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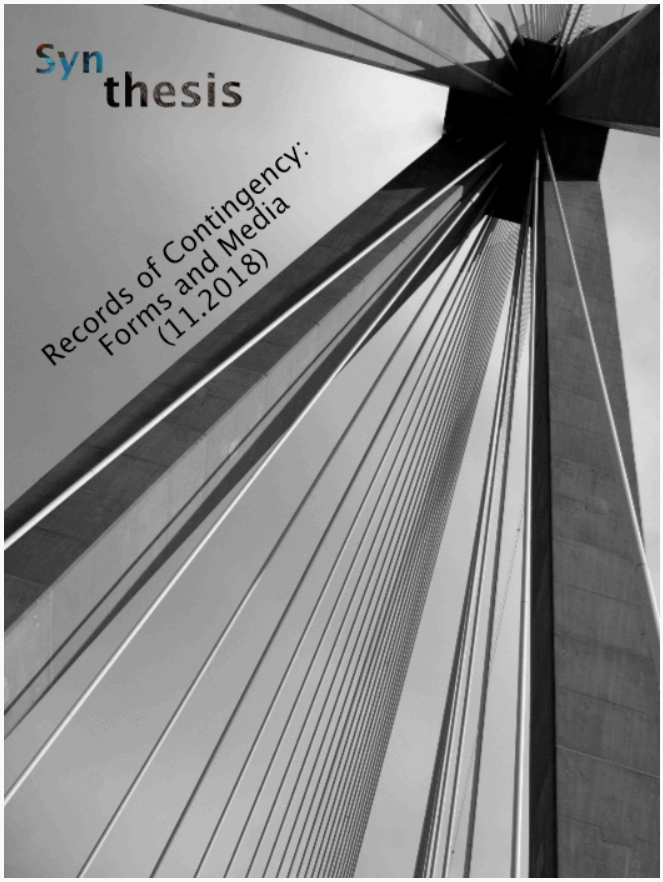

"Poethic" Particulars: Anne Waldman's Poetics of Detail in Manatee/Humanity

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"Poethic" Particulars: Anne Waldman's Poetics of Detail in *Manatee/Humanity*

Laurence Bécel

Abstract
In *Manatee/Humanity* (2009), Anne Waldman investigates our world through a poetics of detail that records diversity in what Édouard Glissant calls the 'totality-world,' against the threat of 'monolithic' representations of the world that, in Waldman's terms, are shaped by totalitarian discourses. The poet's language engages her own relationship with the world. As Waldman asks: "What is poetry's relationship to the composite world, /in the relative world?" In *Manatee/Humanity*, Waldman deals with relativity through a Buddhist conception of time. Besides, her poetic quest echoes Édouard Glissant's definition of a poetics of Relation and challenges the ability of poetic writing to account for a Glissantian relationship with the world. Waldman's interrogation also entails a questioning of the relation between the 'particulars' of the world and the world as structure. This essay argues that Waldman uses detail as an epistemological standpoint for herpoetics of interconnected particulars which is entwined with an ethical approach to our contingent world, and may be defined as a poetics of Relation.

"The microcosm is the host for us on this planet."
Anne Waldman, *Outrider*

"A detail is not a fragment, it interpellates totality."
Édouard Glissant, *Philosophie de la Relation*[1]

Anne Waldman addresses historical contingency through her commitment as a poet, performer and activist. Moreover, for half a century, Waldman has been archiving others' poetry at Naropa University and her own poetic work has also been dedicated to "keeping a record, scribed indelibly in water in sand, in a saddlebag with items of regret" (*Outrider* 28). More specifically, she purports to perpetuate the power of live poetry readings by making sure that recordings are

saved and made available to the public. Waldman's concern for preservation is political; it originates in the felt necessity to safeguard diversity against the threat of "monolithic" representations of the world shaped by dominant discourses in the United States. Waldman refuses to "[Sit] outside the monolith, American governance,/unable to shatter its hold" (*Outrider* 12). By preserving counter discourses, she wants "to let humans of the future know some of us were not just killing one another" (*Gossamurmur* 30). Through her "Archive of the multiple voices" (*Gossamurmur* 29), Waldman challenges the domination of mass media records of the truth, thus responding to Noam Chomsky's call for the "responsibility of intellectuals"against standardised accounts of the world in the United States and elsewhere: "There is a plurality of the mind, of the imagination./ There is a plurality vs. Dominance" (*Outrider* 42). Her Chomskyan purpose meets Buddhist practice in *Manatee/Humanity*, the long poem that she published in 2009. Indeed, *Manatee/Humanity* bears witness to Waldman's inclusive writing strategy which is embodied in the figure of the clear-sighted poet standing on the margin, whom she calls the "outrider": "OUTRIDER is a witness and an animal-plant-mineral-citizen, and strives to make change in the realm of inclusion, inasmuch as Outrider can be persuasive, and inclusion might be a goal. Inclusion in what? The discourse" (30).

Manatee/Humanity is composed of five parts and a bibliography. The underlying structure of the poem is dialogical: it is a conversation between the initiate speaker and her guide. But the text is polyphonic and gives voice to endangered animals as well. Moreover, it is an intertextual project modelled on the Kalachakra Buddhist initiation, also called the initiation of The Wheel of Time. Its structure mirrors the architecture of the palace of Kalachakrain the mandala that is used to support visualisation in the Tibetan initiation. Indeed, the palace has five levels, the last one being the place where the initiate can visualize the deity. The five parts also reflect the structure of the tantra of The Wheel of Time which consists of five chapters: an analysis of the external world, a description of the individual, the initiation itself, the liturgy accompanying visualisation and, finally, enlightenment. Each of the three middle parts in Waldman's book corresponds to a moment in the initiation towards liberation from samsaric time. In the initiation, enlightenment occurs after going through three stages: the stage of the inner teachings, the stage of the outer teachings and the stage of the other. Waldman respectively names them "inner" (5), "outer" (43) and "secret" (89). Formally, the poem is a hybrid; it is mainly written in free verse and also includes prose passages.

