

That's Cool: Contemporary American Hipster Poets as Urban Excess

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"Hipsters are a subculture of men and women typically in their 20's and 30's that value independent thinking, counter-culture, progressive politics, an appreciation of art and indie-rock, creativity, intelligence, and witty banter. The greatest concentrations of hipsters can be found living in the Williamsburg, Wicker Park, and Mission District neighborhoods of major cosmopolitan centers such as New York, Chicago, and San Francisco respectively. Although "hipsterism" is really a state of mind, it is also often intertwined with distinct fashion sensibilities."

-- Trey Parasuco

Abstract: This article points the way to no *moral* progress in the form of a True or Good or Holy or Official or Professional contemporary American poetry, instead it tries to point the way to *aesthetic* progress through self-awareness of our habits of mind. In the end, the choice of contemporary American hipster poets to be aware or innocent of the difficulties of mindfulness has got to be left with the individual.

Keywords: Hipster, American, Contemporary, Poets, Excess, Immigrant, Self-awareness.

Can a biography serve as a poetics?

Whether as a gadfly to the older kids in communist Romania or as a teenager in Chicago, part of me always wanted to be hip. But another part always knew it was simply too much work to keep up with the Popescus. Back in Timisoara, growing up among those pastel and crumbling Austro-Hungarian facades adjacent to the gray and crumbling concrete blocs of Ceausescu's Socialist utopia, I remember the shadows spreading across the street as the sun kept tugging its light over our kickball field or over our realms of hide-and-seek or over the furrowed old men turning their giant pages of news. Those communist blocs, all rebar rheumatism and egalitarian hope, were split into various stairwells like "A-uri", "B-uri". Romică lived in our stairwell with his aging and ailing father. I was 8 and he was 16, and one of the coolest kids in the neighborhood.

Kids my own age bored me. I was an attentive loner, finding ways to eavesdrop on the smoking and gossiping older kids perching themselves in cooler-than-thou poses on the plentiful benches in front of these buildings was my game. Nearby enough to hear, I would busy myself meddling in the dust with a stick. They jeered and puffed and spoke of sexual escapades, swearing followed by long-distance spitting. They narrated in vivid details a trick played on some unsuspecting sucker. There was that one time, my mouth in the obvious oval of shock while listening to their stories, I blew my cover. Squinting into the vinegary distance the one who had just completed impressing everyone with his story shooed me away with a dismissive hand gesture. What do you want squirt, said he hocking a loogie in my general direction? Romică said, he's cool, let him be.

Arriving in Chicago as a wide-eyed 10-year-old-newcomer with an accent and a predisposition for bald enthusiasm, the prospect of cool seemed far away indeed. Because books could not select their company, they could not rebuff me from their society. So I read and learned about how best not to be a sucker from the lives of others through their

written stories. Since the contemporary oral tradition seemed under the lock and key of fashion, I sought the company of books and litigious types and engineers. Those craftspersons of precision like engineers, physicists, and medical doctors attract me still mainly because of their vocabularies and lack of philosophy. What emotions? What difference between good and bad or wrong and right? What beauty in the eye of the geneticist, the organic chemist, or the surgeon?

If contemporary neuroscience is right and we can't actually multitask (our attention can only quickly shift from one thing to another), the diasporic subject must choose between being fashionable and being in the moment by paying attention. But is this a true choice? After all, why can't fashion coexist with ethics? Perhaps learning to enjoy such a teeter-totter-dialectic between surface and depth presents one path toward defining the 21st century glocal citizen in her proper posture, melancholic yet engaged. Perhaps striking a just-in-time balance between relational aesthetics and social justice offers the best way to put contemporary philosophy to work.

What does it mean to be hip? It means to be urban, wired, social, to occupy the latest spaces, to perform the most contemporary habits of mind and dress and body type according to a precise code. Nastic questions come to mind when considering how fashion relates to justice. For instance: what might be the relational aesthetics and social justice concerns cropping up between tight jeans and hate speech? If language performs our social truths, how do we even begin to have a public debate about the acceptable borders between the need for freedom of speech and the right not to be harmed by words? If being hip means being urban, multinational, vanguard; does being unhip end up meaning that one has to be rural, nationalistic, or even parochial?

