

## False Memory

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Also by Tony Lopez

### Poetry

*Only More So* (UNO Press, 2011; Shearsman Books, 2012)

*Darwin* (Acts of Language, 2009)

*Covers* (Salt Publishing, 2007)

*Devolution* (The Figures, 2000)

*Data Shadow* (Reality Street, 2000)

*False Memory* (The Figures, 1996)

*Negative Equity* (Equipage, 1995)

*Stress Management* (Boldface Press, 1994)

*A Theory of Surplus Labour* (Curiously Strong, 1990)

*A Handbook of British Birds* (Pig Press, 1982)

*Abstract & Delicious* (Secret Books, 1982)

*Change* (New London Pride, 1978)

*The English Disease* (Skyline Press, 1978)

*Snapshots* (Oasis Books, 1976)

### Criticism

*Meaning Performance* (Salt Publishing, 2007)

*The Poetry of W. S. Graham* (Edinburgh University Press, 1989)

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Tony Lopez

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*for Sara*



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## Introduction

*False Memory* is an ambitious poem in terms of scale, materials and formal procedures. It also involved a significant investment of time. The writing project that produced the current volume proceeded through a series of stages and showings over an eight-year period. Two sections from this collection, 'Corneal Erosion' and 'Studies in Classic American Literature' first appeared as a pamphlet called *Negative Equity* from Equipage in 1995. Other sections were published separately in various magazines.<sup>1</sup> An earlier edition of *False Memory* (The Figures, 1996) contained six sections: to 'Corneal Erosion' and 'Studies in Classic American Literature', it added 'Assembly Point D', 'Blue Shift', 'Non-Core Assets', and 'Brought Forward'. *Data Shadow* (Reality Street, 2000) consisted of five further sections: 'Imitation of Life', 'Restricted Zone (slight return)', 'Speckled Noise', 'Always Read the Label' and 'Radial Symmetry'.<sup>2</sup> The Salt edition of *False Memory* in 2003 brought together these 11 sections in the first complete edition of the book. This expanded version was widely reviewed and acclaimed: it was named as 'book of the year' by the *New Statesman* and 'poetry book of the year' by the *Guardian*.

As the titles 'Negative Equity', 'False Memory' and 'Data Shadow' suggest, Lopez's poem engages with the damaged world of the 1990s and the specialised discourses that permeate public language. These titles alone point us towards mortgages and the housing market; sexual abuse and recovered memory syndrome; digital media and the data trace we leave behind through our daily transactions. The 1,540 lines of the volume bring into witty and productive collision a range of discourses. As Robert Potts suggested, in his review of the Salt edition, 'these quasi-centos pick their materials from all the white noise of life in 1990s Britain' to produce 'a dynamic picture of the information and disinformation ... available to cultural memory'.<sup>3</sup> However, *False Memory* is more than just a collaging of contemporary discourses, a playful detouring of contemporary knowledges; it is also, like other works by Lopez, a carefully crafted, complexly interconnected work. Each section consists of ten 14-line poems. Accordingly, *False Memory* has to be seen in relation to the recent re-discovery of the sonnet and the extended sonnet sequence within contemporary 'innovative poetry'.<sup>4</sup>

More than that, however, *False Memory* is best seen as a book-length poem constructed on a modular system, its eleven sections each made up of ten units of fourteen lines, which can be read locally or at a higher level, scaling up or scaling down. Here Lopez draws on another interest of the 1990s, fractal geometry, one of whose distinguishing features is that the figure examined—most famously in the case of coastlines—has the same complexity at whatever scale you take it.

### I. *Expect some slippage*<sup>5</sup>

In an essay, 'Innovative Poetry in English', written in 1999, Tony Lopez defines the British 'innovative poetry' of the last thirty years as 'liminal writings' whose 'investigations of language necessarily involve the same issues as those explored in the most recent literary and cultural theory'.<sup>6</sup> He describes these 'investigations of language' undertaken by innovative poetry as a 'presentation of language as a mediating threshold between our senses of internal and external experience' (122)—hence his term 'liminal writings'. He then outlines some of the forms this investigation has taken in practice: 'strategies which delay and confound simple naturalization', 'the development of procedural and aleatory techniques of composition', 'the deformation of advertising rhetoric, the radical revision of pastoral, the development of open and serial forms, the recovery of separate 'expert' vocabularies, and so on' (122).

