

GOING ON IS THE ENORMOUS THING / I DO:
HOW THE UNIVERSE IS MADE BY STEPHANIE STRICKLAND

How the Universe Is Made: Poems New & Selected 1985-2019
by Stephanie Strickland. Boise, ID: Ahsahta Press, 2019. ISBN
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Reviewed by m/ryan murphy

Stephanie Strickland's *How the Universe Is Made: Poems New & Selected 1985-2019* (Ahsahta Press, 2019) makes a poetics of time-space, in which devices—syntax, metaphor, imagery, code, equation, and more—obtain dimension, take up physicality, and take part in creation at the molecular, the universal, and the technological level. Time combines with our x, y, and measurements of space giving rise to our four-dimensional universe as this collection too gives rise to a cosmos containing endless *this* and *that*, constant states of known and unknown, expansion and singularity, natural and technological. Yet, the work is much more than a binary (although containing binary code). The poems, written and digital, express the transience of things, a transience that flows through everything, therefore creating and explaining a universe together in boundlessness, pushing back against Western, capitalist-thinking.

While time, like printed language, places linearity ontodimensionality, Strickland's poetry troubles this seeming constraint. In the title poem, "Presto! How the Universe Is Made," the "I" creates a star from the "first O/riginal Form"—a line. A box is made, which shifts to a star, which shifts to all kinds of complicated shapes, which gains texture and direction, which bursts, returning to the line, infinitely repeating at all stages. "...the born star—is re- / emerging on the line, on the line *or/and* Repeat:" (56). The reemergence of the star and the repetition of "on the line" followed by the possibility of "and" & "or" presents concepts of cyclicity, which undoes linearity. Ending the poem with a colon solidifies the cyclical. It invites the reader to start again or to return to the middle, to a complicated shape, shifting.

If this is how the universe is made, then Strickland understands relations—the physics of connection, the coding/mathematics of language and essence, the breaking of time into extended moments of observation, the natural world's inseparability from human, and our hand in earth's demise. She weaves math, quantum physics, and principles of science into images of water, animals, family, and history, for as mathematical

physicist Josiah Willard Gibbs said: “Mathematics is a language” (73).

The book begins with “Lineage-Linkage-Homage,” a sparse poem that names and thus immortalizes Strickland’s kindred. The lineage continues into the history of Simone Weil. The beginning years of Strickland’s poetry seem rooted in the historical body under oppression. This lineage begins the book in a space of constraint which then mathematical physics and creation opens and relieves. And there’s still history throughout. Figures of science, mathematics, feminism, and more are strewn throughout the work, punctuating the structure of matter and grounding the book in very real people, ideas, and rules while fluctuating between narratives and histories—much like how the multiverse operates. This all creates a poetics of many-layered high and low registers that mimic the varied cadences of the universe.

“I find a straight-line replace it / with a peak, to make a starrier star, nesting the shape / even deeper in the figure, re-placing” (56). Strickland’s syntax employs enjambment and parataxis to further nest the book’s shape in flux, in the historical, and in the body through breath. Yes, the architecture of the book contains beginning, middle, and end, but the formal devices and concepts fold over and onto themselves. They create new meaning, tell a story of a fluid foundation, and create a call to arms against the capital that’s rooted in language itself.

As metaphor jumps from principles of physics to images of flora and fauna, the reader begins to explore “the undecidability / between code and capital” (168). Capital here perhaps meaning the commons or society’s powered bodies’ violence. But I think of botanist Gilles Clément’s theory of Third Landscapes: that of “an undetermined fragment of the Planetary Garden designat[ing] the sum of the space left over by man to landscape evolution—to nature alone.” Strickland writes, “in a meadow O / Of course not a meadow / Some back lot some abandoned weed field” (227). I think of how “the Third Landscape can be considered as the genetic reservoir of the planet, the space of the future.....” (gillesclement.com).

And this is where ending the book in Strickland’s digital poems picks up the idea. Each explanation and hyperlink to the digital works further explores “the undecidability / between code and capital.” The printed poems really gain dimension here. The programs drift words around the space of the screen. They allow a plethora of choices and directions. Strickland writes, “by enacting the differences ordering and context make, it helps us to refuse a ‘canonical’ order, or hierarchy, of attention, such as is normally enforced by print presentation” (273). Stable structures are undone in the digital work. This is good.

The book shows the power of collaboration and how the honoring of

heritage can address “changes that need to be rung—that is, considered and heard—in our lives and communities” (273). History teaches us not only how the universe is made but also how the universe changes constantly—a fact that counters the static nature of Western-thinking. Strickland’s forthcoming book *Ring the Changes* (Counterpath Press, 2019) speaks more toward these “changes” in a formal, historical way.

Read her work. It is urgent, with high stakes, especially in a time that makes preservation near impossible. But “going on is the enormous / thing I do,” Strickland writes (191).

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