Power and Play through Poisies: Reconstructing Self and Other in the 9/11 Commission Report

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Analyses of 9/11 tend to narrowly punctuate understandings of Self vs Other. These mystify the power of politics in international relations, fixing us in locked cycles of dominance, retaliation, and indeed, annihilation. We explore an alternative method (poetry) derived from a dialectical epistemology (poisies) framed by a prismatic ontology (Worldism) to address the relations between Self and Other, and their implications for an emancipatory, transformative world politics. We focus on the 9/11 Commission Report as a starting point.

A tenured professor who’s also a woman of color, Lina directs a program on conflict resolution at the university where Bill presides as Chancellor. A white, upper-class male who’s well-respected in government as well as public intellectual circles, Bill was one of the commissioners who authored the 9/11 Commission Report, issued in late summer, 2004.1 The Commission consisted of ‘independent’ members who were, nonetheless, all former government officials and white. Its mission: to investigate into the causes of 9/11 and their prevention in the future.

It’s the day before the Labour Day holiday weekend and Bill has the afternoon open. Lina knocks on his door. Bill looks up from his desk.

Bill (with a politician’s smile and handshake): Lina, good to see you. What’s up?

Lina: The 9/11 Commission Report. My colleagues and I have read it carefully and while we appreciate the time and effort that have gone into it, we have some concerns—

Bill (gesturing to Lina to sit): I thought we put together a pretty fair, balanced, and comprehensive report given our mandate. We discussed openly, for example, how some agencies failed to alert the American people of one of the greatest acts of terrorism ever perpetrated on American soil. We recommended sweeping reforms—some of which will ruffle feathers in Washington, I assure you, but much needed. We called it ‘a lack of imagination’. Rather poetic, don’t you think? (Lina smiles.) We even declared outright that Iraq had nothing to do with 9/11, and with the presidential election just a few months away, too!—

Lina (politely): We are concerned about how the Report projects Self-Other relations.

Bill: What do you mean?

Lina: How the Report constructs the identity of the American Self vis-à-vis the radical Muslim Other.

Bill: Isn’t it obvious that we’re enemies? After all, these al Qaeda fanatics, led by that religious zealot bin Ladin, bombed us—literally out of the blue! Isn’t that outrageous enough to demand unmitigated retribution?

Lina: I understand. We are outraged, too, but not for the same reasons or purpose. We’re concerned that the Report’s politics may not subside the conflict and may, instead, intensify the violence—

Bill (heatedly): Intensify?! We’re trying to prevent violence!

Lina (patiently): Shall I go over the Report and explain?

Bill (grudgingly): Please.

Lina (takes out a bunch of papers from her briefcase): OK, I’ll just focus on two chapters. Two and Twelve. Chapter Two examines the rise of bin Ladin and al Qaeda, and their appeal to the Muslim world. Chapter Twelve recommends preventative measures for the future. These two chapters, we think, reveal the most about Self-Other relations in the Report. They give the discourse of Othering a foundational status, not merely by absenting the Other, but by eliminating its consideration altogether in formations of liberal democracy.

Bill (perplexed but intrigued): Go on...
Dialectos² I: The 9/11 Commission Report

The Report proposes that the US government utilise whatever means available – radio, television, textbooks, scholarships, exchange programs, foreign aid – to educate Muslims about America and Americans. This would, the Report presumes, befriend, convert, and ultimately domesticate potential terrorists. The Muslim Other is ‘uninformed’ about America at best, the Report finds, and filled with ‘cartoonish’ stereotypes at worst. If only they’d know us better, the Report suggests, they’d realise what friendly and harmless people we are. Here, the Report sounds ironically Gramscian when it suggests that the US government should ‘engage the struggle of ideas’.

Bill: ‘Gramscian’?

Lina: Antonio Gramsci was an Italian Marxist of the 1920s and –’30s. Considering the grip of the Catholic church on Italy, he felt Lenin’s approach to revolution – seizing the apparati of the state like the telegraph office or Parliament – fell short given Italy’s Catholic culture. So he theorised that revolution requires a war of ideas or culture as much as seizure of the state to dislodge the hegemony of ruling elites.

Bill: ‘Hegemony’?

Lina: Moral and intellectual leadership. According to Gramsci, state and society collude to produce hegemony – that is, a specifically political interpretation of the world, exercised through coercion and consent, such that the masses would follow elite rule even when it’s against their own interests. Gramsci underscored that hegemony protects elite rule’s real purpose: the bottom line.

Bill (incredulously): Are you accusing the 9/11 Commission Report of perpetrating hegemony?

Lina (smoothly): If I may...

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2. *Dialectos* means ‘dialect’ in Greek. In Greek theater, characters often speak in local dialects to indicate who they are, where they come from, and what they represent. In this paper, we use *dialectos* to designate an alternative narrative (Lina’s) that reframes the conventional one (e.g., the Report’s).


4. Ibid.

‘The Foundation of the New Terrorism’

The Report sets the US government/reader on one side, irreconcilably opposed to the Radical Islamists/al Qaeda/bin Ladin, on the other. It portrays bin Ladin/al Qaeda as categorically evil, maniacal, not terribly competent nor even effective, outrageously irrational, and kicked out by even sympathetic governments in the region. Only other fanatics, the Report implies, could accept such madness as leadership. Indeed, the Report portrays bin Ladin’s followers as misled, mistaken, and misguided. Instead of looking within, the Report asserts, malcontent Muslims blame the US. The ‘Great Satan’ becomes responsible for any and every problem in their region.

Bin Ladin himself is caricatured as a rich, spoiled charlatan. He abuses his family’s wealth to pull religious wool over the eyes of the innocent, the hungry, the ignorant, and the murderous. He’s embraced more for his money than his religious devotion. Al Qaeda’s only resources are the region’s social and economic ‘losers’, who happen to be testosterone-charged young men with nowhere to go, nothing to do. Actually, the Report asserts, these problems stem from their own leaders’ and governments’ greed and backwardness.

