"**In the 'Imaginary Garden" the 'Toads' are Imaginary Too: An Aesthetic of Desire, An Ethics of Precious**

Mark Ledbetter (UiB/College of Saint Rose, U.S)

My title is taken from Marianne Moore's poem, "Poetry." In her poem, she suggests that given all the challenges of poetry in its ambiguities and abstractions, it can, must, offer something "genuine," and "useful." In her first version of the poem, it was revised many times over several decades, Moore urges poets to be "literalists of the imagination." This is a paraphrase, if not an inversion, of a William Butler Yeats comment about the work of William Blake. Yeats describes Blake as a "too literal realist of imagination, as others are of nature." Moore does not want poetry to be "so derivative that it becomes unintelligible," and encourages the poet to make an imaginative use of the world's "rawness" for an engaging, comprehensible, and I would add responsible, poem. And so we get the often-quoted line of what should be the poet's and poetry's goal, "to present for inspection, 'imaginary gardens with real toads in them.'"

While Moore's poem is worth inordinate attention for intimate, critical, imaginative engagement, for our conversations about aesthetic imaginaries, I'm interested primarily in her line that is a call to poets to "present . . . 'imaginary gardens with real toads in them.'" And I would like to suggest that "In the 'Imaginary Garden" the 'Toads' are imaginary too. I am not sure that all poetry need be easily, if at all comprehensible, simply because I don't believe that all the "rawness" of the world is comprehensible, other than to say, "it is raw." But Moore's line about "toads" is not only important but also calls for further reflection, in particular in light of a conversation about "Aesthetic Imaginaries."

There is nothing, no thing, outside the imagination. This not some philosophical jaunt into the realm of the unreal or the immaterial but it is a reminder that no moment, aesthetic and/or imaginary (I see no difference) is constructed outside of the context of our bodies, in the fullness of their experiences and motivated by or discovered in desire. There is only an imaginary toad aesthetically realized and positioned, as we need it, her, him to be for that given moment. And to live in the fullness of that moment, its "rawness" to echo Moore again, is to recognize how ethically precious is the gift and curse of the creative process. I will draw from several theorists and artists as I talk about these issues in relation to our conversation about aesthetic imaginaries.

Drone Imaginaries

Øyvind Vågnes (UiB)

The drone, according to Adam Rothstein, "has become a composite caricature of technology. It is based upon truth, but spun from a swarm of diverging narratives. These narratives tell as much about us and how we interact with technology in general, as about the drone itself" (*Drone*, Bloomsbury, 2015). I'd like to explore the various ways in which this unruly, widespread narrativization engenders related, but distinct "drone imaginaries" (Thomas Levin) across the fields of political culture, media representation, and the arts, from the utopian techno-fantasies provided by the industry, to dystopian interventions provided by activists and critics.

Figured resonances in Julie Otsuka's
The Buddha in the Attic

Lene M Johannessen (UiB)

Julie Otsuka's novel *The Buddha in the Attic* (2011) tells the story of the Japanese picture

brides, women who in the early 20th century came to the U.S. West Coast on family reunion visas, without ever having seen their husbands except in pictures. The novel's peculiar narrative style and figuration accomplish however something far more than the mere fictionalization of history. To attempt to grasp the implications of its complexity and "strangeness," I want to read Otsuka's novel according to "entangled figurations," carried by scaffoldings that are trailing differently (in)formed imaginaries. The synecdochal imaginings that result may be read as filtering through what Wai Chee Dimock refers to as "traveling frequencies, received and amplified across time … causing unexpected vibrations in unexpected places" (1997, 3). The figured resonances we as readers perceive are selective and selected, and interlock to create and figure again. In the process is re-created an aesthetic imaginary which is modified to also hold the tangled histories out of which the particular story *Buddha* tells arises.

Recognition, Misrecognition. Aesthetic Imaginaries and Reading Images

Jena Habegger-Conti, (UiS)
"The stranger is produced not as that which we fail to recognize,
but as that which we have already recognized as 'a stranger.'"
− Sara Ahmed (2000: 3)
−

Drawing on definitions of social and aesthetic imaginaries (Ghosh 2015, Taylor 2003), this paper takes its point of departure in visual representations of other cultural groups in EFL textbooks in Norway to explore the ways in which images in general communicate through shared realities that construct and inform intercultural dialogues. Central to this discussion is how these imaginaries may impede the aims of intercultural awareness, namely recognition and empathy.
On the surface, images of other cultures in textbooks seem to provide an immediate window into what another culture is like, especially if the images are realistic photographs of contemporary life. While proponents of critical literacy state that every text (including an image) positions the viewer to read it in specific ways, viewers also come to images pre-positioned by expectations and associations that point to a shared visual vocabulary deeply influenced by cultural systems. Viewers read *into* an image from prior learned schemas (cognitively stored patterns of interpretation) rather than meet what is represented with a clean slate, as if for the first time (Berger 1972; Cohn 2013). Thus the very act of reading images entails both acts of recognition and acts of misrecognition (terms understood through Althusser (1970) and Taylor (1994)). As Sara Ahmed (2003) claims, the stranger is one we already recognize as such.
A specific example of misrecognition found in the ninth-grade English textbook *Crossroads*, in which the racial slur "wetbacks" is used in a photo caption to refer to Mexicans crossing the Rio Grande, illustrates the point. As will be argued, even if the caption were removed from the picture, the image, by engaging with social imaginaries already in place, would still position readers to construe Mexicans as undeniably other, as strangers. Misrecognitions such as these highlight the power of the imaginary, seeded in ideology, to both obstruct interpretation, and inform it, turning the light away from how to we define others, to how we define ourselves.

