

An Interview with Michael du Plessis

written by Janice Lee | March 24, 2014



Janice Lee: What inspired you to write *The Memoirs of JonBenet by Kathy Acker*? I imagine this to be a very intentional and carefully-constructed amalgam of ideas. I could imagine too, this having come to you in a dream..

Michael du Plessis: That's an interesting question because I did work on it for a very brief and intense period of time. I finished the first draft in about three weeks and then I went back and worked on it and worked on it, so it did write itself very quickly. You're right, it did feel very dreamlike. And it did grow out of some of the life experiences that I'd had in Colorado up to that point. I was sort of thinking about the end of the 90's and the turning into the 2000's and I think that's also what the book is about, at least for me, which is very different from what a reader might see.

JL: So you did live in Boulder for a while?

MDP: Yes, I lived in Boulder in 1993 – 1994 for a year, and then I lived in Boulder again, while I was writing the novel. In fact, I had a Boulder sublease, for a few months. And the rest of the time I lived in Denver and commuted to Boulder because I was working in Boulder.

JL: Do you want to talk further about what the book is about for you? I think the book can carry different meanings for different readers, and there are certain themes that come up more often than others, but there are also implications that this is a personal book. For example, there's line towards the end of the book: "He's not a character in an overblown break-up novel about Boulder that uses you as a metaphor."

MDP: Yes, well I just had a bad breakup *in* Boulder. The reason I moved to Boulder was to be with a man I was having a relationship with and it didn't turn out well and I was both furious and at loose ends, and thought that was a good time to write. I was enraged, when I wasn't teaching, so I was enraged 23 hours a day and then there was 1 hour where I had to teach. But I started writing, and I was thinking, "How do I write this break-up novel about this relationship that was fairly short and fairly intense and what models can I turn to?" and I read Lydia Davis's *The End of the Story* and in some ways I realized I would never be able to do that, so what I did instead was this novel. It came out of me realizing I wasn't Lydia Davis and couldn't do what she was doing.

It's great that you're not Lydia Davis.

It dawned on me that I would never be Lydia Davis. But I've often thought about the fascinating subgenre of the "break-up book." And can't think of many. One clearly numinous break-up book would be Rimbaud's *A Season in Hell* where Rimbaud tells Verlaine off (I've always thought it's hilarious that he made Verlaine the "foolish virgin" and himself "the infernal bridegroom" and

then there's Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*, which is utterly central to the book (and my life—Barnes's work is crucial for me). Then I think back to Benjamin Constant's novel *Adolphe* from the 18th century. But I can't think of many. This should be a popular genre, no? Maybe I'm just not thinking hard enough.

I think probably there's hundreds of break-up novels, they just don't seem that way on the surface.

That's sort of the thing about break-up novels, they're sort of stealthy, stealthful. You wouldn't think of *A Season in Hell* as a break-up novel, but it is.

I wouldn't necessarily think of your book as a break-up novel either without that giveaway line.

Does a break-up not happen to a lot of people? Do you think people are just too embarrassed to write break-up novels?

I think people just don't admit maybe when a break-up novel is a break-up novel. Or use that label.

I think people need to own it. We should have a conference on the break-up novel. The best part of breaking up is making up a panel at a literary conference about it afterwards. But to get back to your question, it felt like a break-up novel to me. But I'm not sure if that's what the reader takes away.

I think after reading that line, some of the other stuff started to take on a different tone. I think there was this personal feeling throughout, even though the prose is very blunt and very funny and it has this quick momentum that really moves forward, but then when you realize oh this is a break-up novel, some of the funnier or more theoretical bits, like Kathy Acker's rant, start to take on a slightly different tinge. I feel like I could reread this again and maybe notice threads I ignored the first time.

Oh, that's nice to know. I sort of thought it as a one-way read, a one-and-done read.

It definitely could be that. This was nice though for me because, I don't know about you, but I haven't read many literary books lately that are "fun." And this was a lot of fun.

I do want to entertain as well. And really I wanted to entertain myself. If it's funny at all, it's because other people share my sense of humor. A lot of the rants are sort of overblown...

I laughed out loud in that scene when Kathy Acker is resurrected and finds herself in a pet cemetery. That was hilarious. So while I was reading, various ideas were running through my head. I was interested especially in what seemed to be a mystical and fantastical strain through your work. Peggy Kamuf in her introduction brings up this state of "not-knowing-who-writes" as the "the condition of its happening at all," which makes me think a little of Frederic Myers and other occult figures. And then there's so much about

dreaming, the dream life and the waking life, the influence of one over the other, the confusion as to which is more “real,” which makes me think of Lovecraft, who of course figures centrally in your book. It’s interesting that dreams are beyond suggestive in Lovecraft’s work, there’s hardly an other world, these other worlds exist here, on our planet. And then I was thinking of that [South Park episode](#) when Cthulhu is awoken..