It is lyrical as well as philosophical and contains theoretical reflections along with definitions and etymological explanations. *Manatee/Humanity* bypasses the limits of literary genres, and reflects Waldman’s comprehensive mind and writing.

As a matter of fact, inclusiveness is a main stake in *Manatee/Humanity*, a poem inspired by a Buddhist vow to “*take in all the animals with you in your life, in your poetry*” (3). It is the vow which accompanies the female speaker’s initiation as well as the reader’s. Throughout the text, readers encounter little known animals, as in “animals butchered by tools included waterbuck, hartebeest, springbok, zebra,” to list just a few examples (23). The poem does summon a wide range of species and its inclusiveness extends to human communities.Waldman employs enumeration and intertextuality in order to express a detailed diversity. The range of hypotexts is vast in *Manatee/Humanity*, covering all genres and areas, from dictionary definitions to poetry, and from scientific descriptions released on websites to philosophical works. When Waldman deals with time, she does not only refer to Buddhism but also to ancient Greek and Muslim calendars (66). Yet, her focus is on endangered species and from the very start of the poem, Waldman states the synecdochic dimension of the manatee which “[stands] in for all endangered species”(4). Besides this, the lemur and the grey wolf are also given an emblematic function in the representation of endangered life.

Waldman’s focus on endangered species is linked with her poetics of detail which is rooted in the acute perception of the passing of time as potentially deleterious. In this respect, *Manatee/Humanity* may be considered as Waldman’s poetic response to her sense of urgency, faced with the exhaustion of the world. Indeed, the most obvious form of detailing in *Manatee/Humanity*, and in much of Waldman’s work, addresses environmental depletion. Against this process, she offers a detailed account of the world in a positive Whitmanian attempt at listing the complexity and wealth of nature and of mankind. It is a proleptic “poethic” (*Gossamurmur* 105) archiving, and this is one way in which she refuses ecological doom and deals with historical contingency. In Joan Rettalack’s words, “[this] is a question of *poethics* —what we make of events as we use language in the present, how we continuously create an ethos of the way in which events are understood” (*Rettalack* 9). The poet’s work, for Waldman, cannot limit itself to archiving, however vital it may be. The poet’s language engages her relationship with the world while altering that of the readers.

Waldman’s poetic relationship with the world follows the steps of Édouard Glissant who defines a poetics of Relation, as he rethinks human interactions in a

“totality-world” characterised by unpredictability. Like Glissant, Waldman shares Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s definition of relation modelled on the rhizome. In Glissantian terms, her world and writing are “composite” rather than “atavistic” (*Poétique* 34-5): they originate in a constantly evolving network of roots that is marked by unpredictability. Waldman also joins Glissant in borrowing from the theory of chaos, which provides an integrating model associating unpredictability and structure. She takes into account the consequences of Ilya Prigogine’s work on our perception of the stability of structures in time. As a matter of fact, Prigogine’s research on thermodynamics and his definition of dissipative structures have disrupted traditional assumptions about the predictability of physical phenomena, introducing a new approach to the relation between chaos and order:

> Classical thermodynamics leads to the concept of "equilibrium structures" such as crystals. Bénard cells are structures too, but of a quite different nature. That is why we have introduced the notion of “dissipative structures,” to emphasize the close association, at first paradoxical, in such situations between structure and order on the one side, and dissipation or waste on the other. We have seen (...) that heat transfer was considered a source of waste in classical thermodynamics. In the Bénard cell it becomes a source of order. The interaction of a system with the outside world, its embedding in nonequilibrium conditions, may become in this way the starting point for the formation of new dynamic states of matter—dissipative structures (Prigogine & Stengers, *Order* 143).

Relying on the theory of chaos, Glissant’s poetics of Relation posits that the model of deterministic systems going erratic may apply to human interactions within the totality-world. Similarly, Waldman underlines the environmental consequences and poetic potentialities contained in structures whose evolution through time is unpredictable. As a matter of fact, the speaker in *Manatee/Humanity* is a visionary warning against negatively unpredictable evolutions of the world. But she is also a visionary who embodies “poetic thinking,” that is to say a Glissantian positive relationship to unpredictability in our contingent rhizomic world:

> [The] poetic vision enables us to conceive unpredictability not as a negative but as a positive, and it enables us to change our sensitivity on this question while neither a concept nor a conceptual system could do it. That is to say, a poetic intention can enable me to conceive that in my relation to the other, to the others, to all the others, to the totality-world, I change myself while exchanging myself, remaining myself, without denying myself, without diluting myself, and it requires a whole poetics to conceive of such impossibles. This is why I think that today poetic thinking is the principle of the relationship to the world.[2] (*Poétique* 102)

In *Manatee/Humanity*, the poetic quest of Waldman’s visionary speaker aims at articulating the particulars of our universe and their existence in time, so that she

may find an answer to the fundamental question: “What is poetry’s relationship to the composite world, / in the relative world?” (*Outrider* 12). This interrogation entails other central questions raised by Waldman’s poetry. How can poetic writing account for the relation between the particulars of the world and the world as structure? To what extent can a poetics of detail serve Waldman’s ethical stance? If “a poethics thickened by an *h* launches an exploration of art’s significance as, not just about, a form of living in the real world” (*Rettalack* 26), can it be performative and alter the audience’s own relationship with the world? Starting from Waldman’s epistemological standpoint, this essay proposes to examine how her poetics of interconnectedness provides the cornerstone for her poethics.

