

A-B-I-L Conversations

Emilie Appercé

The Talmud –Hebrew: תלמוד, “study”– is one of the fundamental texts of rabbinic Judaism and the basis of its Halakha –“religious law”–. For Judaism, it is not possible to apply the biblical precepts without going through the oral tradition and interpretation of the texts. In a talmudic way, this glossator* corresponds to the written commentaries drawn from the discussions of A Book I Love (A-B- I-L). Each episode of A-B-I-L is a conversation around a book that is special to one of the speakers. We discuss it for the pleasure of thinking together and seeing the good side of things. We ask ourselves the question of the relationship to architecture. So far, the books chosen are not apparently connected to architecture. They speak for each of the speakers about everyday life, about the relationship to others, to spaces in a specific and personal, emotional, and political way. It is a way of talking about architecture that gets away from the usual name dropping, where the same stories often come up, from nerdy dinners or office conversations between architects. It also asks the question of fiction, how fiction is a place, which gives the tools, the language, the way of thinking to put in investigation the ideas that education, nor the practice of architecture does not necessarily defy. (1) see notes on last page.

Dates Texts and Annotations from 1952 to 2021

Themes Colonial Situations, Companion Text, Cultivated land, Domesticity, Feminism, Gender, Shared space, Travel, Ways of feeling, Writing

Publication Autobiography, Book, Fiction, Novel
Types

Authors Chimamanda Ngozi Nan Shepherd
 Adichie Paul B. Preciado
 Deborah Levy Virginie Despentes
 Elif Shafak

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The book of the first encounter was chosen by Helen Thomas, a very meaningful book to her. Without being a mountain lover, all readers of The Living Mountain are inevitably seduced by Nan Shepherd's words.

The Living Mountain

AUTHOR(S) Nan Shepherd PUBLISHED 1977
PUBLISHER Aberdeen University Press LANGUAGES English
TOPICS Companion Text Travel Writing

ANNOTATION

Alicia Ayla Yerebakan on The Living Mountain

19 May, 2022

One uses a word when describing the phenomenon of having experienced something in the past that is happening to the self in the now. It is called *déjà vu*. I have never been to Scotland nor its mountains, but as I read Nan Shepherd's book, I strongly believe that I fell into this state of mind; a recollection of my own experiences while hiking. It almost felt like hallucinating, but I quickly realised that this increasing pulse within the text was proof of a living mountain.

The painterly description of time, space, and practical context struck me the most. There is no light without darkness, no sense without nonsense, no movement without constancy. Nan beautifully opens the gate to her own worldly sensations, a spectacle unperceived without the reader's sensual memory.



ANNOTATION

Helen Thomas on The Living Mountain

14 May, 2022

Alicia beautifully describes the poetry and physical experience of the book, the emotional and spatial dimension of Nan's walk in the Cairngorm Mountains. The way Nan lives nature in a Gaia understanding of it explicitly echoes a contemporary discourse on architecture in our time of change and anthropocentric shift.

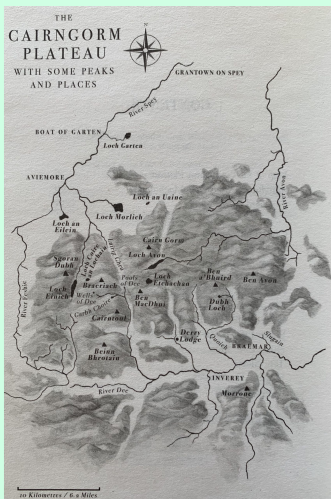
The discussion Helen refers to below involved the notion of custodianship, the idea that we do not own things but that we are the custodians of the future. We are responsible for our world now and for the future. We have the responsibility to care and make sure it can be perpetual and consistent. As did the many people working on the land, in the Cairngorms or high valleys in Switzerland organizing themselves together to maintain the landscape, what also represents national identity. The issue is very architectural.

The book speaks also about ways how one can understand a place of architecture, a site of architecture. It's not something that can be measured in terms of monetary value, or humanity value in the sense of a place for human, but a place that has more subtle qualities that are valuable. Nan Shepherd frames some ways of thinking: what is valuable? What is beautiful?

