

PIERS GELLY

A Conversation with John Keene

JOHN KEENE'S MOST RECENT BOOK, *COUNTERNARRATIVES*, COLLECTS thirteen works of fiction—eleven short stories and two novellas—that invert, undermine, or augment the historical record. Keene's narratives range across continents and centuries. The first, "Mannahatta," takes place in 1613, in precolonial New York; the last, "The Lions," unfolds in the near future, in an unnamed African country beset by a bloody postcolonial power struggle. In between, Keene reimagines colonial Brazil and Haiti, the American Civil War, the Harlem Renaissance, the avant-garde scene of 1920s São Paulo. The stories take place in letters, in an eighty-page footnote to a fictive history book, in two parallel columns of text running down the page, in Joycean stream-of-consciousness and disembodied Beckettian dialogue. In "Acrobatique," Keene imagines the inner monologue of Miss La La, an acrobat famous in nineteenth-century Paris for hanging aloft by her teeth. Keene's formal strategy is no less acrobatic: her story is a virtuosic eight-page-long sentence.

In "Blues," Keene imagines a romantic encounter between Langston Hughes and the Mexican poet Xavier Villarrutia. The text is a series of phrases broken up by ellipses. Keene told me that the ellipses "stand in for what we don't know. What we don't see. The silences. The gaps. They're right there on the page." Indeed, in each of Keene's stories, silences are as loud as words. He has arranged his stories in chronological order, such that the collection—or is it a novel?—reads like a counter-history to modernity itself, a fierce yet tender affirmation of a legacy of liberatory thought and action.

We spoke for an hour or so on Friday, October 26, during Keene's time as a Rea Visiting Writer at the University of Virginia. Three weeks earlier, Keene had been awarded a 2018 MacArthur "genius" grant, the latest in a long list of awards he has received. In 2016, *Counternarratives* won the American Book Award and Lannan Literary Award for Fiction, and earned the Republic of Consciousness Prize for Small Presses for the book's UK publisher.

Keene is also the author of a novel, *Annotations*, and three collec-

tions of poetry: *Seismosis*, *GRIND*, and *Playland*. He has published translations from French, Spanish, and Portuguese, including a translation of Hilda Hilst's novel *Letters from a Seducer*, which was selected for the 2015 Best Translated Book Award Fiction Longlist. He is currently Professor and Chair of African American and African Studies at Rutgers University–Newark, and teaches in the Rutgers–Newark MFA in Creative Writing.

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Meridian: I was hoping we could talk about cannibalism. Your Counter-narratives story “Anthropophagy,” about the Brazilian modernist Mário de Andrade, made me think of the “Anthropophagous Manifesto,” or “Cannibal Manifesto,” from 1928. In that text, the writer Oswald de Andrade [no relation to Mário] uses the indigenous practice of cannibalism as a metaphor for literary influence: he proposes that postcolonial Brazilian writers should kill and “eat” their colonial heritage through parody and inversion. He called it “absorption of the sacred enemy.” Is the “Anthropophagous Manifesto” important to you?

John Keene: That text is interesting, in terms of thinking about Brazilian modernisms, and non-European or non-North American modernisms. In “Anthropophagy,” the manifesto served as a backdrop to my thinking about Mário de Andrade, who was an extraordinary figure in early twentieth-century Latin American and Brazilian—and, I will dare assert, African Diasporic—modernist culture and cultural production.

The “Anthropophagous Manifesto,” anthropophagi, cannibalism, the devouring of that European past, placing the new world at the center of the conversation—that’s something that I think is very interesting. One of the ways Mário de Andrade did this was by traveling through northeastern Brazil and recording all of these folk songs and Afro-Brazilian and Indigenous music. And that was, for him and for the composer Heitor Villa-Lobos, a really important source for thinking about the modern, not thinking solely in terms of the future, but also looking to a different, non-European past.

