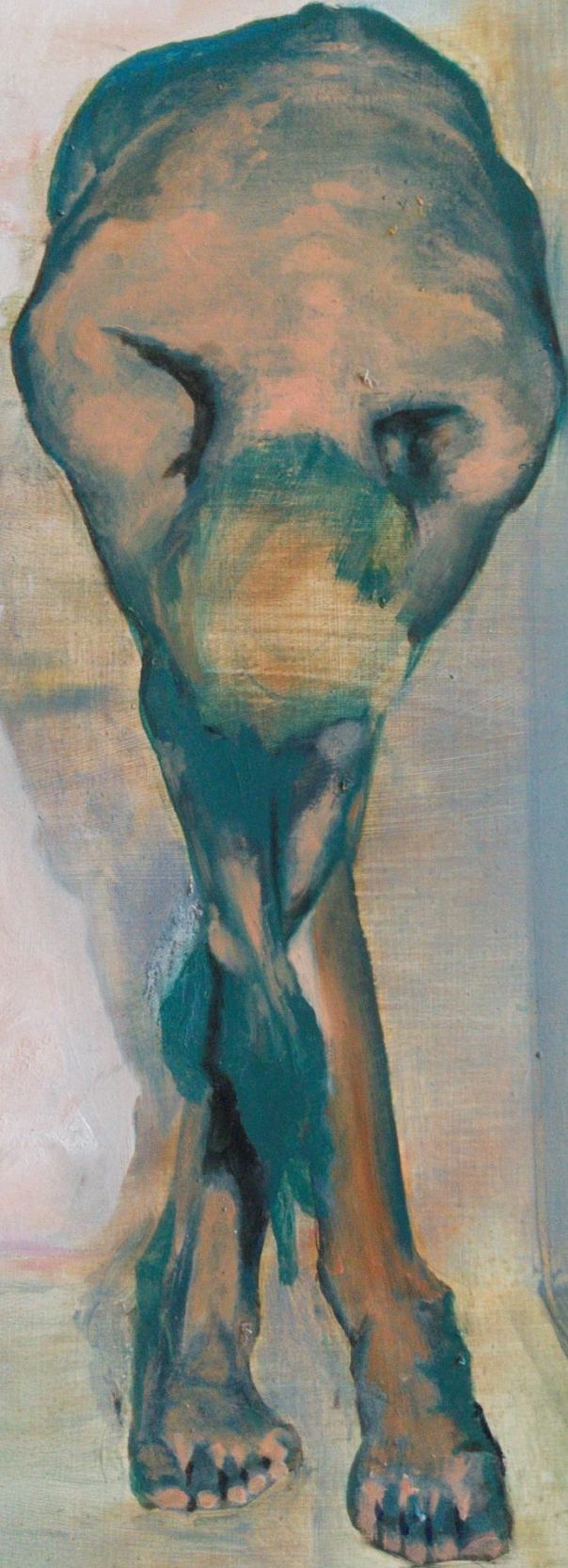


FEMINIST SPACES

CREATE. SHARE. EXPLORE.



Volume 3, Issue 1, Fall/Winter 2017



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Feminist Spaces is an online, interdisciplinary academic journal that invites undergraduate and graduate students as well as faculty and independent scholars from institutions worldwide to submit formal essays as well as multimodal and artistic pieces per our biannual Call for Works. Established in March 2014, this journal is sponsored by members from the University of West Florida's Women's Studies Collective, a student-run organization invested in the vitality of Women's Studies at UWF and the larger academic community.

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Letter from the Editors

Dear Readers,

This issue of *Feminist Spaces* represents our second open call for works. In opening our call, we have been delighted by both the breadth and depth of diversity in the submissions we've received. This issue will span topics from exploring transnational boundaries, to the conversation that surrounds breast-feeding in the workplace, to offering feminist perspectives of film, music, and literature.

The goal of this journal has always been to provide a dedicated platform from which feminist voices can engage with, illuminate, and expand upon the abundant experiences of being a feminist or woman-aligned person as we occupy spaces physically and ideologically across the globe, in varying time periods, in cultural and artistic mediums, and in academia. This journal is about what we produce, what we perceive, and what we live—complete in its expansive and manifold variations. In embracing dynamism of topic matter, we hope to make *Feminist Spaces* an area of growth in the increasingly important realm of women's issues and studies as well as a point of resistance to the unsettling normalization of anti-woman trends in our current cultural zeitgeist.

Progress and change cannot happen in a vacuum, and so we extend our thanks to those who made *Feminist Spaces* 3.1 initially possible and ultimately a reality: our contributors, who bring their inquiry, dedication, and passion in the form of the works you will subsequently enjoy; our readers, who help to ensure our future growth and development; and our editors who make the creation and production of this journal a possibility.

Without further ado, we welcome you to turn the page and discover what lies within and beyond these continually growing feminist spaces.

Our kindest regards,

Erica Miller, Editor-in-Chief
Sydney Stone, Managing Editor



Contributor Biographies

Bouchra Badaoui is an assistant professor of English at ENSAM, Moulay Ismail University in Meknes, Morocco. Her research interests include postcolonial urban space and film studies, particularly North African cinema in its relation to gender and space.

Chandini Jha is a recent graduate from Georgetown University, where she majored in Gender Studies and Government. Her current research interests include feminist theory, area studies (especially South Asian Studies), and criminal and civil law reforms designed to combat sexual assault. She is currently on a Fulbright Student Research Fellowship in India studying legal discourse in rape law. In her free time, she enjoys browsing old bookstores and watching standup comedy.

Helmi Ben Meriem is a Tunisian fiction writer and a researcher of Somali literature. His short stories have appeared in *Glasow Review Of Books*, *Blue Minaret*, *Scarlet Leaf Review*, *Theories of Her: an Experimental Anthology*, and *Thema* among others. He has recently finished writing an epistolary novel entitled *Good Nights Letters*.

April Holland Noke is a graduate student in the English department at The University of West Florida. She holds both a B.S. and M.A. in education. After teaching literature for fifteen years in the US., Germany, and Japan, she returned to school to pursue a deeper understanding of her chosen field. Her research interests include Southern Gothic literature and the depiction of childless women in modern American literature.

Alexandra Shea Paleka is a first-year undergraduate student at St. Norbert College in De Pere, WI. She currently works as a staff member in the Honors Program office which includes writing for the *Honors Pulse* digital newsletter.

Ryan Patterson recently completed her undergraduate coursework in the history, women's and gender studies, and Spanish departments at the University of Oregon. Her research interests include gender and health, reproductive healthcare, transnational histories, and modern social movements and revolutions. Ryan's senior thesis, published in the Fall 2015 issue of the *Yale Historical Review*, examined feminicide in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, the gendered contexts of the murder of women in terms of pervasive patriarchal power structures, and the role of politicized visual art in combatting the disturbing trend. She plans to



pursue graduate degrees in history and education. Ryan currently lives in Edinburgh, Scotland and is interning at Scottish Parliament.

R. P. Stiles teaches composition, literature, and creative writing at the collegiate level. Her primary research is in African American literature and creative writing. Her scholarly co-authored articles have appeared in *International Journal of Trade and Commerce* and *Journal of Cooperative Education and Internships*. Her poems appear in *Failed Haiku*, *Roadrunner*, *Oysters & Chocolate*, and *Southwestern Review*. She is currently a peer reviewer for an online literary magazine.

Ng Lay Sion is a Chinese Malaysian who is currently involved in a three-year doctoral program in American Literature at Osaka University, Japan. Her current research focuses on the gender and sexual cosmology in the works of Ernest Hemingway. Prior to that, her thesis was about “Embracing Otherness: Mastery of Submission in *The Sun Also Rises*.” From 2010 to 2014, she majored in British Literature at Fukushima University, Japan. Her undergraduate thesis was concerned with “Sadomasochism and Yin Yang in D.H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*.” Her other research explores various issues such as poverty and education in Kenya, LGBT communities in Russia, sexuality in Bhutan, and racial cannibalism in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. She is also a contributor to a feminist site called *Slutty Girls Problems*.

Sam Smith obtained her A.A. in Journalism from the former Pensacola Junior College in 2005. She holds a B.S. in Psychology and is currently enrolled in the graduate creative writing program at Southern New Hampshire University

Shelby E. Ward is a doctoral student in the Alliance for Social, Political, Ethical, and Cultural Thought at Virginia Tech, where she teaches for the Political Science Department. Her research interests include displacement narratives, critical and feminist theory, postcolonial studies, and theories of space and mapping. Her dissertation project, “Stranger Maps: poetic mapping as potential resistance in Sri Lankan tourist maps,” introduces poetic mapping as a theoretical framework and methodology that situates both the map-reader and the map itself into their respective contingent, historically developed power relations. Her dissertation accounts for the privileged position of the traveler, and the subsequent historically, contingent discursive function of the tourist map, particularly as seen between relations of the Global North and South. Ward is also co-editor of SPECTRA (the Social, Political, Ethical, and Cultural Theory Archives), a peer-reviewed and open-access journal, and serves as president of the ASPECT Student Association and Alumni Director.



Elizabeth West is a third-year student at the University of West Florida and works full-time in Fort Walton Beach, where she currently resides. She is majoring in English and minoring in Women's Studies. Upon graduating, Elizabeth plans on moving to the East Coast to pursue a career in publishing.

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Dr. Corey Wrenn is the Director of Gender Studies and Lecturer of Sociology with Monmouth University. She received her Ph.D. from Colorado State University, and was awarded Exemplary Diversity Scholar, 2016 by the University of Michigan's National Center for Institutional Diversity. She served as council member to the American Sociological Association's Animals & Society section (2013-2016) and is an advisory board member with the International Network for Social Studies on Vegetarianism and Veganism with the University of Vienna. She contributes to the Human-Animal Studies Images and Cinema blogs for the Animals and Society Institute and has been published in several peer-reviewed academic journals including the *Journal of Gender Studies*, *Disability & Society*, and *Society & Animals*. In July 2013, she founded the Vegan Feminist Network, an academic-activist project engaging intersectional social justice praxis. She is the author of *A Rational Approach to Animal Rights: Extensions in Abolitionist Theory* (Palgrave Macmillan 2016).



Moroccan Cinema's Feminine Spaces between Excess and Tradition

Badaoui Bouchra

Abstract: The present article discusses the different postcolonial representations of feminine spaces in Moroccan women's cinema. Two recent prominent female directors —namely Narjiss Nejjar and Laila Marrakchi— are used as lead-in examples to discuss Farida Benlyazid's 1999 film *Keid Ensa (Women's Wiles)*. In their attempts to retrieve a voice and a space for Moroccan women, these films map a field of disjunctive gender visions that oscillates between excessive urban cinematic representations and traditional or timeless iconography.

In Hamid Bennani's *Wechma (Traces, 1970)* Moumen Smihi's *El Chergui or The Violent Silence (1975)*, and many other Moroccan films, women's presence is informed by absence and invisibility. Women are used as a backdrop to define the power of patriarchy in a male discourse and to define the nation in gendered terms. Allocated to the spaces of otherness and silence, women are denied agency; they are cinematically constructed as objects of the male oppression.

Such a state of being is what makes feminists try to retrieve a voice for women and to negotiate their position within the patriarchal discourse. Farida Benlyazid and Farida Bourquia are the first Moroccan women directors who have sought to clear a space for women in a male cinematic field. Najiss Nejjar and Laila Marrakchi are the most recent prominent examples of such cinematic and discursive endeavours. In their films, Nejjar and Marrakchi try to map a feminine space within a field and a discourse that have long been associated with men.

However, we need to recognise the disjunctive nature of Moroccan films in dealing with the question of gender, because these films create a field of continuities, interruptions and transformations of mainstream gender representations. Instead of looking at feminist representations as representative of all women, I appropriate the word position: this concept amounts to a shifting and multiple field of representation that does not make the gender of the filmmaker an authoritative factor. As such, the word position entails that not all women's films are feminist. Most importantly, the word position is referential and political because it has its own history. So, if women's films are feminist, they intrinsically represent different and various views and positions that cannot be homogeneously assembled. In this respect, I argue that Benlyazid's film is produced within a political context where gender issues and conflicts became focal political agendas in Moroccan society. Although Benlyazid



is a feminist, her feminism is irrevocably different from other feminists like the recent Moroccan filmmakers Narjiss Nejjar and Laila Marrakchi, whose images indulge in the excesses of cinematic representation.

The exaggerated images of bodily desire in Nejjar's *al Oyoune al Jaffa* (*Dry Eyes*, 2003) and Marrakchi's *Marock* (2006) hint at the emergence of a new Moroccan cinema intent on foregrounding the hidden and the forbidden as a sign of revolt and asserting a claim for renewal and change. In an interview in *Tel Quel*, Nejjar claims that her films belong to a cinema that is *engagé*, a cinema which holds a mirror up to reality, uncovering the “*non-dits*” in Moroccan society and challenging the forbidden via strong cinematic images that cast women as protagonists.¹ The same idea is expressed by Valérie Orlando in her analysis of Maghrebian women's cinema, stressing the uniqueness of Moroccan films produced in the new millennium by women like Narjiss Nejjar, Yasmine Kassari and Laila Marrakchi, as they are “socially engaged, thought-provoking, and, with regard to male filmmakers, more readily cast women in take-charge roles.”²

These films, however, are less didactic; they are social-realist texts that tend to address pressing questions with regard to women via strong images that portray their reality; a reality which is, nonetheless, complex and multiple. In Nejjar's film, these abrasive images use the female body. However, the body here acts on another level; it is not used as an object of desire and voyeuristic pleasure. Rather, the female body is sacrificed, drained and battered by and for economic ends. Female characters in the film are all victims; they exist on the margins of society and have only one asset—their bodies—and it is a patriarchal reality in which the bodies of these women circulate. Prostitution as a main theme in the film transforms the personal into the political, as it develops into a stinging attack on the position that women occupy in this Moroccan Berber village.

Through her representation of the appalling experience of rape, physical assault, psychological distress, and childhood trauma, Nejjar has brought the issue of prostitution and human rights abuses into public awareness. The raped girl in the film is still a child, and her case reports depression and post-traumatic stress leading to a lack of trust in people. She suffers grief for many losses: the loss of freedom, protection, and childhood innocence.

But for Nejjar, it is critically important to understand the cultural context in which prostitution occurs; prostitution has become a means of survival in one of the most economically destitute regions of Morocco far away from the urban centres. The film is about the inhabitants –all of them



women who make their living as prostitutes—of an isolated Berber mountain village up in the High Atlas.

Nejjar's film is not set in the city and it sheds lights on those women who live as outcasts in remote regions. On the contrary, Marrakchi's film is an urban text that is shot in Casablanca and is, nonetheless, inextricably linked to women through the female protagonist who is brought into the front screen. The film recounts the love story that takes place between Rita, an upper class Moroccan 17-year-old female protagonist, and Youri, a Jewish teenager. The film is remarkable not only for this relationship and its detours, but also the way in which American culture represented by American commodities, songs, lifestyle, and what Brian Edwards calls "a Hollywood look" threads through a film that is not geographically concerned with it.³ Although the film is shot in Casablanca, it is nonetheless a national allegory that succinctly pictures Moroccan society in the age of globalisation or "age of circulation."⁴ This is already referenced in the title that fuses the word "Maroc," alluding not only to the city where the film is shot, but to the whole country, and "rock" which alludes to the rock n' roll spirit in order to show how the city of Casablanca and the Moroccan society are caught up in the circulation of global culture. Comparing *Marock* and other contemporary films made like Abdelkader Lagtaa's *Baidaoua* (1998), Nabil Ayouch's *Ali Zaoua* (2000) and Hakim Belabbes's *Khahit errouh* (*Threads*, 2003) with the films made in the early postcolonial period, Brian Edwards points to the shift taking place in contemporary cultural production, from a national narrative or narratives concerned with questions of independence from the French, to narratives that are concerned with "what place Morocco and Moroccan culture might have in a global setting within which ideas, products and commodities, lifestyles and technologies have complicated what was once, perhaps, a more binary situation."⁵

That *Marock* presents a city or a society caught up in the global circulation of ideas, commodities, and lifestyles is not what made the film controversial. Rather, "what was provocative was the director's frank portrayal of premarital sexuality among elite Casablangans and her flaunting of religious and cultural conventions."⁶ In fact, three interrelated plot strands comprise the storyline in the film: First, the female protagonist's open refusal to fast during the month of Ramadan, when the film is set; second, her mocking attitude towards her brother Mao at prayer; third, her open love affair with a Jewish teenager, Youri. However, the film's visible treatment of sexuality—what I refer to as an excessive form of exhibitionism or visibility—and the disrespect of religious sanctities are intimately related.⁷ This excess of visibility in *Marock* opens up the possibility of transgression in its excessive visual representation of the forbidden and the profane. The film not only shocks



the audience by its graphic sexual scenes that amount to pornographic imagery, but also deconstructs the very notions of the sacred and the profane.

In their explicit breakdown and fusion of public/private categories, Nejjar's and Marrakchi's films act like the figures of the *majduba* and the woman orator in Kapchan's study of the marketplace. They put traditional definitions of the sacred, honour, and shame into question, opening through the performative economy of the screen a re-inscription into the conventional and dominant conceptions of private/public identities, or what can or cannot be visible.

As a corollary, exhibitionism emerges as a crucial deconstructive strategy for both Nejjar and Marrakchi in their indulgence in the excesses of cinematic representation. This visibility produces a discourse of resistance and challenge that mediates women's representation in both colonial texts and many Moroccan films. In colonial films, women are represented as sex objects and prostitutes. Moreover, lasciviousness is seen as an innate component of their character. Many Moroccan movies, especially early films made by male directors, project a masculine and idealized vision of women.⁸ In *Wechma*, for example, Kamla is an ideal woman: she's a caring and protective mother. In *El Chergui*, Aicha is a traditional woman who represents the ideal of a nation.

These two women's films, then, represent a double response to the mainstream gender representation of women in men's cinema and to their representation in colonial texts by featuring women as real characters and protagonists with real problems. They are not pictured as idealized women or cast as natural lascivious beings. Moreover, "women's problems are not simply related to Islam but likewise to class difference, social exploitation, and political injustice" resulting from many sources.⁹

In their indulgence in the excesses of cinematic representation, these women's films enact the "carnavalesque body" in their overcompensation for the unrepresentable and the unspeakable. I borrow the term carnival from Mikhail Bakhtin to attend to the postcolonial cinematic turning upside down of established conventions and societal orders.¹⁰

In a gesture similar to postmodern feminism, *Marock* has formed new ways of looking at urban spatiality. In an essay dealing with postmodern politics, Edward Soja and Barbara Hooper analyse the way embodied identities that have long been silenced and hidden, by reason of their exclusion and marginalisation, rise up to claim both discursive and physical space for themselves. They write:



The body as the most intimate of spatialities is rediscovered and given a central place in the construction of real and imagined geographies of the city, while through this embodiment the city becomes charged with multiple sexualities.¹¹

As the most intimate of geographies, the body as a political space is heavily deployed in these films to bring postcolonial urban space into proximity. Moreover, through this embodiment, as in the case of *Marock*, the city produces carnivalized encounters that upset those sanctities of religion and the cultural conventions surrounding the notions of the sacred and the profane.¹²

This article considers Farida Benlyazid and her film *Keid Ensa* (*Women's wiles*, 1999). Benlyazid is one of the early women producers. She began her career as a script writer in the 1970s. She also wrote and directed her films. *Keid Ensa* is one of her recent films, in which I will probe the urban vision and spatial tactics that show how Benlyazid allocates a space to women within the discursive structures of patriarchy by voicing their silence and giving them agency. Although the film allows for some magical solutions to the plight of women and tends to overlook the complex gender dynamics of contemporary society where spatial divisions and essentialised categorizations are not possible, *Keid Ensa* is worth considering in some detail because it reinterprets an old folktale about a woman's artful resistance to take part in a contemporary debate on women's rights in Moroccan society. In other words, the film is politically significant because it emerged at a historical and social juncture, namely the circulation of a new discourse about women's rights and freedom. In addition to the films that I have already presented briefly above, the end of the 1990s saw the emergence of a number of films dealing with women's issues: *Nisaa wa Nisaa* (*Women and Women*, Saâd Chraïbi, 1998) and *Masir Imraa* (*A Woman's Destiny*, Hakim Noury, 1998). The new discourse about women's rights in Morocco culminates in the emergence of the New Family Code in 2004, giving women more freedom to decide upon their life. Following this, many films document this event through cinematic representations that take up the issue of the changes occurring in marital relationships because of the new Moudawana (The New Family Code) and peoples' responses towards it. A famous example here is Zakia Tahiri's *Number One* (2009).

Accordingly, Benlyazid's film can be understood within this general context. It represents two worlds and two gendered spaces, where a female opposition pits itself against a male front as a strategy to defeat patriarchy, and thus, clear up a space for feminine resistance.