The Epistemological Standpoint of Waldman’s Poetics of Particulars

In *Manatee/Humanity*, the initiation of the speaker first relies on “examining…details”:

> (…) the text of the Kalachakra initiation moves through numerous descriptions of both macrocosm and microcosm, examining external and internal and “other” (outer, inner, secret) details of the environment, the body, the stars, and even the finest increments of atoms and molecules. (*Manatee* 3)

The conditions which are necessary to the completion of the initiation provide the epistemological standpoint for Waldman’s poetic definition of the world in the poem: knowledge about the world involves the observation of its most minute components. Overall, *Manatee/Humanity* reflects a concern for details through its predilection for the “microcosm” (*Outrider* 70), that is for the smallest and most fragile organisms whether they are butterflies or sea snails (*Manatee* 91). The poem also refers to the particulars of the endangered species that are its chief subjects and we are given precise information about the manatee —“a manatee calf is born every 2-5 years”(69). Another central animal figure is the lemur, whose description exemplifies the frequent use of enumeration in Waldman’s poetics of particulars:

> *lemur* is derived from the Latin word meaning “spirits of the night”
> lemurs are nocturnal with large reflective eyes & mailing cries
> all lemurs (pygmy slow loris, crowned lemur, fat-tailed dwarf lemur, black & white ruffed lemur, gray gentle lemur, ring-tailed lemur, aye-aye, slender loris, slow loris, blue-eyed lemur, lesser bushbaby, collared lemur, golden-crowned sifaka) have a “tapetum”, a reflective layer over the retina that causes their eyes to shine back light
> lemurs evolved before anthropoids living during the Eocene epoch
> 55 million years ago
> (the first monkey dates to 45 million years ago, the ape 35) (*Manatee* 79)

This passage is typical of Waldman’s use of measures in her poetics of detail. One function of measures consists in giving credibility to the accuracy of the descriptions; another function is to introduce the relativity of time by referring to very long earlier periods, turning our life spans into anecdotes in the history of the earth. Meanwhile, time measures impose the order of chronological time against anthropocentric time, since they remind the reader that both the lemur and the manatee have inhabited the planet for much longer than human beings.

As shown in the description of the lemur, Waldman’s poetics of particulars borrows elements from scientific discourse. Among many subjects tackled by Waldman’s comprehensive mind, biology is a major field of interest in the poem. All kinds of living beings are scrutinised, and the poem supplies precise data about cells or other biological particulars such as neurotransmitters (*Manatee* 39), cycles of breath (39), neuron cells (54) or the genome (56). For example, we are given the particulars of the brain with scientific accuracy in the following prose passage:

> Brain tracks fluctuations in light with the help of ganglion cells in the retina of the eye. A pigment in some of the cells —melanopsin— probably dictates light, leading the retinal ganglion cells to send information about brightness & duration to the suprachiasmatic nucleus of the brain. The suprachiasmatic nucleus dispatches the information to the parts of the brain & body that control circadian processes. Events lead the pineal gland to secrete melatonin. In response to daylight the suprachiasmatic nucleus emits signals that stop another brain region —the paraventricular nucleus— from producing a message that would ultimately result in melatonin’s release. After dark, however, the suprachiasmatic releases the brake, allowing the paraventricular nucleus to relay a “secret melatonin” signal through neurons in the upper spine & the neck to the pineal gland… (*Manatee* 89)

The extract is taken from the very beginning of the part entitled “Secret~day 3,”which corresponds to the third day and third part in the initiation, after “Outer~day 1” and “Inner~day 2.” At first sight, the excerpt deals with our relation to time through the physiological handling of daylight. It is filled with scientific terms and does provide a scientific explanation. However, Waldman gradually gives a poetic twist to the text, thus unveiling the poetic potentialities underlying scientific discourse. The causal chain is underlined thanks to anadiplosis while the semantic field of secrecy spreads across the passage from its middle line onwards. As a matter of fact, the occurrence of “secrete” is a watershed and takes place when light, which reigned over the first half of the extract, is about to give way to darkness. The biological description then turns into a revelation of nightly phenomena, as the reader is poetically initiated to the impressive workings of the brain by the witch and poet-speaker. Eventually, it may be argued that Waldman’s

poetic detailing of the brain reproduces the three stages in the initiatory journey of the Wheel of Time, following the travel of light from outside, that is to say, from the sun into the eye, and then inside the human brain, until the "secret" of the brain is finally revealed.

In addition to its revelatory function, Waldman's poetics of detail puts the reader at the level of the common denominators to all "life-forms" (*Outrider* 25, *Manatee* 4). Thus, the human brain shares similarities with the animal brain, and the initiation leading to enlightenment may even include the detailed observation of a carcass:

> *we stopped to observe (my companion always with me now):*
> *cougar, head snapped*
> *entrails ripped out… & spread all around*
> *those parts not eaten*
> *cougar cubs eviscerated, killer instinct or survival*
>
> *what can we learn from the predatory nature of other animals*
> *(…)*
> *we in our sweet-smelling realm so like them—*
> *pack of wolves*
> (…)
> surely our conscious plans have precursors in animal brains (*Manatee* 63)

Moreover, the speaker looking for the common origins of life probes into the smallest units, down to cells and atoms, "counting all the atoms in her day/all the breaths in a day" (*Manatee* 60). In her epistemological and morphological approach to words, the speaker also exposes elementary particles of language such as sound units via syllables, or phonemes: "If you could imagine "soon"/soon, a vowel "oo" sound/I'd wait for you to be, to have been/in universe again, arriving soon" (*Manatee* 52). Thus, *Manatee/Humanity* voices a form of linguistic optimism which may be contrasted with the pessimistic, defeated voice that is to be found in *Gossamurmur* (2013): "What is poetry to the robotic-drone dreamworld/rash of noise hum nonsense syllables" (27). In *Gossamurmur*, the mass of details conveyed by scientific discourse takes over and "[hacks] into delicate twists of language" (18). It invades the sphere of language, seemingly enacting the death of language:

> [Preservation metadata is a subset of administrative metadata aimed at supporting the long-term retention of digital objects. It overlaps with technical and administrative metadata, detailing important information about the digital file, including any changes in the file over time and management history…] (*Gossamurmur* 62)

The poet’s predicament grows into horrifying proportions since the speaker imagines that “Deciders” have taken control of her mind and body. In its science-fiction mode, *Gossamurmur* exposes the defeat of poetry, which is what Waldman wishes to protect our world against by conjuring the “delicate” (*Gossamurmur* 18) details of poetic writing, in a desperate attempt to keep language alive: “a line of poetry brings language again to language/startling in its brevity” (*Gossamurmur* 87).