Speaking about downtown Los Angeles on BBC2 in the early 1990s, Dr. Edward Soja mentions how postmodern architecture can manifest as the feeling of de-centeredness quickly followed by a desire to submit to authority, any authority. (Soja) How does this desire to find a center relate to the desire to lose a center? Wanting to find a center seems intuitive enough to understand since everyone wants to feel at home in the world but who in their right minds would ever want to lose their center? Well, poets and artists and science workers need to risk fallibility to advance their work. But why do visionary knowledge makers want to leave the city? Why does the center never hold for history-makers? Poets and scientists alike take up the prodigal road away from home to enlarge the pinhole of attention through which experience creeps. Any one interested in seeing her self with more precision has got to find a way to gain some conceptual leverage on that self. More precisely, I find myself asking as a first-generation American poet interested in finding his place (while also trying to lose his place): how do the benefits and the hardships of feeling lost play out in contemporary American poetry?

Is it hip to be ontological?

Recently, Swedish-American poet Johannes Goransson has suggested a link between the hipster and an excessive aesthetic on his popular blog: "The hipster lets the art become excessive, lets art become "graffitiesque" (ie when art takes over the space of the everyday)." (Montevidayo) Perhaps hipster poets like Goransson, Ariana Reines, Sean Kilpatrick, James Pate, Anne Boyer, Larry Sawyer, Adrienne Dodt, Lara Glenum, CA Conrad, Josh Bell, Matthew Guenette, Mathias Svalina, Rebecca Wolff, Dolly

Lemke, John Beer, Jen Hofer, Kasey Mohammad, Bhanu Kapil, Nick Twemlow, Brenda Iijima, Danielle Pafunda, Dan Coffey, Marc Vincenz, Mark Nowak, Denise Dooley, Edmond Caldwell, Phil Metres, Virginia Konchan, Andrew Lundwall, Anis Shivani, Sean Bonney, Dorothea Lasky, Mathew Timmons, Tao Lin, Michael Savitz, Amish Trivedi, Kate Durbin, Hoa Nguyen, Michael Dumanis, Daniel Nester, Saul Williams, Michael Robins, Julie Strand, Andrei Codrescu, Saviana Stanescu, Lemon Hound, Amy King, John Ashbery, Laura Jaramillo, Linh Dinh, Sherman Alexie, Marcus Slease, Nada Gordon, Brooks Johnson, Amaranth Borsuk, Kenneth Goldsmith, Vanessa Place, Matvei Yankelevich, Ana Bozicevic, Paul A. Toth, Larissa Shmailo, Rusty Barnes, Jacqueline Lalley, Lisa Samuels, Pierre Joris, Reynorman Escobar, Philip Jenks, Steve Halle, Andrew Demcak, Daniel Borzutzky, Amy Lawless, Antler, Mike Topp, Iam Sparrow, Joshua Clover, Anne Waldman, Qi Peng, Soham Petel, Sally Evans, Gabriel Gudding, Kim Addonizio, Simone Muench, Ben-Sandra Doller, Marvin Tate, Mary Biddinger, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Joy Harjo, Kent Johnson, Jacob Russell, Kat Georges, Jenny Boully, Deborah Poe, Chuck Stebelton, Devin King, Nick Demske, Toby Altman, Fred Mecklenburg, Juan Felipe Herrera, Zach Savich, Eileen Myles, Amina Cain, Forrest Gander, Quincy Troupe, Johanna Drucker, Matthias Regan, Michelle Taransky, Matthea Harvey, Brian Evenson, Vero Gonzalez, Uche Nduka, Jerome Rothenberg, and others, as practitioners of excessive aesthetics, offer a range of useful responses to the moral-relativism articulated by postmodern urban spaces as outlined by Soja. Perhaps art is still that thing that helps us conceive of getting lost as an adventure.