The Report conceives of the US, in turn, as an innocent, albeit powerful and rich, bystander. It remains a friendly power seeking only order and peace in the world – under Western norms and rules, of course.7 The US and other Western powers, former colonial masters in the region, have little to do with the political, economic, and social violence experienced by generations in the region. Indeed, the Report glosses over the role of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), along with European partner agencies, in destabilising or subverting all those countries that the Report itself cites as problem areas: Algeria, Iran, Iraq, Libya, Pakistan, Sudan.8 According to the Report, Others target the US to compensate for what they lack. The Report describes a politics of envy for the Muslim Other but a politics of virtue for the American Self.

To Americans, the Report states, the Middle East remains a place far, far away, stuck in a time long, long ago, filled with the unknown and unknowable, whereas Others know the US all too well given

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6. 9/11 Commission Report, chapter two, 47-70.
7. For example, the Report states that the US helped Afghan resistance fighters defeat an ineffective, unstable communist government (albeit popularly elected) only to be rewarded with obscene ingratitude, as evidenced on 9/11. 9/11 Commission Report, 86.
America’s openness, generosity, and grandness. The Report logically concludes that the radical Muslim Other needs to be converted, assimilated, and reprogrammed – or else.

(Lina stops. She’s slightly out of breath.)

Bill (impatiently): I know all that. I was one of the authors, remember?
My question is: So what? What’s wrong with anything you’ve just said?

‘What To Do? A Global Strategy’

The Report normalises a foreign policy of ‘us v. them’. It fears that boundaries no longer matter: we have become one intertwined mess. Here, the Report updates that old saying, ‘Whatever’s good for General Motors is good for the world’, into a new American domestication of the international: ‘the American homeland is the planet’.

The Report concludes that the US must help ‘Americanise’ Muslim societies. This means inculcating them with the Anglo-American liberal virtues of ‘[t]olerance, the rule of law, political and economic openness, the extension of greater opportunities to women’.

If this means the US must stretch its reach, so be it. Call it an ‘international coalition’ of like-minded states. The US must stand firm in its resolve, the Report states, even in face of temporary disadvantage. By implication, this means penalising even those states and agencies that do not support terrorist activities but raise critical or dissident views. A zero-sum logic emerges: conversion or annihilation for enemies, commitment or exile for allies. The Self remains unchanged despite the changed nature of the times, the agents, and the means. It is the Other who must comply or die.

Bill (looking at his watch): Again, what’s wrong with this?

(Lina answers evenly.)

The problem lies at many levels. First, the American Self abdicates responsibility for contributing to the economic and political ‘malaise’
that has plagued the Middle East or, more specifically, the funding and training of those who now arm against us. In not recognising this complicity, we are doomed to reproduce the same conditions for murderous hatred that motivated 9/11. Instead, we propagandise ‘globalisation’ or ‘regime change’ when, in fact, America treats the world like a backyard, confusing Others for our servants or acolytes, if not cheap labour or sex slaves.12 We manfully claim to save Muslim women from their men while continuing racial and gender discrimination at home, in all walks of life.13 We conveniently forget borders when we bomb, invade, occupy, or buy Other countries.14 But we reinforce borders when Others (e.g., France and Germany) disagree with us on foreign policy or when big bucks are at stake. We also liberally re-interpret the law when advocating torture.15 As for testosterone-charged young men, the Report overlooks our own problems with unemployment and hopelessness, especially for underclass youth.16 Still, we jack up our defense budget to ‘protect the homeland’17; transnationalising insecurity to such a degree that other big states like Russia now feel legitimate in rooting out ‘terrorists’ with ‘pre-emptive raids’.

Meanwhile, US corporations like Bechtel and Halliburton, with ties to the highest echelons of government, rake in billion-dollar contracts to ‘reconstruct’ Afghanistan and Iraq.18 In failing to question

15. See the report from the Center for Constitutional Rights [http://www.ccr-ny.org/v2/home.asp?ObjID=ci38xk7lhk&Content=59].
such mega corporate interests or even note their role in US foreign policy, the Report effectively rationalises US hegemony in the region. *(Bill stares hard at Lina but remains silent.)*

Second, the American Self does not acknowledge the Other’s struggles with the West. Radical Muslim clerics might, like 19th century mandarins in China, mistake Western civilisation as simply a pile of ‘things’. But the Report falls prey to the same fallacy by deriding Muslim education as ‘backward’ or Muslim depictions of the US as ‘uninformed’ or ‘cartoonish’, as if there’s neither merit in the former nor reason for the latter. This casts whole peoples and societies as children or idiots – unless, of course, they are the ‘good’ Muslims who speak, act, and think *just like us*. *(Lina spits out the last three words.)* Precisely for this reason, the Report underestimates bin Ladin’s resonance with ordinary Muslims around the world.

*Bill: Wait, doesn’t this distinction between Self and Other help to stabilise identity, providing Americans with a sense of security?*

*Lina: Which Americans? Certainly, as a woman of color, I don’t feel more secure knowing that my country targets people who look just like me! *(Bill looks on impassively.)*

A victimology arises – even at home, inside America. In essentialising America into one identity under one banner of ‘neoliberal democracy’, ‘free market’, and the ‘liberal state’, the Report pretends we are not composed of many ethnicities, religions, ideologies, and traditions. Yet it permits elites to rule over that very difference which the Report claims does not exist. A second myth emerges: ‘merit’ alone matters, as if ruling elites do not accrue privileges from race, gender, class, and national location. In such an imperialistic environment, every dispute, no matter how petty or temporary, collapses under the full weight of historical encounters between Self and Other. A person of color, as Other, instantly thinks: ‘Whitey hates me because I’m the Wild Native Woman or Ignorant Native Man’.

