

WRITING THE INVISIBLE:
ARIANA REINES'S OCCULT POETICS

by
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“Poetry’s not made of words”
—Ariana Reines, *Mercury*

“Something is saying itself through me”
—Ariana Reines

“That which is not of the body is not of the universe”
—Tantric maxim

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I. “The invisible world was real”: Poetry and the Occult at the Bleeding Edge

“Is poetry responding to the culture or originating the culture?” Ariana Reines asked the *Los Angeles Review of Books* in a recent interview.¹ This question emerges as a primary fascination of her latest book *A Sand Book* (2019), which, she says, resulted from various “upheavals” and “religious experiences” in her life.² The question of poetry’s situation in relation to contemporary culture coincides with a wide array of other concerns that assemble Reines’s roughly four-hundred-page epic account of life in the present moment. Reines’s interests in bodily experience, new media, and the occult—which characterize her oeuvre—return in *A Sand Book*, though they are triangulated by the book’s titular organizing metaphor: sand.³ When asked about *A Sand Book*, Reines explained, “Sand is the most obvious metaphor for time that we have—it’s so obvious that it’s invisible. . . . But it’s also a book about desertification and climate change and acquiring experiences of the divine through things we buy.”⁴ Experiences of the divine persist throughout the book; *A Sand Book* is marked by ecstasy. In “To the Reader,” the final poem in the book’s first section, Reines recalls one of these experiences:

A couple weeks after Hurricane Sandy
I found myself on my knees sobbing

Before an image of the Black Virgin
Of Czestochowa, known in Haiti

As Erzulie Dantor.⁵

¹ Ariana Reines, “Ariana Reines’s Quest for 21st-Century Epic Verse,” interview by Eric Newman and Kate Wolf, *LARB Radio Hour*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, July 19, 2019, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/av/ariana-reines-quest-21st-century-epic-verse>.

² Ariana Reines, “The Condition of Intimacy,” interview by Jess Cotton, *Poetry London*, n.d., <https://poetrylondon.co.uk/the-condition-of-intimacy-by-jess-cotton/>.

³ The themes bodily experience, new media, and the occult are listed explicitly in the profile *The Poetry Foundation* provides for Reines on their website. “Ariana Reines,” *Poetry Foundation*, accessed May 4, 2020, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/ariana-reines>.

⁴ Reines, “The Condition of Intimacy.”

⁵ Ariana Reines, “To the Reader,” *A Sand Book* (Portland: Tin House, 2019), 29; Erzulie Dantor is a senior spirit in the Haitian Vodou religion.

But these are no recognizably orthodox divine encounters; they are characterized by their ineffability and are contiguous with the supernatural. Later in “To the Reader,” Reines is “penetrated / By drops of what I had always wanted // But still, even today, cannot name.” Reines’s divinity revels in mystery and unorthodoxy, experiences that are undeniably felt by Reines but cannot be named, brought on by the religious relics and practices of cultures of which Reines is not a part, or those that have been lost for centuries.

Likewise, the poems in *A Sand Book* are clearly spiritual, but do not correspond with any unified doctrine that might be recognizable to a reader. In fact, the relics and doctrines of an array of religions are present in the book, and these are what motivate Reines’s “religious experiences.” In “Legend,” upon being presented with a beaded cloth that “depicted three peacocks // & some words in a foreign script,” Reines finds herself “racked // with sobs.”⁶ From the ecstasies present in “To the Reader” and “Legend,” both poems that are placed in the first section of *A Sand Book*, Reines makes it clear that she draws from an assemblage of religious sources, from across cultures and across temporalities, without regard for whether their presence might seem anachronistic to a contemporary reader. The ability for these sources to produce a response in Reines, however, is equally efficacious among those sources included in *A Sand Book*. She continues in “Legend,” “More grief was pouring / From me than I could comprehend.” What is striking about Reines’s religious encounters is that in each she is propelled into ecstasy beyond comprehension, even though the religions to which these sources belong—the sources in both “To the Reader” and “Legend” being objects rather than texts,

⁶ Reines, “Legend,” *A Sand Book*, 18; *A Sand Book* punctuates its sections with images. An image of the beaded cloth of which Reines writes in “Legend” is reproduced in the section entitled “A Partial History of Iridescence”; At an event at *Strand Book Store*, Reines identifies the peacock on the cloth as Melek Taus, a holy peacock angel that is one of the central figures in the religious tradition of Yazidism. Ariana Reines, *A Sand Book*, read by the author (New York: Strand Book Store, 2019), YouTube, 1:23:49, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sxH0OslxKKM&t=3682s>.

persons, or rituals, which also appear throughout the book—are of foreign relation to Reines. From the encounters that Reines documents in *A Sand Book* emerges the suggestion that even outside of their formal religious contexts, her objects retain a capacity to inspire religious ecstasy in their beholder.

In recent critical reception, the unorthodox spirituality present in Reines's *A Sand Book* has brought many contemporary critics and readers to call the work "occult."⁷ Associations between her work and the occult are not new to Reines; her third book, *Mercury* (2011), which drew inspiration from Renaissance alchemy, and her private practice as an astrologer have been cited to corroborate Reines's relationship with the occult. In an interview with Reines, poet and critic Ben Lerner remarked that Reines's poems are always "sites of (and screens for) irrational and transpersonal powers. . . . Her voice—which is always more than hers alone—is a dialectic between the very ancient and the bleeding edge."⁸ What Lerner identifies so essentially is the way Reines's evident spirituality is a commentary that responds to the contemporary culture that she is writing within. She is, of course, fascinated by "transpersonal powers," which inspire ineffable feelings of ecstasy and grief in her throughout *A Sand Book*, but the presence of these encounters in her work are, as Lerner notes, a dialectic. Reines's cross-cultural and cross-historical approach to spirituality that is found in her poetry is, then, a reaction to the present moment. Her poems act as sites in which the ancient and contemporary can meet, and in turn interrogate one another. But Lerner also rightfully identifies Reines's poems as "screens" for

⁷ Notably, in their reviews of *A Sand Book*, both Hannah Aizenman in the *New Yorker* and Diana Arterian in *The New York Times* identify Reines's poetry in *A Sand Book* as "occult.;" See Hannah Aizenman, "The Apocalyptic Visions of Ariana Reines," *New Yorker*, October 23, 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-apocalyptic-visions-of-ariana-reines>; See Diana Arterian, "In 'A Sand Book' Ariana Reines Finds Ecstasy in Chaos," *New York Times*, June 17, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/17/books/review/ariana-reines-a-sand-book.html>.

⁸ Ben Lerner and Ariana Reines, "Ben Lerner & Ariana Reines," *BOMB Magazine*, no. 129 (Fall 2014), <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/ben-lerner-ariana-reines/>.

transpersonal powers that account for the bleeding edge. This is because Reines's poems, which are constantly invoking ancient—even discarded—religious practices, are documents of life in the digital age, in which the Internet and various modes of mass communication have propelled globalization and allowed for the unprecedented rapid exchange of information between users and the arbiters of the technologies that these users now wield.

However, Reines is no passive participant in the contemporary luxuries of expedited commerce and immediate communication, especially as more of the public's daily life is characterized by online use, and Internet search engines are identified as prime administrators for knowledge of the world. In a recent interview on *A Sand Book*, Reines remarks, "We live in an era ... in which very powerful entities are always trying to transform the meaning of things, and also to separate from the source whatever real significance is in our lived reality."⁹ She continues, "There is so much happening that's pouring into us every second through all kinds of channels. So much of it is cacophonous and highly disturbing, and has a damaging effect on the brain. It harms the imagination sometimes; it's stupefying." Prompted by the acceleration of the information exchange newly allowed by proliferating digital platforms, Reines observes a public that is stupefied by the often dissonant information and slogans that saturate the Internet, and a public that privileges the experiences and knowledge it obtains online over those that emerge from "lived reality." Recognizing the hegemony with which techno-capital giants like Facebook and Google govern the business of the Internet, Reines questions the reliability of the information coming in from our contemporary media. She tells the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, "I think there are so many things ... coming through all of our equipment in this time that [are] distorted."¹⁰ But Reines realizes that she is also subjected to the influence of the technologies of

⁹ Ariana Reines, "The Impulse of Poetry," *Louisiana Channel*, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, August 22, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r13mN0xGHzk&t=1884s>.

¹⁰ Reines, "Reines's Quest"

which she is suspicious. Therefore, Reines set out in *A Sand Book* to investigate the effects of new media on herself. In the aforementioned interview, she says, “I wanted to figure out what was happening to my consciousness.”

