

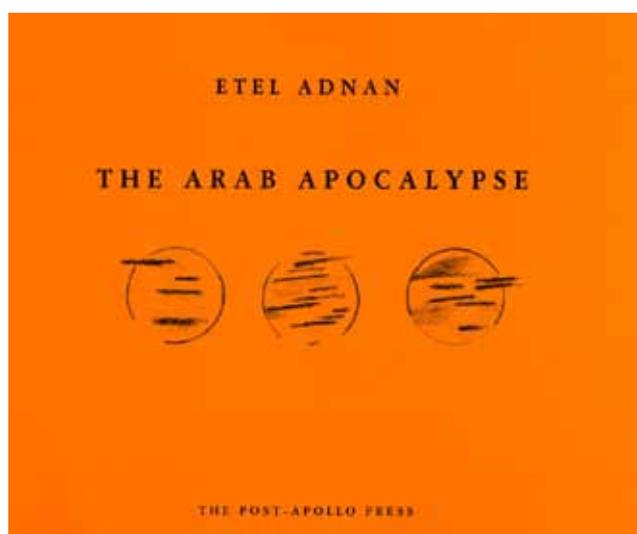
Interview

Post-Apollonian

Simone Fattal in conversation with Mirene Arsanios

I first came across The Post-Apollo Press through Jalal Toufic's book, *Undying Love or Love Dies*. But it was not until I read Lyn Hejinian's *My Life* that I discovered the richness of Simone Fattal's publishing work. She has published many authors that have stood out to me as references: Lyn Hejinian precisely, Leslie Scalapino and Etel Adnan's exhilarating depiction of Beirut in 1982 in the *Arab Apocalypse*. From Sausalito, California, Fattal has published more than fifty-seven titles over the last thirty years, with authors from all over the world. I wanted to know more about the history of Post-Apollo: its roster of authors, its economical viability and its subsistence through the Internet in the present epoch of digitised literature. It is a project that traverses different epochs and styles, collating silence, knowledge,

Etel Adnan, *The Arab Apocalypse, poetry*, first published in 1998, third printing, cover drawing by Etel Adnan, book cover design by Simone Fattal. Courtesy of the artist.



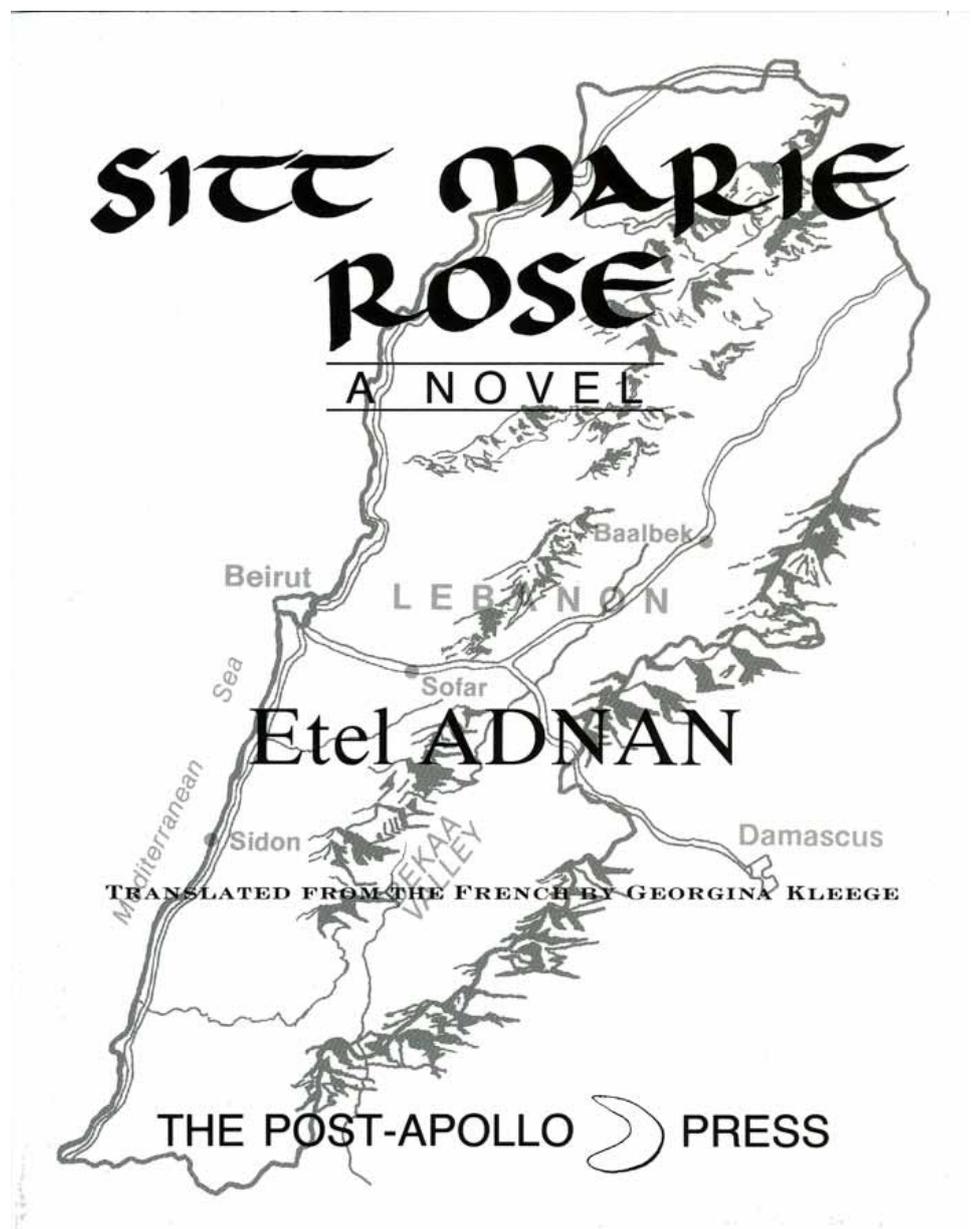
and production in a unique way: something I attempt to investigate in this interview.

