Negative Capability, and a Feminist Metaphysics of Place in Meena Alexander's *Birthplace with Buried Stones* (2013) and *Fault Lines* (1993)

Nanya Jhingran

A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

University of Washington

2023

Committee:

Pimone Triplett

Andrew Feld

Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

English

University of Washington

Abstract

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Nanya Jhingran

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:
Pimone Triplett
Department of English

In Asian American poet Meena Alexander's work, the costs and erasures of migrancy and dislocation–both temporal and geographic–emerge as negativity dense with insight, opacities immensely generative for the poetic work of (re)making the self in place. Written in the aftermath of the failed promises of the Bandung's postcolonial vision of non-alignment, hers is a feminist postcolonial poetics that transforms the disarray and unknowing produced by exile into experiential raw material that the poet crafts into nimble, if transitory, knowledge(s) of self, place, ethnicity, gender, and desire. This thesis reads Meena Alexander's memoir *Fault Lines* (1993) and her poetry collection *Birthplace with Buried Stones* (2013) through John Keats' "negative capability," Theodor Adorno's meditations on the lyric form's societal function, and Audre Lorde's writings on poetry as an illuminative feminist technology of the erotic to show how Alexander's poetics evidence a negative capability towards what lies beneath the surface of the actual, passes as implicit or felt truth but cannot quite be integrated into the literal, that offers potent portals into a feminist reclamation of presence and meaning.

Who are we? What selves can we construct to live by? How shall we mark out space? How shall we cross the street? How shall we live another day?

Meena Alexander, *Fault Lines*

In 1956, just short of turning five, the poet Meena Alexander left India to accompany her mother in a long sea voyage to Khartoum, Sudan to join her father who had been sent there as a meteorologist and ambassador of the Indian government. In 1955, less than a year before Alexander's family embarked for Sudan, representatives from twenty-nine Asian and African states had gathered in the Indonesian city of Bandung to promote a "Third World" politics of anticolonial cooperation in economic and cultural matters and to develop a collective political vision for a decolonial Global South. Shortly after, when Sudan won its independence from British colonial rule and found itself a sovereign nation with a fledging infrastructure of self-government, Prime Minister Ismail al-Azhari drew on the spirit of South-South cooperation fomented at Bandung and asked Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru for assistance, refusing technical aid from Britain. Alexander's family thus arrived in a newly freed Sudan as emissaries of a midcentury politics of postcolonial "non-alignment," their migrancy forever framed by the postcolonial fight for a revolutionary reorganization of the global world order. In her memoir *Fault Lines*, mulling the impact of that first voyage from Kerala to Sudan, she writes:

> That first ocean crossing obsesses me. I think of it as a figuration of death. Losing sense, being blotted out, thrown irretrievably across a border. But it also provokes the imaginary. I am forced to fabricate, trust to the maquillage of words, weave tales. (Alexander 77)

Later in the same memoir, she presses further:

> Somehow, in my mind's eye, the crossing of borders is bound up with the loss of substances, with the distinct pain of substantial loss: with the body that is bound over into death, with the body that splits open to give birth. (Alexander 167)

Reflecting on the aftermath of the 20th century, from the heart of the unabating violence of another, Alexander finds in her experience the crossing of borders braided, "bound up," with the sorts of

infractions death makes on the body: how it obliterates all existent grammars of sense causing an existential dissolution that catapults one wholly into the realm of the unknown, the self becoming an opaque other. Here, wrested from the known coordinates of experience that once anchored living, the poet turns to the imaginary to reconcile the ontological ruptures produced by continuous migrations, her early and foundational loss of homeland and mother tongue, all playing out alongside the failing promise of an anticolonial future in a world ever more marked by imperial violence.