But how does one make harmonious the cacophony coming in through the new media channels that define contemporary life? For Reines, whose explorations often involve an encounter between the ancient and the modern, to interrogate the effects of the contemporary technologies that define the digital age, she turned to an ancient technology: poetry. “I chose to respond in a different medium,” she said.¹¹ Poetry, for Reines, offers a tool for discerning what is true from all of the information being presented to her across media. It is, she suggests, a place where she can assert “some agency over your own consciousness while at the same time letting in everything,” which frees herself from the “burlesque of truth that shoots into you via the media you consume.”¹² But in order to discern truth from the “burlesque of truth” purported by contemporary media, poetry cannot just be another medium among clamorous contemporary media that promise some form of objective truth. She explains to *The White Review*, “Poetry is a great tool for discernment ... it’s *through* it that you find out what you think, what is really happening, how your body is measuring reality for you.”¹³ In other words, poetry is a *practice*; it is, for Reines, the act of writing a poem that clarifies for herself what is “real” and what is otherwise a distortion.¹⁴

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Reines, “The Impulse of Poetry.”; Ariana Reines, “Interview with Ariana Reines,” interview by Rebecca Tamás. *The White Review*, Online Exclusive (July 2019), <https://www.thewhitereview.org/feature/interview-ariana-reines/>.

¹³ Reines, “Interview.”

¹⁴ In fact, Reines says this verbatim on the *Red Scare* podcast: “Poetry is a practice; it’s something you do.” Ariana Reines, “A Sand Pod w/ Ariana Reines,” interview by Anna Khachivan and Sasha Nekrasova. September 9, 2019, in *Red Scare*, produced by Meg Murnane, podcast, audio, 1:22:31, <http://redscarepodcast.libsyn.com/a-sand-pod-w-ariana-reines>.

A Sand Book stages Reines's experiences of ineffable religious ecstasy in a time when smartphones keep members of the public ostensibly more connected than ever, yet geographically distant from one another. In doing so, Reines juxtaposes experiences that are true to her "lived reality," but may otherwise be contested by a contemporary public who could receive these encounters as disingenuous, unlikely, or irrational, with a culture that she sees eagerly consuming information that presents itself as true from many forms of contemporary media. The public does this, Reines observes, even though this information may in fact have no validity after all. She thus posits a dialectic, to return to Lerner's expression, that interrogates the legitimacy of cultural repositories of knowledge, those found on the Internet against those experienced by the body. Because many of the experiences in Reines's "lived reality" that are accounted for in *A Sand Book* are of religious nature, designated by many as "occult," what results in the book is a profound investigation in the possibility of non-secular life—especially one defined by unorthodox rites, practices, and texts—at the *bleeding edge*, where the forces of modernization have propelled the secularization of the West.¹⁵ In "To the Reader," after recounting her rapture before the Haitian icon, Reines asks, "Can you take / Seriously one at once so arch and so // Strange, so frank and yet so withholding?"¹⁶ *A Sand Book* is a challenge to the reader's preexisting assumptions, shaped for them by the contemporary media they consume, assumptions that determine for the reader what seems to be "serious" or otherwise rational.

¹⁵ It is important to note that "bleeding edge" is not merely a blithe synonym for "contemporary." The *OED* tells us that "bleeding edge" refers to "very new ideas, esp. in science or technology, typically when only theoretical, experimental, or yet to be commercially produced." "bleeding edge, adj." *OED Online*. March 2020. Oxford University Press. <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/256765>; With the designation "bleeding edge" comes an assumed precarity in the reliability of these new technologies. In this precarity Reines sees techno-capital forces opportunistically manipulating new technology to control the public, and members of the public struggling to use their devices to communicate with one another.

¹⁶ Reines, "To the Reader," 30.

Here Reines's associations with the occult come to the forefront of *A Sand Book's* critique of the contemporary media and technologies that populate the *bleeding edge*. Insofar as the experiences Reines documents in *A Sand Book* are irrefutably felt by Reines but cannot be categorized or explained, they elude the rational systemization that is embedded in the explanatory models of being that are advanced by contemporary media forms.¹⁷ These “explanatory models” of contemporary media encourage the desertion of knowledge found in embodied experience—what Reines calls one’s “lived reality”—for the knowledge claims, slogans, and experiences being pulsed into the public through new media channels.¹⁸ “In my late teens and twenties I felt so brutalized by the ‘you’ of advertising and politics,” Reines said in an interview with *SSENSE*.¹⁹ She continues, “I am not the ‘you’ you think I am...I am not the ‘you’ you’re looking for.”²⁰ What Reines observes is a collectivization of public experience and consciousness being deduced by the corporations and organizations who seek to impose a mass influence over the public. This recalls Reines’s warning about the influence of the contemporary forces who take up new media to amplify their messages and, as Reines asserts, “are always trying to transform the meaning of things, and also to separate from the source whatever real

¹⁷ In “To the Reader,” Reines directly identifies the phenomena she has experienced as “unexplainable”: “... I have experienced things no one can explain” 33.

¹⁸ Reines identifies this channeling as a pulse, suggesting an equally transpersonal—even occult—effect to advertising, as it is used to coerce contemporary consumers into passive consumption: “There are so many dark mantras being pulsed into us every second. ... It is being done in language because language has that power.” Reines, “The Impulse of Poetry.”

¹⁹ Ariana Reines, “Dropping the Bullshit with Ariana Reines: Speaking About The Weirdness of the World and Her Latest Collection, *A Sand Book*,” interview by Ana Cecilia Alvarez, *SSENSE*, n.d., <https://www.ssense.com/en-us/editorial/culture/dropping-the-bullshit-with-poet-ariana-reines>; In her second book, *Coeur de Lion*, a rejection of the “you” of advertising also appears. In the book-length poem, Reines asks, “Where is the ‘you’ of You / Tube. Who is the / You of advertising.” As in *A Sand Book*, Reines highlights the failure of the “you” of advertising to adequately correspond to a literal “you” that exists beyond media slogans. Ariana Reines, *Coeur de Lion* (Reprint, Albany: Fence, 2011), 49.

²⁰ Reines, “Dropping the Bullshit.”

significance is in our lived reality.”²¹ Reines recognizes the collectivization of public consciousness—its imposition of a universalized “you” onto the public—as the strategy by which singular experience is delegitimized. This is to say that the prescription of a collectivized “you” relegates experiences or knowledge that do not correspond with the ideas of reality purported by contemporary media as anomalous, irrational, or even *occult*.

Indeed, in his sociological investigation of the occult, Marcello Truzzi flippantly defines the occult as “a wastebasket ... for knowledge claims that are deviant in some way, that do not fit the established claims of science or religion ... things anomalous to our generally accepted cultural-storehouse of ‘truths.’”²² But Reines is keen to note in her protestations to the influence of contemporary media that the ostensible defiance of this “wastebasket” is suspect when the forces that determine which knowledge claims are thrown into it do not have a stake in the embodied experiences of the public at which they broadcast their ideas of knowledge. In short, ideas of what is “generally accepted” are the distortions Reines observes coming through the equipment of the contemporary age.²³ To consider the occult is to then also consider the validity with which the “occult” subject in discussion has been designated as such; it is a clash of knowledge systems. For Reines, this is a clash between embodied knowledge and the projected knowledge—the ostensibly “generally accepted” truths—coming in from contemporary media channels.

Reines’s occult, therefore, speaks doubly to the strange religious experiences she accounts for in *A Sand Book* and the singular experiences of her readers. To counter the

²¹ Reines, “The Impulse of Poetry.”

²² Marcello Truzzi, “Definition and Dimensions of the Occult: Towards a Sociological Perspective,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 5, no. 3 (Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell), 245-46.

