

## **Palimpsests**

Phillip Barron

### **Poetics Research Statement**

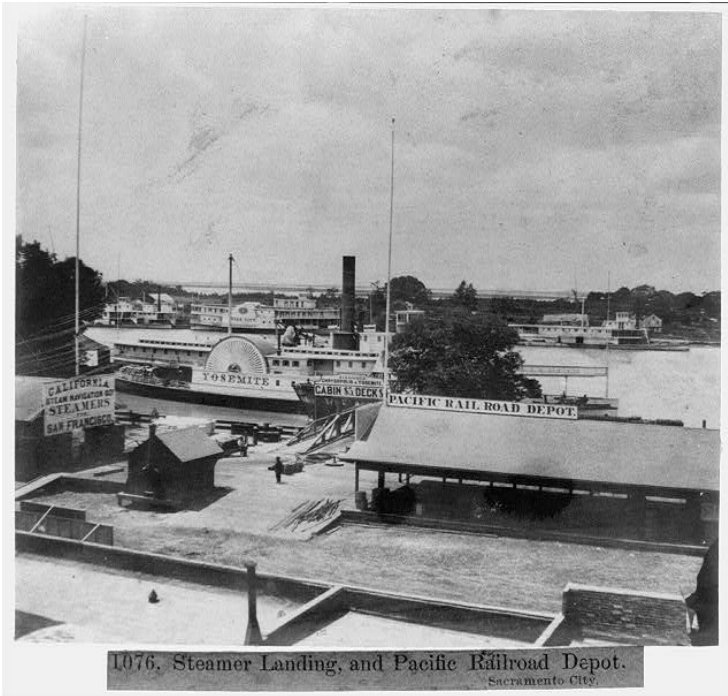
The poems published here take a lyrical materialist approach. They are part of a series on which I am at work called *Palimpsests*.

Lyrical materialism is my term for an aesthetic approach that takes beauty as its object of concern and finds it in the world as it is. As a post-modern poetic, it is engaged with the problems of indeterminacy in language. And, it asserts that nothing more than the material reality of the world is required for beauty to exist. Lyrical materialist poems depend for their cultural depth on informed awareness of historical context.

*Palimpsests* explores the theme of presence and absence with respect to a sense of place through the aesthetics of functional (even if lingering) industrial spaces. These poems embody the sounds and rhythms of factories, industrial farmlands, and ports. Whether rural or urban, the settings of these place-based poems have survived the shift to a post-industrial economy and merit deep attention for the role they play in constructing the materiality and aesthetic of our daily experiences. Sacramento, California's port; Columbia, South

Carolina's last grist mill; Iowa's industrial cornfields; and Black Mountain College's repurposed campus all share a history of transformation.

"At this Point, a Confluence" is based on research into the efforts beginning in 1860 to dredge the flood-prone Sacramento River and raise the streets of California's fledgling capital city. The emerging railroad businesses invested heavily, since Sacramento was the western terminus of the first transcontinental line. Buildings, streets, and sidewalks were literally raised on jacks to create a new, floating street level, high above the flood line. The first loading docks and walkways were built from the wood and boilers of disassembled steamships that had carried miners and supplies to the city's river banks. In addition to traditional archival research, I used digital tools to align and merge historical maps with contemporary satellite imagery in various layers of transparency. The resulting digital palimpsest allowed me to see how the path of the American River and the patterns of city development have changed since the 1860s. The poem's concluding notion, that the transcontinental railroad "obliterated time and space," is taken from historian Richard White's *Railroaded: The Transcontinentals and the Making of Modern America* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2012).



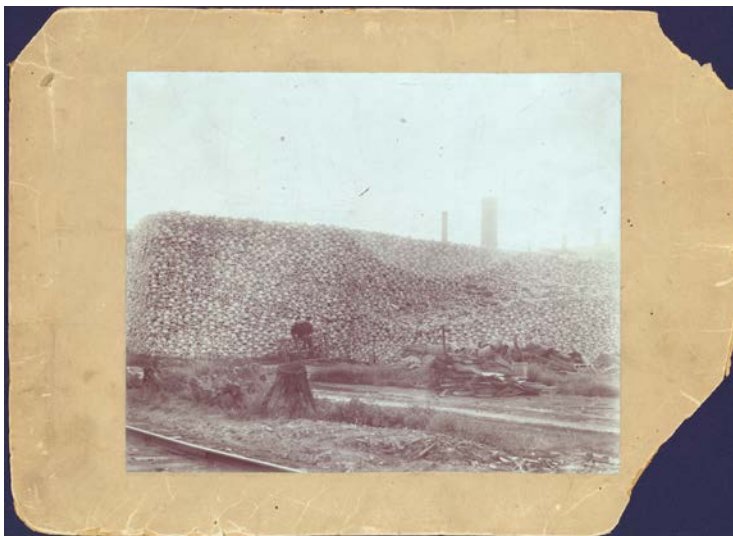
1076. Steamer Landing, and Pacific Railroad Depot.  
Sacramento City.

*Steamer landing, and Pacific Railroad Depot -  
Sacramento City (1866)*

Courtesy of Library of Congress Prints and Photographs  
Division - <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2002719819/>

Dutch immigrant B.R. Crooner founded the Adluh grist mill in Columbia, SC, around 1900. The Allen Brothers Milling Company continues to operate the mill alongside boutique hotels in the heart of a revitalized former industrial district. The origins of the name Adluh are a

mystery, yet, the enigmatic word — lit in blinking neon red capital letters atop the tall building — has been a beacon for generations of residents of South Carolina's capital city. One local legend holds that Adluh is the mirrored spelling of the founder's daughter's name, Hulda. However, census records do not bear this out.



