

# **American (posit): Reforming a Theory of Text**

by

**Ashley David**

**(Under the Direction of Edward Pavlić, Reginald  
McKnight, )**

## **Abstract**

*American (post)* both explores and demonstrates a social justice application for Roland Barthes's process of traversal from work to text. By dispersing authorship, highlighting a multiplicity of perspectives, and cultivating critical thinking among a diverse audience of participants, this creative-scholarly project enacts a performance of theory, which points to and begins to cultivate unrealized democratic potential within the Americas and for literary/artistic practice. Informed and shaped by interdisciplinary foci and anchors, this vein of research and cultural production disrupts binary oppositions such as black/white, male/female, rich/poor, artist/audience, and us/them and contributes answers to the question, "How and when can art empower people and catalyze social change?" In doing so, it posits an aesthetics of social justice and an expression of democracy predicated on conscious collision and collusion.

An interdisciplinary creative-critical manuscript comprises the dissertation. This manuscript explores and performs the project's theoretical underpinnings; the socio-historical context that delineates the methodological field in which manifesting a theory of text becomes significant; the methodology through which manifesting a theory of text

becomes possible; and preliminary speculation about applications for a theory of text beyond *American (post)*.

The project, writ large, invites ongoing community participation through a web presence <<http://ashleydavid.com>> and additional trials of the theory in gallery and non-gallery installations of the 2D and 3D translation-objects, performances, and workshops.

INDEX WORDS: Roland Barthes, Text, Work, Catalyst, Poetry, Theory, Performance, Social Justice, Artscience, Poem, Visual Art, Democracy, America, American, Binary, Aesthetics, Poetics, Installation, Poetics, Lab, Experiment, Ethnography, Chance, Serendipity, Installation, Translation, Spect-actor

AMERICAN (POSIT): REFORMING A THEORY OF TEX

by

ASHLEY DAVID

B.A., Stanford University, 1988

M.A., New York University, 1997

M.F.A., University of Michigan, 2004

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by

ASHLEY DAVID

Major Professors: Edward Pavlić  
Reginald McKnight

Committee: Susan Rosenbaum  
Barbara McCaskill

Electronic Version Approved:

Maureen Grasso  
Dean of the Graduate School  
The University of Georgia  
May 2013

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Finally, with much gratitude for their contributions to my life, and with no small measure of sadness, I dedicate this effort to the memory of the several loved ones I lost during the project's genesis.

May all debts, though great, be settled. Peace.

—Ashley David  
Athens, Georgia  
April 2, 2013

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Residents "read" *American (post)* in-progress in Ashley David's studio.  
Open Studios at the Vermont Studio Center, June 2012.

*...the discourse on the Text should itself be nothing other than text, research, textual activity, since the Text is that social space which leaves no language safe, outside, nor any subject of the enunciation in position as judge, master, analyst, confessor, decoder. The theory of the Text can coincide only with the practice of writing.*

—Roland Barthes,  
“From Work to Text”



## **Welcome**

*American (post)* began with a question about “America” and “Americanness” and a trip to Havana, Cuba in May 2010. I wanted to crack open binary oppositions like us/them, north/south, black/white, good/bad, self/other, and right/wrong to illuminate the whole system that creates and perpetuates opposition. The exercise generated a formal experiment in poetry, which I am calling “plane-poems.” In turn, the plane-poems generated a translation experiment, which I am calling “translation-objects.” Installation of the “translation-objects” generated and modeled a context in which a theory of text could emerge as an infinitely replicable performance of conscious traversal from work to text. I did not anticipate this result when I boarded the plane in Miami for Havana, nor when I wrote the poems. Even when I translated the poems into things, I did not foresee a theory of text. Not until artists and writers from around the world and community members aged three to eighty participated in the first installation of *American (post)* did we manifest the theory, and moreover, did I realize that we had.

*American (post)* was designed to emerge at the mercy and whim of its foundational experiment in democratic potential. The project was not logically plotted to result in a pre-determined conclusion or product. Rather, its trajectory relied on my wholehearted exploration, via the scientific method, of the questions, “How can meaningful art emerge from the collaboration of aesthetic play and a commitment to social justice?” and “how can such a process help us realize democratic potential?” Such an exploration ultimately required me to leave genre allegiances behind. Along the way, I traversed not only genres

but also humanities disciplines, including literature, arts, philosophy, and anthropology, and I employed diverse methodologies culled from the arts and sciences to facilitate the journey.

The courage and impulse to make such leaps is derived in part from what I am calling a zeitgeist cloud. If zeitgeist is the spirit of the times, a zeitgeist cloud speaks to one's personal experience of the times.<sup>1</sup> I was raised in, and have been nurtured by, this cloud comprised of the work and personal examples of a diverse collection of writers, artists, and thinkers and by some key geo-cultural encounters. I conceive of these influences as a cloud because their influence, by the time it surfaces in *American (post)*, was not particularly conscious. Rather, the influence was akin to a cross between the experience of breathing and randomly colliding with serendipity and circumstance. By itself, the zeitgeist cloud would provide insufficient energy to fuel *American (post)*. Coupled, however, with my encounters with the everyday world around me and the beings who populate it—their experiences, their voices, their perspectives, and their conundrums—such collisions become significant and urgent enough to yield the base materials from which I could construct the initial work that forms the core of *American (post)*. Because UGA's policy requiring mandatory electronic publication of dissertations would preclude publication of this manuscript in literary markets, the remainder of this section has been withheld. For more information and to continue reading, please contact the author at [ashleydavid.com](http://ashleydavid.com). Thank you.