²³ See note 12. Reines discusses the validity of the transmissions coming through contemporary media in an interview with the *Los Angeles Review of Books*. Responding to the mass dissonance she sees emerging from digital platforms, Reines remarks shortly, “It is a distortion at best.” Reines, “Reines’s Quest.”

collectivization she sees the public being subjected to, she advocates for a heightened attention to the particular moment, person, and experience; she advocates for singularity. Reines does so because, as she puts it in her essential critique of the forces trying to control public consciousness through mass media, those who hold power over the media wield the authority to “transform the meaning of things,” which in turn impoverishes the real felt significance that exists in embodied experience.²⁴ The mandate for Reines in *A Sand Book* is to restore meaning to the singularity of experience. And it is in her investigation of the value of singular experience that the preeminent among *A Sand Book*’s organizing metaphors, sand, becomes key. When discussing the origins of *A Sand Book* at the book’s publication launch event, Reines said that throughout the period of her life during which she was writing the book, which spanned from 2012 to the book’s publication in 2019, “somehow there were all these sands happening: Sandy Hook, Hurricane Sandy, Sandra Bland’s murder.”²⁵ These national events all concurred with the religious experiences that Reines recounts in *A Sand Book*. Later at the same event, she expresses suspicion toward the claim, which she suggests that contemporary culture promotes, that “none of these things can possibly be unified” and “there’s no way to speak of all these things at once.” Reines’s *A Sand Book*, which traces the recurrence of sand and other signs in Reines’s life, history, and literature, among other sources, is an attempt by Reines to draw out a totalizing correspondence among these recurrences. In other words, *A Sand Book* is Reines’s attempt to articulate the *meaning* of a series of occurrences that may be dismissed by skeptics as coincidence. But it is important to acknowledge that this meaning precipitates from the singularity of Reines’s own consciousness, from her singular poetic subjectivity; these events hold meaning to her because they emerge from her own “lived reality.”

²⁴ Reines, “The Impulse of Poetry”

²⁵ Reines, Strand Book Store.

However, because poetry is a practice for Reines, a way of interacting with and receiving the world, her strategy for meaning-making—the organization of recurring metaphors throughout the poems of *A Sand Book*—is also a strategy for restoring meaning to the world outside of the poem. The distance between reality and poetry for Reines is negligible; she collects her organizing metaphors from recent events. Thus, *A Sand Book* offers the reader a poetic way of interacting with the world, which Nathaniel Mackey in *Paracritical Hinge* calls “poetic thought.” In his essay “Gassire’s Lute,” Mackey, through the poetry of Robert Duncan, provides an analysis of the poet’s role in servicing the polysemy of words that could just as easily have been written about Reines’s approach in *A Sand Book*.²⁶ Mackey writes, “The poet becomes a tool of the word’s multiple meanings, serving the overload or surplus of meaning that resides in language as it does in the world.”²⁷ Yet, for Reines, the “surplus of meaning” that precipitates from the metaphors that proliferate in her life and poetry present to her not merely secular semantic meaning, but an assurance of a spiritualized interrelation among all things. It is by interacting with the world through a poetic worldview—by practicing poetry—that Reines is encouraged to trace the recurrence of significant metaphors in her life. In doing so, she realizes the surplus of distinctively *spiritual* meaning that emerges thereafter. Reines calls this surplus the “ecstasy of meaning,” and identifies this phrase with the belief that “every single particle of your reality correspond[s] to a bigger and deeper truth.”²⁸ From the singular particle of sand to the totalizing whole of the dune, Reines sees each holding an immense value to the “bigger truth” to which the world corresponds.

²⁶ For a thorough account of Robert Duncan’s association with the occult, especially the tradition of dictation, see Devin Johnston’s essay “‘Sublime Undoing’: Robert Duncan and Dictation” in *Precipitations: Contemporary American Poetry as Occult Practice* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2002): 49-98.

²⁷ Nathaniel Mackey, “‘Gassire’s Lute’: Robert Duncan’s Vietnam War Poems,” *Paracritical Hinge: Essays, Talks, Notes, Interviews* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2018), 102.

²⁸ Reines, “The Impulse of Poetry.”

“Sand was the place between two worlds / Waves rolling in like prayers,” Reines writes in her poem “Venice.”²⁹ It is by seeing the world in recurrences of sand that Reines recognizes a relation between her and a greater spiritual order. Sand, for Reines, is an instrument for divinity, the means by which she comes to believe in “two worlds.” Yet, the greater suggestion that emerges from the divinity presented in *A Sand Book* is that metaphor and also poetry are the foundation for the spirituality that becomes apparent to Reines. “& there began my history / Following a bird thru / the sand & its people,” Reines writes at the end of “Legend.”³⁰ What is extended to the reader from *A Sand Book* is the proposition that if the reader mines their singular lived experiences for their own recurring metaphors and “follows” them, they will be inaugurated into a newly spiritualized understanding of the world too. It is no mistake that the first section of *A Sand Book*, “Arena,” which is the Spanish word for sand, concludes with the poem “To the Reader,” a poem that “tells the story” of *A Sand Book*. Reines confesses to the reader, “I am burning / With desire to make myself known to you.”³¹ In “making herself known” by recounting the revelations that led her to a spiritualized relation to the world, Reines gives the reader a look into the “ecstasy of meaning” that is possible if the reader also introduces the practice of poetry into their life.

II. Meaning-making in a Disenchanted World: Toward an Occult Poetics

What are occult poetics? And what are Ariana Reines’s occult poetics? To arrive at an understanding of how the occult informs Reines’s poetics, it is necessary to delineate a greater categorization of the occult. Earlier, I identified several ways that Reines’s work and the poems

²⁹ Reines, “Venice,” *A Sand Book*, 22.

³⁰ Reines, “Legend,” 18; Reines says that “To the Reader,” “Articulates how [the book] came together. ... It sort of tells the story of ... the book.” Reines, “Reines’s Quest.”

³¹ Reines, “To the Reader,” 33.

in *A Sand Book* have been associated with the occult, and among these include Reines's experiences of religious ecstasy that defy explanation or classification; Reines's fusion of the objects, rituals, and texts of many religions in her private practice; Reines's work as an astrologer; and the evident spiritualism in *A Sand Book*, despite its distinctiveness from any unified orthodox religious doctrine. Yet, definitions of the occult are extremely variable across fields of inquiry. Given the contemporary resurgence of "the occult" in popular discourse, many readers of Reines's *A Sand Book* may most understand the occult in terms of its associations with witches, magic, tarot, and astrology, a recent digital revival of which has seen extreme success in smartphone application downloads. And while all of these would be certainly welcome in most definitions of the occult, these commercialized byproducts hardly do much to clarify the essence of occult practice or belief. Rather, occultism as one might understand in today's age is a product of many knowledge systems and practices that had undergone varying degrees of scrutiny and repression by the hegemony of Western organized religion, politics, and science.

In his study of the development of Western Esotericism, Wouter Hanegraaff refutes the belief, which he remarks is a residual of post-Enlightenment processes of secularization, that the occult is a "collection of survivals" that suggests "regression to a superseded stage of cultural and religious development."³² These religions and knowledge systems have discrete histories, and the presumption that these religions and systems collectively referred to as "occult" are pre-historical, primitive, or anachronistic is a dismissal of the legitimate historical development each has undergone.³³ The reminder Hanegraaff's study offers is necessary for contemporary

³² Wouter J. Hanegraaff, "A Historical Framework," *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 407.

³³ In "A Historical Framework," Hanegraaff, a historian, fully delineates the historical developments of many esoteric traditions, such as Hermeticism, Renaissance alchemy, occult sciences, Gnosticism, and New Ageism. This leads him to make the weighty assertion, which rebukes suggestions that "occult" religions are primitive or irrational: "Esotericism ... *has a history*" (emphasis in original). Ibid.

discussions of the occult, in many of which the occult has often endured a dangerous and unthinking conflation with irrationalism.

Yet, asserting the legitimacy of the occult as a field of inquiry does little to define it. It is, however, important to underscore that the contemporary treatment of the occult that one might glean from popular media, which, for example, places witchy kitsch alongside the sacred relics of Haitian Vodou, came to rise through a collectivization that Hanegraaff identifies is a product of post-Enlightenment secularization. The occult as Hanegraaff is considering the term gestures to an array of non-dominant—often non-Western—religions, which had at one time been reproached as deviant, irrational, or *other* by the imposing forces of Western orthodox religion and secular science.³⁴ But while many practices and objects identified as occult today originated from a religion previously relegated as occult, globalization has significantly obscured the elements of the contemporary occult from their cultural origins. In fact, the obfuscation of modern occult practices from their corresponding religious-cultural sources traces back to globalization's first major acceleration in the late nineteenth century. In "The Global Occult," Niles Green writes, "The occult ... emerged at the auspicious conjunction of colonialism, technology, consumerism, and globalization."³⁵ The entrance of religions designated occult—along with their practices, texts, and knowledges—into Western commerce and culture was "predicated on the movement and exchange of books and bodies, ideas and practices, all made possible by the steam travel, telegraphy, and world postal system that their impresarios would put to such effective use."³⁶ What resulted from this mass global exchange were new occult

³⁴ In this sense, "the occult" can be understood as a close relative of "heterodox."

³⁵ Nile Green, "The Global Occult: An Introduction" *History of Religions* 54, no. 3 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 385.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 390-91.

religions, trifling in their accordance to their cultural sources, but which nonetheless retained traces of their religious-cultural correlatives.