Indubitably, this is my own randomly ordered list with my own myopic social purview and by its categorical function in no way do I intend to suggest hermetic closure or completion or even self-satisfaction. Whether hipster poets are born or made, minority and women and immigrant hipster poets certainly fetishize the center differently. After all, a list is a terrible thing to make: it bifurcates reality into ins and outs stereotypes people find themselves performing because it is easier than resisting the irresistible pressure to communicate. My list of American hipster poets can never be read twice, for new names ever rush in upon it. This list suggests a few poets not only who might be worth having a PBR tallboy with but, it also suggests—perhaps only to me—a few poets who may be among the most important tastemakers of tomorrow’s poetry.

Hipster performativity enacts a culmination of cultural capital—masked though it may be—through dress, food ways, esoteric music, sipping of working-class beer under ironic moustaches, carefully studied poses in Brooklyn subways, and so on and so forth. The Third World garment industry services the topical hipster fashion with its need for such cool commodities as much as it services the suburban mall culture, the rave culture, the hip-hop culture, etc. How could the planet’s most wired and skinny-savvy people become more aware of and engaged with the means of their own image production? Or, is class alienation cool? Perhaps class-consciousness can become “deck” (as in “to knock out,” meaning “cool” in hipster lingo) when considering anthologies—however cringingly uneven the poems—such as: *The Occupy Wall Street Poetry Anthology*, *100 Thousand Poets for Change*, and *Poets Against War*.

The momentous lesson of art, idleness, excess, surface, and of the Humanities in general remains that we lug our prisons on our backs, right above our necks. If words perform our captivity, words may also perform our liberation. Liberation from what? Words just might perform our liberation from institutional, historical, and psychological

conditions limiting the individual's critical and creative imaginations. The crazy Hegelian paradox that being is nothingness and nothingness is being reveals that behind every single breath, behind every single moment of our lives resides the possibility to change. This is the idealistic heart of the Left in all its frail utopian glory. Art and self-reflecting activities like producing and reading creative and critical cultural works can help us realize our lives' *sui generis* potential while honking and hollering on our way in the traffic of everyday living. Or to paraphrase the late Whitney Houston's 1984 hit song "The Greatest Love of All":

I believe the hipsters are our future
Teach them well and let them lead the way
Show them all the beauty they possess inside
Give them a sense of pride to make it easier
Let the hipster's laughter remind us how we used to be

While poaching Whitney Houston may not solve all of our postmodern ailments, it does reiterate that the mindfulness of the young, wired, adaptable, educated, and urban is the best chance we have got as a social order to realizing that the air we breathe matters more than the financial profit we may reap. Additionally, Houston's lyrics warrant a *caveat lector* against pride's identitarian temptations as a salutary measure combating oppression as well as against the sentimentality we tend to ascribe to our own biographical travails and highlights when gazing back upon them. Pride is like revenge: it only propagates a paradigm of violence rather than taking up the difficult struggle of attempting to communicate with others beyond categorical stereotypes such as gender and national identities and the complex tunnels of sublation. Pride, like revenge, appeals to the individual's experience, while—quite ironically—snuffing it out with the ashes of fellow feeling. Sentimentality likewise iterates a false memory, bereft of the pungency and caroling hurt of the past that might otherwise be alive in our language usages except for our desire to laminate our feelings.

Keeping in mind this list of hipster poets and set of linguistic and social problems, what does it mean to take seriously the central lesson of the European avant-garde, via Tristan Tzara, that: life is art? How can contemporary American hipster poets' various understandings of excess help us understand the terrifying idea that life is an adventure and not just a time-keeping instrument? Art dares suggest that we may not have been born just to work and die. Art provokes questioning the meaning of dying well while dreaming in sunset brochures and retirement packages. Art—not philosophy—musters the courage to ask if we were born only to die with yet another anonymous utopia wafting up to the rafters from our unclenching jaws. If the twentieth century teaches us that our values are relative, what kind of self-expression or Romanticism or precision fantasies do writers who are hip to the death of the center permit themselves?

