue, military and linguistic operations, and of that ever-present "we," to name only a few. At once exhilarating, challenging, and humbling, THE TRANSFORMATION is a hefty book in its honesty and scope, a must-read.

The Transformation Details

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From Reader Review The Transformation for online ebook

Carol Peters says

Non-fiction, memoir, by a poet, with whom I am about to study for a week.

Along with Claudia Rankine's "Citizen," everyone should read this book.

It explicates & contains the global reasons for 21st century grief.

Aubrey says

But they continued to find it impossible to talk about aesthetics without also talking about who took over whom.

The readers aren't going to like this cause it's too difficult. The readers of the difficult aren't going to like this cause it's too political. The lit critic academics aren't going to like it cause the metaphorical death of the author really doesn't count for much in a text that deals with the infinitely occurring incidents of it in the literal. The heteronormatives aren't going to like it cause of the sex. The queer theorists may or may not like it for all the fumbling attempts at a beginner's course of methodology, cause this being an absolute favorite of mine doesn't mean the biphobia/transphobia inherent "looking like a heterosexual relationship" passed unnoticed. I am very much enjoying my equal-opportunity-ass-gazer-status for the entirety of the population thank you very much, and roughly half of those asses belonging to society defined men doesn't make me straight.

"But usually when they said these words they meant that the literature resists or revolts against certain literary norms and conventions, not against large political structures like colonialism.

All this work really boils down to is a successor in the line of lit about white people going to colonized places and relating this oppression engrained in the way of things to their socially nonconforming sex life. They think too much, they drink too much, they mooch off their parents who grew up before the economy got tanked by fat cat fucks, they aspire to revolution but want to keep their heads, they acknowledge their privileged foot in the door but keep coming back when the job market's bad, they write weird ass poetry/prose pieces for their own personal catharsis and infect their fellow colleagues enough for said colleagues to assign it for their upper division English courses. Due to contemporary times being my standard of relating to things, I goddamn fucking adore this book. If you want to peer into a slice of my brain when I'm not having an episode or an even greater via influx of info via Tumblr than the technology of this work's setting was capable of offering, this, leastwise for now, is it.

It refused to understand what was terror and what was war. It refused separations between just wars and unjust wars, bombs and smart bombs, deterrence and self-defense.

It's not the idea that everything's connected that makes one paranoid. It's the complete and utter lack of ability to determine which connections are benevolent, which are symbiotic, which are parasitic and which are just plain and simple violent. Do this to someone and you'll go to hell. Exist like this under a particular ruling government and they'll come after you. Your choices in regards to this all have great ramifications, but

as far as codes of morality go they're not the most complex. One, you glorify what keeps you and your kind winning and grease the wheels of human sacrifice of the other whenever you can. Two, you suck the cock of the dominant status quo and call it neutrality. Three, you think a lot and feel guilty a lot about whether it's more helpful to stand up and speak or whether you should forever and ever sit down and shut up. Four, you go full out political and drown out those who were there before you with your hobby politics that for them has ever been a war for life. Five, you go full out down with the imperial state and get yourself raped/killed/tortured/locked away for life in Guantanamo Bay and that one black spot in Chicago, or was it New York. Just bear in mind that certain demographics consistently go straight to five when they're just a kid/teen/infant, cause that's just how the world works.

They debated the relation between poetry and violence and the sudden relevance of poetry about violence.

I like my books and I like my thinking and feeling and writing reading related to books, I really really do. All this, literally, keeps me sane. The way things have fallen out in the course of that, though, means it's impossible for me to embrace this bedrock when so many others who could be doing the same are dying in jail or being raped by US police or being killed by drones overseas. Major depressive disorder's a shitty business, but there are aspects of said shittiness that I will never have to deal with by way of the fortunes delineating who is born to whom. As such, I have an easier time of yelling at people about this business, within the boundaries of self-reflexivity and self-care of course. Going gung-ho into the revolutionary fray isn't that admirable or triumphant and business when self-sacrifice is your brain's first wired instinct.

Pumped with the left ventricles the admission that they didn't have any real answers, only the hope that if they kept writing others might point them to answers.

Shanxing says

I found reasons why I didn't want to enter a graduate program or the academic world in english or creative writing. I learned more about the colonial past of the islands in the Pacific and the unnamed continent. It made me think more about Chinese history from 1840 to 1949. The problematic of the expansionist language and culture. Also the burning question: how to live with snapping turtles, institutionalized or not? I like its frankness, prosaicness, attention to often neglected details of things. Self-awareness is the first step towards social transformation. Though the detachment of the theyness in teh text brings a kind objectivity into the exposition, the total absence of I and We does not seem to help initiate or sustain action. Is it necessary for the transformation to be manifested in the structure of the poem? Is it possible? How can it be done?