Moving across experiences of time, language, and place–childhood to motherhood, Kerala, to Sudan, to Manhattan, to Hyderabad, between Malyalam, Hindi, Arabic, and French–she finds her sense of self deterritorialized in the long voyages she regularly endured; long interregnums accompanied by acute feelings of "substantial loss," such as is experienced by bodies when crossing over into death, being rent apart in childbirth. "In [her] mind's eye" these material losses that resist languaging straddle the twin opacities of the utterly positive, (re)productive body, and the one passing into death's ultimate negation. In Alexander's work, the erasures and costs of migrancy and dislocation–both temporal and geographic–emerge as negativity dense with insight, opacities immensely generative for the poetic work of (re)making the self in place. In her poetry, one finds a feminist postcolonial poetics which transforms the disarray and unknowing produced by exile into experiential raw material that the poet crafts into nimble, if transitory, knowledge(s) of self, place, ethnicity, gender, and desire. Crafted in the long shadow of colonialism, her poetry is deeply attuned to the perverse distortions suffered by the postcolonial promise in a globalized capitalist world order relentless in its violence. For Alexander, these political and historical aporia are deeply related, even inseparable, from the aporia of bodily experience: what cannot be fully admitted about history conjoins with what evades capture in the embodied transits of life-making (reproduction) and death. For her, this spectrum of the unsayable forms a rich archive of negativity–what is present but not visible, graspable–that structures experience and puts pressure on the poet's craft. In its deep attention to the

negative, hers is a poetics that speaks to and revises across various canons: from the metaphysical poetry of John Donne to the Romantic poets' refusal of reason and logic in favor of the unknowable sublime, to the elegiac verse of South Asian poets such as Mirza Ghalib and Faiz Ahmed Faiz, American poets such as Emerson, Dickinson, Stevens, and the exilic writings of Walter Benjamin, Mahmoud Darwish, Assia Djebar. This is the varied, messy, deeply diasporic itinerary by which Meena Alexander develops what I have found to be a poetry in which exile and diaspora inform (as in, give form to) the poet's sense of what holds one's self in place and history, what sutures the everyday experience of time, place, and belonging, and what the dark discomforts of (un)belonging and desire might reveal about the violences that (de/)stabilize the realm of the social.

Her poetry collection *Birthplace with Buried Stones* unfurls in a hyper-present tense of the *now,* such that even memories are inhabited with deep attention to the minor details of everyday experience. In series of poems titled "Mother, Windblown," Alexander writes of having experienced menstruation and childbirth and finding herself suddenly unable to make meaning of her transformed sense of the present, one with no stable coordinates marking a "home". The first section, "Housekeeper," begins:

> Why such wandering–
> What has happened to home?
>
> The ruinous everyday,
> How to cope with that?
>
> To have given birth once, twice,
> And before that, to have borne witness
>
> To a clot of blood
> Drained into a china bowl.

Framed by a litany of metaphysical questions, the poem's heart resides in its desire to "cope" with the "ruinous everyday" which the speaker must endure as part of definitive, archetypal human experiences such as childbirth, where the self gives birth to what then departs from it, becomes not-itself. A loss of living self-substance, moreover, that has in the poet's experience led to the joy of two children, and

the difficult earlier experience of "have[ing[borne witness// to a clot of blood/drained into a china bowl." The poem turns to the vivid detail and minor movement of the "clot of blood" that is "drained into a china bowl" to answer larger questions of how to inhabit the violence and pain of the present. A visceral, bodily mass is transferred to a common household object–the toilet bowl–which holds in its naming traces of the relation of imperialism that make it a global commonplace. The simple clarity of this remembered image heightens the sense that the banality of the everyday pollutes even those processes that appear to transcend the violence one is experiencing. However, as the poem turns its attention to minor detail, memory is led by attention's movement also into more tender, quieter details, continuing:

> It was up there in the mountains,
> Where we loved each other,
>
> Close to a forest of whistling deodar,
> Deer too, ears pricked up.

Ending at this still, alert image of deer with "ears pricked up" somewhere nearby, the poem suggests that the salve to the "ruinous present" might also lay within the realm of ordinary and minor detail. The metaphysical exile experienced by the poet might temporarily find an anchor in deep presence and attention, a scale at which memory seems to halt temporarily and grow dense with the viscera of presence, its many and contradictory sensations. In the third section of this poem cycle, titled "Interlingual," the speaker entirely refuses dwelling in the simple past, claims:

> No, not that deaf, grave past,
> Rather to be here where I have gone on
>
> Saying yes, yes–always yes!
> To reel backwards,
>
> To be gathered (as the vagina bleeds)
> Into unerring lightness.