Yet the liberal white managerial self *(Bill winces)* psychologises everything into an externalised, individualised matter: ‘This person of color hates me because s/he is hysterical, unreasonable, or

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incompetent. It has nothing to do with me’. What results is alienation for all. A sense of community and public deliberation break down and, all-too-easily, senseless, banal violence erupts.

(A knock on the door. The Chancellor’s assistant Mark, a seventh-year graduate student in International Relations (IR), pokes his head in.)

Mark: Sir, I have some papers for you to sign.

Bill: Come in! Join us in this very interesting discussion. (Mark is a typical IR graduate student: single, white, male and eager to debate any topic. Bill welcomes the reinforcement.)

Lina (continues while acknowledging Mark): ...Typically, the Report tries to manage change. But change, by definition, refuses control. That’s the irony and the tragedy. The Report presumes that Others don’t have the agency to come up with strategies of their own. They serve as mere vessels for the rules and norms that decision-makers like the US pour into them. An endless cycle results: tit-for-tat, attack and counter-attack. What kind of communities are we building, then?

Bill: You’re talking about the nature of power.

Lina: Precisely. (Mark’s ears perk up.)

Dialectos II : The Nature of Power

The Report denies history. It glosses over and, at points, ignores the impact of US foreign policy – especially rapacious corporate acts – on the region. These do not matter in the Commissioners’ eyes. What counts is their version of ‘leadership’, whether it comes from corporations or the state.

Such leadership, however, forecloses thinking in terms beyond itself. Always ‘the Center’, it doesn’t allow for recognition of other communities or agency, outside of bin Ladin/al Qaeda (e.g., women’s labour in communities, alternative modes of being). The Report naturalises its own dystopic ‘clash of civilisations’, where realism and liberalism as tropes for change turns into a stagnant tale of irreconcilable Self v. Other.

20. The US government now prohibits Iraqi farmers, for example, from saving their own seeds, a century-old practice. Instead, they must buy the seeds from US corporations. See the article put out by the Centre for Research on Globalization [http://globalresearch.ca/articles/KHA501A.html] (14 February 2005).
Bill (interjecting): So you’re saying that the US mistakes power for a unilateral show of force, based on superior economic and military resources, when power should be seen, instead, as...?

Lina: Social relations. I’ll elaborate later but for now, let me say that my colleagues and I define power as a trans-subjective mode of relating and imagining among multiple selves and others who co-produce our world despite global asymmetries...

Bill: Are you suggesting that individuals and states are not unique, not sovereign?

Lina: Yes. The history of colonialism shows beyond doubt that sovereignty, for individuals and states, was a beautiful but ultimately violent myth.

Bill: Why is a relational approach to power better?

Lina: For one thing, we’d be spared a self-serving moral vernacular in world politics...

Bill: What’s wrong with a ‘moral vernacular’?

Lina: It sentimentalises the Other rather than honestly assesses the Self and its relationship with the Other. A moral vernacular silences the violence and violations that legal structures perpetrate against women, workers, queers, and people of color, generally. Simultaneously, it displaces attention from changing these structures. Of course, emotions and compassion are important! But when they are decontextualised from particular histories, they become tools for reproducing empire rather than effective modes for change and improvement.

Power, in short, stems from an intersubjective consensus, albeit within a context of material capabilities. The trick lies in the framing. But it’s never complete; therein seeds revolution. Once the Soviet Union could no longer maintain its fiction as a superpower, for example, it had to resort to another story to recuperate itself. Gorbachev called it ‘perestroika’ and ‘glasnost’.22

Mark (excitedly): Constructivists – this cutting edge group in IR theory (he explains to Bill) – would cheer this development as concrete

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instantiation of their theoretical point: intersubjectivity. Power is not just an objectified, reified condition of who’s ‘on top’ but results from agents recognising, accepting, contributing to, and possibly transforming macro-political structures like ideology, organisation, and power relations.\(^{23}\) Paraphrasing Wendt on anarchy, power is what we make of it.\(^{24}\) (Mark is very pleased. The Chancellor seems impressed.)

Bill (ever practical): But how do we measure power as a ‘relationship’ and ‘imagination’? How do we know ‘who’s on top’?

Lina: Such questions foreclose space for democratic deliberation. Rather, I’d ask: What kind of intersubjectivity is constructed by whom and for what purpose? And do we agree with it? (Mark wipes his brow. This woman is no easy customer!) Not probing into the social relations of intersubjectivity effectively erases the power politics of meaning – including its political economy – returning us to the conventional treatment of power as domination, pure and simple.

Bill: What do you mean by intersubjectivity’s ‘social relations’?

Lina: That is—

Mark (irrepressibly): The power and class relations that produce certain norms, institutions, practices, and behaviors that prevail over others... (Lina sighs. These guys thrive on oneupsmanship! Mark continues, oblivious to the dynamics of the ‘debate’. He turns to Lina.) How is your understanding of power different from Foucault’s?

Lina: For Foucault, power pervades all.\(^{25}\) He makes no distinction between power and the resistance it generates. He does not consider, for instance, the differential legacies of power under colonialism for coloniser and colonised.\(^{26}\) Hence, Foucault’s revolutionary method effectively returns us to imperial IR with the common assumption that power operates in one, universally-recognised and -experienced world.

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Five ways Self-Other relations can become fixed emerge: as (1) a state-centric, territorially-absorbed understanding of sovereignty that rationalises power as control ('My sovereignty is more important than yours'); (2) a global hierarchy to resources and capability ('I'm rich and want to keep it that way even if it means you stay poor'); (3) a race to encode normalcy ('I set the standards, you comply'); (4) a claim to legitimacy ('I'm genuine and right, you’re fake and wrong'); and as (5) a singular definition of power ('I impose, you consent').

