

A FEW POSSIBLE TRAILHEADS FOR HIKERS IN GIRL SCOUT NATION

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and it should not be assumed that a Scout, however small, does not in a real sense contain the universe, and containing it thus, serves the burden that is ours, binding it solidly to her own slight back, and howls as the planet howls, lacerated by need and arrogance

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I find, right at the beginning of the expedition, that something in the landscape, some allergen perhaps, will not allow me to feel comfortable in my own skin. This feeling pervades my experience of the book, even in those passages where I am invited to relax into the actual, non-ironic beauty of wilderness, the pleasure of a well-turned phrase, the healthy glow of promised liberation.

Exploding my stick brings down a hairy meatball, it's torn inside and I stuff it and eat it and bang it on the Forest floor. The wood is full of wonder, I've scratched it and sniffed

If girls are the center of this book, then let me be clear what we find orbiting that center: the full, malignant range of attitudes, actions, and concepts our culture produces to contain the possible unruliness of girlhood. All the leering, the petting, the suggestions and more-than-suggestions of sexualized violence, the reveling in peril, the misrecognition, the efforts to punish the girl's inability to be a properly-gendered woman, a properly-neuter child, a properly-compliant citizen. All of this, *Girl Scout Nation* holds under my nose and blows into my eyes on my way.

As a catalog of disciplinary practices, falsehoods, and atrocities, this would be simply oppressive. That I have now read the book again and again over a period of several months suggests to me that something more is going on.

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The first evidence of a pervasive violence against girls, perhaps against girlhood as such, is presented “under erasure” as an epigraph to the book’s first section, a struck-through news account of the murder of two Girl Scouts. This would seem to propose a mode of reading for the book as a whole.

I want to claim that Yedda Morrison has fixed on the figure of the girl for her capacity to work our systems of discipline, falsehood, and atrocity *otherwise*, perhaps even to *unwork* them. It is important to recognize, though, that this capacity is not discovered “in spite of” all that girls and girlhood are subjected to in such systems, but arises as an immanent contradiction within subjection itself.

...girl becomes aggressor, seeping up through wood chips, earth and oil and deep deep below the core of language the charging hole works overtime to solidify her wildness

An incomplete woman. A broken – or, self-fulfilling cultural prophecy, breakable – boy. A figure of impossible purity against whom the culture imagines and organizes violation. At every turn, girlhood as we have received our understanding of it presents itself as an internal exclusion, if we look honestly. And it is in this contradiction, this being-inside, at the heart of things, while radically and violently displaced, that Morrison struggles to locate an insurgent universality for the girl, an account of her as that “part of no part” which Jacques Rancière’s thought positions as the figure in which the singular makes a claim to the universal and thus founds politics.

The bad castration pun when Rancière’s phrase is translated into English is perhaps not entirely beside the point.

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If a girl can grow up to be Laura Bush, then we have to consider the disturbing possibility that she can also grow up to be a Hunter, a Torturer, even a Man. And on the other side, we have to consider the possibility that she will not grow up at all. And on yet another side, that the Hunter, the Torturer, the Bush, the Man, might still harbor a girl with as-yet unrealized plans of her own.

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There is a look on the child’s face as if running through a trashy jungle with her

tiny broken penis out. There is a look on the parent's face like that of proliferating power also well lit and banging, but in conflict with the power itself and banging and parenting and national security.

We need not look as far as Henry Darger, say, for a source here – though his girls and their tiny broken penises are almost certainly in evidence. The ideological function of “outsider” art is primarily to name and make manifest that which is most *inside*, but whose avowal as such would leave us all naked and cold, without shelter. Not even a tent, or a lean-to.

Or a hood. In *that* shrouded conjunction of Red Riding Hood and the cowed victim of torture, I can make out the beginnings of a figure for the scout, by all accounts a person of uncertain loyalties.

