



## Genre Fusion (not linked)

### by Christy Sheffield Sanford

#### **Moving toward Genre Fusion**

This essay traces my roots in genre fusion from a literary to a Web perspective. Those familiar with my recent work know how image and text join and share focus. Before 1996, I was highly involved in the small press world.

In the early 1980s, I realized I had collections of related imagery, and I began to write about them. The images were charged in various ways. They related to uncontrollable natural forces such as hurricanes or passionate responses such as fainting. Still others focused on food (chocolate, citrus and fish) or iconic objects associated with childhood or femininity (balloons, veils, lipstick and fans). The images frequently appeared to me in scenic or filmic episodes. Invariably, I found I had a mosaic of images, conceptually rather than narratively connected. The finished work was unresolved yet complete. The set formed a satisfying whole.

Most of the work in my first book **Only the Nude Can Redeem the Landscape** contains experiments with interlaced or juxtaposed texts. "Hurricane! Alex!," features concurrent texts. It joins a love story with meteorological material and thus runs hot and cool. In "Dreams of Snakes, Chocolate and Men," the work appears layered because there are three foci. The images move from singular to plural and are cumulative.

#### **Fusion and Image**

"The Romance of Citrus" was seminal in that it led to a change of direction in my work. I felt an aesthetic attraction to the piece, which I was reluctant to call poetry, and began to systematically explore what it involved and



to define its significance. From this effort, many related works were spawned. The Citrus piece was submitted to over thirty literary magazines. In the interim, the content was revised but never the form. Suddenly three publications wanted it. (To date, it has been published in **The Exquisite Corpse, American Poetry Since 1970: Up Late, The Stiffest of the Corpse, Slipstream** on taped edition, **Only the Nude Can Redeem the Landscape** and **Aires** in French translation.).

In “The Romance of Citrus,” the conceptual scheme hangs suspended on the left-hand margin of the page, and to its right are stories that feature fruit and cities. The framework contributes to the cohesion of the piece. It also gives the objects integrity and a degree of humor. The place names have two roles. They function poetically as names and fictionally as signs that move the action forward, from city to city. I didn't know how important this was to me until one space-conscious editor integrated the frame into the text, which destroyed the balance. The form keeps the relevant variables prominent.

It took years to articulate what was transpiring in the work and why I felt it was aesthetically satisfying. Some with a superficially similar form to my own were really using topical tropes derived from the content of their stanza or paragraph. I was doing the opposite. The content of my work came from the conceptual ideas.

### **Stein's Importance in Defining Genres**

After writing a series of formally related pieces (for example, “**Traveling Through Ports that Begin with 'M'**” and “**Indigo Love Affair,**” and “**The Romance of Reptiles,**” I read Gertrude Stein's essay “**Poetry and Grammar**” in **Lectures in America**. In this essay, Ms. Stein discusses poetry's intimate association with the noun and with naming.



Poetry is concerned with using with abusing, with losing with wanting, with denying with avoiding with adoring with replacing the noun. .... Poetry is doing nothing but using losing refusing and pleasing and betraying and caressing nouns.

Ms. Stein related prose to the verb.

Really great written prose is bound to be made up more of verbs adverbs prepositions prepositional clauses and conjunctions than nouns .... the vocabulary in respect to prose is less important than the parts of speech, and the internal balance and the movement within a given space.

In fiction, characters move from place to place and events happen over time. To the degree that the weight (or sense of importance) rests with the noun, the work is poetry; to the extent that weight is placed on time-related / scenic shifts, the work is fiction. If the weight is fairly evenly distributed, a sense of genre fusion results.

I've encountered a marked preference for either-or thinking. Most prefer to avoid this fuzzy area, in which weight must be aesthetically felt. It disturbs a pre-existing conceptual category. Fuzzy thinking, a Boolean algebra term coined in the 1960s by Dr. Lotfi Zadeh at the University of California, Berkeley, has similarities to the yin-yang mode of cognition. It deals with values that are neither completely true nor completely false. Here, I'm presenting a product with attributes of fiction and poetry.

Integration is an interesting concept. I've woven pieces with disparate elements. I've intentionally separated them and placed them side by side. I've also alternated texts. There are many ways to join concepts. Synthesizing and homogenizing have less appeal. In fusion, parts retain their integrity, their separate identity.



### Genre Fusion and Essence

It seemed to me that if you could find the essence of fiction and poetry and combine them, you would have a powerful new form. In the first half of this century, there was a current that ran through all the arts—to abstract out the essential elements of each art form. One might argue: what was painting except color, line, form, space and texture. Likewise what was literature? Parts of speech and other grammatical issues. I'm summarizing; the variety and depth of exploration was quite committed.