I had been thinking about cannibalism as violent: you kill somebody and you eat them. But here, there seems to be something quite intimate about

it. At the end of “Anthropophagy,” Mário de Andrade is walking along the street, looking out at the beach, and then he has this memory of a time before his falling-out with Oswald. And he remembers reading his poetry aloud “while thinking to himself, then as now, we must never let the lies and the tears devour us, we must devour and savor the years.”

It made me think: what does it mean to eat something? You’re devouring and destroying it, but you’re also metabolizing and gaining its life force.

That’s a great reading. There’s the question of a certain kind of intimacy, and also Andrade’s queerness. Oswald de Andrade famously referred to Mário de Andrade as “our Miss São Paulo,” so he was outing him in a way, and mocking him, even as he and others acknowledged that Mário de Andrade was this paradigmatic modernist figure. I think about the anthropophagous as a lot of different things, but yes, the core of it is that intimate connection. There’s a violence that occurs, but also a taking-in of the other, so that the other is now part of you, is never going to be fully separate(d) from who you are.

There’s an authorship to it: you’re taking this person in, you’re consciously choosing.

Well, I think it’s conscious and unconscious, because culture is consumed consciously and unconsciously.

I have a question about “Blues,” the story about Langston Hughes’s romantic encounter with Xavier Villarrutia. I read your story, and then I went and found the poem that inspired it—the smoking gun, as it were—Villarrutia’s “North Carolina Blues,” which is dedicated to Hughes. Maybe it’s because I read your text first, but I got to the end of the poem, and I read the line “This mouth is mine,” and I couldn’t help but think, “Something totally happened between them.”

Right.

In an interview with the New York Public Library, you described a feeling of exhilaration as you were writing their love scene. Can you talk about that feeling?

When you're writing and you're deeply into a character, into a scene, you are transported to that place. It is not separate from your body, from your self. There's a merging between yourself and the page.

For me, it felt like a major act of recovery. This is giving Langston Hughes an erotics that he's been at times denied. The marvelous movie *Looking for Langston*, by Isaac Julien, does that, and there are other works where people have tried to reimagine Hughes in interesting ways. But I thought, "What would happen if we put these two people together?" Because we never see that, this particular kind of hemispheric queer modernism, a black-brown queer modernism. Speaking of modernism, and queer modernisms, there's this fascinating exchange that was happening between Langston Hughes and all these queer Mexican writers and poets and artists. That's never really talked about; actually, I shouldn't say it's not talked about, because some scholars of Mexican, Latin American, African American and American literature and cultural studies are talking about it. But I wanted to think it through in fiction, to dramatize it in fiction.

What we choose to represent, or dare to represent, is quite important. If we don't see ourselves reflected in the world outside, in literature, in film, then it's hard to imagine we belong in certain places and spaces. I wanted to give both Hughes and Villarrutia space and voice, and a kind of freedom they might have had but we've rarely seen depicted.

I'm really interested in the distinction between scholarship and fiction. On the one hand, you have a sort of scholarly discovery. You've read Villarrutia's poem and you're like, "Huh, I've done the chronology, I've figured out some things, and this poem seems to suggest something about their relationship." But then at a certain point you make a leap to fiction, so that your text is half discovery and half invention. Do you think about this jump from historical scholarship to fiction?

I think about it a little bit. This sounds kind of hokey and clichéd, but the important thing is to be as true to the story as possible. I had an idea. I wanted to write a story about these two. Momentarily, I thought I'd do it in a more straightforward way. And then I thought, "You know, I've always been transfixed by Richard Bruce Nugent's 'Smoke, Lilies and Jade.'"

I don't know that text. Can you tell me about it?

