

EMILIA-AMALIA Session VIII:

Questioning Through Writing

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Chapbook 4

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Emilia and Amalia were two very different women brought together by a feminist reading and writing group in 1970s Milan.

Emilia's mind was a deep and disordered archive of her personal history, which she recounted for Amalia again and again, always in the most disorganized way. The events of her life were a chaotic jumble she could never order or put to rest, no matter how many times she described them.

Amalia, on the other hand, had a natural facility with narrative. With the encouragement of the group, she began to write out her own life story in long solitary sessions that lasted deep into the night. There was pleasure in reading her words aloud to the group when they gathered, but the real joy was the sight of her own writing filling the space of the page inch by inch.

Eventually, in a gesture born from equal parts friendship and frustration, Amalia tried to write out the story of Emilia's life as well. She knew it well enough by then, having heard it retold so often by her friend. All the

events, the slights and failures that Emilia could never order in her own mind, Amalia began to place into relation with one another. In this way the story of a life emerged.

Amalia gave the story to her friend and Emilia was deeply moved. To see her own life arranged as narrative helped confer meaning onto what once appeared to her as nothing but chaos. From then on, Emilia always carried the story with her in her purse. She read it over and over again, crying new tears each time she did.

Annie MacDonell



p.4-5 Film still from *Scuola Senza Fine* (School Without End), Adriana Monti, Italy, 1983, 40 mins. Screened on 26 September 2016 at the Feminist Art Gallery (FAG) in Toronto as part of EMILIA-AMALIA Session IV: Education/Pedagogy. Image used with permission of Adriana Monti.

EMILIA-AMALIA is a Toronto-based feminist exploratory working group. Initiated in 2016, the group meets monthly to examine and employ practices of citation, annotation, questioning, interviewing and autobiography as strategies for activating feminist art, writing and research. Each session is organized around a “text,” a conversation and a writing activity, but beyond that the meetings have taken many different forms. All meetings are open to the public and participants have varied widely.

One particular interest has been to elucidate the histories and strategies of feminism that have been obscured and overlooked in the narratives of “second-wave” feminism we have inherited. EMILIA-AMALIA asks how we might update and rewrite past practices so they can better respond to contemporary questions. Our aim has been to think through these questions from the differences and disparities between members and in a spirit of collaboration. For this reason, EMILIA-AMALIA is an open group that invites all levels of engagement.

We are all experts.
No one is an expert.
Expertise is not expected.

This series of five chapbooks is a partial record of the conversations, texts, images and output the meetings have generated and engaged with.

**EMILIA-AMALIA Session VIII:
Questioning Through Writing
2 March 2017
hosted by Gallery 44
held at Trinity Square Video**

The last writing intensive (Session V: Alien Language, 13 October 2016) focused on autobiography and self-narration as feminist strategies for art making and writing. In this deep winter writing intensive, we'll consider the flip side of that coin. Using a series of textual, filmic and visual prompts, participants will attempt to shed the skin of their own experience and ask questions from inside another body, or from outside the body altogether. In the previous writing intensive, we thought about the political potential of writing one's own story in a language that has only and always been designed by others. But is there any potential in attempting to write from outside the self?

There is no pre-reading required for this session. All writing will be spontaneous and formulated in response to the prompts provided. Participants are also invited to bring their own prompts to share.

This session is part of a five-session arc exploring "How to Ask a Question."

Four Prompts for Writing Exercise

All That is Left Unsaid
Michèle Pearson Clarke
video, 2014, 2:27 mins

The Co(te)lette Film
choreographed by Ann Van den Broek
dance, 2007, 148 mins

Libation For Mr. Brown—Bid 'Em In
Matana Roberts
song from *Coin Coin Chapter One: Gens de Couleur Libre*,
Constellation, 2011

Untitled (Clay Portfolio)
Chris Curreri
gelatin silver print, 2013, 7¾" × 5¾",
from a portfolio of 21 images
[see p.10–11](#)



In response to *Untitled (Clay Portfolio)*, write for five minutes, uninterrupted.