Describing herself (and literature as such ... since biography is written and, as well, it writes the self she describes), Ariana Reines writes in *Coeur de Lion*:

I don't mean some internet-ready
self-reflexivity, self-irony, whatever
people call it, as if a self were so fixed

just ironizing “it” could constitute
a surge of consciousness. (7)

Certainly, Reines is right: a self is not so fixed, a ready target awaiting its adornment in order to bridge somatic biography with rhetorical subject position. Writing (or being) isn’t that simple, or that inert. At least it isn’t that simple or inert for those poets who read and have come to understand that history has a history. Identity is a powder keg just waiting for the mixed metaphor to be pulled from under its feet. Delete the center and what have you got left to ironize?

The glamor and allure of being too cool for school applies to the standard hipster topoi of B-movies and esoteric music as much as it does to pop culture and mass media. This ironic—if not always critical—distance can easily swirl into the ever-fascinating lint-cosmos any given hipster may find while gazing into his or her respective navel. Or, if the polished trick-mirrors of hipster sarcasm morph into the biting irony of critical self-awareness, this distance can operate as the space where hipster consciousness joins the spectrum of historical consciousness. How might this identity commodification with its aloof consumer lifestyle trigger self-awareness in the hipster poet about her or his status as an ontological tool? Perhaps hipster poets might take up death gazing to cure their navel gazing affliction: perhaps empathy starts with a cracked mirror. Who cracks the hipster poets’ mirror though? Who is going to radicalize hipsters and subsistence farmers all over the Second and Third Worlds?

Here Reines is holding pop culture at a properly disdainful and therefore hip distance:

Apocalypto is an awesome title, we agree.
And Mel Gibson is like some kind of grotesque rendition
Of a stupid, stupid Georges Bataille
But his bloodlust, in its excess, is dull.
Its voracity runs too headlong
Into the carnage, or something, it doesn’t
Exploit the eros of violent possibility enough. (12)

To face death with a look and to become aroused by the corporeal knowledge of how much there is of being without us in it: this is one way to pursue “the eros of violent possibility”. Artful writing exploits this erogenous zone found on the social relations corpus. Literary writing communes—and even enters into erotic relations—with the dead and dying since it knows itself as already dead and dying, and so never more fully alive or living. What about looking *life* in the face and becoming aroused by the corporeal knowledge of how much there is of being *with* us in it? What about the excess of being as an alternative arousal site to necrophilia? Erotic arousal, it would seem, is relative not only to the individual but also to life and death itself. It’s not that Nietzsche was any less Romantic and in lust with the possibility of his own annihilation than contemporary American hipster poets, it’s that he was more critically aware of his Romantic impulses and their potential uses.

The Left is dead. Rumors of the Left’s still being alive have been greatly exaggerated and greatly promulgated to serve the need for an abundant balance spectacle

between the cultural elite parties, those perennial insiders. If anything may still unite the aesthetic Left, the skeptical faith in the possibility of possibility may. Aesthetic progress, unlike its evil twin moral progress which hasn't budged forth one iota, does not need to abandon rationality to consider itself as having advanced in the many eyes of its beholders since its vital premises depend on amoral, hedonistic, paradoxical sets of best practices rather than on linear, authoritative, and fixed positions.

Privy to the metabolic afterglow of French ideas running through their various gestation cycles, the Reines reader hangs on to his or her dear sympathies and a lemon pig. Reines' *Coeur de Lion* is like Lyn Hejinian's *My Life* in that it serves as an example of a self-reflexive text not naïvely perpetuating the intentional fallacy by confusing circumstantial biography with its rhetorical subject position. Reflecting on the rather self-obsessed and confessional mode of the book, Reines' speaker writes:

When do you
Decide you're talking to
Literature too? It's hard
To separate a body from
The words it lets fall.
And then the difference
Between what's written
And what seems, outside
Of writing, almost just to be.
Writing has to do with
Time. It comes very close
After. Or
It can. This is very
Close after.
So close that it could
Scare me. I hope it
Will. I really hope it will. (50)

Perhaps as fair a question: when do you decide literature is talking back? The body and language go hand in hand in time. The writing and reading body has to do with time because the language of the body cannot be split from the body of the language. And since no word is ever the person, place, or thing itself, all language is of the body. Figures of speech only make this corpus-centric circumference more obvious as they body forth their meanings. Writing is a kind of staring off into nothingness and—once timed, once embossed by the fiction of time—this blank gaze becomes the auto-terrorizing instrument of our moment-chewing selves. In this way, writing down the moment becomes momentous, monstrous.

