

Embodied Histories: Phenomenological Poetics in Jenny Lewis's *From Base Materials* (2024) by Tayah Fraser

Merleau-Ponty suggests 'there would be for me no such thing as space if I did not have a body.'¹ Perception, therefore, is found in a sensing and vulnerable self. Similarly, Sara Ahmed describes phenomenology as a 'turn toward'² objects. She asks how it is 'that we come to find our way in a world that acquires new shapes, depending on which way we turn'³. It is suggested, in poetics, epistemology isn't entirely conceptual, but springs from the dynamics of orientation and touch, and of embodied experience. This commentary on Jenny Lewis's *From Base Materials*⁴, from a phenomenological perspective, argues that her collection builds the embodying poetics of history, where memory and myth are lived through marginal, gendered and precarious bodies, rather than simply retold. Across a selection of poems ('As Adam Lay Sleeping', 'The Temple Dancer's Story' and 'The Temple Dancer's Second Story'), Lewis evokes inherited narratives into a realm of sensory perception and ritual gesture, including stories of biblical creation and the epic of Gilgamesh. Eve is reimagined as a body awakening to an 'apple-tasting world', the temple dancer a lyric 'I' whose performed identity occupies a liminal space, a multi-I. Judith Butler's *Precarious Life*⁵ and Denise Riley's work on lyric selves and linguistic unease help to frame these embodiments. I argue that *From Base Materials* demonstrates a poetic registry of mythic and historical embodiments through orientation, sensation and the (un)ravelled 'I'

In 'As Adam Lay Sleeping', Lewis returns to the story of Genesis in the moment of Eve's first relation to the world, where she pointedly stages Eve's emergence as a sensory, speculative experience rather than grounded in the context of doctrinal narrative. We're met with an image of Eve 'looking out from between his ribs / into thin air', the biblical creation story at the vantage point of bodily experience, where space is not merely a conventional backdrop but a means of establishing Eve's position as a body about to emerge from another. The prepositional phrase 'between his ribs' offers a phenomenology of enclosure; Eve's first awareness is of gaps, of the novel 'thin air' as opposed to sin. Merleau-Ponty claims there'd 'be for me no such thing as space if I did not have a body'. Lewis establishes Eden's existence as being in conjunction with Eve's growing selfhood, her lived environment and her body's orientation within it. The poem's syntax mirrors her tentative grasp of

perception, leaning into interrogatives and conditional verbs, where Eve ‘wonder[s] / how it would feel to be made of freshness / and juice’; knowledge is consistently framed as merely on the way to being possessed, and is suspended around Eve as a repeated hypothetical ‘would’, its materialisation dependent on her severance from Adam and discovery of space in actual bodily experience. Lewis’s language here emphasises the pre-conceptual nature of sensuousness. The ‘freshness’ and ‘juice’ and ‘apple-tasting world’ grounds such experience as tactile and taste-reliant, whilst the later ‘tumultuous singing of the birds’ invokes aural experience. Lewis uses no definitive or authoritative traditional speech from Genesis, but offers Ahmed’s phenomenological ‘turn toward’ objects. ‘The work of inhabiting space involves a dynamic negotiation between what is familiar and unfamiliar, such that it is still possible for the world to create new impressions, depending on which way we turn, which affects what is within reach.’ⁱ Eve’s first acts are not witnessed as obedience or disobedience; she turns to the apple, she turns to birdsong and the task of ‘naming’ as the world acquires new shapes through a progressing alignment. And most significantly, Lewis asserts that ‘naming’ does not precede, but can only spring *from* saturation of the senses—first, she must ‘[hear] clearly for the first time’ the singing birds before she ‘could set about the task of naming them.’

Lewis’s language, and Eve’s story by extension, thus presents not so transcendental as much as a beginning demanding to begin again, to be re-felt and experienced without implicit blame or anticipated discipline, and insists that even the most cemented of origin stories can be re-approached in a vulnerable, doctrine-severed lens.

In the paired poems ‘The Temple Dancer’s Story’ and ‘The Temple Dancer’s Second Story’, Lewis’s phenomenological poetics are found in the explicitly spectacular body of a working performer. The first poem stages the dancer as both an archive and a medium; the narrative voice moves through outfit, adornments, ‘kohl’ and percussion, reading like a score for movement in enjambed lines and sensory nouns that give the poem a sense of prosodic choreography, where rhythm spills and clicks in ways that mimic labouring feet and bells. The body here is one that holds stories of temple rituals, tourism and colonial desire Sara Ahmed would call a ‘bodily orientation’, where class and gender determine ‘what we ‘do do’, and thus ‘what we can do’, how one occupies space and how such space is organised

around us. The poem's first person present tense distinguishes this history and lived kinaesthetic field from a more abstract sense of culture.

Simultaneously, the dancer's lyric 'I' doesn't take a stable fixture. Their training, working conditions and external perception hold a self-description that's ready to self-correct, or construct with an element of irony, with the type of instability Riley identifies in *Lyric Selves*, where a subject is not pre-existing but holds competing and colliding identifications⁸. They are aware they're being visually consumed, and Lewis tonally plays with fatigue, seduction and jesting to facilitate the dancer's unease at the unfurling linguistic self-portrait, and the form's detailed parataxes that construct and deconstruct them as they speak.

'The Temple Dancer's Second Story' then re-outlines the same body from another temporal approach, where the dancer explicitly relays the Gilgamesh story and Gilgamesh's own spectacularity, pitting contrast between divine exceptionalism, and consequence that would come to 'anyone else'. This second monologue highlights the division Butler would call 'precarious life', where there are differences between lives deemed dominantly 'grievable', and those which vanish at limits of what dominant narratives can see or 'count' as human⁹. Lewis uses shifts in tense, comparably abrupt stanza breaks, a retrospective approach and an abrupt halt at the focus shift from the dancer's retelling to their more personal, performed enactment. In conjunction with one another, the two work to form a palimpsest of history embodied. One offers the temple dancer as movement-based, ritualistic storyteller, the other as a more literal but more actively removed, precarious bodily object, from which the gaze has been diverted, less adorned and phenomenologically repositioned.

From Base Materials images history as something that can be known intrinsically within the body. Eve's speculation, and the dancer's labouring and exposure, highlight two different means by which historic and mythic narratives and material sensations continually work together epistemically. In each case, perception precedes doctrine in making narrative work. Lewis's handling of line action, enjambment and prosodies is crucial in allowing orientation and movement to be felt through form, rather than accepted nominally; still, the poetry insists that not all bodies are equally authorised to register one's world. A phenomenological poetics in which the past can be reinherited, by reader as well as by subject, asks us not to attend to

disembodied tradition, but to the vulnerabilities of all in which such stories come to inhabit or exist at all.

¹ Maurice, Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (London: Routledge, 2012), Part One, “The Body”, p. 167

² Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), ch. 1, p. 2

³ *Ibid.*, p. 1

⁴ Jenny Lewis, *From Base Materials* (Manchester: Carcanet Poetry, 2024)

⁵ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004)

⁶ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, p. 7-8

⁷ Denise Riley, *The Words of Selves: Identification, Solidarity, Irony* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000)

⁸ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life*, p. 120