Gone was the sweetness of impressionism, the fire of expressionism, the zany political bent of DaDa and the dreamy, imaginative surrealism. In sway, there was a cooler, more intellectual approach. One must search for pure formal elements. Due to the Beats and to a rising social consciousness in the country, abstraction proved insufficient. Concurrently, scattered language, visual and sound poets felt there was much to do in terms of space-time and language.

Some artists prefer to take things apart; I prefer to build. Nevertheless, with the work of purists to offer a base, I'm much clearer about what I'm joining. In summary, I realized, in regard to genre fusion in literature, that "naming" and "moving" are aesthetically complementary and exciting to unite. Conceptual and kinetic fusion provides a satisfying experience. Ultimately, I think this leads to the development of new genres, radically different from traditional epic poetry and the more linear types of fiction. The Web, which I refer to again at the end of this article, seems the ideal new medium for such change.

### Fusion and Time

Whereas pieces in the **Only the Nude** collection originated from the direction of poetry and moved to include fiction, works in the subsequent book **The Kiss** came from the direction of fiction. Although several earlier pieces contained temporal variables, time—a date or



season– became more significant in the second collection. Certain nouns can be used in evocation but also in context to denote motion. For example, place names, seasons and months can function this way. “Looking at Paris and the Moon in 1922” illustrates this.

## Other Contributing Factors

### I. Film and Fusion

There is no doubt that Ms. Stein laid the groundwork for fusion.<sup>1</sup> I believe there are three other strong reasons writers began attempting genre fusion in the latter part of this century. First, many of us grew up watching movies and television. The motion picture medium provides an intensely visual and scenic experience. Movies have the marvelous ability to transport characters rapidly from place to place over time. Poetry has traditionally been a strongly imagistic, visual genre, while fiction has traditionally been a highly scenic and kinetic one. The dynamic and visual fuse in film and that quite naturally permeates literature.

Of course, poetry is more than image and fiction is more than action. There are many ways to see essence. I have experimented with a number of starting points. For instance, poets frequently cite distillation and spareness as virtues. Taking fictional texts from Balzac and George Sand, I ellipsed passages and provided line breaks. I interspersed these attributed passages with biographical musings. These works, “Balzac Robed, Balzac Nude” and “Double Portrait of George Sand and Frederic Chopin” were submitted and published as poetry. I think one reason Raymond Carver, master of the ellipsis, was so popular is that the public was ready, due to film and video exposure, for a type of cultural shorthand. This distillation again, has its roots in poetry.

### II. Feminism and Fusion

A second impetus for fusion relates to feminism. I asked art critic Lucy Lippard why she thought so many people were collaborating. Her unexpected response was “feminism” because, she elaborated, many feminists



place a premium on cooperation as opposed to competition. The same rationale could contribute to the rise of genre fusion.

Institutions foster specialization. There are a jealously guarded number of Creative Writing faculty and grad student positions. Genres have genuine differences, but stringent limits evolved in the late twentieth century. University professors naturally define their area of study. Yet definitions tend to narrow and stifle innovation.

Libraries and book stores easily classify poetry and fiction but ignore hybrids. Literary magazines employ discrete poetry and fiction reviewers and editors. Granting agencies bestow awards in fiction or poetry. These factors work against fusion. Despite constraints, limitations in literature continue to weaken.

### **III. Physics and Fusion**

Finally, one urge to unify fiction and poetry or other genres springs from exciting developments in physics. Einstein developed the Theory of Relativity concerning light, gravity and the cosmos. Although he laid the groundwork for Quantum Mechanics, which deals with the microscopic or sub-atomic world, Einstein was unhappy with the element of chance articulated in the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle. This principle, which pointed out the impossibility of obtaining accurate measurements for both position and velocity (motion of particles), was unsettling to many physicists. The cognitive dissonance caused by incompatible theories has inspired much thought and research. The penetration of physics by Chaos Theory from the field of mathematics may prove to be the bridge. The race is on to find an aesthetically satisfying linkage.

The effort to develop a theory of everything, or the unification theory, is contagious in much the same way that the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle was in the twenties in introducing the concepts of chance, random



elements and the observer-participant into the arts. The impulse to join various genres in literature may be a metaphor for what is transpiring in physics. Artists throughout time have reflected the most informed world view of their age.