Walter Mignolo refers to this discourse of Self and Other as ‘Occidental liberal nationalism’. He sees it having emerged from ‘the reciprocal relations of colonialism’; and sees its ‘perverse notions of mutual aid and production [emerging] with the inception of modernity’.28

Bill: Please elaborate.

(He takes off his jacket and rolls up his shirtsleeves. He enjoys a good debate – especially with Mark there. Besides, it’s good PR: the Chancellor jousting with radical feminist while earnest grad student looks on. That’s why they pay him the big bucks. Lina answers.)

Colonising Others becomes necessary to the European definition of Self, later inherited by the US. It propagates a myth of independence when, in fact, the coloniser is highly dependent on the colonised not only for material resources but also psychological affirmation. If the colonising Self sees any aspect in the Other, it is, at most, the erotically exotic. Such effacements and exclusions consolidate neoliberal state power structures, constantly reproduced through new transnational forms. For the heirs of colonial pain and burden, however, rage ferments. Some figure there is only one option left for the survival of their families and communities: to ‘imperialise’ the imperialists. Note bin Ladin’s ‘mirroring’ of Bush’s hypermasculinised, imperialist rhetoric (‘the world must choose’) based on a feminisation and indenturing of society (‘go shopping’ for Bush, ‘they [the US] have

29. Ibid., 201.
30. Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge*.
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raped us’ for bin Ladin).32 Suicide-homicides proliferate. In turn, former imperialists unreflexively bomb whole cities in the name of ‘democracy’ and ‘human rights’. Yet only massive sacrifice and suffering result.

(Lina’s voice drops. The enormity of the task before her suddenly seems daunting. Mark jumps in, to Lina’s delight. Fresh air, Lina inhales, that’s what we need.)

Mark: Postmodernism has only made things worse. Although its emphasis on ‘traveling’ and ‘empathy’ suggests the need to get outside of oneself, one’s own experiences, to extend to another by ‘walking in the other’s shoes’, it also foregrounds a fundamentally fragmented subjectivity that forecloses the possibility. The logical reaction is ‘why bother? ’I can’t do it, so I won’t even try’. For example, this well-known IR Postmodernist once declared that he cannot know the Other because he cannot ‘jump into the mind’ of the Other. ‘After all’, he reasoned, ‘I am in the West, in the Center’.

This postmodern distancing matches up conveniently with liberal white managerialism and its emphasis on efficiency. (A good grad student, Mark picks up new discourses easily. Indeed, he exemplifies his training under liberal white managerialism. The neoliberal academy rewards him in ways big and small for such intellectual ‘efficiency’.) Both ‘radicals’ and ‘conservatives’ end up with the same conclusion: ‘the Other is unknowable’. Moreover, the lack of resources relieves us of the responsibility to even try. It’s more efficient to have them follow us. After all, we’re better. We know. In this way, an imperial politics is born.

Bill: What are the limits to your definition of power? What is it that it can’t account for?

Lina: Limits would lie in misunderstandings of it. One such misunderstanding would be to claim that this determination of power would remove difference by incorporating everything into one identity. But as I will explain later, relational power necessitates recognition of multiplicity. No relationship could be reduced to or copy the same elements. Even when attempts are made to universalise governing structures over time and space (e.g., colonialism), different features still result. Note, for example, how

British-ruled India differed from colonial America. This is not to deny that certain structural similarities prevail. But recent history shows that even an ‘objective’ process like capitalism or globalisation produces highly differentiated norms, rules, institutions, and practices.\(^3\)

A second misunderstanding would be to charge us of blaming all of the world’s ills – 9/11 especially – on the ignorance of elite white males. (\textit{Lina chuckles.}) If only the problem were that easy! It’s like saying racism would end if we were to get rid of all white people. This presumption denies any internal contestations among white people as well as the history of institutionalised, social relations, not to mention competition for scarce resources that beset groups of people at any time.

Bill: If we stick with relational power, how can we break through the impasse of relations that Self and Other find themselves in today?

Lina: Suspend judgment.

Bill and Mark (\textit{simultaneously}): What do you mean?

Lina: Each party needs to suspend judgment long enough to consider other strategies or methods of seeing the Self and Other. Otherwise, they could not work together to realise possibilities for action and transformation.

Mark: This requires another way of understanding the world—

Lina: Yes.

Mark: —as well as being in the world.

Lina: Yes.

Mark: So we’re talking about an alternative ontology and epistemology in addition to method.

Lina: We have to. One is not sustainable politically or logically without the other.\(^4\) Look at postmodernism and constructivism. Both offer a critical, alternative epistemology to IR but without critiquing what Marx called the ‘economics of untruth’, they leave de

\(^3\) Ling, \textit{Postcolonial International Relations}.

\(^4\) Agathangelou, \textit{Global Political Economy}.
In short, postmodernism and constructivism stay at the level of cultural politics. They fail to integrate considerations of material interest in the formation of such cultural politics. That is also the failure of the Report. The result? More violence.

Bill: Are you questioning the entire foundation of Western culture, politics, economics, and science? (Mark can hardly contain himself. This is exciting stuff!)

Lina: No. We question its narcissism. Let me explain...

**Dialectos III: Poetry**

Suspending judgment is not about ‘postponing’ or ‘avoiding’. Rather, a trans-subjective, multiply-produced mode of relating and imagining allows us to refrain, for the moment, from fixing identity into one thing and not the other. This clearing of psychological, emotional, and structural space helps to reconfigure old versions of Self and Other in order to forge a new, transformative relationship.36

Trans-subjective relating and imagining materialise as well. We see, for example, how macro-political structures like the transnationalisation of insecurity directly affect micro-personal domains like the body (through war, torture, and death) and relations of intimacy (such as domestic and racial violence),37 binding us to a common humanity. But to transform hegemony – building an alternative ‘us’ – we need to redirect micro-personal energies, visions, voices, and actions back to the collective, macro-political structure. In this way, we radically democratise world politics.