In favor of the present perfect ("to be here where I have gone on"), of having arrived at the moment at hand–given body by the metaphor of menstruation where the fertile body must feel the pain and the lightness of shedding lifegiving materials–the poet turns away from the known lessons offered by the "deaf, grave past" and repeatedly, insistently, affirms the viscera of the present, however unknown or obscure it may threaten to be. As the title might suggest, the "interlingual" space between the ordinary and the momentous in which the poet's experience unfolds is necessarily inchoate, unstable in meaning, threatening to insight, but also the place from where the poet may briefly make meaning in language as detail is

> Translated
> Into a mother tongue
>
> Which no one can hear
> For very long.

For the poet in exile, always having to process experience in palimpsest and multiplicity, for the female poet, whose bodily experience militates against the neatly crafted transcendentalism of the Western male poet, experience can only be given language in provisional "mother tongues" that operate at the interstices of various languages and canons and "which no one can hear/For very long." The cost of presence, and its gift, is a make-shift, pidgin "mother-tongue" which soon turns obsolete with time and distance ("long") but which also allows the poet to find a way to inhabit the messiness of the ordinary, giving the self a full sense of one's ontology, making (for now) a sort of home in it. In the coda to this poem cycle, titled "Sky-Water," the image of the deer returns, the entire landscape transformed by what the speaker now recognizes as the ambient noise that mothers memory, gives it language:

> On a cloudy slope
>
> Deer nibble cut stalks
> Of deodar and chir pine.
>
> Syllables tumble

In a milky river:

Babbling mother
Font of memory.

Every action in this final image is measured and slight: "deer nibble," "syllables tumble," a "babbling" in the air that prefigures as it anchors one's memories of the present in the past. The poem resolves the metaphysical questioning it begins with ("Why such wandering") and the frame within which this these questions arise ("the ruinous everyday") by transforming details from memory into the extended metaphor of deer nibbling beside a stream on a foggy slope, an image constellation that she reads as the "mother/font of memory." Having come unpinned in her exile, the poet resides in the concrete, felt-witness of this described memoryscape–cloud-obscured, changing, riparian–which becomes both the answer to and trace of the metaphysical impasses (exile, motherhood, pain) that spark the poem's questioning.

In Meena Alexander's poetry, image works to relentlessly index the myriad, often contradictory, impasses experienced by the exilic body-mind. In this, Alexander's is a poetics that straddles the two impulses that lead a poet to figuration: the impulse of thought, and that of feeling. A student of British poetry, educated in postcolonial India and Sudan, Alexander writes of the permission she felt upon first reading poets such as John Donne and Samuel Taylor Coleridge and discovering their deep commitment to the poem as the space in which what is thought can be felt, where thought and feeling can find a form in which to be united or temporarily reconciled. She shares, in particular, feeling an affinity towards Coleridge's notion of "organic form," "the idea that any living existence, a cloud, a plant, a poem, a person, might have its own unique inner teleology, apparent only in the flowering of the fullest form, a logic, a *svadharma*, that could not be questioned" (Alexander 143). In this conception of "organic form," she finds permission to maintain fidelity to the felt truth of an experience over the demands made by "decorum" or the "principled order" that governs language. At the same time, being an Indian poet writing in English first in Khartoum, then

in Hyderabad, and finally in the United States, Alexander also acknowledges the unique contradiction of receiving these permissions in the language proliferated throughout the colonized world, adding: "Yet even as these liberating thoughts came to me in English, I was well aware that the language had to be pierced and punctured lest the thickness of the white skin cover over my atmosphere, my very self. The language I used had to be supple enough to reveal the intricate mesh of otherness in which I lived and moved" (Alexander 143). Later, as she finds herself settled in the United States and having to articulate herself in relation to another received tradition, American poetry, she turns to Wallace Stevens's notion of the poetic imagination "as a violence from within that presses on the actual, the violence from without" (Alexander 229). In asking what kind of "American" poetic tradition she might find history in as an immigrant woman of color, she too finds a crucial relationship of violence between the "real" and the "imagined."