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<sup>1</sup> A zeitgeist cloud acknowledges that subjective experience (unless one occupies only dominant, unmarked categories) is informed and shaped by spirits, plural, rather than a singular spirit of the times. A zeitgeist cloud takes a “one size fits [few] but inflects many” zeitgeist and personalizes it such that an implicated subjectivity can begin to emerge consciously. Check out the zeitgeist cloud for *American (post)* in “Phenomena.”

## **Context**

Two sticky conundrums launched the thinking about and creative impulses for *American (post)*. On the one hand, my life has been niggled by birthright colliding with personal experience. American, white, and privileged collides with the knowledge and experience that “American,” “white,” and “privileged” are somewhat arbitrary historical constructions enabled by coincidences of power; that they exist only as the dominant, unmarked halves of problematic binary oppositions; and that they guarantee nothing. On the other hand, my creative life has been niggled by a question of connection or lack thereof. Fundamentally democratic methodologies and ideas land on my pages as largely “inaccessible” poems—inaccessible because they are poems at all (and not, for example, television); because they elide a broad spectrum of culturally and historically disparate voices, aesthetics, and themes; because they do not consciously emerge from a literary trajectory or literary conversation; and because they confront and challenge reified social structures. The issue of (in)accessibility raises questions of relevance and of audience. I do not write poems to communicate, nor to represent, nor to witness, and I am therefore not particularly concerned with reaching an audience with a message of any sort. If anything, I write to transform inequity in favor of balance. Such a focus, however, seems out of whack with poems that require so much of their readers.

Thus, these two conundrums collide as a turf war between aesthetics and politics, between my ideas and impulses toward art/beauty and my compulsion to recognize and address social inequity. *American (post)* is my effort to marry these historically combative

partners in a conscious union that recognizes that whether or not the partnership is harmonious, the two are inextricably linked when consciously considered. By integrating aesthetic motivations and practices with political motivations and practices, I work toward one whole that accepts aesthetic and political motivations as mutually inclusive, concurrent, and inseparable and that posits the possibility for social transformation via aesthetic contexts.

Less than a project about the crafting of poems (or art or community action or academic discourse), *American (post)* uses various generic conventions to craft an experiment to explore the question: how might art catalyze conscious and comprehensive democracy? As such, *American (post)* is simultaneously an aesthetic enterprise (in several media) and a performance of theory (in the service of realizing democratic potential). A kind of singularity, operating across media, time, and space, *American (post)* taken as a whole may be conceptualized as a worm hole bridging aesthetics and politics. Often falsely conceived as oppositional and perhaps, parallel, universes, these binaries (and others like them) are subverted by practices designed to re-configure them as a whole facilitated and characterized by empowered and conscious human engagement. Because UGA's policy requiring mandatory electronic publication of dissertations would preclude publication of this manuscript in literary markets, the remainder of this section has been withheld. For more information and to continue reading, please contact the author at [ashleydavid.com](http://ashleydavid.com). Thank you.

## **Catalyst**

David Edwards begins his book *Artscience: Creativity in the Post-Google Generation* with the following assertion about the preeminent importance of catalysts.

Catalysts are indispensable. From the nudge that sends the nervous ballerina onto the stage to the enzyme that sparks cellular life, catalysts precipitate change that would otherwise not occur owing to some obstacle. Since obstacles exist, change—or innovation—would be impossible without catalysts (1).

Edwards' book is about “a remarkable kind of catalyst that sparks the passion, curiosity, and freedom to pursue—and to realize—challenging ideas in culture, industry, society, and research” (*Ibid.*) He calls this catalyst the “lab,” and he “envisaged it as an actual setting, a place for experiment, action, and movement in and between the arts and sciences” (3). Although it was not initially conceived as such, *American (post)* ultimately became this kind of catalyst. Simply put, *American (post)* became a lab in which and by which the audience was catalyzed to perform text as a conscious empowering act thereby transforming audience into spect-actors and thus, co-creators.

My initial foray into this territory was with a multimedia essay called “An Elegy: Fine Things, Flip-side(s) & Transformation” (David, “Elegy”), in which I invited the audience, both in a live academic conference setting and online, to co-create their experience of the piece, to traverse the work in real time to create their individual texts from it. I intended to empower the audience to enact the process of creating a text consciously from the work before them, and I encouraged them to have fun doing so. The piece was conceived as a performance of Roland Barthes's theory, which he explored in

“From Work to Text” (Barthes) and by which a work becomes a series of texts through a process of traversal as people encounter and “read” it. This theory acknowledges that readers bring subjective experience to a work and further, that via this subjective experience, readers collaborate to create a text from the work before them, that reading is a live act shaped by subjectivity and circumstance. As with “An Elegy: Fine Things, Flip-side(s) & Transformation,” *American (post)* begins from the proposition that readers can (and should) be empowered to, and that they must take responsibility for, creating their own texts from the work and world before them. *American (post)* endeavors to perform this theory more comprehensively than I was able to do in “An Elegy.”