(Bill nods agreeably but pensively. Of course, he supports democracy but questions ‘radicalising’ it. Would it remain democracy as he knows it? Bill furrows his brow. Mark looks on excitedly.)

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36. Traveling theory, in contrast, presupposes that identities stay ‘bordered’ even when interacting within the same individual. See Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back* (New York: Kitchen Table, Women of Color Press, 1983).

Poetry offers one means of doing so. (Bill and Mark exchange glances. Poetry? Weird!) It offers us a site for critique as well as reconstruction.\(^3\) From the conceptual fortresses of the familiar and entrenched, we can then envision the new and unexpected. Poetry also connects the macro with the micro by politicising the supposedly self-centered, fictive, and narcissistic individual. Let me explain how and why. (Lina pauses for breath, then begins enthusiastically.)

Poetry’s ‘imprudence’, according to Gaston Bachelard, breaks into ‘the dead formula of a system’ with its ‘dictatorship of the mind’.\(^4\) In this way, poetry jars the imagination, producing new images, relationships, and possibilities for action. Bachelard emphasised that language acts by bearing a world within: ‘Truly, words dream’.\(^5\) Poetry intrudes upon perception to ‘reverse the real and the figurative poles’ of meaning to open new vistas of thought and vision.\(^6\) In this way, past connects with present, solitude with communication, ‘reconciling the world and the subject’.\(^7\) But reverie comes not easily. It is earned through disciplined reading, writing, and thinking; there can be no ‘lazy dreamer’.\(^8\) Imagination makes it possible for us to explore ourselves with Others.\(^9\)

We invert Bachelard’s formulation. From finding the material in the poetic, we discover the poetic in materiality, particularly in divisions of labour configured by race, gender, sexuality, class, nation-state, and culture. For example, the neoliberal world economy does not just structure the world according to certain interests, products, and markets. It also imagines the world in a particular way. Marx first theorised about capitalism’s imagination as ‘commodity fetishism’ and ‘alienation’. We emphasise capitalism’s overall worldview, particularly its latest neoliberal variant.\(^10\) In exposing neoliberalism’s nightmare scenario of excess built on fear, greed, and violence, we realise that we don’t have to accept, share, or participate in this vision. There’s a choice.

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40. Ibid.
41. Ibid., xxii.
42. Ibid., xxxv.
43. Ibid., xxviii.
44. Ibid., 16.
Through poetic practice, different ways of living and being within different structures emerge. Roland Bleiker and his colleagues apply these insights to world politics. They see poetry as a source and means of ‘critical history memory’. It allows nuance and opens possibilities, ‘stretching the boundaries of our minds’.

Bill: But how much is our identity dependent on those stories that we cannot control or change?

Lina: All stories are ‘for someone’, ‘for some purpose’. If these change, so do the stories!

Bill: I see...

Lina: Still, we need more than an ‘aesthetic turn’ in world politics. Poetry serves only as a method or site of labour for transforming and reconstructing our worlds.

Bill: Wait, isn’t poetry exactly the opposite of what you claim to want: a radical democracy? Isn’t poetry elitist by nature? Wouldn’t something else, like film, be more democratic? After all, film reaches more people than poetry.

Lina: Yes, film mass-communicates more efficiently. But only a few privileged people can make a film; whereas, poetry – whether in the form of folktales or songs or simple ditties – has expressed human needs, goals, aspirations, and desires from ancient to present times. Unlike a filmmaker or even a painter, a poet or singer or storyteller doesn’t need a lot of capital or technology to produce a narrative.

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47. Ibid, 281.
50. See, for example, Purna Nepali, ed., Gandharwa: Sangeet Ra Sanskriti [Marginalised: Songs and Culture] (Kathmandu: UNESCO, 2003). We thank Ashok Gurung for bringing this collection to our attention.
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Bill: What about the need for interpretation in poetry? I respond differently to a poem than my wife, for example. How do we overcome these differences, if poetry aims for a common understanding?

Lina: That’s the beauty of poetry! The point is not to reach a common end-goal but to enter into a process of public deliberation where we identify spaces of contestation – such as differential power relations and why these exist – to forge solidarities and connections. Only in this way could we appreciate the multiple worlds that people come from, live by, and die for.

Bill: I salute your sentiment but aren’t these strong words for world politics? Shouldn’t we surrender passion for rationality if we hope to ever achieve anything as grand and elusive as world peace?

Lina: So-called rationality in world politics has always covered for passion. What is colonialism but desire writ large? First it was for spices and trade, then lands and peoples, next raw materials and market shares, and today...the neoliberal way of life! No, repressing passion from world politics merely heightens its unspoken desires with unspeakable outcomes. Instead, explicitly acknowledging the passions that drive the world may finally give respect to those who have been marginalised historically by the politics of elite, patriarchal, and colonial privilege.

Let me demonstrate.

Ioannis Tsiolis specifies the political poem. It offers a way out of the injustices and inequities that produce the ‘pained self’ (‘I did X’ or ‘I thought Y’) by generating a transformative vision of what to strive for in the world (‘the world is like Z’). He cites Kiki Dimoulas’ poem, ‘Unexpectations’. In it, she sees a picture of a soldier, long dead. Yet she infuses new life into the bereaved by challenging boundaries of all sorts – physical, emotional, national, cultural, religious. The bereaved thus finds a larger, more embracing community than the isolating sovereignty of grief.