This new occult, a patchwork of and elaboration on religious forms and practices encountered outside of the West, gave rise to the surge in popularity of occultism at the fin de siècle, the influence of which is commonly recognized in the work of W. B. Yeats and less commonly with other modernists like Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot.³⁷ Notably, in the occultism of the fin de siècle, there was an attempt to reconcile the secularization of scientific methods of inquiry with spiritual belief. Thus, a fascination with table-rapping, materialization séances, clairvoyance, palmistry, among other occult practices and instruments arose for those seeking a systemized mode of communing with a newly spiritualized self.³⁸ In her study of British occultism at the fin de siècle, Alex Owen remarks that these occult methods offered fin-de-siècle participants “a newly imagined self—an occult subjectivity formulated within the context of secularized modes of inquiry but dedicated to a spiritualized understanding of the ‘I.’”³⁹ Considering exclusively the use of this “spiritualized understanding of the ‘I’” for poets of the

³⁷ For an account of the influence of occultism on the work of Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and W. B. Yeats, see Leon Surette’s *The Birth of Modernism* in which Surette asserts, “Instead of a break with a Romantic and symbolist past, I find a continuity with modernism and its precursors.” Surette, *The Birth of Modernism* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1993), 18.

³⁸ George Bernard Shaw in his preface to “Heartbreak House” usefully accounts for an array of occult practices that were popularized at the fin de siècle. George Bernard Shaw, preface to “Heartbreak House” (1917), in *Four Plays by Bernard Shaw* (New York: The Modern Library, 1953), 330.

³⁹ Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 256; Earlier, I remark on the difficulty to assign a fixed definition to “the occult,” especially as it relates to a historical appropriation and development of a wide range of religious practice and knowledge systems. Alex Owen corroborates this difficulty in *The Place of Enchantment*, writing of occultism at the fin de siècle: “The term *occult* ... encompasses such a broad spectrum of beliefs, ideas, and practices that it defies precise definition. It is often applied without qualification to activities as diverse as divination (astrology, palmistry, tarot reading, crystal gazing, and so on), sorcery, and black magic (the manipulation of natural forces, often for self-interested purposes), and various kinds of necromancy or spiritualist-related practices.” *Ibid.*, 19.

early twentieth century, the possibility to assume a spiritual “I” amid the contexts of secular scientific-rational inquiry offered poets like W. B. Yeats, who was a frequent participant in occult séances, a model of poetic subjectivity that exceeded the bounds of their socio-political conditions; it allowed Yeats a poetic “I” that at once spoke of the world in which he lived as if from the position of a higher spiritual plane.⁴⁰ This is because, as Alex Owen remarks, fin-de-siècle occultism was predicated on the belief in a “hidden reality” or “occluded spiritual real” that could only be accessed and explored through occult methods.⁴¹ Yeats, for whom poetry was an occult practice, found a means to articulate his traversal of the real and the “occluded spiritual real” in verse.⁴² Other modernists like H. D., T. S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound benefitted variably from the models for poetic subjectivity they identified in modes of occult practice, as did later twentieth-century poets like Robert Duncan, Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes, and James Merrill.⁴³ In his survey of contemporary American poetry as occult practice, Devin Johnston even identifies alchemical and mercurial concepts of selfhood in the oeuvres of contemporary poets Nathaniel Mackey, Brenda Hillman, and Susan Howe.⁴⁴

The diverse manifestations of occultism in the work of poets throughout the twentieth century lead Devin Johnston to offer a telling definition of the occult, one nonetheless comprehensive in its generality, in his introduction to *Precipitations*. In its modern iteration, occultism, Johnston writes, “is essentially a modern pastiche of religious practices from diverse

⁴⁰ For an account of W. B. Yeats’s involvement in occult séances and occult societies, like the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, see Devin Johnston’s *Precipitations*, 5-14.

⁴¹ Owen, *Place of Enchantment*, 20.

⁴² Yeats had asserted all of his poetry is “steeped in the supernatural.” W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* (London: Macmillan, 1980), 116; Yeats’s *A Vision* (1917) most strongly encourages, if not demands, an autobiographical reading of his research and practice in occultism.

⁴³ For a rigorous study of the influence of occultism on these poets, see Timothy Materer’s *Modernist Alchemy: Poetry and the Occult* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

⁴⁴ See Johnston’s “Afterword” in *Precipitations*, 157-163.

cultures and historical periods.”⁴⁵ Being a “pastiche,” bound to no fixed set of religious sources or cultures, occultism offers profound singularity and self-determination to its practitioners. This understanding of occultism is illuminating in consideration with the occult apparent in Reines’s poetry. *A Sand Book* assembles a pastiche of religious and cultural practices that, when brought together, form the gestalt whole of Reines’s divinity. Reines, using poetry as a tool for discernment, draws a continuity among Haitian Voodoo, Yazidism, Gnostic scripture, Hinduism, Hellenistic astrology, and many other religious-cultural practices in *A Sand Book*, all through organizing metaphors of sand and birds. In her refusal of heterodox religious practice, insistence on a poetic worldview, and fusion of practices across cultures and histories, Reines’s divinity is as close to definitionally “occult” as one might be able to determine. But how else might these occult practices inform Reines’s work and consequently result in their own strain of poetics?

“Writing the occult,” Reines told *The White Review*, is “writing what’s invisible, or *apparently* invisible.”⁴⁶ Based on Reines’s private occult-spiritual practice, however, one might expect Reines to gesture to her experiences of religious ecstasy or the influence various religious doctrines have had on her spiritual relation to the world to elucidate what “writing the occult” means for her poetic practice. Instead, she invokes a different definition of the occult: hidden.⁴⁷ Although unexpected, Reines offers an essential framework for understanding her poetics. Not only does Reines present in *A Sand Book* the fruit of a poetic worldview that identifies the surplus of meaning that proliferates if one devotes oneself to their own singular experience of the real, which some might say constitutes a way of “writing the occult” already, but Reines also suggests that poetry is an act that services and thus materializes the invisible. Of course, Reines’s

⁴⁵ Johnston, *Precipitations*, 5.

⁴⁶ Reines, “Interview” (emphasis in original).

⁴⁷ The *OED* defines “occult” as “hidden from sight; concealed (by something interposed); not exposed to view.” “occult, n. 3a,” *OED Online*. March 2020. Oxford University Press. <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/130166>.

suggestion that writing the occult is “writing what’s invisible” includes her accounts of experiences of ineffable rapture, ecstasy, and grief, but her definition has resonance with another invisible force: the Internet.

Reines said of the Internet, “There’s this mystery happening around us and it is *apparently* invisible, yet it’s affecting us on a cellular level constantly.”⁴⁸ The extreme similarity between Reines’s descriptions of the occult and the Internet, both being what is *apparently* invisible, is no mistake. Reines’s poetics stage occult spirituality as a response to the occult effects of the Internet and new (social) media. In “A Partial History,” a poem that is an estimation of the failure of the current investment in social media by contemporary culture, Reines writes:

We were lost in a language of images.
 It was growing difficult to speak. Yet talk
 Was everywhere.
 ...
 The images gave us no rest yet failed over
 And over despite the immensity
 Of their realism to describe the world as we really
 Knew it, and worse, as it knew us.⁴⁹

In the first section of *A Sand Book*, which otherwise exclusively foregrounds Reines’s occult ecstasies, a poem so overtly addressing the contemporary culture of mass communication may be unexpected. Yet, understanding that writing the occult is writing the (apparently) invisible, Reines’s poetics come into clearer focus: Reines’s poems are arenas in which several occult

⁴⁸ Reines, “The Impulse of Poetry” (emphasis mine).

⁴⁹ Reines, “A Partial History,” *A Sand Book*, 10-11.

forces are at work. Thus, Reines's her work as poet, wielding the craft as a discerning technology, is to stage these occult forces in juxtaposition to examine them. At the end of "A Partial History," Reines documents the plight of an ailing public for whom speech and communication have been reduced to "talk."⁵⁰ Indeed, she records a gross devastation undergone by language in contemporary (online) discourse. The dominant vernacular is now a "language of images," the unrolling "content" of advertising and social media.⁵¹ And "despite the immensity / of their realism," their exact photographic resemblance to the real, the images that comprise this vernacular hold no correspondence to the world. In other words, meaning is impoverished from all this "talk."