Oh yes. Richard Bruce Nugent was one of the members of the Harlem Renaissance, and “Smoke, Lilies and Jade” is a foundational black queer text. It’s one of the only ones from the Harlem Renaissance that overtly stages queer desire. It’s really quite beautiful. It’s a prose poem with ellipses, like “Blues.” The ellipses do lots of work; they stand in for what we don’t know. What we don’t see. The silences. The gaps. They’re right there on the page. I realized that that “Blues” was probably not just going to be an homage to the Harlem Renaissance and to Richard Bruce Nugent, but also the most accurate way to capture even a portion of Langston Hughes’s life, particularly this interaction with Xavier Villarrutia.

The other thing I would say is that there were certain things I wanted to do. I wanted to imagine Depression-era New York. I wanted to imagine what it would be like for Langston Hughes to be in Mexico. I wanted to imagine what it would be like for Xavier Villarrutia to be in New York. I wanted to imagine these two figures in conversation around literature. Writers talk about books, and other writers! In can be very high-minded, and other times it’s just about pure gossip. I wanted there to be all of that. For it to feel natural, in a way, even as the story is pushing against the usual conventions of what a story should be. Timothy Griffiths, a Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Virginia, called my story “queer fanfic.” And I said, “That’s cool.”

You're fine with queer fanfiction.

Yeah. [Laughs] It’s a version of that genre, I guess you could say, but with their poetry in it. I have snippets of their poems collaged into the text. So it’s doing, I think, a lot of things. It’s also looking back to one of Nugent’s guideposts, which is Aestheticism, the late 1890s, the figures that come out of the Aestheticist Movement. I’m thinking of Oscar Wilde, Walter Pater, and what it means, as Pater says in his “Conclusion” to his *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*, to “burn always with this hard, gem-like flame.” To “maintain this ecstasy,” to be alive, to move through the world and create. How do you capture that? I feel like “Blues” is almost pulsations of experience, as opposed to a straightforward narrative.

So all of those things were swirling in my head, and then they appeared on the page, with some careful formal considerations. For example, the shifting of points of view: it starts with one character, then moves to the other, then the other, then the other, and then at the end, they merge into those final few phrases, where they sort of separate—sort of, but don't.

I'm glad you mentioned the ellipses, because I wanted to ask you about that. These are very different stories, but in "Blues" you use ellipses with three dots, and in "The Lions," the last story in the collection, you use four dots to render the silence of one of the two speakers in this disembodied dialogue. I wonder if you can tell me about ellipses in both contexts, and how you think about them.

I love ellipses. When I write emails and texts and things, I try to force myself not to use them. I also love exclamation points, by the way. Exclamation points add a certain kind of exuberance. There's this dictum now that says, like, "No exclamation points." But even before I read any poems that used exclamation points, I think I just talked with exclamation points. And when I read people like Frank O'Hara and Kenneth Koch, I was like, "Oh my God! You can do this! This is so cool!" There's a famous O'Hara poem where he's like, "harmonicas, jujubes, aspirins!" It's this excitement at the world. Not an ecstatic enthusiasm, but a certain joy at living. So those are two punctuation marks that I have to watch myself with.

In "The Lions," the ellipses really are about silence. Silences of a very different kind than in "Blues." Silences of violence and brutality. Postcolonial neocoloniality. Of voices that have been silenced, and the silence around power.

That story is a dialogue between these two powerful and dangerous people, who began as idealists and utopians, but then, of course, absolute power corrupts absolutely. One turned on the other, but now the second man has taken power over the first, and has harmed him, but doesn't want to have to kill him. The second guy wants the first guy to acknowledge what he did, and to figure out—because he's a brilliant person—how to save himself. "What I want you to do," the second guy says, "is the heroic thing, the ethical thing, that you were incapable of doing in the past, when you tried to destroy me, and everyone else, for

your personal gain, as opposed to sticking to this anticolonial project that we were engaged in.” He cites various anticolonial, decolonial, and postcolonial theorists, Fanon and others, to say, “We know the theory. But now I want you to show me, truthfully, that you understand what you did.” And the first guy can’t do that.

