

Guide to *Copia*

by Erika Meitner

Author Asks:

- 1) I took my title for this book—*Copia*—from photographer Brian Ulrich’s project of the same name (which can be seen [here](#)). Can you find any imagistic connections between the poems in the book, and Ulrich’s project?
- 2) This book is broken into three numbered sections. How do the sections seem to differ from one another? What would you point to as the thematic focus of each section? And are the sections connected to each other? If so, how?
- 3) Poems like “Litany of Our Radical Engagement with the Material World,” “Borderama” and “Terra Nullius [The poem in which...]” utilize repetition of particular phrases at the start of nearly every line of these poems. How does repetition work in these poems? Do the form and content of these poems act in opposition or tension to one another, or mimic each other? Does this device allow the poems to move in particular ways?
- 4) Poems are often identified as belonging to either the “narrative” or “lyric” poetry traditions. A narrative poem is loosely defined as a poem that tells a story, whereas a lyric poem generally relies more on descriptions of feelings and a musical quality of language. In which category would you be most inclined to place the poems in *Copia*? Why?
- 5) There are many poems in *Copia* about places—from retail establishments to entire cities. How does *Copia* utilize places such as Walmart or Niagara Falls in its poems? Does the book reach toward any larger statements about home and sense of place? About urban or suburban life in America?
- 6) Some of the poems in *Copia* were specifically made to resemble buildings on the page, like “Retail Space Available,” “The Book of Dissolution,” and “Ghostbox.” How does this choice of concrete form affect your reading experience of my poems?
- 7) Section III of *Copia* includes ‘documentary poems’ that I wrote after spending time in Detroit touring the city, interviewing teachers, urban explorers, auto workers, small business owners, journalists, academics, students, and other residents, along with a radio journalist, and in conjunction with a photojournalist. Do these poems seem to have different operating principles than the other poems in the book? If so, how would you define these principles? Are there ethical questions or concerns involved with this kind of work that you can discern through the poems? What might these be?

Writing Exercises:

- 1) Many of the poems in *Copia* take place in and outside of Walmarts, such as “Big Box Encounter,” and “Walmart Supercenter.” Go to a local big box store in your town (or a supermarket, if you don’t have a big box retailer). If you drove to the store, sit in your car, in the parking lot, and observe your surroundings for 3-5 minutes; write down what you see in a small notebook. Go inside the store, grab a cart, and start making your way through the aisles. Write down: a) at least 2 different sets of human interactions you see in the store which stand out to you; b) 5 products which strike you as unusual, noteworthy, humorous, or poignant; c) 2 snippets of overheard dialogue. Take your notes home, and shape them into a poem.

- 2) The website "[Labelscar: The Retail History Blog](#)" has pictures of both thriving and "dead" malls and shopping centers. Pick a mall—any mall—and click on the 'comments' section to read people's memories of specific stores, jobs they worked at the mall, interactions they had, and things they bought—all the ways in which a particular (and often semi-generic) retail space became an active part of their lives. Now, think about your own retail experiences: have you ever worked a job at a store or restaurant in a shopping center or mall? Bought something that meant a lot to you at one point in time? Had an argument, or coming-of-age moment, or romantic encounter in a particular retail space? Write out 1-3 memories of your own. Free-write for 5 minutes on one image from the labelscar site. Pull three sentences from the comments section of any part of the labelscar site. Fuse this material together into a poem.

- 3) "To Whom it May Concern:" was written as a hyperbolic excuse note for a faculty meeting I didn't want to attend. It contains some language from an [NPR story on Antarctica](#), too. Think about an event that you yourself do not want to attend (family wedding? annual checkup? orientation meeting? job training? class?), or an obligation you have that you don't want to fulfill (required course? DMV license renewal? student loan repayment? house cleanup?), and write yourself an over-the-top excuse note that gets you out of said obligation. Start with the phrase "To Whom it May Concern," and use at least three phrases in your poem from one external source that has nothing to do with your topic ([National Geographic](#) works well for this).

Recommended Reading:

Non-fiction & Photography:

Detroit: An American Autopsy, Charlie LeDuff
Lost Detroit: Stories Behind the Motor City's Majestic Ruins, Dan Austin & Sean Doerr
Autopsy of an Engine and Other Stories from the Cadillac Plant, Lolita Hernandez
 "Detroit Arcadia: Exploring the post-American Landscape," Rebecca Solnit ([Harper's Magazine](#))
From a Ruined Garden: The Memorial Books of Polish Jewry, Jack Kugelmass & Jonathan Boyarin
Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity, Marc Auge & John Howe
The Practice of Everyday Life, Michel de Certeau
Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience, Yi-Fu Tuan
Close Out: Retail Relics and Ephemera, Brian Ulrich
Is This Place Great or What, Brian Ulrich
Pictures from the New World, Danny Lyon
Niagara, Alec Soth
The New American Ghetto, Camilo José Vergara

Poetry:

Garbage, A.R. Ammons
Utopia Minus, Susan Briante
Nox, Anne Carson
Even the Hollow My Body Made is Gone, Janice Harrington
American Noise, Campbell McGrath
Coal Mountain Elementary, Mark Nowak
Don't Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric, Claudia Rankine
Sum of Every Lost Ship, Allison Titus
One Big Self: An Investigation, C.D. Wright
One With Others: [a little book of her days], C.D. Wright

Artistic/Visual Influences:

— [Kim Beck](#) — [Brett Amory](#) — [Kevin Cyr](#) — [James Griffioen](#) — [Brenda Ann Kenneally](#) — [Danny Lyon](#) —
 — [Andrew Moore](#) — [Jared Soares](#) — [Alec Soth](#) — [Brian Ulrich](#) — [Camilo José Vergara](#) —

*Bonus—
If This Book Had a Soundtrack:*

Howlin' for You, The Black Keys
Who Do You Love, The Woolies
Baby Please Don't Go, Moonrakers
Love Interruption, Jack White
Excursions, Tribe Called Quest
Slow Down, Brand Nubian
Bei Mir Bist Du Schon (Dub), Waldeck
Bei Mir Bist Du Schon, The Barry Sisters
Abi Gezunt, The Barry Sisters
Tumbalalaika, The Barry Sisters
Feliz Navidad, Jose Feliciano
Little Talks, Of Monsters and Men
Dirty Paws, Of Monsters and Men
Michicant, Bon Iver
Early Morning Blues, Harmonica Shah
Mrs. Obama's Boogie, Harmonica Shah
Hail Hail, Shovels & Rope
Story of My Life, The Unrelated Segments
O' Be Joyful, Shovels & Rope

[You can listen to the entire soundtrack using this link to Spotify: [Copia - book soundtrack](#)]