*Photo courtesy of Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library - [http://quod.lib.umich.edu/d/dpa1ic/x-dpa4900/dpa4900\\_\\_tiff](http://quod.lib.umich.edu/d/dpa1ic/x-dpa4900/dpa4900__tiff)*

"Succession in Iowa" paratactically sets technology at odds with what is missing from the landscape: the herds of buffalo that once roamed the great plains and were

hunted nearly to extinction. Images like those from the mid-1870s of the men standing in front and on top of piles of buffalo skulls at the Michigan Carbon Works give a sense of the scale of the killings.

The final poem, "Palimpsest," is perhaps the most difficult and layered of the four, because the form of the poem is structured around the changing layers of information in a map that persists through time. A palimpsest is a document on which writing or drawing has been erased to make room for later writing and on which traces of the previous draft remain visible. Palimpsests are common not only in times when writing materials are scarce but also in times of exploration, when boundaries are contentious. A palimpsest, then, is the metaphor that I employ in this poem for the shifting boundaries driving the *avant garde*.

The Black Mountain College, the radical campus experiment outside Asheville, NC, operated between 1933 and 1957 in two locations. After the college closed, both campuses converted to other uses. During its brief existence, BMC included among its faculty some of the most pioneering visual, literary, and sound artists of the mid-20th century. Josef Albers, Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, Willem de Kooning, John Cage, and Buckminster Fuller all held teaching positions at one of BMC's two campuses. The poem opens with an image of wild turkeys that continue to use daily the paths which they have used since a time before human encroachment

and despite the development (and therefore changed map) that has grown up around them. "Palimpsest" closes by exploring the limits of what information maps convey, how maps themselves are historical documents the moment at which they are produced, and the inability of maps to account for changes over time.

## **At this Point, a Confluence**

*Less enterprising men would have left  
the beautiful ruin of a city  
to moulder away and decay, but the Sacramentans  
could not be induced to forego the work of a decade  
just for the disasters of a month.*

Editorial, The Sacramento Bee, October 3, 1865

Before rousting the American from its bed,  
a century before sobering the Sacramento's snowmelt  
with a catch and release schedule,  
they stood in the park to watch two rivers mix:  
one ran muddy from paddlewheels and boilers,  
the other spooned the city  
like a lazy morning lover.

Citizens feared  
an inconsolable river  
would stumble home angry and drunk,  
bring everyone down to its banks  
for a baptism, wash away  
the sins and signs  
of order, civility.

It took twelve years for a sidewalk of dismantled  
steamships,  
fraying even before it was finished,  
to float the city on stilts

the river thickening  
    with silt from the mines  
the mines that pushed  
    the railroad to Promontory  
the railroad that promised  
    a passage east by way of the west.

A streetside frescoed Virgin of Guadalupe  
watched over flocks of families spilling  
between pushcarts and Pullman coaches  
where the docks met the tracks  
    that obliterated time, space.



## **ADLUH**

A thin slice of cinderblock, seven stories high  
squares against the sky, a downtown silo  
with what is left of the working wage. Harvest  
rains within windowless walls of whitewashed  
ads, which flash neon on and off again  
in an Amen cadence slowed to pace the rails  
and Congaree canals that once mapped coastal plains.  
Reapers' fruit goes crushing, grinding, gristing.  
Who set it flowing, this nourishing dust  
sitting in the middle of time, no plains, no past?  
What talk was wrought in the wheat stalk fields?  
And the dusk yields   ADLUH           ADLUH

## **Succession in Iowa**

Contrails bend pink and north over Osceola,  
hot trails dragging behind what makes them  
roar, passing through other ragged clouds  
tossed across the darkening sky.

A train whistle wails over rip rap  
creek beds, calling to the grain towers  
that huddle like rocket thrusters  
on hills combed neat as heads of hair.

And when those engines finish shouting hosanna,  
echoing off the paved hills, their thunder  
trickles through full summer cottonwood branches,  
where the noise could be mistaken for herds of buffalo.

## Palimpsest

I.

Where black asphalt splits an ancient trail,  
    which fauna have not forgotten,  
a tom fans royal feathers  
for his brood,  
    who drip their gray drop bodies  
from terra cotta roof tops  
and swagger the asphalt's  
    addresses even to odd,  
stopping traffic with red, round authority.

Sidelit by the low sun, the crossing guard  
folds up crimson feathers and marches over  
to where, in a panic of wings,  
    the flock takes to the sky,  
    trailing molt like the stains  
of scraped away ink on a map's second draft.

II.

A hand-drawn map needs RE-visioning  
when memory leaks through borders.  
Black Mountain's first campus  
now tithes for the Scots' god,  
its Lee Hall rocking chairs answering  
traditional on the valley-side porch.  
The lower pasture of its second,

paradisa Eden, fell back to being  
just another exit before Bat Cave.

To stand on the open field  
with the old tobacco barn  
that never dried leaves, only paint,  
speaks the difference between rhododendron  
and mountain laurel: one  
should never build a campfire  
without telling them apart.  
Is an uncured branch still poisonous without geography?  
Departure means a separation from vitality.

III.

Black ink on paper traces a communicative edge.  
It is right to resist declension narratives,  
it is just that location is never where we left it.

IV.

What the map can't tell:

The time of year the night is as hot as the day.  
That a bobcat's cry sounds like a human baby.  
How mating love bugs resemble Chinook  
helicopters.  
Why redbuds bloom before dogwoods, and which  
is prettier.  
Which granite face eroded to make this creek  
sand.

How to pedal past a timber rattlesnake.  
Why dance moves look like domestic chores.  
That when getting off a plane in sandals,  
humidity affects the feet first.