


Mark Tardi



Vernacular Architecture: Posthumanist Lyric Speakers in Elizabeth Willis's *Address*

As Rosi Braidotti has observed, “[f]rom the politics to the poetics of the feminist voices—new spaces of enunciation are opened to us—new, different, and differing ways of speaking” (208). Elizabeth Willis’s award-winning fifth book of poetry *Address* is just such space: a collection teeming with plurality, inhabited by poisonous plants and witches, tornados and forecasts, bees and blacklists—which enacts Braidotti’s remarks and adds hearing and seeing into the mix. The economical one-word title, *address*, is a term Willis leverages to activate multiple meanings throughout the book, to animate poetic dark matter. The concept of address invites the reader to consider various questions: from where does the lyric poem speak? To whom? How do we locate or navigate such a profound “molecularization of the self” amidst the instability of our current times (Braidotti 16)? When asked about the plethora of references and forms that appear in her book, Willis herself responded in an interview, “I’m not interested in being merely citational or allusive; I want to build a new architecture out of the ones I inherit” (Hill). This impulse to “build a new architecture” is evident even in the book’s design, which literally enumerates plurality as each page number is framed by ripples or echoes in a trio of half-parentheses, like so:)))

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The primary concern of this essay is Willis’s authorial strategy in presenting the lyric subjects of her poems, which toggle between the micro- and macro-scales of self and world, human and nonhuman, invisible and imaginary, biological and alchemical, private and political. To apply Braidotti’s terms, Willis’s work stands as an example of a feminist nomadic poetics, “blurring boundaries without burning bridges” (15) and within her alternative cartographies, her poetry offers “points of exit from the debris of the posthumanist universe” (279). Willis’s concern with hazy borders,

a multitude of off-ramps, and forms of address is consonant with Braiddotti's view of feminist nomadic poetics: "A related feature of this style is the mixture of speaking voices or modes" (37). As we will see, Willis deploys disruptions of voice and syntax for various effects, one of which is to (re)create a poetics of socio-historical becoming, braided with undoing; or, as Willis succinctly writes, "[w]hen the ghost is on you, / you don't even see it happen" (23).

From the beginning, the titular opening poem functions akin to an epigraph for the entire book, as it foregrounds a dynamic poetic landscape:

I is to they
as river is to barge
as convert to picket line
sinker to steamer
The sun belongs to I
once, for an instant
The window belongs to you
leaning on the afternoon (1)

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Thus, Willis introduces her readers to a lyric subject that is nomadic and diffuse—"I is to they / as river is to barge"—where everything glides upon fluid but unsatisfiable syllogistic relations, simultaneously singular and plural, subject and object, consciousness and materiality, exemplifying what Trinh T. Minh-ha has termed writing "to become, intransitively" (19). Words such as "convert" or "sinker" carry multiple meanings or causal possibilities: is *convert* a religious or ideological position/person? A verb noting a kind of transaction? Is *sinker* nautical cartography in opposition to steamer, a boat? Or a specific pitch in baseball, a pitch that relies on gripping two particular seams of the ball to produce a downward spin? "The sun belongs to I" could be seen as ending in a purposeful ungrammaticality; or "I" could be a pun on "eye" and the sun—part of a duo or analogy; "I" could even be a conversion of Roman numerals, with "once, for an instant" offering synonyms or a definition. As Abigail Licad argues in her piece on *Address*,

[f]urther combinations of liquid syntax between antecedents and object pronouns, and the prolific use of the possessive prepositions "of," and "to," as well as the word "belong," collapse any hierarchy syllogistic structures purport by undermining subject-object dichotomies. Finally, the metaphorical barrier represented by a transparent "window" can be read as a liminal point between public and private spheres, public and private speech, between social and personal concerns. (Licad)

As the book progresses and poems accrue, the slippery pronouns and pressurized verbs in Willis's poems not only construct a complicated feminist

critique of (historical) representations of women, but may also be giving voice to ghosts, hills, months or shoes. As early as the second piece, "Take This Poem," the imperative form of *take* is put in considerable tension, as a directive in domestic, social, and political contexts as well as an act of aggression, defense, or frustration (perhaps recalling Johnny Paycheck's famous 1977 country song, "Take This Job And Shove It"). Beginning with the title, the reader is implored to take a vertiginous and compounding catalogue of objects, which range from common household items to geological masses or events.