However, she finds the conditions that enable Stevens' symbolist aesthetic, what she calls its "deadened eroticism," in significant discord with her embodied experience. In particular, she finds that it is not only an imagined "violence from within" that presses on the violence of the "real" outside, but for immigrant women of color, "it is our bodies that press against the actual of America, against the barbed wires and internment camps and quotas" (Alexander 229). It is the encounter between the racialized body and the American "real," all occurring outside, that militate against truth in language.

For Alexander, it is not simply an individual, internal language of the "imagination" that must be cultivated to devise an American poetics capable of giving witness to the experience of ethnicity, but more importantly the imagination must step into and account for "the truth of our bodies". In her work, one finds a deeply woman of color feminist commitment to understanding the work of poetry as inextricable from a postcolonial politics of language, one in which "our song must also be a politics, a perilous thing, crying out for a world where the world is held high in sunlight" (Alexander

228). Drawing on Frantz Fanon, she argues for the work of poetry as the work of decolonizing language and dismantling the imperialism it propagates. The "barbed wire" that marks America's imperial sovereignty becomes in her work a steady metaphor for language's violent fencing of the embodied, female, Asian American experience such that to give witness to this violent wire fencing, "in our writing we need to evoke a chaos, a power co-equal to the injustices that surround us" (Alexander 228). In articulating her task as an Asian American poet writing at the end of the 20th century, she argues for a poetics of "chaos," a negativity drawn from the embodied truth of the imagination which alone might be equipped to press against the violence of hegemonic languages and traditions that render certain forms of witness inadmissible. Indeed, Meena Alexander's refusal to look away from the violence that permeates all experience, a violence which cannot be spoken of without threatening the stability of language itself, marks the precipice at which her poetics break from the predominantly male traditions of British Romanticism and American pragmatisms–poetic traditions predicated on an individuated subject for whom a reverence for Beauty allows the possibility of (temporarily) transcending political and intellectual concerns, in which the poet must retreat inward and away from the commotion of the social in search of poetic truth.

In departing from these received traditions, Alexander's work turns to postcolonial, feminist, and Marxist historical materialist thought to develop a theory of the work poetry does in the world, how the poem might relate and be accountable to the social. In "Lyric Poetry and Society," Marxist cultural critic Theodor Adorno points to a telling idiosyncrasy in the traditional understanding of the lyric poem's staging of a hyper-individuated speaker-subject who can within the poem, through an immediacy of thought and feeling, transcend the social contradictions that give rise to it. Drawing on examples from European lyric poetry such as Rilke's thing poems, Adorno argues that the lyric subject's production of an intensely private subjectivity that might find in the poem a way to gain distance from society, from the crudeness of what things are, "is itself social in nature" and "implies

a protest against a social situation that every individual experiences as hostile, alien, cold, oppressive, and this situation is imprinted in reverse on the poetic work: the more heavily the situation weighs upon it, the more firmly the work resists by refusing to submit to anything heteronomous and constituting itself solely in accordance with its own laws." That the lyric subject turns away from the social order to develop a distinct form for experiences that transcend the given logics and materialities of the social, is itself evidence of the lyric as a sort of alternative social technology. It is precisely the alienations produced by what's out there, so to speak, that the speaker turns away from it and towards herself. Thus, in as much as a given lyric account produces forms of being and experience that transcend the logic of their present, this same account also contains within it an analytics and poetics of its own time, of the realities that condition its making. For Adorno, this is how the lyric poem (when successful in its refusal of present social logics) can act as "a philosophical sundial of history"– in it, "through the individual and his spontaneity, objective historical forces rouse themselves within the poem, forces which are propelling a restricted and restricting social condition beyond itself to a more humane one" (Adorno 65, 60). In this way, the lyric's temporary, yet internally complete, retreat from society allows it to become a vessel and technology that produces new ways of understanding how to inhabit history, and how to traverse the impasses of a present by inhabiting language in a new way.