The Cairngorm mountains in the heart of Scotland inhabit my dreams, a constant provocation. This is perhaps because I have never been in the area long enough, or with enough energy perhaps, to make the long preparatory journey that a walker must make before arriving. Instead, Nan Shepherd's account of her observations made during many days spent over a lifetime on the plateau, in the recesses, surrounded by water in all its manifestations, frame my imagined experience. Her writing is poetic because it is empirical, her eye and all her senses so sharp that it is possible to see and hear more than would be perceived if you were actually there.

The manuscript was written during the second world war, but it lay more than thirty years before it was published. Today, my feelings about Nan Shepherd and her writing are not unique, and she is a Scotswoman celebrated. Her face appears on the Scottish five pound note.

In a recent conversation about the book, the question came up around how its subject could be related to architecture. Aside from the usefulness of her approach to the physical world as a means to understanding the many facets of a site, her writing raises pertinent questions around man's position in the world and its contingent nature that underlie any questioning of what role architecture, as an imaginative relationship with the wider world, can play in constructing our present.



Nan Shepherd's figure is depicted on Scottish banknotes with the citation: "It's a grand thing, to get leave to live". She delivers a nice message of gratefulness, on how we can perceive the world each time in a different way, something we can do over and over again.

Real Estate and The Island of Missing Trees were challenging choices of books for WWA. These are two very popular, mainstream biographic novels. –What do these books have to do with architecture? Our discussions proved to be very fruitful. Both authors use polyphonic structures to describe places and characters. The writings are combined with sophisticated literary tricks, that blend into the texts, sometimes in an intriguing way, which actively speak about highly politicized subjects.

They touch on issues of transcultural identity, of many places where stories are intertwined in time. They directly confront historicity, the idea that there is one single linear History with a capital "H". They acknowledge many things happening in another understanding of time. (2) see endnotes on the last page.

These two books make a strong analogy with WWA, a space for multiplicity of voices, acting as an agent in mechanisms of change and the construction of knowledge.

The Island of Missing Trees

AUTHOR(S) Elif Shafak PUBLISHED 2021
PUBLISHER Bloomsbury Publishing LANGUAGES English
TOPICS Colonial Situations
Cultivated land Shared
space Ways of feeling

We discussed how the detailed description of interiors of the Tavern in the book of Elif Shafak, emotionally charged describe a safe place. The place has architectural qualities that stand out from the icons of architectural history, able to dissolve entirely boundaries.

Testo Junkie

AUTHOR(S) Paul B. Preciado PUBLISHED 2013
PUBLISHER Feminist Press at CUNY LANGUAGES English
TOPICS Gender

Deborah Levy's narrative is regularly interrupted by citations from literature. She looks at places from the perspective of a writer, observing in different ways. Places are almost annoyingly detailedly described, like theatrical stage sets, in a completely imaginary way and outside the reality of the world. In some ways, she brings us back to our own bourgeoisie.

ANNOTATION

Thomas Rohrer on Testo Junkie

30 June, 2021



Testo Junkie, eye opener! – we had a cross generational conversation about it. The book introduces an all-new way of thinking about gender. How gender is a constructed idea, fully artificial which can be recreated through chemical, and drugs. How we define ourselves in the physical world, our struggles through the prison of identity policies. How we should shape our identity being living bodies struggling to live on earth. We discussed how Paul Preciado writing are very much physical and visceral which reminded us of Hilary Mantel, who writes very much about the physical world, in order to care across theoretical thinking.

Purple Hibiscus

AUTHOR(S) Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie PUBLISHED 1952
PUBLISHER 4th estate LANGUAGES English
TOPICS Colonial Situations
Domesticity

ANNOTATION

Laura Evans and Finian Reece-Thomas on *Purple Hibiscus*

12 January, 2022

Adichie's rich and immersive descriptions of interiors, gardens, climate and the changing seasons serve to situate fictional events within a world so tangible that it is hard to leave it behind even when the book is finished. Her domestic settings in particular unfurl to reveal the hidden structures of class, religion and power that underpin everyday life in Nigeria.