53. McClintock, Imperial Leather.
54. Dimoulas neither intended nor inspired our political and methodological interpretations. Rather, we draw on her poetry for illustrative purposes. See also Agathangelou and Killian.
For Vrasidas Karalis, Dimoulas’ poetry ‘transubstantiates’: ‘the universe becomes world once again, agony becomes longing, absence appears as time redemption’. Unlike postmodernists who only deconstruct, Dimoulas reconstructs with language. Her world has experienced the dissolution of postwar humanity and finds itself, literally, at a dead end. She intervenes in this insecure and homeless landscape with a creative, dynamic re-envisioning of a ‘new’ world: ‘through astonishment and surprise...her lines suggest the stability of a world that eyes can’t see, but which becomes whole through its imaginary reconstruction within the poem as an organic whole’. Neither time nor love nor the dead soldier is lost. Rather, all maintain ‘a continuous and active presence. Through her lines, personal time is born anew and is accomplished forever as collective experience and prismatic image’. In this way, Dimoulas shows us a ‘social ontology’ that fuses politics with aesthetics.

In recuperating words and memories and whispered dreams, as a site of struggle poetry returns to our collective consciousness the possibility of change. We can perceive worlds other than the one espoused by neoliberal/transnational capital and its national representatives. The pain of death and absence mobilises connections previously thought not possible. Stories of the everyday and ordinary challenge master fables

57. Ibid.
58. Ibid.
and mirages, opening another window through which to contemplate ourselves as well as others.\footnote{60. Phillip Darby, ‘Pursuing the Political: A Postcolonial Rethinking of Relations International’, \textit{Millennium: Journal of International Studies} 33, no. 1 (2004): 1-32.} Realisation of pain, injustice, and terror may motivate this way of being but it reminds us, also, of humanity’s ability to heal and rebuild amidst chaos, disorder, and insecurity. Such ordinary living may not promise the perfect dream but rather recognises the urgency of being present here, now, in this world, collectively and critically.

Still, poetics alone is not enough. We need to address why our collective imagination is robbed of other visions of encountering the Other besides reciting those standard rights and freedoms centered on the Western Self. To sustain itself politically, poetry as method must derive from an epistemology that explicitly recognises the concrete legacies of race, gender, class, and culture that have shaped and structured world politics from its very beginnings.\footnote{61. Phillip Darby, ‘Reconfiguring “the International”: Knowledge Machines, Boundaries, and Exclusions’, \textit{Alternatives} 28, no. 1 (2003): 146.} This history must include not just the differential impact of Self on Other but also the multi-varied \textit{receptions} of Self by Other.

Bill: Like what, for instance? I’m familiar with how the West changed the world. Isn’t that what colonialism and imperialism were all about? Isn’t that what you’re complaining about today? If so, what’s this about the Other ‘receiving’ the West?

\textit{(Mark is slightly miffed that he didn’t think of this question.)}

Lina: Postcolonial scholars have shown, for instance, how colonised peoples have integrated local ideas and practices with those of the West to produce what we have today, a third entity.\footnote{62. See, for example, Thongchai Winichakul, \textit{Siam Mapped: A History of the Geobody of a Nation} (Honolulu: Hawaii University Press, 1994).} They call it hybridity. So while the West sought to reproduce itself globally with violent oppression, coercion, and/or corruption, the reality is that the result is necessarily hybrid given that everything operates in a pre-existing context. We have, in other words, evidence of what colonialism’s civilising mission tried to suppress: all those sterling qualities appropriated from but denied to ‘barbarians’. That’s why we need to pay attention to epistemology and ontology as well as method when discussing an alternative way of seeing, doing, and being in the world.

\textit{(Bill nods.)}
Dialectos IV: Poisies and Worldism

In poisies, worlds emerge from constant interplays, both interpretive and material, between selves and others. They create ceaseless, multiple constructions of being and becoming that transform familiar boundaries—material, geographical, social—into unfamiliar reconstructions of We. Poisies resembles other ancient epistemologies like the Buddhist principle of pratitya samutpada (‘co-dependent arising’). Both emphasise the necessarily mutual nature of subjectivity and its construction. Subjectivities reverberate with one another to transform into entirely new entities; indeed, one cannot be without the other. What these dialectical traditions convey is a different story of the world and how to be in it.

Poisies as an epistemology articulates five commitments: (1) intersubjectivity rather than sovereignty, thus institutionalised social structures of struggle and labour among interacting agents; (2) agency, the process of creating, building, and articulating selves in reverberations with others, (3) identity, a complex configuration of abstraction (e.g., notions of Self), materiality (e.g., the body), and social relations of production (e.g., capitalism), (4) critical syncretic engagement, interstitial compromises compelled by conflict and contestation across multiple worlds, and (5) an accountability that is grounded in the Self’s inescapability from the Other.63

These epistemological commitments express an overall ontology. We call it worldism. It proposes that multiple worlds live in and through us. These refer to contending traditions of thinking, doing, and being that have interacted over five centuries of colonialism and imperialism, reinforced most recently by neoliberal globalisation, to produce what we know of as world politics today. The asymmetries that result from these worldly connections and contestations demand our utmost attention today, as seen in the Report’s Self/Other relations.

Bill: How would your approach – worldism – make a difference?

Lina: Just as a thought experiment, let’s apply poetry, poisies, and worldism to the 9/11 Commission Report.

(The sun is setting. Shadows creep across Bill’s desk. His office lights automatically turn on. Just as ‘automatically’, Bill’s secretary brings in a silver tray. It holds a silver coffee pot with three cups and saucers, and a

63. For a detailed explication of these principles, see Agathangelou and Ling, ‘The House of IR’.

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plate of cookies. Cheryl is surprised that Bill has stayed this long with Lina, not one of his favorite people. Too feminist, he’s mentioned in passing. As if! Lina smiles gratefully as Cheryl hands her a cup of coffee. Cheryl smiles back.

