

# Introduction

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Only twelve years ago, Mieke Bal considered narratology to be at an impasse, insofar as it had not succeeded “in establishing itself as a *tool*, that is, in putting itself in the service of any critical practice” (*Story-Telling* 27, *emph.* Bal’s). Narratology’s failure to contribute to critical theory owed in part to the persistence of a positivist philosophy of the subject—the knowing critic—as a detached observer who does not participate in the truth-speak s/he proffers. Things seem to have changed, radically so, and all for the better: read Bal’s 2001 work, *Louise Bourgeois’s Spider: The Architecture of Art-Writing*. In this, an entire book written on a single Bourgeois sculpture, criticism offers itself not as a discourse *about*, so much as an *accompaniment* to the work of art (xii). Narrative intervenes on every page: the book makes any account of artwork a story of the critic’s viewing; and it approaches Bourgeois’s sculpture as both questioning and revising dominant modes of narrativity.

I thought of Bal’s book during the interview that opens this *Mosaic* issue. Aritha van Herk says in the interview that her “introduction to fictocriticism goes back to an approach to art criticism that, instead of describing paintings or art, writes a parallel narrative to the work.” Like Bal, van Herk foregoes “a purely stand-back-and-objectively-look-at-this-work approach” in favour of one in which “the critic writes a narrative that may not actually reflect on the work but that reflects *beside* it. The resultant text demonstrates a mirror moment that’s more parallel than directly confrontational.” For van Herk, the critical and the creative are not bounded off from one another. Indeed, “criticism is its own act of fiction,” and narrative is as much a critical as a creative strategy. “Crossings: An Interview with Aritha van Herk” explores some of what this means. The text initiates a series of interviews on “crossings” that *Mosaic* plans for upcoming issues. I am grateful to Aritha van Herk for giving this series such a “provocative” start.

I am also intrigued by the many modes of crossing that emerge from the essays in this issue. Denis B. Walker’s “The Displaced Self: The Experience of Atopia and the

Recollection of Place” is but one case in point. This essay considers diverse (auto-graphic and photographic) critical narratives of the self and its unmaking, narratives that inevitably build on fictions of place and space. Autobiography, for instance, is understood here as a “gathering of the places of one’s past around one in an act of re-collection and recollection,” a discursive remedy against the loss of self-identity that attends to the experience of being displaced or unplaced. What particularly interests Walker in this essay are Edward Said’s narratives of displacement and recollection, accounts of exile given by him and by Palestinians in the camps of Lebanon, these as a “record of territorial displacement and the effect this has on a sense of self.” Walker focusses on Said’s *After the Last Sky*, published in 1986. “What Said records here, and in his autobiography, and what Jean Mohr’s photographs, which accompany Said’s texts, also record, is the almost desperate gathering of the things of the past, of the lost land, around the lives of the exiles.” As Aritha van Herk reminds us, the visual now enters the text more than it ever did, and this signals more than rhetorical promiscuity. Says Walker, reading Said: “Photographs on walls, deeds in boxes, habits and customs, colours of flags and dress, accents are wrapped around the displaced, defiantly asserting a continuity where that continuity is most challenged—by the conflicting political claims of the Israelis, by the customs and habits of a host society that is indifferent to that continuity, that does not care, does not understand or want to understand.”

I invite you to approach the essays in this issue as occasions where crossings happen. Prepare, then, to read the visual and political folded into writing, as in Stephanie Brown’s “‘Black Comme Moi’: Boris Vian and the African American Voice in Translation,” where narratives of self-identity are examined as narratives of race, and where the vexed question is opened “of what makes anyone, or any text, ‘black.’” Here, the *faux* becomes the paradigm for understanding a novel’s stance on race identity: “In parodying the idea of the impossibility of translation from American English into French by offering the reader an ‘inept’ translation, Vian simultaneously provides a model for investigating the secondary ‘translation’ he is also purporting to perform: the translation of a ‘black’ story into a text accessible to a white readership.” In this essay, as elsewhere in the issue, the pseudo does not recall the “real” or reassemble an original, and the point is not to unveil a unified self or a pure language. Positivist philosophy no longer holds sway.

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#### WORKS CITED

- Bal, Mieke. *On Story-Telling: Essays in Narratology*. Ed. David Jobling. Sonoma, CA: Polebridge, 1991.
- . *Louise Bourgeois’s Spider: The Architecture of Art-Writing*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2001.