Oh I have to see that. I just taught a class on the fantastic and one of the students did a presentation on the cute-ifying of Cthulhu because you know, like when I was first writing the novel, I don’t think they had soft toy Cthulhus yet, but now there’s slippers, there’s tea cozies, there’s hats, there’s everything. And it’s strange. I think that in some way Lovecraft is a very central writer to the American canon. If you look at Deleuze’s take on American literature, which is very weird, he always comes back to writers like Lovecraft. He sees them as sort of liberating. But I’ve always liked Lovecraft. I read a lot of Lovecraft as a child. And I read a lot of Lovecraft now. So Lovecraft is in there partially just because of my familiarity with him, and a certain kind of identification with him. Spoiler alert, but if you look at the description of Lovecraft that I give, I’ve taken it verbatim from L. Sprague de Camp, that acolyte of Lovecraft who wrote his first biography, and I took chunks straight from his text, (large parts of the book are collage), but I changed the description to be me, so the statistics that I gave would fit me. I’m trying to read a book right now about Lovecraft’s style, which is something that has always interested me because “The Carpet Out of Space” in *JonBenet* is mainly based on Lovecraft’s “The Color Out of Space,” that you can sort of recognize.. Michel Houellebecq, the French novelist, in a dreadfully boring lecture, did say one interesting: the precision with which Lovecraft presented his monsters.

Have you ever read the work of his friend Clark Ashton Smith? He had a style that made Lovecraft’s style look like Hemingway’s. His language was very archaic and his stories were much more mannered even than Lovecraft’s, and with this urgency of terror. He was a California-based writer. Lovecraft never traveled much so he was always writing to all these people, so Ashton Smith and he had some correspondence.

In his [review on HTMLGIANT](#), Impossible Mike was postulating on whether your novel was a horror novel. What are your thoughts on that? The break-up novel simultaneously as a horror novel.

I wonder! Because I have to admit I’m sort of steeped in horror, I watch a lot of horror films and I read a lot of horror fiction, etc. So it may be just that I’m steeped in horror and I can’t produce anything outside of that so what I thought was a break-up novel turned out to be a horror novel.



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Your book is also labeled as a work of conceptual writing. And you talk about this in your aesthetic: "My work is, I hope, a contribution, in other words, to a self-reflexive conceptualism, a conceptualism that may as yet be a conceptualism to come." [*TrenchArt: Surplus Aesthetics*] Do you want to expand on that?

I was thinking of the turn of the term "to come" that has been used a lot by Derrida and Giorgio Agamben in *The Coming Community*, and in some way I would like to think of conceptualism as a kind of placeholder for ways of thinking through things that we do that haven't happened yet. In other words, I'm thinking of a conceptualism that doesn't have to look necessarily like what we would imagine.

If I can go on about my aesthetic and why it's tied to collage and ekphrasis as practices, I'd start by noting how Jacques Rancière summarizes Greek genre theory as really rudimentary but focusing on how the lyric was speaking in one's own voice and was therefore ethically okay (you were being yourself, albeit lyrically), but epic in which you speak in both your own voice (as narrator I imagine) and as characters (that is beings whom you are not) becomes an issue. And drama is a really big problem because there is no real voice there anymore, only you pretending to be other voices. So the further away you get from speaking in your own voice, the dodgier it gets ethically. (This is in Rancière's *The Flesh of Words*, if eager readers want to follow up.) Rancière doesn't pursue the issue in the direction I'm taking it in, but for me, the issue works completely in the opposite direction—I associate fiction and here I'm thinking, oddly of poetry itself as fiction, as what is not one's own voice (if we think all the way back at least to T.S. Eliot's wanting to call *The Waste Land*, *He Do the Police in Different Voices* instead), hence is not what is real or true—it's the pretending to be other. And it seems to be this pretending to be other is in some way profoundly ethical by being just that, the ethics of the unreal.

