
Neighbourhoods publish books, the printing costs are paid by Ex-landlords Inc.': rent-free imaginaries in Bernadette Mayer's 1980s poetry

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Abstract

In the 1981 poem 'EVERYBODY SLEEPS IN BLUE SATIN SHEETS / LIKE CUCUMBERS IN A BOX OF SNOW', also referenced in *Utopia* (1984), Bernadette Mayer lays out a vision of a post-work society in answer to Bill Berkson's question, 'What's your idea of a good time?' According to Mayer's vision, 'Since the revolution, accomplished pacifically, all artists / Live on large sufficient farms in the city with other poor people / All of whom now have plenty of food, shelter, health services and libraries.' So why was it that by 1992 Mayer came to notice that her Reader didn't include 'the more strongly political poems', suggesting they were 'tremendously dated'? To answer this question, and to explore relationships between colour, politics and form, I will trace the earlier appearances of colour and particularly blues in *Studying Hunger Journals*, kept by Mayer between 1972 and 1974. I will also consider why it was that Hannah Weiner, in *The Fast* (composed 1970; published 1992) thought that she had to be 'rescued... by a blue'. 'If you are a synesthete and see letters as having colours, your colour for the letter A will always be different from someone else's', Bernadette Mayer wrote in 2020, thereby highlighting one perceptive difference that may come between herself and community. With this statement, she echoed the words of her 1992 interview with Ken Jordan, in which she recalled realising 'that I saw each letter as a particular color, with consistent colors for every letter of the alphabet (...) it was just a matter of talking to people and finding that it didn't happen to them.' The letter-colour correspondence Mayer cites in this interview coincides with the alphabet printed vertically at the beginning of her *Proper Name* (1992), in which blue, after brown, is the most frequently appearing colour (f is blue gray; h is gray-blue; k is dark blue; p is blue-purple; and t is blue-gray). This paper will discuss Mayer's alternately coloured reality broadly, alongside that of her close friend Hannah Weiner, before narrowing down on the significance of the colour blue. This paper will speculate by way of conclusion about the extent to which blue is bound up with Mayer's concerns, in *Studying Hunger Journals* and elsewhere, about 'racist America', and racialised structures of rent, property and policing. Is there a colour bar in Mayer's work, and if so, how does this operate poetically? **Lizzie Homersham** is a PhD candidate at the University of Westminster (English Literature), where she is researching the work of Bernadette Mayer, with a focus on politics and form. She has an MA in History of Art (The Courtauld Institute of Art, 2013), and a BA in Modern and Medieval Languages (University of Cambridge, 2011). From 2015-2023 she worked as Editorial Assistant, then as Editor at Book Works, a publisher of artist's books based in London. From 2016-17 she participated as a Critical Studies fellow in the Whitney Independent Study Program, New York, and presented a symposium paper on empathy and institutional critique. Her arts

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