Every shape is a choice not to make another shape.

I guess I'm thinking about negative space: the space of a page around the lines of a poem, the space of a stage beyond the arms of a dancer, the space of an um, a pause, a voice dragging through the air before or after a word. The air that meets the edge of a curve, the shell of an ear, the space between a kiss. That's what's sexy, right? Making room, collapsing it again—a vessel contains a space. It's the choice to curve, to house. A fold of clay, a fold of skin: there's room within its grainy darkness.

A body is about 60% water, an atom is mostly empty space that vibrates. What vibrates in stillness, in a pause? I heard recently that some choreographers say a still body is enacting a 'little dance'—still moving in micro ways, still flowing through space, still shifting its empty-fullness forward and back.

This is a still photograph but maybe it's doing the same thing, still breathing, still folding inwards.

An open mouth.

Daniella

Is it a vessel or an orifice? This is the question that plagues me always when I look at Chris's work. Both are spaces for holding or containing things, but one seems more ambiguous than the other.

Why is something bodily automatically something more abject? Maybe it is the discarded nature of these markings, this clay, that lends the sense of abjection, of having been forgotten or thrown away. Clay that holds the imprint of another's fingertips, that is moulded by the heat of coursing blood, an object of transference in every sense of the word. How are these "loud objects," as Clarice Lispector once titled her book, and what is it that they scream, or stage-whisper, from the refuse bin? Is anthropomorphism a way of making everything useful to us, affectively if not practically?

To work clay, to know it, to mould it, to be moulded like or from clay. We give this materiality such strange silent autonomy, only to wring every ounce out of it.

Gabby

Listen
she said
Listen
I'm open
Stretched to receive.
All he could see were the shadows and light as it played on her curves. Shadows where she concaved and hid her better bits. Light where she grandstanded, held herself out in the open for consumption

Listen
she begged
or pleaded, trying to maintain her dignity
I just
she said
I want
she whispered

He folded himself back away from her, hiding his curiosity. Pulling his desire into a cleft of mystery.
Withhold
With, but holding
He didn't want to listen.
Everything in his shape should have been clue enough.

The space between them grew in the silence.
He inhaled in preparation.

Lesley

it would take a while to find a stopper whose sides could
muzzle this hollow - - so slippering, sliding, nestling from
within - - - a trickle choosing in or out, in and out, in or
outer in - - either route a towards, one a spacious door - -

what is a good fit what is a right fit what
- - spelunkers coasting in - -
is your perfect fit

oprah said 'long and lean, gap classic,' i remember this fit
because she advertised it in the way that someone adver-
tises their lunch as a satisfying meal that was perfect for me
[the speaker] so perfect for you [the listener] it

must be
a perfect
fit
fits
inside inside inner more in

Esmé

My ear throbs. The ear is throbbing at the sound of silence.
If I could not hear, my ear would throb from the desire to lis-
ten. This object (how do I know though?) desperately wants
to be heard. The viewer is viewing it, and in turn, listening
to the throbbing ear. This is a thing whose only body part
is an ear. The ear is the heart, soul and mind of this curvy,
throbbing, fleshy thing. It cannot move, it can only listen,
or try to listen. This poor ear is stuck in a silent, unmoving
purgatory. Is it half formed? I look closer. On a human being,
there exists a pair of ears. This is the special case of a literal
single pair of ears, existing on their own, and deaf. The
blood moving within them is loud and I feel sad when I can
hear them, but they cannot hear me.

Camille

Working with a form that GETS ALL OVER YOU more than paint. But even so you just shower it off. The rectum and its possessiveness, its catch-and-release generosity, its furious withholding, its vulnerable aggression. The anus and the eye as alternate ending points to the anus and the mouth—what does it mean to shit out what you see? Am I thinking about this because of clay?

Magdalena

What is the relationship between abstraction and the body?