*but how will we know the hood
that of the nation or its drab little mate*

One who goes among the enemy in the name of the nation, one who goes into the wilderness in the name of civilization, there is always the possibility that the scout will “go native.” In a U.S. historical context, there is a whole story back of this, of first peoples pressed into military service, and the imperial anxieties about their dependability. In the context of *Girl Scout Nation*, there is also the whole story of how direction can go awry, how one is never sure that the emissary sent into the wilderness is not met halfway by her own mirror image sent back as an emissary of the wilderness.

*Oh to be
an image!*

– when image is so radically and violently decoupled from body, as happens in our culture with respect to girlhood, one has to expect such reversals.

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I read *Girl Scout Nation* as a continuation and expansion of Morrison's project begun in her tough, necessary book *Crop*. That book sought to draw out the productive role of feminized labor in the very systems that claim to produce the feminine as a series of effects and epiphenomena, thus to pose the question whether the producers themselves might not produce something else. Or perhaps not produce at all: the refusal of work is an active option.

For solidarity with such an aim of refusing the work of gender, kari edwards' *a day in the life of p* might serve as a useful companion volume.

While *Girl Scout Nation* retains the earlier book's focus on production, what's being examined here is not the shop-floor of factory labor, agriculture, or the fashion system, but the production of the citizen, the nation, the land. All that melts becomes solid in air, affect and phantasm congealing in particulates like the smoke from this year's wildfires, or the agricultural dust blown over the coastal population centers when the wind shifts to inland.

Costs – of land development, of hydraulic semi-arid food production – are externalized into the invisible, only to be redistributed downwind as toxic sustenance, compromised breath, visible symptom. As Amy Balkin's *Public Smog* project insists, this degraded commons is also a "made place" through which an alienated *poiesis* already operates, and out of which, or in place of which, a resistant or insurgent poetics could make a common place *otherwise*.

I want to claim that Morrison's book engages a parallel set of concerns with remapping and remaking. And while the literal common *places* of ecology are a determining condition here, I also want to claim that the signal contribution of these poems has something to do with their attention to the *commonplaces* of an alienated "general intellect" – that is, with what we imagine when we talk in our loose, quotidian, available terms of what we are as bodies, as citizens, as situated beings.

It's in this production of the imaginary, of politics, of gender and sex, that the linkage of girl to nation by way of scouting is most useful. But useful to whom? Morrison reminds the reader at every turn that things are not simple: the girl scout will serve neither as the state's useful idiot, nor the one-dimensional ideal of resistance. If we are to find a path in this wilderness – or some wilderness to save us from the sheer oppressive boredom of the same damn path every time – we will have to make our way through difficult terrain.

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The scout revels in her independence, her ability to strike out for parts unknown, at the same time that capital, state, and empire rely on her as an avant garde for their own depredations. The loosening of bonds to obligatory "civilization" – gender-effects in abeyance, obedience in question, pleasures in abundance – runs smack up against all the national-romantic *Wandervögel*-isms that civilization can muster. And those in turn run up against terror.

We simply don't get the one without the other, and the other, and the other. The trail twists, and we will need to locate our *otherwise* – to obliga-

tory gender, to sexual and class violence, to the destruction of ecosystems, to empire – right there at the twist itself, in closest contact with the oppressive same.

Scout raises her fist in a thin plume of defiance, a human handkerchief flogging the Alamo winds, that enemy combatants might mistake her surrender...

A false flag maneuver, luring the cross-border other into a posture of relaxation so that the state of emergency and torture can commence. A trespass into the test range, aiming to interpose the fragile but guileful body between the production of mass death and its spread into the landscape. She is a Minuteman. A Nuclear Freeze worker. A prison guard. An anarchist. All of these. None of these.

The Alamo / Los Alamos. For their capacity to chart this contradictory political landscape, crosscut by principled resistance and shameful complicity, Rebecca Solnit's *Savage Dreams* and Mike Davis' *Dead Cities* might serve as useful companion volumes.

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The story of "the nation" is, in one respect, a chronicle of enclosures: sheep-walks on the commons, nuclear test facilities on native land. That the forms of wilderness, of wildness, which we find at our far end of this story are themselves enclosures – designated wild areas, parkland, preserves – all more or less guaranteed by the power of the state, is not surprising enough to be a revelation.

