"My phenomenology waits": Death and Rebirth in Joanne Kyger's Phenomenological

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Abstract
Joanne Kyger's literary career is soon to come full-circle, with the imminent re-publication of the legendary Japan & India Journals, which predates her first published collection of poems. When this happens, there is likely to be a reinvestigation of her "travel journal" publications, and this essay is my vote for Phenomenological, published in 1989 by The Institute For Further Studies, as the most deserving of critical attention.

Disciplines
English Language and Literature | Library and Information Science

Comments
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Though a vote for *Phenomenological*, the ballot form that the essay is being written on is an endpaper torn from another slim Kyger publication, *Patzcuaro* (Blue Millennium Press, 1999), a collection of poems date-bracketed in typical Kyger journal style, written during the winter that straddled 1997 and 1998 when she and companion Donald Guravich were visiting Patzcuaro, a town in the Mexican State of Michoacan. In January of this year I met Kyger and Guravich in Patzcuaro while attending a writing workshop. Thus, this volume informs the following writing, if only in that strange personal sense of being in the mental space between an italicized title and the memory of a place. There are some similarities between these two "P" works, but a careful reading of *Phenomenological* will produce the aforementioned effect - the awareness of a seemingly mystical space that is part physical location and part literary construct.

*Phenomenological* was written during another trip to Mexico - the Yucatan Peninsula this time - with Guravich and another companion in February and March 1985. At first glance, there isn't much to differentiate this book from the surface-world focus of some of her other travel books (*Desecheo Notebook, Mexico Blonde*); it is a celebration of friends and funny, poignant events. The title, however, speaks to the ambition that sets this work apart from the rest of Kyger's writings. Most of Kyger's non-poem works have been phenomenological in nature - using that discipline to reflect on the thought processes that are involved in observing the material world - but to
actually call attention to that particular method in the book's title gives a self-consciousness to the work, above and beyond the self-consciousness of the "I" in the text of the journal entries. One more than the usual remove for Kyger, she is using phenomenology to analyze the phenomenological method itself. Kyger is no stranger to Mexican poetry, as can be seen from her meditation on Juana Ines de Asbaje in *Phenomenological* and a poem based on Pablo Neruda's *Memoirs* in *Patzcuaro*, and was most likely to a certain extent familiar with the work of the Mexican literary critic Arturo Rivas Sainz who wrote *Fenomenologia de lo Poetico* in 1950. This link between poetry and phenomenology forged mid-century by Rivas Sainz makes Mexico an ideal place for Kyger to carry out her experiment involving the poetic use of the phenomenological method.

![Image of Phenomenological Joanne Kyger](image)

Courtesy of the brief prefatory note, Kyger provides a key to the book that acts as a sort of Indra's Net placed over the map of the text; it allows for any number of intuitive metaphysical connections between points that stretch far beyond the author's physical location. Thus the conceit, as expressed in the preface, that the journal is an account of a proposed meeting "between the real and the apparent" - the author and her terminally ill friend, presumably thousands of miles away - is surreal without being far-fetched.

The friend in question is Bill McNeill, whom Kyger describes as having been a "painter, poet, and student at Black Mountain College when Charles Olson was teaching there." In setting the stage for this "meeting" (or at least
for a journalistic account of the meeting) Kyger has created a shadow world, populated almost as much by dream figures as by living and dead people, mostly fellow poets, who are either physically present, or remembered in her waking hours.

Poets, and other characters in *Phenomenological*, are most often leaving the immediate scene or have left, in the mortal sense. Olson, an obvious means of summoning McNeill, is present through his book *Mayan Letters*, which Kyger re-reads one week into the journey. Another day, another entry, while Kyger's "phenomenology waits," she meditates on the life of the 17th Century Mexican poet Juana Ines de Asbaje, ending by quoting an exceptionally morbid poem. Many West Coast poets interact with Kyger in dreamtime/space, and Ted Berrigan is admonished: "No, you are not free/ from the memories/ of others." All these are possible manifestations or signifiers of McNeill’s spirit.

Tracking the shadowy presence of McNeill throughout the book requires one to go against the chronological narrative. Sara arrives and joins Kyger's company on Saturday, February 18. The February 26 entry has Sara leaving for Merida. On Sunday, March 18, Kyger is in Merida and reads a letter from Sara saying that Bill McNeill died on Saturday, March 10. The curious reader, jumping back to the entry for that day to see what Kyger was experiencing, will find that there is no entry for that day. The last lines of the entry for Friday, March 9, however, are telling: "always another / turn brings / perfect vista." This is not to liken the journal to a piece of experimental fiction playing with conceptions of time, but to suggest that the power of Kyger's intention to create a textual space for a meeting with McNeill's spirit necessitates a separate narrative that works against the journal's linear form.

That all the poignant sights and events described by Kyger in this journal are in some way connected to, if not representative of, the spirit of Bill McNeill, is a moving tribute to a friend. By seldom mentioning him directly, Kyger is aiding in his rebirth, recreating him, for her readers, out of her experiences. When Kyger tends to be too surface-oriented or "in-crowd"-ish and insular, she is able to abruptly to change course and make an observation that both satisfies the "here & now" journal interest and uncovers a deeper spiritual presence. Kyger is able to fuse the journal and the overlaying Indra’s Net into one seamless work, and no one - living, dead, or in between - was ever more present in their absence than Bill McNeill is in *Phenomenological*.
A native of Western NY, Dan Coffey has recently relocated to the midwest, and is the Literatures and Languages Librarian at Iowa State University. He is currently working on a comprehensive bibliography of Anne Waldman's works.