The book is structured around three contrasting houses: the formality and oppression of narrator Kambili's childhood home, a compound house in Enugu, and her family's home in their ancestral town of Abba, and the comparative freedom and spontaneity of her Auntie Ifeoma's flat in Nsukka. Ifeoma is a lecturer at the University of Nigeria, and although her way of life offers a new model to Kambili, ultimately Ifeoma and her children are forced to emigrate to the United States. The lives of these two families are played out in kitchens, living rooms and dining rooms, but most of all in gardens, in the spaces beyond the interior where the dual forces of the harmattan and the rainy season drive the cycle of growth and decay onward at a furious pace. Here, nature continually invades the interior, whether it is through the sickly-sweet scent of blossoming frangipani trees, the red airborne dust brought by the dry Harmattan winds or the bees that bump against the mosquito netting on Kambili's bedroom window, the rustling of the coconut fronds that wakes her from her dreams.

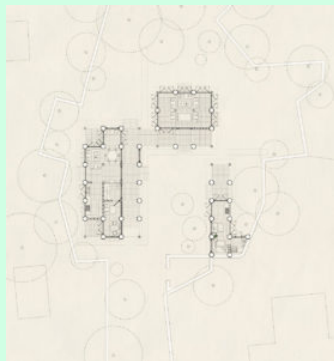
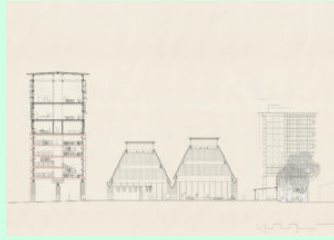
The novel was studied by Finian Reece-Thomas as part of Unit 3 at Kingston School of Art. Finian chose to expand the narrative by following the path taken by Kambili's cousin, Amaka – at the end of the novel, the young Amaka moves to the United States with her mother, and Finian imagines her return to Nigeria as an adult. A successful artist, Amaka wishes to establish an art school in Enugu. This is the project for the Enugu School of Art.

Laura Evans together with Nana Biamah-Ofori were invited to the 5th A-B-I-L session. Laura came to choose this book directly through architecture, how she describes it in the annotation. They used the book in a very direct and instrumental way to develop a project. How do you make an architecture which reflects a very strict patriarchal, high- hierarchal catholic in a post- colonial situation. How do you make the opposite of that?

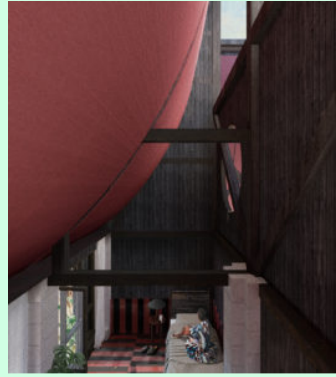
How the architecture explains these social theses, the social organisation of things?

We discussed the reading of architecture through the lens of the complex characters playing in Adichie's novel: the different figures representing the complexity of human conditions. Using the book as an instrument was a fruitful exercise to stretch the ability of architecture to establish order and power as well as to understand what role architecture has played in post-colonialism. Fiction is a place which gives tools to question what architecture practice don't necessary defy.

This is a project for a residence for the school's first professor, which takes its cues from the domestic spaces described in the book.



Achille makes a very conscious reference to Chinua Achebe *The African Trilogy: Things Fall Apart No Longer at Ease Arrow of God*. Starting the book with the description of things falling part, situates the writing in the long tradition of African history reminding us that independence celebrations couldn't come from Architecture: they came from fiction.



ANNOTATION

Laura Evans on Purple Hibiscus

24 August, 2021

Adichie's rich and immersive descriptions of interiors, gardens, climate and the changing seasons serve to situate fictional events within a world so tangible that it is hard to leave it behind even when the book is finished. Her domestic settings in particular unfurl to reveal the hidden structures of class, religion and power that underpin everyday life.



King Kong Theorie

AUTHOR(S) Virginie Despentes PUBLISHED 2007
PUBLISHER Berlin Verlag LANGUAGES German
TOPICS Feminism Gender

King Kong Theorie has been chosen as the subject of our next A-B-I-L session...

ANNOTATION

Annamaria Prandi on King Kong Theorie

30 December, 2022

King Kong the fictional giant monster resembling a gorilla? King Kong the anti-hero? Not here. Despentes invites us to consider King Kong without sexual attributes, a metaphor of power (he is still King), but of a sexuality that predates the distinction of genders. King Kong beyond the female and beyond the male, indeed, if anything, a link: man/animal, adult/child, good/bad, primitive/civilised, white/black.