In the film, patriarchal logic is hardened into the material spatiality of male/female, public/private spheres. Benlyazid's film can be considered as a feminist film because, to some extent, it deconstructs this gendered iconography in telling us the story of Aicha and her struggle with the son of the Sultan. The narrative of the film is about her rebellion against the denial of female agency and power against the reckless patriarchal logic represented by the son of the Sultan. The film is an adaptation of a traditional story, *Aicha Bent Et-Tajer* (*Aicha the Merchant's Daughter*); it is a kind of narrative based on storytelling. Aicha is a young woman who has learned to read and to write from her father. The son of the Sultan is enamoured with her, though he does not believe women are as intelligent as men. She tries to prove him wrong. However, the son of the Sultan is not so easily convinced, and after he gets married to her, he decides to teach her a lesson by locking her in his granary for three years. Aicha, however, soon finds a way to outwit him by digging a tunnel from the granary to her father's house with the help of this latter.

The film delineates two worlds and spaces that are pitted against each other. The antithetical structure of the film is fundamentally inscribed in the title that makes reference to the two sides of the oppositions. "Keid ensa" presupposes the opposite front that is "keid er-rjal" (men's wives). By foregrounding women wives at the level of the title, Benlyazid re-essentialises oppositions from the side of the marginal by articulating a subversive discourse that culminates in the assertion of the margin. The same holds for Chraïbi's *Nisaa wa Nisaa* where the film producer re-essentialises gender conflicts from the side of women at the level of the title, as well as, the film's poster and its caption which features the names of the female characters in bold letters and writes the names of the male characters in small letters, locating them at the bottom of the poster. This visual and iconic marginalisation, or absence of men, is counterposed with their shadowy presence in the film as perpetrators and oppressive patriarchal figures.

By the same token, Benlyazid's critique and spatial mapping in the film remains binary, in the sense of channelling its critical power and emancipatory objectives around the gendered opposition of men/women. The film represents space as oppressively gendered: men occupy the public sphere while women are relegated to the sphere of domesticity. Moreover, when women go outside into the public space, they put the veil on as a marker of their invisibility in the public space.

Through the story of Aicha Bent Et-Tajer, *Keid Ensa* tries to relocate women at the centre, turning their marginality and physical weakness into a force of subversive strategy that discloses the discourse of patriarchy and reveals their centrality or agency. Depending on a popular



culture's text, the film produces a space of manoeuvres and play, whereby Aicha resists the coercion of the male order. De Certeau's account of the way a popular use of imposed systems create a space of play that foils the other's game is worth citing here. He writes that:

More generally, a way of using imposed systems constitutes the resistance to the historical law of a state of affairs and its dogmatic legitimations. A practice of the order constructed by others redistributes its space; it creates at least a certain play in that order, a space for maneuvers of unequal forces and for utopian points of reference. That is where the opacity of a popular culture could be said to manifest itself—a dark rock that resists all assimilation.¹³

For de Certeau, what is called wisdom in popular culture may be defined as a stratagem—that is a play on words—and as trickery which is ruse, or deception. Such tactics create a field of play and combination of manipulation and enjoyment in getting around the rules of dominated or constraining spaces.¹⁴ In the argument that follows, I shall reveal how Benlyazid's deconstructive strategies in the film build upon lived spaces in the film, as well as, upon a play on words and tricks that foil the order of the prince.

Following this, the balcony is a crucial spatial metaphor that deconstructs gender polarities in the film. Early in the film, the female gaze thwarts the controlling look of the male. Conscious of his voyeuristic desire, Aicha puts a veil on her face and forbids the prince from stealing or having a glimpse of her. So, instead of being an object of voyeurism, the female emerges as a self-conscious subject of enunciation.¹⁵ The scene at the balcony is very revealing. At the outset, the camera looks down on Aicha, intensifying the power of the prince.¹⁶ A confrontation of the two characters is played in a shot/reverse shot pattern which has the son of the Sultan (or camera) looking down to address Aicha in one shot and Aicha (or the camera) looking up to address him in the next shot. Aicha is then oppressed and diminished by the camera angle while the son of the Sultan is magnified.¹⁷ Yet the confrontation of looks in the alternation of shot/reverse shot pattern evokes the piercing and disorienting look of Aicha. Shot/reverse shots are important here because they evoke a structure of cinematographic apparatus that imitates the mirror wherein the subject structures himself through a mode of identification with or rejection of the other. So, rejecting the curious look of the prince, Aicha covers her face and gazes back at him. The point-of-view shot invites the audience to identify with Aicha's position and her perceptual experience that create rupture by means of a clash of gazes (figs. 57- 58).¹⁸



Fig. 57 The son of the sultan surveilling Aicha Bent Et-Tajer—Keid Ensa

Figure 57 depicts the son of the sultan surveilling Aicha Bent Et-Tajer from the top of his window. The top down view of the prince is analogous to that of travel writers in travel narratives. The use of his scopic device — that is the viewing instrument that narrows in on a far away target— underpins meanings of power and mastery.



Fig. 58 Aicha Bent Et-Tajer hiding her face with a veil—Keid Ensa

However, Aicha counteracts this surveilling look through her conscious manipulation of the gaze (fig. 58). As figure 58 reveals Aicha, who becomes conscious of the scopic drive of the prince, hiding her face with a veil as she is looking at him. This gesture expresses her refusal to be gazed upon. The shot/reverse shot intensifies the clashes of gazes



between the two characters. The camera magnifies the piercing looks of Aicha that put an end to the prince's voyeuristic desire. Aicha appropriates the gaze and turns it into a means of resistance rather than repression.

The subtle and resistant activity of Aicha does not stop at this stage. She uses innumerable "ways of playing and foiling the other's game, that is, the space instituted by others."¹⁹ Resorting to linguistic parody and mimicry, Aicha finds a kind of pleasure in reversing the power of the prince. In the story as well as the film, several interactions between the two characters reveal the extent to which Aicha has got "the art of making do" with what she has in order to outwit the prince. This is one of them:

"O Lalla, you who grow basil, you who water a pot of basil on the terrace, tell me, I pray you, how many leaves there are in your basil-plant!" Said the Sultan's son.

"O son of the Sultan," she answered, "O you who hold all lands, O learned Lord, O sage who reads in the book of Allah, tell me how many fish there are in the water, stars in the sky, and stops in the Koran!"

"Be quiet, greedy!" he mocked. "You took up the ball of the thin soup from your breast and ate it."²⁰

Bad humoured, Aicha went away and asked her nursemaid to accompany her out. On their way, she sees the Sultan's son eating a pomegranate. Aicha was much delighted to see him picking up a seed of pomegranate which fell to the earth and eating it.

The following day, the same dialogue takes place between the two. On hearing: "Be gone, greedy! You took up the ball of the thin soup from your breast and ate it," she quickly replies: "Be gone, greedy! You took up the pomegranate seed which had fallen in the mud between your slippers and ate it."²¹

Further tricks used by Bent Et-Tajer are those of disguise. Disguised as a Jewish fish merchant, the son of the Sultan steals a kiss from Aicha's cheeks (fig. 59); in retaliation, she disguises as a black maid and plays tricks on the prince (fig. 60).



Fig. 59 The sultan's son disguised as a Jewish merchant—*Keid Ensa*



Fig. 60 Aicha Bent Et-Tajer disguised as a black maid—*Keid Ensa*

Aicha has learned to make do with what circumstances provide her. The Sultan's son gets married to Aicha and locks her in an underground granary for three years in order to compel her to confess that man is wiler than woman. Instead, she cunningly adapts herself to the new circumstances by digging a tunnel between her prison and her father's house. In these numerous "combatants' stratagems," "there is a certain art of playing one's blows, a pleasure in getting around the rules of constraining space."²² So with the help of her wealthy father, and by means of disguise, Aicha's moves and ruses successfully outwit the



Sultan's son. By using different names and means of masquerade, Aicha accompanies the Sultan's son in his long journeys in the countryside and eventually gives birth to three children: Sour, Dour and Hmamt Laqsour. The children's names correspond to the places where Aicha befriended the prince. At the end, the prince is compelled to admit that woman is wiler than man.

Keid Ensa tries to present a counter discourse to patriarchy. The film's underlying message seems to pronounce female agency in a male oriented society by bringing forth a story from the collective memory of Moroccan culture. Yet, the film does not present the issue in its full complexity. In his analysis of the language used by Brazilian peasants in talking about their situation or crisis in 1974, de Certeau notes:

The discourse parted space in such a way as to stratify it on two levels. On the one hand, a socio-economic space, organized by an immemorial struggle between "the powerful" and "the poor,"...On the other hand, there was a utopian space in which a possibility, by definition miraculous in nature was confirmed by religious stories.²³

The same can be said about *Keid Ensa* and Benlyazid's manipulation or use of popular culture. The story of Bent Et-Tajer tends to create a possibility in the form of a utopian space of female agency and femininity as an eternal subversive essence. This accounts for Benlyazid's choice of a double spatial and temporal framework. While the film's beginning refers to the computer and to the contemporary times of global technological flows, Benlyazid has chosen to take us out of the present; that is, out of the urban space in which we normally live. The film is set in an old city, where the absence of cars, street furniture, huge public buildings, and modern department stores means that the urban in the film constitutes a very distinctive space, essentially a timeless space. Like the old medinas of the principle cities, this space functions as a site of memory and myth, tradition and nostalgia.²⁴

The time lag between the rhythm of contemporary urban life and the traditional space of the city in the film has a critical function. This atemporality in the film helps Benlyazid to take something that is happening in the present and situate it in an urban setting that is different from the contemporary city as it resides anterior to modernity. Deploying such an urban space for her cinematic representation of gender issues is concomitant with her feminist critical views that are based on a gender division between men and women. However, if this gender spatiality of masculine/public and feminine/private space is timeless, women's resistance within it is also eternal. The film tends to argue that whether in



the past or in the contemporary urban space, women have always been powerful agents who subvert the male order of things.

However, Benlyazid's feminist perspective remains retrospect, choosing to situate the gender issue in the past rather than in the present postcolonial urban context. In her examination of Tunisian films dealing with the status of women, Viola Shafik concludes that these films are retrospect in their treatment of gender; they "either excluded the present or showed signs of insecurity when dealing with it."²⁵ Benlyazid's *Keid Ensa* is an example of this tendency. The film as I already discussed above is divided into binary poles on the temporal as well as the spatial axis, providing an urban image titillating between the present and the past, modernity and tradition, while negotiating the possibilities of resistance and emancipation for its female protagonist.

If I can dare to compare *Keid Ensa* with a 1969 film like Latif Lahlou's *Chams Ar-rabi* (*The Spring Sun*), I can confer that Benlyazid's film draws upon a story which offers a view of gender relations and spatial mapping that remains essentialist because excluded from the real play of contemporary urban space. The film lacks the touch with the tempo-spatial dynamics of the present postcolonial urban context. Benlyazid's analysis seems to be tantamount to remaining inside patriarchal metaphysics by representing two worlds, where a unitary female opposition pits itself against a male front as a strategy to defeat patriarchy. Against this asymmetrical grid, *Chams Ar-rabi* sets gender ambivalences and complex spatial geographies within the lived space of Casablanca. Although this film is not altogether about women's resistance, it is nonetheless among the first Moroccan films to offer a sustained view of gender and urban space, and to foreshadow the future of Moroccan cinema in its relation to the urban. The film provides a critique of the binary understanding of gender from a contextual and a relational point of view that constructs the meaning of gender by framing the issue in postcolonial urban space. Within this lived space, which is undergoing socio-economic changes that have led to the emergence of women as visible agents in public space, the notion of a gendered space based on the plenitude of referential meaning is undermined through the staging of reversals and ambiguities. The film not only deflects Benlyazid's view, but carves out a new terrain for the interrogation of the mainstream representation of women and their relative invisibility in other films of the same historical period. Lahlou's film about working women's presence in the market, and their negotiation as well as transformation of urban space, disturbs the gendered spatialities of the private and the public. This presence of women in urban space and their concomitant negotiation of public space is itself an everyday practice



engendered by the socio-economic pressures that weigh equally on both women and men.

In her analysis of the cinematic representations of the changing gender relation in today's Cairo, Dalia Said Mostafa places her examination of the gender dynamics in the urban metropolis of Cairo, a rapidly transforming city, in order to study the relationship between the individual and the restructuring of urban space. More specifically, the main aim of her study is to examine the restrictions placed on public and domestic spaces in Cairo, as well as the impact of such restrictions on their relationships. During the past few years, Egyptian cinema has increasingly documented these changes through urban narratives that involve new themes that challenge these restrictions imposed on both men and women, as well as on public and domestic spaces.²⁶

Dalia Mostapha stresses this point and argues that the economic pressures that weigh equally on both women and men in today's Cairo have created new patterns of relationships between men and women that do not fit within the stereotypical gendered spatiality since both "men and women have found themselves sharing common grounds, values and ideas that bring them together rather than separate and divide them."²⁷ As such,

They go on strikes and protests side by side, they occupy factories together whilst demanding the payment of their wages and bonuses, they queue for bread in the streets together, and they are the ones who are jailed and tortured in prisons and police stations.²⁸

Following this, men and women have found that abiding by conventions and traditions that have hitherto constrained their mobility or visibility in urban space is no longer possible. This is not that society offers women and men more freedom and liberation, but rather that certain past traditions and conventions are no longer possible in a rapidly changing society.²⁹

Lahlou's film seems to cater for these new urban gendered insights. I am referring to it here because this is a film that foreshadows, in my view, the future of Moroccan cinema in terms of its representation of the urban. It also reveals the limits of Benlyazid's gendered view.

This article has considered the question of gendered space in women's films produced by recent female figures like Nejjar and Marrakchi, but more focus has been given to Benlyazid's *Keid Ensa* because of the political and spatial relevance of this film. Benlyazid tends to see the



gender division of men/women as a timeless issue that pertains to the very contemporary society in which we live as well as the traditional one, which somewhat undermines her intention to write female resistance and subjectivity into male-dominated space; this is why, as I have tried to argue, *Keid Ensa* is expressive of Benlyazid's view of feminism as much as it is indicative of the limits of such a view. Spatially, the end of the film shows that the private/public division remains intact and is even reasserted, as Aicha joins the harem life of the Sultan's son.

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¹ Narjiss Nejjar, "Je ne fais pas de propaganda."

² Valérie K. Orlando, *Screening Morocco*, 125.

³ Brian T. Edwards, "Marock in Morocco," 294.

⁴ Ibid, 289.

⁵ Ibid, 292.

⁶ Ibid, 288.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Zahia Smail Salhi, "Maghrebi Women Film-makers," 55-57.

⁹ Viola Shafik, "Arab Cinema Today: A Postscript," 252.

¹⁰ Edward Arnold, "Carnival Ambivalence," 198.

¹¹ Edward Soja and Barbara Hooper, "The Spaces that Difference Makes," 384.

¹² The verb "carnivalize" is derived from Bakhtin's writings on the carnival. See his *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1981): xvii.

¹³ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 18.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ This seems similar to Malek Alloula's Harem where the veil that covers the Algerian woman thwarts the voyeuristic urge of the photographer and "discourages" his "scopic desire." See Malek Alloula, *The Colonial Harem* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987): 7.

¹⁶ "If a camera is.. looking down on its subject, its position is one of power." See Graeme Turner, "Film Languages," in *Film as a Social Practice* (London: Routledge, 1995): 52.

¹⁷ In a sequence like this, "the manipulation of the camera angles is the major means by which the audience is informed about the changing relationship between the two characters." Ibid.

¹⁸ "Camera angles can identify a shot with a character's point of view by taking a position which corresponds to that which we imagine the particular character would be occupying." Ibid.

¹⁹ This expression is used by de Certeau in his account of the tactics used by resistant people who subvert the fatality of imposed systems and orders by re-employing and modifying their function from within. De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 18.

²⁰ See "The Merchant's Daughter and the Sultan's Son," eds. Khalid Bekkaoui, Jilali El Koudia and Abdellatif Khayati (Fez: The Moroccan Cultural Studies Centre, 2007): 8-9.

²¹ Ibid, 10.

²² De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 18.

²³ Ibid, 16.

²⁴ Roy Armes, *Postcolonial Images: Studies in North African Film*, 150.



²⁵ Viola Shafik, “Arab Cinema Today: A Postscript,” 248.

²⁶ Dalia Said Mostafa, “Cinematic Representations of the Changing Gender Relations,” 4.

²⁷ Ibid, 6.

²⁸ Ibid, 7.

²⁹ Ibid.



Sexism through Song: A Feminist Analysis of Bollywood Item Songs

Chandini Jha

Bollywood, India's massively popular movie industry recently started marketing "item numbers," certain song and dance sequences with minimal plot development. Bollywood is more than a movie industry: it serves as a socializing agent in how Indian audiences develop their attitudes about sexuality. How do item numbers featuring sexualized female performers play into the acceptance of sexual violence? By analyzing some of the most popular item songs through multiple feminist lenses, I conclude that item songs not only normalize sexual violence against women, but promote sexual aggression as a desirable quality.

To understand the way item songs contribute to sexual education, it is necessary to establish Bollywood as an important form of sexual socialization in India. Discussing sexuality in India is considered "all but taboo," where the state's abdication of its responsibility to teach students about sexual education has led to "patchy implementation [of sexual education] across Indian states...only focused on abstinence."¹ This self-imposed cultural gag magnifies Bollywood's power in conveying messages about sexuality. Michel Foucault describes how, in the past three centuries, the Western world saw "rather than a concern to hide sex...[there was] wide dispersion of devices intended to speak about it...what was involved was a regulated and polymorphic incitement to discourse."² In India, the vacuum of language or discourse around sexuality has reduced the "dispersal" effect present in the West. Instead, Bollywood movies are one of the only cultural discourses around desire, leading to the centralization of sexual discourse. Thus, Bollywood self-regulates "its incitement to discourse," or the way that Indian normative sexuality is framed, in a veritable monopoly. This magnifies the problem if Bollywood does indeed teach problematic messages about sexual violence as its lessons about sexuality do not have many forms of cultural correction.

Another level of sexism becomes apparent when one factors in Bollywood's economic motives. Item songs are "dance sequences of raunchy movements and risqué lyrics with little relation to the plot line, which aspiring starlets use to debut in Bollywood."³ These item songs are noticeable intrusions on the movie's narrative plot: female sexuality is presented as a pre-packaged commodity put into films for audience entertainment, or consumption by the male gaze. The way item songs are often vehicles for starlets to launch



their careers may contribute to the idea that female actresses' worth is defined by their sexual appeal, or can essentialize women's roles to their (male-defined) sexual appeal.

This economic exploitation of women's sexuality has a long history as a source of gendered oppression. As Gayle Rubin posits, there exists a "sex/gender system...[or] set of arrangements by which society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity, in which these transformed sexual needs are satisfied."⁴ Bollywood presents a manifestation this sex/gender system: the industry uses item songs as a transformative vehicle, in which women's sexuality is turned into a purely economic commodity to provide sexual stimulation for male audiences. Ironically, the idea of women's bodies as "naturally" sexual is only constructed through an elaborate system of patriarchal socialization, which Bollywood is implicated in. Item girls conduct a form of gendered labor, which reinforces the idea that women are responsible for managing men's sexual desires. More troublingly, if women are responsible for men's sexual desires, it encourages societal attitudes that blame women for their own sexual assaults or "mismanagement" of their gendered labor. Women are thus exploited in the economy of sex, but also made to bear the social responsibility of their exploitation.

A closer analysis of their item song lyrics reveals messages that undermine women's agency and ability to consent. Both "Lovely" and "Munni Badnam Hui" are popular item songs, each with over 10 million hits on YouTube.⁵ During "Lovely," the female cabaret performer croons, "my red bangles jingle for you, my hands dance for you... I have gone crazy for you, beloved."⁶ A male lover makes the performer crazy with desire, supporting the idea that masculinity can provoke an incoherent sexual response in women. This conflation of craziness and desire undermines the idea of consent by suggesting that women do not rationally understand their sexual desires.

The singer's sexuality, expressed through her hands and bangles, is performed for the man's sexual pleasure. Thus, female sexuality is only understood in relation to, and in dependence of, the male's active, dominating sexuality. Likewise, in "Munni Badnam Hui" (Munni has become Infamous), the titular Munni states in the chorus: "I have become infamous, just for you darling."⁷ The social responsibility of expressing sexuality is constructed as a female burden; likewise, the idea of acting sexually is associated with dirtiness. Thus, women's bodies—and by extension, women themselves—are lyrically treated as objects for male



pleasure. These lyrics, though not explicitly advising pro-rape behavior, arguably teach to Indian audiences pro-rape attitudes.

However, the cultural construction of item songs are not limited to their textual interpretation: they must be analyzed in terms of their visual elements as well. Turning again to “Lovely” and Munni Badnamm Hui,” female dancers perform their sexuality in ways designed to capture the male gaze. In both videos, the songs begin with a crowd of male spectators viewing the bodies of the female performers, the women’s faces obstructed. When the female performers dramatically turn around, the male spectators cheer uproariously.⁸ The filmmakers thus intend the people watching the dancers—both within the movie and outside of the frame—to be male viewers. Indeed, the male actors can be considered as modeling how the male audience members respond to the dancer’s erotic moves: with vocalized glee and anticipation. The visual elements of the film may socialize viewers into considering public, supposed “appreciation” of women’s bodies as an acceptable behavior, thus encouraging verbal sexual harassment.

