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An Interview with Erika Meitner

Erika Meitner is a graduate of Dartmouth College and the MFA program at the University of Virginia, where she was a Henry Hoyns Fellow, and also earned an M.A. in Religion as a Morgenstern Fellow in Jewish Studies. Her first collection of poems, *Inventory at the All-Night Drugstore*, won the 2002 Anhinga-Robert Dana Prize for Poetry from Anhinga Press. Her second collection, *Ideal Cities*, was a winner of the 2009 National Poetry Series Award and was published by HarperCollins in 2010. She is currently an associate professor of English at Virginia Tech, where she teaches in the MFA program.

LUCIA LOTEPIO: You had me with the epigraph with this book. Where did you find that definition and example sentence? I was literally giving you snaps after I read it.

ERIKA MEITNER: Lucia, the definition was mostly from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, but the epigraph includes additional definitions from other dictionaries too—so it's a sort of amalgamation of everything I could find on the word that seemed pertinent to the book. Believe it or not, that example sentence was in the *OED*, and as soon as I saw it I had to nab it for the epigraph.

KATIE WARING: I read on your website that you decided to title the collection *Copia* after seeing a photography project by Brian Ulrich. There's definitely a striking similarity in images here (I'm thinking specifically of your first poem, "Litany of Our Radical Engagement with the Material World," though obviously these images threads throughout). How did you discover Ulrich's photography, and have you ever spoken to him about your collection?

EM: Katie, I'm glad the imagistic connections to Ulrich's project are clear! I'm not sure what exactly led me to Ulrich's work (other than possibly Google). I know I became interested in this idea of 'Ghost Box' stores and 'Dead Malls' first, and found Ulrich's photos online later. I read and listened to many interview with him, in addition to looking at his photos. And then I got to see his work in museum format at the Cleveland Museum of Art in 2011—which was a few years after I had started writing from his poems online. But I've never spoken to him about my book.

LL: The copia of commercialism and material goods are at the forefront of your book, yet there is also a focus on absence and empty space, like with the speaker's body in "By Other Means." Similarly, your exploration of Jewish history and the Yiddish language within the collection offer a contrasting discussion of memory. How did you begin to approach these ideas/topics within the collection?

EM: I'm not a project book kind of person—meaning when I set out to write, I just write poems; I don't usually think about a collection as a whole. It happened that my obsession with Detroit (and its abandoned buildings) coincided with my struggle to have a second child, and those empty buildings (in retrospect) became a really fitting metaphor for my body. At the same time, my grandmother had died, taking her language (Yiddish) with her. Which is to say that life happened, and art became a way to work out the deeper meanings and resonances of things that were happening to me, rather than the other way around.

LL: I know geographic location is important in your other collections, but in very different ways (I'm thinking of *Ideal Cities*, in particular). Can you talk about the importance of this specific place, and locality in general within *Copia*?

EM: While poems about Detroit are a big part of this book, when I started the poems in *Copia*, I was actually thinking a lot about what it meant to be from or of a place. I'm first-generation American. My mother was literally a refugee—a stateless person—as she was born in a Displaced Persons camp in Germany, which is where my grandparents settled after they were liberated from Auschwitz. My father's family escaped the Nazis in what was then Czechoslovakia by moving to Israel when it was still British Mandate Palestine. I grew up in very Jewish parts of New York, in Queens and Long Island, and my family and friends are mostly still in the tri-state area. But I've been living in rural Southwest Virginia since 2007, and trying to figure out how to bridge that dislocation became a central tenet of *Copia*. So a lot of the poems take place in and around the town I live in now, but some of the poems also go back to the Bronx of the 1950's and 60's (which is where my mother spent her later childhood), the Queens of my childhood, and Detroit.

While Detroit is an actual place in these poems, it's also a bigger part of the story of American desire and consumption. And I think that Detroit is a city that's changed so much in a relatively short period of time, that even the people we spoke with when we were there acknowledged a feeling of dislocation inherent in the dissolution and renewal happening in various neighborhoods around the city.

KW: What was your process like when deciding on the organization of the collection, both throughout the book as a whole and within the separate threads of each section?

