theories and methodologies

Metamorphoses: Fictioning and the Historian's Craft

CARLA NAPPI

LANGUAGE AND FLESH CREATE EACH OTHER. HERE YOU WILL FIND THREE STORIES, FROM THREE ONGOING PROJECTS, THAT ARE EACH IN some way about the metamorphosis between word and body. Each story is an example of my use of fiction writing as a scholarly tool: for understanding a map as a material object, for weaving lives from textual fragments, and for making a little world with little gods as a way of exploring a work of theory. Fiction, here, is an apparatus for paying new kinds of attention, as well as a vehicle for creating stories, worlds, and selves to give to others. Some persistent concerns in my fiction writing have deeply influenced how I pay attention to the documents I work with in my research: concerns with materiality and history, with the legibility of bodies, with fragmentariness and the transformative power of desire, with the nature of selves and flesh as constantly in the process of becoming, with voicing and with fiction as technologies of conversion. (I did not understand, before writing "The Gesture of Smoking a Pipe," which you'll read below, that there was an important link in Vilém Flusser's work between physical gesture, selfhood, and the calling down of—and metamorphosis of selves into—gods. Now, the connection between movement, identity, and conversion is becoming central to my work as a historian.) Imagining materiality and metamorphoses this way—and practicing the metamorphosis and conversion of documents—has pointed me toward the ways that materiality and material experience emerge out of relations and relationships and the ways that the kind of orientations that relate bodies in space and time leave traces in our documents.

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[I]

Writing is a way of seeing, and fictioning can be a way of seeing documents anew. In the autumn of 2013, I joined a tour of the MIT Museum during which we were shown a map with the following inscription: "In the Province of Sancy was made a round lake here by a deluge in the year 1557. . . . Seven cities were drowned, besides little towns and villages, and a great number of men, only one boy was

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saved in the body of a tree." I lost the details of the document—this was never an object I was interested in writing a history of, or with—but the boy on the map stayed with me. And so the map did as well. And so I began to imagine this boy. And in imagining him I also began imagining what it was to be underwater, to be submerged, to be inside. And this concern has shaped my research since. It also shaped one of the first stories from a new fiction project that retells the stories in Ovid's *Me* by misreading historical documents. As a storyteller and a historian I understand the state of being a body in the world as an ongoing series of metamorphoses. The *Me* pr
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And the sky grew new stars that showed the boy where to go. (And the sky grew new tales that showed the boy how to go.)

One night he looked up and he read in the sky that a man and a woman had also been saved. (But they lived on the other side of the world and they couldn't read the book in the stars and they didn't know how to find the caves with the fish and the crab and the stories in coral.)

So the boy closed his eyes and imagined a bird, and he opened them to find it was perched on his arm. (He looked at the bird and it looked back at him and in that exchange he saw what to do.)

The boy lay down and he opened his arms and he opened his breath and he opened his future.

And he closed his eyes and he closed his mouth and he closed his fists and he closed his what-ifs. And he slowly thinned to a flat bright sheet and the bird looked on as the boy became map.

His skin turned to paper.

His blood became ink.

His spine became mountains.

His thumbs turned to streams.

His name grew into words to mark the landscape.

His curls became scrolling designs to delight.

As the boy changed, his birthmarks stretched and thinned and curved to write his story on the page.

When this was done, the bird bit the map in its long yellow beak and it took itself off to the end of the world. When it found the people, it gave them the map. And when it gave them the map, it pecked at the boy's story. (And then there was where, and then there was why.) After it pecked, it turned to the wind and sang. And after it sang, it burst into a cloud of feathers to offer the man and woman shade on their way. (And then there was what, and then there was how.)

And that is how the world began, with a flood and a tree and a boy.

[II]

Fiction is not only a way to give lives to documents through creative misreading but also a way to bring beings into the world and to voice them. And this brings us to the second project I want to share with you.