Though Bollywood arguably socializes men into accepting sexual violence, the question remains how films actually encourage men to act out these behaviors as a normative ideal. Though sexist media can promote pro-rape attitudes, acting on these attitudes is another issue. However, research into the way masculinity is presented in item songs reveals that the sexual aggressors in films are often rewarded. An in-depth analysis of Hindi films during the late 1980’s and early 1990s found that Hindi films “do more than depict violence against women; they ‘eroticize’ such violence and ask male viewers to identify with heroes who use force to gain the affection of their beloveds.”⁹ Indian men are taught that sexualizing women’s bodies is not only appropriate, but that male protagonists (termed heroes in Indian film culture) who respond to these sexualized bodies are actually rewarded.

Even more troublingly, this phenomenon is not limited to a few movies: a recent study of nine randomly selected Bollywood box-office hits from the late 1990’s reveal that nearly 70% of the perpetrators of sexual violence in movies were the male protagonists.¹⁰ Thus, Bollywood promotes the idea that female sexuality is a prize to be won for simply being a supposed good guy—or that men are entitled to female affection. Indeed, item songs present an ideal time for heroes to express their masculinity. This a theme in both the “Lovely” and “Munni Badnamm Hui” videos, in which the male protagonists erotically dance with the item girls, who reward them with smiles and affectionate touches. Thus, the concepts of sexual aggression and



being venerated as a “hero” are interlinked, implicitly teaching men that sexual violence is not only excusable but a normative standard.

Given the way Bollywood item songs seem to express and reinforce pro-rape attitudes, a question remains if there can be a feminist reclamation of the item song in which women claim, rather than abdicate, their sexual agency and ability to consent. Consider “Sheila Ki Jawani” (Sheila’s Killer Youth), a popular item song with what can be considered a feminist message. During the song, Sheila dances on stage surrounded by male admirers, physically pushing them away from her.¹¹ Rather than accepting their invasion of her personal space, Sheila’s body language reinforces the idea that women can reject men’s advances. Though Sheila dances in a hyper-sexualized way, even posing in bed-sheets and pouring water on herself, her behavior can be analyzed as a woman celebrating her sexual agency and desirability. As Sheila herself states, “I know you want it but you’re never gonna get it/I’m too sexy for you/I’ll never fall into your hands.”¹² Sheila self-identifies as a sexual being, but refuses to consider herself an item for male consumption: they will “never” capture her in their hands. Instead, she subverts gender dynamics by frustrating her admirers, thus placing her in a position of power.

“Sheila Ki Jawani” seems to promote a feminist cause, but a closer analysis of the video reveals that Sheila is actually prevented from claiming her sexual agency. Helene Cixous promoted the idea of women’s sexuality as a creative force, arguing that “by writing herself, women will return to the body which has been confiscated from her... it will tear her away from the super-egoized structure in which she has always occupied the place reserved for the guilty.”¹³ “Sheila Ki Jawani” fulfills the first part of Cixous’ recommendation by allowing a woman to celebrate her own sexuality as a creative force. Much like in writing, Sheila uses her sexuality to creatively perform as an actress: she overturns the patriarchal script by refusing to apologize for her sexuality, instead flaunting and taunting men. However, the fact Sheila’s performance of sexuality is constrained by her occupation actually undermines its feminist bent. Her dance is designed to be part of a script (a movie within the actual movie), reinforced by shots of her director filming Sheila.¹⁴ Thus, Sheila is not joyously claiming her own sexuality, but distancing herself from it: her sexual behavior is a required part of her job. Likewise, “Lovely” and “Munni Badnam Hui” feature a cabaret and roadside peepshow performer, respectively.¹⁵ In all three cases, women are not acting in a self-directed pursuit of desire but are implicated in the economic and social structures designed to produce male pleasure. Thus, Cixous’ call for women to reclaim their bodies from the “structures that



make them... guilty” remains unfulfilled: women’s true expression of sexuality, for their own pleasure, is seen as deviant and obscene.

In summary, Bollywood’s item songs send problematic messages about female consent and venerate male sexual aggression. Rather than conceptualizing item songs as myths or fantasies, audiences use their messages to establish norms of sexual behavior, in part because of Bollywood’s control of discourse about sexuality. These pro-rape attitudes—reinforced through item songs—contribute to a culture where sexual violence is allowed to thrive. In order to meaningfully combat sexual violence in India, more attention needs to be paid to educating the public to be critical consumers of item songs’ explicit and implicit messages about sexuality; to add competing narratives about sexuality through more comprehensive sexual education; and to craft socially responsible video songs that allow women to genuinely express sexual desires.

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Embodying the Serpent: A Critical Re-engagement of *Borderlands/ La Frontera* in Language and Identity Performance

Shelby Ward

Abstract: Using feminist standpoint and linguistic theoretical lenses, I re-explore Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/ La Frontera* in order to examine how we might more productively engage and perform identities on the space of the page. My argument covers two parts, first, that writing itself is always a performance of the self, and that by acknowledging this performance we might more actively engage our writing in alternative and productive ways. Second, I believe that we can see Anzaldúa's work as way to see the performance of identities through writing, and to more mindfully engage the audience for a more active social consciousness. In order to show how Anzaldúa's work adds to the scholarship of performance studies, I will also be reading *Borderlands/ La Frontera* alongside the work of and about Anna Deavere Smith. By putting these women in conversation together, I suggest we deepen our conversations about the performance spaces of the body and language. Ultimately, I argue that writing is a performance of the self, and a more mindful approach to language as performance has the potential to provide a more radical openness for a transformative social and political consciousness as it calls, through its performance, the emergences of new voices and bodies, previously left and silenced in the margins and borderlands. That is, Anzaldúa and Smith show us how to embody the serpent.

Keywords: border studies; identity politics; feminist theory; linguistic theory; performance studies

Since 1987, Gloria Anzaldúa's work *Borderlands/ La Frontera* has given individuals, particularly those contested bodies, a language and theory to talk about the border spaces of identity, as they move through and navigate the different intersecting threads of cultural, political, economic, and geographical spaces. Every time I return to *Borderlands*, I feel Anzaldúa reaching out to me, bringing the desert heat close to my skin. But what was different about this work than other approaches to writing? For me, *Borderlands* is a dance, as if there is a moving body in front of the page, that emerges from the small corners of the margins, speaking, whispering in a language the body has, somehow, always known. Thus, while Anzaldúa sought to complicate our understanding of those bodies living on the borders of the American Southwest, she also complicated the relationship



between language and the body. For Anzaldúa, “the borderlands are only in part geographic; instead, the borderlands must be understood metaphorically, as a state of being and consciousness, continually being redefined.”¹ Anzaldúa demonstrates the fluid interactions and the co-creating agency between geographic place and the cultural space of individuals.² *Borderlands* has allowed those of us interested in the liminality of bodies and identities to theorize a border consciousness. However, I suggest that it also provides a lens to explore *Identity Performance* in writing. This investigation will, as is appropriate, be an investigation of another borderland: between language and the body.

Introducing Identity Performance to this investigation is, somewhat, tautological. Referencing Judith Butler, identity is already indicative of performativity. Notably, Butler has indicated the social construction of gender within repetitive acts, or performances. As she writes, “if gender is instituted through acts which are internally discontinuous, then the *appearance of substance* is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief.”³ However, I overtly emphasize Identity Performance to, first, explore how the construction of identity formations, such as gender, are articulated within language as one of numerous “*stylized repetition of acts*” that constitute identity within time and space.⁴ And, second, to facilitate conversations between literary theory and performance studies to more productively engage our understandings of “identity” and “performance.” Therefore, when I use Identity Performance I refer to the collective “gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self,”⁵ or identified self, and as I invoke “identity” or “performance,” I mean to invoke a specific articulation of the self as indicated by the author, or performer.

In the act of writing, the page becomes a borderland where the individual is forced to shuttle between different identities, as different identities are always being redefined and rearticulated.⁶ Additionally, I maintain that work like *Borderlands/ La Frontera*, with a political and social consciousness, more effectively engages mindful performance writing than more “traditional” approaches to scholarship.⁷ Engaging writing as performance, as a productive means, also acknowledges the historical resonance that theatre has had in political activism and social change. As Baz Kershaw states in “Performance, Community, Culture,” that “[i]n attempting to forge new tools for cultural production, alternative theatre ultimately hoped, in concert with other oppositional institutions and



formations, to re-fashion society.”⁸ Anzaldúa’s work, in many ways, seeks to re-fashion consciousness, and ultimately, in doing so, teaches us how to *speak identities*. That is, identities are languages themselves, and it is precisely those bodies on the border, whom are already required to overtly shuttle between linguistic and social practices, that have the most to teach us about the fluency of Identity. Anzaldúa, herself, creates her own language by engaging in multiple writing and performing voices, each style of voice or language allowing various identities to emerge on the page. As Yvonne Yarbo-Bejarano states that “*Borderlands/ La Frontera* juxtaposes essays and poetry, political theory and cultural practice, not separating one from the other but producing a fusion of the two, a ‘theory in the flesh.’”⁹ Monica Perales also adds that “[Anzaldúa’s] profoundly personal insights into the centrality of gender and sexuality made her work enduring across disciplines, forcing us to consider how sex and gender structured power relations and historically shaped struggles for dignity and survival, and how socially constructed ideas about sex and gender clashed in physically and psychically violent ways.”¹⁰ Additionally, *Borderlands* provides insight to reading theories of the flesh as individuals navigate and move through various identity spaces, and as markers of gender and sexuality are also historically produced through various power relations, we might also meet these discursive power relations on the page itself. The page is the space where these identity relations are not only performed, but are also critiqued, questioned, and made strange.

Therefore, I maintain that this work also provides scholarship on the performance aspect of writing, which ultimately questions the relationship between language and the body. *Borderlands* is a performance of the body, even without a corporal being staged in front of us. The page, the text itself is a material space that can open up new alternative avenues for performance, specifically, a performance of Identity. The page allows multiple, and sometimes contrasting identities to show through, just as Anzaldúa’s says that she is both the eagle and the serpent, the page becomes both body and text. For example, writing on the connections of language and performance, John Jesurun writes that:

I am not only writing on a page, I am writing in space that simultaneously contains all these points of view and their mediators, including the performers. Words are points in space, and purely physical notions of boundaries and scale become irrelevant. It is a constant process of trying to stretch the language around new forms with the thought that language is the ultimate survivor and can take all kinds of



reformatting. This includes the use of silence, which introduces speaking to the threat of its own mortality.¹¹

This relationship between writing and death has been theorized by several, including, Michel Foucault, stating that “this relationship between writing and death is also manifested in the effacement of the writing subject’s individual characteristics. Using all of the contrivances that he sets up between himself and what he writes, the writing subject cancels out the signs of his particular individuality.”¹² Language moves towards death as it moves out beyond us, away from us, effacing the writer in the process. To write is to constantly engage with this effacement. Additionally, I would argue that it is this disappearance that Anzaldúa actively acknowledges in her work, at times fighting against erasure, and at other times, embracing it. This writing style acknowledges death, but also sacrifices to death each time she enters into the text with a new voice. Engaging the disappearance and reappearance of her varying voices is one of the multiple ways to approach this work. As Foucault also posits, “we must locate the space left empty by the author’s disappearance, follow the distribution gaps and breaches, and watch for the openings this disappearance uncovers.”¹³ Her sacrifice into writing should not be in vain.

Writing is a way to hold up, all at once, all the different performers within the self. Anzaldúa’s work only engages the black and white spaces of the text as a way to stage, and to claim, all the varying voices within her borderlands psyche. Specifically, for Anzaldúa, she understands her work as the poetic performance of a shaman. As Anzaldúa writes, “[i]n the ethno-poetics and performance of the shaman, my people, the Indians, did not split the artistic from the functional, the sacred and from the secular, art from everyday life...The ability of story (prose and poetry) to transform the storyteller and the listener into something or someone else is shamanistic. The writer, as shape-changer, is a *nahual*, a shaman.”¹⁴ The act of writing becomes the entranced, transformative ritual to bring forth the multiple voices and spirits from within her body. Her own shape-shifting body, one that we learn to see as the serpent’s, uses the space between the body and language to perform Identity in all its multiplicities. On a similar note Ronald J. Pelias also argues that “the poetic essay is a powerful way to render a performative experience, and that his book, *Writing Performance: Poeticizing the Researcher’s Body*, is a “‘a writing performance.’ That is, it is interested in both writing about performance, from everyday performative routines we enact to the texts we stage, as well as writing performatively, creating texts that vanish as they appear, that live in a complex undecidability, and that reside in the poetic.”¹⁵ *Borderlands/ La Frontera* is the poetic residing in



the performative. Like Pelias and others, we can see the performance aspects within language as scripting and informing our identities. Anzaldúa writes of own poetic performances:

My 'stories' are act encapsulated in time, 'enacted' every time they are spoken aloud or read silently. I like to think of them as performances and not as inert and 'dead' objects (as the aesthetics of Western culture think of art works). Instead, the work has an identity; it is a 'who' or a 'what' and contains the presences of persons, that is, incarnations of gods or ancestors or natural cosmic powers. The work manifests the same needs as a person, it needs to be 'fed,' *la tengo que bañar y vestir*.¹⁶

Not only do her stories contain bodies, incarnations of gods and ancestors, but these are also hungry bodies. The voices performed are not all human, but also a "what" as her shamanistic powers calls forth for the multiple shape-shifting bodies that they performance may call for. She describes this book as a "precocious girl-child forced to grow up too quickly, rough, unyielding, with pieces of feather sticking out here and there, fur, twigs clay. My child, but not for much longer. This female being is angry, sad, joyful, is *Coatlicue*, dove, horse, serpent, cactus. Though it is a flawed thing—a clumsy, complex, groping blind thing—for me it is alive, infused with spirit. I talk to it; it talks to me."¹⁷ It is no longer hers, it is ours, and we as readers must watch it grope, squirm, scream, fall silent, and morph to serpent and cactus before our very eyes. That is, it performs for us.

Identities are expressed and performed in various and multiple ways, and writing is one of them. As bell hooks states, "[w]e are wedded in language, have our being in words. Language is also a place for struggle...Our words are not without meaning, they are an action, a resistance. Language is also a place for struggle."¹⁸ And we use these actions to create work that "include our multiple voices within the various texts we create—in film, poetry, feminist theory."¹⁹ And it is through these agentic modalities invested in language that I maintain that we can more mindfully engage to create Identity Performances.

My argument covers two parts, first, that writing itself is always a performance of the self, and that by acknowledging this performance we might more actively engage our writing in alternative and productive ways. Second, I believe that we can see Gloria Anzaldúa's work as way to see the performance of identities through writing, and to more mindfully engage



the audience for a more active social consciousness. In order to show how Anzaldúa's work adds to the scholarship of performance studies, I will also be reading *Borderlands/ La Frontera* alongside the work of and about Anna Deavere Smith, particularly those involving her piece, *Fires in the Mirror*.²⁰ By putting these women in conversation together, I suggest we deepen our conversations about the performance spaces of the body and language. Ultimately, I argue that writing is a performance of the self, and a more mindful approach to language as performance has the potential to provide radical openness for a transformative social and political consciousness as it calls, through its performance, the emergences of new voices and bodies, previously left and silenced in the margins and borderlands. Anzaldúa effectively acknowledges that writing is a performance of the self and uses the performance to engage the issues embedded within identities themselves, particularly those bodies that are forced to shuttle between political, social, economic, and cultural borderlands. She forces the reader to consider their own political positions of privilege and oppression, while they also revisit their own stereotypes and assumptions. While she specifically discusses those individuals living on the border of the US and Mexico, she makes the reader question other macro and micro identity politics that govern bodies from governmental legislation to an individual's own body. Anzaldúa's work not only demonstrates the performance of the self in writing, but also how place and the spaces that are created around geographic landscapes also perform the body in political, social, economic, and cultural ways.

Additionally, by using various kinds of writing including poems, prose, personal narrative, song, histories, and whatever else to mix together to form a theory of borderlands, she is able to engage multiple voices and even change how we can interact and approach the spaces on the page, where white space and black letters become blocking and staging, lighting and shading, in order for these various voices and accounts to perform the engaged self, and to call for an altered consciousness. My approach to understanding Anzaldúa's and Smith's work is with a feminist standpoint theory lens, that is, I believe that knowledge can be gained from those perspectives on the margins, and that their lived experience not only serves to provide alternative, radical possibilities of for understanding language and the body, but I also believe that through this relationship to text we can also see how these identities are played out, or performed, in writing. Anzaldúa states that "[t]o write, to be a writer, I have to trust and believe in myself as a speaker, as a voice for the images. I have to believe that I can communicate with images and words and that I can do it well. A lack of belief in my creative self is a lack of belief in my total self and vice versa—I



cannot separate my writing from any art of my life. It is all one.”²¹ For Anzaldúa, to write is to also speak, to use her voice effectively with both images and words. To write is also to perform.

In conversation with Donna Haraway, Liliana Vargas-Monroy states that Anzaldúa’s own situated theory “arises then from her own history and connects with the emergence of new spaces, of new narratives of refuges, which she constructs by weaving her histories with the subaltern knowledge of the indigenous Mexican people.”²² This is an Identity Performance that allows the body to move and sing and transform within the staging of white space. White space is the stage where disruptions, resistances, and contradictions, that is, the borderlands emerge. White space is both the page, the performance of the text, as an act of identity politics, where black words create borderlands, carving out centers and margins, and is also that perceived culturally-constructed, white space of American identity. In either case, without borders, it is just blank space. bell hooks, discussing the relationship between voice and the margins, and arguing for the possibilities that stories contain for an alternative, radical openness, states, “[t]his is an intervention. A message from that space in the margin that is a site of creativity and power, that inclusive space where we recover ourselves, where we move in solidarity to erase the category colonized/ colonizer. Marginality as a site of resistance. Enter that space. Let us meet there. Enter that space. We greet you as liberators.”²³ In Anzaldúa’s text she invites those to join, to enter the space, but only those that already are fluent in the language of marginality, as she uses various languages without translations, are able to move freely between the center and margins.

Moreover, there is enormous potential in looking at writing as performance, including the potential of the forms and functions that different writings can have within a text. In this work, I examine the transitive relationship in performance roles as writer and reader, suggesting that the performance of the text enables us to engage the different worldviews, perceptions, identities, and bodies that each of us possess, and that this awareness can be a deconstruction mechanism for power relations embedded in our skins, and their subsequent socio-cultural constructions. Ultimately, this study sees bodies as discourses, both in lived experience and in writing.

Mapping the Borderlands between the Body and Language

In order to understand how writing provides a space for Identity Performance, we must ultimately question the space between the body and language. We might even think of the body as kind of language: a moving, shifting language. André Lepecki perhaps puts the issue best when he asks,



“[w]here lie the limits between body and text, movement and language?”²⁴ There is a movement in language, a performance of the self. Lepecki suggests that in order to investigate the relationship to language and text that one must also understand the Western tradition of Femininity with dance:

I am referring to the (almost spontaneous) parallels habit and language have forged between dance and writing (as explicitly manifest in ‘choreo/graphing’) and between dance and femininity (as explicitly manifested in the perception of dancing as threat to masculinity...The spaces of friction constituted by the restless tensions between body and text, movement and language, indicate precisely a limitless contiguity among dance, writing, and femininity.²⁵

The moving body is also a written body, as the body moves it performs. Anzaldúa also describes in the process of writing that the space between body and text becomes a shifting, morphing space that moves, like a dance. As Anzaldúa states, “[t]his almost finished product seems an assemblage, a montage, a beaded work with several leitmotifs and with a central core, now appearing, now disappearing in a crazy dance. The whole thing has had a mind of its own, escaping me and insisting on putting together the pieces of its own puzzle with minimal direction from my will.”²⁶ Anzaldúa is aware of the self-appearing and disappearing into the text, and lets the trace of her disappearance, which moves like her breath, in and out, in and out of the text, take over and dance. To begin mapping the relationship between language and the body, as Lepecki suggests, we should also consider the performance of the feminine. Perhaps we can also think of this moving body, moving and transitioning, like a snake. After all, this is also how Anzaldúa also thinks of her own feminine body. A body that is mythical, full of earth and stories and timelessness.

Anzaldúa begins “Entering Into the Serpent” with her mother’s warnings of snakes: “Don’t go to the outhouse at night, Prieta, my mother would say. *No se te vaya a meter algo por allá*. A snake will crawl into your *nalgas*, make you pregnant. They seek warmth in the cold. *Dicen que las culebras*, can draw milk out of you.”²⁷ One does not have to work hard to see the traditional phallic characteristics of the snake image, however, what Anzaldúa goes on to say is that she eventually learned that she was actually the snake, it’s fluid body, was her body too. As she states: “Snakes, *víboras*: since that day I’ve sought and shunned them. Always when they cross my path fear and elation flood my body. I know things older than Freud older



than gender. She—that’s how I think of *la Víbora*, Snake Woman. Like the ancient Olmecs, I know Earth is a coiled Serpent. Forty years it’s taken me to enter into the Serpent, to acknowledge that I have a body that I am a body and to assimilate the animal body, the animal soul.”²⁸ The snake metaphor also serves as a conceptualization mechanism for understanding the contrasting identities that any one individual body contains. By claiming this story, she is also claiming her body through language, that is, her serpentine body. And in the end she knew the truth: the earth was a coiled serpent. Her body was the serpent. Her body was the Earth, and knew things older than gender, and other such historical and socially constructed entities.