/
black clay
unfired and wet
all curves; the impossibility of a straight edge
messiness
the unfixeness of bodies
=

the messiness of feeling,
betrayal by our fleshy materiality

/
We are
malleable
full of potential
receptive
easily shaped and hurt by others

What liberation is there in abstraction?

/
bisqued clay
=
rigid brittle bones
vulnerable and fragile,
not agile

a part of the process
not young nor old anymore

Cecilia

A soft, malleable form lies in the earth, far below the surface. A mound of clay, once excavated, can be transformed and take on many shapes. Clay has weight. As matter its texture is strong, it resists but also gives in. Folds can be coaxed and cajoled. What about when it is not relation? Is it only when manipulated, when it encounters active, tactile intention, that it changes? There is this huge power in potential, in flexibility, adaptability, malleability. It rests comfortable in its amorphous state, more free than it could ever been in any single fixed shape.

Yaniya

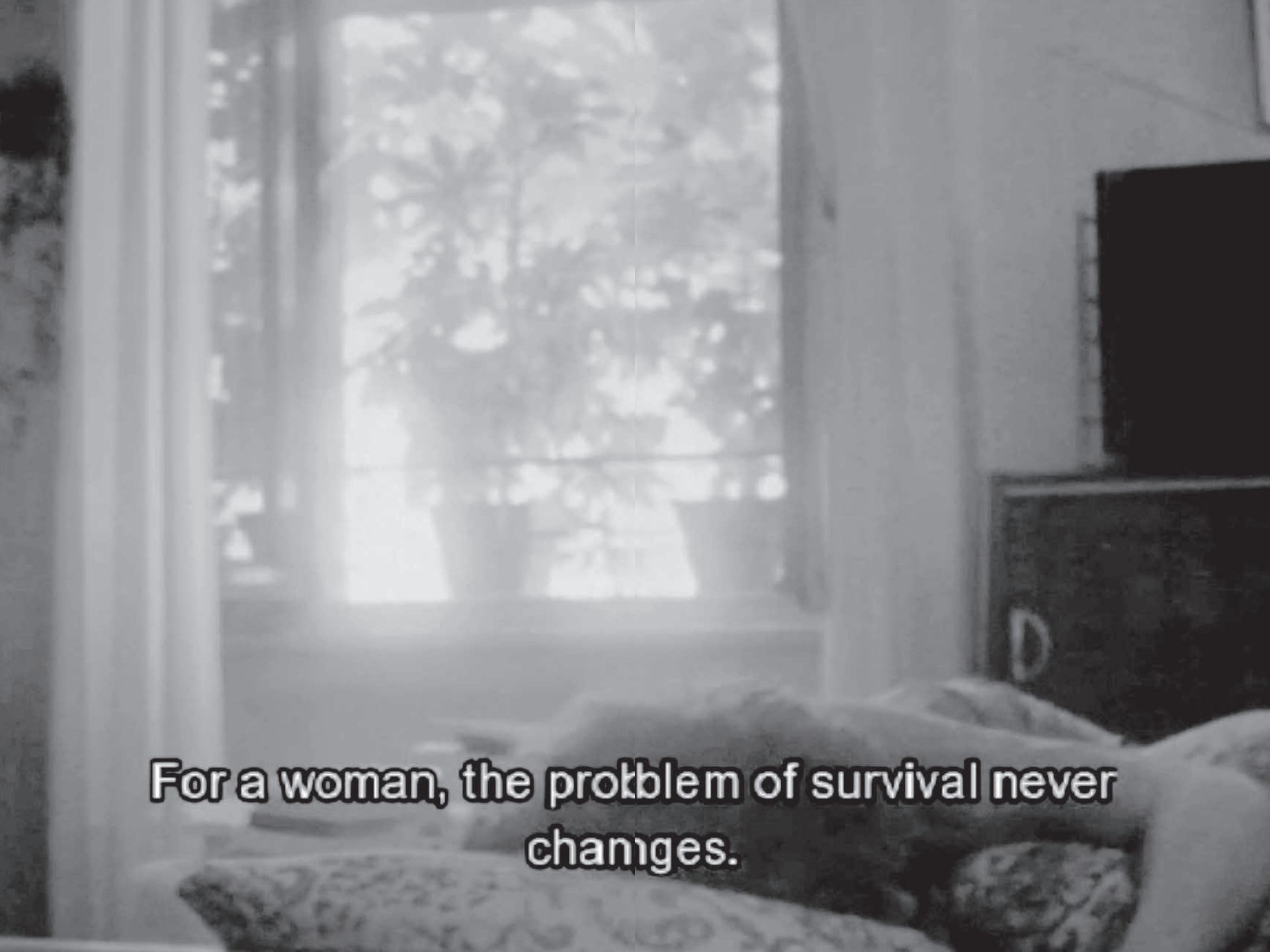
Sweet, gaping holes. Collapsing, spent in pleasure, exhaling breath in long and matching sighs that are one and are not one at the same time.