But King Kong girl will choose another type of protection, that of the hypernormed heterosexuality, of the fit, of the civilised man who wants to touch the bestial and feel terrified as long as it is safe, as long as he does not lose control, as long as he remains within society and its dictates. King Kong yes, but only in chains. So much so that when he breaks free, and unleashes his power in the city, he is punished with death. And King Kong girl remains a prisoner.

And it is against that form of civilisation that has relegated women to a subordinate position that Virginie Despentes lashes out in this book that seems to burn in your hands as you read it. It explodes with the violent charge of words, a violence claimed by Despentes right from her 'Baise-moi'. Because Despentes is angry, against society, against conformism, against the idea of femininity that wants women attentive, composed, pretty, cultured but not too much, domesticated and tamed, against the phantom that disturbed Virginia Woolf intent on writing, the Angel in the House.

Despentes claims power for women, the virile category par excellence. The book is read in one breath, we race to know where we can go. And Despentes pushes us to the end, to that 'I want it all'.

Feminism is revolution. This is about blowing it all up! she says.

Glossary

The following themes have been noted as being present in the citations in your collection.

Colonial Situations

1. by Women Writing Architecture

Colonization is defined as: the action of appropriating a place or domain for one's own use; the action or process of settling among and establishing control over the indigenous people of an area. Ensuing realities are complex, contested and in perpetual transformation. In this label, the word situations is added to the word colonial in an attempt to acknowledge that the post-colonial, even the decolonized, bear the traces of the colonial, in their challenge to, replacement of, and sometimes reframed re-embodiment of previously hegemonic histories and structures of interpretation.

Companion Text

1. by Sara Ahmed

"In the chapters that follow, I refer to different kinds of feminist materials that have been my companions as a feminist and diversity worker, from feminist philosophy to feminist literature and film. A companion text could be thought of as a companion species, to borrow from Donna Haraway's (2003) suggestive formulation. A companion text is a text whose company enabled you to proceed on a path less trodden. Such texts might spark a moment of revelation in the midst of an overwhelming proximity; they might share a feeling or give you resources to make sense of something that had been beyond your grasp; companion texts can prompt you to hesitate or to question the direction in which you are going, or they might give you a sense that in going the way you are going, you are not alone. Some of the texts that appear with me in this book have been with me before: Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, George Eliot's *Mill on the Floss*, Rita Mae Brown's *Rubyfruit Jungle*, and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. I could not have proceeded along the path I took without these texts. To live a feminist life is to live in very good company. I have placed these companion texts

in my killjoy survival kit. I encourage you as a feminist reader to assemble your own kit. What would you include?"

excerpt from *Living a Feminist Life* by Sara Ahmed

Cultivated land

no definitions yet

Domesticity

1. by Helen Thomas

This important word is laden with implications, since it is often associated with the cult of domesticity developed in the U.S. and Britain during the nineteenth century that embodies a still widely-influential value system built around ideas of femininity, a woman's role in the home, and the relationship between work and family that this sets up. When conventional boundaries of what and who constitutes a family are questioned, so too is this fixed definition of domesticity. Within writings about architecture, this extends to the physical and spatial qualities of the domestic interior, and their socio-political meanings as they change over time and geography.

Feminism

1. by Women Writing Architecture

The central tenet of this powerful word is a belief in the social, economic, and political equality of women, and it is in this general sense that it has been applied as a thematic term in this annotated bibliography. While this is a clear statement, many complexities are embodied with the ambiguity of its terms, as well as the history of its struggle. As a descriptive term, it has been broken down into various categories which vary with the ideological, geographical and social status of the categoriser. For example, feminism is sometimes assigned chronological waves or stages: from the 1830s into the twentieth century – women's fight for suffrage, equal contract and property rights; between 1960 and 1990 – a widening of the fight to embrace the workplace, domesticity, sexuality and reproductive rights; between 1990 and 2010 – the development of micropolitical groups concerned with specific issues; and the current wave of feminism that draws power from the me-too movement, and recognises the fluidity of biological womanhood.

Gender

1. by Women Writing Architecture

Gender is a social construct whose traditional binary construct – male/female – is challenged by the concept of gender fluidity, which refers to change over time in a person’s gender expression or gender identity, or both. Another direction in which the question of gender as a social construct is extended is into the realm of interchangeability with other species.