By deriving an experiment for performing a Theory of Text, *American (post)* illustrates how a Theory of Text can illuminate whole (binary) systems and further, that it can re-order, at a minimum within the context of the experiment, power relationships that create and perpetuate opposition. Through the practice of “writing,” broadly defined as conscious engagement with a range of analogous activities, including writing and art making, *American (post)* nuances culturally based and propelled binaries such as black/white, male/female, rich/poor, north/south, us/them, right/wrong, nature/culture, self/other, and language/thing that characterize experiences and understandings of “America” and “Americanness.” A closer look at Barthes’s essay will help us understand how. In “From Work to Text,” Roland Barthes asserts that the move toward “interdisciplinarity” catalyzes what he calls a slide (as opposed to a break) toward “a relativization of the relations of reader, writer, and observer (critic)” (155-156). This slide creates “a new object, [...] the *Text*” (156.) Barthes then locates “Text” at the intersection

of seven propositions, which I now relate to and correlate with the propositions that inform and locate *American (post)*.

My foundational proposition modifies Barthes's first proposition to claim that text is relational, mobile, and generative; that this nexus has tremendous potential for transformation; and that this transformational text is performed when social actors collide consciously with work (whether it is language or materially or otherwise culturally based). In his first proposition, Barthes claims that a text is not "an object that can be computed" (156), and he lays out the principle distinction between work and text. Whereas a work is an object that can be "displayed," a text is a "methodological field" that must be "demonstrated," is a "process of demonstration" (157). For Barthes, the work is a physical object whereas the text "only exists in a movement of discourse, [...] is not a decomposition of the work, [...] *is experienced only in an action of production*. [...] As such] the constitutive movement [of text] is that of cutting across [...] the work, several works" (*Ibid.*). I expand the concept of text and its methodological field to include not only language but also analogous systems and phenomena of cultural production, specifically art. I am confident in making this move to broaden the methodological field because language is situated in, created by, and creates culture (Hymes, Duranti, et al.); because the vibrancy of language may be extended to include the vibrancy of things (Bennett); and because Barthes himself, in his sixth proposition, draws a parallel to a time when playing and listening to music "paralleled Text fairly closely" (162-163).

This move is further supported by Barthes's second proposition, which maintains that text "cannot be contained in a hierarchy, even in a simple division of genres, [...] that it] is always *paradoxical* (157-158). The potential to disrupt hierarchy is fundamental to

democracy. Thus, I make no effort to contain *American (post)*. It traverses genres with abandon, and they include ethnography, poetry, prose, creative writing, academic writing, art, performance, and community action. Each instance of work, generated in series and according to the requirements of the scientific method applied to the hypothesis that catalyzed *American (post)*, slides—sometimes concurrent with its creation and sometimes post-creation—into a new instance of text. This process parallels the action of text itself as delineated by Barthes’ third proposition. Because UGA’s policy requiring mandatory electronic publication of dissertations would preclude publication of this manuscript in literary markets, the remainder of this section has been withheld. For more information and to continue reading, please contact the author at [ashleydavid.com](http://ashleydavid.com). Thank you.



## **Potential**

Democracy is a great word, whose history [...] remains unwritten,  
because that history has yet to be enacted.

—Walt Whitman (*Democratic Vistas*, 960)

In a review published in *Black Diaspora Review* of an edited collection that included an essay I wrote on Toni Cade Bambara's novel, *The Salt Eaters*, Christopher Dennis writes, "David's reading of Bambara's novel is unique in that the underlying message is the need also to recognize and embrace human interconnectedness" (Dennis 21). In a fundamental way, Dennis misses my point. Although my underlying message is indeed concerned with human interconnectedness, following Bambara's lead, I extend the concept of interconnectedness beyond humans to include the planet and the universe. This concept of what I call in my essay, "everything/and wholeness," is comprehensive such that humans are only part of the everything/and whole, and importantly, they are not the center of the whole. However, Dennis is not alone, particularly in the West, in assuming a human preeminence. Western history and thought have been dominated, certainly since the Enlightenment, by a hierarchical concept with humans on top. We could claim origins of this hierarchy in the Old Testament (i.e. Genesis), with the caveat that god is the one entity that displaces humans from the top slot. I am not, however, concerned with origins of the hierarchy, but rather with toppling it for what Dennis summarizes in his review of my project as "trying to imagine a better, more harmonious, world for all of humanity" (*Ibid.*). I would nuance his reading to claim that I am concerned with a vision for a balanced

planet and universe with a decentered humanity. I stand firm in aligning my foundational interest, for all my work, with what I believe to have been Toni Cade Bambara's concern with an ongoing evolution of consciousness that comprehends and embraces everything/and wholeness.

This scope continues to prove itself to be overwhelming, notably because of its problematics of comprehension, as illustrated by the reception of Bambara's novel and in turn by my essay about it. Thus, for *American (post)*, I carve out a more immediately manageable terrain. I concern myself with a subset of obstacles ostensibly focused exclusively with humanity, and with "American" versions of humanity foregrounded. This decidedly humanity-focused subset circulates through the phenomenon of social injustice; the capacity of unrealized democratic potential to facilitate it; and the ways in which art might catalyze in its place, social justice and a more broadly realized concept (and practice) of democracy. It bears noting before I proceed, that although my scope for *American (post)* is overtly delineated (and limited) in this way, I believe that performing a theory of text is not analogously circumscribed. A theory of text has the potential to catalyze, not only a more conscious and comprehensive expression of democracy, but also conscious engagement with, and experience of, everything/and wholeness.