Holes collapsing in dissolution, stretched out beyond best practices. Internal matter that once made muscled walls, firm bulwarks for soft organs, but are now only so much pulled out pizza dough.

Holes that form a place within a place. Holes that are not holes but buckets, bubbles, bindings.

Oh my babies, oh my bodies, oh how they grow. One out in the plain light of day. One in the dark collapsing recesses of this pregnant body which, if it doesn't embarrass you already, is sure to do so soon.

Annie



For a woman, the problem of survival never changes.

p.22-23 Film still from *Scuola Senza Fine* (School Without End), Adriana Monti, Italy, 1983, 40 mins. Screened on 26 September 2016 at the Feminist Art Gallery (FAG) in Toronto as part of EMILIA-AMALIA Session IV: Education/Pedagogy. Image used with permission of Adriana Monti.

As part of EMILIA-AMALIA's five-session arc on "How to Ask a Question," three writers were invited to respond to the group's meetings and discussions. Here, writer Yaniya Lee reflects on Session VIII: Questioning through Writing, held at Trinity Square Video on 2 March 2017.

Why I Write

/towards relation

Yaniya Lee

Yaniya Lee's interdisciplinary research draws on the work of Black Studies scholars to question critical reading practices and reconsider Black art histories in Canada. In 2016 she programmed *Labour, Land and Body: geographies of de/colonialism* for Vtape's Curatorial Incubator, and, with members of the 4:3 Collective, she organized the *MICE Symposium on Transformative Justice in the Arts*. She is a founding collective member of *MICE Magazine* and an MA candidate in Gender Studies at Queen's University.

I write to to figure things out, to understand the world around me and to make sense of my own feelings.

I write in two modes. The first is not so much an act of creation, but of release: a balm for difficult emotion. There are scraps of paper and half-filled notebooks all over my apartment. They are nothing and they are everything—the externalization of frustration and inner turmoil; a method of survival. When I wake up restless and anxious at 5 AM, scrawling into a notebook calms me. It allows me to place myself and others in some semblance of order, an arrangement that feels manageable. This writing is not a vehicle for ideas. Rather, it is a way of putting down and putting out what

irks me. If I can write to the end of the trouble, I can fall back asleep.

The other kind of writing is an act of composition that has its own particular procedures and strategies. I'll try to understand a problem outside of myself, and build a response to that which is structural: brutally overt and sensed, but unseen. What can I say about a six-year-old girl handcuffed by police officers for misbehaving in her grade-school classroom? How can I describe the recurrence of an absence? In this writing, my intention is to expose the scaffolding of difference that governs our proximity to death and joyous living. I read everything, note all gossip and pursue evasive research. Then I write

it all out and whittle away—adjust the angle, change the tone. It takes a pile of messy drafts, overwritten and revised, before this writing feels right enough for me let it go. Before it stands alone.

Several women seem to manage the ideal combination of these two modes. Their forms are a source of solace and nourishment. I revel in Adrian Piper’s humour, Jamaica Kincaid’s acuity, Dionne Brand’s grammar, Hannah Black’s intimacy. Their work gives me strength. It does something more than itemize their experience through critical considerations. They connect diasporic movement, art, love and Black life to the dull ache of living boundaried within a system of white

supremacy. Warily, I go back to their writing again and again, finding repose in the precious spaces of lucidity they conjure.