Bill (absent-mindedly, as he reaches for a cup of coffee and cookies. Mark does the same): Tell us.

Dialectos V: Reconstructing Self and Other

The analysis so far suggests some strategies for reconstructing, re-envisioning, and re-organising to Self-Other relations: e.g., honestly re-appraise the American Self’s complicity with the Muslim Other in transnationalising violence and insecurity, scrap Self-righteous double standards that enrich ‘the West’ and impoverish ‘the Rest’, acknowledge the Other’s efforts to deal with the West on its own terms to labour together across – not deny – differences, and wake up to the addictive ‘fix’ of reactionary imperialism that realises short-term benefits for elites in reputation or gold but long-term suffering in bodies, land, livelihood, and communities for all. These suggestions are not new and have been voiced elsewhere.64

But more than policy change, we must reframe our understanding of the problem. Here is where poisies’ five epistemological commitments, mentioned earlier, come into play:

(Rosa, a member of the cleaning staff, slips in. She quietly dumps the trash and dusts the furniture, careful not to disturb the ‘important people’ in the room. Bill and Mark do not notice her. An immigrant woman from the Philippines, Rosa is used to being ignored. She’s surprised to find Lina making eye contact even while speaking. Rosa acknowledges with a smile and nod.)

1. Intersubjectivity Contests Sovereignty. The principle of sovereignty supposedly ensures equality for all. Yet the Report dismisses the Other’s sovereignty by recommending conversion or annihilation for enemies, even absolute commitment or exile for allies. Intersubjectivity challenges such boundary-making that keep us, literally and figuratively, where we are. In recognising and accepting multiplicity and co-constituted worlds, intersubjectivity demystifies imperial IR’s facade of sovereignty by opening up spaces to rethink and reorganise the social (power) relations between Self and Other.

64. Ibid.; and Johnson, The Sorrows of Empire.
Dimoulas offers one example of how to do so. In her poem, ‘A Minute’s Licence’, she recalls a burglary at a neighbor’s house. She proffers another response to the sense of threat, fear, and violation that burglaries typically induce:

It’s been years since any thief
Set foot in my house
Even for coffee.
I deliberately leave the pot unlocked.

With the door/pot unlocked, Dimoulas re-positions Self (who had been merely the homeowner) and Other (who had been merely the thief). The Other becomes, a-priori, a guest, not an intruder. The terror of boundary violation transforms, instead, into a social exchange (‘for coffee’). Relatedly, Dimoulas urges us to find out about the ‘Other-thief’ – why he robs – as well as about the ‘Self-proprietor’ – why can we afford the luxury of not jeopardising our lives so explicitly? Even if we do rob, say, through ‘innovative’ accounting practices, why are we rarely caught, sentenced, and imprisoned by law and order? These questions highlight the asymmetrical yet active production of relations between Self and Other, including marginalizing the Other and narrowly-punctuating the Self.

Applying this reconceptualisation to 9/11, we suggest an international commission on truth and reconciliation. Similar to the one convened by South Africa post-apartheid, the commission would allow a voicing of grievances by 9/11 victims and perpetrators alike. We need to account for the pain and injustices of the past. Only then could we move forward together to build solidarities and connections for the future.

2. Agency Disrupts Hierarchy. The Report recommends an ‘international coalition’ to combat terrorism. But without an internal interrogation of how we got to where we are today, such a coalition effectively polices the Other to preserve the privileges of the Self. Agency is able to disrupt asymmetrical power relations in the following two ways: (1) challenging the relation of self and other and its production, and (2) seizing disjunctive/contradictory moments to

65. For example, Enron’s former chief executive officer, Jeff Skilling, and chairman, Ken Lay, have been indicted of fraud, insider trading, and lying about corporate finances as but as of this writing are still awaiting trial four years after the corporation’s collapse [http://news.ft.com/cms/s/9c8f0ef4-7454-11d9-a769-00000e2511c8.html].

66. Here, we refer to all victims and perpetrators, not just Americans or Arab Muslims.
imagine empowered, interconnected communities despite historical legacies of asymmetry.

Dimoulas questions the hierarchically determined Self by focusing on barbed wires:

\begin{verbatim}
See how it catches on a stretch of barbed wire
Round the property. Low, tame and yet
If you look carefully consider it carefully it divides
My good-morning from the neighbour's
All day long fanaticising borders quietly arming
The weeds against their brothers
\end{verbatim}

In asking who’s ‘in’ and who’s ‘out’, Dimoulas demystifies freedom. Who is ‘free’, in this case, and who not? Aren’t we all demarcated by barbed wires? If so, what of ‘self-protection’? If you look carefully, she tweaks, you can distinguish her ‘good-morning’ from her neighbor’s. Such fanaticism (‘all day long’) sets even Nature against itself (‘the weeds against their brothers’). Nature – and those deemed ‘natural’ – is conquered once again, but for whose benefit, what purpose, and at what cost? Does this strategy preserve the Self or distort it such that even Nature (‘the natural’) wars against itself? Hierarchy, in short, undermines the very security that the Self seeks. Instead, we must ‘untie’ ourselves from these boundaries that have their history in fear, ignorance, greed, and colonial power relations.

Foreign policy, in short, needs to be re-thought. It must accommodate the multiple worlds that live in, through, and amongst us. To begin, we must recognise that ‘international relations’ is not just about Hobbes, Clausewitz, or Machiavelli but also Confucius, Kautilya, Senghor, Che, and Aung Saung Ssu Kyi as well as the struggles, dreams, and desires of ordinary folks to a life that’s alternative to the Neoliberal one.