To understand what I mean by democratic potential, we must turn to Walt Whitman and John Dewey by way of Richard Rorty. In *Achieving Our Country*, Rorty notes a change on the U.S. left that begins in the 20<sup>th</sup> century wherein a faith and hope in U.S., "America" and "Americanness," propelled notably by theorists and theory (36), shifted away from action and its possibility toward a "spirit of detached spectatorship" (9-11). By contrast, as "prophets of [the American] civic religion, [Whitman and Dewey had]

offered a new account of what America was, in the hope of mobilizing Americans as political agents” (Rorty 15). Rorty delineates these two camps of the U.S. left as, respectively, the critical left (of the 20<sup>th</sup> century), what I’m calling spectators, and the progressive left (initially of the 19<sup>th</sup> century), what I’m calling spect-actors. He proposes that the spectators inhibit progress toward achieving the promise inherent in the experiment of U.S. democracy, and sees a return to the pragmatism exemplified by the progressive left and initiated by Whitman and Dewey, as our chief hope for achieving our country. Omar Swartz interprets Dewey’s idea of democratic promise and does the work for me to align it directly with a contemporary concept of social justice in the following manner:

Democracy, notes Dewey, is not limited to formal expressions of voting, as many citizens do every couple of years on this country. Rather, democracy is better and more fully understood as a *process*, a self-overcoming, a commitment to substantive equality, pluralism and a rejection of hierarchical privileges brought about by wealth, as well as by racism, sexism, and other evils. Democracy, in short, concerns social justice, a society in which everyone is included in the benefits and privileges of the social order and no one is treated as a second class human being (Swartz 253).

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## **Theory**

*American (post)* is not concerned with *representing* society to itself. Rather, it is concerned with *catalyzing* new possibilities for society. The project works to open up this new territory by making several moves simultaneously. It firstly creates an artistic experiment that empowers anyone (and everyone) who encounters it, regardless of cultural or linguistic fluency, to make it his/her own and/or to dismiss it. Rather than perpetuate the U.S. ethos of equality embodied by the Horatio Alger myth, wherein anyone can rise to the top, *American (post)* embraces the reality that, within the Americas, in practice, all (wo)men are *not* created equal, that this fact is inextricable from artistic and cultural production about “America.” It then posits that, through art, it may be possible to create an alternative reality and alternative practices, which consider, address, and posit alternatives for the whole system that creates and perpetuates this inequity. The project sheds light on power discrepancies and imbalances by systematically calling attention to them in the poems via content and poetics and second, by subsequently toppling the obstacles of access the language-based medium creates by translating the poems into objects and installing them in public settings where spectators are encouraged to become spect-actors. An aesthetics of social justice supports and informs these moves.

Following the lead of Arnold Berleant, who posits a “social aesthetic,” with which he asserts that “the connection of the aesthetic and the social may even provide the basis for a philosophy of culture (24), I link art to culture writ large. I am not at this time occupied with a philosophy per se, but I am occupied with questions (not answers) about

democratic potential, and thus with how

“an aesthetics of the arts [might] lead us beyond the arts” (*Ibid.*) via “a sequence of arts that proceeds from a simple, delimited art object, and its correlative response, to an integral aesthetic-social situation [...wherein] time enters into the art work explicitly and consciously, along with the appreciative observer, who is obliged to become a participant [who] activate[s] the environment by moving through it” (25).

I’ll add: by moving through it consciously as a co-creator of text.

Berleant conceptualizes such an aesthetics as contextual: “In contextual theory no single or dominant feature establishes an aesthetic situation. Instead, a number of factors combine into an inclusive situation” (26). Berleant’s factors include acceptance, perception, sensuousness, discovery, uniqueness, reciprocity, continuity, engagement and multiplicity (26-29). I will circle back to discuss these factors in a subsequent section because they align significantly with my staging and facilitation of the performance of a theory of text. Key to the present discussion, however, is the notion that Berleant’s factors, and the inclusive social situation they create, lead us to the conclusion that a “social aesthetics is, then, an aesthetics of situation” (30). My aesthetics of social justice is likewise, at its core, an aesthetics of situation, which is to say context. Moreover, this context is formed and informed by what Adrienne Rich terms, in her 2005 foreword to James Scully’s *Line Break: Poetry as Social Practice*, “a web of [...] social practices historically weighted with enormous imbalances of social power” (91). At the core of my own aesthetic is a parallel awareness of a context that includes social (in)justice and conscious collusion toward realization of democratic potential. I hope with my work, which proceeds from this aesthetics of social justice, to illuminate new possibilities for democracy and significant repercussions for art as a catalyst for democratic potential

experienced as social justice.

Because I am interested in what might result from an improbable—given our history of inequity—but potentially harmonious or balanced encounter, I invite disparate voices and experiences to sit at the same supper table. This table (or context) exists generally (exclusively?) within the frame of my work and is a context that some might argue could never exist in the real world. Rorty’s critical left and the right writ large, for example, would likely dismiss it, whereas Whitman and Dewey’s “hopeful” and Rorty’s “progressive” left would indeed embrace the possibility of such a dinner party. I derive this metaphorical supper table from my own zeitgeist cloud. In turn, it comprises the zeitgeist cloud that I create and install as *American (post)*.

Driven by a preoccupation with the forces of power and history that create, circumscribe, and perpetuate “us” and “them,” and that generally preclude conversations like the ones I construct with my poems and art, I have approached poetics and aesthetics in my work in terms of a potential for social justice aka democratic potential. This potential does not, however, deliver a pedagogical nor an activist promise. My goal has not been to create work that conveys information that may be consumed, nor work that is a rallying cry or a call to action. Rather, my goal is to create an aesthetics of social justice, which is concerned with the *potential* for and *performance* of social justice, even though it is not assigned the functional role of bringing it about.

