

# Gillian Conoley

## The New Page

Once I began thinking about this panel, about the postmodern lyric and what new forms and directions the lyric might take or be taken to—I have been thinking about the page. It seems to me that the page itself is in another time of unusual upheaval. We can think of various manipulations of page and how each variation of the page has affected the words— We can think of Keroac’s ingenious scroll and how the presentation of an ongoing page as material aided the riffs of *On the Road*, how the use of a teletype scroll in 1950’s America also linked Keroac back to ancient scribes for whom the scroll was the norm while at the same time seeming utterly new, the latest news, unfurling before us, unending, erupting as if from the deafening noise of an Associated Press wire machine before the soft purr of computers brought us our daily horrors. We can think of course of Olson, who in his great essay *Projective Verse* unleashed the notion of the page as an open field, a plane for breath, on which words were allowed to sprout, as he said, like fresh vegetables on the field, and we must of course go back to the great precursors Mallarme and Apollinaire, Apollinaire being, to my mind, a poet who saw the page more as canvas, while Mallarme, in his great unprecedented work *A Throw of the Dice*, threw the page into much more of a 3-dimensional space— traversing gutters, enacting void, creating pages which had more in common with rooms than the flat, lateral plane of the page or canvas. Technology has brought us to a moment when much material (poetry or otherwise) is being read from and written on a glossy, celluloid-like substance that has properties of appearing to have depth and dimension, a page that is lit and projected before us, and that, like film, has great properties of seduction, a page that arrives and is delivered in a much more frontal gesture than the lateral, tactile properties of the paper page. Whether or not one “gets one’s news,” either poetic or otherwise, from a computer, whether or not one composes on a computer or reads from a computer, as a daily practice, we must acknowledge that for most, the computer document screen or webpage receives as much “eye time” if not more, than the paper page. And so we have a new page, a cultural and technological shift that effects the art of writing and reading—the page is now endless, the

page is not often held in the human hand, the page, if it is not imprisoned by a “Read Only” command, can be interactive, with a reader often sitting before it with hands on a keyboard as if on a player piano. And even if we turn from our computer back to, as so many of us do, a hard copy, that paper page is now irrevocably altered by the mother from which it came.

Thinking of the page in this way led me to thinking of inflationary cosmology theory, a notion over the last three decades which has significantly challenged the idea that our universe started some 13.7 billion years ago with a bang. Stanford physicist Andrei Linde, whose model of inflationary cosmology many hail as the most important development in cosmological thinking since the Big Bang itself, presents to us many startling implications--not the least of which is that ours may be but one universe in an eternally self-replicated “multiverse.” Eternal inflation predicts that in some other universe, we are all sitting in the room just as we are right now. Not someone like us, but us, or at least people who are entirely indistinguishable from us. And not on another planet like Earth, but on an exact replica of earth.

What does all this have to do with the page? A lot, if we think of how we perceive the flat plane of the paper page and the universe, and how it might be more natural, given our current technology and notions of cosmology, to think of the page as something more curved in space. Eternal chaotic inflation asks the following questions: If general relativity suggests that space is curved, why does the visible universe appear flat and mostly homogeneous? Why do we look up to the sky and see a relatively flat plane? Until the early 1980s, these questions seemed odd, impossible, ridiculous. Scott Shackelford, writing in *Stanford* magazine, explains, “Enter inflationary cosmology. Instead of an expanding ball of fire, inflation suggests that the early universe exploded faster than the speed of light from a size smaller than that of a proton in a fraction of a second. Like a vast bed sheet snapped taut, this exponential stretching effectively flattened out the visible universe, so that things look uniform in all directions. Thereafter, the universe evolved along the lines that the Big Bang predicts.”

It’s that simile, “like a vast bed sheet snapped taut,” that I keep thinking of as being related to our current page—a page undulating in space, and then brought before us as a taut entity. And of course, it is easy to see the connections between inflationary theory and the web-- the connection between cyberspace worlds and the notion of “multiverses” continually self-replicating. It seems that postmodern poetry, that innovative practice, has focused primarily on the notion of language as a shifting,

unpredictable medium. Now that the page, too, as we thought we once knew it, has drifted away from us, I find myself intrigued as to what this shifting page, no longer nailed to the desk, might bring in new shapes and forms.

Notes:

“Worlds Without End: Marrying Particle Physics to Cosmology”

By Scott Shackelford, *Stanford Magazine* Nov./Dec. 2007