EM: Because I was working from series of photographs in many of these poems, some of them share titles (like "Niagara"). I was also really interested in what happens when you approach the same concept via wildly different content (as in "Terra Nullius" where I was trying to explore the idea of 'no man's land'). To organize the collection (and to order most of my books), I need wall space. I usually try to go to an artist's colony (most recently, Virginia Center for the Creative Arts) where they have studios for writers that have giant bulletin boards on the walls. I'll post all the poems I'm try to organize, and shift them around until I can see the connections between them (which can be both subtle and more overt). I also ask poet-friends to read the manuscript, as often they see connections in my work that aren't obvious to me. In *Copia*, the first section is all about desire—often physical desire for a 'you,' or desire for objects. Section two deals with domesticity and violence, place and dislocation—desire for a home and homeland. There's a word in Judaism—"galut"—that means exile; more specifically, it refers to the historical exile and dispersion of the Jews after the destruction of the First Temple in the 6th Century BCE (when Jews were uprooted from their homeland and subject to alien rule). What I was trying to get at, in section two, is not only the harshness/violence of the mountain landscape in rural Southwest Virginia (where I've lived for the past seven years), but also what it means to be people in exile, and be in a place that feels wholly alien and Christian, and detached from the Jewish areas in New York where I was raised. Section three has to do with infertility—desire for a child—and includes my documentary poems about Detroit, which function as a metaphor (all those abandoned buildings) for my body, for a hopeful sort of re-birth from the ashes. So desire ties the book together, but the subject material was disparate enough that the book needed sections.

LL: Aesthetically, this book is beautiful. I love when collections have off-beat shapes—and with *Copia*, this fat square is so necessary considering your fabulous long lines. I felt like it was almost selfish with space, while at other times luxurious in its usage of it, which is awesome considering the subject matter. Did you work closely with BOA with design?

EM: Thank you! It's interesting—I did choose the cover art for the book (and the amazing book designer, Sandy Knight, made the art on the cover work in really creative ways), but I had no idea what size the book would be until it showed up in a box on my doorstep. I was so happy with the larger format of *Copia*. I knew when I was looking at the page proofs that none of my lines wrapped—which was something that had happened with all of my previous books—there were always two or three poems where the lines wrapped past the end of the page. But I didn't know how good-looking the book would be until it arrived, or how big it was!

KW: Another thing I loved: the playlist. I've never seen a poet construct a Spotify playlist to parallel their collection before. Is this the music you just happened to be listening to while writing the collection, or songs you think pair well with specific poems within *Copia*? What gave you the idea to share this music with readers via Spotify?

EM: I actually got the idea from the blog “largehearted boy,” which has a section called “book notes” where authors create playlists for their books. Some of the music is stuff that I was listening to when I wrote the poems, or inspired the poems in some way. Other songs evoked the flavor (time/place) of some of the poems in various sections. I felt like the playlist was one other sensory way to help readers find their way into *Copia*.

KW: I've been thinking a lot about the crossover between poetry and creative nonfiction lately, and if the two genres should always be so black-and-white in their categorizations. In the reading guide you posted on your website, you list quite a few nonfiction books as background reading for *Copia*—personally, I was super-excited to see Charlie LeDuff's *Detroit: An American Autopsy* on that list. You spent a lot of time in Detroit conducting research and interviewing local residents in order to write the poems in section III, correct? Have you ever thought about writing a CNF essay using some of that research? Or are there topics/ideas/images within the Detroit section that you think naturally come across better in poetry versus an essay?

EM: I actually did write a nonfiction essay to go with the Detroit pieces that doesn't appear in my book, but you can find it online with the Detroit poems, at *Virginia Quarterly Review*. In this instance, I do think the poems allow me to use some of the language of people and place in different ways than the more factual essay does. But it was important for me that my process for the project was transparent and contextualized in some way, thus the essay.

KW: I know *Copia* is still hot off the presses, but is there anything we can expect to see from you in the near future? Any ongoing projects you're currently working on?

EM: I'm currently at work on a collection that's tentatively titled *Fragments from Holeymoleyland* (and the title comes partially from my visual artist friend Kim Beck's piece "Holeymoley Land"). I also borrowed much inspiration and a title and cover art from her for *Ideal Cities*. Anyway, my new collection has to do with various kinds of violence—and especially gun violence. I'm headed to Belfast, Northern Ireland, in December with my family for six months on a Fulbright Fellowship, where I'll be teaching at Queen's University Belfast, and also doing some research and interviews on the conflict in Northern Ireland as part of the project.