Lopez uses this overview of recent practice as the starting-point for a reading of specific poems by Denise Riley, Allen Fisher, J.H. Prynne and Tom Raworth. What Lopez says about the four poets he discusses in this essay, as we might expect, often throws an illuminating light upon his own practice in *False Memory*. We might consider, for example, how his own writing operates through the kind of 'choreographed collisions' of different kinds of language that Lopez analysed in Prynne's work and how he produces that 'language of constant slippage' that he finds in Fisher's work. The third poem (or stanza) in the section called 'Imitation of Life' begins as follows:

This application form should be accompanied  
By voice mail and personal calls. Fair Athena,  
It's easier if we don't see one another. (63)

The first line derives clearly from the world of bureaucracy—the official administrative language of job applications or grant applications.

Subsequent lines bring in the registers of personal relationships ('It's easier if we don't see one another'), formal grammar ('For first and second persons only, and agree/Like adjectives'), classical translation ('We did not pull down the city...'), advertising ('Forget lip gloss'), and possibly an echo of the start of Lyn Hejinian's *My Life* ('A moment white...'). Part of the pleasure of the poem is the cutting from one register to another - and the constant demand on the reader's attention that this cutting makes. There is generally (but not always) a change of register at each line-end, but there is also often a cut within the line to produce an internal torque. This constructivist aesthetic produces, for example, the amusing discontinuity of the juxtaposition of classical invocation ('Fair Athena') with mundane twentieth-century personal drama ('It's easier if we don't see one another'). The poem is sensitive to the welter of discourses, knowledges and processes (bureaucratic, advertising, etc) through which we daily have to navigate and negotiate, but, above all, it registers, the coercive pressure of this linguistic context: not only the fragmentary glimpse of grammatical regulations, but also the repeated instructions that shape and construct modern subjectivity ('The application form should be accompanied', 'It's your natural charisma that should shine through', and 'Forget lip gloss, discover our new creation').

Compare this with the fourth poem (or stanza) in 'Speckled Noise'. Again, the writing works by appropriating and turning the language of power: 'You may wonder why our ready-gel is causing / So much excitement'. These opening lines don't merely ironise and send up the language of advertising. Like the reference to 'natural charisma' in the previous poem, the word 'excitement' points precisely to the alienated nature of the commodity culture we live in. The opening lines of the poem invoke the systems of advertising, print-media, and banking. The next four lines lay these systems bare through the juxtaposition of company liquidation, consumer special offers, and the treatment of citizens:

Normally,

A liquidator is appointed but buyers  
Get no compensation. Simply collect 8 tokens  
And join the queue for post-war restitution  
(Don't even ask about the price of dental work).

The poem creates a sense of a society in crisis. At the same time, the internal and external cutting seems to have a palpable intent: it conveys a clear sense of the imposed powerlessness of the citizens—fobbed off with tokens, consigned to queues, deprived of affordable health care. But even the functionaries and administrators of this system do not escape its alienation:

Lawyers, notaries and fiduciaries have all  
Just been lonely too long.

The technical language of legal professions is cut into the language of popular song ('too lonely too long'), but, as in Denise Riley's poem 'Lure 1963', the echoing of the words of a popular song suggest that even strong 'personal' emotion is inescapably mediated and commodified. The final lines juxtapose images of extreme deprivation ('No chair, no table, no straw mattress, nothing') to the availability of 'vast sums of production money' that have been 'held back', presumably in some film-making deal. The poem negotiates the language, processes and systems of a mediated and commodified culture, registering alienation and deprivation, and exposing (again and again) the structural inequalities that the production of these mediated and mediated discourses are designed to occlude.