Take this bowl
 this kettle, this
 continental plate
 Take, if you will,
 this shallow topsoil
 above my bedrock
 This swingset
 above the topsoil
 this raven
 from my hair (2)

Willis's poem flows from common images (a bowl or kettle) to striking ones (e.g., the pun of a "continental plate"), and at times the poem arrests the mantra-like momentum by surprising the reader with the implications of certain expressions or lines, such as "this raven / from my hair." Perched atop the speaker's head, the well known Poe-inflected image of the raven violates personal space and the reader becomes implicated in a potential act of aid, challenging passivity. Lines like "Take this patience / and burn it to the ground" or "Take the low road / out into the sunset" (4)—while reminiscent of the humor used in poetic conceits from earlier eras, e.g., Shakespeare's sonnet 130, "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun"—similarly exhort the reader to act. Moreover, an obvious (and potentially violent) political dimension is visible in the demand to "[t]ake it out back / And take it / to the people / Take Florida / . . . Ohio / . . . Wisconsin / . . . Missouri" (3), with "it" in this case referring to fight, and the "taking" of various states to the winner-take-all format of the American Electoral College system for presidential elections.

Put another way, Willis's lyrical subject could be understood as "a collection of diversified, non-linear developments and potentially conflicting experiences, an aggregate of variables" (Adamiak 133). These subjects maneuver within the myriad complexities of our contemporary moment: for instance, jolts to the body politic (as discussed in poems such as "Black-list" or "This Is Not a Poem about Katherine Harris") or (re)considerations

of institutional memory via notions of witchcraft (particularly in the poem “The Witch” and, again, in “Blacklist”). Thus, “[t]he sun belongs to I” could be read as a distillation of Braidotti’s version of the nomadic subject, where our planet and solar system is a posthumanist Heliopolis, albeit one which Willis is careful not to romanticize, as poems such as “Poisonous Plants of America,” “Still Life with Tornado,” or “A Species is an Idea (2)” demonstrate. Anthony Caleshu sees such rhetorically elusive lyric subjects as an important feature in the work of a cohort of contemporary North American poets of the same generation, including, besides Willis,

Julianna Spahr, Lisa Robertson, Mark McMorris, [and Peter Gizzi]. It’s the [poetic] air of abstracted subjects and personality—an anecdotal and yet impersonal (and plural) “I” that makes for a montage of selves and experiences, for poems that are aurally enhanced and tangibly descriptive, poems that transcend context by multiplying meaning within a tradition that appropriates and subverts its (re)written language. (xiv)

Caleshu’s “plural ‘I’” shares similarities to Willis’s use of the third-person singular in a pairing of longer poems which establish contours of intimacy and familiarity rather than detachment. The poetic diptych presents a feminist critique of how the figure of the witch has been represented throughout the centuries—“The Witch” appears early in the volume; “Blacklist” is the penultimate poem—and the two are linked by more than their approximate page-length or positioning in the collection. Together, they function more like quantum entanglements, with one continually and nomadically affecting the other. The shared thematic and formal concerns are evident: they both operate as poetic litanies, with “The Witch” offering a catalogue of pseudo-definitions, historic “causes” or supposed characteristics, and “Blacklist” locating and enumerating an extensive cast of historical figures with whom witchcraft or bewitchment could be associated. Admittedly, however, some of the associations are quite tongue in cheek. For instance, when Willis writes in “The Blacklist” that “Charles Olson worked for FDR,” “Robert Creeley voted for McGovern,” or “Frank O’Hara conceived ‘Personism’ as a defense of witchcraft” (58), the implication is that political progressivism and (support of) poetic activities are a form of dark arts, exactly the sort of dangerous behavior that could be added to the alleged attributes of witches.