P. says

Spahr articulates her confusion in a clear way and methodically, readably unpacks the experience of trying to figure something out so large and interconnected with everything else that it is nearly impossible. A narrative of describing and cataloging the symptoms of racism, classism, sexism, and terrorism. Highly recommended.

which lena says

appreciated reading this to give context to her later work ; don't necessarily recommend it as a starting place.

Steve says

<http://thiscruellestmonth.blogspot.co...>, <http://amyking.org/blog/?p=349>

jeremy says

september 7, 2008

dear they,

thank you for writing their book and for writing it in the way they did

some really enjoyed it especially toward the middle when some began noticing the diseased cells entering their own blood some thought they would like to enjoy all books every single book and all names every single name not in the same way but in a similar way where the enjoyment is related to noticing diseased cells entering their own blood

like when some see the name of a writer too conservative in form or a writer too conservative in feeling or a writer too conservative in lifestyle or a writer too conservative in other respects to be much liked these days by those who are the most fun to hang out with well some would like to think hey this writer who is a writer too conservative in form or a writer too conservative in feeling or a writer too conservative in lifestyle or a writer too conservative in other respects is not so bad and trying to make something neat and enjoyable and useful and even if it is in some sense complicit with capital hey when is that not the case and hey isn't it not really that writer who is to blame exactly not because of their parents exactly or their genes exactly but rather the larger forces that have bequeathed them a world of experiences and also the other two the parents and the genes might count somewhat also

some think it's maybe right to think of another writer who wrote a number of books in the 1970s that explained how thoroughgoing those types of larger forces are and how in fact nothing is bequeathing them a world of experiences but how in fact they are rather created out of that world of experiences bequeathed not to them but in general by those larger forces and how finally limited their ability to recognize or resist those forces finally is well some think it's maybe right to think of this writer who wrote a number of books in the 1970s when some dislike or dismiss or bark at or even just have a very slight irritated reaction to a person even when that person is a writer too conservative in form or a writer too conservative in feeling or a writer too conservative in lifestyle or a writer too conservative in other respects especially because oftentimes some dislike or dismiss or bark at or even just have a very slight irritated reaction to not the person or to the work but sometimes just to the name of the writer too conservative in form or too conservative in feeling or too conservative in lifestyle or too conservative in other respects because of their belief in a particular idea or group that some think lowers the world's ok-ness or because their work affirms in a clear way a particular idea or group that some think lowers the world's ok-ness or because their work affirms in a not very clear way a particular idea or group that some think lowers the world's ok-ness or because their work does not

disaffirm in a clear way a particular idea or group that some think lowers the world's ok-ness or because their work does not disaffirm in a not very clear way a particular idea or group that some think lowers the world's ok-ness or because of their belief in a vague idea or group or a constellation of vague ideas or groups that some think lowers the world's ok-ness or because their work affirms in a clear way a vague idea or group or a constellation of vague ideas or groups that some think lowers the world's ok-ness or because their work affirms in a not very clear way a vague idea or group or a constellation of vague ideas or groups that some think lowers the world's ok-ness or because their work does not disaffirm in a clear way a vague idea or group or a constellation of vague ideas or groups that some think lowers the world's ok-ness or because their work does not disaffirm in a not very clear way a vague idea or group or a constellation of vague ideas or groups that some think lowers the world's ok-ness

but that way of thinking about the writer who wrote a number of books in the 1970s and about the names of those writers too conservative in form or too conservative in feeling or too conservative in lifestyle or too conservative in other respects should not function as an excuse because without disliking or dismissing or barking at or even just having a very slight irritated reaction to certain things that lower the world's ok-ness those things might be forgotten or exacerbated or considered too regular to be worth barking at so maybe some should bark at those writers too conservative in form or too conservative in feeling or too conservative in lifestyle or too conservative in other respects and bark at their work and bark at their names or maybe some should sleep with those writers or marry them or date them or have a baby with those writers but maybe some should ignore those writers and seem cool when in close proximity to those writers so that those writers will want to be more like them and in that way by being cool some are making the world a better place with less capital more trees

sincerely,
some

january 20, 2009

dear they,

they felt this way but also felt that they probably should not feel this way or should not feel good about feeling this way at least

sincerely,
some

april 12, 2009

dear they,

some sit here in a classroom discussing a thinker from the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s who claims to read the work of the thinkers from a country across the Atlantic with lots of thinkers from the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s in a simple and compelling way but some think this might not matter and some think this might matter a whole lot and some think that it might only matter if some leave this classroom and stand in the street wearing many many layers of different colored clothing and ask the passing streetwalkers whether there is

anything to be done with these thinkers or these items of clothing while slowly removing the many many layers of different colored clothing piece by piece

some would like to draw you a picture of the suffocating and the despair at the failure of sitting in classrooms in order to be ready to sit in other classrooms and of sitting in classrooms in order to be ready to sit in the same classroom again in the near future, perhaps somewhat closer to the front

sincerely,
some

Lauren says

If I were going to write something, some thing about this book I would want to use "fragmentation, quotation, disruption, disjunction, agrammatical syntax, and so on" but I'm not sure. sure I'm sure. the surety I feel is beyond.