For me, this question of the unreal is at the heart of all literature and art—that it is not what it is, in some sense, to extrapolate a bit wildly. And we need that boundary to exist not so that we can be confined to reality but precisely so that we can exit reality and know that we are doing so. Jean-Luc Nancy writes of this very movingly as the way that art allows us to experience being as withdrawing—of course, he's working with Heideggerian notions, but that sense that art is what allows us to experience non-presence or absence is for me crucial. I think it's also why I'm so interested in ekphrasis—*The Synnot Children* in *JonBenet* is a real painting, by the way, which I saw as part of an exhibition at the Denver Art Museum. There's the project about decapitation in cinema you and I are working on, my collection of poetry takes a lot of its sources from either painting or cinema, and my current project is an exploration of old children's books and stories, primarily. For me this is less about the universality of post-production as a way of signaling that my work is simulacrum, the copy of a copy. Here I'm thinking of simulacrum in the way that Pierre Klossowski uses it (Klossowski's work is also crucial for me)—that is an artifice that is suspended between art and life—it's an imitation, but not of some "natural" or "self-evident" reality, it's the construct of a construct. But I do think

this is different from the way that the simulacrum has become a synonym for hyperreal, which I think is everywhere and suffocating us like one of the continents of plastic that kill large swathes of ocean. This is where I part company rather sharply with David Shields et al. But really, that's going without saying.

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Sorry if I'm a in fog of "theory" name- dropping, but I guess I'm trying sleazily to establish my bona fides as a theory writer, now that the term is so trendy. (Ah, whatever would we do without *Semiotext[e]*!) But seriously, the tradition of continental philosophy has been a key source of my ideas and even my practice, and on another level is just as you've said, philosophical or literary theoretical texts or texts about aesthetics texts are when all is said and done, more texts that one has either read as a writer (and therefore acted with or reacted against or whatever) or not.

I've said publicly that I don't believe in attempts to fuse art and life; if I can explain myself, I would say that after the advent of digitality, we're stuck in a hyperreal from which there is no exit, since the boundary between fiction and the real seems to have ceased existing. While it may have served some purpose given the configuration of cultural power for the historic avant-gardes in the early twentieth century to assert that they were obliterating that boundary, it really makes no sense to claim to be doing that in a cosmos in which everything has already been transformed into its perfectly hyperreal, hypercapitalist commodity image, its selfsameness, its identity, its "relatability" as one equivalent among others. But a not-being-what-it-is, a duplicity, a difference, I tend to fold back into my work as the content of my work, which seems to me always about my not speaking in my own voice and not telling my "own" story but rather exiting to some other sphere that is, precisely, not reality. E.T.A. Hoffmann describes this very beautifully and movingly at the end of his fairy tale, "The Golden Pot." The ending is about the distinction between what is real and what is fictional and about their necessary separation; I think Angela Carter's *The Infernal Desire Machines of Dr. Hoffman* makes a similar point. Satoshi Kon's film *Paprika* (Kon's work has been a very big influence on my work) is about what happens once we've realized the surreality of the Surrealists.

Have you noticed the way people now say "surreal" when they just mean, banally, "extraordinary"? It's the "unreal" of the 2010s, and I think it speaks to the devaluation precisely of what the Surrealists valued as the unusual, *l'insolite*, the marvelous. Our new capitalist realist banality, evidenced by the now suddenly universal use of the adjective "surreal."

In terms of how that fold of fiction takes place, for me, it's through my practice of collage. In the words of Maggie Nelson, I "lean on," I'm great leaner-on-er. I think this is an affinity with conceptualism and certain strategies of putting the name of the author, the signature, at stake—and I understand that as something much wider than the literal signature, of

course, although the signature is precisely some blurring line between literal and figurative. (Here one thinks of Derrida's work as an extensive investigation of and meditation on the signature, the proper name, the counter-signature, and so on.)

I adore writers with pseudonyms, Dominique Aury (author of *The Story of O*, a book I've always adored and which Acker, as you know, uses extensively) played out her whole life as an elaborate game of pseudonyms. So I was terribly thrilled to be Vanessa Place in the Factory Series for which I did *Thank You for Reading* and which I'd argue vehemently deals with key issues in some of Vanessa's work. If I may say so myself.

Oh right. I haven't seen yours but I did one of those too.

Oh which one you do?

I did the one where I actually appropriated Vanessa.

Oh, how clever!

I obtained electronic versions of all her books up to that date and searched for every phrase that had an instance of God, or synonym of God (ie. Lord, Holy Father, Yahweh, etc.), and I took those out and compiled them in order, and the text is called *Only Yahweh*. It was mostly just a find-and-search, which seemed appropriate to me, to appropriate her own work.