What kind of nothing do you believe in? What kind of nothing do your poems represent? Which nihilism represents you as a poet: Nietzschean fecundity or confessional solipsism or another? Do you prefer to lose your past, your faith, your self in the infinite music of the void through Dionysian excess or in puritanical minimalism with its hidden Apollonian authority or in some other direction? How do your poems "take responsibility for their freedom" as Sartre put it? Camus found relief when the Sisyphian boulder was

rolling back down the mountain. Where do you find relief? Is finding relief and closure why you write your poems?

To take a note from America's menacing twenty-first century political rhetoric, make no mistake about it: this article points the way to no *moral* progress in the form of a True or Good or Holy or Official or Professional contemporary American poetry, instead it tries to point the way to *aesthetic* progress through self-awareness of our habits of mind.

All fashion and no nightmare, makes hipster poets dull boys and girls. Textual self-reflection—a poetry and poetics admixture—has got to mean noticing the monster underneath the Fedora hat and the *Urban Outfitters* costume, noticing not only the lack of moral progress poets represent in the world but also the lack of *potential* moral progress poets represent in the world.

In his gothic and Google-age-surrealist book *Entrance to a colonial pageant in which we all begin to intricate*, Johannes Goransson writes: “His dingle-dangle is a strange fruit. Get out of here if you don't know how to raise a child, how to save a child, from this disease. It's a disease of language. I suspect I have it already. Shit.” (6) And in his most recent book *Haute Surveillance*, Goransson writes: “It's a ridiculous death I am living and I live it ridiculously in an economy of trickle-down disease.”

It's dark and concave inside the Goransson mind, weaving in and out of theoretical psychologies and musicology with a bellyache from ethical perturbations and Freudian croutons getting soggy in the vestibule. Georges Bataile lingo economy meets Billie Holiday's rage. It's 10:00 PM; do you know where your inner child is? Goransson understands that without a well-nourished inner child the imagination withers in the vein. If you don't put Fellini in, you can't get Fellini out.

In 1922, Tzara said: “DADA is useless, like everything else in life ... DADA is a virgin microbe which penetrates with the insistence of air into all those spaces that reason has failed to fill with words and conventions.” If language is a contagious disease as Tzara, William S. Burroughs, Laurie Anderson, Goransson, and others have said, I think we'd be better off joining language. Rather than resist the virus of language, we might think of the contagion as food for the excess of being since taking up arms against the tides of language would end the troubles of human experience.

Sean Kilpatrick's sexual and aggressive book called *fuckscares* offers a series of horrific images in a variety of textual shapes cutting up pith and anger and idiom and confession all with a syntax that implicates the reader in this apocalyptic mess. He writes:

Neat breaks of ammo stung the weather.
They played my father's rigor mortis over the loudspeaker.
Doctors with poor eyesight wearing rubber boots
Through his carrion, with southern accents in his carrion,
On lunch break, the color of lotion, his carrion in tents,
Said, “toothbrush removes father.” They
Said, “he served us well, your daddy pile
Of Frogger super-genes gone splat”. (24)

Here the hipster speaker turns his gaze on death. To gaze upon the mess shaped by our lust for allegory and profit is not only to say, “Fuck it all,” but also to actually fuck it all

away by so saying. Contemporary cynicism has appropriated only the shallowest lesson—like a fleeting attention span—from Cubist and Surrealist cutup techniques, evacuating politics and history from these methods. Kilpatrick's scenes of no escape present risible war, stiff corpses, propaganda, nightmares, disgust, precision, obsession, and forlorn regret. Skepticism, if not indeed hope—that arbitrage scheme of the imagination—offers contemporary American hipster poets a method for undermining the death-drive of profiteers; while the Internet presents all of us with the necessary network to communicate and organize such knowledge economy resistance.