I nonetheless believe in, and hope for, the capacity of art proceeding from an aesthetics of social justice to catalyze social justice. Joseph Beuys provided an excellent illustration for how aesthetics might catalyze a shift in consciousness that could lead to social justice when he proposed that the Berlin Wall be raised five centimeters for “better

proportions.” Trevor Stark brought this example to my attention in the exhibition catalog for “This Will Have Been: Art, Love & Politics in the 1980s,” when writing about artist, Martin Kippenberger. Stark sums up the example’s import in the following way: “for Beuys, by considering the wall aesthetically and raising it to conform to the canon of proportions, one dismantled its ideological effectiveness” (Stark 88). Beuys illustrates aptly the inherent power in aesthetic concerns and the actions they might motivate. To change the proportions of the wall is to change our ideological stance toward it because as its aesthetic sensibilities change, so, too, do our reified patterns of thinking about the object(s) in question.

Beuys did not think that art merely had the capacity to bring about social change; he considered it our only hope. For Beuys, “only art is capable of dismantling the repressive effects of a senile social system, [... and the] most modern discipline—Social Sculpture/Social Architecture—will only reach fruition when every living person becomes a creator, a sculptor, or architect of the social organism, [... in short, when] every human being is an artist” (Beuys 929). Importantly, Beuys was arguing for a broadening of the definition of “art and activities related to art” in order to realize its “evolutionary-revolutionary power” (*Ibid.*) in his manifesto for the “Fifth International” and “direct democracy.” *American (post)* widens the field, in the manner Beuys intended, specifically because it catalyzes, via a theory of text, spect-actors. Because UGA’s policy requiring mandatory electronic publication of dissertations would preclude publication of this manuscript in literary markets, the remainder of this section has been withheld. For more information and to continue reading, please contact the author at [ashleydavid.com](http://ashleydavid.com). Thank you.

## **Experiment**

*American (post)* began, before its experiment was conceived, because a dear friend, whom I had not seen in years, invited me to Havana, Cuba, where she has lived as a working artist for many years. She promised, “We can catch up, and I will introduce you to the inside circles of contemporary Cuban art.” How could I refuse? So, my brain conspired to make sense of “awesome invitation” + “need to create a dissertation project” + “interested in American binaries” + “broke,” and it came up with, “these variables = I should apply for a grant to launch my dissertation project in Havana as an exploration about American binaries.” In short, *American (post)* began in a context of serendipity and circumstance. Early in its development, however, I designed *American (post)* overtly as an experiment tied to a hypothesis that I intended to investigate to its logical ends and guided significantly by the scientific method. What began with, and continued to make good use of, serendipity also employed a formal rigor as dictated by the scientific method and the methodologies of the various media, which rigorous adherence to the scientific method required *American (post)* to traverse.

I do not normally write (or create) this way, but I was interested in what might happen if I did, what might happen if I was required to create by a set of constraints far more formal than the immediate bits of inspiration and provocation that normal catalyze my work. Additionally, I was interested in the parallel that can be made between art and science as analogously creative pursuits. I wondered what might happen if I reconciled the art/science binary as inextricable components of *American (post)*. Methodologies, both



familiar and new, informed the journey that resulted. Because UGA's policy requiring mandatory electronic publication of dissertations would preclude publication of this manuscript in literary markets, the remainder of this section has been withheld. For more information and to continue reading, please contact the author at [ashleydavid.com](http://ashleydavid.com). Thank you.



*for you*

(yes, you.)

Conclusion: A point is that which has no part. A line is breadthless length. A surface has length and breadth only. So, by nature, a plane poem is merely an emergent state of reality. Coded by its fact and choice of language, it explores and interrogates but does not necessarily disrupt or transform. Depthless, it is ultimately transitional.

22.

**Ways To Be a Cat**

Old soap, apple juice, hay. The sole  
species in the genus comes crawling in.  
Minus ate elixir. The mouth wounded  
sits in the remains. To answer before  
they are asked requires seeing past.  
Time naturalizes the colicky edge. When  
past and future fly into parts, I plant  
a buckeye in each bit of swaddling and  
hum. Leaves rot. Beneath the nursery, a  
good sign.

5.

### **Arrival**

The invaders carried knives with wide blades, curved at the ends, twelve inches long. They slit the throats of the men and the vaginas of the women with imprecise cuts. Small children, the ones under five, went untouched. Women who did not bleed out healed over time and raised children who were on occasion raped. Those who conceived gave birth to pain given to others to raise. Breath, I was born.

My family's involvement with the Americas began before the Revolutionary War. I know nothing directly of war. That ended with Vietnam and the last of the sons.



30.

**It must be March.**

Meanwhile, back at the sugar bush. A stand of maples turgid for tapping, a wood-fired evaporator pan at the ready. Farewell pigeon. Travel light. Burning down. Wait, no. Tearing. Pour history in a dixie cup and smell the sweet. Talk about sex and fail to arrive at blooming distinction. Bonsai sheep and massive swarms of jellyfish. Life gets simpler. A slimy bank. A noisy ocean.

13.

### **Leftover Wings**

From the basket, the babies point to  
pretty boxes containing imitation real  
things and artificial ones of a kind. I  
talon a raw snake. Not knowing to check  
whether the eyes were round. With eel  
sauce, sushi. With a sling-blade in  
three parts. Without precedent the  
eccentric moose. Original the sea bass.  
Creole the rice. I-kernels flock to a  
bottle tree. Sad eyes flecked with  
pecan gold. A green truck haunts a  
swollen face. I spit shells in the  
direction of hearth, make lefts under  
bridges, and bottle up while the river  
babies us.