This little history of salt is a piece of a project inspired by four women whose names appear in *The Casebooks Project*, an online collection of the case records of two early modern astrologer-physicians. I found each of these women as a small fragment included in this digital archive. Each of them was named Elizabeth. Each lived in early modern England. Each apparently had something wrong with her. That something, for each of the Elizabeths, was related to her relationship with elemental stuff: Elizabeth Sanders had a problem with her liquids ("Case 155"), Elizabeth Woodfall had too much wind inside her ("Case 27326"), Elizabeth Turvey was overcome by an overwhelming heat ("Case 12980"), and Elizabeth Rively had worms where they should not have been ("Case 10597"). I spent a little time with each of them, and rather than write them into history I made them into historians: one of liquids, one of wind, one of flame, and one of burial. And so *The Elizabeths* was born. On the Web site of the project (theelizabeths.org/), a work in progress, you can read about the four Elizabeths, learning about their practice as historians and browsing through some of the histories that they might have written: of mercury, of clouds, of fireflies, of smoke, of rain, and more. Here, fictioning is a way to make worlds from fragments, to imagine what a document can be, and to explore what it might look like to make stories with our bodies.

This is a story by Elizabeth Rively, the historian of earth, of burial, of decomposition.

With "The History of Salt," I was trying to understand how telling a story about the past or the future from traces left over from other times (and this, after all, is what a his-

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torian does) depends on a kind of observation that constitutes an act of empathy with the material observed. I wanted to explore the violence entailed in that empathy and in that act of looking. And so this story became a way for me to think and write about the connection between history and empathy, between empathy and destruction, without explicitly framing it as such.

Academic writing tends to live within policed walls that restrict access to the work through the increasingly prohibitive cost of academic books and journals. It has become important to me, as a storyteller and a scholar, to make my work accessible to anyone who wants to experience it. Thus, this project lives online and is freely available to anyone with an Internet connection.

The History of Salt

The history of salt is the story of an oracle.

She smelled like the sea and like celery and she lived at the top of a mountain and spent her days trying to find tomorrow in a bowl of bones.

She was a seer of idiosyncratic and unreliable capacities who consistently missed the crucial details. She would see the smile but not the knife, the flush on one cheek but not the tears on the other, hear the sadness and the sigh but not the undertow of laughter pulling them into the sunshine. But her vision was trustworthy, in its way, and its brokenness promised hope, and that was enough for those who sought sight.

Her gift for tomorrow came from a talent for coupling with the surfaces of now. The bones were brought to her, and her eyes found an empathy with the cracks, the parched stained whiteness, the holes of the sponge of the core, and when she looked at them her whole soul looked, and when she snatched pieces of prophesy her whole soul snatched, and it bit off pieces that came to her gnawed at the edges and crystalled with salt.

But tomorrow does not want to be your food, and looking can be a kind of violence, and the bones bit back. Each day she felt pieces of her arms sink into skin and muscle, sharp pain in her shoulders where tiny mouthfuls of scapula went missing. It became hard to hold the bowl as her wrists collapsed into an absence of ulna. In place of these she grew a skeleton of sodium, and it preserved her from the inside until it could not, and it held her steady until it could not, and it let her eyes cradle the brought bones until they could not, and then one night with a full yolky moon she looked lovingly up and came tumbling down.

As her body fell, the mountain consumed her. Its grass took her skin, and its puddles took her voice, and its gravel took her breath, and its beetles took the shining brown of her eyes, and its pinecones wound her hair around themselves, and its tree roots learned the movements of her fingers, and its cats took the soft down that grew on her arms, and its snakes grew scales in the shape of her teeth, and its moths feathered antennae out of her eyebrows, and its cold rain washed the remains of her.

It took the span of the moonrise for the oracle to drop to the foot of the mountain as a bare handful of salty bones. A young girl found them and picked one up and licked the salt off and then did the same with the rest. And as she tasted the bones, she saw her own tomorrow, and she felt a bite in her big toe, and she took out a bowl, and dropped the bones inside, and began her long trek up the mountain.

