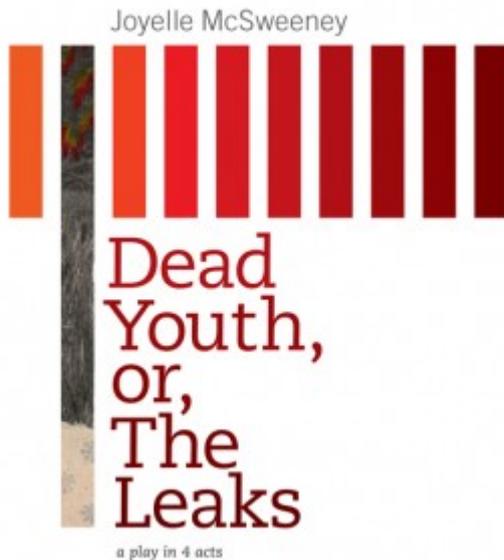


# Dead Youth, or, The Leaks by Joyelle McSweeney

written by Guest Contributor | September 10, 2015



*Dead Youth, or, The Leaks* by Joyelle McSweeney

Litmus Press, 2014

90 pages – [Litmus](#) / [Amazon](#)

As a wild and pulsing parable of the Anthropocene, Joyelle McSweeney's *Dead Youth, or, The Leaks* constructs a reality similar to the contemporary age—one defined, structured, and fractured by human presence. *Dead Youth* self-identifies as an “intentionally badly-wired allegory” (perhaps a *misallegory*) that attempts to recall into consciousness events that have been culled out of sight. Miswiring in this case is used to construct a necessary slippage in resemblances: *Dead Youth* is a play built on the ignored or revised histories of its characters, and its loyalty to history is as strong as our shaky remembrances and popular media retellings of it. In terms of a “badly-wired” allegory rooted in historical forgetfulness, the skewed resemblances between the characters on stage and their historical counterparts create an instability that carries the plural tenor of the misallegory.

The eponymous Dead Youth—recycled refuse of the Anthropocene machine, those who “could not survive what was required of them”—and their volunteer protector and/or mother hen, Julian Assange, embark on a migration to Magnetic Island (Assange's childhood home) on the MV Maersk Alabama (AKA the SS Smirk). Henrietta Lacks, who serves as omnipresent mother-deity of the play, iterates the significance of the Dead Youth, noting that they “are the dark energy of this play” and that “this play is really about them.” As McSweeney points out in the casting note, “...the play may also call up certain ghosts currently absent from the main body of the play, such as Trayvon Martin, Chelsea Manning, the dead women of Juarez, *los desaparecidos*, etc. It

is for this... reason that the body of *DEAD YOUTH* is suggestively plural and flexing." Of course, "the body of *DEAD YOUTH*" can refer to the literal bodies of dead youth that are present in the play as well as the body of the play itself, and, in the sense that the Dead Youth are multiple and multiplying, their identities are blank slates on which readers can place various identities.

A blank slate functions as a perfect vehicle for allegory. Readers often interpret an allegory into a text by way of placing many different contemporary situations onto a general narrative. In this case, we can envision any number of contemporary figures as part of the Dead Youth, and the interactions between them and Assange and the other characters generate a lengthy supply of extended metaphors. The Dead Youth represent those ignored and trampled-upon by our contemporary institutions, and their survival hinges upon those who bring attention to their plight: whistleblowers and victims of the Anthropocene whose sporadic and fleeting visibility reveal institutional injustices.

However, the skewed resemblances between the stage characters and their historical counterparts disrupt the straightforward representations we expect from allegory. "Mama Julian" seems more interested in saving the Dead Youth than in exposing state secrets: "DEAD YOUTH, I adore you, and I have personally vouchsafed for you here at my maternal bosom, even though I am a very hunted man. Mine may not be the safest of bosoms in which to hide your lean, rodentine faces." Abdi Wali Abdulqadir Muse further interrupts the whistleblower-as-hero narrative by seeking refuge on the Maersk Alabama, whose hijacking has sentenced him to imprisonment at Terre Haute, Indiana ("OH, is any fate worse than Terre Haute, Indiana?"). Muse appears to be hunted by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, who imposes upon the migration of Dead Youth. A vigilante (and dead) defender of Western justice, Saint-Exupéry exudes disdain: "This blonde [Mama Julian] might be a stowaway, some homeless mom leaving the night shift at Dunkin Donuts with a packet of reject munchkins for her litter kids."

Assange assumes the identity of Mama Julian, a refraction of his identity that incorporates the popular media's feminization of Assange. While this can be seen as an indictment of misogynist media culture using feminization as a silencing tactic, this is also an instance in which the plural tenor of the misallegory comes to light. McSweeney draws our attention away from the simple whistleblower-as-(masculine)-hero narrative and towards another—one of motherhood, as seen through Mama Julian and Henrietta Lacks.

A badly-wired allegory is an appropriate and necessary formulation for a work critical of (or objectively interested in) the Anthropocene. Marked not only by human omnipresence but also by technological extensions of human presence, the Anthropocene distinguishes itself by its crutches of industry and capitalism. Everything's so beautifully, tragically efficient, coded and marked, calculated and documented. Traditional allegory is an effective marker of the efficiency of the contemporary: a reducible equation of equal parts. Solve for  $x$ . Instead, McSweeney's skewed construction of *Dead Youth* makes room for fractures in the machine through which some noise can escape. If something (a building, a text) is badly-wired, then a faithful analysis of

the current output as if that output was at a normally-wired level does not provide a satisfactory understanding of the situation. Instead, the intentional slippages of a skewed allegory prompt us to consider the breakages, the accidents, the slip-ups, and the inconsistencies in resemblances–inconsistencies which, in an allegorical sense, allow divergence from the traditional one-to-one ratio of meaning and make room for multiple and necessary truths.

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