38.

**Jeopardy**

I forgot that white woman is the devil. Dangerous woman. Make a man soft. White woman make a man a woman. Serves me right, the falling. I should have seen it coming. Devil baby. Sure as hell the devil. & vulnerable as hell. Will it right the boat, this bit between my legs? Always lists to starboard. Take what you know is yours. I would have given it. But you never could ask, could you? This boat never sails to weather. Now, I'm here to tell you I can be ornery, too. I ain't talking sewing circle nor tea party. No, I'm smelling fleshy like an iron.

21.

**Pedal Steel**

if i is you is she is he is you and me  
if she is you is me is he if we is are  
is you is i are me was is are is were  
are if you is you is you is you if us  
were are is you is me are we if you if  
you if you if you if me

46.

**Mr. Noble Melancholy**

Would you like to go dead mouse shopping on Wednesday? What if I sweeten the deal with calamari at the airport bar? I'm going to Chicago and thought we might talk about how this summer Odin, who prefers live ones, could enjoy a move to Florida so you won't have to worry about his eighty years mining your thirty-five. This whale story, a ploy to understand number theory and your experience of love. An opening. Ignore the tiny rows of sharps. Bulge after bulge goes down.

15.

**A Celebration of America's Refuse**

Caught hiding stolen goods under rolls of body fat. Concealed four pairs of boots three pairs of jeans a wallet and gloves. The brassiere already full. A bottle of prescription pills a large beaded change an envelope cherishing several uncreased photos her reading glasses his spare a little bottle of hand sanitizer. Fat women can't win even. A John Waters movie. Only short men climb.

40.

**The American Question**

She likes to hunt and eat raw things.  
Do not hang me. We die for the symbol.  
Herein, the American conundrum, the  
western flummox. Ego marked unmarked.  
Resist the question at its crux. Who  
are we to stop invisibility? Neither  
nature nor nurture. Mockingbird  
fledglings and a chameleon might die in  
the mouth of a cat. Though neither  
questions individualism.

9.

**Born behind Myself**

I wish someone would diagnose me, run trials and fill me full of pills. Tap the long leaf yellow pine. Neither mystery nor memory, but turpentine. A match for the chiggers. I was born an old woman the size of a button.



34.

### **The Index**

When the Chinese most trust peasants,  
clergy, and sex workers, in that order.  
A homeless doll for less than a hundred  
bucks. Classes of people pay a firm to  
deliver friends. It takes two hands to  
count states that consider spousal  
abuse a pre-existing condition. A size-  
able number of women claim never to sex  
sober. Such policies can of course  
provoke the witch. An American girl.

3.

**Revolution, a word like banana**

All bananas come in threes long-wise. A well placed tongue fingers the business and splits the fruit for sharing. Such things do not matter to hawks whose visions range long. Count different insights. The minutiae of the monocot discovery mixed blessing, Mama. I want some. Look. We know humiliation and intimate desires. Breakfast is done for provisional humans. Elephant, cat, dolphin, horse and dog, a ridiculous torture in stages. Mediocrity, a knife. Cards splayed, shells thrown. Be still the thief's lover. Make short work between shower and bench. A bank will tell you what I see in the pond's barnyard.

28.

**Undulant, Inviolate & Six**

The place to learn lies under water  
where dark green rocks mantle and caves  
connect to form a whole. What water  
will teach us oil cannot burn. Missing  
chunks of crust cry out for axe and  
screw. Like swimming eye-level with a  
yellow striped fish tipped in blue or  
the sting from something unseen. A mark  
lingers red and casual. Neon corals  
vision. Vague and hiding. Sea salts  
memory. Were I to face fear it would  
not be this list but something like the  
line advancing unnamed and graceful.  
Now, dip my balls in milk and squat me  
in a kitchen full of kittens. Have you  
forgotten?

45.

### **Wildlife Refuge**

Did you see the I-75 Jesus get struck by lightning? No drills. A coat of jet integrated with a cloak of crystal. Of course, I'm your man. Girly-girl, I gave you a hat. Shadow and light. Hear he put a ring on her finger. I laughed and thought of you driving through fucked up Ohio. Ho, ho, ho. Donuts in the parking lot. Now, let's take your picture kissing the deer ass on the wall. Weather beater. Pi equals an approximation of infinity. Be still my tender and foolish heart. There's enough love here. Unknown enmeshed growling.

20.

**Indian Tree**

White the silent places in wax. Eye  
never again. An oxygen tank makes a  
hiss, and the tide goes over the bar.  
Carry teacups to the kitchen and wonder  
how you know they are Spode. The girl  
stands up in the deep end.

My father's father was at Normandy while my father and grandmother awaited his return. In my cottage, I have the box my grandfather carried. It contains photos of my father and grandmother, photos of another woman (a nurse), photos of the liberation of camps, racy photos from Paris, bullets, and a four-leaf clover.

37.

**Hope**

Hack a foe to bits in the spring grass  
you cut with a sling blade. Peace it  
together, a brown snake. Smash  
potential with a mattock in a path you  
clear on a warm fall day. Pause first.  
Calculate baby pit viper probabilities  
and threats under foot. Move stones in  
the early garden and contemplate odor.  
Ardor. Not fall leaves nor spring thaw  
but familiar and obvious when you  
glance at the tail end snaking your  
shoe. Fling fear and your shoulderless  
company screams unharmed. Plant peas.

12.