### **Historical Instances of Genre Fusion**

My thesis **Paris<—>Dakar** was a creative writing product, based on reading over four centuries of French literature. I began to see many instances of breaking form. One could cite Montesquieu's **Persian Letters**, 1721, and Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's **Paul and Virginia**, 1788. In the guise of an epistolary novel, Montesquieu encompassed a fascinating range of genres: legend, satire, commentary, history, cross-cultural comparison and philosophical treatise. **Paul and Virginia** is a love story with long passages of natural history (describing flora and fauna of Mauritius), social criticism (decrying the aristocracy's devaluing of talent/merit in favor of birthright), and moral lessons (idealizing nature and virtue).

In the nineteenth century, two of many examples spring to mind: **Corinne, or Italy** by Madame de Staël and **The Fatal Skin** by Balzac. Germaine de Staël's work is a clearly alternating romance and travelogue. **The Fatal Skin** is a tragicomic romance with extended breaks in form devoted to social/religious criticism. In one long passage, science in various forms is lambasted. A zoologist identifies his specimen as the skin of a wild ass, an onager with tawny stripes and hypnotic eyes—a notorious object of prostitution in the Old Testament.

### **Contemporaries Employing Fusion**

Strong elements of genre fusion are apparent in the novels of Kathy Acker, who died in 1997. Influenced by Black Mountain poets and Gertrude Stein, **Blood and Guts in High School** contains numerous formal breaks including dream maps, hieroglyphics, a play, and handwritten, irreverent "Persian" poems. Acker's work shares an affinity with William Burroughs' experiments.



Leslie Scalapino and Carole Maso, also well-versed in Gertrude Stein's ideas, demonstrate a sense of fusion in their work. Most often Scalapino is classified as a poet and Maso as a fiction writer. Scalapino in *Way* and other works renders the continuous but ever-changing present by a frequent use of gerunds (words used as verbal nouns) and participles (words participating as verb and adjective).<sup>2</sup> The use of the "ing" forms possesses a two-for-one quality. That is, the border between genres is breached.

a boy--so it's in the past, though he'd  
said this about himself--on his father's  
sailboat

wanting to consider it his; his father jeering at  
him for that--it being fixed would be to free the  
past from myself (not necessarily it freed from  
him)--that would be the life of desire

driving away from the projects--the man seeing  
them

and so endangering the other men--their being  
benign--who are motionless outside; saying it  
wasn't known what people like this are  
going to do

Carole Maso in one extended experimental novel, *Ava*, separates out sentences and phrases that might ordinarily form a paragraph. Taking individual phrases and sentences out of the traditional form and placing them each on one line, redistributes the weight. Here is an excerpt from *Ava*:

They were speaking loudly and in German.

They were instructing her on where to stand.

Move your hand slowly like this. A little faster.

Right there.

She sees the last corner of sky vanishing forever.

Right there.





Lines enjoy their own space and thus become more important. Presenting phrases with the equivalent of line breaks gives a dramatic, if not operatic, quality to the flow of narrative. The forced slowing of narrative also creates a sense of poetry. Yet the book is classified as fiction. The use of graphic space in work by Maso, Scalapino and myself is essential. Creating space or “air” around text or textual passages, tends to create a meditative climate and focal intensity. The awareness of weight is essential in genre definition and in breaking form.

### **Genre Fusion and the Web**

Now, I am pursuing the question of how to fuse text and image without losing the integrity of either. An obvious pitfall is to simply use images to illustrate what is being said. Are the image and text resonating at the same pitch? The balance rests, in part, on emotional resonance. The overwhelming power of inclusiveness, of trying to address “everything” is what keeps me going. I’m interested in imagery and text--each holding its own. Divergent, tangential and oblique relationships are also relevant. I want the viewer-reader not to know if he/she is looking at something that is predominantly visual or textual. The weight must be equal. I seek the consternation of category.

**Christy Sheffield Sanford** delivered parts of this Talk-Show at the State University of New York, Plattsburgh. [December 2, 1993]

1 Gertrude Stein’s own experiments are quite varied but one group relates to a desire to break the stranglehold of the noun in poetry. She wanted to discover if prose and poetry were one. It’s uncanny, that she had the inclination to create a poetry that could address everything. To me this resembles the thrust in physics to come up with a grand unified theory.

[2 Leslie Scalapino died May 28, 2010. She was sixty-five.]



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Other essays about my work on the Web are forthcoming:

- 1) spatial literature: how space-time concepts shape writing in the Web environment;
- 2) brain-computer metaphors: how the chemical brain can influence Web work and
- 3) Web conventions and innovations: how they operate and what they mean.

[Bibliography](#)

[Back to the Beginning](#)

I created the term genre fusion to describe the work I was creating in the 1980s-1990s. This essay was published on my first web site at Florida Digital Turnpike.