The repetitions of phrases that Spahr uses sometimes resemble incantations, sometimes make one dizzy because of the circular whirlpool directions they take.

It's hard to say that I like so so much this book but I do say it hard. It has lots of things about islands, the internet bombs, war, hearts, and the inability of language to suffice yet its persistence in attempting to map consciousness even in the faces of horrors, even in the faces of joys.

Rosalind Grush says

sure.

Drew says

The Transformation is part cultural history, part philosophical treatise, part political diatribe, part confessional lyric, and part poetic manifesto. This unflinching exploration of the inherently equivocal nature of the self, the community, and culture is filled with the best kind of doubt – the kind that circles question after question, without becoming mired in hopelessness. There's a brilliant tenderness in the way that Spahr out the flaws in our human logic:

"...claiming the being human of the space in the palm of their writing hand, in that space that their little and ring fingers made when they held a pen, the space that when they were learning to write in first grade they had been forced to fill with a small cool marble so as to learn the proper way to hold a pencil."

Andy says

Spahr's novel is intelligent, moving, thoughtful, crucial. It's the story of the change in her writing that led to *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs*. Told almost entirely in the third person plural, it's the story of a three-person relationship that moves to Hawaii in the late '90s. There "they" meet with a series of contradictions and absent places: their roles as low-grade pawns in the post-grad employment machine, which is at the same time a vast system reproducing cultural imperialism in a colonized place; the ecology, alien to them but also invasive as regards the island; the lack of social support for the kind of sexual relationship they've undertaken; the foregrounding of the impossibility of ranking issues of class, race, gender, and aesthetic commitments. It's the story of their subsequent move to another colonized set of islands (New York), and the effects of 9/11 and the beginning of the "War on Terror" on every aspect of their lives. Most of all, it's a story about discovering vulnerabilities, at first imposed upon the "they" of the book, and finally sought after in the consciousness that only the opening of themselves to all these contradictions, difficulties and dangers can make possible a writing that may help develop a life worth being called human in the midst of social, cultural, economic and political crisis.

I'm generally on the lookout for "Vulnerablist" writing, and this is a magnificent part of that canon.

Erin Zwiener says

An experimental triumph. The course of reading this book changed the way I think about pronouns, eponyms, and repetitive language. You follow an overthinker's mental process as she tries to make sense of race, class, sexuality, and 9/11, and knowing all of those complications, how to write about the world. The last few pages broke my heart in the best sort of way.

Erin says

I loved this book - esp. how she layers repetitions in order to get at the constantly shifting, murky waters of ethnic politics in the islands.

cristiana says

a friend told me that there some notable female poets who are writing memoirs...another contemporary female poet's book is by jennifer moxley.

the opening chapter delves into spahr's "unusual" live-in relationship w/ two other poets. the writing is strong and clear and provocative, and idiosyncratically, spahr's "style."

so far, so good.

Farren says

UGH I don't want to talk about it.

Ginger Brooks says

"The gray matter at the back of their brain told them to move to the islands in the Atlantic because the islands were known for their perversions and various sexualities and they wanted to live someplace known for its perversions and various sexualities. The gray matter at the back of the brain wanted to move to the place that self-identified as a place of complicated sexuality, a place for people who liked to be getting in and out of various beds in various different ways. A place that celebrated different beds and different ways of bedding down and around. The islands of the Atlantic, were full of perversions of all sorts and the stories told about the people of the islands had all the genders in all the different combinations, even the ones beyond the two that so defined their culture at this moment. They liked this."

i am reading this while coming back to brooklyn from a couple weeks of lesbian separatist camp where i met someone who lives in hawai'i, where most of the thinking in this book takes place

i am reading this at a time when i don't want to be in new york, while i am seeking out a new place

H says

Flora and fauna grow next to and around each other without names. Humans add the annotation. (13)

What was called the maracuja, the passiflora, the passionflower, they called the huehue haole. Huehue is the name of a climber native to the islands. Haole is the word that is used to describe some of them in this story, people who arrive from somewhere else. In the world of plants it is also used to describe a particularly noxious and invasive species. (13-14)