Mirene Arsanios: My first question is not a question but an observation. The Post-Apollo Press has existed since 1982, for more than 30 years. You have published incredible poets and writers from all over the world such as Etel Adnan, Lyn Hejinian, Leslie Scalapino, Jalal Toufic, Robert Grenier and Marguerite Duras, among others. Today, you are still an impressively active press; publishing, distributing, discovering and promoting experimental forms of writing. There is almost an anachronistic quality to your publishing history. You have managed to sustain quality and singularity in your literary choices without turning into a commercial venture and without having to close down shop. There is a very strong imprint – I dare say spirit – to your project that doesn't age with time. It remains incisive and powerful. Yet it is not slave to the 'new' as in 'what comes next'. Could you talk about Post-Apollo's relation to time in these three decades? I imagine that many things have changed in terms of production techniques with the ubiquity of the Internet as a tool and a medium. But I also imagine certain things haven't changed...

Simone Fattal: I will start with the end. Actually, nothing has changed in the way we are doing books at The Post-Apollo Press, I use the same printer, as since the third book. I had to sometimes change printers because mine could not do certain formats like in *The Arab Apocalypse*, or Leslie Scalapino's *The Dihedrons Gazelle-Dihedrals Zoom*, which had many colour reproductions. But otherwise I am still the one who decides on colours, formats, fonts, et cetera. I have always relied on my instinct for choosing the texts I wanted to publish. When I had to choose a discipline in college, I knew I did not need to read literature because I 'knew' it, so I chose to read philosophy instead, so as to learn something new. For The Post Apollo Press, I had a total confidence in my understanding. And although the writers I chose were very different in genre, they had the same excellence. I chose them because, as I already said in some interviews, I had a standard I needed to keep. I had started with *Sitt Marie-Rose* by Etel Adnan, and therefore I needed to give it worthy companions. I must say having a commercial venture was never my aim, nor did I want to lose time and energy asking for grants (I did it once and I was refused!). So I decided to run my press the best way I could: the way a single person can do to the best of 'her' ability, investing my money and my time. For years I didn't even have an assistant. Only when I started living abroad for longer periods did I hire a part-time assistant. As for the thirty and some years this has been in operation, I must say I did not see the time go by...