Anyways, this is sort of a silly question, but the other thing I thought of while reading your book was the fantasy of playing with toys and dolls. When I was little, I played a lot with dolls and stuffed animals, and there was this whole world we created with our stuffed animals where there was a little town and they had jobs and personalities and relationships. And there was never any doubt that it was pretend, but there was also never any distinction. There was never a moment where we had to pause and say that we were now entering make-believe world. We knew it wasn't real, yet there they were, and it *was* real. So it's interesting when we watch movies like *Toy Story*, there's always that question we respond to "What if the dolls were alive?" But then the question in response to that is, well *what are the dolls now?* If they're not alive now, does that mean they're dead? So in reading your book, I was interested in this cultural fantasy and this relationship we have with toys, especially dolls, even as adults. Did you play with dolls as a child?



I realize, and obviously the gender thing really comes into play, I was really into playing with dolls when I was a child but because my parents wouldn't really let me play with dolls as such, I played with figurines. I remember my favorite toy was this little figurine of Alice, from Disney's *Alice in Wonderland*. And I was really obsessed with this Alice. And then I had a series of kind of china figurines, which are very period-specific. You see them sometimes at yard sales. They're part china. They're usually women in 18th century dress, and they have a kind of lace attached to them to create ruffles but the lace has been treated with something so they're ultra-

stiff. And I played with those. But for me, the doll was always tied to the figurine and the figurine was always tied to a sort of narrative in some way, the tactility of the doll, and I think you're right about dolls and their relationship to us, we're always moving them around, sort of slotting them into narratives, and that's interesting to me. That's how I fantasized as a child, thinking about narrative or non-narrative, but you're right, it didn't seem very distinct from my real life either though I could draw the fantasy-reality distinction.

It seems that the distinction's always there, but it's not always something that gets called out. I played mostly with stuffed animals: hippos, monkeys, ducks. And for me, I think it was one of my first relationships with storytelling. Elaborated worlds were created. At one point, there was a new mayor of the town, who was a hippo, and his girlfriend, who was a duck. And he had become mayor because he had discovered oil. But we really wanted them to be good, to be the good guys, so they donated money to other stuffed animals so they could open up their own businesses. And I realize now the strange transparency of these narratives, though we weren't thinking about capitalism or oil barons or any of that when we making these stories then.

Oh, you must write a book! The oil baron hippo and duck couple who devote themselves to good deeds...

I think probably it was the obvious narrative of popular culture and media leaking into our fantasy world, but in this world, we had complete control over the outcomes. I want to ask too though, are all the references to "The Yellow Wallpaper" intentional?

No, but oh, you're right! It's an interesting question because I'd read "The Yellow Wallpaper" before I wrote the novel, I'd read it quite a few times. I read it as a child actually, I have to admit, in a horror story collection, and it terrified me.

Oh it still terrifies me. It's one of my favorites.

It's one of my favorite stories too. But no, there's nothing collaged from "The Yellow Wallpaper," which would have been great. I'm just so steeped in "The Yellow Wallpaper" I guess...(actually, when I check, I see I do have direct references to "The Yellow Wallpaper"—the book is sort of about forgetting where the bodies are buried, if one thinks of the quotations as bodies...

At some point, I was thinking of an Eliotean set of notes explaining where all the quotations come from, but I've dropped that and have needed up forgetting the sources of a lots of stuff in the novel. I did read a LOT of Stephen King for the book, just to make sure I wasn't being unfair. And he did write a children's book called *My Pretty Pony*, or some such, which makes him an early brony.

Well the first reference for me was when Lovecraft starts to talk about the carpet and he starts to become obsessed with the carpet in the same way the narrator becomes obsessed with the wallpaper in that story. And then the

carpet is described as "creeping," which is exactly like the yellow wallpaper. And later, though I forget who, one of the narrators expresses that they wished they had yellow wallpaper instead of blue wallpaper.

Well I've read it several times, including as a child, and it really scared me. I think you're right though, the word "creeping" in that is sort of the key...

Yes that word "creeping" is absolutely the perfect word. And the other word is "smooch," how her shoulder fits perfectly into the "smooch."

There's so much to talk about in that story. Also what I love about that story, and Poe does this a lot, is that it's the kind of text in which one isn't entirely clear where the voice telling you the text is coming from, because if she's crawling around and around, and that's where the story ends, she couldn't have written this. So it's sort of the impossible voice, which I think is part of the creepiness.