3. Identity and Critical Syncretic Engagement Question Normalcy and Legitimacy. The Report claims a stability and longevity that the Muslim Other cannot enjoy due to the latter’s incompetence, ignorance, or sheer lack of authenticity. ‘[T]he American homeland’, after all, ‘is the planet’. The American Self possesses the Other, physically (through appropriation of labour and natural resources) and emotionally (through colonisation of the mind). The Self cannot admit to having anything to learn from the Other.

A poietic approach to identity questions and exposes these erasures in imperial IR. Because identity emerges mutually with Others, its

67. See Agathangelou and Killian.
malleability lies in its connectedness. So connected, we could risk listening to, communicating with, and learning from Others even when deeply fearful of and insecure about them. They become part of us and we realise that all expect a better world. Learning thus unfolds critically yet syncretically: that is, as negotiations at the interstices of Self and Other, not wholesale mimicry or glorification of one at the expense of the other.

Note this line in Dimoulas’ poem, ‘Cartoon’:

*Are you still smoking those? Try Camel.*

If one were to smoke, she suggests, why not puff up ‘the best’? Dimoulas satirises the brand *Camel* which, like *Marlboro*, conjures an image of the wild, open, rugged American West where Manifest Destiny subjugates all non-white-males.68 But cigarettes ultimately ruin the smoker’s health. Indeed, it is the seduction of such imagery – beauty, independence, power – that kills over time. Metaphorically and materially, neoliberal democracy (as embodied by the Marlboro Man) subverts our freedom and emancipation from necessity (illness, dependency, death).69 Who, then, conquers whom in the long-run? Who enjoys stability and longevity and who not? Who needs help and who gives it? In these scenarios, what is ‘normal’ and ‘legitimate’? Such heuristics expose the long-term consequences to Self-conceit. Put differently, blind copying as a developmental strategy, no matter who practices it, damages all in the long-run. Instead, we must sort through those interstitial points of conflict that clog the local and the global to free ourselves from elite manipulation and profiteering.

Toward this end, we need to engage in democratisation as a dialectical, historical, and material process. This means examining its internal contradictions (e.g., the authoritarianism within liberalism, hierarchy despite equality, representation *and* voice) as well as external applications (e.g., exploring culturally-resonant means to emancipation, equality, and voice in societies without a liberal tradition), and the interstitial syntheses that may result (e.g., another mode of governance?). From this basis, neither identity nor democracy is imposed but organically grown, ‘weeds’ and all.


4. Accountability Confronts Power. In the Report, the American Self remains unchanged despite radical change all around. It is the terrorist Other who must comply or die. Yet the American Self must account for 9/11 if it seeks sustainable prevention in the future.

Continuing with the previous poem, Dimoulas punctures the mirage of ‘self-sufficiency’:

Let’s not fool ourselves my likeness.
Only the futile is self-sufficient.

We all need one another, she stresses. Nothing proceeds unilaterally or unidimensionally. Such narcissism, even our own ‘likeness’, merely mystifies power and its distortions. The Self needs the Other to survive; more, the Self cannot be without the Other. From this realisation comes a necessary premise: we must work together because we cannot escape one another. To begin, let’s ask: what do we want and why?

The suggestions above – an international commission on truth and reconciliation, worldising foreign policy, the material dialectics of democratisation – help us to ‘suspend judgment’ long enough to consider this question, and so begin an answer. Clearing away the same old patterns of hatred, vengeance, and violence, would allow us to shoulder, at last, the responsibility that we owe ourselves as well as others.

Exodus

Bill (suddenly feeling uneasy, gathers his jacket to leave): All this is very interesting, Lina. But we still have to return to the fundamental problem of what to do about these Muslim terrorists and their sick attempts to destroy us. They need to be taught a lesson! We cannot let them affect our way of life. We have the strongest, richest, and freest country on earth. And we mean to keep it that way.

(Lina’s shoulders stoop visibly.)

Come, Mark. Walk out with me. We should go over next week.

(Mark looks at Lina sympathetically. Clearly, Bill would not acknowledge Lina’s argument even if he understood it. Mark sees its value, though he can’t push it too far. He needs the Chancellor. Mark jumps up and follows Bill out.

Lina gathers her papers slowly. She’s deeply discouraged. She’s just wasted a lot of time and breath.

Rosa (politely): Excuse me.

Lina (distractedly): Oh, I’m sorry. Am I in your way?

Rosa: No, no. I couldn’t help hearing what you were saying, about how we need to change the way we see the world so people won’t be killing one another all the time...

Lina (impressed): Yes...

Rosa: Well, if you don’t mind, I just wanted to share a folktale that my Vietnamese friend told me the other day. It’s called ‘The Fish and the Turtle’. 71

(Lina turns to Rosa attentively.)

It’s about a little fish that meets his old friend, the turtle, who has been to earth. Fish asks Turtle several questions about earth. But each question reflects Fish’s knowledge of the sea rather than Turtle’s experience with earth. Finally, Fish got mad.

‘I’ve asked you many questions about earth, and all you can answer is no. As far as I am concerned, that earth of yours does not exist’. And with a disdainful flash of his colorful tail, he swam proudly away.

Turtle sighed. ‘How can one know something new when one’s questions are based on the prejudices of the old?’

(Lina and Rosa share a hearty laugh.)

Lina (delightedly): Thank you...

Rosa: My daughter is a senior at this university. She wants to go on for a higher degree in IR. Could she come and see you?

Lina (renewed): Anytime. (Lina hands Rosa a business card.)

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Rosa: Also...Would you speak to our local union? We need to learn more about what you said about collective deliberation, negotiation, and overcoming differences.

Lina: Of course!

Rosa (with a twinkle in her eye): As you know, it’s always the first, small step that counts...!

(The two women exchange knowing glances.)

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