With “The Witch,” Willis echoes the discourse of Robert Burton’s famous *Anatomy of Melancholy*. Lines such as “A witch will gaze wistfully at the glitter of a clear night” (19), “A witch makes her world of air, then fire, then the planets. Of cardboard, then ink, then a compass” (20), or “I have personally known a nervous young woman who often walked in her sleep. // Isn’t there something witchlike about a sleepwalker who wanders through the house with matches?” (22) bear more than a striking stylistic resemblance to any number of entries in Burton’s compendium. Consider, for example:

"Primary causes are the heavens, planets, stars, &c., by their influence (as our astrologers hold) producing this and such like effects" (178) or

This is likewise evident in such as walk in the night in their sleep, and do strange feats . . . The like effects almost are to be seen in such as are awake: how many chimeras, antics, golden mountains and castles in the air do [witches] build unto themselves? (216)

But Willis's duet poetically also builds on the pioneering work of feminist scholars Carolyn Merchant and Silvia Federici. In her influential study *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*, Merchant explores the horrific violence, injustice, and oppression visited upon women once the spurious accusation (*witch!*) was hurtled and blame assigned, and where both nature and women prompt subjugation (127). Yet the absurdist characteristics delineated to help us locate or "address" a potential witch—both in Willis's poem and in history—are disrupted by the interjection of lines that flatly describe some of the precise forms of violence that Merchant and Federici's work has highlighted, such as: "An executioner may find the body of a witch insensitive to an iron spike" (21) or: "The skin of a real witch makes a delicate binding for a book of common prayer" (22). In both of these examples, the humanity of the victim is erased and they themselves reduced to an object, mere body or skin, and tenderness reserved for iron spikes or book bindings.

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In "Blacklist," Willis deploys a flattened aphoristic style reminiscent of David Markson's work, where the number of historical figures aggregates across centuries. The characteristics and definitions activated in "The Witch" migrate to "Blacklist," where they are given the names and faces of actual people, many of whom are poets and writers—such as Lorine Nie-decker, Samuel Beckett, James Baldwin, Simone Weil, Orson Welles, Tallulah Bankhead, Gloria Steinem, Sappho, Billie Holiday, Hilma af Klint, and many others—as well as victims of the infamous Salem witch trials, such as Martha and Giles Corey, or Rebecca Nurse. "Blacklist" takes the dehumanized skin or bodies in "The Witch" and locates them in a plurality of historical figures; as a result, the importance and influence of the witch itself becomes nomadic, moving across history and into (or around) any number of very real people, and also enveloping the reader. Moreover, some of the Burtonian language from "The Witch" migrates to "Blacklist," with Caleshu's "plural 'I'" in the mix: "I have personally known witches whose voices seemed to rise out of a hole in the earth as if it were a mouth" (60). Braidotti is again helpful in understanding Willis's poetic diptych, when the philosopher argues that

[j]ust as new language is born of patient frequentations, caring and frequent encounters with the old, so equally history is not a four-lane high way but a discontinuous

line, where progress is often achieved by twisting and turning, repeating and going back. History as repetition is a genealogical cycle, the careful sifting through of old notions, to improve them, to make them less regulative, more beautiful. (278)