And so perhaps it is a story of coming to an identity, coming to realize that they not only had a gender that was decided for them without their consent and by historical events that they had not even been alive to witness, but they also had a race and a sexuality that was decided for them without their consent and by historical events that they had not even been alive to witness and they just had to deal with this. So it is also a story of finding an ease in discomfort. And a catalogue of discomfort. (22)

There was an indigenous bird, the kolea, that summered on the continent and wintered on the island. It was often called the haole bird because it came to the island, got fat, and then returned to the continent. (31)

The poet admitted that they hated the university also. But, the poet added, the university was the only place that ever invited them to read and when they read at the university, mainly haoles showed up to listen, so there they were once again, the poet said with some resignation, reading to haoles. (42)

They had worked on this getting a job in the complex day in and day out for so long because at the time they

had felt that working for the complex was somehow less coercive than most jobs because it didn't really involve selling things or making things for people to buy but also because they had at the time believed that education was transformation, believed that reading was a good thing, believed in literature's power to comfort, to reform, to stir the emotions, to offer guidance. They thought they were doing good by working in the complex. That they could be a little less guilty, maybe even a little more innocent, than if they worked in advertising or in the military-industrial complex. (56)

When reading this work, they could relax into it and let it take over all the parts of their brain. For some reason they could not understand, writing that used fragmentation, quotation, disruption, disjunction, agrammatical syntax, and so on entered into their body and changed it. (64)

Sort of how Frankenstein's creature had been from the monstrous but was no longer of the monstrous after they learned to read by looking through a peephole. (66)

There was no way that the expansionist language could carry all the local knowledge because the expansionist language was only able to be expansionist because it claimed to be universal, neutral, objective, because it did not name the winds so specifically. (98)

When they talked about poetry and the island with their friends, they could often be heard declaiming to anyone who would listen that nature poetry was the most immoral of poetries because it showed the bird, often a bird that like themselves had arrived from afar, and not the bulldozer. (107)

They needed writing. They needed poetry because it reshaped their mind, because it resorted things in different, sometimes beautiful, sometimes troubling patterns. They especially needed poetry to think with others, to think with the traditions of the island, to think beside them and near them but not as part of them. (115)

Remembering the ocean, by which they meant remembering the devastation of the ocean that had happened in the last twenty years, they thought again about place, about the responsibilities of writing to place. And thus they continued to circle around and around in their thinking and the sun shone down and their skin sometimes tanned and their skin sometimes burned. (116)

Their brain ignored that the islands in the Atlantic also had a history where people came from afar and set up their own form of government, an inefficient and unfair one. Their brain pretended as if they were no longer colonizers on the islands in the Atlantic but instead were immigrants. (124)

The ability to recognize one's self as lost and belonging with the others in the lostness, this is what made the place matter, what brushed off on them and made them matter and everyone around them matter also. (128)

They did this because they saw poetry as a way to think about the linguistic imprecision that so defined their live after the buildings collapsed. (184)

They wrote poems in which they remembered the ocean and then they would fly on planes that spewed out the contrails that were increasing the cirrus coverage and thus contributing significantly to warming to read these poems to small audiences who already were concerned with the ocean and did not need the reminder. (204)

And in order for there to be a bombing there had to be a we and a they, an us and a them. So it was a time of troubled and pressured pronouns. (205)

They wanted to be they the way that humans might be they with a dog and a dog they with humans, intimately together yet with a limited vocabulary. . . . They felt they could not allow themselves to be an us. That they had to be a they. (207)

They realized at this moment that they had to stop making maps that were limited by their horizontal or vertical axes. Or charts that started with two options and then spread from there. They need a new sort of conceptualization that allowed for more going astray than any map they had ever seen. (211)

and says

i took this book on vacation with me, not knowing what the hell it was about. my girlfriend and i were going through something like an open relationship love triangle crisis, at the time. when i got to the second part of this book, i realized it was about love triangles and how radical they are. there's some good news. i read the book. vacation ended. my girlfriend left me for the other dude. i said "fuck what's radical, this sucks." afterwords i said "fuck this book, it sucks." i changed my rating from 5 to 1 star(s). it's an objective way to review the book.

Sarah says

Stylistically similar to Lydia Davis, but with John McPhee's attunement to nature and Juliana Spahr's own characteristic lyricism embedded with colonial critique and poststructuralist inquiry. A story that is also a meditation that is also a poem that is also a theoretical essay--incredibly poignant and beautiful. Also manages to make me super anxious about ice caps melting and my decision to get an MFA and polyamorous relationships and the United States' bulk collection of personal metadata in one fell swoop, which must be some kind of accomplishment.

Jacob Wren says

They found themselves questioning ambiguity and its presumed neutrality in their work.

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