**There's something about America that's  
unthinkable.**

A boy asks a girl to go steady and  
gives her a ring. A plastic silver ring  
he perhaps a) found b) put a quarter in  
a machine to retrieve or c) ate cracker  
jacks to acquire. He may have stolen  
it. No one will tell us. Substance says  
return the ring. Drops shame I never  
understand. Ergo a)sex b)class c)reject  
d)control e)spite f)you g)taste h)envy  
i) Q j)drink k)Tuesday l)because m)ill  
o) fear p)red shirt q)bad hair r)mean  
s)sis t)race u)temper



On the ground in Vietnam, the early stage, my  
father wrote my mother and his parents  
counting down the months till my arrival and  
his return.

29.

### **Courtesy of Choice**

A centuries old philosophy acknowledges differences and allows for harmony. A tidbit here and there. These mother fucking gang members mess with my hometown. I fall in love before breakfast to accommodate preferences. The bright orange bathing suit in the bathroom promises a stunning day, offers a spirit of conviviality. It used to be safe for someone on top to go cheap. Nowadays, it might as well be Mexico. A tortilla is not a biscuit, not cornbread, not apple pie. Not as American as Christopher Columbus. I ponder the sex life of snakes. Reptiles in every crevice. The problem with white folks is the sun. Good thing brilliant yellow eggs sputter diesel and history accumulates. An imagination is not about red shoes, but broken glass and pines in the wind. Cypress rooted to the blue hole. An assembly of percolating molecules sweetens the hand that curls around the things we hold.

**This is not a poem**

Because UGA's policy requiring mandatory electronic publication of dissertations would preclude publication of this manuscript in literary markets, the remainder of this section has been withheld. For more information and to continue reading, please contact the author at [ashleydavid.com](http://ashleydavid.com). Thank you.

## **Findings**

My work proceeds from the nexus formed by race/class/gender studies and activism; literary and artistic practice; and elements of post-structuralism that theorists like James Snead, Gyatri Spivak, et al. have begun to mine from the vein occupied by Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, and Paul De Man. This fundamentally interdisciplinary enterprise presupposes identity and feminist theory(ies) and activism and also an unrealized revolutionary potential for aesthetic applications in the Americas of this vein of poststructuralism. Moreover, it makes a move—analogous to postcolonialism—to situate and integrate constituent parts, particularly those occupied by the historically disenfranchised, within a whole system in order to illuminate thinking and practice both within the constituent parts and for the whole system. With *American (post)*, I combine creative practice and scholarship to integrate disparate understandings and experiences of postmodernism and postmodernity and to extend them toward more inclusive positions and positionings.

Specifically, *American (post)* explores and demonstrates a social justice application for Barthes's process of traversal from work to text. Barthes's seven propositions inform *American (post)* theoretically, but the project begins where Barthes ends "From Work to Text," with the action of the theory. *American (post)* is thus both work and text and/or a series of texts. Moreover, even while it is work and text, it is also a performance of a theory of text. *American (post)* performs the theory that Barthes proposes. To do so, the project traverses and blurs disciplinary and genre boundaries as

dictated by creative instinct and serendipity. It relies on a number of factors to create the context in which it makes this journey. They include Berleant's list of factors: acceptance, perception, sensuousness, discovery, uniqueness, reciprocity, continuity, engagement, and multiplicity (26-29). Such factors create and characterize a context that engenders conscious collusion in an everything/and whole.

In personal communication, Ed Pavlić has noted that “this project is not a ‘collection’ of poems or short stories nor a novel set in a certain venue of experience, or range of experiences. It is not aesthetically close to a certain range of books in a specific lyric or epic voice. Neither is it conceived in a specific conventional or experimental way. Rather, *American (post)* is generated from, and designed with, many moving discursive, performative, and material parts.” As a result, authorship is dispersed; a multiplicity of perspectives are highlighted; and critical thinking among a diverse audience of participants is catalyzed and cultivated. This performance of theory points to, and begins to create the possibility for realizing democratic potential within the Americas and for literary/artistic practice. Informed and shaped by interdisciplinary foci and anchors, this research contributes answers to the question, “How and when can art empower people and catalyze social change?” and its corollary, “How and when does it fail?” by theorizing an aesthetics of social justice and performing an application of it.

It bears noting that this aesthetics of social justice requires *American (post)* to engage in on-going methodological evaluation, justification, and (re)adjustment. Such processes further blur genre distinction and nuance—in addition to the aforementioned binaries—literarily, artistically, and academically cultivated binaries such as art/literature, aesthetics/action, author/audience, word/image, poetry/prose, and creative/academic. They

also blur the distinction between critical introduction and creative manuscript in favor of an integrated whole. Although, I do not mean to dismiss the poems as poems, and each is crafted for aesthetic achievement in its own right, any achievement arises in and around the complex negotiations required by an aesthetics of social justice. I work to craft poems that might *transport* readers across experience (their own) to a place in which “us” and “them” exist as part and parcel of a shared whole. Thus, in the larger project, the poems take a back seat to the performance, and the poems leave the page to become a set.

The plane-poems that follow from my hypothesis examine and interrogate the voices, images, and rhythms by which and through which (post)modern constructions of “America,” “American,” and “Americanness” emerge across the Americas when cultural geographies, history, and globalization collide and intersect with questions of perspective, mediation, and power. The collection works, however, because it disrupts the binary oppositions that tend to define dominant discourses about Americanness, both within the U.S. and elsewhere, when spect-actors perform it. This performance nuances and integrates notions of “self” and “other” because spect-actors must integrate conflicting and contradictory perspectives and personas and grapple with juxtapositions consciously. The collection, as performance, re-positions the frame of reference from a collection of whole pieces to the concept of a single whole that circumscribes and encompasses the constituent whole parts.