## II. *Editing numbers*

In another essay from this period, his 2002 essay on Ted Berrigan's '5 New Sonnets: A Poem', Lopez offers a reading of the first of these 5 sonnets.<sup>7</sup> Lopez engages with the discontinuities and incoherences of the poem, before revealing that '5 New Sonnets' had been 'mechanically derived' from Berrigan's earlier book *The Sonnets* (1964): the first line taken from the first line of the first sonnet, the second from the second line of the second sonnet, and so on.<sup>8</sup> This article suggests what Andrew Crozier has called Lopez's beguilement by the 'tectonics of number systems'.<sup>9</sup> This is obviously an element in the composition of *False Memory* as well. I want to begin, however, on other issues raised by the article. Lopez's attempted reading of the sonnet constructs a 'speculative narrative ... sustained by formal connections that are both thematic and acoustic ... across the irregularities of punctuation and grammatical inconsistencies' (48). Lopez's own sonnets, if that is what they are, are

also collaged and linguistically discontinuous, but they are, to use his own word, 'smoothed' in terms of punctuation and grammar. They are coherent on the levels of syntax and punctuation, but semantically discontinuous. It is at this level that, like Berrigan's sonnets, they articulate and embody 'a poetics of discontinuity and incompleteness' (51).

There is a similar play of continuity/ discontinuity on the formal or generic level. Lopez's 14-line poems, like Berrigan's, allude to the sonnet form but generally ignore the rules of the form. As Lopez says of Berrigan's sonnets: 'there is no division into octet and sestet ... no scheme of rhyme ... and no snapping into place of dialectic synthesis, whether in sestet or clinching couplet' (48). Occasionally, Lopez produces an echo of that clinching final couplet ('How long have we poor shepherds lived and dreamed/ Within these shady incremental pay-scales?'). More usually, however, the fourteen lines end with the opposite effect—with inconsequence or dislocation: 'You are as old as you feel—but how well does your DNA copy?/ You can't substitute for okra in a ground nut stew'. Instead of the internal patterns of the traditional sonnet, Lopez's poems are often marked by patterning that repeats across the section of which they form a part. The first section, 'Corneal Erosion', for example, has recurrent motifs of flooding, fire, the sounding of sirens, university business, numbers (perhaps a game of bingo), building processes and procedures, a Conservative party conference, trains and aeroplanes. Thus the first poem begins:

And I don't see how we can win. The first faint  
Intermittent soundings of the sirens may be ignored.

In retrospect, the first line can be taken to refer literally either to a game or to the General Election—as well as figuratively—although it is not clear who 'we' is. The second line is picked up a few lines later ('But you should vacate the building when you hear/A continuous note') and these safety instructions generate a narrative that returns in the second poem: 'I heard the call, looked up, went on with my work'.

At the same time, the interlinking of these sonnets is also foregrounded by other devices. Thus the third poem ends with a reference to 'sparse woodland', which leads directly, without any full stop, into the first line of the fourth poem: 'Or what used to be called

campus development'. In the same way, the fourth poem ends with the question: 'But would you pay for a job title and office space?', which the next poem answers: 'Me neither. Though it depends what you mean by pay.' This poem in turn ends with the statement: 'Bourgeois is an obsolete type size, pronounced *berjoyce*.' The sixth poem begins: 'Of course the search committee and shortlist were bourgeois' causing a momentary hesitation between type size and social class, documents and individuals. In addition, apart from this replacement of 'berjoyce' in the final line by 'bourgeois' in the first line, and the replacement of 'pay' in the first line of the fifth poem (appropriately) by 'play' in the last line of the sixth, the two poems mirror each other—with the final word in each line of the sixth poem repeating or echoing, in reverse order, the line-end words of the fifth. In 'Studies in Classic American Literature', the fifth poem responds line-by-line to the fourth, repeating key words. Similarly, in 'Restricted Zone (slight return)', the sixth poem ('The coiled wires are red, yellow and green') has the same end-line words as the eighth poem ('I recollect the council was going green'), while in 'Radial Symmetry', the line-end words of the third poem are repeated in reverse order by the seventh. By such means Lopez encourages us to see connections within and across the separate sections of *False Memory*.