Richard Thomas writes in *The Imperial Archive*, "As advertising, language approaches the condition of pure noise."⁵² As Reines demonstrates in "A Partial History," when the noise of advertising as a "language of images" saturates one's life, it is "difficult to speak," even when one is surrounded by "talk." Reines, commenting on the developments in mass communication over the last decade, corroborates in an interview, "I think that we have not yet learned how to use language. We have not yet learned how to communicate. And we also have not learned how to build and rebuild a kind of technology that better reflects the fullness of who we are and what

⁵⁰ Of poetry, Reines notes, "It's dealing with the whole history of written language, but it also has to be dealing with all the crazy ways that people talk." Reines, "The Impulse of Poetry." In a time when communication is reduced to "talk," poetry is an essential technology for Reines to understand how language is being affected by the new technologies of the digital age.

⁵¹ Earlier in the poem, Reines refers to "sharing," one of several gestures of mindless approbation and frustration available to users on Facebook, as "the dominant / Rhetoric of the age." Reines, "A Partial History," 8. Throughout "A Partial History," Reines estimates a total revolution being exacted on language by the corporations who maintain and profit from social media platforms and the passive users who perpetuate this revolution with their passive participation.

⁵² Richard Thomas, *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire* (London: Verso, 1993), 97; Reines said on *Louisiana Channel*, "Advertising is satanic poetry." Reines, "The Impulse of Poetry."

we are.”⁵³ A central objective in Reines’s poetics is to explore the retained potentiality for language to communicate and to reflect “the fullness of who we are,” which is also, for Reines, an exploration of how meaning might be rediscovered in our communication and the world.

However, an exploration of the ways meaning can be rediscovered requires a staging of occult forces in comparison, because Reines recognizes that occult forces—namely the political and techno-capital entities that take up the faculties of the Internet and new media to manipulate the public—are “trying to transform the meaning of things, and also to separate from the source whatever real significance is in our lived reality.”⁵⁴ Reines writes earlier in “A Partial History”:

Everything we did for our government
 And the corporations that served it we did for free
 In exchange for the privilege of watching one
 Another break down. Sometimes we were the ones
 Doing the breaking.⁵⁵

The exploitation being done by the “government / And the corporations that served it” to which Reines directly refers is the mass plundering of user data by corporations and the government to in turn fuel enterprises of targeted advertising. This continuous plundering is one of many occult phenomena occurring constantly on the Internet, yet hidden from users. Insofar as these occult exchanges are hidden from all users who engage in online activity—actions that can then be reduced to metrics of consumer choice and extracted as data—contribute to this secreted corporate and governmental enterprise for “free.” But just as these occult exchanges elude detection by users, Reines notices incendiary polemics proliferate online, so damagingly so that participation in such discourse is predicated on or otherwise guarantees “watching one / Another

⁵³ Reines, “Reines’s Quest.”

⁵⁴ Reines, “The Impulse of Poetry.”

⁵⁵ Reines, “A Partial History,” 7.

break down.” In discussion of the vicious digital cultures created by a mass cultural investment in social media, Reines cites “the construction of identity, the weaponization of suffering,” and the “weaponization of anything available” as “chaotic symptoms and results” of our reliance on new media.⁵⁶ The public’s ability to communicate effectively is deteriorating, all while corporations and governments profit off of the choices—statistically measured and then mined—that lead the public toward that decimation. “Sediment of our relations / Now spun to a fine mesh,” Reines writes in “Attar.”⁵⁷ “Sediment” is what is left of the communications of a public that has broken down.

But just as Reines recognizes a public that is “watching one / Another break down” into “sediment,” she sees literal and metaphorical sands emerge throughout her life and in her poetry. In conversation with *Poetry London*, Reines remarks, “Sand, birds, and notions of infinity—these kind of gestalt metaphors exist in Sufi poetry and show up in Chaucer, the metaphysical poets, in Lorca, and yet sand is so much and so little it seems hard to say anything ‘about’ it. It’s the background of the current ecological catastrophe. ... [S]and is the eroding background of everything, the negative space.”⁵⁸ Not only is Reines writing the invisible forces of occult spirituality and the Internet, she invokes another apparently invisible force: desertification. And with her recognition of the constantly occurring process of desertification—the slow

⁵⁶ Reines, “Reines’s Quest.”

⁵⁷ Reines, “Attar,” *A Sand Book*, 15.

⁵⁸ Reines, “The Condition of Intimacy”; The “ecological catastrophe” to which Reines refers is desertification, which is “the process of becoming or rendering desert; the transformation of fertile land into desert or arid waste, esp. as a result of human activity.” “desertification, n.” *OED Online*. March 2020. Oxford University Press. <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/50784>; In interviews, Reines often cites biologist Allan Savory’s assertion that roughly two-thirds of Earth’s land mass is desertifying. Allan Savory, “How to Green the World’s Deserts and Reverse Climate Change,” *TED*, March 4, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vpTHi7O66pI>; Reines calls desertification “the invisible killer of climate change,” which, with regard to her definition of “writing the occult,” overtly suggests desertification to be one of “the invisible” (or apparently invisible) forces of which Reines writes. Reines, “The Impulse of Poetry.”

transformation of fertile farmland into desert or sand—a similarity arises between this current ecological disaster, which is exacerbated by an overfarming epidemic that is avariciously encouraged in the global agriculture industry, and the breakdown of human relations into “sediment.” Just as Reines notices that sand has proven a useful metaphor for poets from Chaucer to Lorca, desertification too proves to be an apt metaphor for Reines to articulate what is happening to meaning in the wake of hyper-mediatized communication.

Yet, once Reines begins to notice these metaphors of sand, she comments that “sand is the eroding background of everything, the negative space.” The appearance of sand “in the background of everything” makes it even more telling that Reines calls the metaphors “gestalt,” each grain of sand being one part of “a specific whole or unity incapable of expression simply in terms of its parts.”⁵⁹ As metaphors of sand recur in *A Sand Book*, it becomes clear that poetry allows Reines to make connections that exist constantly in the “background of everything,” connections that are otherwise occluded amid the “noise,” to return to Richard Thomas’s expression, that overwhelms digital platforms of communication. Reines’s practice of poetry allows her to trace these metaphors that exist in the world and realize that, even as our relations are ground to “sediment” and it seems that “there’s no way to speak of all these [recurrences] at once,” each particular iteration is “gestalt,” and once assembled, these recurrences can form an inexpressible and meaningful whole. It is then that the reader can realize that as they continue their passive consumption on new media platforms, they participate in a desertification of language while the literal desertification of Earth’s land mass progresses too.

Poetry, for Reines, offers the possibility for occluded metaphors, connections, and forces that otherwise exist constantly in the “background of everything” to suddenly come to the

⁵⁹ “gestalt, n.” *OED Online*. March 2020. Oxford University Press. <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/77951>

foreground by way of Reines's poetic staging of them. Her staging of what is occluded then stands as a criticism to understandings of and attitudes toward the world that otherwise occupy the foreground of consciousness in non-poetic thought. The stagings and connections that emerge from Reines's poetic practice provide for her what she has identified as an "ecstasy of meaning," which re-imbues language and the world with the meaning she had previously found ground to "sediment." What results from this practice for Reines is overtly spiritual, and leads her to say that "spirituality and writing are completely inseparable."⁶⁰ Her practice of poetry as a spiritual practice would then be categorically designated "occult."

But Reines is not alone in crafting a poetics that seeks to "write the occult." In recent literary criticism, poet and critic Joyelle McSweeney constructs a new strain of ecopoetics and a theory of Art in *The Necropastoral: Poetry, Media, Occults* that McSweeney designates "the necropastoral." The book accounts for what has become of the pastoral tradition after globalization. McSweeney writes, "I give the name 'necropastoral' to the manifestation of infectiousness, anxiety, and contagion occultly present in the hygienic borders of the classical pastoral ... The term 'necropoastoral' re-marks the pastoral as a zone of exchange."⁶¹ Like Reines, McSweeney is devoted to exposing the occult forces that contemporary commerce would otherwise prefer to keep secreted from consumer detection. She continues, "Strange meetings in

⁶⁰ Reines, "Reines's Quest."