Thus, the poet’s work with the particulars of language in *Manatee/Humanity* derives from an epistemological standpoint according to which the only way to knowledge and truth is through details. In parallel with detailing the wide range of life forms, *Manatee/Humanity* zooms in on the tiniest elements in the world: the poem draws the map of “our composite world” and reproduces the Kalachakra movement towards the initiate’s knowledge of the particulars of the universe. Thanks to its poetic strategy, *Manatee/Humanity* arguably fulfils the philosophical and political function of poetry in the “totality-world,”as expressed by Glissant: “[The poem] is (sings) the detail, and it also announces totality. But it is the totality of differences, which is never imperious” (*Philosophie* 83).[3] Contrary to totalitarianism, totality in Glissant and Waldman’s totality-world is inclusive. Waldman’s poetics of detail in *Manatee/Humanity* may be defined as a poetics of Relation, focusing on interrelation. In this respect, the detailed description of the brain and its connections is emblematic of the importance of detail in Waldman’s poetic expression of contingent “life forms” (*Outrider* 70): her writing represents the particulars of the world as “inter-connected” entities (25).

Particulars and the Poetics of ‘inter-connectedness’ in the ‘composite world’

Interconnectedness is central to the project of *Manatee/Humanity* since Waldman founds her poem on the experience of her own encounter with a wounded manatee in a sea park in Florida. The poet explains that she was struck by the reciprocity in her exchange with the animal. She felt that the manatee was looking deep inside her as much as she was looking deep inside the animal. This is how the autobiographical narrator relates the event in the introductory part of *Manatee/Humanity*:

> The day a few years ago in Miami when I spent several hours in the presence of a wounded manatee in a local “sea park” was key to this project. I vowed to “include manatee.” I believe it was a “she” who had weathered human harm and neglect. She

> seemed an ancient soul, and contemplative in her demeanour —huge, Buddha-like— and I fancied that I received transmission from her example, which was as a witness to cruel captivity… I perceived her less as a victim and more as a poetic deity. And I felt she had the greater sympathy for me. (*Manatee* 4)

The seminal scene between the poet-narrator and the manatee epitomises the central importance of inclusiveness and interconnectedness. Buddhism also emphasises interdependence among living beings, as Waldman underlines at the beginning of her work:

> The Buddhist view is that all life-forms are interrelated through their evolutionary history and that animal and human minds are both participants in reality. We share the planet with many non-human temporalities. Minds exist at the quantum level, below the level of atoms and subatomic particles. As is said: Minds never come from nothing or go to nothing. (*Manatee* 4)

Following these assertions, the observation of details is necessary insofar as it enables us to perceive interconnections, and thereby allows to understand the true nature of our world marked by "the inter-connectedness, the symbiosis of all forms of life" (*Outrider* 70). This stance is arguably a pillar of Waldman's poetry and has been shaping the form of her writing, but it seems that one specific poem is worth mentioning in order to grasp the far-reaching importance of the poetics of interrelated particulars in *Manatee/Humanity* and in Waldman's recent work. Waldman published another long poem entitled *Structure of the World Compared to a Bubble* (2005), four years before *Manatee/Humanity*. Despite seemingly different subject matters, both texts share the same poetic quest and such singleness of purpose is backed with structural similarities. In the first place, *Structure of the World Compared to a Bubble* draws inspiration from Buddhist initiation as well. The poem aims at reproducing the speaker's initiation on visiting the stupa of Borobodur and, consequently, may be used for the audience's initiation or, if read, for the reader's. The link with Buddhist initiation is even clearer in *Structure of the World Compared to a Bubble* than in *Manatee/Humanity* because the main subject is the narrative underlying the bas-reliefs of the stupa. As a matter of fact, these bas-reliefs were designed so as to guide visitors on their way to enlightenment, through more and more accurate knowledge. Formal ties with initiation are also made tighter than in *Manatee/Humanity* because the poem is closer to a chant: in addition to the fact that mantras are more present, the reading is supposed to be accompanied by gamelan and the text contains indications suggesting when lines should be punctuated by strokes on the instrument. The poem epitomises the fundamental importance of Relation in Waldman's rhizomic

work: writing poetry means connecting structures and *Structure of the World Compared to a Bubble* is designed after a carefully planned stupa which is itself modelled on a mandala[4]. But poetry should also aim at detailing the different parts that structures are composed of. Centuries after being erected, the Buddhist monument built on the island of Java stands at a crossroads of cultures and, although the author wants to bear witness to the past, her text needs to connect particulars if she is to express the present:

> A key for me is the notion of “syncretic”—both historically, as we sift through the remnants of powerful cultures, and contemporarily in the details of our own particular existence, experiencing the fluid layers and participation of cultures, realities, energies at work all the time. (*Structure* xiv)

Further down in the poem, Waldman provides a poetic expression for the theoretical principle that is stated in the introductory part, as she lists the particulars of existence, that is to say the “traces of evidence” betraying a variety of “cultures” and coexisting in the composite world of “quotidian life”: “Picture this: objects of farm culture —shovels,/cutting tools, backhoes—& maritime culture: boats, sails/rudders, masts/& fashion culture: earrings, necklace, a scarf/quotidian life of business” (*Structure* 38).

In *Manatee/Humanity*, living beings more than cultures are the focus of Waldman’s poetics of detail. Sharing common denominators, such as elementary biological units, allows all life forms “to morph” into each other: the verb recurs in the text and suggests transformations of the guide into a lemur, of the speaker into a manatee, or of the manatee into a human being, as in this passage when the manatee is speaking:

> without legs I a mermaiden be
> before you
> seaweed standing in my hair
> come to my house of the sirens
> morph this sea & land &
> buck the boundaries (*Manatee* 81)

Drawing on the manatee’s mythological connection with mermaids, Waldman’s morphological play with language powerfully initiates the fusion of the animal and the human being in the first quoted line, while announcing the subsequent use of the verb “to morph.” The passage also encapsulates a blurring of “the boundaries” both semantically and morphologically, which is reinforced thanks to the device of alternating speakers. Indeed, after the passage that the extract is taken from, a new page of the poem starts without any change either in the typography or in the

presentation of the text on the page. At first glance, we may not guess that the speaker of the lyric is muted;the poem shifts from the manatee back into the initiate again, until we find out that the ‘I’ is writing: “the aquarium deserted now,/this is the song at dusk I write in the notebook:” (*Manatee* 83). Waldman’s lines remind us of the essential affinity between the animal and the initiate, which lies in both beings’ most specific attribute: lyricism. Not only is the manatee redefined poetically through Waldman’s writing, but the endangered animal is also both the addressee of the text and a lyrical alter ego for the speaker of the lyric:

> Please come home to me in this one
> my darling, my love, my friend, companion
> who sings of all this too
> & you, manatee, you join in this *Convivio* (*Manatee* 8)

The treatment of the relationship between the manatee and the speaker in the poem exemplifies Glissant’s conception of the rhizomic world that may be expressed through a poetics of Relation:

> “[Some environmentalists] draw a network of relations between the human being and the environment (…). [If] we conceive of a rhizome identity, that is to say a root, which however encounters other roots, then what becomes important is not a so-called absolute of each root, but the mode, the way in which it gets in touch with other roots: Relation. A poetics of Relation seems to me more obvious and more “including” today than a poetics of the being.” (*Introduction* 30-31)[5]

As highlighted with Waldman’s reference to singing in the excerpt quoted above, the text’s metapoetic dimension is central to the poetics of detail. The poem recurrently underlines the crucial function of poetry and celebrates lyricism, a form that connects singing and poetry. Furthermore, Waldman’s evocation of a protean world is supported by her close analysis of the connections linking the particulars of language. In *Manatee/Humanity* as in other works by Waldman, the most acute expression of interconnectedness in the composite world occurs at the linguistic level. One striking device is to be found in the use of pronouns, which results in the erasure of all the barriers that have been imposed by the classification of living beings. On the one hand, the manatee is the object of scientific discourse in a naturalistic manner;on the other hand, the speaker refuses to designate the animal with the impersonal pronoun “it”. “It” rather merges into “he” or “she,” through “you. ”This blending of biological categories through pronouns and personification is characteristic of the treatment of interrelation in the text. For example, the following lines refuse to choose between possessive pronouns while rejecting the notion of specificity according to genre or species:

his name
is her heart again, sign off

& the distraction of
his/her/one’s monkey mind! (*Manatee* 17)

As in Glissant’s philosophy and poetics, Relation in Waldman means the coexistence of differences which may only be perceived in details, here in the particulars of grammar. Nevertheless, Waldman’s poetics of the pronoun draws a line between the empathetic world that her poetry wishes to summon and those who, on the contrary, threaten her ideal and whom she usually designates under the collective pronoun, “they.” For instance, in the nightmarish vision of *Gossamurmur*, “they” stands for totalitarian forces that reject poetry and want to master language for their own political and economic purposes. Waldman’s “they” usually belongs to the total world, not to the composite totality-world. However, even this delineation is relative and “they” may be “us” as well:

> that’s what they’ll say about us generations hence (how living then hence without so many animals then?) they fucked the world over in their sweet avaricious time frame that’s what they’ll say, about us, those stupid fuckers, they let animals die, they let the plants die, they killed the air, they killed the water, they killed each other, they killed language. (*Manatee* 64)

Here anaphora forcefully hammers the domination of “they” into the dead world of the prose quotation, in sharp contrast with the interplay of pronouns morphing into each other elsewhere in a poetic landscape which is marked by plasticity. Waldman’s world is neither definite nor stable. Morphing is also a characteristic of Waldman’s poetic discourse thanks to her interest in the particulars of sound. In the following passage, the initiate witnesses the transformation of her guide:

> [...] *morphing into*
> *more of a voice (high-pitched what you might hear in the Bardo were you to listen)*
> *because sounds had made a kind of syncretic power*
> *between human & animal a force in the poem*
> *all the sounds in the poem, all the breaths in one day*[6] (*Manatee* 85)

Like certain cells, sounds are common to diverse living beings. For instance, the “oo” sound that Waldman singles out among elementary particles is shared by the speaker of the poem, the whale and the dolphin (*Manatee* 52). At an even subtler level, vibrationsproduced by the larynx provide another interesting example since they are associated with the pronunciation of the name of the manatee: “Latinized as *manatus*/infrasound produced in larynx/Ojibwa: *manitoo*” (*Manatee* 25). The

ability of the manatee to emit infrasounds is often mentioned in descriptions of the herbivorous animal. Because of their wave lengths, infrasounds propagate below the level of usual human hearing capacities. However, they may sometimes be perceived by the body through vibrations. Inthe poetic text,humans make their larynxes vibratewhen, for example, they hunt animals: “dressed in their skins/with gestures & sounds from the vibrating larynx/sing of becoming them” (*Manatee* 33). Here, Waldman’spoetic use of vibration underscores the invisible rhizomic connections between living beings but she also suggests the deadly consequences that interconnectedness may have on animals. Yet, the manatee is etymologically linked with the “manitoo,” a mythical creature that is central in an Ojibwa Native American creation story. Through vibrations, human beings and animals poetically belong in the same mythical pre-existing truth, before the world was created. Thanks to poetry, the manatee retrieves the poetic and mythical aura it had for the speaker on the day of their first encounter.

Morphing through sounds is most obviously present in the eponymous paronomasia, which reverberates throughout the text through the recurring use of the word “inter-species” (*Manatee* 113, 119). But the power of its particular sounds extends well beyond the cover of the book thanks to the creation of a palimpsestic mantra: “mother…mother…om manatee hum” (71). In fact, the line detailing the sounds of the title is reminiscent of the mantra of the bodhisattva of compassion,[7] that is to say the most important mantra in Tibetan Buddhism: “om mani padme hum.” In the original mantra, the sacred syllable, “om,” is juxtaposed with “mani,” meaning “jewel” or “bead,” then with “padme,” meaning the lotus flower (the sacred flower of Buddhism), and finally with “hum,” standing for the spirit of enlightenment. However, Waldman makes the most of the English meaning of “hum” so that the syllable epitomises her lyrical use of sounds in *Manatee/Humanity*, aiming at compassion through the voice of the “I” and her poetics of the particular.