The separate sections of the work have their own thematic foci. The second section, 'Studies in Classic American Literature', for example, appropriately enough seems to have an American setting and invokes various American authors—Melville (and whaling), Thoreau, Haniel Long, Robinson Jeffers, Ted Berrigan and Ezra Pound—as well as various American poetry critics such as Marjorie Perloff and Helen Vendler. It also recalls Joseph Beuys's performance with a coyote in a cage in New York (17)—which is subject-rhymed with Pound's forced repatriation ('a man in a cage') from Pisa to America (19)—while Keats's definition of 'negative capability' is split across two poems: 'That is when a man is capable of being in uncertainties' (13) and 'Without any irritable reaching after fact and reason' (20).<sup>10</sup> A later section, 'Brought Forward', similarly revolves around the Windsors and Lady Diana Spenser, programmed cell death, finance, a costume re-enactment of Sir Francis Drake's colonial landing, the Srebrenica massacre, the Jones-town cult suicide and fragments of Keats's poetry relating to death. At the same time, as this second reference to Keats suggests, certain thematic materials recur not just within the same

section but across the various sections of the whole series. In each case, Lopez works with 'public language' in various forms: the public language of bureaucracy or advertising, but also the public language of newspapers, biographies, scientific reports and literature.

This raises a number of questions. What does it mean to use (and abuse) the sonnet form? What does it mean to cite and re-contextualise literary fragments? Is this the same kind of 'turning' of public language as the turning of bureaucratic language? Should we, perhaps, see the sonnet form (like any literary form or genre) not merely as a liminal space, mediating between the practitioner and the reader, but as a public space that perpetually invites its own re-appropriation and turning? The foregrounded and inescapable restrictions of the sonnet form invite an inventive response, while the history of the form, from Petrarch and Shakespeare through Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti and Hopkins, is a history of formal variation. In the same way, are Lopez's literary citations to be seen as appropriating and critiquing a discourse that has shaped us – or are they to be seen as a form of public language that provides a site for resistance? Lyn Hejinian reminds us that public life is not just civic life, but also extends to the daily life we lead.<sup>11</sup> In addition, through a reading of Barrett Watten's 'Mode Z' and Wordsworth's *Prelude*, she shows how the public can be made private in order to be made public again—and how the citation of the poetry of predecessors creates a space of intersubjectivity that might even provide the basis for an alternative mode of sociality. It is particularly interesting that Lopez should cite and recycle Keats's definition of 'negative capability', since this was originally a private communication, part of a letter to a friend, never intended for publication. But it also offers a stance towards experience, a programme that is based on negativity, on lack, as the basis for openness and acceptance. In addition, in the context created by the title 'Studies in Classic American Literature', it inevitably brings with it thoughts of D. H. Lawrence—and also of Charles Olson's engagement with Keats and negative capability. It signals, in other words, a tradition of engagement and re-interpretation. In *Necessary Business*, Eric Mottram describes the 'resources' he lists at the end of his poetry collections as 'a multiple area of reference, of shared information'.<sup>12</sup> In this spirit, I would want to suggest again that the repeated citation of predecessors creates an alternative mode of (transhistorical) sociality, that, in turn, provides the basis for another form of critique.