The Textual Oddbody: Ripp(l)ing Aesthetic Imaginaries in Service of Justice

Susan Cumings (UiB/University at Albany, SUNY))

I'm working on a book I'm calling *Oddbodies and the Textual Performance of the Body/Politic* that uses dis/ability, queer and trans* theories, figured through the uniting notion of the "odd body" or body at odds, to explore representations and performances of the material and social realities of oddbodied lives in service of a transgressional and liberatory body/politic. What I bring to this aesthetic imaginaries symposium are examples of the creation of an economy of specularity in three transgender memoirs: Boylan's *She's Not There*, Valerio's *Testosterone Files,* and Green's *Becoming a Visible Man,* and several pieces of Young Adult (YA) fiction in which one or more characters have anomalous cranio-facial appearances. I will pay close attention to the rendering of acts of seeing and looking in the opening pages of the three memoirs, and to verbal details' interaction with deliberately non-representational portraits in the YA fiction, and will interpret them as mobilizing what Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, in her work with image and disability, calls the dynamics of the stare. Through the dynamics of the stare as it can be shaped in text (as opposed to in person), the authors I study make use of and deconstruct the economies of imaginative aesthetics in which they expect their readers participate (which *act* as fixed aesthetic imaginaries), and encourage a reforming of the parameters of what it is possible to imagine. The "cross-border epistemic and cultural circulations" created in and through these texts expose fictive, misleadingly binary divisions (trans/cisgender, female/male, dis/abled, "normal"/monstrous) that have real, material effects in the lives of those depicted, and move, gradually but deliberately, to displace them. This is not an esoteric exercise, because for the oddbodied, it is a matter not just of finding space to exist in cultural imagination, but a recognition that without that space, which the privileged take for granted, they cannot live. This is living both as staying physically alive and, crucially, living fully and freely, that is, with a right to be respected for one's integrity of person, and a right self-determination and to opportunity for meaningful occupational, social, and relational (not to say political) engagement. As Herbert Marcuse explains it, the role art can play is that of pointing a finger at mechanisms of subjugation. I am arguing that these texts go beyond that, and serve to heed Mike Oliver's call that we have done enough **describing** of injustice, observing, analyzing, and must instead do the work of **dismantling** it. Thus my contribution to the symposium involves demonstrating that realistic prose narrative (autobiography, autotheory, fiction for the young) does not have to stop at talking about injustice but can, through an understanding of the operations of both aesthetic imaginaries and the imagination itself, do the work of justice.

Technology, visual aesthetics and the social imaginary in the poetry of Alan Gillis and Sinéad Morrissey

Anne Karhio UiB/National University of Ireland, Galway

This presentation will consider the work of two contemporary Irish poets, Alan Gillis and Sinéad Morrissey, and focus on their engagement with visual media and technology as they explore the social and political dimensions of the aesthetic.

Gillis's poetry has repeatedly returned to the image of the architectural window and the windows of the digital screen to draw attention to how they direct our experience of the surrounding world, and act as metaphors for the multiple, fragmented perspectives offered by the new media environment. Morrissey frequently sets her poems in the late 19th century – early 20th century historical context, and engages with early technologies of photography and film to interrogate the social and political dimensions of the visual media aesthetic, as well as the continuities between 19th and 21st century

culture of technology. Both poets demonstrate an awareness of how science and technology impact our visual experience, but also how technological and artistic inventions and innovations themselves emerge as responses to specific social and historical contexts.

As Anneke Smelik observes in *The Scientific Imaginary in Visual Culture*, "Skills of looking and observing [belong] as much to the realm of science and technology as to the realm of arts. Visual culture as we know it today, with its vast array of audiovisual technologies and explosion of images […] derives from the concerted effort of artists and philosophers as well as engineers and scientists" (9). Both Gillis and Morrissey show how poetry as a verbal medium can make visible the cultural and political structures behind the visual aesthetic experience, but also how these structures can be appropriated to create alternative imaginary domains, beyond established social and institutional borders.

Ernie Gehr and the Aesthetic Imaginary

Asbjørn Grønstad (UiB)

The life and work of American experimental filmmaker Ernie Gehr have often been shrouded in a veil of enigmas. Consider, for instance, his "oblique autobiography," his well-known reservations with regard to sharing personal information, and the resolutely anti-psychological and abstract style of his films and videos. An artist more interested in capturing the delicate changes of objects and spaces than in showing characters and action, Gehr's body of work has typically been described as "oblique" and "mysterious."

In this paper, I examine a few of his most recent video works – *Abracadabra* (2009), *Auto-Collidor XV* and *Auto-Collidor XVI* (2011), and *Work in Progress* (2012) – with an eye toward conceptualizing the relation between the ghostly and the opaque in his aesthetic. Since early films like *Morning* (1968), *Transparency* (1969) and *Serene Velocity* (1970), Gehr

has betrayed a rare sensitivity to the materiality of the medium; for instance the texture of surfaces, the modulations of light, the play of color and the importance of scale. More often than not, his art seems poised on the edge of the discernible. Yet, the impenetrability of Gehr's images also tends to generate a sense of the apparitional, in that his formal obfuscations of mundane spaces (say, a busy urban street) bring out an almost otherworldly presence. For example, in *Abracadabra* – a digital reconfiguration of four early silent films reminiscent of the stereoscope loop – Gehr assembles semi-transparent images of boys playing outside a department store, which he effortlessly transforms into cinematic ghosts. In *Work in Progress*, he exploits the elusiveness of the video surface in reconstituting an informationally dense urban street as a spectral tableau. The paper asks how, even on the very margins of legibility, Gehr's images are capable of conjuring these phantasmagoric spaces.