Thus, in its own poetic way, *Manatee/Humanity* awakens readers to the world as a composite, rhizomic whole made of interconnected particulars. It is therefore a poem in the full meaning ascribed to poetry by Glissant: “But the poem is, in effect, the only dimension of truth, or permanence, or deviance, which links the presences of the world” (*Philosophie*, 19)[8]. However, Waldman underlines that true enlightenment must deal with the passing of time. From her Buddhist perspective, she adds yet another element into her poetic equation of the world when she asks: “What is poetry’s relationship to the composite world,/in the relative world?”

(*Outrider* 12) Although her work relies on tight structural patterns, it must integrate the flexibility of our worldshaped by the passing of time. She therefore reminds us that "[time] in Buddhism is primarily a measure of change" (*Manatee* 3).

Poethic Particulars: Enlightenment for "the composite world/ in a relative world"

According to *Manatee/Humanity*, the postulate that time is defined by change must determine our relation to truth if enlightenment is to be achieved. As underlined previously, measures play a chief role in the poetics of detail since they introduce relativity: on the scale of the history of life, human beings rank after the manatee or the lemur. In fact, Waldman's poetics of interconnected particulars cancels any form of single focalisation in her "rhizome field" (*Outrider* 18), whether it be anthropocentrism, ethnocentrism or univocal lyricism: "In the rhizome of the totality-world, centres and peripheries are obsolete concepts[9]" (Glissant, *Introduction* 137). As argued by the speaker's companion and guide, the real world is "relative" and this can only be "measured," "observed" (*Manatee* 63), experienced through the poetic description of the particulars of the world perceived at moments in time within "the changing diffracted totality[10]" (Glissant, *Philosophie* 102). Thus, the poem portrays the manatee at various moments, in detail and in a variety of modes, showing the animalin a variety of roles. The poetic redefinition of the animal thereby conforms to the Buddhist conception of the variability of the world through time, which is illustrated in the following line as well: "& gaze down again: a beautiful yellow nimbus outlines this shimmering pale blue butterfly in its pale blue butterfly time" (*Manatee* 67). Consequently, universal pure abstraction is impossible in the ever-changing environment that Waldman wants to represent. Her poetic initiation inspired by Buddhism must rather challenge the supremacy of the mind's universality:

> At its subtlest level the mind is known as "primordial pure light" and is free of the oscillations of conceptual thought or disturbing emotions…there is no such thing as a universal mind in which our minds all participate, but rather myriad unique individual pathways, innumerable possibilities. (*Manatee* 1)

Instead of connecting particulars with the universal like William Carlos Williams in a poetic gesture whereby "picking out a flower or a bird in detail…becomes an abstract term of enlightenment" (*Essays* 198), Waldman highlights particulars as

evidence of the multiplicity and interconnectedness among the components of our world which is subject to time: "how different times give the peculiarities & particulars of people & praxis & place & thought systems, & become their own 'zones' in this" (*Manatee* 65). What is more, our composite world of particulars is also shown as being threatened by ephemerality. Such mutability is a determining factor which must be taken into account by a poetic text that aims to foster our compassion. Indeed, Waldman's phenomenological poetics of detail follows the ethical goal that is ascribed to the initiate:

> 'within the cognitive source that is all phenomena arise forms that come from mental storehouses, generating compassion—such as vows'
> ...
> & he responded as if translating for her the notion of enlightenment: form has shape & color—color implies wavelength frequency on a spectrometer... (*Manatee* 34-35)

In his teaching, the guide draws upon the scientific definition of light in order to underline that form is essentially linked with time through wavelength. In fact, the speaker seems to apply the guide's advice about enlightenment and form with her evocation of "the blue butterfly" in its "blue butterfly time," literally turning her poem into an initiation for its readers, by making them poetically acquainted with the form of the butterfly as one of the "forms" taken by the paths to "compassion" (*Manatee* 34). As a matter of fact, the formal work on sounds illustrates the power of poetry by suggesting the adjective "beautiful." Besides, the reference to wavelength as a basic unit available for describing forms is central in Waldman's poetic expression of interconnectedness because it connects the poet's vision and voice. Although the text is formally a hybrid, it is undeniable that its ethical claim to foster compassion is expressed through lyricism.

The final step in Waldman's poethical strategy is action through performing which relies on a structural pillar of *Manatee/Humanity*, the empathetic Buddhist vow to "take all animals with you in your life, your poetry" (3). Among Waldman's motivations for performing poetry, her interest in the orality of the vow should be mentioned. This is how she describes the vow in *Outrider* which was published three years before *Manatee/Humanity*:

> And vow is an aspiration, it helps remind you of your original intention to be compassionate. You keep working on it, and you make the gesture to wake up, be less of an egomaniac, with your "body, speech, and mind." So it's the speech part, trying to refine your thinking, your imagination, your aspiration in language, and in poetry. It's also a musical gesture and dance. That's what caught me in the first place, the sounds inherent in language. Down to increments—phones and phonemes that

> seemed to carry, like a mantra, a certain efficacy, power, magic (...) That somehow your body is a receptacle for mantra which is part of the "hum." (*Outrider* 70)

Waldman here emphasises the physicality as well as the spirituality of the vow. However, the formulation of a vow involves orality in its most fundamental particulars, providing yet another reason why the sounds in a poem inspired by a vow should be chosen very carefully:

> When one is in the grip of a poem, one is contiguous to chaos, yet one maintains a balance, an articulation through the form, or « text », mouthing those very specific vowels and consonants. One pays attention to the smallest increments of speech: phones, phonemes, allophones, which register in all parts of the body. Through language one makes gestures that ward off death, that honor the earth, that encourage the rain to fall or someone to fall in love with you, to stop the war, to close down Rocky Flats. Language provides access to the poet's ultimate desire and manifested efficacy. (*Vow* 198-199)

Waldman's attachment to the performative power of sounds is exemplified through the poetic treatment of the manatee. In addition to the paronomasia that links "manatee" and "humanity," the speaker in the poem argues her use of "she" for the manatee by underlining the length of its vowel sound, as opposed to the short sound in "it": "she the notable pronoun always of itself heard longer than uncertainly" (*Manatee* 51). Beyond the autobiographical experience of empathy that is conveyed through personification, the speaker's precise justification for the phonetic particulars of the pronoun fulfils the poet's vow and ethical stance: as the poet allows more space and time to the manatee by using "she" instead of "it," the text invites readers to reconsider mankind's supremacy and to acknowledge the equal worth of all living beings.