“The Lions” is more of an allegorical or fabular approach to storytelling than the other stories in the book. But I feel like it resonates backwards, in terms of what has come before in the collection. And “The Lions” also looks forward to where we are today. Look at the United States. It’s really frightening.

Were you sure all along that you wanted the collection to end with “The Lions”? How did you come to that ending?

I wasn’t sure how I was going to end the book. I’d wanted to write that story for a while. There was actually another novella, which I hope I can finish at some point, set during World War II, that I wanted to write, that would have followed “Cold.” So that story would have been the last one. And it would have given more of an arc into the present. But I lost a huge portion of it when my hard drive crashed about fifteen years ago, and then I couldn’t reconstruct it, and I didn’t want to take another however many years. So I said, “Okay, I’ll try this story that really is about voices.”

When I was younger, I was fascinated with playwrights. People like August Wilson, Charles Fuller, Ntozake Shange, Eugene O’Neill. And of course Samuel Beckett was a huge influence. And then more recently I was reading people like Suzan-Lori Parks, Kia Corthron, Jon Fosse, and I was interested in how they play with voices, how much you can do with voice. And I thought about what it meant to write a story like that—not a play, something that really is a story, so the demands of a dramatic text are not exactly there, but you still have to animate those voices. It has to be these speakers telling you the story, bringing the story the life.

“The Lions” is a horrifying piece, but I would love to see someone stage it. It could be staged. That was in the back of my mind. The zero ground of existence and experience. It is nothing but darkness and voices.

If you were to stage it, do you think it would be in the dark?

It would be interesting to do it in a very dark set. I guess I'm thinking of Chris Ofili's *Blue Rider* series, those beautiful, extremely dark blue paintings that, when you see them up close, sort of shimmer. There's an iridescence in that blue. Depending on where you stand, you can or cannot see the images. I'm imagining something like that, where there's darkness, but some contours of human figures. But the voices themselves are what carry you. The action is static, but there is movement in the voice—that's what I was thinking. How do you create that? A lot of these were challenges I set for myself. How do you create action without any physical action? How do you create movement and drama and conflict solely through voices? And that, to a huge degree, is what drama hinges on, except that you do usually have people moving around in space.

I was talking to Colson Whitehead once about dialogue, and he said something along the lines of, "All conversations are about power, about the balance of power. One person has it. One person's trying to pull it away, the other person's pulling it back." I talk to my students about this, because I think that's what makes conversations have dimension. This is very clear in "The Lions," where you can see one person is silent—is gagged.

Yes.

And then the gag is taken out, and he starts to speak more, and by the end of the story, he's the one who's doing all the speaking.

Right.

Power is this intangible thing. How do you make it show up? What black-light do you use to make it appear?

Exactly. That might be an interesting thing to think about, right, to have the light slowly shift to the one who's speaking, even as he's being—well, I won't give it away.

Spoiler alert.

Right, right. But you know, that's what Harold Pinter does, again and again and again. That exchange of power, these elliptical exchanges, but they're so menacing. I think about *The Birthday Party*, and the ominousness of what could, in the wrong hands, be the most banal language. He knows how to charge it. Which is what poets do, on another level.

In "The Lions," the two characters are talking about fearlessness. You have one character say to the other, "I remember how in our school, that professor of ours called an extreme version of this mindset the greatest danger known to mankind, and I immediately looked at you, though at your core you were all fear. Fear, fear, fear. You were never fearless, though you had me fooled."

Why is fearlessness the greatest danger to mankind—or why does this man think it is?

Because it means you have no constraints. It means you will do almost anything. Including betray the people who are closest to you. Your loved ones. Anyone.

I'm not saying that I believe this. I think this character is, to a certain degree, misguided. But on the one hand, a certain level of fearlessness is clearly needed for people to do extraordinary things—or to be able to live with one's fear. To surmount that fear, to leap into the void, to handle the nothingness of potential failure, of disaster, is what he's referring to.