In the context of the two witch poems, we can indeed see history as “a discontinuous line” prone to repetitions and reconfigurations, although the “old notions” may be less “beautiful” and more sharply criticized—*illuminated*, in multiple senses of the term. Moreover, the nomadic drift of the lyric subjects operates to differing degrees across the entire collection: “The Witch” and “Blacklist” have a clearly delineated theme; other poems are more disjointed, a lyric of smooth shards. The short poem “Flow Chart” can certainly be read as alluding to (and hyper-condensing) the more-than-200-page book-length poem of the same name by John Ashbery, with the Ashberian hallmarks of absent punctuation, ironic enjambments, and hair-pin shifts in register. Willis’s poem opens with: “You take the sun personally / like a coin in a purse” (16). As in her earlier “Take This Poem,” Willis leverages minute fluctuations in how the reader might understand the verb *take*, with the opening line suggesting an internationalization of emotion, but the subsequent line rendering the meaning more literal—and an absurd form of theft. While Willis has noted that she is “not interested in being merely citational or allusive” (Hill), there are no shortages of either in *Address*. Poems such as “Valet of the Shadow of Death,” “Ruskin,” or “This Is Not a Poem about Katherine Harris” pull the reader off the page—at least in part—by bringing to mind, respectively, a biblical psalm, a nineteenth-century polymath, and a Florida Republican; in addition, these resonances and people nomadically wander into Willis’s poetry.

With “Poisonous Plants of America” (17–18), the reader is offered an alphabetical list poem which enumerates exactly what the title suggests. Alphabetizing, it begins with “April fool,” already signaling irony, which is apt. The names of the plants carry additional connotations or sound like euphemisms for genitalia, body parts, and sexual acts. “Bog-onion,” “Flying saucers,” “Lady’s-thumb,” “Moonseed,” “Naked lady” (perhaps the most obvious), “Puncture-vine,” “Snakegrass,” “Stinking Willie,” “Swallow-wort,” and “Wonder berry” all have sexual connotations, often the sort of terminology employed by teens. Thus, the poem could be (partially) read as a sophisticated exploration of *la petite mort* for the post-humanist age, linguistically conflating or converging plant-life with human sexuality, like Walt Whitman’s “Urge and urge and urge / Always the procreant urge of the world” (“Song of Myself”). But it also echoes what Willis writes in the previous poem, “Flow Chart”: “Even the warmth of a poem / suggests a proximate danger / Wild mushrooms” (16). This sense is amplified by the inclusion of “Witches’ thimbles” as the second-to-last

plant in Willis's list. Intimacy and the attendant collapsing of boundaries between the human and nonhuman, the exterior and interior, history and the present are inextricable from risk. The mushroom, after all, can nourish us, offer us a psychedelic journey, or kill us; depending upon who is looking at it, the witches' thimble can be seen as a poison, as well as to an imagined target of witchcraft or the witch herself, vulnerable to life-threatening public paranoia. In *When Species Meet*, Donna Haraway takes the notion of the "plural 'I'" a step further:

I love the fact that human genomes can be found in only about 10 percent of all the cells that occupy the mundane space I call my body; the other 90 percent of the cells are filled with the genomes of bacteria, fungi, protists, and such, some of which play in a symphony necessary to my being alive at all, and some of which are hitching a ride and doing the rest of me, of us, no harm. I am vastly outnumbered by my tiny companions; better put, I become an adult human being in company with these tiny messmates. To be one is always to *become with* many . . . I love that when "I" die, all these benign and dangerous symbionts will take over and use whatever is left of "my" body, if only for a while, since "we" are necessary to one another in real time. (3–4)

In light of Haraway's writing, the "plural 'I'" is not just a matter of grammatical exertion in a poem or a particular authorial presentation of the lyric subject (in other words, a language game): instead, it is the plurality of the body, reflected in the multiplicity of language(s), and the rampant cellular interconnectedness of any given self—human or nonhuman—is the "symphony necessary to . . . being alive at all," Whitman's "procreant urge" made visible and celebrated. In a very real sense, this symbiotic relationship is a socio-historical becoming, braided with undoing.