In my lifetime, there have been two epochal moments in Britain: the post-war consensus that produced the welfare state—and the Thatcher election victory that began to dismantle it. Tony Lopez’s critical turning of public language provides, I would argue, a model for engagement with these material and cultural conditions. More than that, *False Memory* combines this sustained engagement with the political and economic life of the 1990s with both the pleasurable dance of the intellect produced by its choreographed collisions and the serious investigation of modular form as the basis for the ambitious extended poetic work.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> ‘Four poems from False Memory’ appeared in *Object Permanence*, 7 (1996); ‘Brought Forward’ in *Salt* (Australia), 9 (1996); ‘Blue Shift’ in *Talisman*, 16 (1996); ‘Non-Core Assets’ in *Capilano Review*, 2: 21 (1997).
- <sup>2</sup> ‘Speckled Noise’ was published in *Fragmente*, 7 (1997); ‘Always Read the Label’ in *The Fiddlehead*, 196 (1990) and *Angel Exhaust*, 16 (1999); ‘Radial Symmetry’ in *The Gig*, 2 (1999); ‘Imitation of Life’ in *Oasis*, 100 (2000) and *The Germ* (2000).
- <sup>3</sup> Robert Potts, ‘Newly dug plots’, *The Times Literary Supplement*, (2 January 2004).
- <sup>4</sup> See Jeff Hilson (ed.), *The Reality Street Book of Sonnets* (Hastings: Reality Street, 2008), which includes ‘Assembly Point D’.
- <sup>5</sup> *False Memory*, 5.
- <sup>6</sup> Tony Lopez, ‘Innovative Poetry in English’, *Meaning Performance: Essays on Poetry* (Cambridge: Salt, 2006), 122. As examples of those ‘issues’ he instances ‘the social construction and the inscription of gender identity; the relations between ideology and economy, colonial history and race; the politics of language, literary form, and canonicity’ (122).
- <sup>7</sup> Tony Lopez, ‘“Powder on a Little Table”: Ted Berrigan’s Sonnets and 1960s Poems’, *Journal of American Studies*, 36.2 (2002), 281–292; reprinted in *Meaning Performance*, 45–57.
- <sup>8</sup> ‘Powder on a Little Table’, 50.
- <sup>9</sup> Andrew Crozier, ‘Writing by Numbers: A Preview’, Jacket 11 (2000): <http://jacketmagazine.com/11/lopez-by-crozier.html>
- <sup>10</sup> For more on Joseph Beuys’s performance with a coyote, ‘I like America and America likes Me’, see Uwe Schneede, *Joseph Beuys: Die Aktionen* (Bonn: Gerd Hatse, 1994).



- <sup>11</sup> Lyn Hejinian, 'The Sad Note in a Poetics of Consciousness' in Tony Lopez and Anthony Caleshu (eds), *Poetry and Public Language* (Exeter: Shearsman, 2007), 107–21, 109.
- <sup>12</sup> Allen Fisher, *Necessary Business: J.H. Prynne, Eric Mottram, cris cheek*, *Spanner* 25 (July, 1985), 184.



## Corneal Erosion

And I don't see how we can win. The first faint  
Intermittent soundings of the sirens may be ignored  
Just as the slogans come through unpractised speech.  
In Arcadia, when I was there, I did not see hammering stone  
But you should vacate the building when you hear  
A continuous note. It is best to move away—  
Best to pay bills by direct debit and avoid offices.  
Water bombs, I hear, are great fun and completely harmless.  
We have the numbers 12, 84 and 51 mostly  
Counters, cashiers and other people. Stay at home  
Stay in bed, shop through TV: I should say so.  
Think about who is at the wheel in the car ahead.  
At the time I was interrupted by a lady from Totnes  
Who had been burgled and who couldn't keep quiet.

I would like a no-risk enrolment (ring your choice).  
A day on which a raven flew high overhead  
Brought in the vogue for apparently fenceless gardens.  
I heard the call, looked up, went on with my work  
Turning an adjustable. It was the enclosures acts  
Where maize is planted right up to the treatment works.  
Magazine fillers, non-fiction, writing for children,  
Do you have the time for the due process of law?  
The air itself is carved into sectors maintained  
By threat of force and the stony faced use of finance  
In a pre-paid tunnel of exclusion going away.  
The animals get eaten or plucked from the sky.  
Don't be fooled by pretty flowered frocks and bifocals  
Some of these old people are dangerous criminals.