Additionally, this passage advocates for different kinds of voices, demonstrating how different stories and languages surround and construct individuals. Ultimately, it is through language that she is able to explore the identity performances of her own body. Cultural stories are not homogenous, they affect individual bodies in different and various ways. The snake also creates a gendered and sexed space, the judgement of the feminine. But by claiming this cursed body, she also liberates it in the very act of performing it. This move toward performance is also in the writing subject’s body. As Pelias similarly describes the relationship between the poet and the performer, “[t]he performer’s empathic move to the poet ends in the somatic. The body learns its desires. It lives in and for the sensuous. It comes to understanding by feel. Its knowledge is felt. It holds its secrets in its muscles, in its step, in its reach. It finds truth in the tightened fist, the swift turn, the hesitant tone. It breathes down the poet’s neck.”²⁹ We can feel the somatic in Anzaldúa’s claim of her own snake body. A body that she moves with, a body that she can speak with, a body that she can speak from.

The body of a snake is also a body of borders. As Anzaldúa declares, “I am a border woman. I grew up between two cultures, the Mexican (with a heavy Indian influence) and the Anglo (as a member of a colonized people in our own territory). I have been straddling that *tejas*-Mexican border, and others, all my life. It’s not a comfortable territory to live in, this place of contradictions. Hatred, anger and exploitation are the prominent features of this landscape.”³⁰ She has lived the borderlands, but now she must speak them, claiming “I am.” She also demonstrates the borders in flesh by blurring the line between geographies and bodies, (and perhaps there never was a difference.) Through *Borderlands* we watch her perform her various identities, simultaneously, but she also, always is considering the identities of the reader. Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano suggests that we keep the borders between the reader and the text into consideration when reading



Borderlands/ La Frontera, “the reader, vis-à-vis plural centers and margins, and the text, within traditions of theorizing multiply embodied subjectivities by women of color and living in the borderlands.”³¹ The body that is performing in front of you should not be fetishized, nor co-opted and (re)written to fit the center’s language.

The is text the space where these different Identity formations are performed, both for the reader and writer. Because these plural centers and margins are moving in and out, like undulations of serpents, the performance is never the same. Understanding the different intersections of text and reader also avoids fetishizing “*Borderlands* as the invention of one unique individual,” as Yarbo-Benjarano also argues, and “[g]iven the text’s careful charting of *mestiza* consciousness in the political geography of one particular border, reading it as part of a collective Chicano negotiation around the meaning of historical and cultural hybridity would further illuminate the process of ‘theorizing in the flesh,’ of producing theory through one’s own lived realities.”³² The alternative consciousness that Anzaldúa works towards is a collective, shifting consciousness of difference, a *mestiza* consciousness. Again, the text is the space that the performance is given life; the reader becomes involved in the creation of the performance, but it is important to keep in mind the reader’s own situated, corporeal body of knowledge. For example, when Anzaldúa writes that “[w]hen we’re up against the wall, when we have all sorts of oppressions coming at us, we are forced to develop this faculty so that we’ll know when the next person is going to slap us or lock us away...It’s a kind of survival tactic that people, caught between the worlds, unknowingly cultivate.”³³ It is just as violence to co-opt her voice, and to have her language rearticulated in the center’s tongue. The metaphoric bodies performed within the text are performative of the lived, corporeal body. This move both effaces the writer’s body in the act of writing, but is also referring back to the physical body. This also indicates the multitudes and fluidness within the identities of the body. For Anzaldúa, this fluid body, this snake’s body, is performed in the borderlands of lived experiences and writing.

In theatre proper, there is a similar sentiment in relation to Anna Deveare Smith’s work to not tend toward voyeurism when working with the “other.” For example, in *Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Other Identities* Smith interviews both political and local community members, and from these conversations creates a script, playing each individual herself. As she transitions between male, female, old, young, white, black, and Jewish, she blurs the degree of separation between each, indicating socially fluid constructions. As Carol Martin states that “[Smith’s] theatrical



specialty is shape-shifting, a morph without aid of digitization. Slippery identity and morphing are very powerful because they conjure the extreme fluidity of social and personal identities and the fears such fluidity arouses.”³⁴ Like Anzaldúa, she has accepted this fear, and reclaimed her own morphing, fluid serpentine body. A body that moves in and out of identities, and in and out of languages. In an interview with Martin, Smith says that she emphasizes to her students “that acting is becoming the other. To acknowledge the other, you have to acknowledge yourself.”³⁵ To acknowledge the other you have to acknowledge where your own social consciousness lies, what it sees and what it does not. To acknowledge the Other is acknowledge your own blindness. Again, the importance of language is demonstrated in the mapping of the body, this time, for the other’s body. As Smith explains, “I can learn how to know who somebody is, not from what they tell me, but from *how* they tell me. This will make an impression on my body and eventually my psyche. Not that I would understand it but I would feel it.”³⁶ To understand the other within yourself is to understand the shifting identities within each of us. Language, is a medium that is able to perform these multitudes.

Furthermore, Yarbo-Bejarano explains that “Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands* exemplifies the articulation between the contemporary awareness that *all* identity is constructed across difference and the necessity of a new *politics* of difference to accompany this new sense of self.”³⁷ The act of writing that also demonstrates the performativity of Identity, so then to write is to perform one’s identity, or the moving shifting identities that make and unmake an individual. However, it is in language we must also be careful in *how* we express identity categories, as Judith Butler posits, “identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes, whether as normalizing categories of oppressive structures or as the rallying points for a liberatory contestation of that very oppression.”³⁸ Thus, there is also risk within language, “to be recolonized by the sign under which I write,” as Butler explains of her own work, “and so it is this risk that I seek to thematize.”³⁹ However, I also suggest that as Anzaldúa and Smith perform identities within multiples, they subsequently resist re-colonization. Their serpentine movements, moving within shadows, with shadows, throwing up unfaithful puppets on the wall, make them hard to catch, and difficult to label, without consent. To take on such risk, both in corporeal, social and political life and as these intersections articulate in language, can be, as suggested by Anzaldúa, exhilarating, as “[l]iving on borders and in margins, keeping intact one’s shifting and multiple identity and integrity, is like trying to swim in a new element, an ‘alien’ element.”⁴⁰ But constantly moving, crossing between fear and excitement, I am compelled to ask, when



does the serpent's body tire? The answer seems to be, it does not, as it emerges in language. The performance of the serpent is always re-performed between the reader and the text. And it is precisely these spaces of the text, articulating between the reader and author, that we map out the borderlands between the body and language, and map a place containing a radical openness within the shifting borders of voices and text.

Speaking in Borders: The Performance of Identity in Language and Voice

Once Anzaldúa and Smith have claimed the title of Border Women they must then learn how to speak borders, as a performance of the multiple identities embedded in their voices. Anzaldúa states that the Mexican-US border is a "1,950 mile-long open wound/dividing a *pueblo*, a culture,/ running down the length of my body,/ staking rods in my flesh,/ splits me splits me."⁴¹ Referencing this passage, Yarbo-Bejarano suggests that, "[t]his initial image figures the border as the writing subject's own body, exemplifying Anzaldúa's embodied theory and subjectivity."⁴² Anzaldúa contrasts the hard border of the U.S.-Mexican "where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds" in contrast with the image of the unborderable sea. As she states, "[b]ut the skin of the earth is seamless. / The sea cannot be fenced, / *el mar* does not stop at borders."⁴³ These statements indicate two things about borders. First, even though they have very real implications for social bodies, but they are secondly, a constructed entity. There is nothing natural about them. It is also in this first chapter, "The Homeland, Aztlán/ *El otro México*" where Anzaldúa goes through all the different identities contained within her skin: Texan, Mexican, Native, Spanish. All of these identities, designated by Capital Letters, are likewise social constructions, and she moves between them like the sea washing on the land. The border signals the linguistic borders laid out on top of geographical borders. But these spaces are not closed, they open and speak back as they are performed. Borders, then, are not dividing lines, but spaces of intersection where voices are created in co-creation with the other.

This co-creation of identity and identity spaces that open up in the text itself is the way that Anzaldúa she shuttles between Spanish and English without preface or translation. She is working through more than just Spanish and English, as we might traditionally think of, but she is also working within and out of a variety of different, what we might call "Creole" languages. She shows that language, as any other border-drawing practice, is not clearly defined, but that language itself is slippery, it moves, it changes, it blends, and reconfigures. For example, we can see how language moves and shifts with her varying voices and identities when she writes: "*La travesía*." For many *mexicanos del otro lado*, the choice is to stay in Mexico and starve or



move north and live. *Dicen que cada mexicano siempre suena de la conquista en los brazos de cuatro gingas rubias, la conquista del país poderoso del norte, los Estados Unidos. En cada Chicano y mexicano vive el mito del Tesoro territorial perdido.* North Americans call this return to the homeland the silent invasion.”⁴⁴ Language is linked to the sociocultural and political threads running through these geographic borders. The decision to cross borders or not, *la travesía*, is also dangerous, forcing individuals to choose between starvation and silence. People live and breathe and speak and dream in these in-between languages, in these in-between political systems, and in these in-between territories. As she explores geo-political borders, she is simultaneously questioning, tracing, and mapping the borders between body and language. Revealing that there are no borders, only borderlands, the messy in-betweenness of languages and spaces.

In these revelations, we can also think of her use of different languages, as well as the different voices she claims –The Shifting Skins of the Snake Woman—as purposeful staging. Each voice, each story, each utterance is not contradictory, but as all of these voices and identities move through her own body, come from her own situated knowledge, they become a part of *a dance called borderland identity*. She is able to do this effectively because her body itself is always, already performing these identities. In regards to her language shuttling, Anzaldúa states:

The switching of ‘codes’ in this book from English to Castilian Spanish to the North Mexican dialect to Tex-Mex to a sprinkling of Nahuatl to mixture of all of these, reflects my language, a new language—the language of the Borderlands. There, the juncture of cultures, language cross-pollinate are revitalized; they die and are born. Presently this infant language, this bastard language, Chicano Spanish, is not approved by any society. But we Chicanos no longer feel that we need to beg entrance, that we need to always make the first overture—to translate to Anglos, Mexicans and Latinos, apology blurting out of our mouths with every step. Today we ask to be met halfway. ⁴⁵

That is, the entire text is only completely translatable for those individuals which already embody the language outside of the text itself. As Anzaldúa chooses to use English, Spanish, or Metiza language, she operates as a cartographer of liminalities, negotiating and mapping the borderlands between her own body and language, and between the body of the reader



and the text. Additionally, this shuttling between languages, by showing the crossing between national, geographical, and linguistic borders deconstructs any notions of a single, stable identity.

For the reader, this liminal cartography is productive as it makes language strange for those bodies in the center, for those that do not have to constantly shuttle and code shift. This is similar to what Elin Diamond notes is the “cornerstone of [Bertolt] Brecht’s theory,” that is, the concept of “Verfremdungseffekt, the technique of defamiliarizing a word, an idea a gesture so as to enable the spectator to see or hear it afresh.”^{46 47} And quoting from Brecht, writes that “a representation that alienates is one which allows us to recognize its subjects, but at the same time makes it seem unfamiliar.”^{48 49} Although, I would suggest that Anzaldúa’s work slightly alters Diamond’s reading of Brechtian Theory, as Diamond states that the actor “‘alienates’ rather than impersonates her character’s behavior instead of identifying with it.”⁵⁰ Through her particular technique of language use, Anzaldúa makes language strange by alienating certain readers, however, she also embodies and identifies with this strangeness within language. This works because she is confessing that she has been made to feel estranged through the political, social, and cultural borderlands of language. The fact that she is both able to both alienate and embody, but abandon the reader while claiming her own voice, she is able to more overtly acknowledge the power discourses that course through the very words we speak and embody the cultural worldviews that they help to create.

Additionally, Anzaldúa moves through these different voices by showing different kinds of writings, besides the choice of language use, including myth, poems, personal histories, along with more traditional social and political writings. Through the performance of language and these different styles, borders are made strange, as each of us contain various borders and subsequent voices that we must navigate through. Anna Deavere Smith is also able to show the arbitrary construction of borders, while also still able to convey the very political, social, and cultural implications that these identity borders have for individuals. Carol Martin, setting up her interview with Anna Deavere Smith, states that Smith is “the person through whom so many voices travel.”⁵¹ Her series, *Fires in the Mirror*, dealt with another borderland: Crown Heights⁵². Crown Heights through the 1991 riots became a space of contested identity as black and Jewish neighborhoods and individuals claimed their places. For this piece she played such figures as Angela Davis, Reverend Al Sharpton, and a Jewish school teacher, and as Martin states, “[t]hey speak together across race, history, theory, and difference in their own words through Smith’s conjuring performative



language.”⁵³ Smith, discussing her writing of the script, states, “I actually tried to heighten the sense of inclusion for everybody by using the pronouns ‘us’ and ‘we’ in relation to everybody. I address the text like a poem. I work on ‘us’ and ‘we’ whenever anybody, regardless of race, says them.”⁵⁴ It may appear, initially, that Smith’s inclusive language is an alternative approach to difference and borders, as often Anzaldúa work alienates those bodies who do not speak borders. However, I maintain that each woman approaches the border in order to embrace, perform, and resist the strangeness of border-making. That is, each travels to the borderland in order to indicate the social constructions of divisions between bodies, such as race, religious identities, and gender.

Moreover, as the traveling, the crossing to and between borders also involves language, each woman also acknowledges that words themselves possess spiritual powers. Similarly, as Anzaldúa’s learned to embody the snake, Smith states that, “[my] grandfather told me that if you say a word often enough, it becomes you. I was very interested before I developed this project in how manipulating words has a spiritual power. / I can learn to know who somebody is, not from what they tell me, but from *how* they tell me. This will make an impression on my body and eventually on my psyche. Not that I would understand it but I would feel it.”⁵⁵ Words are not only embodied, but might enable us to embody some sliver of another individual’s experience. By speaking their words, we might have an idea of how their language sounds on our tongues, within our own bodies. Showing the other is not outside, but within. However, Smith never forgets, and, perhaps most importantly, does not let the audience forget that the individuals that she portrays are social, political, and cultural individuals that must act in the world as social bodies.

These different uses of alienation, inclusion, and strangeness between Anzaldúa and Smith, signals their various Identity Performances. Anzaldúa performs her own identity, and the multiple voices and stories that she contains, while Smith performs the identities of others. Both kinds of performances show both the constructed and fluid nature of identities, but each performance seems uniquely suited to the approach taken. Smith uses her body as writing mechanism, showing the mobility of identity. In a review of *Fires in the Mirror*, Attilio Favorini states that Smith is “literally ‘identity in motion,’... [i]t also comes close to emblemizing Smith’s definition of acting as ‘the *travel* of the self to the other.”⁵⁶ ⁵⁷Anzaldúa stages the page as a space for her own identities to sing and dance, while acknowledging those that are pushed to the borders and marginalized. At the end of “The Homeland, Aztlán / *El otro México*,” that “*La mojada, la*



mujer indocumentada, is doubly threatened in this country...As a refugee, she leaves the familiar and safe homeground to venture into unknown and possibly dangerous terrain. This is her home / this thin edge of / barbwire.”⁵⁸ Likewise, Anzaldúa steps into writing this piece as a performance, with an overt awareness of the vulnerability inherent in showing one’s body on stage. Her spirit stands naked on a block saying, “look.” Both women are able to not only show the performativity of identities, but also the lived and embodied experience that comes from individual bodies, such awareness might open new radical, mindful consciousnesses.

Performance Writing as a Mode of Deconstruction for Power Relations:

Anzaldúa uses her body as discourse, she writes:

I look at my fingers, see plumes growing there. From the fingers, my feathers, black and red ink drips across the page. *Escribo con la tinta de mi sangre*. I write in red. Ink. Intimately knowing the smooth touch of paper, its speechlessness before I spill myself on the insides of trees. Daily, I battle the silence and I write the red. Daily, I take my throat in my hands and squeeze until the cries pour out, my larynx and soul sore from the constant struggle.⁵⁹

This dialogue on identities and the space and voices that they inhabit and perform, she carves out of her bones. Writing, stepping into language, is not easy, and, at times, is not pleasant, but it must be done.

Monica Perales states that “[y]et for as violent and oppressive as such forces, the borderlands also provide a space of resistance and survival that is equally expressed and experienced in corporeal terms.”⁶⁰ In order for borderlands to become a place of transcendence it requires a new consciousness, a new corporeal awareness. Anzaldúa’s writes: “[i]ndigenous like corn, like corn, the *mestiza* is a product of crossbreeding, designed for preservation under a variety of conditions. Like an ear of corn—a female seed-bearing organ—the *mestiza* is tenacious, tightly wrapped in the husks of her culture. Like kernels she clings to the cob; with thick stalks of strong brace roots, she holds tight to the earth—she will survive the crossroads.”⁶¹ Here, the rhythm of the passage is tight. She uses one syllable words, like a steady drum beat, determined, she marches within the text: her own call to arms.



Anzaldúa is able to deconstruct the power relations on either side of the border because she plays within the middle, the formidable borderlands. This interest comes from embodying the borderlands, living it, breathing it, speaking it, moving in and out of them, and how she performs them, dances them, sings them on the page. It is through this performance that she is able to deconstruct the notions of borders, revealing the fluidity between absences and presences in such notions as identity, geography, culture, gender, sex, racial identities, and anything else that we may attempt to draw boundaries around. This is also a rise of a new individual, a new consciousness: “It is a consciousness of the Borderlands.”⁶² As she elaborates through a poem, “*Una luncha da fronteras / A Struggle of Borders*,” she states “Because I, a *mestiza*, / continually walk out of one culture / and into another, / because I am in all cultures at the same time, / *alma entre dos mundos, tres, cuatro, / me zumba la cabez con lo contradictorio. / Estoy norteadada por todas las voces que me bablan / simultáneamente.*”⁶³ We can also see the productive ability of the fluid body, the fluidness of identity in the work of such actresses as Anna Deavere Smith’s work. Smith also forces us to reconsider how identities are constructed not only because of her ability as a performer to play different roles, but in the roles that she chooses, and the way that she chooses to show the ambiguity, and perhaps arbitrary, nature of such categories of race and gender. She does this because she too is a Serpent Woman, with shifting skins capable of moving through the borderlands of identities. As Carol Martin states, “[a]part from Smith’s formidable skills as a performer, both her fluidity and her ability to portray many characters from many ethnic and racial backgrounds are attributable partly to the fact that she is light-skinned enough to pass.”⁶⁴ However, watching *Fires in the Mirror*, I do not believe that the audience ever fully forgets that Smith is the woman in front of them, therefore, it seems, inconsequential that she is ‘light skinned enough to pass,’ as such statements might only assist in reifying whiteness. Instead, I suggest, it is her ability to move through the different identities, while still being fully aware of her own body in front of us, proves the ability of the fluid self, which can potential deconstruct the social-cultural make-up of race, because race, then shows itself for exactly what it is, a construction, an Identity that we must perform, it is a script that is already prepared for us.

Then, how can this same deconstruction of scripted identities be applied to writing and language, which do not have the same visual benefits as a theatrical performance? By acknowledging and assuming the biases inherent in our position as the constructing-observer of the text, and within the socio-political body outside of the text, I suggest opens a space where



identity is made strange. Therefore, by acknowledging our observable material and corporeal realities, we displace ourselves within language not to perform the Other, but to perform ourselves in otherness.

Yarbo-Bejarano points out that “[i]n *Borderlands*, this new consciousness is created through *writing*; Anzaldúa’s project is one of discursive self-formation.”⁶⁵ Both Anzaldúa and Smith use their different performances in order to create a space for this mindful consciousness. The particularities of our existences are created by co-creations of influxes from borderlands, which are not separate from the other, but are intersections of intra-actions in a nondualistic identity mechanism. And, it is through the act of writing that we are able to bear witness to these co-creations in Identity Performances. It is not that we are capable of “passing” in other identities, but that we can find the potential to engage different voices and bodies, within the capability of our own bodies. However, this is not to say that my own body that has been socially constructed as white will ever be able to understand the lives of black, brown, and other bodies of color. What I am saying is that by acknowledging that my skin contains a history of violence and oppression, that I am not trying to run from it, but I see that history is still bloody and ragged in front of us, by saying my voice has been constructed in that history, that I might find a way to reach beyond the pale, beyond my own white skin and reach for something in the darkness of time and consciousness, and that there might be something out there, out on the edge that I can touch, that can be touched, through the veil.