Socio-historical critique is also embedded in the sparsely economical list poem, another aspect of the formal strategy deployed by poets such as Willis to activate rhetorically elusive lyric subjects. This is also visible, for example, in "Dumb Duke Death (for Dick Cheney)" by Willis's contemporary, Lisa Jarnot, from her 2003 collection *Black Dog Songs*. In her poem, Jarnot limits herself to words beginning with the letters C or D, and between two and five letters long:

down dire
death day
dim dale
ding dong
dip down
dame chase
cheap date
dance dodge
do dive
dull duck (19)

Like Willis's "Poisonous Plants of America," Jarrot's "Dumb Duke Death" is deeply ironic. Consisting entirely of simple two-word lines, the poem is dedicated to the person who, at the time, was the sitting Vice President of the United States. As with Willis's poems, the phrasing at times veers into juvenile invective, with pairs such as "dim dale," "ding dong," and "dull duck" presumably accentuating a perceived lack of intelligence in Cheney. Lastly, both poems refuse to offer the reader the access point of personal pronouns, and make no attempt at creating a traditional lyric speaker. Instead, the poems traffic in a peculiar kind of aggregating staccato, phrasing that darts out, but stumbles because of its economy.

In Jarrot's *Black Dog Songs*, an entire sequence of poems is ironically dedicated to different key figures in the George W. Bush administration, including Bush himself. Similar rhetorical acrobatics used for political critique can be found in Willis's "This Is Not a Poem about Katherine Harris," the longest piece in *Address*, placed squarely at the center of the book. Although the lyric "I" in the poem is not plural, the political positions and modes of address that Katherine Harris proffers (albeit as Willis's construct-*cum*-speaker) unmask a wide array of logical fallacies and ideological "flip-flopping"—to borrow the term George W. Bush so effectively popularized within American political discourse:

Homelessness has been so well
fixed that everyone I know
has at least one somewhere else,
a home in the sand
and one in the bush. (36)

As the poem progresses, Harris-as-speaker's buffoonish attempts to clarify her various political stances result in nomadic fallacies: non sequiturs, post hoc ergo propter hoc, or arguing off the point. For instance, she feels the need to state that her support of "Stop Sex Trafficking" Act was not intended to stop all human sexual activity, and also notes particulars such as: "When I came out against terrorism / I was not 'coming out'" (34); she also aims to "Protect Our Children" from the perils of affordable health care and "the protracted / violence of a liberal education" (36). Willis enjambs lines for comedic effect as well, pointing out that Harris was "uncompromising [in her] syndicated / cleavage" (33). The rhetorical posture within the poem recalls comedian Stephen Colbert's satirical rightwing talk show, *The Colbert Report*, where the host's blowhard character would parody provocative conservative talking points in the service of upending stereotypes: "Tonight, *shocking* news from Spain! Someone was caught on camera . . . working!" (Colbert).

For Braidotti there is no “separat[ing] the question of style from political choices” (16), and Willis is in complete agreement: “I don’t think there’s an ‘outside of politics’ . . . There are political implications to every choice you make, and that’s part of what constitutes a poetics” (Turner). Thus, the formal and stylistic strategy to nomadically transmute the lyric subject throughout Willis’s collection is a continuously feminist one:

Women can see the light where men just stare into empty space, watching the downfall of the phallic monuments and documents they had erected by and for themselves. Women have something to say—failing to say it would amount to an historical abortion of the female subject. (Braidotti 130)

Whether it is to reflect on the centuries-long oppression of women as “witches,” to find sexual humor and to critique America’s puritanical patriarchal history via poisonous plants, to reveal a Florida politician’s words and deeds as absurd or empty, or to offer a Whitmanian pluralistic “I,” Willis’s lyric subject is corporeally, formally, geographically, historically, politically, and temporally nomadic. Poetry, Willis claims, is “an ancient technology,” which has “a kinship with both legal language and scripture,” the effect of which is to shape reality (Turner). In other words, it is “like a thought becoming / its own money” (Willis 23), a conscious negotiation of liminal spaces where the abstract can become concrete and then abstract again. In aggregate, the continual reconfigurations of the lyric subject act as a rejection of rigidity. To quote from Braidotti again, “feminists and other nomadic intellectuals are the strange angels of a failed system, stumbling to a new age” (279–80). The *address* in Willis’s book is simultaneously a forwarding one and a return-to-sender stamp; a reality-making speech act and a distrust of imbuing any one subject—human or nonhuman—with too much authority.

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