When I think of the fearlessness of someone like Martin Luther King, Jr., or Malcolm X, or Patrice Lumumba, so many of these extraordinary figures. I'm not saying they didn't have fears, but you think about that remarkable speech that Martin Luther King, Jr. gives just before he is assassinated. He's a religious person, he's a religious man, a preacher and the son of a preacher, and he's put his faith in a higher power, and he says, "They may kill me, but this movement that I have been a part of, that I have partially led, but also I have *been* led—by the people, all of you who have walked beside me, fought beside me, and suffered beside me, and those who have been killed—it's not going to stop. Because the arc of justice, the vector of justice, is going to keep going. It's long. It's not going to end. I'm just one body." That's a kind of radical fearlessness. Because it says, "I'm willing to die for a greater

cause. Liberation! Of millions. Equality for millions and millions of people.”

So in “The Lions,” all those things are woven into what this character is saying to this person who he sees as, basically, a coward.

It sounds to me like fearlessness is dangerous, but the thing to which it is dangerous is the order. Things as they are are threatened by this willingness to say, “I’m less important than this political project.”

The other side of it, of course, is that you can have a fearless maniac. I won’t name any names. [Laughs] We could point out some people in very recent history, and the past—the question is, are they fearless, or are they so guided by fear that they just destroy everything around them? That’s another danger. But I’m thinking here of a more utopian, liberatory fearlessness.

I wanted to ask about a line in “Gloss, or the Strange History of Our Lady of the Sorrows.” You write, about Carmel’s father, “During a counterattack against the rebels at Las Cayes, one of the Cuban attack dogs imported by the French turned on him, opening his throat, with the precision of a masterly brushstroke, in one bite.”

It’s a terrifying, clean, precise metaphor. It made me wonder, can we run this in the opposite direction: if a fatal bite can be like a brushstroke, can a brushstroke be like a fatal bite?

Yeah. I wanted to suggest the latent power in art. Carmel’s father is this extraordinarily skilled, and gifted, but enslaved person, whose talents are put in the service of beautifying the homes of the wealthy colonial masters. But his daughter has a similar power, and as we see, her power takes a very different form. She has an artistic power, but it’s a predictive power. I was playing with the idea of genealogy, and inheritance, and heritage, and culture, what we carry in us. On multiple levels, the spiritual as well. The spiritual and its relationship to the corporeal, the body, the bodily. This absolutely brutal thing that happens to the father can be likened to the power, wielded in the wrong way, of pen and brush.

I want to return to another moment of this New York Public Library inter-

view I read. You were talking about this chance encounter, at the Morgan Library, with the story of Miss La La, the subject of the Edgar Degas painting at the center of "Acrobatique." You said, "As I left the Morgan Library, I was under her spell, and the outline and even words from the story started to pour into my head," which I think is just beautiful. Do you remember any of those words?

I was walking from the Morgan Library back to the New York Public Library, to get things I'd left in there, and to head to the train, head home. I was spellbound. I think it was words like, "Higher, I hear—"

Which is the first line of the story.

"From the center of the circus..."

Which is amazing, because it suggests that "Acrobatique" began as a gesture.

Exactly. The feeling of height, of flight, flight in multiple senses. Being up in the air, but also, fugitivity—like, "You can't capture me." And the extraordinary challenge that she undertook as an acrobat, as an artistic figure. I think of her as an artist. Again and again and again she did this. And she never fell. Which I love. I mean, thank God she never fell! But also, what kind of skill is that? And then the acclaim that she received, but of course now she's almost completely forgotten. So all that was swirling in my head as I was walking.

I always have the thought, "Someone else has written about this." So that was one thing. And I also thought, "Maybe I should take a more conventional approach." But then this just started to come out. And I realized, as I was writing it, that it was almost like being on a high wire, so that became the structuring principle for the text. It was exhilarating to write.

But then, afterward, I went back and said, What have I not gotten right? Where was she from, really? Little things like that. Did she ever marry? She did. Where did she travel? So I tried to fill in some of those blanks, but to make sure that it all fit with the flow of the narration.