Again, however, this must be done mindfully, for me this means learning to listen through the silences in between texts, words, and bodies. This means watching as the writer appears and disappears, when she speaks and when she is silenced. Looking for a space that could open up for resistance, bell hooks quotes Bob Marley, “‘We refuse to be what you want us to be, we are what we are, and that’s the way it’s going to be,’ that space of refusal, where one can say no to the colonizer, no to the downpressor, is located in the margins. And one can only say no, speak the voice of resistance, because there exists a counter-language.”⁶⁶ As part of this new consciousness, the counter-language it must involve acting, as opposed to reacting against the centers. This allows an individual to form her own identity formation and space. This is not allowing yourself to be claimed or identified in contrast by the other, but because you understand the fluid possibilities from living on the borders, you know that a new consciousness is possible; a new way of being is possible. One way to get to this is through language, is through the act of writing. This form of writing, to be truly successful in creating a new consciousness, must be successful as a performance of identity be-coming.



As stated in the beginning, any act of identity ultimately involves performance, as shown by Butler and others, which would include writing as an identity space. However, to work towards a mindful identity consciousness, one that considers the voices of the margins and borderlands, is to overtly work towards an Identity Performance, as Anzaldúa and Smith mindfully bear witness. This is also a balancing act, Anzaldúa writes of finding the balance between the languages you are given to express your identity:

At some point, on our way to a new consciousness, we will have to leave the opposite bank, the split between the two moral combatants somehow healed so that we are both shores at once and, at once, see through serpent and eagle eyes. Or perhaps we will decide to disengage from the dominant culture, write it off altogether as a lost cause, and cross the border into a wholly new and separate territory. Or we might go another route. The possibilities are numerous once we decide to act and not to react.⁶⁷

Mindfulness is also finding the difference and balance between reaction and acting. As part of these traces, the center must continually be re-questioned, by constantly moving, by embodying the serpent's movements. As Anzaldúa explains how this internal movement plays out in her own identity space, "[i]nternal strife results in insecurity and indecisiveness. The *mestiza's* dual or multiple personality is plagued by psychic restlessness... [r]igidity means death. Only by remaining flexible is she able to stretch the psyche horizontally and vertically."⁶⁸ It is also the poetic voice the refuses closure, knowing that there is death in stability. As Pelias also writes of this poetic approach to writing, "[t]he poem isit refuses closure. It wants readers ready to read, ready to put themselves forth, ready to muscle their way in. It waits for the old one-two, a quick skim followed by a right flip of the page. It will take a fall just for them. It has no backbone, not guts, no heart. It is a patsy, an easy mark."⁶⁹ This body without a backbone is also the performing, serpent's body, the body that can move between the borderlands, of identities and language. Pelias gets to another crucial point, which is the relationship of the reader to the performance. Writing is a way for the poet-performer to showcase their multitudes of voices, but it is the act of reading that allows the performance to continue. Always a different performance, as the reader is always within her own space of cultural, political, social, and geographical intersections.



These two women of color move between identities and social constructions of consciousness because their identities contain a double consciousness. I must acknowledge where my own situated body of privilege stands. For white bodies, we must unmake our bodies invisible, and show them colored and raced and created, we are not the norm or the standard; we must first make our bodies strange to us. I must learn from others, learning to unlearn, learning from a *mestiza* consciousness. Writing, as the performance of ourselves, of our identities, is one place to start. Such a consciousness would give us the ability to speak and write in deconstructions, to find the fluid, to find the fluid spaces between ourselves and others. Anzaldúa says that the work of such a *mestiza* consciousness “is to break down the subject-object duality that keeps her a prisoner and to show in the flesh and through the images in her work how duality is transcended.”⁷⁰ The answer to the problem of all these dualistic identities that been created for us, against us, as she describes as the “white race and the colored, between males and females, lies in healing the split that originates in the very foundation of our lives, our culture, our languages, our thoughts.”⁷¹ Only when we look and what we see in the mirror becomes foreign, when we travel to the very edges of our skin and back, and we begin to deconstruct what we see, but never are we able to leave them indefinitely. And ultimately, as Anzaldúa states, “[t]he new *mestiza* copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity...She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode—nothing is thrust out, the good, the bad the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something.”⁷²

And in the end, I must write:

I have been violated as I have also been the violator, but I cannot say this, because our eyes white-wash the other, and the stories are lost. Until we decided to get up and play with the multiple, fluid masks that we are given. We are so full of contradictions, and the conflicts of this historical, time-less world are playing out in the features of our bodies and consciousnesses, all we have to do, is play them. Write your skins. The violence. The privilege. Carve it out of your bones.



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¹ Monica Perales, "On Borderlands/La Frontera: Gloria Anzaldúa and Twenty-Five Years of Research on Gender in the Borderlands," 163.

² The scholarship distinguishing place and space distinguish them as place as the physical and tangible entity and that space is the chaotic, dispersing networks that surround these different geographies. But as Jeff Malpas posits that we must imagine the interconnections of space/place discussions, and that place also contains these chaotic orderings (2012, 227).

³ Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," 520.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 519.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ By my use of the term "page," I mean that space consisting of white space and black text, whatever medium or materiality, paper or screen. Regardless of technological medium, I mean to engage the function of the body in the act of writing.



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- ⁷ Referring to “traditional scholarship,” I mean to invoke approaches to the text that continue to re-produce writing that remains under the illusion of objective knowledge production, and does not acknowledge the situated and performative act of writing.
- ⁸ Baz Kershaw, “Performance, Community, Culture,” 136.
- ⁹ Yvonne Yarbo-Bejarano, “Gloria Anzaldua’s Borderlands/ La Frontera: Cultural Studies, ‘Difference,’ and the Non-Unitary Subject,” 17.
- ¹⁰ Perales, “On Borderlands/La Frontera,” 164.
- ¹¹ Juliette Mapp, Theodora Skipitares, John Jesurun, Simone Forti, Steve Paxton, Cynthia Hopkins, Richard Maxwell, et al. “Writing & Performance,” 122.
- ¹² Michel Foucault, “What Is an Author?” 206-207.
- ¹³ Ibid., 209.
- ¹⁴ Gloria E. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: The New Mestiza = La Frontera*, 66.
- ¹⁵ Ronald J. Pelias, *Writing Performance: Poeticizing the Researcher’s Body*, xi, xiv.
- ¹⁶ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 67.
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ bell hooks, “Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness,” 154.
- ¹⁹ Ibid.
- ²⁰ For the different sections of this work I will be focusing on three chapters: “The Homeland, Aztlán / *El otro México*,” “Entering Into the Serpent,” and “*La conciencia de la mestiza*: Towards a New Consciousness.”
- ²¹ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 73.
- ²² Liliana Vargas-Monroy, “IV. Knowledge from the Borderlands,” 264.
- ²³ hooks, “Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness,” 159.
- ²⁴ André Lepecki, ed. *Of the Presence of the Body*, 124.
- ²⁵ Ibid., 124.
- ²⁶ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 66-67.
- ²⁷ Ibid., 25.
- ²⁸ Ibid., 26.
- ²⁹ Pelias, *Writing Performance*, 75.
- ³⁰ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, Preface.
- ³¹ Yarbro-Bejarano, “Gloria Anzaldua’s Borderlands/ La Frontera,” 8.
- ³² Yarbo-Benjarano, “Gloria Anzaldua’s Borderlands/ La Frontera,” 8.
- ³³ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 39.
- ³⁴ Carol Martin, “Bearing Witness: Anna Deavere Smith from Community to Theatre Mass Media,” 82-83.
- ³⁵ Carol Martin, “Anna Deavere Smith: The Word Becomes You: An Interview by Carol Martin,” 192.
- ³⁶ Ibid., 192.
- ³⁷ Yarbo-Bejarano, “Gloria Anzaldua’s Borderlands/ La Frontera,” 11.
- ³⁸ Judith Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” 371.
- ³⁹ Ibid., 371-372.
- ⁴⁰ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, Preface.
- ⁴¹ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 2.
- ⁴² Yarbo-Bejarano., “Gloria Anzaldua’s Borderlands/ La Frontera,” 19.
- ⁴³ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 3.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid., 10.
- ⁴⁵ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, Preface.
- ⁴⁶ Diamond is using Brechtian Theory in order to show, as she states, the potentiality of Brecht’s theory for feminism, and [as] I mentioned above, a possible re-radicalization of his theory through feminism” (122). For my own work, I see her analysis of Brechtian



Theory working towards a more productive approach and understanding of the performance of the self in writing, including our own intersections of racial identity, sex, gender, class, and any other identifying mechanism that we may perform.

⁴⁷ Elin Diamond, "Brechtian Theory/ Feminist Theory: Toward a Gestic Feminist Criticism," 122-123.

⁴⁸ Diamond cites from: Brecht, Bertolt (1964) *Brecht on Theatre*, edited by John Willet. New York: Hill and Wang.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 123.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Martin, "The Word Becomes You," 185.

⁵² The work explores the many identities and voices involved in the 1991 Crown Heights Riots, where a black child, Gavin Cato was killed by a reckless driver, which then resulted in the murder of Yankel Rosenbaum, a Jewish Australian.

⁵³ Ibid., 186.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 189.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 92.

⁵⁶ Favorini cites this from Smith's own introduction to *Fires in the Mirror*, stating that "identity in motion" is "the crucial tension of America" (106).

⁵⁷ Attilio Favorini, "Review: Fires in the Mirror," 106.

⁵⁸ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 12-13.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 72.

⁶⁰ Perales, "On Borderlands/La Frontera," 164.

⁶¹ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 103.

⁶² Ibid., 99.

⁶³ Ibid..

⁶⁴ Martin, "Bearing Witness," 82-83.

⁶⁵ Yarbo-Bejarano, "Gloria Anzaldúa's Borderlands/ La Frontera," 13.

⁶⁶ hooks, "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness," 157.

⁶⁷ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 100-101

⁶⁸ Ibid., 100-101

⁶⁹ Pelias, *Writing Performance*, 75.

⁷⁰ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 102.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid., 101



Masculine Desire's Construction of Female Identity in Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*

April Noke

Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* has garnered much criticism as both a traditional fallen woman narrative and a proto-feminist model of a woman's escape from male subjugation. The literary fixation on women's sexuality during the 1900's has often been blamed on social anxieties caused by rapid urbanization and industrialization. One literary response to these anxieties came in the form of the fallen woman narrative.¹ Though mutable in style these narratives generally involve a female protagonist who, seduced by both the city and the urban male, ends up disgraced and destitute. As Dreiser's narrative traces Carrie Meeber's journey from small town Illinois to the emerging city of Chicago and finally to the urban metropolis of New York City, what is clear is that as Carrie's physical journey proceeds into larger scale locales, her interiority is reversely affected. In these urban settings she recognizes her own value as a commodity, first to her sister as a rent payer, then to Drouet and Hurstwood as a kept woman, and finally as a stage actress for the masses of paying theater-goers. As she succumbs to objectification, her middle-class mores grow less pronounced. What is startling about Carrie is her willingness and determination to become the commodity that others want her to be. Some critics argue that in accepting her role as a commodity and striving to perfect that image, Carrie is able to escape the fallen woman narrative. Tracy LeMaster argues that in Carrie's ownership of her own marketability she "affirm[s] her own position as subject"² and "challenges woman's social objectification and commodification".³ I agree that Carrie claims a limited liberation from male domination through her successful ability to market herself, but argue that because her identity as a commodity is shaped by the desires of the men around her, she fails to break free from male subjugation. In essence, *Sister Carrie* is still a fallen woman narrative, but unlike those which condemn female sexuality, Dreiser's critique is of the patriarchal manifestation of capitalism that subjugates traditional value systems to fashion female sexuality and market it in an effort to assuage its own limitless desire.

Despite proving to be a felicitous receptacle for the lessons of Chicago's commodity fetishism, Carrie illustrates the intransigent tensions between her working-class upbringing and the conspicuous consumption of urban America. Upon entering The Fair for the first time Carrie "could not help feeling the claim of each trinket and valuable upon her personally... There was nothing there which she could not have used – nothing which she did



not long to own” (Dreiser 31). Every bit of finery in the department store affects Carrie on a psychic level. Her longing for the things which she sees is physical, overwhelming, and is juxtaposed against a personal history of lack. The fact “that not any of these things were in the range of her purchase” and that the lack of them signals her as an “outcast” makes them more desirous (31). Paula Geyh notes that Carrie “intuitively understands, in this capitalist economy of desire, to lack a desired thing is to lack a desired self.”⁴ Every piece of clothing or ornamentation which she does not have is an indicator “of what she is not, of her class bound status as a daughter of working-class parents.”⁵ As a rent payer and factory girl, Carrie cannot afford a winter coat, much less the glitzy fobs and ornaments of the department store meccas. Her first encounter with the commodity culture of Chicago unhinges her sense of self-worth. Carrie learns that in the city not being able to afford the items that will make her appear stylish actually makes her less valuable as a person. Carrie’s working-class upbringing continues to clash against her desire to market herself as a commodity, but is ultimately impotent against the persuasion of masculine desire.

The pull of Carrie’s desire for commodities and comfort is redoubled with Drouet’s insistence that she has no hope of success without his help, and her conscience is eventually overwhelmed. Drouet insists to Carrie that she “can’t make it,” and he asks her “what can you do alone?” (Dreiser 93). Drouet convinces Carrie that she doesn’t have the ability to provide for herself, much less make a success out of herself in Chicago without his assistance. When Carrie returns to the department store with cash in hand to make a purchase, she lavishes in thoughts of “How would she look in this, how charming that would make her” (92). She notes that the valuables she sees will transform her into an object of more value than she currently is. However, she is unable to make any decisions concerning her purchase and leaves empty handed again. This is in part because of the guilt she feels over the way she has procured the money. After taking the bills from Drouet she “felt ashamed in part because she had been weak enough to take it” (86). Carrie’s working-class morality makes her feel that she must put in the required labor to attain money. Because she did not work for the money that was given to her, she understands that she now owes him something in return. Unfortunately, Carrie’s earned wage as a factory girl doesn’t afford her the opportunity to become what she believes the objects in the department store can make her. Drouet’s bills do afford her that opportunity, but Carrie is unsure that she is willing to pay Drouet’s inferred price. Charles Harmon has noted that Dreiser carefully crafts these moments of guilt and shame. Harmon states that “The constant and generally ignored implication of Dreiser’s novel is that the subjective



explosions Carrie experiences in places like department stores and city streets are always reactions to other kinds of experiences – experiences that can be traced to her rural, working class, and latently religious origins.”⁶ The juxtaposition of these two possible yet disparate subjectivities is further evident as Carrie progresses in her relationship with Drouet. Carrie understands the “drift” (94) of what Drouet is suggesting in their mutually advantageous enterprise, but she continually wishes “If only I could get something to do” (95). Carrie wants a legitimate wage-earning job, but the harsh realities of factory work, all that she has been able to secure, weigh on her more heavily than Drouet’s suggestion of “Let me help you” (83).

Fashioning herself into an object of desire, a commodity of high value, becomes the job, the “something” Carrie “wished” she could get before succumbing to Drouet’s advertisement of a secure position as his mistress. Carrie’s guilt begins to assuage itself when she endeavors to perfect herself as the object Drouet believes she can become. Since her guilt is due to her upbringing, which tells her that respectability comes with a job well done, she sublimates her guilt into a hard-working, honest effort to be worthy of the money and comfort that Drouet has traded her for sex. In a sense, Carrie tries to convince herself that her job is to be a desirous thing, and that the reward she gains for her performance is earned for her labor and therefore recuperates her sense of worth. Carrie’s working-class origins make her an “apt student of fortune’s ways” (Dreiser 136). In this sense, it is fortune as in consumerism itself, not fate, that Carrie is naturally attuned to. Carrie throws herself into this new job. The narrator describes that “Carrie took instructions affably” (138). Just like any job, she understands that learning is part of the process and she willingly accepts Drouet’s intimations and outright schooling. LeMaster explains that “Given her own experience in exchanging sex for money, clothes, and security, Carrie fully recognizes how women sell themselves in a capitalist economy.”⁷ She recognized “what Drouet liked,” and “she felt a desire to imitate it” (Dreiser 138). Carrie’s determination to become the object of Drouet’s desire is driven by her middle-class work ethic. Drouet’s enthusiastic approval insists to her that her perfection of object status is a job well-done.

Under Drouet’s tutelage Carrie learns to become an aesthetically pleasing valuable herself but to the further detriment of her own interiority. Irene Gammel notes that “Carrie’s desire for beauty and clothing is not her own, but it is always already mediated in her society’s power structures” and that “It is usually male lovers who play powerful roles” in negotiating female desire.⁸ Carrie’s conversion from naïve Midwestern girl to cosmopolite confirms this since it is through Drouet’s desires that Carrie determines



which commodities she must procure in order for her to gain his approval. Drouet has thoroughly advertised the advantages of her position and has trained her to value her own image over her conscience. Her principles still nag at her, but in acquiescing to her object status, she relegates those persistent mores to the background. Her working-class upbringing tells her “put on the old clothes – that torn pair of shoes,” but at this point, she can only “dream of giving them up” (Dreiser 137). The luxuriousness of comfort and commodities juxtaposes too harshly against her remembrance of the girl she used to be. The narrator relates that “She looked into her glass and saw a prettier Carrie than she had ever seen before; she looked into her mind, a mirror prepared of her own and the world’s opinions, and saw a worse” (125). Her nagging and unshakable guilt is an explicit criticism of the relegation of values in favor of valuables which exposes the danger of conspicuous consumption to traditional working and middle class morality.

Drouet’s and Hurstwood’s attitudes toward Carrie make clear that her modern status as an unattached woman is still a male construct of subjugation.⁹ Carrie’s new social role in urban society is itself a critique of the reign of male desire in a capitalist market. Both Drouet and Hurstwood have effectively incentivized sex for Carrie, and she must either play along or risk destitution once again. Before accepting Hurstwood as her new lover, Carrie thinks “she could cry out and make such a row that someone would come to her aid; at other times it seemed almost a useless thing – so far was she from any aid, no matter what she did” (Dreiser 359). Carrie believes that she is trapped in the role of mistress because no one would willingly give aid or sympathy to an already fallen woman. Carrie runs all of the risks of a single woman in a compromising situation, has none of the benefits that go along with the institutionalized security of marriage, and therefore has no power within these relationships. Implicit in Carrie’s social transformation is a critique of the male dominated market economy which both creates and exploits the status of unattached women. Gammel states that “Dreiser’s female characters are assumed to be endowed with bodies saturated with sex, so that they cannot escape a sexual destiny. ...The sex-filled woman is rather a static target that prompts the male to move.”¹⁰ Hurstwood confirms this when he defends his physical abduction of Carrie claiming, “I couldn’t help it. I couldn’t stay away from you the first time I saw you. ...You think I have deceived you badly, but I haven’t. I didn’t do it willingly” (Dreiser 358). Hurstwood emphatically blames his actions on Carrie’s sexuality. His claim that he “didn’t do it willingly” implies that his desire was aroused by Carrie’s irresistible sexual allure. As an unattached woman, Carrie is subjugated by the male power structure that both incentivizes sex and holds her responsible for men’s actions. Carrie’s status enables Drouet



and Hurstwood to live out their fantasies through her, but the role inherently denies her any option for an independence from the men who provide for her. The construction of the unattached woman as a social type allows men to move from woman to woman without consideration of family responsibility or the civic duties that would naturally follow. They are free to begin and end relationships with these women without regard to any tradition of patriarchal responsibility. Rather than being a prototype of feminist liberation, the unattached woman is even more subjugated than other female social types of the early 1900s.

Despite her eventual financial independence, Carrie is never free from masculine control since her success as an actress is reliant on her ability to reflect the desires of a masculine audience. Gammel argues that “Carrie’s success is not so much explained by her outstanding artistic performances, but by the fact that she is an art object into which can be read any desire, all the better as she is not monogamously attached to anyone.”¹¹ Carrie shows herself to be an exacting imitator of affect. The narrator describes that “She possessed an innate taste for imitation and no small ability. ...She loved to modulate her voice after the conventional manner of the distressed heroine, and repeat such pathetic fragments as appealed most to her sympathies” (Dreiser 209). Just as Carrie is able to reform her image to fit the model required by Drouet’s desires, she is also able to reflect her audience’s desired emotional affects on stage. Harmon argues that she “succeeds because she assumes roles in which she pretends to be helpless and ignorant.”¹² Notably, Drouet first discovers an interest in her when she is exactly that, helpless and ignorant on the streets of Chicago with no obvious prospect of success. Carrie’s desire to imitate, along with her working-class ethic, make her a successful actress. She practices her first on-stage role with Drouet, who during the actual performance is responsible for reminding her of her more than average ability, but LeMaster notes that during the rest of Carrie’s performance that night “the vitality she musters still depends somewhat on a mental image of herself as an object of a male gaze.”¹³ Not unrelated is the fact that Carrie rockets to stardom on her convincingly distressed pout. During her role as a Quakeress, “The portly gentlemen in the front rows began to feel that she was a delicious little morsel. It was the kind of frown they would have loved to force away with kisses” (Dreiser 583). Carrie’s success here is due in part to her role as a helpless woman. As a woman in distress, the men in the audience are able to fantasize that they might be able to save her, that is, save her for themselves. While Harmon contends that “male characters in the novel show themselves immediately willing to worship Carrie simply because she fulfills cultural standards for a kind of childlike, wistful, self-involved beauty”,¹⁴ LeMaster argues that “she



assumes control over that objectification.”¹⁵ However, Carrie’s success after constructing an image specifically for male theatre-goers firmly suggests that she has no control over the type of object they are willing to pay to see.