⁶¹ Joyelle McSweeney, *The Necropastoral: Poetry, Media, Occults* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015), 3; Later in *The Necropastoral*, McSweeney does well to articulate the urgency of the atemporality that is characteristic of the "strange meeting" as an "occult political mode": "I think so-called progressives and innovators need to think carefully about how their ideologies of experimentation, innovation, newness, progress, and improvement remap or offer support to these ideologies of capitalist, corporate, historical, patrilinear time." McSweeney, *The Necropastoral*, 42. It is important to consider in both McSweeney's and Reines's work how atemporality or cross-historicity figure as responses to linear "capitalist" time.

the necropastoral eat away at ... separation, hierarchy, before-and-after, on linearity itself ... the ‘strange meeting’ will emerge as one of the necropastoral’s occult political modes.”⁶²

The “strange meetings” McSweeney identifies in the necropastoral are integral to Reines’s occult poetics also. In Reines’s *A Sand Book*, in her occult pastiche, one finds cross-historical and cross-cultural references stitched together and staged in the arenas of her poems. Strange meetings occur throughout the book, from the dustily ancient (“By the seven concentric walls of Ecbatana / ... / I wish to praise the shining altar...”) to the recognizably—and often comically—modern (“I passed a woman twerking / In an open car door”).⁶³ New media even meets spiritual revelation. Reines recounts in “To the Reader”:

I saw how I was held by the reflection
In the screen of my computer when it was in

The off position and I saw what my phone
Saw of my face as rocks of sorrow and confusion

Were born in my cheeks to bloom and die there
Leaving serrated proof that the invisible

World was real⁶⁴

What Reines’s poems create are arenas of occult precarity, where, as McSweeney asserts in *The Necropastoral*, presumptions of “separation, hierarchy, before-and-after” and “linearity itself” may collapse in order to better examine the conditions of the contemporary culture in which Reines writes. Thus, in poetry’s capacity to allow the staging of “strange meetings,” which are occult encounters across cultures and histories, Reines achieves an “agency over [her] own consciousness while still taking in everything that’s happening” that frees her from and interrogates the “burlesque of truth that shoots into you via the media you consume.”⁶⁵

⁶² McSweeney, *The Necropastoral*, 3.

⁶³ Reines, “Silicosis” *A Sand Book*, 12; Reines, “Solstice Poem,” *A Sand Book*, 14.

⁶⁴ Reines, “To the Reader,” 32.

⁶⁵ Reines, “The Impulse of Poetry”; Reines, “Interview.”

Strange meetings in these arenas of occult precarity, however, are always predicated on Reines's faith in her "lived reality" and poetry's ability to discern and organize the experiences of that reality for her. Unexpected meanings arise when the occult is foregrounded or "written" into a poem. For Reines, these are meanings brought from the recurrence of occluded metaphors, the unlikely interactions of disparate cultures, or, in "Mosaic," the final section of *A Sand Book*, take the form of a strange meeting with the sun from which she takes dictation. Reines's meetings, however, require a removal from or skepticism toward the notions of truth that she identifies being pulsed into the public from the channels of new media. Devin Johnston writes in *Precipitations*, "[O]ccultism can assist poetry in defamiliarizing the modern world and thus critiquing its pretensions to rational systemization."⁶⁶ For Reines, her critique of the modern world's "pretensions to rational systemization" is an occult investigation of how meaning, or the "ecstasy of meaning," might return to the public's communication with one another and their lived realities by way of poetic practice, and poetic practice as having an inherently spiritual relation to the world.

In his seminal account of rationalization in the West, "Science as a Vocation," Max Weber identifies the disenchanted world that Reines seeks to revive. Weber asserts that the organizing principle of rationalism is the belief that "there are no mysterious incalculable forces ... one can, in principle, master all things by calculation."⁶⁷ He concludes, "This means that the world is disenchanted." Reines's poetics are a direct response to the disenchanted rational systemization of which Weber remarks, a disenchantment Reines observes encumbering the public. Later in "Science as a Vocation," Weber asks, "Who ... still believes that the findings of

⁶⁶ Johnston, *Precipitations*, 2.

⁶⁷ Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation," *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 139; Devin Johnston remarks in his introduction to *Precipitations* that rationalism, as a culmination of eighteenth-century Enlightenment, is the force that makes occultism seem irrational or anachronistic. Johnston, *Precipitations*, 2.

astronomy, biology, physics, or chemistry could teach us anything about the *meaning* of the world?”⁶⁸ For the digital age, Reines might add technology to Weber’s list of vocations, but the inability of these scientific vocations to provide an account for the world’s meaning remains no different. For Reines, poetry’s ability to conjure a surplus or “ecstasy” of meaning from the occult connections that can be made in the poem and that otherwise reside in the “background” of everyday life makes it a technology that offers the ability to re-enchant the world.

At the end of “To the Reader,” Reines breaks from the poem’s narrative, which recounts one of Reines’s experiences of spiritual ecstasy and “tells the story” of *A Sand Book*, to address the reader directly.⁶⁹ Reines asks, “But why am I trying to talk to you now / In this of all media.”⁷⁰ In a culture characterized by proliferating new media, Reines brings the reader’s attention to the ancient medium she is using to address them: poetry. But Reines leaves her question unanswered in “To the Reader.” Through the poem’s conclusion, Reines only discloses what the reasons for taking up poetry as her medium are *not*:

Not because I have seen things no one can explain.

And for which no lineage
Credentialed me

Not because I wished to pass
Out of the world and managed to

Or because I wished to pass
Back into it and was clemently received

Or even because I am burning
With desire to make myself known to you

At last, in the secret place I have prepared
For us⁷¹

⁶⁸ Ibid., 142 (emphasis in original).

⁶⁹ Reines, “Reines’s Quest.”

⁷⁰ Reines, “To the Reader,” 32-33.

⁷¹ Reines, “To the Reader,” 33.

As a result, the question of Reines's chosen medium, positioned at the end of the first of *A Sand Book's* thirteen sections, hangs over the remainder of the book: why am I trying to talk to you now in this of all media? It is notable that in the final couplet she identifies the poem as "the secret place" that she has "prepared" for the reader. As "the secret place," the poem is also definitionally the "occult" place, a place where surprising meanings, connections, and forces—visible and invisible—can be staged for the reader by Reines. In disclosing what her reasons are not for addressing the reader in verse, she admits that *A Sand Book* is not a mere attempt to exclusively communicate her experiences—to "make [herself] known"—to the reader. Rather, the book is a method by which the reader can be inducted into a poetic worldview, into poetry as a practice. From a poetic worldview a critical distance from a failing culture of new media is offered to the reader, and likewise the possibility of a re-enchanted world.

III. "Little truths beguiling": Reines's Re-enchantment of the Body and the World

"NO MORE SAND ART, no sand book, no masters," writes Paul Celan in a late untitled poem. Reines takes this line as the epigraph and title for *A Sand Book*, which places the book *sous rature*—under erasure—after which Reines must configure its contents from negation. Understanding the epigraph in relation to Reines's poetics of "writing the invisible," however, the epigraph's placing of the book *sous rature* foregrounds Reines's continuous action of making visible the forces and connections otherwise kept occult in contemporary culture. Beginning in negation, in negative space, Reines designates an "Arena" in which meaning proliferates. Indeed, the first poem in "Arena" is entitled "Desero," the Latin verb meaning "to desert," and is comprised of a series of conjugations: "*I leave / I depart / I quit.*"⁷² Written from her experiences in a world in which she identifies massive spiritual and culture desiccation and literal ecological

⁷² Reines, "Desero," *A Sand Book*, 3.

desertification, *A Sand Book* fittingly begins in the desert, from erasure, and with the act of desertion. But as Reines has tellingly noted, even is spaces of total absence, “sand is the eroding background of everything, the negative space.”⁷³ She begins *A Sand Book* in the desert and, after showing the reader the many meanings that can be extracted even from the verb “to desert,” leads the reader not out from the sand but into her “Arena,” in which they may discover the occult meanings—beyond absence, aridity, and negation—that are present when one traces the recurrences of metaphors like sand

The profundity of sand as Reines’s chosen organizing metaphor comes into clearest view in the titular poem of “Arena,” which Reines wrote just after several religious experiences in her life and she came to the realization that “somehow there were all these sands happening.”⁷⁴

Reines begins the poem:

Because that light was not like the others
 Making us seem to be becoming a place
 & because on a traffic island the sun had filled me
 & because my mother was crazy
 & because she was sometimes sane
 & because...⁷⁵

A litany of “& because” clauses then descend in successive anaphora through the end of the poem. Reines has noted of the section “Arena” that this part of the book is filled with poems that act as “personal statements” for the book.⁷⁶ With its consistent anaphora, offering successive justifications for the book, the poem “Arena” is perhaps the book’s most explanatory. The continuous “because” clauses pose to the reader a phantom question: why? Or, considering the poem’s title, “Arena,” which is the Spanish word for sand, the question is: why sand? And by extension: why *A Sand Book*? A close look at the explanations offered by Reines in “Arena” is

⁷³ Reines, “The Condition of Intimacy.”