2. by World Health Organisation

Gender refers to the characteristics of women, men, girls and boys that are socially constructed. This includes norms, behaviours and roles associated with being a woman, man, girl or boy, as well as relationships with each other. As a social construct, gender varies from society to society and can change over time. Gender is hierarchical and produces inequalities that intersect with other social and economic inequalities. Gender-based discrimination intersects with other factors of discrimination, such as ethnicity, socioeconomic status, disability, age, geographic location, gender identity and sexual orientation, among others. This is referred to as intersectionality. Gender interacts with but is different from sex, which refers to the different biological and physiological characteristics of females, males and intersex persons, such as chromosomes, hormones and reproductive organs. Gender and sex are related to but different from gender identity. Gender identity refers to a person’s deeply felt, internal and individual experience of gender, which may or may not correspond to the person’s physiology or designated sex at birth.

3. by Paul B. Preciado

I. To begin with, the regime of sex, gender and sexual difference you consider universal and almost metaphysical, on which rests all psychoanalytical theory, is not an empirical reality, nor a determining symbolic order of the unconscious. It is no more than an epistemology of the living, an anatomical mapping, a political economy of the body and a collective administration of reproductive energies. A historic system of knowledge and representation constructed in accordance with a racial taxonomy during a period of European mercantile and colonial expansion that crystallized in the second half of the nineteenth century. Far from being a representation of reality, this epistemology is in fact a performative engine that produces and legitimizes a specific political and economic order: the heterocolonial patriarchy.

From: *Can The Monster Speak? A Report to an Academy of Psychoanalysts* (Fitzcaraldo Editions, 2021): 45

Shared space

no definitions yet

Travel

1. by Anne Hultzsch

Commonly regarded as a (more or less) personal account of a journey written in the first person, travel writing is often considered as sitting between genres, between fact and fiction, and has in the past served a variety of purposes. Trailing the history of travel itself, in the West it has undergone a transformation from those accounts reporting on justifiable travel up to around the French Revolution – religious pilgrimage, mercantile journeys, and variations of the educational Grand Tour – to more subjective descriptions of journeys openly undertaken for pleasure since around 1800. It was this subjective mode that, in many ways, opened the doors for female authorship. Often taking the form of letters or diaries, travel accounts written by women exploited the frequent male admission that the female mind was particularly suited for sentimental descriptions based on the emotional response to the foreign. There were indeed critics who ascribed women with a special sensibility (otherwise seen as weakness) rendering their descriptions of buildings and landscapes particularly vivid and captivating. Travelogues also sold well – so this was a good means to earn a living for a middle-class woman who would have struggled to take most other types of paid work while keeping her social and moral standing in society.

2. by Women Writing Architecture

Searching for writing by women about architecture in the long period preceding the twentieth century reveals few texts in the conventional sense; that is, familiar within the form of canonical histories, theories and critiques of buildings, ideas and architects' lives. When this is the case, a more lateral approach to the definition of architectural writing is required, and one of the fields where women, intrepid women, were writing about architecture was in their travel writing, where they recounted their experiences and impressions of exotic worlds near and far, and the buildings they found there, for their counterparts who stayed at home.

3. Extract from The Cambridge History of Travel Writing

Ways of feeling

no definitions yet

Writing

no definitions yet

Published on 6 January 2023 by
Women Writing Architecture
womenwritingarchitecture.org

1. A-B-I-L resonates very much to me with a conversation I had with Soline Nivet, architect of studies and critic of built environments. She evoked the question of what women do to thought? –Que font les femmes à la pensée?– out of the Pamphlet "Philosophy or the art of nailing the beak to women" written by Frederic Pagès, and his friends of the association of the friends of Jean Baptiste Botul, a fictitious philosopher. The text proposes another version of the history of women and philosophy: the idea that women are not interested in thinking by weaving concepts in chains and speaking as a polemic moments.

2. A Pale View of Hills, first book of Kazuo Ishiguro was mentioned as another example of a double narration of double time. The story of a housewife remembering her experience living in UK– and Elif Shafak was certainly referring the novel of Orhan Pamuk My Name Is Red about the culture differences in Venise and Constantinople, the ways of producing art and what beauty meant.

*Glossator These user-created, bespoke bibliographies are designed on womenwritingarchitecture.org to be useful for personal research and for sharing with students, colleagues and friends. In addition to simply emailing your Personal Collection list to yourself or others, it can also be produced as a PDF.