Another major reason for Waldman to perform poetry lies in the fact that she wants poetry to be "enacted" and experienced as "the presence of an event" (*Vow* 204).[11] The reflections and works of Charles Olson have had a decisive influence on this turn in Waldman's poetry, but, as noted earlier, she also draws on Prigogine's theory which describes the exchange of energy between organisms and their environment. According to Waldman, there is a similar exchange of energy between the poem and its environment: "My words are empty unless they 'connect' with a field of energy that confirms or activates further the breath of the poem" (*Vow* 196). For her, this takes place through performance, while transfers of energy occur in the triangular relation between the poet-performer,the object ofher poetry and the reader-audience: "a definite exchange of energy between poet/performer and his or her 'muse' as well as an exchange between poet and

audience” (*Vow* 202). As she is looking for a connection with an audience, she wants her poetry to assume the force generated by the “kinetics of the thing” in Olson’s definition of “projective verse"(“Projective Verse”).[12] When she performs, her whole body is involved, andbreathing plays a key role as her voicebuilds energy through modulations in speed and volume. Her audience cannot but be struck by the wide range of sounds that she uses, from extremely low to extremely high pitched sounds, including innumerable variations in intonation, stress and intensity. Playing with the length of vowel sounds is also a recurring feature in Waldman’s readings. She actually reformulates Williams’s objectivist principle “No ideas but in things” (*Poems* 55) into her own projectivist manifesto for performing poetry: “Not no ideas, but no ideas but in projectiles of things./To vocalize. To mouth the impossible” (*Outrider* 31). Thus, the chant of the speaker in *Manatee/Humanity*is a *mise en abyme* of the poet’s “enactment” (*Vow* 196).

Rejecting conceptions of the poem as a self-contained whole and claiming that poems are fundamentally unstable structures interacting with their environment, Waldman states that “The poet/performer is an ‘open system’ in Prigoguine’s sense” ((“Projective Verse”). 202). According to Prigogine, instability does not exclude organised patterns:

> One of the most interesting aspects of dissipative structures is their coherence (...). A system far from equilibrium may be described as organized not because it realizes a plan alien to elementary activities, or transcending them, but, on the contrary, because the amplification of a microscopic fluctuation occurring at the "right moment" resulted in favoring one reaction path over a number of other equally possible paths. Under certain circumstances, therefore, the role played by individual behavior can be decisive. More generally, the "overall" behavior cannot in general be taken as dominating in any way the elementary processes constituting it. Self-organization processes in far-from-equilibrium conditions correspond to a delicate interplay between chance and necessity, between fluctuations and deterministic laws. (Prigogine & Stengers 171-175)

Life and poetry are “modal structures” (*Vow* 204) subject to change for Waldman who, as discussed, introduces Prigogine’s model of “dissipative structures”[13] into her poetics, focusing on the fact that they are “open systems involved in a continual exchange of energy with the environment” (*Vow* 194). She is particularly fascinated by the contrast between the very small size of these structures and their immense strength. The model allows her to integrate tight poetic form within contingency and to experiment with poems as “modal structures”:

> This dissipation of energy creates the potential for sudden reordering. This does not have to be a slow process; it allows for spontaneity. In my view this is also the potential in poetry and in the performance of poetry.

> The continuous movement in a structure results in new fluctuations, which is how I characterize the act or event of extending the writing back off the page. Poetry is not a closed system. The elements of old language patterns come into a new one to make new connections. Individuals and societies may have great mental and physical potential for transformation as well (…)
> The making of the poem, the form it takes both on the page and in its ritual enactment, is an open system involved in a continual exchange of energy with the environment (…) This enactment results in a public poetry—a communal poetry. (*Vow* 193-194)

Being aware of plasticity is important because it implies the realisation that all beings are contiguous and influence each other. They are all “potentially” involved in each other’s “transformations.” Such knowledge can bring about compassion, which is the aim of the “om mani padme hum” mantra that Waldman refers to in *Manatee/Humanity*. This is also the aim of the Kalachakra initiation and the goal of Waldman’s poetic text. Therefore, the poetics of detail in *Manatee/Humanity* should lead readers and audiences to compassion through a circulation of energy: just as particles of matter can cohere into a manatee or a human being, particles of sound can cohere and combine, and form either the chant of a manatee or the chant of a human being. In Waldman’s poetic practice, performing achieves the ideal of open structures through improvisation according to the poet-performer’s contingent states of awareness. Thus, shemay decideonly shortly before public readings which texts she is going to perform. Eventually, particulars introduce readers and audiences to the experience of empathy.The committed poet must dedicate herself to her poethical task against those who “killed language” (*Manatee* 64) and the speaker’s poethics reactfsivates the ontological power of naming.A word, “manatee”, may reclaim the endangered animal’s lost mana: “a new life, a new style of poetry filled with yearning for the animal/but empty of animals remembered only in our naming of things after them/cars & trucks & teams & products that sap their mana” (*Manatee* 78).

This is what happens in the central passage of the poem, focusing on the name “manatee” and endowing it with compassion through lyricism, singing and performance. The various forms of morphing between human beings and endangered species that have been highlighted in this essay are a most striking poetic expression of compassion, or suffering with. Above all, the fact that particular sounds can turn into songs and chants, which may equally be uttered by the manatee and by the initiate alike, makes it possible for the speaker to reproduce the singing of the manatee in the litany placed at the very core of the poem. Below are the first lines of this climactic moment:

& passing before her captivity
reiterating a chant of manatee
I began

the manatee is found in shallow slow-moving rivers
the manatee moves in estuaries moves in saltwater bays
the manatee in moving moves gently
the manatee is to be found in canals & coastal areas
the manatee is a migratory animal
the manatee moves in slow-moving rivers slowly
the manatee is completely herbivorous
the West Indian manatee has no natural enemies
the manatee has no natural enemies but unnatural man
the manatee is constantly threatened by man unnaturally
man with his boat & plastic & attitude
the manatee often drowns in canal locks of man
(...) (*Manatee* 67-68)

Several lines paraphrase data found on an environmentalist website which is cited in the bibliography that Waldman has placed at the end of her work. But the litany form helps to awaken compassionfor the manatee and the original use of the litany as a supplication is reinforced by repetitive literary patterns, including anaphora as well as other sound and rhythm effects. The intensity and power of the text are further enhanced at public readings by Waldman’s impressive performance.