⁷⁴ Reines, Strand Book Store.

⁷⁵ Reines, “Arena,” *A Sand Book*, 19.

⁷⁶ Reines, “Reines’s Quest.”

clarifying in understanding the origins of the book and how the period in which Reines wrote *A Sand Book* shaped her distinctly spiritualized relation to poetry.

Reines begins the poem by invoking a religious experience that she writes of in the book's final section, "Mosaic," which is comprised of the dictation she took from the sun: "on a traffic island the sun had filled me." Often in interviews, Reines has said that this encounter was among those that prompted her to begin writing *A Sand Book*, and to begin to see the surplus of meaning that resided in the world's apparently occult recurrences of sand, birds, and iridescence. But Reines also defines the more mundane conditions of her life that proved true, even as she began to have the religious experiences that are documented in *A Sand Book*. She continues, "& because I was hungry / & because I needed to party / & because I was grieving." After these lines, Reines then embeds the poem with a blistering display of source texts, images, and cultures that account for Reines's discovery of her organizing metaphors of birds, iridescence, and sand, and subsequently the spiritualized understanding of the universe that proliferated for her following these discoveries. She writes:

& because I studied the Dust Bowl, the architecture at Delphi,
 Judaic & Islamic legends of Moses, Midianite theology, the history
 of Haiti, Aryan horsemen of ancient Iran, the collapse of Sumerian
 agriculture, Kundalini yoga, Allan Savory's & competing theories
 on desertification reversal, ancient & contemporary methods for
 ruminant grazing...

Reines's "Arena" is a contemporary conversion narrative; with extreme detail, she recounts the conditions and sources that led to her spiritual revelation of universal interconnectivity.

Disparate histories, cultures, and practices are sutured together by Reines's cascading lists of continuous anaphora. The quotidian ("warming Pop-Tarts") meets the ancient ("the collapse of Sumerian agriculture"), the mystic ("& because an ugly incense was emanating") meets the apparently secular ("& because the air was filled with the odor of cheap men's cologne"), and the vividly personal (& because I was grieving) meets the political (& because ... Israel was

investing heavily / In anti-desertification efforts).⁷⁷ “Arena” recalls Reines’s protestation to the assertion that “none of these things can possibly be unified.”⁷⁸

Though gradually at first, sands, birds, and iridescence emerge frequently throughout the poem: “& because / ‘The iridescence in the peacock was due to a complex photonic / Crystal & because that crystal was silica & so / For the most part was sand,” “& because dust storms on Mars / & sand storms in China,” “& because a bird / Had alighted on the lectern of Bernie Sanders,” “& because the relentless spread / Of stupidity was allegorized in Flaubert’s / Novels by grains of sand.”⁷⁹ From the textures of seeming disparity that characterize the world, Reines sees patterns imbued with meaning emerge. She recognizes her own inauguration into a poetic worldview in the poem:

& because I fell down sobbing over a beaded cloth
 & because what I had for so long failed
 To see, what I had ignored, mistaking it for ornament
 Was information hiding in plain sight & because...⁸⁰

Newly seeing “information hiding in plain sight,” a phrase that resonates Reines’s definition of the occult as the “*apparently* invisible,” Reines realizes in “Arena” the mass recurrences of her organizing metaphors and refuses the convenience of believing that these recurrences are coincidental. “Arena” replicates in part for the reader the effect of the “ecstasy of meaning,” which is conjured for her by the sources of “Arena.” Likeness between sources proliferates as a deluge of “information hiding in plain sight” continuously dawns on the reader. Indeed, Reines’s breathless litany of anaphora exhilarates the reader in one unrelenting stanza.

In the poem’s final gesture, Reines concludes the poem’s continuous accretion of resounding consonance with one final explanatory clause: “& because the less we could agree /

⁷⁷ Reines, “Arena,” 19-20.

⁷⁸ Reines, Strand Book Store.

⁷⁹ Reines, “Arena,” 20-21.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

the more it seemed we were revolving / Into a gem.”⁸¹ Reines here accounts for the noise, cacophony, and polemics of online discourse, which invokes her assertion: “We have not yet learned how to communicate.”⁸² Even despite the mass disagreement that characterizes contemporary mediatized communication, Reines finds an encompassing gem: the surplus of meaning that fills the world when one awakens herself to “information hiding in plain sight.” More than any other poem in *A Sand Book*, “Arena” is an articulation of Reines’s suggestion that poetry provides an “ecstasy of meaning, of every single particle of your reality corresponding to a bigger and deeper truth.”⁸³ What begins as the benign conditions of familiar quotidian life can, with attention to occult connections, become a theology in itself.

An echo can, however, be heard in Reines’s “Arena,” as with the motif of *A Sand Book*, in William Blake’s “Auguries of Innocence”: “To see a World in a Grain of Sand.”⁸⁴ Indeed, a newly spiritualized world opens itself up to Reines in recurrences of sand in *A Sand Book* and especially in “Arena.” These resonances are not unlikely, as Devin Johnston in *Precipitations* suggests, “[O]ccultism corresponds to a more general return to Romanticism.”⁸⁵ Johnston cites Blake’s organicist aesthetics and asserts that both occult and Romantic poetry take an “organic view” of the world, one that creates a “larger order within disorder.”⁸⁶ He continues, “In the dark and irrational processes of the occult, poets discerned a coherent chaos, a sense of interrelatedness transcending the Enlightenment divisions of subject and object, self and other.”

⁸¹ Reines, “Arena,” 21; Reines’s final lines hold an extraordinary resemblance to a comment she made in an interview with *SSENSE*. Reines said, “Another trick that can be found in every religious tradition—it’s a trick, but it’s a good trick: every single thing that happens to you, that befalls you, is a treasure. A jewel in your hand.” Reines, “Dropping the Bullshit.”

⁸² Reines, “Reines’s Quest.”

⁸³ Reines, “The Impulse of Poetry.”

⁸⁴ William Blake, “Auguries of Innocence,” *Poetry Foundation*, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43650/auguries-of-innocence>.

⁸⁵ Johnston, *Precipitations*, 2.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

By tracing recurrences of her organizing metaphors, Reines continues a tradition of discerning a “coherent chaos,” “sense of interrelatedness,” and even a “gem” amid disagreement.

But the spiritual interrelatedness that emerges from Reines’s work also reflects, as Johnston puts it, an “organic view.” Reines told *Enchanted Living*, “Every particle of our existence partakes in living divinity.”⁸⁷ Yet, in the “chaos” from which Reines forms a sense of interrelatedness, she observes a public whose relationship to new media obstructs its ability to participate in “living divinity,” and to even live in their bodies at all. Of the pernicious cultures of online discourse, Reines writes in “A Partial History,” “...even the passing / Sensation of true sincerity, of actual truth, quickly emulsified / Into the great and terrible metastasizing whole.”⁸⁸ Reines further asserts that “it began to seem wisest to publish only / Within the confines of our flesh” and “to retreat into the jail of our own bones / And the cramped confines of our swollen veins and ducts.”⁸⁹ “A Partial History” is thus not only Reines’s estimation of the failure for new media to allow the public to communicate with one another, but also a critique of how new media has reorganized one’s relationship to their body in the pursuit of connectivity and communication. The spiritual interrelation Reines forms in *A Sand Book* is a call not only for spiritual awakening, but a plea to divest new media of its power in controlling our bodies.

⁸⁷ Ariana Reines, “Astrologer-Poet Ariana Reines and the Larger Aliveness,” Interview by Carolyn Turgeon, *Enchanted Living Magazine*, n.d., <https://enchantedlivingmagazine.com/astrologer-poet-ariana-reines-and-the-larger-aliveness/>; The belief that all things “partake in living divinity” evokes a strain of holistic belief adopted by New Ageism, a contemporary occult spiritual practice that rose to peak popularity in the late nineteenth century, called “universal interrelatedness.” Universal interrelatedness is the belief that “everything in the universe is related to everything else by virtue of the fact that everything participates in, or emerges from, the same Source.” Hanegraaff, “A Historical Framework,” 128. It is useful for readers to know that this belief is preestablished and persists to the present, though Reines has on several accounts expressed reluctance to being associated with New Ageism.