Carrie’s interpellation as a commodity is complete when she celebrates the appearance of her own sign in the local papers, but it is also at this time that her guilt, having produced nothing of value, begins to reassert itself. Harmon explains that these are the tensions inherent “in attempting to have commodities substitute face-to-face relationships.”¹⁶ Carrie learns that the relationships she has, whether with her sister, Drouet, or Hurstwood are of less value in the city’s exchange markets than is her own symbol as an item of availability. Carrie’s understanding and willing acceptance of capitalist logic are suggested by her impatience to have her picture in the local newspapers. The narrator describes that “She learned what the theatrical papers were, which ones published items about actresses and the like. She longed to be renowned like others. When would some paper think her photo worthwhile?” (Dreiser 576-7). Carrie knows that having her picture in the papers is the next step in becoming a recognizable and available commodity. Though the men in her audience “yearned towards her” and view her as “capital” (583), it is only after her image becomes a recognizable advertisement that she can claim her efforts to become a valuable object successful. Geyh notes that once Carrie’s sign goes up in the city, her “real identity is now not much more than this sign, and that the theater has become the privileged site and fitting symbol of her construction of her own identity.”¹⁷ Despite acceptance of her role as a commodity, her unshakable working-class mores continue to haunt her. After collecting her paycheck she remembers “poor homely-clad girls working in long lines at clattering machines” and that at the end of the week, they would collect “small pay for work a hundred times harder than she was doing now” (Dreiser 599). She is unable to feel at ease with her new situation because it requires so little of the grind that she associates with honest labor. Her role has been created by the male value system, and it has been further approved by the society in which she finds herself. However, in becoming a *thing*, Carrie has lost her intrinsic worth. The extrinsic value her audience and admirers have placed on her is due to a well-crafted illusion which provides her no internal solace for the hard-fought subjugation of her conscience.

Carrie’s unhappiness at the end of the novel illustrates Dreiser’s criticism of a commodity culture that rewards the role of objectified woman who appeases the commodity-fetishism of men. Harmon relates that “By presenting its protagonist as a mute plaything of unnamable forces and as a creature of mysterious agency, Dreiser’s novel paradoxically suggests that



monopoly capitalism stabilized itself” by allowing males in positions of power to temporarily feel themselves at the mercy of a woman.¹⁸ Carrie is unhappy at the end of the novel because her only agency is determined by male willingness to consume her image. In endeavoring to become a thing, Carrie has exchanged her identity for one imposed upon her by the commodity market. Carrie’s role as an actress reaffirms for the men in the audience that their own roles within the economy have not left them unable to feel. As such, she is a tool for their own emotions and social wellbeing. Toward the end of the novel, Ames says the same thing himself when trying to make Carrie understand her role in society. Ames tells Carrie that “The world is always struggling to express itself,” but “Most people are not capable of voicing their feelings” (Dreiser 636). He further claims that Carrie has been given a gift, through which other people may reclaim their emotions. His statement rejects the notion that Carrie has any agency of her own. In stating that she has been “given” a gift, he denies that she has labored to hone her skill. His hortative suggestion to Carrie is that she has been granted comfort by a power not her own and that it is her duty to express her gratitude. Once again, Carrie is in a position of dependence.

Though Carrie’s abilities secure her a position of limited success, Dreiser’s narrator does not laud her efforts. Even if Carrie’s ability “granted a temporary, liminal power”¹⁹ to her while onstage, in such a role she is only a puppet for male desire. In critiquing Carrie’s acquiescence to her own object status, Dreiser’s novel determines that Carrie will remain unhappy because the things she has yearned for prove to be fleeting. The narrator asks the reader to consider “if the drag to follow beauty be such that one abandons the admired way, taking rather the despised path leading to her dreams quickly, who shall cast the first stone?” (Dreiser 657). The “admired way” to achieve her goals would have been “by honest labour” (657). Instead, by marketing physical sex and then her image as an object of potential sex, she has taken the “despised path.” However, the narrator implies that she should not be condemned for her choice. Explained as such, the ending of Dreiser’s novel, while a critique of Carrie’s pursuits, is more a condemnation of the capitalist machinations of male desire that create a market which rewards women who cultivate and sell their image for male consumption in exchange for a modicum of security disguised as liberation.

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¹ Wald, "Dreiser's Sociological Wisdom," 178.

² LeMaster, "Feminist Thing Theory in *Sister Carrie*," 45.

³ Ibid, 41.

⁴ Geyh, "From Cities of Things to Cities of Signs," 419.

⁵ Ibid., 419.

⁶ Harmon, "Cuteness and Capitalism," 127-128.

⁷ LeMaster, "Feminist Thing Theory in *Sister Carrie*," 53.

⁸ Gammel, "Sexualizing the Female Body," 45.

⁹ Priscilla Wald (2004) defines the unattached woman as a new social role that "represents the working-class counterpart of the New Woman, tainted, like her, by the fallen woman narratives, but nonetheless distinct in the nature of the anxiety she produces" (179).

¹⁰ Ibid., 37.

¹¹ Ibid., 47.

¹² Harmon, "Cuteness and Capitalism," 132.

¹³ LeMaster, "Feminist Thing Theory in *Sister Carrie*," 51.

¹⁴ Harmon, "Cuteness and Capitalism," 126.

¹⁵ LeMaster, "Feminist Thing Theory in *Sister Carrie*," 50.

¹⁶ Harmon, "Cuteness and Capitalism," 130.

¹⁷ Geyh, "From Cities of Things to Cities of Signs," 424.

¹⁸ Harmon, "Cuteness and Capitalism," 126.

¹⁹ Ibid., 136.



Gender and Environmental Utopia/Dystopia in Paul Auster's *In the Country of Last Things*

Ng Lay Sion

1. Introduction

Paul Auster's *In the Country of Last Things* is often categorized as a dystopian or an "(post)apocalyptic fiction" as in the novel. All fictional characters suffer from the near-total destruction of humanity caused by the lack of natural resources, starvation, social isolation, unpredictable natural disasters, and crimes such as rape and robbery.¹ However, in *Conversations with Paul Auster*, the author himself claims that this novel is not a science fiction set in the future but in the present, as the subtitle for the novel was "Anna Blume Walks through the Twentieth Century."² He further reveals that the idea of the garbage system in the novel derives from "the present-day garbage system in Cairo."³ In a *New York Times* review (1987), Padgett Powell states that *In The Country of Last Things* is not just apocalyptic because many things match with our present world. For instance, the image of homeless people collecting consumer waste by using shopping trolleys symbolizes "a vision of late-capitalist 'collapse'" and "an industrialist's true nightmare."⁴ It suggests that the imagined dystopian world in the novel serves as a parody of our present world. Through the form of defamiliarization, Auster attempts to expose the environmental issues that have been ignored by mankind. Furthermore, he provides fresh perspectives toward those problems. Another point that draws the reader's attention is that this is the only time that the author uses a "female" as the narrator of the story. The explanation given by Auster is that women have been the best witnesses to historical events because "they're usually in a situation of marginality, so their testimonies are more accurate."⁵ Drawing on this clue, it seems more coherent to explore the environmental issues from the feminist perspective since both women and nature remain oppressed under the patriarchal system of society. Through the lens of environmental and feminist theory, the first part of the paper focuses on analyzing the dynamic of the dystopian and utopian thoughts that are formed in these key locations: the City street, Isabel and Ferdinand's apartment, the National Library and the Woburn House. The second part of the paper concentrates on the metaphor of literary writing and imagining, suggesting that through these activities Auster attempts to provide new insights on environmental and gender issues in our present day society.



2.1 The New American Dream in the City Street

The location of *In the Country of Last Things* is a place of fragmentation where “things fall apart and vanish, and nothing new is made” (7). The city itself has the power to “turn your thoughts inside out. It makes you want to live, and at the same time, it tries to take your life away from you” (2-3). One can no longer apply the perception that has been formed in one’s former society to this ruined society. The only way to adapt and survive in this destructive city is to “make yourself die” (20). For instance, the condition of food shortage forces Anna to “eat as little as [she] can” but ironically the desire of “hunger” is her main motivation to survive (2). To survive, Anna claims that “one has to learn to accept what is given to [oneself]” (4). People who are unsatisfied and obsessed with food often end up going through “a slow death,” being consumed by their utopian food talk (10). Calling these absurd talks “the language of ghosts,” Anna comes to recognize that intoxicating oneself in a utopian state will ultimately lead one to a dystopian state: death. However, in the city where thousands and thousands of desperate people are hungry and homeless, “death,” in fact, “has become a source of life” because “it is the one thing [that one] has only feeling for” and “it is the only way [one] can express [oneself]” (13). In order to die, some would pay the “Euthanasia Clinics” or the “Assassination Clubs” for their own death (14, 15). Others would join the “Runner,” which is a form of self-punishing association that boosts one to run to death, or “The Last Leap” that encourages one to die in a “flash” and “glorious moment” by jumping off a tall building (11, 13).

Supposedly, all these diverse methods for self-suicide are created not only to end the torments of hunger but also to prove one’s human identity and existence. Thus, we come to realize that human identity is deeply linked to food. As D. M. Kaplan (2011) has stated, “food is a marker of [human] identity” and “a diet expresses ethnic, religious, and class identification; it prescribes gender roles,” which provides a reason why Anna claims that it is a difficult task to change her “diet” frequently (4). However, in a condition that one day there might be only slavery foods like “radishes” while another day only “stale chocolate cake,” Anna has no choice but to eat whatever she can get (4). Thus, the markets actually create a gender/racial/ethnic utopian condition as it dismisses the association of certain foods with certain privileged identity, that no inferior groups will be formed under this random food distribution system.

Another aspect that is worth exploring is the business of recycling in the city. Here, “shit is a serious business, and anyone caught dumping it in the



streets is arrested. With your second offense, you are automatically given the death penalty” (30). Under such circumstances, scavenging and object hunting become the primary jobs in the city. As an “object hunter,” Anna salvages objects and sells them to the Resurrection Agents who play the role of “part junk dealer, part manufacturer [and] part shopkeeper” (33). Ironically, the equipment for transporting the garbage is the “shopping cart” which is similar to our present world (32). This defamiliarization of the use of shopping cart functions is a satire on our present consumerist society. More specifically, that shopping cart itself is an ironic symbol of the American Dream. Drawing on Jimmy Carter’s speech in 1979 that “too many of us now tend to worship self-indulgence and consumption. Human identity is no longer defined by what one does but by what one owns,” it is suggested that Auster basically brings back the condition of human identity as “defined by what one does” through the defamiliarization of the jobs and the use of shopping carts in the novel.⁶ This ironic setting of jobs and shopping carts further implies that a consumerist society is intrinsically dystopian while a recycling-based society is the opposite.

2.2 Female Oppression and Feminist Movement in Isabel and Ferdinand’s Apartment

While object hunting, Anna accidentally saves the life of Isabel from being trampled by a group of Runners (45). Since then, they share a kind of special bond in which they “belong to each other forever” (46). While Isabel regards Anna as a “sweet child” who comes to her from “God,” Ferdinand, Isabel’s husband, sees Anna as a “little slut” (49, 55). Living together with Isabel and Ferdinand, Anna discovers that Isabel lives under a utopian dream that has been constructed by Ferdinand. Ferdinand’s handmade miniature ships enable Isabel to imagine herself as a homunculus which sails away with these ships (47). Perhaps this is why Isabel chooses to bear Ferdinand’s abuse and his obsession with the making of miniature ships at home while she has to hunt for salvage all day long in the city. In the company of Anna, the hunt for salvage goods is easier than usual but the situation changes when Isabel gets ill and can no longer work outside. Not only has Anna to bear the pressure of hunting outside but also the abusive attitude of Ferdinand toward her when she comes back, as Isabel’s staying at home deprives Ferdinand of his “freedom and solitude” (61). From “little slut,” “ugly cracks” to “dirty-minded little whore,” Ferdinand increases his tone of insults from time to time and eventually he attempts to sexually assault her after overhearing her voice during masturbation (55, 63).



It is suggested that Ferdinand uses rape as a vehicle to test his “superior strength and the triumph of his manhood” over his victim, Anna.⁷ Calling rape the “All-American crime,” Susan Griffin (1971) describes that “forcible rape is the most frequently committed violent crime in America today” and “rape and the fear of rape are a daily part of every woman’s consciousness.”⁸ Indeed, there are a few times where Anna almost gets raped and she is forced to cut her hair short and hide her “feminine things” under the fear of rape (60). Similarly, our present society is constructed on this gender-based distribution of power, in which the fear of rape still restricts women’s behavior and women’s movements; female oppression remains an unsolved problem. However, Anna’s reaction toward Ferdinand implies a strong sense of feminist perception. Neither rebelling nor crying, Anna puts her finger around Ferdinand’s neck and pretends that she is playing with him. When she starts applying pressure on his neck, she feels “an immense happiness, a surging, uncontrollable sense of rapture” (65). Nevertheless, when she realizes that “the pure pleasure” she feels in killing him is actually dehumanizing her own self, she quickly lets go of Ferdinand’s throat (65). Horrified by this extremely utopian and dystopian moment, Anna runs out of the apartment and stays out until the sunrise (65).

2.3 Creation of Love and Life in The National Library

The next morning when Anna returns to the apartment she finds Ferdinand dead. While throwing Ferdinand’s body down to the street, Isabel confesses that although it is “a terrible thing to say,” she feels “very happy” because she is finally released from oppression (70). However, soon after Ferdinand’s death, Isabel suffers from muscles breakdown and dies under Anna’s care. After that, Anna experiences a series of misfortunes such as the loss of her shopping cart and the invasion of Isabel’s apartment by housebreakers. Nevertheless, while escaping from a food riot, Anna accidentally ends up in the National Library, where she encounters Samuel Farr, a journalist whom she has been searching for all the time in order to find her lost brother. More surprisingly, Anna “fell deeply and irrevocably in love” with Sam (107). The reason why Anna and Sam will fall in love with each other is the sharing of utopian hope and memories: “we often talk about home then, summoning up as many memories as we could”; “we share [...] things to relive the myriad incidents of a world we had both known since childhood and it helped [...] to make us believe that someday we would be able to return to all that” (110).

Having been through “the Terrible Winter” with Sam in the library, Anna claims that it was “the best day of [her] life” (107). Ironically, it is through



the burning of hundreds of other books in the library that Anna and Sam can work on their book and keep themselves warm (116). That is to say, the library serves as a utopian space where love, literary creation, and even a new life, can be created while the miseries of city life can be transcended.

2.4 Community and Women Bonding in Woburn House

However, disaster happens. The library burns down, the lovers part, and Anna, to escape a human slaughterhouse, throws herself from a window. When Anna regains consciousness, she finds out that she has been rescued and brought to a charity hospital called Woburn House, a “heaven” in which all the patients are provided with warm meals and a clean bed and clothes (139). However, soon Anna discovers that Woburn House also serves as a dystopian space, “a foundation of clouds,” as some patients deliberately injure themselves in order to enter Woburn House and some suffer terribly “at the thought of having to return to the streets” (154, 141). Nevertheless, Peacock emphasizes the utopian feature of Woburn House by claiming, “in ethical terms Woburn House provides the main hope for civilization because it demonstrates that it is still possible for people to pay attention to the wider community” (98). He further explains, “even if it offers only temporary respite, there is hope for humanity in the simple fact that society still exists within the walls of Woburn House” (98). Thus, the dystopian condition of the outside world reflects the utopia of Woburn House but beyond that, it is the community bonding that improves its utopian state.

Furthermore, it is suggested that this utopian state of Woburn House encourages alternative sexualities. During her stay in Woburn House, Anna has sexual intercourse with Victoria Woburn, a middle-aged woman who runs Woburn House. Through the connection with Victoria Woburn, Anna gradually goes through a spiritual recovery and becomes cooperative within the community. Thus, this bonding between women serves as a sign of female self-affirmation and self-sufficiency. Interestingly, this bonding is transferred into an invisible form when Anna reunites with Sam and returns to a heterosexual relationship with him. A question then arises inside the reader’s mind as to what lies behind this changing of sexuality in Anna? Supposedly, the author attempts to invoke the considerable power of alternative sexualities to question any generalization about gender through bringing them into the utopian system.

3. Writing and Imagining as Ecological Movement



Unfortunately, in the end, Woburn House has run out of money and there is no choice but to close. Despite this, Anna's letter presents an optimistic ending, in which Sam, Victoria, Boris and she are going to head west in order to escape the city and once they have arrived, Anna promises the reader that she will try to write again (188). Symbolizing enlightenment and freedom, west presents a utopian direction for Anna to start her new journey. Even if Anna might be dead later, at least her words have survived and served as an important tool for human connection. As we know, the story of the novel is about how she struggles to remain like a human being and how she attempts to connect with Sam, William, Isabel, Victoria and us, the reader. That is to say, the act of writing represents Anna's attempt "to keep her humanity intact."⁹

Moreover, it is suggested that the act of writing itself can be seen as an ecology movement as though the novel itself is an eco-book. Throughout the story, the act of keeping on writing serves as a parallel meaning of keeping on going from one place to another, as if "the page itself becomes a kind of landscape."¹⁰ This parallel movement between language and space provides us with a sense of reality toward the imagined dystopian world and thus creates a clearer contrast to our present world. For instance, the description of the shit and garbage business in the city leads us to rethink our perception toward waste, that those things should not be seen as waste but natural resources that can be reused. Furthermore, Anna's task in collecting used waste before it falls apart is parallel to her act of writing down words before they fade away, which emphasizes a crucial connection between the literary movement and the ecology movement.

Another metaphor that is worth exploring in the novel is the act of imagining. In the novel, Anna claims that without imagination it is impossible to fit into the role of object hunter, as "when things disappear so rapidly" one must be able to "look at them afresh" and "to think creatively in order to see new potentials."¹¹ More specifically, the ability to encounter everything without holding any preconceived idea toward it is what Anna wants to remind the reader: "The essential thing is not to become inured. For habits are deadly. Even if it is for the hundredth time, you must encounter each thing as if you have never known it before. No matter how many times, it must always be the first time" (7).

Boris Stepanovich, the supplier for Woburn House, further exhibits the act of imagination. For Boris, language is "an instrument of locomotion—constantly on the move, darting and feinting" (146). His constant changing of his identity and personal stories makes him an unreliable narrator, but



these stories are created consciously in order to make a utopian world for himself. Beyond this, Boris is unscathed by all kinds of dystopian circumstances because he has imagined all of them in advance. Thus, he can take action correctly and rationally according to the situation anywhere and at anytime: “Make plans. Consider the possibilities. Act” (155). What is central to this, as Peacock has suggested, is “an ethical imagination alive to the reality of suffering in social relationships but at the same time negotiating it anew, embellishing it, and making it livable.”¹² In other words, it is because of “a pessimism so deep, so devastating, so fully in tune with the facts” that Boris is able to construct a “cheerful” life (147).

It is suggested that Boris serves as a positive model for analyzing the environmental issues, as the ability to picture the wholeness and integrating the complex webs of communal networks are what we are lacking due to the “split culture” that has been imposed upon modern society.¹³ Here, the “split culture” means that “our modern civilization’s root metaphor is division rather than connection”¹⁴; we no longer feel ourselves as a part of this earth and “we even learn to disown a part of our own being” due to “a gradual shortfall of perceptual awareness initiated by modern institutions, economies, and educational systems.”¹⁵ This culture of dividedness is portrayed in our modern language and therefore, in the novel, it is purposely set out to be irrelevant by the author. Paradoxically, language also becomes the key for reconnecting the energies, matters, and relationships that are related to the greater whole. This explains why the pages are portrayed as a kind of landscape and the novel itself is set in the form of a letter. Moreover, the decrease of Anna’s writing in order to fit the pages in the notebook symbolizes a call for a more effective way in utilizing our natural resources in the world. Thus, literature plays an important role in imposing interconnectedness—an idea that can be found in the philosophy of ecofeminism.¹⁶

4. Conclusion

Undeniably, Paul Auster’s *In The Country of the Last Things* is an eco-feminist fiction. The utopian/dystopian elements in the book serve not only as a key for us to explore the environmental issues that have been ignored in our present society but also provide us with some fresh perspectives in looking at the problems. Through the feminist narrator Anna Blumes, we come to realize the oppression toward women still remains as an unsolved problem due to the patriarchal system that is constructed by the male-dominated society. The alternative sexualities represented by Anna and Victoria in Woburn House further implies female self-affirmation, which



calls into question the norm of gender and sexuality that has been imposed upon our present society. Parallel to this is the oppression of nature by mankind, which is derived from the development of “split culture,” a negative product of modernization and industrialization. In the novel, Auster defamiliarizes the shopping cart and the job of scavenging in order to impose a strong contrasting image between the consumerist society and the recycling-based society, providing the reader a channel to rethink, firstly, the meaning of consumerism and its effects on our environment, and secondly, the perception of garbage as a useful resource. In addition, the parallel relationship between the act of collecting garbage before they fall apart and the act of writing down words before they fade away by Anna implies an undividable connection between the literary movement and the ecology movement. Through Anna, we understand that every fragment waste symbolizes the literary words while every scavenging movement represents the movement of literary creation. Furthermore, Boris’s ability to imagine the whole picture and every possibility of a circumstance before it happens serves as a great model to the reader in constructing complex webs of networks regarding environmental issues that have happened, are currently happening, and are going to happen. This function of interconnecting reminds us of the role of this book, which is to connect the world of literature to the environment.