MA: What about utopia? As in having no place. The Post-Apollo Press is physically produced in California, and many of its authors are based there as well as in Europe and in the Middle East. However, most of the authors you publish are also translators (Keith Waldrop, Stacey Doris, Eva de Vitray-Meyerovitch, Sarah Riggs). They navigate different languages and consequently, they travel different, striated geographies. I wouldn't say that the voices your publish are

Etel Adnan, *Sitt Marie-Rose*, novel, first printed in 1982, 12th printing, book cover design Simone Fattal, Paris. Courtesy of the artist.



'diasporic', but they are definitely exploring the shifting boundaries of language, across different languages and in a same one. How do these explorations harbour new understandings of language and how do these languages relate (or not) to new possible geographies outside or parallel to the borders of the nation-state?

SF: I was born in Damascus and my family spent summers in Lebanon. Then at age 11, I was sent to a boarding school in Beirut and I crossed the border once a week – or more often – often. I am used to crossing borders, without losing the sense of place. For in my experience, Syria and Lebanon were the two places where I lived and to which I belonged. I also then had two languages, as do most people from these two countries. So the nation state is non-existent in my psyche. On the other hand, Syria, is a very strong entity, it is kin to a Platonic idea. I certainly belong to many Platonic ideas: Syria, the Arab World, Mesopotamia and its history. I am extremely rooted in all these geographies. On a more mundane level, I am certainly French in my education and American from the experience of living and working in America for thirty years. All these entities are compatible. I see no difficulty in living them all at the same time. The

way we translate everything what we think as we go along. My writers are equal in value. The place they come from hardly matters. As you know, translating in mathematics is merely displacing. We put them somewhere else – for people to see and enjoy. Translating is one of the most important exercises, for what would we know if there were no translations? There is no civilisation without translations. Now, I also believe in one's mother tongue, the way most poets cling very strongly to their native language. I had no such luck.

MA: I fully understand the lack of 'luck' or frustration in not having a 'natural' language or a mother tongue. However, I convinced myself to see this lack as a privilege. Most of the writers you publish are so called experimental writers. Post-Apollo really stresses on exploration – of identity and language/s – through the writing itself. Can you talk about what drew you to the writers you publish? Do they resonate with your own history?

I am perhaps projecting here, but the writer Renée Gladman once said in an interview:

Experimentation, we were saying, is an ideal mode of engagement for marginalised people, and we couldn't understand, we continued to say, why so many people still believe that the 'transparency' of conventional storytelling somehow allows one to capture what it is to exist in the world more authentically. Of course, this question has been debated within the arts for decades now, but it is no less pertinent and divisive today. As a 'black lesbian poet' you enter language from a place of disorientation. Your grasp of the authority of the subject is slippery. You feel deviant. You feel the need to fuck with things. As you gaze into words, into their relation, you see things that are not there to people who have never had to prove that they should be counted among the living.^[1]

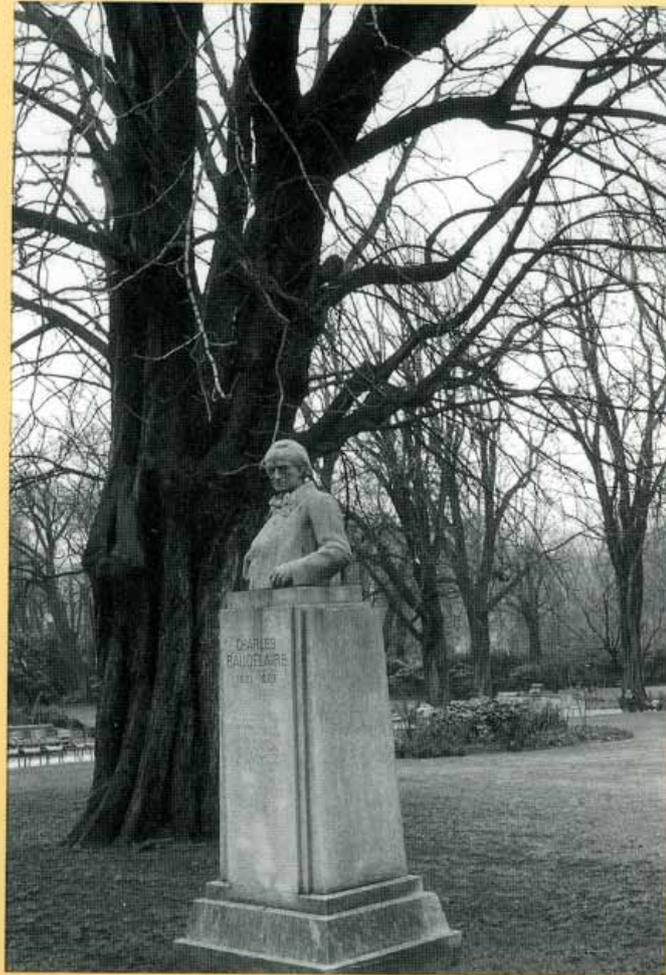
I quote her answer in full because I think she seizes the politics of experimental writing, in a way. What do you think?