Crucially, this understanding of the lyric poem as providing a social critique through its immanent content–that which comes from within the text, that which dwells inside–is taken up in the writings of late 20th century feminist poets such as Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, Diane DiPrima, June Jordan, and more. In their writings, these third wave feminist poet-intellectuals recharge this argument so as to reveal the importance of acknowledging the sociopolitical stakes of poetic creativity for the development of feminist coalitional politics that are anchored in women's (different, situated) embodied knowledges. In an essay titled "Poetry is not a Luxury," Black

Feminist poet Audre Lorde writes of poetry as the illumination of that which resides buried, felt but not languaged, in women's internal repository of experience and wisdom. Lorde calls poetry "the skeleton architecture of our lives," arguing that,

> The quality of light by which we scrutinize our lives has direct bearing upon the product which we live, and upon the changes which we hope to bring about through those lives. It is within this light that we form those ideas by which we pursue our magic and make it realized. This is poetry as illumination, for it is through poetry that we give name to those ideas which are, until the poem, nameless and formless-about to be birthed, but already felt. That distillation of experience from which true poetry springs births thought as dream births concept, as feeling births idea, as knowledge births (precedes) understanding. (Lorde 1)

In consonance with Adorno's claim that what connects the intense privation of the lyric to the social world from and to which it emerges is not the author's social viewpoint or an ideology smuggled in from the outside but precisely something that can only emerge from the inside of the poem as a result of its crafting, Lorde presents the poem as a technology of "illumination," a "quality of light" that allows for the revelation of some deeply felt but as yet inarticulable, obfuscated knowledge. Strikingly, for Lorde, this negative, dark internal space that poetry might allow women to navigate is the space of embodied feelings that have not been afforded the social acknowledgement of languaging. As antidote, she finds that "our poems formulate the implications of ourselves, what we feel within and dare make real (or bring action into accordance with), our fears, our hopes, our most cherished terrors" (Lorde 1). Like for Meena Alexander, for Lorde the stakes of poetic creativity lie precisely in its ability to sculpt knowledge from the opacities of everyday embodied experience, of feelings so in flux we must delve into the space of the poem to craft a form in which they can be transformed to insight.

In another piece titled "The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," Lorde writes of this space of as-yet-unnamed interior knowledge as constituting the zone of "the erotic," writing that "the erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings." Across these writings, the sphere of the felt becomes an archive that lives within the body,

that catches the traces of one's experience of and in the world, and which exists prior to language; to access this sphere language must come into contact with a certain destabilizing chaos. This, across these works, is the poem's task. In Meena Alexander's poetry, an engagement with the erotic surfaces as a lyric of the intense present in whose fissures and seams the poet locates traces of a history to home in. The poem's syntax becomes a way of mapping the shifting, contradictory logics of this experiential repository. In its deep indefinition, its resistance to categorization as one specific and limited sort of feeling, process, or form, this approach to poetics resonates with John Keats's idea, mentioned briefly in a letter to his brothers, of "negative capability" which he defines as "when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason […] That with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration." (Keats). The work of the poet for Keats is the work of the negative, the less than known, that which eludes reason or language. However, in Meena Alexander's and Audre Lorde's hands, this negative capability latches onto not only that which is uncertain or doubtful, but more importantly is brought to bear on that which is deeply certain, has crystallized as an embodied truth, contains within it an answer or wisdom which has not yet emerged in the verbal consciousness as (and which therefore might prefigure) knowledge. For their particularly feminist poetics, the stakes of a capacity for the negative is to map an understanding of the intricate, intergenerational, felt reason that forms the landscape and topography of the interior, and which thus anchors one's desire and power.

In a poem from the final section of *Birthplace with Buried Stones,* titled "Question Time," Alexander engages this capacity for dwelling within the negativity of one's hidden, interior emotional responses in the charged social space of the Q&A that follows a poetry reading. As before, the poem begins from within a memory, filling the past with presence through intricate description:

> I remember the scarred spine
> Of mountains the moon slips through,

We find the speaker gazing at a wide landscape at night, distance and darkness forming the remembered atmosphere in which the poem begins. Crucially, though this first couplet renders a landscape through a bodily metaphor, the metaphor itself is interrupted and spread out over the course of two enjambed lines. Thus, the first image the reader encounters is that of a "scarred spine," an image of vertebral injury that does not as yet read as a vehicle for anything besides itself. It is only when we move into the second line that the "scarred spine" transforms into the wide, ridged landscape of "mountains the moon slips through." As a result of this attenuation, however, the first detail the viewer retains is that of a body under duress, and we carry this image into the description of the wider scene in which memory plays out. As a reader, the enjambment of this metaphor across two lines of a couplet allows that first image serve as a conceptual anchor for the poem's concerns, before it is turned into a vehicle for another description, such that we continue to read the "scarred spine" into all that comes after: we move through the poem in view of the injuries sustained by this "spine," a column of support that gives form and stability to the body which here carries the signs of a previous injury that has healed and left traces on its surface. Too, the syntactical placement of the verb ("slips through") in the second line allows for the a sturdy spine–of both body and mountain–to be established while something is set fleeing, slipping through it as we leave the couplet. Having established this capacious concept-metaphor that blends the temporality of the vertebrate body with the geologic time of a mountain range, the poem moves us into the scene of the social by way of a series of images sutured by associations of hues of orange-reds:

> Fox fire in a stump, bushes red with blisters,
> Her question, a woman in a sweatshirt,
>
> Hand raised in a crowded room–
> *What use is poetry?*

It is as though the irritated redness of the scar has spread through the entire landscape, as filtered through the speaker's seeing, painting it all in hues of red ("fox fire in a stump," "bushes red with

blisters"), such that when we get to the "literal" situation at hand ("her question, a woman in a sweatshirt") it seems that the "question," too, is somehow within this injurious image family. Each image follows, and transforms, the visual material or hue of what comes before until we land at the question asked by a woman in the audience rendered in italics. The first sentence of the poem is thus a series of images, placed in constellation and separated by commas, enjambed across the first three couplets. The speaker makes their way to the memory of this question necessarily by way of these images in which a certain danger, a burning sort of injury, has taken over the landscape. When we finally reach the decisive, bodily image of the woman's "hand raised in a crowded room–," it carries with it the figurative weight of what comes before. This is the language that Alexander gives us for the feeling of the present in the past of this memory: the immediacy and dangerous edge the question comes sheathed in.

Once the question has been uttered within the poem, the speaker's attention catches on a light flickering overhead. As readers, we are back inside the context of the room within which the reading is taking place, though the language we are given allows for the flickering light to operate on various scales: inside the room, and outside in the mountain-scape at night; the wiring both electrical and drawing our connection to larger circuitries that may be facing interruptions in energy flow:

> Above us, lights flickered,
> Something wrong with the wiring.
>
> I turned and saw the moon whirl in water,
> The Rockies struck with a mauve light,
>
> Sea creatures cut into foliage.

Again, the poet is everywhere at once: the lights inside and the lights outside conjoin in the poet's consciousness, what is of the water is carved into the mountain ("sea creatures cut into foliage"), and so the woman's question is set to bristle against all these larger forms of refraction and reflection. As before, the space of memory offers Alexander many seamless portals, and from this

view of the Rockies at night the speaker is transported to another, unnamed, space where she is together with another person. The poem continues:

> In the shadow of a shrub once you and I
>
> Brushed lips and thighs,
> Dreamt of a past that frees its prisoners.

This memory of togetherness, unfolding in "the shadow of a shrub," marks a potent volta in the poem. The speaker departs from the immediate situation in which the poem started–this room where the Q&A is taking place–into a memory of being with a beloved ("you and I"). This memory is ushered in as though coaxed along with the consonant whispers of "In the shadow of a shrub once," the s-sounds evoking the sound of a wind blowing through the shrub. Though the poem has thus far looked to the wide apertures of mountain-faces and moonlit skies, it now contracts to this small, dim place where the speaker shares, elliptically, the sensual memory of having "brushed lips and thighs," an intimacy shared between two people which is qualified with the apposite clause "dreamt of a past that frees its prisoners." In these lines, Alexander crafts a syntax in which each clause stands besides its other, with no clear hierarchy enforced between them. That this intimate memory is enjambed across couplets serves to suture the present with the past with the lyric reflection on the past. Then, as though abruptly, this embroidery is rent apart as the speaker re-enters the space of the Q&A, its alienating distances:

> Standing apart I looked at her and said–
> We have poetry
>
> So we do not die of history.
> I had no idea what I meant.