Little goats soon exhausted the blue-flowered alfalfa  
And bitter willow. We had chestnuts and new cheese on offer,  
October it was. A wave running through the house. I woke  
Going back to the engine over the Somerset levels.  
Best if we call it a “maintenance holiday”  
And patch in warm associations. Arrange for prosody  
To look over the tapes. Allude to pleasant hopes and dreams.  
This could be the last decision of the outgoing  
Management. Give me the LD<sub>50</sub> on leakage projections—  
But make it verbal, beware the shredder, better burn this.  
A tree here and there on the fire horizon.  
Planes light up for an instant and then flash again,  
Further on. Most of the eastern counties are now flooded  
But the troubles keep us moving in sparse woodland

Or what used to be called campus development  
Before the fires. Fields of cars reflect heat. Hazard fence  
And all-over schleiren : a metal surfaced plant  
Or planet. We ride in lively annelid segments  
Under London, past corrugated sheds of steel  
And loaded trucks of used aggregate, ready to move out  
For in-fill in the home counties. How does it feel  
To be really on the make at last ? Local sea trout  
Close to extinction, look likely for bio-production  
If we can get the lice off their backs. It is lightning  
Regenerates the forests. Zeus solves the equation  
By being a name that encodes what is frightening.  
It's good to be at work, to inhabit some other place,  
But would you pay for a job title and office space ?

Me neither. Though it depends what you mean by *pay*.  
Cash is the least of it, since one's life is used up in attendance.  
You may find it more convenient to insert Greek characters  
Than built-in negated symbols. Use keyboard shortcuts  
But avoid slash and burn diacritical embellishments.  
These templates are used for creating radicals :  
Ask Annie Apple, Oscar Orange, Yo-yo Man. In French,  
As any major dude will tell you, gender is proclaimed  
By a particular use of adjectives and past participles.  
Each time you say you don't believe in the unified subject  
Another child enters the symbolic order. Clap hands,  
Do not adjust your seats, extinguish smoking materials :  
We're going down to Shanty town. Expect some slippage.  
Bourgeois is an obsolete type size, pronounced *berjoyce*.

Of course the search committee and shortlist were bourgeois,  
The process itself has built in defences against slippage.  
Now the way is clear for open cast extraction of materials  
The growth would be more visible if it were on your hands.  
We did not know enough to resent being called subjects  
So dazzled were we by synecdoche. Each party seeks Paul :  
A name that I didn't even have to make up. *Proclaimed*  
*Land* is a book title for Lacanians who work in French  
That I offer here for free and without strings. Radicals  
Are subject to growth deformation by embellishment.  
You never see the road itself if you're on a shortcut.  
I have every sympathy for those who wipe out characters  
But deferred closure is our only chance of attendance  
When we finally step out of the taxi and begin to play.



Rally cries are paralysed before your eyes.  
It's the knowledge that truth is simple, natural and final  
That brings them to their feet. Electric Elgar:  
Lillies that fester at party conference.  
Good mottled and stripy waves curling on sand  
That's how I see it. Sailing in the gravel pit  
Doing the rest of it right here in my mind.  
Mobile homes close to the site entrance, on set aside,  
Landscaped in. Nicely printed day permits, some fat carp.  
A part-work on angling (with free binder) in the *Sierra*,  
8% gilts. What a way to invest our redundancy.  
Services may be altered to accommodate changes in demand.  
A bright young man, well schooled, from a good home  
Takes the platform to sustained applause from all sides.

The pills are trapped between clear orange plastic and foil  
In sheets of twelve, long and rounded, easy to swallow.  
We are still waiting for the peace dividend  
But would settle for fixed-rate income in the interim.  
In court, out of court, AGM, shareholders meeting –  
Exactly what does it cost to set up a shelter belt  
Or property trust? For dinner we have turkey franks  
Unless you want me to stir fry. Major's majority.  
So you have a stoma and here you are telling me  
It's best to keep your pants on when you have sex  
In case you spill the shit. Check on the pantograph  
Running seven minutes late out of Berwick-upon-Tweed,  
Structure is fully visible only late in construction  
And weatherproofing will obscure its own means of support.