SF: I went to experimental writing because it was there that the most interesting and vital writing was being done! Especially in poetry. I also yearned to find the same in prose and Leslie Scalapino gave me the privilege to publish her great prose work *The Dihedrals Gazelle-Dihedrals Zoom*. In this book, Leslie describes the chaos of today's world, with the only means to describe it. She had to find the adequate vocabulary and form. Each work, each signifier contains its form. It is inherent. You can see it very well in Etel Adnan's work. Each of her books uses a new genre because what she says is not a repetition of the previous book and her new subject demands this new form. I can say that all these experimental poets found their way through investigating a new path just because they were compelled to do it for the sake of what they had to say and not to be new or interesting. Anne-Marie Albiach dug a new path. She was following her thoughts.

[1] <http://bombsite.com/articles/6321>

Etel Adnan, *When It's Naked*, fiction, first published in 1993, third printing, cover photograph Simone Fattal, book cover design Simone Fattal. Courtesy of the artist.

PARIS, WHEN IT'S NAKED



Etel Adnan

In what way was her writing related to me? When I opened her book, after a few sentences I was hit by the music of her words. Music is a universal language and this explains in what way we are all related.

To go back to Renée Gladman's quote we should enlarge her vision to include most poets who have been important, most of them come from a marginalised station. As for the native language, I disagree completely with you. I think it is essential to have a mother tongue. As Barbara Guest used to tell me: when the language goes, everything goes.

Language is the binding force that makes one human. It gives you your history, (without history, and past, no future), and your archeology. You are related to your ancestry, subliminally. It goes back thousands of years; it carries with it the history of letters and of all these social interactions. It gives you tools for thinking. Without the

daily investigation of your vocabulary, thinking stops short; stopped by the poverty of the vocabulary. The familiarity of this music resonating in yourself, all the time since your birth and feeding you with all what you do all day, is incalculable and irreplaceable.

We have been cut off from ourselves, in a very deep way. We do not have enough references to our past and our environment. One does not need to forget one's mother tongue in order to acquire other languages. Dominique Fourcade, in one of his books, addresses his own problem with his language from the basis I am explaining it and he is a significant writer in his own language: French! So imagine where we stand, who have none.

On another level, I always realise when I read *Gilgamesh* or any other Mesopotamian or Ugaritic text in Arabic, how it is related to the Arabic language and so my understanding of it is illuminated with a different light. Place names, still extant today in the original. The richness and the pleasure of it all.

By the way, we should all have a full education, the one Botero mentions in his interviews. To know the Orient one should know Cananean, Akkadian, Arabic, Greek and German, French and English! Of course, I would like to add here that Arabic has an intrinsic value. There is an extraordinary intelligence to this language that very often some 'foreigners' notice and appreciate more than the Arabs themselves

We witness everyday in the Arab world the way practically few people can finish a sentence in the language they started it with, which indicates the chaos of their minds. During the uprising in Tunisia, we could read placards: *Dégage!* Addressed to Ben Ali! Really. In an international school, all schoolchildren were asked to sing a song from their country and the little Arab boy sang Happy Birthday in English! It is sad and ridiculous, and can be in no way a 'richness'.

Barbara Guest was also extremely worried about the English language being used by so many – this of course is a different problem, (we can say that almost everybody on this planet speaks bad English!), and therefore the language is perverted, subject to being brought down. I can see very well the advantages of a language being shaken by the new users like the German of the Turkish writers in Germany, or the French used by the francophone writers or the English by so many different nations. I am talking about the effort one should make towards excellence in the use of any language.

I want to stress the invaluable advantage of having at your command the vocabulary you need. Language allows thinking. I was struck during my conversations with Anne-Marie Albiach of her extraordinary use of the language. The words she used were absolutely exact. They expressed her thinking in the most perfect way. It was an immense intellectual pleasure for me to spend hours talking with her. Her perfect knowledge of French did not prevent her from knowing English (which she also translated) and Spanish.