According to Jamaican theorist Sylvia Wynter, everywhere different forms of inequality, like the notion of a biological hierarchy, are produced and passed on through the stories we tell. Our narratives and aesthetics shape us as human beings.

If being human is praxis, then writing for me is a movement towards self-determination and new ways of being. I hold fast to these artists. Their work has none of that very specific brand of white noise: the dull hum of white supremacy not knowing itself. I see in it a transformative,

liberating power. As I develop a practice of thinking and writing, it is my hope to settle into self-knowledge: a synergy of my two modes of writing that speaks to the complicated, unresolvable present in clear, nourishing forms. This would mean understanding myself as always in relation, as a part of a vast, shifting constellation of beings and things.

Untitled (Clay Portfolio)

Chris Curreri

Chris Curreri is a Canadian artist who works with film, photography and sculpture. His work is premised on the idea that things in the world are not defined by essential properties, but rather by the actual relationships that we establish with them. Recent exhibitions include *La Biennale de Montréal 2016* at Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal (Montréal, Canada), *Compassionate Protocols* at Callicoon Fine Arts (New York, USA), *We are safe and all is well in the world* at Scrap Metal (Toronto, Canada), *Central China International Ceramics Biennale* at Henan Museum (Zhengzhou, China), *So Be It* at Gardiner Museum (Toronto, Canada), *Fan the Flames: Queer Positions in Photography* at Art Gallery of Ontario (Toronto, Canada), *Medusa* at Daniel Faria Gallery (Toronto, Canada), *Surplus Authors* at Witte de With (Rotterdam, The Netherlands), and *An Unpardonable Sin* at castillo/corrales (Paris, France). His films have been screened at Image Forum Festival, Japan; Festival Internacional de Cine de Mar del Plata, Argentina; and the Toronto International Film Festival, Canada. He holds an MFA from the Milton Avery Graduate School for the Arts at Bard College.







p.32-39 Chris Curreri, *Untitled (Clay Portfolio)*,
gelatin silver prints, 2013, 7 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x 5 $\frac{3}{4}$ ", from a
portfolio of 21 images.



EMILIA-AMALIA meets on the ancestral and traditional territories of the Mississaugas of the New Credit, the Haudenosaunee, the Anishnabe and the Huron-Wendat, who are the original owners and custodians of the land.

EMILIA-AMALIA is currently initiated by Cecilia Berkovic, Yaniya Lee, Annie MacDonell, Gabrielle Moser, Zinnia Naqvi, Leila Timmins and cheyanne turions. It is hosted by Gallery 44, but sessions have also taken place at Trinity Square Video, Dufferin Grove Park and the Feminist Art Gallery (FAG) in Toronto and The Showroom, in London, UK. From May to August 2017, EMILIA-AMALIA was the artist in residence at the Art Gallery of Ontario, where these chapbooks were produced.

EMILIA-AMALIA would like to thank Gallery 44 for hosting sessions; Trinity Square Video for lending space; and the Ontario Arts Council and the Art Gallery of Ontario for financial support. Special thanks to Sean O'Neill for inviting us to be residents; Adriana Monti for giving us permission to use stills from her film; Helena Reckitt and the Feminist Duration Reading Group in London for their inspiration, mentorship and friendship; Yaniya Lee and Chris Curreri for their brilliance; Daniella Sanader, Esmé Hogeveen, Camille Rojas and Magdalena Suksi in Toronto and Lesley Ewen in London for their texts; and lastly to all of the participants who have come to sessions over the past year who shared their thoughts, writing and time with us.

A portion of the proceeds from the sales of the chapbooks will be donated to Black Lives Matter Toronto's Freedom School. freedomschool.ca

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- Chapbook 5** **EMILIA-AMALIA: Syllabus/Workbook**

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