⁸⁸ Reines, “A Partial History,” 8.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

Avital Ronell writes in *The Telephone Book: Technology, Schizophrenia, Electric Speech*, a book that inspired Reines's play *Telephone* (2009), "When you hang up, [the telephone] does not disappear but goes into remission."⁹⁰ Later in the book, Ronell writes, "The eye, ear, even skin, have been divested of authority as they require technical extension and amplification in media."⁹¹ Ronell remarks of the telephone's total penetration and reorganization of human sociality. This penetration has been so significant that the telephone, a device whose hegemony has only grown with the development of the smartphone, social media, and phone applications, has divested the body of its status as the authoritative instrument of human life. Reines, too, has been critical of the disembodiment effects of new media. She suggests, "I think the Internet as we now experience it very much reflects the people who built it, their concerns, their ideas about what the person is. Even if you go back to some of the founders of the Internet ... these men were very exhilarated by the idea of getting rid of the body."⁹² Indeed, one of these very founders, John Perry Barlow, wrote in "A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace," "Cyberspace consists of transactions, relationships, and thought itself, arrayed like a standing wave in the web of our communications. Ours is a world that is both everywhere and nowhere, but it is not where bodies live."⁹³ Barlow admits to the occult nature of the Internet, its being "both everywhere and nowhere," and curiously betrays its influence on occulting the body. Reines's poetics, however, refuse to allow the body to become occulted. Once she sacrifices the truth she finds in her "lived reality," she is subject to the occult influences who use the Internet

⁹⁰ Avital Ronell, *The Telephone Book: Technology Schizophrenia, Electric Speech*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 1; Reines's evident interest in and reliance upon Ronell's text make it among the most telling of studies on technology and the body that can be used to inform Reines's work. Reines was also a student under Ronell when Reines attended the European Graduate School.

⁹¹ Ronell, *The Telephone Book*, 109.

⁹² Reines, "Reines's Quest."

⁹³ John Perry Barlow, "A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace," *Electronic Frontier Foundation*, February 8, 1996, <https://www.eff.org/cyberspace-independence>.

to manipulate the public. By foregrounding the truth found in her “lived reality,” in her living body, Reines’s poetics demand a reinvestment of authority in the body as the storehouse of truth. Reines notes, “Poetry is a mirror; it allows you to reflect on your state ... and writing comes from deep in the body.”⁹⁴ In providing an account of poetry’s ability to harness an “ecstasy of meaning,” one that suggests spiritual interrelation, Reines is asserting the necessity of a re-enchantment with the body.

In an interview with *The White Review*, Reines said, “When it’s working, poetry ... can give your body back to you. ... No matter who says what is real, it is up to us to experience and discern, and decide what is true for ourselves: this is what it means to be human.”⁹⁵ For Reines, poetry, as a discerning technology and an embodied practice, offers an alternative channel through which she can examine experience and distill embodied truths, even if that means asserting the validity of her ecstasies when posed with “the problem / Of being taken seriously.”⁹⁶ Reines recognizes that she may be met with this problem in its most skeptical form in “Mosaic,” a poetic sequence that accounts for the dictation she takes from the sun.⁹⁷ “The words aren’t ‘mine,’” Reines writes in the preface to the section.⁹⁸ Of the “thoughtforms” being communicated to her, Reines writes, “There was no way to see around it and no desire to for anything but to be filled with it ... my entire body, my every cell, and every particle of my experience was being reorganized in order to shape and receive each thoughtform.”⁹⁹ What

⁹⁴ Reines, “The Impulse of Poetry.”

⁹⁵ Reines, “Interview.”

⁹⁶ Reines, “To the Reader,” 30.

⁹⁷ In the context of this essay, it is useful to note that Reines first presented “Mosaic” at a conference entitled “Occult Poetics” at Concordia University in Montreal, Canada. The conference was in February 2017. “Mosaic” was dictated on October 7, 2014.

⁹⁸ Reines, “Mosaic,” 359.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 360.

resulted from Reines's dictation on a traffic island in New York City are thirty pages of didactic axioms, configured in white text on black pages. From the series include:

REALITY IS PERCEPTIBLE

SITUATIONS ARE CELLS

...

THE DEEPER INTO THE CELL WE GET

THE MORE KINDS OF PEOPLE WE PRODUCE

THE MORE WE LEARN ABOUT THE CELL

THE MORE WE HAVE TO KNOW ABOUT THE PEOPLE¹⁰⁰

These axioms reflect Reines's relationship to poetry and the body. Here the cell is identified as the discerning mechanism of truth and experience. These axioms likewise corroborate Reines's insistence on the significance of "lived reality" at a time when the public is antagonized by and ailing at the effect of the disembodying effects of new media.

However, setting aside the semantic content of "Mosaic," the encounter seems a telling testament to the fruit of Reines's poetic relation to the world. Reines at her most rigorous practice of poetry is most rigorously in her body; from a poetic relation to the world, she becomes the medium herself, receptive to the "thoughtforms" of ambiguous occult forces. Reines closes the distance between the corporeal body and her body of work, the textual medium and the spiritual medium. Thus, at her encounter in "Mosaic," Reines's state can be called one of extreme "vigilant receptivity," in which she is unharnessed from new media channels and newly receptive to those in the environment, as she "steadily gave way to rapture."¹⁰¹ At its most vigilantly receptive, the medium of poetry transmutes: no longer is it merely the technology by

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 384.

¹⁰¹ Johnston, *Precipitations*, 4; Reines, "Mosaic," 360.

which the poet communicates, but it becomes a zone for occult transference. But the relation to the world that produces Reines's rapture is not entirely new; it closely aligns with an older model of poetic receptivity: Keats's "negative capability." Negative capability refers to the condition in which "a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason."¹⁰² To practice poetry for Reines is "to experience and discern, and decide what is true for [herself]," without regard to the assertions of rational skeptics. Likewise, to be attentive to one's own life by way of a poetic worldview to the point of vigilant receptivity is to be unreceptive to the continuous pulses and notifications of modern smartphones. As Ronell notes, "To the extent that you are always on call, you have already learned to endure interruption and the click."¹⁰³ Reines's vigilance offers an alternative proposition: if one removes themselves from their usual vigilance to new media networks, a world of occult mystery, possibility, and interconnectivity reveals itself. For Reines, this is a world that "better reflects the fullness of who we are."¹⁰⁴

When the reader reaches the final page of *A Sand Book*, the concluding axioms in "Mosaic" take up a sudden turn to the second person: "EVERYTHING HAS A NATURE / FIND OUT YOURS,"¹⁰⁵ leaving the reader facing one final black page, empty of text. *A Sand Book* began in negation under Paul Celan's epigraph and ends with the negative space of its pages and its poems now configured in black. The negative space has been made positive, a reminder of the occult forces Reines wrote into visibility in *A Sand Book*. The assertion in "Mosaic" to "FIND OUT YOURS" is a call to the reader to yield at no apparent invisibility or negation; the depths of the occult can be mined for meaning. But this sudden turn to the second

¹⁰² John Keats, *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. Robert Gittings (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 43.

¹⁰³ Ronell, *The Telephone Book*, 1.

¹⁰⁴ Reines, "Reines's Quest."

¹⁰⁵ Reines, "Mosaic," 396.

person also carries a resonance from earlier in the book, the sudden turn to the second person and question that sprang forth from “To the Reader,” out of “Arena,” and that hung over the remainder of *A Sand Book*: “But why am I trying to talk to you now / In this of all media?”¹⁰⁶ Having traversed the desert to its extremities in *A Sand Book*, the efficacy of poetry to unearth occult meanings lies newly visible to the reader. With the “ecstasy of meaning” that proliferates from a poetic relation to the world now exposed, the reader in “Mosaic” is no longer presented with a question but an undertaking: “EVERYTHING HAS A NATURE / FIND OUT YOURS.” The undertaking proposed in “Mosaic,” presented with Reines as a model, is an invitation to divest from the hyper-mediatization and manipulation of the digital age and become the medium itself. To do so only requires faith in one’s “lived reality” and in the body. “I am no different / From anybody else,” Reines writes in “Tenth Body.”¹⁰⁷ Strange meetings, Reines suggests, of metaphors, as in “Arena,” or “thoughtforms,” as in “Mosaic,” can be encountered by anyone. “Poetry is something anyone can practice,” she says.¹⁰⁸ To harness the surplus of *apparently* invisible meanings that lie just beneath bounds of perception, all it takes is that one be attentive to their “lived reality” and trace the connections that emerge. “There are nectars hidden inside your body,” Reines reminds readers in “Son of a Jar.”¹⁰⁹ “Suck your own tongue.”

¹⁰⁶ Reines, “To the Reader,” 32-33.

¹⁰⁷ Reines, “Tenth Body,” *A Sand Book*, 26.

¹⁰⁸ Reines, “The Impulse of Poetry.”

¹⁰⁹ Reines, “Son of a Jar,” *A Sand Book*, 4.

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