

Ching-In Chen

Breaths for Mark Aguhar

(1) I'm sitting down tonight to think of Mark Aguhar.

This writing began as an invitation for a sideways look at Asian American poetry. A secret, alternative history. "To imagine Aguhar's legacy as a space—not instead of a body but as supplementary to it—encourages proximity without approximation."¹

A request for a flexible kind
 of laying bare. To make
 a breath, a caesura, to hold space for re-memory.
 To survive and surface a tale.

(2) When you (the curator)² asked me who I wanted to think about with more intensity at the Asian American Literature Festival in DC.

Which ancestor could grow our imagination, our loves, our cares for each other.

Which ancestor who wouldn't be invited as a matter of course.
 Which made kin without deliberate act and intervention.

I tallied up who had been invited into syllabi. Who had access to my waking space.

My community center open mic. "In fact, I only became familiar with her incredibly beautiful, unrelentingly snarky body of work after her passing."³

(3) Which beloved name to call into space. Whose stories to preserve, whose bodies to cherish. Who we (community) so often taught to dismiss.

“I think she saw into the future of her communities in so many ways—the many modes of care and political interventions one and all can make possible. Her art means so much to me in its articulation of queer kinship, of holding multiple identities at once, and of being accountable to each other as means of cultivating better survival.”⁴ Who we (community) demand alter in uncomfortable and painful ways.

Not allowed to be full flesh.

Ugly delicious, in our majesty, draped with our best skins.

I imagined all the unbraided legacies I searched for, unseen in any official capacity. “BLESSED ARE THE BELOVED WHO I DIDN’T DESCRIBE, WHO I DIDN’T DESCRIBE, WILL LEARN TO DESCRIBE AND RESPECT AND LOVE.”⁵

(4) I’m sitting down tonight to imagine Mark Aguhar, Call Out Queen, Brown Gurl blogger, visual and performance artist.

An approximate breath I’m taking now that I’m (you’re) gone from Houston, Texas, a place both share(d). Though not with each other.

You were born in Houston in 1987. I relocated from Milwaukee, from Massachusetts, from California in 2015. In 1987, when I was a very awkward nine-year-old starting middle school, looking for a place to friend my misfit body. “My work is about visibility. My work is about the fact that I’m a genderqueer person of color fat femme fag feminist and I don’t really know what to do what that identity in this world.”⁶

(5) A space (for me) of struggle and loving in the thick air for all kinds of breathing.

“She transformed herself all the time—with makeup, wigs, glitter, and self-made clothing that utilized bright and colorful patterns fabrics that were cut and pieced together in order to reveal parts of her heavenly, fat, brown body.”⁷

Where I started to focus on the breath (my breath) as a unit of meditation, of pause, of space, of gathering. After storm and chemical and calm.

(6) I came upon your show at the Lawndale Center, *MF*M, on the Internet. You ask via exhibition: “WHY IS EVERYONE SO OBSESSED WITH MY BEAUTIFUL BROWN BODY?”⁸

A familiar space, a room I have circulated in. Seven years after *MF*M is exhibited at Lawndale, I am (t)here, contemplating a life-sized papercut of an Asian American nonbinary writer made by genderqueer Vietnamese American visual artist Antonius Bui.

On the wall adjacent is what feels like a larger-than-life-sized papercut of me.

“With signature sunglasses perched on head,” my partner teases me. I am recognizable, distinct.

It is difficult to stand in front of my image, to face my own approximated reflection.

“From verbal harassment to social ostracization, you experienced rejection in queer communities that value masculinity, whiteness, and thinness. In contrast, your fat, brown, and femme body was marked by them as ugly and undesirable. But this did not stop you from taking glamorous photos, declaring yourself ‘stunning,’ and investing in feminine clothing and makeup. You knew that embracing your beauty, and

ugliness, was a radical and disruptive act.”⁹

To look at my body and not criticize my own fatness, my own ugliness.

Because what we choose, often is not each other. By turning away, not
looking, engaging in distance. “Bodies are inherently
valid.”¹⁰

(6) A few months later, Bui and I plan a Lunar New Year ritual at Lawndale
where we invite intimates and strangers to burn their demons, after
Lynda Barry. We read Asian American queer poets
into the space. We bless the space. With our
performance, our struggle, our flippancy.

“I don’t need to be strong, I need for the world to stop
being so fucking weak, that my sisters are being swallowed up before
my eyes.”¹¹

Our queerness, our love, our family, our food. Our
fire, our smoke, our imperfect ways of telling story and healing.

(7) An image which sticks with me. A bird netted by an almost violet webbing.
A desperate feeling, almost frivolous. A pattern which catches your eye.

“I found myself thinking about some other reparative process, one that
encountered this kind of damaging objectification with an even more powerful kind
of objectification. I wanted to treat each other like objects in profound affirmation,
to learn to see each other, to look at one another as bodies and say YES.”¹²

After so many chunky heaves, of hearing Die, m*f*er, die!, when I couldn’t
breathe.

When I sometimes desperately wanted to die for revenge. Then,
then, maybe they would wonder. Who was that we had dismissed so readily?

To look at the videos, the artist inviting and daring me to look head-on.

(8) In a new city, new co-workers, a new trans friend. A flash across networks, across years.

In his office, I notice a familiar white square with loud red letters: “Who is worth my love, my strength, my rage?”¹³ *Not You (Power Circle)*, says the title of the piece and its flippant maker.

(9) Reading all the community love letters to/for Mark Aguhar, I followed some dead links all the way to the Wayback Machine with only access to the last screenshot of the blog.

Could all the entries be brushed off the Internet, lost in the past?

The last one stark on a white background: “LOL WHITE MEN BORE ME.”

And then:

“There’s nothing here! Whatever you were looking for doesn’t exist at this address.”

(10) Whose eye is worth my love and rage?

A blur. You can’t quite make out.

No one. LOL. No one.

Endnotes

1. Pérez, Roy, "Proximity: On the Work of Mark Aguhar." *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*. Edited by Johanna Burton, Reina Gossett, and Eric Stanley. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press and The New Museum, 2017, 281–291.
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4. Quote by Muriel Leung, Vallarta, MT. "'I'd Rather Be Beautiful Than Male': Remembering the Radical Art of Mark Aguhar." *VICE*. 2018, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/j5bwm8/mark-aguhar-art-id-rather-be-beautiful-than-male. Accessed 10 Dec. 2019.
5. Aguhar, Mark, "Litanies to My Heavenly Brown Body." *Blogging for Brown Gurls*. 2011, <https://calloutqueen-blog.tumblr.com/post/2804992867/litanies-to-my-heavenly-brown-body-contd>. Accessed 10 Dec. 2019.
6. Aguhar, Mark, "Artist Statement." *Mark Aguhar*. 2011, <https://markaguhar.tumblr.com/page/4#3768186234>. Accessed 10 Dec. 2019.
7. Kwak, Young Joon, "Mark Aguhar." *The Brooklyn Rail*. 2016, <https://brooklynrail.org/2016/07/criticspage/mark-aguhar>. Accessed 10 Dec. 2019.
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12. Hall, Gordon, "Reading Things." *Walker Reader*. 2016, <https://walkerart.org/magazine/gordon-hall-transgender-hb2-bathroom-bill>. Accessed 10 Dec. 2019.
13. Aguhar, Mark. *Not You (Power Circle)*. 2011. <https://markaguhar.tumblr.com/tagged/drawing#3848472138>. Accessed 10 Dec. 2019.