[III]

Fictioning can be a tool for paying attention together, and collaborative writing has become vital to my thinking and scholarship. This final story comes from a collaborative project in which Dominic Pettman and I have been reading Vilém Flusser's *Gestures* (2014) together, each of us responding to every chapter—each of which examines an individual

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gesture—by composing a work of short fiction that explores some aspect of Flusser's theory. (The stories may not seem to have anything to do with the gestures named in their titles—you will find no smoking pipes, below—but each is shaped and informed by some part of Flusser's essay on the gesture that inspired it.) In this work in progress, we are experimenting with what it can look like to write with and about theory. "The Gesture of Smoking a Pipe" is one of the sixteen stories that I have composed for the project, each of which has a partner composed by Dominic. Together, the stories consider how movement and gesture create materialities. Together, the stories make little worlds that we can enter, where we spend time watching and reflecting. And then we come out of those worlds and bring those reflections to our other writing and to our lives. This, also, is what fictioning can do. And with that, I leave you with what I'd like for you to leave this piece with: the final story, below. Thank you for journeying with me, and I hope you enjoy spending some time with a girl and her frog-gods.

The Gesture of Smoking a Pipe

It was autumn and it was cold and she went out in the rain. She walked to a bench in the park and waited there until someone came. A man did come, and he was tall and smelled like cats. She sat with him for a while, silent and still with eyes closed while she tried to imagine herself into his pockets. Eventually she brushed the lint from her eyelashes and stood up and walked away until she came to a large dark puddle.

She bent down and sat beside it, and she waited for the rain to let up enough to still its surface, and when that happened she peered inside and looked for what looked back. When she recognized herself in the water—and this did not always happen, and certainly not right away—she closed her eyes and felt a splash on her face as a tiny frog hopped out of the puddle and sat on her knee and blinked up at her as she opened her eyes again.

She reached out to touch it. In that gesture of connection, once again she saw herself, and again she felt a splash as two more miniature green frogs hopped from the puddle and settled beside her. She sang to them—just a little—and as she heard herself in the song, she watched as the ground greened, covering itself with little hopping things birthing themselves out of splashes.

She looked around her at the spreading carpet of small green gods with tiny frog eyes and small frog feet that she had called out of the earth in her acts of recognition. (Recognizing yourself is a rare thing, her mother had told her. It almost never happens. It happens all the time. It's the most normal thing in the world. It's a kind of magic. You have to be very patient, and very careful, and know how to look, and know where to watch. It can happen when you're not looking. It will turn you into a magician, her mother told her. You must try never to do it. You must do it as much as possible. You are a goddess, her mother told her. You are nothing special.) She scooped up handfuls of gods and stuffed them into her pockets until she couldn't fit any more, and she nodded to the ones left behind and watched them disappear back into the puddle and got up and brushed leaves off the seat of her pants and wetly walked home.

Her tiny companions made the weather along her way. When a frog-god hiccuped, she heard a peal of thunder. Another one sneezed, and a tree fell over. As she walked past the man on the bench, he looked at one of the little gods and smiled, and when it smiled back the man felt heavy coins filling his hat and socks and mittens. When she walked past trees with the gods in her pockets, for a moment they each sparkled as if strung with lights, until she left them behind and the lights went out.

When she arrived at home, she scooped the gods onto the countertop and poured a

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plastic cup of bubble tea into a large saucer and watched as they hopped over to it and tried to balance themselves on the tapioca pearls.

There were no mirrors in her house, no photographs or portraits, no cameras, no laptops, no paper or pens, no magazines or books—nothing to record an image or a sound, nothing to convey herself to herself. She used to have all of these things and she nearly drowned in the clouds that would open up in the ceiling and pour down upon her every time she saw her own reflection in a glass or the description of a character in a story. Jellyfish gods rained down with the water, and her skin would sting with the bites of their long jelly arms. It was better when she was outside. Somehow the puddles helped. She found the frogs more manageable.

She sat down in the kitchen and fanned her fingers out on the table until she could just make out the faintest webbing starting to form between them. She bent her back until it was nearly horizontal, and as the little gods started jumping out of the saucer and over to her, she widened her eyes and they began to bulge out from her head. She opened her mouth, and one by one the gods jumped inside. When her cheeks were full with them and the saucer was empty, she closed her mouth and began to chew, tasting damp and pebbles and wood and leaves and smoke. As she swallowed divinity, her fingers unwebbed and her eyes receded back into her face and her skin lost its green tinge, and she got up and took herself to bed. That night she dreamed of the man on the bench. And when she woke up soaked, the bed and the floor obscured in a tangle of tentacles, she watched her eight fingers stretch and her knuckles grow suckers and she clicked the little beak forming on her lips, and she sighed, and she readied herself for breakfast.

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