In terms of anything like a "tradition" for me it goes back to Poe and Hoffmann and the Romantics—I take a rather long view. Beyond, Barnes, whose work is vital for me and utterly central to *JonBenet* (I think she's the writer with the most material collaged in *JonBenet*, but that's a guess), there's Jean Rhys, whose narrative voices are always haunted voices and self-imaging and barely self-sustaining voices, in many anticipate and outdo Beckett's experiments with sustaining an unsustainable voice (and of course I appreciate her coming overtly from a colonial situation, too), Jane Bowles, Hoffmann, Ashton Smith, Lovecraft, Lord Dunsany, Ronald Firbank, Ivy Compton-Burnett, J. G. Ballard (whose world we still live in, it seems to me), Sylvia Townsend Warner, and also by cinema—Roger Corman's Poe Cycle is for me a very important America masterpiece, as is the work of Jacques Tourneur, a lot of which I pay homage to in my collection of poetry. I think I come from a very particular kind of queer tradition that includes writers like Barnes and Firbank and Compton-Burnett and that also has Fassbinder or some of François Ozon's films. Oh, and the tradition of decadence from Baudelaire to Wilde to Rachilde and Jena Lorrain and Vernon Lee to Villiers de l'Isle Adam, whose *Future Eve* is again a crucial text for *JonBenet*.

In writing, I'm attracted to mannerism and the baroque, so Marguerite Young's work really fascinates me. I'm attracted to certain kinds of language, and particularly tonal qualities in those kinds of language, a certain attached detachment or detached attachment. I read a huge amount of genre fiction, especially the long tradition of the Gothic and the fantastic.

The Manuscript Found at Saragossa is one of my very favorite books and so is Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*, but I've also read a lot of horror (the Wordsworth series is a good reissue) by Victorian-Edwardian horror writers such as W.F. Harvey, whose collection, *The Beast with Five Fingers* I can't recommend enough. Of, and there's Marjorie Bowen's work which is breathtaking—*The Bishop of Hell* is a text I'd recommend to anyone. She's Lovecraft-like in ways that outdo Lovecraft sometimes.

Then there's also always Jean Ray, in many ways a Belgian H. P.

Lovecraft—I've been working on and off on a translation of his collection of short horror stories which are also stories about golf, called *The Dark Tales of Golf*.

I think I've watched almost every horror film ever made, I love animation, the Quay Brothers and Lawrence Jordan, but I did have a childhood obsession with all things Disney which still continues. My first experience with the "death of the author" came when my much-older (and mean) brother used to tease me when I was at the height of my Disney obsession (around 3-6 years old), that Disney wasn't even alive and that his head was cryogenized. I'd cry because I couldn't square the thought of an absent author with a present, ongoing work—hmm, it's clearly a primal scene for my work.



Do you want to talk about what you're working on now?

There's the [decapitation project](#) with you, but my next work up, in the sense of what I'm working on right now, is a Benjamin-inflected voyage through a kind of Victorian-Edwardian childhood, and plays with toys, puppets, paper theaters, old illustrated books, and really stresses the superannuated and the handmade: it's a bit Etsy-esque.

In a poetry collection I've just finished I do a lot with ekphrasis, but I extend it to translation, too. The collection includes translations of a South African poet's work—she's Ingrid Jonker's work and some translations from German—Christian Morgenstern, Stefan Georg, and Unica Zürn. Ekphrasis, verbal-visual connections, and particularly cinema are my key concerns, so there are several poems about Poe films (which I'm working perhaps into separate book).

And I've just started working on short prose poems that are a kind of mythic family history, about my South African childhood. Oh, and there's this long on-again-off-again project I've been working since "9/11" called UNHOMELAND. My chapbook, *Songs Dead Soldiers Sing*, is part of it, but the other parts are written in a kind of punning, polysyllabic way that tries to create some South African accents in writing—the piece is very much about the uncanniness of seeing so much of what had happened in South Africa under apartheid start happening here (detentions without trial, surveillance, mass patriotism, using "folks").

It's odd, for me, being a writer in America and having been born in South Africa, which means that in terms of the US addiction to labeling, I'm technically a South African American writer. You can imagine that displacement and disidentification become key for me. Which I was dealing with in that TrenchArt essay—I'd read Lelsie Fielder's *Love and Death in the American Novel* and it blew my mind.

Anyhow, UNHOMELAND deals with the space between South Africa and the US for me—a charged political space, for me, for all my aestheticism. UNHOMELAND's about the context of colonialism and so on and on. It's going to be another fun read.



Michael du Plessis teaches Comparative Literature at USC and is the author of *Songs Dead Soldiers Sing* (Transparent Tiger, 2007) and *The Memoirs of JonBenet by Kathly Acker* (Les Fignes, 2012), as well as essays and reviews on topics such as Goth culture, French literature of the *fin-de-siècle*, and the semiotics of betrayal.