It is no secret, Americans like their personal space and the Internet would seem to offer the ultimate in disembodied connectedness with its main utopian promise of a ubiquitous self. However, because we conceive of the Internet as a kind of space-space continuum that operates somewhere out there and out of time, it performs Dr. Soja's "spatial turn" in the Humanities as a modal default. Because spatial thinking is the modal default of the Internet, an uncensored Internet is the most powerful instrument in the Democracy 2.0 movement. Do contemporary American hipster poets understand the need to protect an ideologically unencumbered medium of information exchange?

How does spatiality relate to the cool poets? Contemporary American hipster poets comprise a network of agglomeration in urban centers and as a causal consequence of this proximity to one another they create the necessary buzz for the literary mutations we come to recognize as aesthetic progress. Certainly, various colonial projects continue to benefit from the myth of progress but isn't the myth of progress also the principal way in which each generation comes to understand the geography of the past?

If the hipster makes art that is everywhere, does the marginalized maker make art that is nowhere? If we are the ones who construct space in poems and in burnt out downtown districts of Detroit (along with the Chinese), what is the role of the oligarch who sponsors building projects? When a city generates excess, this garbage or grotesque excess offers once again the primary lesson of the European avant-garde: life is art. Consider the terrain of mortality; consider performing life as a fellow traveler to death. After all: nihilism shows us the amorality of fashion, but only if that amorality is seen from a critical distance rather than just lived in the false comfort of an unaffordable innocence. How, then, do we exploit the eros of violent possibility so we may live our art to the fullest?

Are immigrants better at putting deconstruction to work?

As an immigrant myself, I think I understand Jacques Derrida because he was also an immigrant. The immigrant experience—mine, to be sure—is one of becoming decentered and of finding one self in a foreign place where one has to introduce one self (and to be introduced) as a representative abstraction of another culture and as a brief (and textual) identity. If deconstruction acts as the *de facto* method put to work by many postmodern (or hipster) writers, then dislocation acts as a biographical trope for the radical multiplication of readings.

To strategically essentialize based on my experience, I would agree that ESL poets see and hear English from the outside as a strange and awkward medium because learning to communicate with a new language demands more sensitive

attention to its materiality than it does for native speakers. The shock of the idiomatic phrase delights the foreign tongue because the foreigner hears (as does John Ashbery) in the wisdom of slang and clichés the horded culture of a people, a zeitgeist or an essence of a place in time, a myth of origin. The foreign poet takes delight in these loaded everyday dictums and listens with his tongue. (Tanta 29)

Poetry is dead. Rumors of poetry's still being alive have been greatly exaggerated and greatly promulgated in the service of war profiteering. The future of poetry is Creative Nonfiction. Verse or the breaking of lines into discrete acoustic, visual, semantic, breath, or idiomatic units is as over—and as quaint—as the villanelle was to Walt Whitman. Having said the above, the quicksand of narrative with its immersive pleasures—readily commodifiable by glocal capital—stands bloated and waiting to be exploded by the raw teeth of form. Content comes and content goes, but only form will break the bones of our assumptions.

Musing on our mania for the new, Andrei Codrescu writes: “The most valuable commodity, right after human energy, is *style*. If styles don't change to arouse us to trade in yesterday's model for today's, the world collapses. Style feeds capital, and so it can never be allowed to devolve into the familiar, it must aspire to multidimensionality, to complexity ... to poetry.” (94-5) Codrescu's critical observation points to the troublesome wedding between kinds of aesthetic progress (that feeling of forward motion in cultural time) and profit-making schemes.

Deconstructing the host language and host culture and host food ways, the newcomer waffles between acculturation and assimilation. In banal and extravagant ways the immigrant has to choose between remaining a kind of billboard for national excess and blending in. The immigrant poet has to choose between representing and ignoring her or his location-trouble. Somehow, the immigrant is forced to be hip in that she or he has to create a network in order to survive, to thrive, and eventually to erect a white picket fence around a set of habits commonly known as an identity.

Performing the categorical violence in deciding what's hip and not hip remains today—as it ever was—relative to the degree of innocence afforded by various conceptual and material comforts. In the end, the choice of contemporary American hipster poets to be aware or innocent of the difficulties of mindfulness has got to be left with the individual.

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