I've always been fascinated by writers who have long sentences—or, not just long sentences, but like an entire story that's a sentence, or in certain cases an entire novel is a sentence. I think there's something to

be said for that. Sometimes it can be gimmicky. But if it's in the service of the plot and the idea, the theme, then I think it's doing something extra, which is good.

Speaking of long sentences, is Proust important to you?

Yes. Proust is extraordinary. I always think about Proust in the sense of someone who was thought for much of his life to be talented, but a dilettante, and not really taken seriously. But inside that seemingly frivolous dilettante was one of the really, truly, most extraordinary writers and artists of his generation, or any generation. Think about how he depicts a world, and in that depiction you get elements of sociology, of history, and art history. His discussions of painting and music. You also get a delving into a social world, on the order of Tolstoy. It's just fascinating. But also the queer element, transgressing against what was considered respectable, even though he was a figure of respectable society, of high society. The fact that his family was Jewish. The slightly slant take that he brings to this depiction of French-Catholic haute bourgeoisie. All of these things. It's really so extraordinary. Proust is a very important person.

And then, at the very level of language itself, he was one of the greatest, in French or any language. Because you think about those sentences, and the marvelous things he does. Syntactically situating certain things in certain spaces and places, to produce a certain kind of effect. He shows you what syntax and rhetoric can do.

The sentences just fall in these very particular ways. Often it's like—well, it's like a gymnast's landing. You get to the end, and you're like, "Whoa, here we are two pages later, and something has just happened."

Right.

Is there anything that you wish people would ask you in interviews? Is there a question you don't feel you get?

Few people ever ask me about religion in *Counternarratives*. I don't know if I'd have very good answers! But with the story "A Letter on the Trials of the Counterreformation in New Lisbon," for example, there's

a lot going on in terms of religion in that story. And I'm so curious—I mean, including those epigrams at the start of it. I don't have the book with me....

I've got the book in my bag. Here.

Keene: Several of those epigrams are real, but one is made up. And no one ever says, "Where did this come from?"

Which one is made up?

Let's take a look. Well, the first is, "What is the nature of the recurring irrationality of culture which precludes a victory of modernizing rationality?" Now, Abby Warburg, that's real.

And then, "If I could fly to you on the wings of eagles..." by Yehuda HaLevi, which is real.

And "I want the essence. My soul is in a hurry," by Mario de Andrade.

And then "The disquiet that lurks beneath the placid surface..." by Manoel Aries D'Azevedo.

He's the character in the story!

He's the character, right! And I'm like, "Please, someone ask me!" But of course no one ever does. People have discussed the Gothic element, the character Burunbana, but...what does it mean to write a story in which you are grappling with multiple oppressions at the same time?

The battle for Catholic Brazil is not just a battle for territory, but it's for people's souls. What would have happened if the Dutch had kept what's now Olinda and Pernambuco? Their approach was a much more proto-Enlightenment take on how you structure a society. You could have had a Protestant country, a Reformist approach to religion. But also they allowed religious dissenters, they allowed Jewish people as well as Catholics. It would have been a very different sort of society had the Dutch been able to hold on. The Brazilian state of Recife could have become its own little country, like Suriname. So I was thinking about that.

And the question of precarity. Depending on where you are, that

determines to such a huge degree—and this is true all over the world—the kind of life you can lead. So often in the United States, we talk about the world as if everyone lives the same way we do, or as if all of us live the same way, without thinking about the almost incalculable differences that exist out there.

The story tries to put all those things in motion. But all beneath, again, the placid surface. The surface of what seems like the norm, or the normal, but always there are things roiling beneath. In the story, Burunbana actually says, “Whenever one looks too deeply beyond the surface of this world of men, one may find truths submerged that not even the most long-held beliefs and traditions can withstand.” Not only can you not look away, but your vision is changed.