MA: I'm conducting this interview for Ibraaz Platform 005, which is themed around the question of 'Globalising Tactics in Contemporary Art of North Africa and the Middle East.' Though the connection between the topic and your work might not be apparent at first, I was thinking when proposing this interview about – again – your involvement with language. Could working with contemporary poetry help to redefine our subjectivities as people living in this region? In one of your author blurbs, the poet Anne Lauterbach says:

Once again, we are reminded that language is the ordering structure of how we come to know, and changing that order changes what we know.

You published several Middle Eastern authors such as Joyce Mansour, Fouad Gabriel Naffah, Ahmed Toufic, Jalal Toufic and Yasmina Zahran. Do you think their work contributes in changing what we know? Can you tell us more about these authors?

SF: 'Language is the ordering structure of how we come to know.' Indeed, what Ann Lauterbach says defines what I have been trying to say about language.

- A. When I decide to publish a writer I listen intently to first the music struck by the first notes of their text. This is the first and essential element. In the case of these five writers other things came into consideration.
- B. They needed to be known and I was the one to do it.

My first encounter with Joyce Mansour happened a very long time before the translator came to me with the work proposed. I saw her sculpture before I read her poetry and I liked it a lot. There was a sale of paintings and *objets d'art* organized in 1977 in Paris to which many important artists contributed and the proceeds were to go to Lebanon to help the Palestinian and Lebanese victims of the civil war. And Joyce Mansour gave a sculpture. After her death I visited her husband in his apartment, it was full of Egyptian antiquities to a frightful degree. It was like being in a funerary hall. She was dark although a very interesting artist. Her poetry is violent, as was her art, infused with the surrealism of the period I would say but extremely strong. I think she was a voice that needed to be heard. It is also a look at an Egypt that is no more in our psyche, an Egypt that was the most cosmopolitan country in the Arab World. An Egypt that has been this way for centuries and I am sure always will be.

Fouad Gabriel Naffah is a very great poet. I knew him well. He is unknown because he fell victim to the obscurantism of the uneducated milieu in which he was born and of a certain Lebanon. He appeared in the *Ecole des Lettres* that was started in 1945 in Beirut by the great Gabriel Bounoure and which Etel Adnan attended as one of the first students. She describes his appearance as an angel wearing a bright, white shirt. He brought his poems. They provoked quite a stir, made

a big impact. But he was unable to enjoy the fame that it gave him. He suffered a severe depression and as it was the fashion in those days he was taken to *Deir El Salib* where he underwent electroshocks (I hear that they are still being done in the United States and maybe elsewhere). He was never the same afterwards and did not write more than his first two books. He did not know that when Claude Royet-Journoud was in charge of a radio program in Paris, he asked Anne-Marie Albiach to read his poetry on the air for a whole week. That would have made him the happiest man. He knew he was great and was hurt by the injustice of his plight. I knew him well. For a few years, whenever I was in Beirut, I would send him a taxi to bring him to my studio and we would have a whisky or two together. He always had the most extraordinary comments to say on my painting. One day he said: 'you made an exact moral landscape.'

It is Claude Royet-Journoud who asked Norma Cole to translate his book. I asked Irving Petlin to make a drawing for the cover. He made five, and I immediately decided to use them all, that is how we have four drawings inside the book. The most extraordinary day with Naffah was when he read to me his autobiography, (that he had written in Arabic), interrupted by his tears. After he died, I visited his brothers to offer my condolences and I asked if he had left something. They told me he died in the hospital, leaving nothing except a few 'scraps of paper' in his pocket. Of course no one bothered to look into these bits of paper. He had given me some of them earlier during our evenings. They were pathetic sentences: 'The trees on the avenue', is one.

Yasmine Zahran's book albeit very informative contained a symbol that I thought needed to be put out there: her character, the Palestinian woman, decides to go back to Palestine and disappear in the population. She is there and everywhere and no one could catch her. It is an important book.

Jalal Toufic is one of our greatest thinkers. He should be translated into Arabic for sure. He is essential reading. He also reads the contemporary world through film, which is his metaphor – (and certainly the media most universally used in today's world) – through our culture, through Islam and the politics of our everyday world.