In this final movement, when we return to the question asked of the poet, this recollection's form of address appears transformed: it seems to be addressed to the beloved of the intimate, sensual memory, to that "you." This comes across as a familiar "you"—who has participated in the memory, who can access the intimacy the audience cannot, or it is addressed to the reader of the collection

who has glanced what this "dreaming," "this brushing" entails—such that when we return to the memory of what the poet said in response to the question and admits not knowing what they meant, she has also signaled that there might have been a form of poetic communion in which we can be freed from the past and so "do not die of history"—but the room of the reading and the question itself is not this engagement. The poem ends with a confession which might seem to discredit the speaker, make them unreliable, by revealing their own uncertainty about what they claimed. However, if we place stress on the term "idea," the poem also suggests that the "use of poetry" is perhaps accessible or potent in the dim moments where lovemaking–or similar forms of embodied being-with-an/other–can enable dreams of fleeing the shackles of one's past, a use value that is recoverable only as a set of felt memory-images through the act of poetic reflection. Thus, the poet might speak of the value of poems instinctively, as felt knowledge, which does not translate directly into an "idea" that can be traded across the faulty "wiring" of the Q&A room.

By syntactically mapping where experiences might suture across history(/ies), and at what distance, the poem offers a notion of poetic value that sits within the poet's body, in an embodied set of sensual memory-images, and which is only ephemerally surfaced in the poem itself. Outside the poem, the poet cannot speak of this in the imperative, treading tentatively across her own unknowing. The capacious "you" addressed in the poem might speak of a beloved or metaphorically of the intimacy shared between poet and reader, but it is within this embodied dyad that the use value of poetry or what it evokes/invokes resides. That there is a felt truth to which Alexander spoke in her response at the Q&A is only evidenced by the fact of her having said it and the confession within the poem, in the past tense ("I didn't know what I meant"), that this unknowing might be transformed into some form of insight because of, and in the form of, the poem's meditation on this incident.

In this way, the poem cleverly deconstructs its title, "Question Time," into a sort of response to the audience member's question: perhaps the poem can allow us to question how time works in our world, how we can inhabit it with greater creativity and freedom, how the poem might allow us to return time and time again to show how certain incidences reverberate and connect with others across a lifetime. In *Fault Lines*, speaking of poetry's capacity for mapping our experience of the world and the self, Alexander writes,

> It seems to me that in its rhythms the poem, the artwork, can incorporate *scansions of the actual, the broken steps, the pauses, the blunt silences, the brutal explosions*. So that what is pieced together is a work that exists as an object in the world, but also, in its fearful consonance, its shimmering stretch, allows the world entry. I think of it as a recasting that permits our lives to be given back to us, fragile, precarious. (Alexander 330; emphasis added)

As a poem, or vessel, works through such a "scansion of the actual" that in gathering a series of "fearful consonances" and "blunt silences," it allows something of the world to be acknowledged, allowed entry, by offering a discretely formed art-object as a witness response. In reading *Birthplace with Buried Stones,* it is this negative capability towards what lies beneath the surface of the actual, passes as implicit or felt truth but cannot quite be integrated into the literal, that offers potent portals into a feminist reclamation of presence and meaning. In the aftermath of the loss of motherland and mother tongue, in the disarray produced by multiple migrations undertook in the context of violent and unresolved histories, Alexander finds in poetry a method and a gateway into producing momentary points of anchor, belief, and knowing. For the diasporic poet, poetry and the act of poetic making become portals to temporary zones of belonging and integration, fragile but internally complete. Where the world outside, hyper-nationalized and yoked to ethnopolitics that are unfriendly to hybridity and crossover, is unable to account for the texture of one's diasporic, gendered experience, where the contradiction can be acutely felt but is not articulated or acknowledged within the realm of the said and the actual, the poet turns to the space of poetry to

craft a form where these experiences can surface, mingle across the span of a lifetime, and come into some sort of provisional articulation that creates for them a home in the world.

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