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¹ Bernd Herzogenrath, *An Art of Desire: Reading Paul Auster*, 75.

² Ibid., 12.

³ James M. Hutchisson *Conversations with Paul Auster*, 12.

⁴ Padgett Powell, *Understanding Paul Auster*, 1987.

⁵ *The South Bank Show*, 1996.

⁶ *U.S. News*, 2008.

⁷ Brownmiller 1975: 14; qtd. in *Male Rape* 63.

⁸ Laura O'Toole and Jessica R. Rchiffman, *Gender Violence*, 188.

⁹ James Peacock, *Understanding Paul Auster*, 85.

¹⁰ Ibid., 88.

¹¹ Ibid., 90.

¹² Ibid., 91.

¹³ S. Griffin, "Split Culture," 7.

¹⁴ Fed H. Besthorn and Diane Peason McMillen, "The Oppression of Women" 225.

¹⁵ Ibid., 225.

¹⁶ Ibid., 225.



Alice's Exploration of Feminine Identity in Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass*

Alexandra Paleka

Abstract: This academic paper of the English literature discipline is a feminist criticism exploring Alice's transformation of identity in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass*. Though it is the commonly less appreciated sequel to the widely popular *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, the children's novel contains hidden literary value with its feminist message. *Through the Looking-Glass* engages in the discourse on the social ideology (as defined by Eagleton) of gender norms, as observed by strong-willed Alice's rejection of society's expectations toward women. As she reaches the age of entering adulthood, Alice becomes aware of the fact that she must now encounter the challenges of being a woman in a male-dominated world. She is faced with overcoming several obstacles on her journey for self-identity, such as offensive interactions with characters like the matriarchal flowers in *Wonderland*. The symbol of the Queen demonstrates the woman's struggle for power in society, whereas only if Alice succeeds in becoming a Queen in the chessboard land controlled by male Pawns can she escape the confines of the backwards looking-glass world. These polarizing situations force Alice to choose between two equally negative stereotypes: the weak conformist woman and the overbearing tyrannical woman. Alice must resist the harmful effects that this oppressive ideology has on young girls like herself as they develop both physically and psychologically into the next generation of young women. Through this adventure, Alice independently determines for herself the meaning of the female identity, one of fortitude, courage, and resilience. As a work of fantasy fiction with a dedicated following from a large fan community within the realm of popular culture, *Through the Looking-Glass* poses as an interesting subject for study. Enticing the reader's imagination since Carroll's publication in 1871, the children's novel serves as an excellent model for feminist criticism with its discourse that has remained relevant to modern day to both children and adults.

"Growing up is losing some illusions, in order to acquire others" (Virginia Woolf). In *Through the Looking-Glass*, Alice, a young girl on the verge of womanhood, does just that. By creating the mad world of *Wonderland*, she replaces one illusion for another: *Wonderland* for unrealistic expectations projected upon women by her society. In the novel, a sequel to Carroll's famous *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Alice returns to *Wonderland* for another series of nonsensical episodes that serve to reveal pieces of her fluid



identity during this transitional pubescent stage of life. The novel begins with Alice and her cat, Dinah, idly playing with a ball of string in the living room of her home while catching a glimpse of the boys productively working outside from the window. Soon after, she decides to move through the mirror into an alternate version of reality. There, she navigates through the many sections of the chessboard kingdom on a quest to become a Queen to earn herself enough power to return safely home. Along the way she meets many eccentric—and sometimes utterly befuddling—characters who either help or hinder her on her journey. After facing many confusions and struggles, Alice is eventually able to return from her dream-world to reality, but is left wondering how she can apply her experiences in Wonderland to her real life. In Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass*, Alice recreates the nonsensical Wonderland in order to explore and determine for herself the meaning of the female identity by rejecting socially constructed gender norms, demonstrating that the ideology of sex affects the psychological development of youth.

Alice's real-life experience of the oppression of women leads her to construct the looking-glass version of Wonderland, which enables her to subconsciously investigate the issue through her own ridiculous imagination. In *Introduction: What is Literature?*, Eagleton defines ideology as the circumstances relating to contemporary social power.¹ Ideology can further be defined by historians of literature as “an interrelated set of convictions or assumptions that reduces the complexities of a particular slice of reality to easily comprehensible terms and suggests appropriate ways of dealing with that reality.”² This play between reality and imagination can be observed in the novel as Alice aims to deconstruct her distressing experience from the real world within the fictional world of Wonderland as a means to understand more clearly her personal convictions as a woman. This concept of social ideology can be observed in traditional children's literature such as *Through the Looking-Glass*, in which the “text's playfulness only thinly masks a hostile anti-feminism. Thus, the attempt to subvert a particular social ideology is actually preconditioned and controlled by an attitude which is only a darker aspect of that very ideology's construction of a woman.”³ In the opening of the novel, Alice sees the boys gathering sticks, but knows that she must stay inside out of the cold while the men work: “I was watching the boys getting in sticks for the bonfire—and it wants plenty of sticks, Kitty! Never mind, we'll go and see the bonfire tomorrow.”⁴ Feeling slighted for not being invited to work with the boys, Alice is stuck by herself inside left bored and with nothing else to do but talk nonsense to her cat. Girls like Alice are not allowed to do “masculine” tasks like gathering wood out in the public, but



rather must stay hidden within the privacy of the home learning domestic tasks that foreshadow her future role as a mother, such as nurturing and disciplining the kitten. Though her subtle discomfort may not seem to convey any sign of troubled emotions, the event itself is significant because Alice is forced to face a situation in which her sex prevents her from participating. While she sits around lazily with nothing to do, the boys are allowed to be productive; meanwhile, she must wait for the next appropriate social opportunity to interact with them at the bonfire. In effect, it is as though society is telling Alice what girls can and cannot do—that is, that they cannot accomplish any valuable or similar work as men do. This sexist phenomenon is further described in *Family Status and Criticism of Gender Inequality at Home and at Work*: “Women’s prescribed roles leave them with the burden of extensive domestic and nurturance responsibilities as well as limited power within the family. These patterns constitute gender inequality within the home and are reflected in the ideology legitimating a gender-segregated labor force in which women’s earnings and opportunities are not equal to men’s.”⁵ These gender constructs of social ideology placed on young girls by society can harm their development as multi-dimensional human beings. Preventing women—specifically, impressionable young girls—from accomplishing the same tasks as men may directly cause them to feel undervalued and isolated by society. As she begins to question the society she lives in, the imaginative Alice creates the looking-glass Wonderland as an outlet in which she can dissect her true feelings toward feminist values and rejection of sexism. She accomplishes this by leaving the physical space of reality and entering into an imaginary construct of Wonderland, in which she concocts characters that challenge her identity and call her to confront injustices aimed at women.

Alice’s interaction with the matriarchal flowers, who demean Alice for behaving un-girlishly, shows her the everyday social pressures placed on women that she will soon face as she develops into a young woman. The “matriarchal vision” is “the idea of a society of strong women guided by essentially female concerns and values. These included, most importantly, pacifism, cooperation, nonviolent settlement of differences, and a harmonious regulation of public life.”⁶ Flowers, a symbol of female fertility, epitomize the matriarchal model, the ideal of women who embody society’s expectations and limitations. Immediately in their encounter, the Rose curtly reminds Alice about “manners.”⁷ Her overbearing personality is revealed even further to the discomfort of Alice when she continues to judge her worth by her appearance. The Rose concludes that Alice’s petals do not pass inspection, nor is she so intelligent as to be able to “think at all”—in fact, a Violet adds that she “never saw anybody that looked stupider.”⁸ Alice



rejects the flowers' harsh assessment and counters their aggression with a question that undermines their passive lifestyle: "Aren't you sometimes frightened at being planted out here, with nobody to take care of you?"⁹ The flowers respond that there is a tree, a phallic symbol, who protects them from danger just as men are expected to govern women. After all, "What else is it good for?" The social passivity of the flowers—who represent real-life female examples in the lives of young girls—provides poor female role models for Alice, whose sense of self-confidence and identity is being formed. Similarly, any "strong" female characters such as the queens in the novel are portrayed in a negative light for digressing from the norm of submission to males.

The symbol of the queen in Alice's Wonderland demonstrates the "bitch dichotomy," a phenomenon in which strong women are scorned by society for not conforming to social norms, thus reinforcing the belief that a woman's identity is defined by her subservience to powerful men. When a woman shows the strength, such as that of an independent queen, they can be perceived as being cold and controlling rather than kind and nurturing. This occurrence is what is known as the "bitch dichotomy," which is "the phenomenon that women, when exhibiting powerful leadership traits, are seen as 'bossy' or 'bitchy.'"¹⁰ In the novel there are many characters who are queens including the White Queen, Red Queen, and even Alice herself eventually becomes a queen. By definition, a queen is the most powerful woman in a patriarchal monarchy; however, it is interesting to note that typically—though not always (think Queen Victoria of England)—this great power ultimately derives from a man (i.e.: through the death of a spouse, a family line without a male heir, arranged marriage, etc.), thus making a queen's reign in essence still controlled by dominant male figures. As Alice examines the layout of the looking-glass Wonderland, she realizes that it resembles a checkerboard and notices it is being played on by men: "It's a great huge game of chess that's being played—all over the world. How I *wish* I was one of them! I wouldn't mind being a Pawn—though of course I should *like* being a Queen, best."¹¹ Essentially, the Wonderland chessboard represents the real world as a sort of "man's game" in which Alice must fight to be a part of. The only way to achieve this is by rejecting the many social barriers she is confronted with in Wonderland to become a powerful queen. However, she is still met with self-doubt about the validity of her accomplishment, whereas the novel culminates with Alice pondering whether her dream was under the control of the Red King the entire time.¹² Through this detail the novel demonstrates the deep extent into which male-dominant ideology has pervaded independent female thought. Alice's choice to be a powerful queen navigates the concept of the bitch dichotomy.



Take, for example, the tempestuous Red Queen who constantly barks out orders, confidently claims that “all the ways about here belong to me,”¹³ and makes the Red King submissive to her. Perhaps the Red Queen is an effective ruler; however, the only attributes ever mentioned are those of a tyrant so as to undermine her control. By refusing to be subservient to males, Alice takes on the risk of becoming alienated like the Red Queen. Feminist critic Glen Downey analyzes the text from a similar perspective, arguing that “Although it is by no means considered a feminist work in the way that other Victorian novels have been re-appraised by contemporary critics, *Through the Looking-Glass* is nevertheless recognized for its keen understanding of Alice’s predicament. Carroll shows how Alice is ultimately a prisoner of her inability to change the frustrating game in which she finds herself because her only models of behavior are the helpless but amiable White Queen and the responsible but mean-tempered Red Queen.”¹⁴ Moreover, Alice is caught in a dichotomous predicament: if she chooses to remain a mere Pawn in the game she will have no social standing or value, but if she chooses to become a powerful Queen she will be alienated and scrutinized. Alice continues to exercise control over her position in society by refusing to be manipulated like the White Queen.

Alice overcomes society’s expectations of women to be helpless and counterproductive, as portrayed by the White Queen, by learning how to reject sexist biases and disallowing them from compromising her psychological development as she becomes a woman. When the White Queen is introduced, she is described as looking quite disheveled and out of control: she appears to be in a “helpless frightened sort of way,” quite timid, and wearing a crooked shawl.¹⁵ Also, the White Queen literally does things backwards, such as feeling pain before being pricked.¹⁶ As opposed to the overbearing Red Queen, the White Queen is the epitome of the subservient female model who remains bent at the will of the turbulent forces of male social dominance around her. Assumingly, a woman in this position has too little control over her own life to be a contributing member of society as would a stable male. Despite being bound to this stereotype, the White Queen does in fact surprise readers by momentarily breaking free from her mold. She gives Alice the key to her own happiness by reminding her to “Consider what a great girl you are.”¹⁷ When Alice replies to this advice by saying “There’s no use in trying, one *can’t* believe impossible things.” White Queen testifies to the effectiveness of this mindset, saying that as someone much older than Alice she herself has gotten through life by daring to believe in the impossible. With the presence of this strong female influence in her life, Alice chooses to now ascribe to feminist theory as she matures into a young woman. She moves forward with her decision to become a



queen, thus rejecting the social ideology that had once conflicted her. By doing so, Alice prevents the “destructive masculine ideologies that govern the public world” based on “the differences between men and women [that] are principally biological”¹⁸ to reflect her female identity.

In Carroll’s *Through the Looking-Glass*, Wonderland serves as an imaginary construct that allows Alice to confront her subconscious challenges against gender norms caused by social ideology in order to define female identity as she prepares to transition into womanhood. Though written by a man, the feminist message of this novel is applicable to young girls who are transitioning into womanhood. Just as Alice undergoes her many adventures, so do many girls around the world face many undeniable challenges that—depending on how they react by either accepting or rejecting implied notions—will impact their concept of what it means to be a woman. The age-long quest to determine a universal definition of feminism is still an undergoing journey for modern society. Perhaps if women are taught as young girls to question their position in society, then future women will learn to say “I don’t want other people to decide who I am. I want to decide that for myself” (Emma Watson).

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¹ Eagleton, Terry, "Introduction," 1-14.

² Michael H. Hunt, "Ideology," 108.

³ John Stephens, *Language and Ideology*, 94.

⁴ Lewis Carroll and Morton N. Cohen, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, 115.

⁵ Emily W. Kane, and Laura Sanchez, "Family Status," 3.

⁶ Josephine Donovan, "Cultural Feminism," 32.

⁷ Carroll, Lewis and Morton N. Cohen, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, 129.

⁸ Ibid. 130.

⁹ Ibid. 129.

¹⁰ Ingrid Rosenthal, "The Bitch Dichotomy."

¹¹ Carroll, Lewis and Morton N. Cohen, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, 133.

¹² Ibid. 230.

¹³ Ibid. 132.

¹⁴ Glen Downey, "The Critical Reception of Through the Looking-Glass."

¹⁵ Carroll, Lewis and Morton N. Cohen, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, 162-164.

¹⁶ Ibid. 165.

¹⁷ Ibid. 166.

¹⁸ Josephine Donovan, "Cultural Feminism," 62.



The Appropriation of an Epic: Lucille Clifton's Feminist Retelling of Milton

Jessica Williams

Lucille Clifton, 20th century African American minimalist poet and author of Afrocentric children's books, and John Milton, 17th century, English blank-verse poet and prose author, would not seem to be natural bedfellows. Yet Clifton follows in Milton's footsteps by having written poetry that appropriates and reimagines the stories of biblical characters. While Milton attempted to write an epic which would "justify God," Clifton writes to find the human, the feminine, and the personal spaces in these mythological characters, though she, too, searches for understanding in and of her God character. Her depictions of Eve and Lucifer, specifically, reveal her preoccupations with a feminist ideology as she not only removes blame from Eve but gives her power—sexual, linguistic, intellectual, and otherwise—over both Adam and Lucifer. Like Eve, Lucifer, too, is exonerated for some of his actions; he is not merely the adversary of God, but a light-bringer who, like Clifton, comes to represent both light and darkness in her poems.

Of course, the Bible has been a natural source of inspiration for a multitude of writers since its many stories, parables, and fascinating characters invite literary interpretation. In my readings of Clifton's characterization of Eve and Satan in her Old Testament poems, I look back to Milton's versions to understand how and why Clifton sought to insert a female retelling into the lexicon of biblical literature. I argue that, in fact, Clifton's biblical poetry is directly appropriated not from the Bible itself but from Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Hers is a contemporary revision of his retelling, a feminist footnote, and a distinctly female envisioning of a historically patriarchal Christianity.

Alicia Ostriker discusses one of Clifton's earlier poems about her vocation, "prayer," and makes a direct parallel to Milton's "Sonnet 16." In "prayer" Clifton tells her listener, presumably God, to "lighten up" (1) and asks,

why is your hand
so heavy
on just poor
me? (2-5)

The speaker receives a response which Ostriker argues "makes this poem cunningly parallel John Milton's famous complaint of blindness" (41). The answer in Clifton's poem reads:

this is the stuff



i made the heroes
out of
all the saints
and prophets and things
had to come by
this. (7-13)

The poem closely resembles Milton's famous 16th Sonnet, which is in the same question-answer format. In his sonnet, Milton asks his God how he can exact the "day-labor" of poetry from a man whom he has struck blind. The Sonnet famously ends with the answer: "They also serve who only stand and wait" (81). It is impressive that there is an almost "identical structure" in Clifton and Milton's poems "in which the [each of the] poet[s] interrogates God's fairness and gets fairly answered"¹. Ostriker's example underscores that both poets are searching for the answer to the same question – is God just? For me, the answer itself is not nearly as important as is their very similar ways of attempting to answer it.

Lucifer: Bringer of Light

The name Satan literally means "enemy," while Lucifer, Satan's original name, means "bringer of light." Clifton only refers to him as Lucifer, while Milton only calls him Satan. At first glance it seems as though the two poets see the "devil" in two very different lights – quite literally – as Clifton sees him mostly in light and Milton mostly in darkness. In Clifton's poem "[oh where have you fallen to]," Lucifer is described as "son of the morning,"² "beautiful Lucifer," and "bringer of light" (2-4) opposing some of Milton's descriptions of Satan whom he calls "adversary of God and man," "a monster," and refers to Satan's home in hell as a place of "no light" (II :329; I: 192-209; I: 63). Time and again we see these two very different descriptions of the same character throughout each poets' works, but a closer examination reveals that in each of the poets' depictions of the fallen angel there is some blurring, and neither Satan nor Lucifer is really seen as all good or all evil. It, too, becomes apparent that, to some extent, their examinations of Satan/Lucifer are held up as mirrors to their own struggles with God and faith.

Throughout Clifton's poems there are references to the character "Lucille Clifton" whom she seems to treat as her distant self; that is, her self but a separate self from she who writes the poems. She explores the origin of her name – Lucille means "light" – and it becomes a powerful theme throughout much of her work. In her Biblical poems we see that Lucifer is always described in reference to light of some sort and from here we can begin to



make a Lucille/Lucifer connection in the poems. In interviews, Clifton has often referred to having had mystical experiences, saying that she has heard voices for much of her life which she considers not the voice of God, but “an awareness of more than the physical,” and this is represented in her sequence of poems titled “the light that came to lucille clifton” from *good woman*. These poems are filled with light images and of this Clifton says that “Light takes on lots of meaning in my writing – a knowing, a clarity. *The Book of Light* (1993) is about clearness, about seeing things whole, seeing what’s there and more” (30-32, 87-90. 32). The light metaphor becomes a way for Clifton to explore her inner life as well as her relationship with her spirituality. As I will illustrate below, she attaches these same light images to Lucifer, and in doing so merges the two identities until they, at times, become indistinguishable.

This is most clearly seen in the eight poem sequence titled “brothers” which is considered by many, and rightfully so, to be the apex of Clifton’s biblical writing. The sequence of poems is headed by the explanation: “*being a conversation in eight poems between an aged Lucifer and God, though only Lucifer is heard. The time is long after*” (69), a preface Hillary Holladay identifies as a “minimalist description [which] pays glancing tribute to the prose ‘Argument’ preceding each book of *Paradise Lost* ³. It is a fascinating sequence which begins with “invitation,” a poem in which Lucifer invites God to “coil” with him in “creation’s bed” and shoot the breeze “like two old brothers / who watched it happen and wondered / what it meant” (1-2, 14-16). In the sequence, Lucifer praises God, questions how he came to “this serpent’s understanding” of himself, defends himself as well as Adam and Eve, and questions God. Throughout all of his assertions and queries we see a fragile, almost remorseful, and strikingly human version of Lucifer, one with whom the reader can identify, specifically because he asks questions of God which many might, in fact, have asked of themselves and which Clifton is also clearly asking. In a sense, Lucifer becomes “a proxy for Clifton and her own questions about God,” as Holladay notes⁴, so much so that when Lucifer asks God to “tell us why / you watched the excommunication of / that world and You said nothing” (6: 9-11) we get the strong sense that it is not Lucifer, but Clifton who demands an answer from God. The character of Lucifer allows Clifton to address her theological doubts from behind the mask of the fallen angel.