Ahmad Toufic wrote a very poetic novel using his Moroccan culture in the most positive way. We are used to writers and thinkers educated in the West and using the same ideology or frame of mind as their teachers. But in the case of these four writers, we 'learn' something new and we 'hear' something new about our own world! And get rerouted into our own archeology.

MA: You have translated a few works from Arabic to English. Have you ever thought of doing it the other way around? It would be great to have Lyn Hejinian or Leslie Scalapino translated into Arabic!

SF: I couldn't agree more! I know that most of these writers, if not all, if we asked them would love that. Why don't you do that yourself in your new publishing venture? What is the mission as they say of your

future publishing house? I would love to know that.

I was instrumental in bringing some works into Arabic. One of them was the autobiography of Malcolm X and I must say I was the happiest person for doing so. At the time, I was approached by Elizabeth Fernea who was the head of the Middle East Studies Association in the United States. She asked me to solve the problem of publishing this magnificent and important text that had been translated by the Moroccan writer Leila Abou Zeid. I took the manuscript and found the publisher in Beirut. All Abou Zeid wanted was 100 copies of the book to be sent to her. It took a very long time for the publisher to send the books. Leila complained and, in one of my visits to Beirut, I enquired about the reasons for such a delay. I was answered that the book needed to be sent to the Mufti so as to obtain permission for export. I said, let us send it. The publisher was flabbergasted when we did obtain full permission and the books were sent to Morocco! But I don't think I could start a new publishing house in Arabic, this is for someone else to do.

MA: My last question addresses the relationship between literature, publishing and the art world. Etel Adnan, whom you have published throughout the years, is a close collaborator with The Post-Apollo Press and has enjoyed growing recognition in her work as a painter. You yourself are a sculptor and a trained painter. How do these two practices – writing and art – converge in your publishing work or/and what separates them?

SF: The fact that I was a painter gave me the assurance to design all the books of The Post-Apollo Press. I chose every cover. The cover of Sitt Marie-Rose was commented at length by one of the first reviewers of this book when it first came out. They said it was a political indication, it was saying: 'this is Lebanon, and don't trespass!' I must say that the book was published during the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and yes the idea of drawing its boundaries and existence was paramount in my mind. For the third book already, *The Indian never Had a Horse and other poems* by Etel Adnan, I asked Russell Chatham, who is a great American painter, to make etchings for it.

From there on, I used art made specifically for these books. I never used a pre-existing image, like a beautiful painting by Delacroix or Canaletto. I asked Etel Adnan to make drawings specifically for most of the books. I sometimes asked her to do more than one and we would eventually choose one. I used my own drawings and photographs a few times. I also had the idea of having series – does that come from the way we painters work in series? I don't know. I also always refused to let the writer dictate or even know what was coming. I remember Anne-Marie Albiach who wanted a friend of hers to do her cover and I refused categorically. She said, 'But I am Anne-Marie!' I must say she was overjoyed with both her covers: the one for *Mezza Voce* and the one for *A Figured Image!* Barbara Guest gave me the compliment of my life, saying that the cover I did for her *Quill, Solitary Apparition* was better than a Richard Tuttle!

For me, the image has to be an equivalent of the text, somehow. The way art can summarize a text. Art is quick information. The essence of the text was in the image I used on the cover. It was just another way of saying the same thing. But not illustrating it! That is why I don't understand some of these lengthy developments called installations. They are narrative in a way that is the contrary to what art is about.

Simone Fattal was born in Damascus and was educated in Lebanon. She studied Philosophy in Lebanon and France. In 1980, she settled in California, where she founded The Post-Apollo Press: dedicated to publishing experimental and avant-garde literature. She is a painter and a sculptor.

For more information on The Post-Apollo Press, visit www.postapollopress.com.

About the author

Mirene is a writer based in Beirut. She holds a Masters in Contemporary Art Theory from Goldsmiths College and teaches at the American University of Beirut. In 2007, she co-founded the collective 98weeks research project. Her writings have been published in *Bidoun*, *Flash Art*, *Cura Magazine*, *The Rumpus* and *Ibraaz*. She has collaborated on various artists books and self published the magazine, *how to make nice things happen*. She is currently pursuing an MFA in writing at the Milton Avery School of Arts, Bard College.