It may be argued that Waldman’s poetics in *Manatee/Humanity* is a “poetics of globality” which respects “the threads of Relation” at the global level but also listens to “very particular breaths”[14] (Glissant, *Philosophie* 86). As Waldman explores the relationship between the I and otherness in her poem, her poethical writing reassesses our relation to the world through poetic language focusing on particulars. It is Glissantian in its portrayal of a “composite” instead of “atavistic” world, as well as in its quest for “infinite detail”[15] instead of “totality” (Glissant, *Philosophie* 27). In this respect, it belongs to a committed poetic alternative that Waldman has been working on, against aggressively totalitarian conceptions of the world. In Waldman’s and Glissant’s composite world, the detail is necessary to the whole because “totality lives on its own tiny particulars and flavours lay down there like milk from the dew or from the star apple; there is no generalizable Empire of the world, despite the terror of weapons and the hundreds of thousands of deaths[16]” (ibid., 87). Waldman’s poetics of detail is also a poetics of Relation investigating “the rich layer of inter-living beings on the planet Earth’s surface” (*Outrider* 70) and protesting that “we aren’t the rulers of the universe” (70). Starting from a phenomenological approach to particulars, andfrom a reflection on time relying on the Buddhist definition of time as change, she empowers the detail

with epistemological value in order to foster compassion. Meanwhile, her poetics of detail reaches her ethical aim, cancelling the validity of any kind of personal or political isolationism, just as the founding experience of her encounter with a manatee in Florida is emblematic of her encounter with all living beings. *Manatee/Humanity* thus fulfils Waldman’s vow and seems to answer Glissant’s call for a poetics of Relation, that is to say poetics in its most noble sense which is poetical, philosophical and political.

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[1] “Un détail n’est pas un fragment, il interpelle la totalité (*Philosophie* 102).”All quotations from works by Édouard Glissant are translated by the author of this essay.

[2] “[La] vision poétique permet de vivre avec l’idée d’imprédictibilité parce qu’elle permet de concevoir l’imprédictibilité non pas comme un négatif mais comme un positif, et elle permet de changer notre sensibilité sur cette question alors qu’aucun concept ou aucun système conceptuel ne pourrait le faire. C’est-à-dire qu’une intention poétique peut me permettre de concevoir que dans ma relation à l’autre, aux autres, à tous les autres, à la totalité-monde, je me change en m’échangeant, en demeurant moi-même, sans me renier, sans me diluer, et il faut toute une poétique pour concevoir ces impossibles-là. C’est pour cela que je pense que la pensée poétique aujourd’hui est au principe du rapport au monde (*Poétique* 102).”

[3] “[Le poème] est (il chante) le détail, et il annonce aussi la totalité. Mais c’est la totalité des différences, qui jamais n’est impérieuse (*Poétique* 83).”

[4] Borobodur is a stupa made of three platforms of decreasing sizes. Seen from above, Borobodur looks like a mandala with three parts representing the three realms of Buddhism: desire, form and formlessness. Initiation brings the pilgrim from the large platform at the bottom of the stupa, which is the equivalent for the outer part in a mandala, to the middle platform and finally to the top platform, or inner part in a mandala.

[5] “[Certains écologistes] établissent un réseau de relations entre l’être humain et son environnement [...]. [Si] on conçoit une identité rhizome, c’est-à-dire racine, mais allant à la rencontre des autres racines, alors ce qui devient important n’est pas tellement un prétendu absolu de chaque racine, mais le mode, la manière dont elle entre en contact avec d’autres racines: la Relation. Une poétique de la Relation me paraît plus évidente et plus “prenante” aujourd’hui qu’une poétique de l’être.” (*Introduction* 30-31)

[6] Italics as used in the original text.

[7] In Buddhism, a ‘bodhisattva’ is a person who has achieved enlightenment but refuses Nirvana in order to remain among suffering human beings and help them.

[8] “Mais le poème est en effet la seule dimension de vérité ou de permanence ou de déviance qui relie les présences au monde” (*Philosophie* 19).

[9] “Dans le rhizome de la totalité-monde, les centres et les périphéries sont des notions caduques” (*Introduction* 137).

[10] “la totalité diffractée changeante” (*Philosophie* 102).

[11] In her essay entitled "I is another: Dissipative Structures," Waldman refers to the founding/transforming/formative experience of listening to Charles Olson at a conference in Berkeley, in 1965: "'*In the presence of an event*' was the illuminating phrase for me." (*Vow* 204).

[12] See in *Outrider*: "No event is isolated, no force is ever spent. This is wild thinking. It is the basis for a particular poetics that allows for improvisation as well, and the 'kinetics of the things' (*Outrider* 71)." See also Charles Olson's essay "Projective Verse": "the *kinetics* of the thing. A poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it (he will have some several causations), by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader. Okay. Then the poem itself must, at all points, be a high-energy construct and, at all points, an energy-discharge."

[13] For a detailed definition of dissipative structures by Prigogine, see *Introduction to Thermodynamics of Irreversible Processes* (1955).

[14] "poétique de la mondialité" (*Philosophie* 86); "tissus de la Relation" (ibid., 86); "respirations très particulières (ibid., 86)."

[15] "un infini détail" (ibid., 87).

[16] "La totalité vit de ses propres infimes détails, les saveurs s'y déposent comme lait de rosée ou de caïmite, il n'y a plus d'Empire généralisable du monde, malgré la terreur des armes et les morts par centaines de milliers" (*Philosophie* 87).

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