What does surprise me in reading here, is how fiercely the enclosed resists, even *as* an enclosed resistance. There is an excess of energy needed to produce the power of enclosure. That excess, while it is the first and often most violently grasped object of enclosure, will not go quietly.

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In one account whose longevity may be no guarantee of its value, poetry's struggle for and against words is a labor to reconcile the beautiful and the true. The political aesthetics of *Girl Scout Nation* spins for me a just-so story in which this reconciliation has already been performed, as it were, on the left-hand side. If the beautiful has been that which is too given to semblance for truth, and truth that which is too taken with itself to appear, Morrison's book squares the circle in the figure of the pretty. Prettiness – too good-looking to be beautiful, too precise or exact (exacting?) to be true – is posed as internal to both beauty and truth, and guarantees their coherence and mutual comprehensibility, on the condition that both disavow it

with all the powers at their disposal. These powers, in turn, might be seen to emanate in some key respects from the pretty.

*We have to PIN
the PRETTY language
BACK*

*from the girls
and the boys who are yet girls*

Pretty is the beautiful truth subject to the pinch on the cheek, the slap on the bottom, the whole catalogue of minor and major violences with which the constitutive “part of no part” is both maintained to do its work, and sacrificed on the altar of that work.

*pictures, and pictures of pictures of parts
and language as vista
where we point and shoot
all the pretty
pretty*

There is a question here, as well, of scale. Often the work proceeds by a deliberate miniaturization, as if to ask: What happens to us when we take a girl to be a smaller woman, a woman to be a diminished man? What happens to the world when the photograph or picture postcard comprehends landscape? What happens to politics when the political itself is reduced to the nation, and the nation to its border?

*beneath a wildlife underpass allowing
animal traffic to cross below the tracks
two by two physically mounting
the wall of fear that a homeland might
become a home*

While much recent poetry has pursued these questions in the language of expansive claim and disputation, Morrison’s book contests the effects of diminution almost by an excessive compliance. The progressive “cutening” of what we disavow, the vanishing magnitudes of perceptible contradiction, are allowed to reach their logical end, at which limit the full uncanny, unseemly, *fucked-up* and *fucked-over* nature of the miniature emerges, larger than life.

*Oomph. My rumph. Bambi cakes. Damp spotty. Roundy. Leany. Sloapy. Fawny.
Girly. Flick goes the tail. Flick goes the tongue. Flick goes the giant animated vulva*

For its account of the surplus and unruly potential of minor negative affect, Sianne Ngai's *Ugly Feelings* would serve as a useful companion volume.

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Of course, all of this is a partial view, the pedestrian approach to the book's terrain. I have chosen to think of this reading of mine as a series of trail-heads – not maps, not yet even paths, just possible beginnings. There is so much else to be discovered here, and my overwhelming sense in reading *Girl Scout Nation* is one of gratitude, as one is grateful perhaps for an earth to “go up and down in,” however difficult may be the terrain. One sees here not as a colonist mapping the landscape as an alien quantity, but as a participant in the rhythms and forms of an ecology:

the human eye
a striated leaf

In *Girl Scout Nation*, I am grateful that the desert West, the California North Coast, and the Sierra it proposes are actual, and exceed their roles in allegory. I am grateful that it goes some way toward uttering a public language of responsibility, in which, among other talismanic words, we find “Abu Ghraib” written in the cells of the American body and across the vistas of the American landscape. I am grateful for the hand and eye and leaf in “Survivor North Coast (Shelter Cove),” a beautiful and true and (in this book's context) exceptionally hard-won new approach to the nature poem. I am grateful that it teaches this transplant to the West the names of birds and bushes, while not neglecting the names for industrial chemicals, bombs, and new, possibly unofficial body parts. I am grateful that it knows I was once a girl, even when I was a boy.

I am grateful that it ends by inviting me – and us, as readers – to get lost. Again.