This single whole requires comprehensive acknowledgment, and invites comprehensive assessment, of a sum total of factors rarely considered in questions of nationhood or citizenship because by definition, one is either inside or outside. One is either “us” or “them.” Demarcating a single whole asks the audience to digest competing

perspectives and to dissolve them in favor of a third perspective which is neither us nor them but is instead both, which is to say something altogether different.

I use the concept of my imagined (and perhaps impossible) supper table, attended by unlikely dinner guests, including readers who come to *American (post)* in its public and private manifestations, to challenge and illuminate the false reality of separation.

Importantly, the action of transport is not the primary maneuver each poem makes. The poems exist primarily or solely in the new place, the dinner party en medias res, which is to say at/in the performance, which they catalyze. I don't particularly care how my guests, including the reader, arrive at the party. I am more interested in what they do in the middle of it.

Throughout the project's genesis and reception, power relationships are constantly and consistently called into relief in the service of unifying binary opposition into a whole (social) system. In doing so, *American (post)* integrates the "polar split" that characterized the avant-garde tradition in modernism, and which was the subject of de Ventos' book. It also endeavors to construct a replicable transformative creative space that catalyzes experiences capable of disrupting binary oppositions that define social relationships in favor of an integrated whole that *repositions* social relationships. Because UGA's policy requiring mandatory electronic publication of dissertations would preclude publication of this manuscript in literary markets, the remainder of this section has been withheld. For more information and to continue reading, please contact the author at [ashleydavid.com](http://ashleydavid.com). Thank you.

## **Phenomena**

**America:** north, south, central, United States, Brazil, Mexico, Columbia, Argentina, Canada, Venezuela, Peru, Chile, Guatemala, Ecuador, Cuba, Haiti, Bolivia, Dominican Republic, Honduras, Paraguay, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Puerto Rico, Panama, Uruguay, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana, Suriname, Guadeloupe, Martinique, Bahamas, Belize, Barbados, French Guiana, St. Lucia, Aruba, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, U.S. Virgin Islands, Grenada, Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, Bermuda, Cayman Islands, Greenland, St. Kitts and Nevis, Turks and Caicos Islands, British Virgin Islands, Anguilla, Montserrat, St. Pierre and Michelon, Falkland Islands.

**Americanness:** depends on who's asking and who's talking

**artist:** spect-actor. This definition elides audience and actor and thus departs dramatically from preceding notions of artist eg. the definitions Nicolas Bourriaud offers in *Relational*

*Aesthetics:*

When Benjamin Buchloch referred to the conceptual and minimal generation of the 1960s, he defined the artist as a "scholar/philosopher/craftsman," who hands society "the object results of his labour." For Buchloch, this figure was the heir to that of the artist as "mediumic and transcendental subject," represented by Yves Klien, Lucio Fontana, and Joseph Beuys. Recent development in art merely modify Buchloch's hunch. Today's artist appears as an operator of signs, modeling production structures so as to provide significant doubles. An entrepreneur/politician/director. The most common denominator shared by all artists is that they *show* something. The act of showing suffices to define the artist, be it a representation or a designation.



**binary:** us/them, black/white, male/female, rich/poor, north/south, east/west, good/bad, hot/cold, open/closed, right/wrong, nature/culture, language/thing, art/science, elite/popular, order/entropy, raw/cooked, capitalism/communism, rational/utopian, historical/contemporary, visceral/intellectual, inductivism/eurekaism, magical/scientific, accept/reject, local/global, social/natural, technological/spiritual, political/aesthetic, heart/mind, here/there, reason/intuition, creative/critical, past/present, self/other, sender/receiver

**community:** spect-actors

**democratic potential:** unrealized social justice

**social justice:** “the [democratic potential...] in [the U.S. for] a widespread political and social commitment to economic equality humane and nurturing organizations and institutions, egalitarianism, as well as foreign policy conducive to world peace and parity between the developed and developing worlds” (Swartz 249).

**whole:** “a concept of wholeness [that] interrogates, complicates, and encompasses all other reified whole parts” (David 161), which “is truly everything, which includes all and nothing” (David 162), and is “the broadly defined spectrum of reality that spans and encompasses the tangible, the intangible, the concrete, [and] the imagined” (David 163), which is to say, “the all-encompassing *everything/and whole*” (David 178).

**zeitgeist cloud:** a zeitgeist cloud is comprised of selected influences and touchstones, which—by appearing on one’s landscape with some frequency as work, personal example, and experience—inflect and inform the development of experience A zeitgeist cloud holds sway whether or not its elements can be credited as conscious influences or lineages. Identifying, with any certainty, all the elements of one’s zeitgeist cloud is no more

possible than sourcing the molecules of every breath. e.g. the zeitgeist cloud for *American (post)* might include, but is not limited to, the following elements, which become harder and harder to source and credit as *American (post)* becomes intertextual for succeeding texts: Because UGA's policy requiring mandatory electronic publication of dissertations would preclude publication of this manuscript in literary markets, the remainder of this section has been withheld. For more information and to continue reading, please contact the author at [ashleydavid.com](http://ashleydavid.com). Thank you.

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Citation Addendum: Online (in)Credible Sources for the Serendipity & Chance Example

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