

Robert Archambeau, *The Kafka Sutra*. Asheville: MadHat Press, 2015. 108 pp. \$18.95

Robert Archambeau's new book of poems *The Kafka Sutra* differs from his previous book *Home and Variations* (2004) in the degree to which it explores the possibilities of appropriation as a literary device. Appropriation, moreover, becomes a hermeneutic tool in Archambeau's hands. A poet and a critic—the author of *Laureates and Heretics* (2010), *The Poet Resigns* (2013), and the forthcoming *Making Nothing Happen*—he employs it to compose his poems and to perform criticism on his textual sources. Entertaining and intelligent, *The Kafka Sutra* shows Archambeau's in-depth engagement with this widespread, increasingly dominant poetic practice.

The title sequence at first quite implausibly grafts several of Kafka's enigmatic parables onto the subject matter of the Hindu classic *Kama Sutra*. Describing it elsewhere as “one of the odder things [he's] done,” Archambeau promises, at least in theory, a merging of existential anxiety, sensual fulfillment, and didactic intent. The result is indeed odd, but not entirely foreign to anyone who has ever had the experience of reading creatively more than one book at a time. The sequence is also disarmingly playful and funny, as are the accompanying illustrations by Sarah Conner. Here is “Couriers,” quoted in its entirety:

He is offered the choice of becoming a husband or the lover of another man's wife. Men being as they are, he wants to be a lover, as do all the others. Therefore there are only lovers hurrying around the world, near rabid with ardor and bearing their secret letters of desire. There being no husbands, though, there are no wives, so there is no one to receive their amorous messages. Secretly they would all like to put an end to this miserable way of life, but fear commitment.

As he exploits the comedic potential of the double parody, Archambeau makes a not-so-outlandish critical point: he reminds us that Kafka's writings are pervaded by frustrated sexuality, while Vātsyāyana's text, primarily known as a manual on the art and techniques of lovemaking, is also one of the world's most comprehensive guides to a happy life.

The section that follows, “Responses,” contains sixteen poems inspired or otherwise instigated by other sources, not always literary or written: the comic book character Sheena, Queen of the Jungle (later reinvented as a “punk rocker” by Joey Ramone); a photograph of David Bowie, Iggy Pop, Lou Reed, and Tony Defries; the design of US and Mexican flags; a typo in his friend's email message (contextualized through a misprint in a poem by

Thomas Nashe); the life and work of Archambeau's teacher and mentor John Matthias; John Berryman's poetry (who "taught / [his] teacher"); Milton's neologisms; Albert Goldbarth's *Budget Travel through Space and Time*; and the ancient Gnostic texts discovered in Egypt in 1945. These poems can be most readily called Archambeau's own. Though prompted by other texts, they are linked to his personal experiences and relationships; in one instance, he quotes and ruminates on some words spoken by his five-year-old daughter. Formally elaborate, they project several authorial stances—anecdotal, excursive, dramatic, meditative. My favorites in this group are "Brightness Falls" and "Nag Hammadi: A Parable," poems that speak at once casually and profoundly about global politics.

The next two sections, "Two Procedures" and "Versions," offer compositions made up completely of borrowed material. "Manifest Destinies, Black Rains" splices two prose passages, one from Anne C. Lynch's nineteenth-century essay on Washington, DC, emphasizing US exceptionalism, the other from Masuji Ibuse's 1965 novel about the aftermath of the bombing of Hiroshima. As in most instances of documentary poetry, the choice of textual sources invites readers to draw their own conclusions. In a rhetorically significant maneuver, Archambeau shapes them into nine four-line stanzas, one per page, to make them resonate together with the white space around them:

A magnificent country's principles of freedom,
completely razed to the ground.
Where they had once stood an arid waste
Scattered with broken tiles.

He follows this with "If Wronging You is Love," a clever "conceptualist inversion" of a text by Felix Bernstein, itself containing allusions to Luther Ingram's song and David Antin's talk-poem "what am i doing here?" Another variation on appropriative poetics comes in the form of "free and loose" translations of French-language poems by Martinique's Lucie Thésée and twin brothers Gabriel and Marcel Piquera of Belgium. The product of a collaboration with Jean-Luc Garneau, these "versions" seem akin to mid-twentieth-century experiments like Jack Spicer's renditions of Federico García Lorca and Robert Lowell's "imitations" of various European poets. Even as he salvages these relatively obscure poets from the past, Archambeau hints at additional meanings of appropriation. Combining the strains of Surrealism and Négritude, Thésée adopts the persona of her island to express an attitude of protest, proving herself a worthy counterpart to Aimé Césaire. As for the Piquera twins, the elusiveness of their verse can perhaps be explained by the fact that they did not believe in individual authorship and often published under pseudonyms.

Archambeau concludes *The Kafka Sutra* with a prose “afterword” in which he reflects on the partisan nature of poetry criticism in the past several decades and his own resistance to polemic. If not exactly the key to his book, the essay comes close to being an explicit statement of Archambeau’s broader agenda, which is predicated on a relatively modest claim “merely to describe” poetic texts and phenomena as he sees them. As I noted earlier, he is not only a poet but also a prolific critic, editor, and blogger with a long-standing interest in the social contexts of poetry writing in the United States, as well as an English professor at Lake Forest College. The academic background comes across in the poems, with their numerous allusions and references, mostly to the Romantic, Victorian, and modernist poetry canon he presumably teaches. Like a good teacher, Archambeau shows us how literature is made: through the zany, delightfully dissonant title sequence, as well as his other “riffs on, remixes of, replies to, or deeply unfaithful translations of what others have written,” he illustrates how one text gives birth to another, how one reading generates another. The essay at the end suggests that, at least in his case, the creative faculty is never too far from the critical.

Throughout his book, Archambeau also makes an argument about the personal side of writing and reading. What especially stands out to me is the way he pays homage to two individuals who have shaped him as a writer: his mentor Matthias, the addressee of “Working the Piano” (“it is your work // my books are all about”) and his father, a ceramic artist based at the University of Manitoba whose name he shares and who is the hidden subject of “*La Bandera*,” a poem ostensibly about differences between the US and Mexican flags. In the concluding essay, the younger Archambeau considers his father’s contempt for artistic grandstanding as a likely source of his own “neutral” temperament: “Most of our attitudes are absorbed from our environment without much conscious reflection on our part, and I imagine my distaste for battles about aesthetic recognition and campaigns against forms of art different from one’s own comes less from all those grad school hours reading Bourdieu and Adorno than from seeing my dad roll his eyes at the rhetoric and ambitious yearnings of his colleagues.” Even Archambeau’s biographical note at the end of the book is more than a typical list of publications and teaching appointments. Rather, it’s a graceful précis of his life at its midpoint, as it salutes both of his parents, recalls his beginnings as a poet in Canada and his formative study under Matthias at the University of Notre Dame, declares his fascination with appropriative poetics and his critical interest in the social position of poetry in the United States (he certainly knows his Bourdieu and Adorno).

The Kafka Sutra is an accomplished book—thoughtfully put together, formally and linguistically adept, comfortable with a wide range of cultural idioms, responsive to world events. It is also a very personal book, expressing gratitude and love to those individuals who have enabled Archambeau’s career.

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