By examining the speaker of “brothers” as a Lucille/Lucifer hybrid, we are able to see that the metaphor of light, very much present in these poems, is one that is applied to both Lucille and Lucifer because Lucille sees a lot of Lucifer in herself. In an interview conducted in 2000, Clifton discusses her



notion of light as well as the Lucille/Lucifer connection, in which she says that she sees writing as a way of “keeping back the darkness” which exists in one’s life. She expresses the darkness in herself through Lucifer but does so by bathing him in light. She addresses the “dark side of herself,” saying that by writing about it she “validate[s] what is human” explaining that darkness is a part of every person and that it must be acknowledged in order for one to have balance. She believed that you have to have grace as well as darkness, which is why her Lucifer is, again, not represented as a dark figure but as a “bringer of light.” In an earlier interview with Holladay she says,

I’ve said that I know there’s Lucifer in Lucille, because I know me – I can be so petty, it’s amazing! And there is therefore a possibility of Lucille in Lucifer. Lucifer was doing what he was supposed to do, too, you know? It’s too easy to see Lucifer as all bad. Suppose he were merely being human. That’s why the Bible people – it’s too easy to think of them as all mythological, saintly folk. It is much more interesting to me that these were humans – caught up in a divine plan, but human. That seems to me the miracle. (188)⁵

Her depiction of a Lucifer who is not all bad, but merely human, allows her to work through her relationship with God.

Hull points out “after being told that ‘God is Light,’ – Clifton maintains her designation of Light as ‘personification’ for ‘Transcendent Being,’ but still attaches it to Lucifer, who is God’s opposite, or, at the least, is certainly not God.” She attaches it to herself as well – also a not-God, but certainly, in a sense, closer to God than perhaps Lucifer should be. Hull tells us that Clifton “responds to this puzzlement by asking, ‘If God is God – is there a “not God?”’ – which means that if God is everything, ‘He’ is also Lucifer, who can then be seen as (part of) God, and hence as Light” and the same can be said for Clifton⁶. Because God is everything, everything is part of God, including God’s opposite.

Clifton uses Lucifer in a way which allows her to safely and anonymously pose her questions to God. She uses the ideas of light and darkness in order to justify evil, and at times, she lets us know that the distinction between good and evil cannot be so clearly identified. By inverting the way in which we normally define these terms, and by aligning herself with Lucifer, she allows herself a way to explore her universe, and a way in which to ask her questions to a God whom she doesn’t necessarily identify with.

These are all ideas which are undoubtedly prevalent in Milton’s *Paradise Lost* where he explains that the entire purpose of writing his epic is to “assert eternal providence / And justify the ways of God to men” – a claim which begs the question, why do God’s ways need justification in the first



place? (I. 25-26) The first person to question God's ways is and always has been Satan, and so in a sense there is a parallel immediately drawn between the poet and his fallen angel. In other words, without Satanic doubt Milton would not have a subject for his epic, and in choosing the Fall as his subject he does what Satan set out to do – that is to get to the bottom of this whole God business and challenge it. The difference mainly lies in intention; while Satan tries to overthrow God, Milton attempts to justify him – both put themselves in superior positions and attempt to gain personal achievement and glory, though while Satan delights in his glory, Milton denies that he seeks it for himself.

The idea of Satanic doubt, because it links Milton with his archangel so closely, is important to examine a bit further. William Empson, in his book *Milton's God*, tells us that one of the controversial views regarding *Paradise Lost* is that it is either bad because Milton's God is bad, or that it is good because his God is tolerable. Empson denies both, stating that "the poem is not good in spite of but especially because of its moral confusions, which ought to be clear in your mind when you are feeling its power" and sides with Blake and Shelley who said that "the reason why the poem is so good is that it makes God so bad"⁷. The problem with recognizing Milton's God as "bad" is that it makes us realize that his Satan is, as Empson puts it, "in some romantic way good"⁸. This is a view put forth by Blake in his *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, which claimed that "Milton...was of the Devil's party without knowing it," a viewpoint which seems to be supported by the poem⁹. As Shelley points out, Milton does indeed give Satan every possible advantage while exposing God's seeming injustices and weaknesses¹⁰. He later gives an example by pointing out that the fall would never have happened had God not sent Raphael in to talk to Adam and Eve, or had he never "cheated his own troops" allowing Satan to enter Paradise in the first place¹¹.

Many critics have seen Satan as a sort of heroic rebel, undoubtedly as the most captivating character in the epic, and in many senses the "author" of the fall from Eden. Stanley Fish makes this argument in his book, *Surprised by Sin*, and asserts that a Satanic reading is in fact encouraged by the poem. In other words, the poem encourages its own misreading in order for the reader to then make a proper and corrected reading. In Fish's words: "Satan's initial attractiveness owes as much to a traditional idea of what is heroic as it does to our weakness before the rhetorical lure. He exemplifies a form of heroism most of us find easy to admire because it is visible and flamboyant." Fish goes on to point out that even the epic voice admires Satan's charismatic persona, and says that Satan's "courage is never denied



(instead Milton insists upon it).” As a result of Milton’s heroic portrayal of the fallen angel, the reader has to find a new way to think about heroism, and to develop more finely tuned judgment making skills. So, to reiterate, the poem almost insists upon a Satanic reading – a morally “incorrect” reading of the poem – but the purpose of this, according to Fish, was that Milton wanted his readers to actively participate in the text; he wanted them to work for the answer; it was supposed to be difficult. The reason for this was the existence of two “analytical traditions, one concerned with the inner life and encouraging introspection, the other concerned with objects and artifacts and encouraging a sense of responsibility to ‘the linguistic situation’.” The poem has been written in a way, which should encourage these responses from its readers¹².

Through this heroic view of Satan, we can certainly see reflections of the author; as Kenneth Gross puts it, “...we see in [Satan] aspects of Milton in his roles of poet, visionary quester, rebel against tyranny, conspirator for liberty, propagandist, worshiper in a church of one”¹³. The point that we see a bit of Milton in Satan’s role as poet rings true, especially considering the many references in *Paradise Lost* to Satan being “the author of all ill” and “the author of evil” (II: 381, VI: 262). If this is true of Satan, then it must be true of Milton as well since Milton is the author of “the author of all ill.”

Regina Schwartz’s discussion of voyeurism in *Paradise Lost*, while stopping one step short of making an in-depth Milton/Satan connection, can give us an interesting look into the parallel. She sees Satan as a voyeur, spying on Adam, Eve, and all of Eden, “his eye his weapon.” Using a Freudian framework, she outlines a “mechanism of reversal in which the aggression toward an object is turned back upon the self, and the once active subject (sadist, voyeur) assumes the role of passive object (masochist, exhibitionist)” so that when “Satan is apprehended by Uriel, the dreaded event occurs: the viewer is viewed.” She poses the question, “Has the narrator made his blindness a figure for the unseeing exhibitionist? If he could see, he may only encounter a universal blank of his darkness, there may be no sight of God, there may be no justification of God’s ways. And so he wards off that fear by displaying himself”¹⁴. Once the viewer is viewed he can no longer see God’s creations and so the dualism here lies in the fact that Milton’s re-writing of God’s creations is his way of “displaying himself” in order to put off his own fear that because he is “in darkness,” in other words literally in blindness, that somehow he is separated from his God, very much in the same way that Satan in hell’s darkness cannot ever regain Heaven’s grace, and so Milton is able to hide behind his role as narrator in order to shrug off the fear that he may not be seen by God.



I noted in the earlier discussion of Clifton's use of Lucifer as a proxy to address God that this was also a device used by Milton, as Schwartz's discussion has helped show, and it is significant to discuss how this is seen through the various invocations of Milton's Muse. Fish argues that Milton will typically "present himself as someone who wishes nothing more than to serve...while he tends to displace the *anxiety* of service...onto others or onto fictionalized versions of himself" as he does in the role of narrator in his epic poem¹⁵. Therefore, Milton says he wants nothing more than to illuminate and justify the ways of God, in other words to serve God by sharing his ways with mankind, but the fears and anxieties which he harbors come across in the fictionalized version of Milton as narrator; the proem to Book VII is a perfect example of this. Fish notes that it can be no coincidence that among Milton's themes are personal glory and the rise to power, nor that he spends so much time giving credit to his Muse. He constantly asserts himself as "only God's mouthpiece" a declaration which "speak(s) to a fear that what Milton (quite literally) demonizes and pushes away may be what he desires: that is, to be first, preeminent, outstanding, independent, new, separate. He wants at once to celebrate humility and to be celebrated as the celebrator of humility" the result of which is that he allows us to see that "He longs to be absorbed by a power greater than he, and he experiences absorption as a threat...to his very being" (6-7) and so he cannot help but write from behind a veil, or a fictionalized version of himself, in very much the same way that we have seen Clifton do.

Of the poem's four invocations, the proem of Book III stands out due to its seemingly autobiographical yearning for inspiration and call for the "celestial light / [to] shine inward" (51-52). The imagery of light and darkness in this invocation clearly references Milton's blindness, saying, "Thus with the year / Seasons return, but not to me returns / Day...But cloud instead, and ever-during dark / Surrounds me" (40-42,45-46). His lament ends with a call for the "celestial light" to "Shine inward, and the mind through all her powers / Irradiate, there plant eyes, all mist from thence / Purge and disperse, that I may see and tell / Of things invisible to mortal sight" (52-55). While many argue that Milton is clearly present in this particular proem, an alternative has been provided by Merritt Y. Hughes, who posits that "Sympathy for the blind poet has made the passage seem simply autobiographical...But at a time when the 'Book of Nature' was familiarly regarded as one of God's lesser epiphanies, Chambers points out that men thought of sight as the sense which 'best helps us to know things'"¹⁶. In other words, God gave vision in order that we gain knowledge of seasons, time, and the heavens – all things Milton references here – and



without it Milton is “Cut off from God’s epiphany in the Book of Nature” and so his “only hope of divine illumination must be that of the poets and seers who were stricken blind in antiquity” hence his references in this proem to Homeric prophets. To draw another parallel, it should be noted that most critics have agreed that throughout the epic we see a gradual, yet steady, decline and degradation of Satan¹⁷. In other words, as Satan performs more and more evil, or falls further and further into darkness, he collapses. He is blinded by his jealousy and rage toward God. Because of his blindness, Milton can be seen to be – as Satan is – cut off from God, and therefore we see the personal fears of the author, but through a veil of narrative where Milton is *not necessarily* speaking. As with Clifton, Milton has an exterior version of himself, a John Milton separate from he who has written the epic; in other words, a fictionalized version of himself, which allows him to express personal thoughts and fears without completely exposing himself to his audience.

following the bright back of the woman

Through their individual depictions of Satan, both poets have attempted to explore the same questions: is God just? is Satan purely evil? can we see a bit of ourselves in these characters? They also both do something similar when writing about Eve. Both Milton and Clifton each have a very specific version of the character Eve who, though different in each of the authors’ works, is in essence similar because her legacy is reclaimed in both *Paradise Lost* and in Clifton’s poetry. The first woman is, in Clifton’s poems, seen as sharing in the blame of the fall rather than being entirely at fault. She is also seen as an enlightened woman who is both intellectually and spiritually equal to Adam, if not at times superior. Milton, on the other hand, portrays a version of Eve who is extremely complex and can be read in a few different ways. Historical readings of Eve include the view popular during the Renaissance which held that she was solely at fault for the fall of man, and contemporary critics tend to say that she can be viewed as an equal partner in the events of the fall. In either case, Milton and Clifton have taken great care to present to us their very specific versions of the first woman, and through an examination of both Eves we can see the different ways in which each of the authors have sought to do the same essential thing – to reclaim and rewrite Eve’s legacy. Furthermore, the two poets’ share a similar purpose in doing this. The way that we interpret Eve has a lot to do with how we interpret the entirety of the fall, and again, in seeing Eve in a more fair and human light, as both Clifton and Milton seem to do, we get an even deeper understanding of how each poet strives toward an understanding of God’s ways.



Clifton's version of Eve seems to stem directly from her own femininity, her need for vindication, and simply from her tendency to take stereotypical or archetypal things and people, and transform them into her own versions. The result of her rewriting of Eve is that we get a character who is in some ways the Eve that legend knows and who is in many other ways a contemporary, feminized, and humanized version of that legend. Her Eve still "leads the human fall from grace" as Akasha Hull puts it, but "her revised role is a splendid one"¹⁸. The most appropriate example is seen when the pair leaves Eden in the poem, "the story thus far." Clifton writes, "so they went out / clay and morning star / following the bright back of the woman"; it is Adam and Lucifer following Eve's brightness out of Paradise (*quilting*, 1-3, 79). Eve is portrayed as magnificent in her role as leader in the fall. An examination of the way in which Clifton sees Eve in her poetry paired with a comparison to Milton and his rewriting of Eve will illuminate how both authors have each reclaimed Eve as their own.

Taking a cue from Genesis, Clifton discusses the act of discovering words in "the birth of language" in which she describes Adam, rising "fearful in the garden / without words for the grass / his fingers plucked" and without language for the taste of it in his mouth (1-8). She wonders if maybe the blades of grass in his mouth drew blood and "became his early lunge toward language" implying that it must have astonished him and caused him to "whisper / eve" (11-17). Though Clifton gives Adam credit here for uttering the first word, as the Bible traditionally does, and as does Milton, Clifton makes the change that the first word ever spoken by a human tongue is the name "Eve." This is significant because it pays respect to the first woman, a woman who has very often been the object of blame and criticism. So here we see that Clifton attempts to vindicate and pay homage to Eve who is traditionally an object of weakness and fault, which essentially lets her readers know that her Eve will not be the Eve we are familiar with, but rather a re-creation of the first woman in a very different light.

We get a more personal view of Eve in the poem "eve thinking" in which we see the first woman observing sexual acts all around her which she describes as "brothers and sisters coupling / claw and wing / groping one another" (2-4). She says she is waiting for Adam to find the language to call to her, but she grows impatient, and ends saying that perhaps she will "whisper [their names] into his mouth" while he sleeps at night so that he will know how to beckon her to him (12). This is significant for a few reasons. Traditionally, Adam's naming of the animals has been taken as a sign of his superiority. By allowing Eve to whisper their names into Adam's mouth, Clifton reverses



the balance of power between them. She doesn't necessarily give Eve the upper-hand, but she certainly acknowledges an equality between the two.

The scene where language is discovered also appears in *Paradise Lost* though it is quite a different scene. The scene is presented to the reader by Adam, who is relating the story of his life thus far to Raphael. He describes his first moments of existence, saying that "...who I was, or where, or from what cause, / Knew not; to speak I tried, and forthwith spake, / My tongue obeyed and readily could name / Whate'er I saw" (VIII: 270-273). His first words are sun, light, and "thou enlightened earth"; there is no mention of Eve because she has yet to be created. God brings all the animals to Adam in order that Adam should name them, and he does, but it is not until almost 100 lines later that Adam asks God for a companion (VIII: 341-354, 444-448). So Eve is absent in this scene, the result of which is that Milton can be said to have placed Adam at a higher status. However, we find out in Book XI, while Eve is lamenting her loss of Paradise, that she has named the flowers when she says, "O flowers...which I bred up with tender hand / From the first opening bud, and gave ye names" (XI: 273, 276-277). Eve is actually given an equivalent responsibility by God and so Milton has given the power of naming to both the first man and woman.

By pairing our earlier discussion of "eve thinking" with its mate, "adam thinking" we can further strengthen the argument that Clifton's version of these characters is one of equality. Spoken in Adam's voice, "adam thinking" shows him thinking about Eve, and there is violent and sexual imagery throughout the poem. The first stanza reads:

she
stolen from my bone
is it any wonder
i hunger to tunnel back
inside desperate
to reconnect the rib and clay
and to be whole again. (1-7)

Adam is expressing a desire to crawl back inside Eve, to connect the two pieces which have been separated, to reclaim his rib from which Eve was created and essentially to make man and woman one being again. This is clearly sexual, and seems to be his justification for wanting to sleep with Eve. The rest of the poem becomes more violent:

some need is in me
struggling to roar through my
mouth into a name
this creation is so fierce



i would rather have been born. (8-12)

His desire is so overwhelming to him; he has no name for it but believes that it is a need to reconnect to his stolen rib. He uses it to justify his sexual urges saying that it is so fierce, he would “rather have been born.” Adam was created by God, not birthed, and so his obvious meaning is that he would have rather been a result of sex because it is such a fierce creation.

So it is significant that while Adam justifies his lust for Eve, in “eve thinking” it is she who plots a way in which to get him into her bed. In this instance Clifton seems to be taking a direct cue from Milton. In *Paradise Lost*, Lucifer whispers into Eve’s ear while she sleeps in order to tempt her to eat the forbidden fruit and to fuel her with desire; by placing this act into Eve’s power, the implication is that Eve is seducing Adam with her forbidden fruit, and is essentially playing the role of tempter (IV: 797-809). Eve is allied with Lucifer here (which we see also in “eve’s version”); she is taking on the role of Milton’s Lucifer by luring Adam while he sleeps. This alignment is interesting because we now have Lucifer/Lucille and Lucifer/Eve hybrid identities.

Clifton gives Eve a chance to tell her side of the story and to defend herself in her own words in “eve’s version.” In this poem, which again falls in line with *Paradise Lost*, Eve lays much of the blame on Lucifer explaining that he “slides into my dreams / and fills them with apple / apple snug as my breast / in the palm of my hand” (2-5). She explains how Lucifer further tempted her: “it is your own lush self / you hunger for / he whispers lucifer / honey-tongue” (8-11). The devil is a “smooth talker” who convinces her that what she desires is herself, a gorgeous blossomed apple. Lucifer essentially says that Eve, woman, is herself forbidden fruit. The result of this is that Eve is seen as delighting in sexuality. Holladay takes this point further, noting how the alignment of “lush self” and “Lucifer” creates a visual result of allying Lucifer and Eve, again very much like in “eve thinking”¹⁹. This poem does not serve to excuse Eve, and there is no evidence here that she is looking for any sort of excuse or justification; she is merely telling her side of a story she has never been able to tell, or that she has chosen not to tell, as in *Paradise Lost* where it is Adam – not Eve – who does all of the exculpatory story-telling. While this could be seen as a sign of Adam’s superiority, I would argue that it is actually Eve who is taking the morally-higher road in accepting the blame and taking responsibility for an action that she now knows is wrong. While it is true that Milton does not give Eve a voice to defend herself to the Heavens, it can be said that the reasoning is that she, unlike Adam, does not need one because at this point her moral character and ethical thinking are much stronger than Adam’s.



He attempts to excuse an action that he knows is wrong while Eve acts as a more ethically responsible person.

Keeping this in mind, but returning to the idea of an alignment between Eve and Lucifer, we can turn to *Paradise Lost* where the very same alignment that is present in Clifton's poems also exists. When Adam and Eve have their post-lapsarian fight, and Adam is lamenting the terrible state he has found himself in, he completely blames Eve for his fallen state and lashes out at her, proclaiming:

Out of my sight, thou serpent, that name best
Befits thee with him leagued, thyself
as false and hateful; nothing wants, but that thy shape,
like his, and colour serpentine may show
Thy inward fraud, to warn all creatures from thee
Henceforth; lest that too heavenly form, pretended
To hellish falsehood, snare them. (X: 867-873)

Eve is connected intrinsically to Satan here – a serpent, false, hateful, prideful, vain, untrustworthy, and defective – all words which have also been used by Milton to describe Satan. So here, Eve is not simply *as bad as* Satan but she may as well be Satan herself, according to Adam. Also, as Hughes has noted in a gloss to the text, in allying Eve and Lucifer here there exists a pun: in Hebrew Heve means serpent, and so we have a visual, adjectival, and an etymological aligning of Eve and Satan.²⁰

Clifton hints at an underlying sexuality in Eden, which seems to center around Eve. As we have discussed earlier, she is often seen as being surrounded by sexuality as well as instigating actual sex or the thought of sex. The connection with Eve and sexuality is interesting because it encompasses all the aspects of Eve we have already discussed – such as her connection with Lucifer and her feminine power – and so it is significant to unfold here. In “the birth of language” Eve is an observer who is surrounded by sexual acts; “eve’s version” shows her lusting for herself; in “adam thinking” the power of sex is recognized and Adam longs for a way to “tunnel back / inside” of her; and in “eve thinking” she is instigating sex with Adam.

In “whispered to lucifer” the angels think that Eve could have been powerful enough to have enticed Lucifer to leave Heaven. They ask, “was it to touch her / featherless arm / was it to curl your belly / around her”? The sexual undertone is there, and it is implying that Eve’s beauty and sexual power *was* enough to tempt Lucifer to leave Heaven. And indeed, in “lucifer understanding at last” it is Lucifer who brings lust into Eden, giving it to Eve. The poem reads:



thy servant lord

bearer of lightning
and of lust

thrust between the
legs of the earth
into this garden

phallus and father
doing holy work (1-8)

Lucifer and God come together here to “thrust” lust into the Garden, and to hand it over to Eve. In such poems, sex is seen as something to be celebrated. It is, as Clifton portrays it, fun and games, and another way to embrace life. In an odd departure, Clifton portrays Adam and Eve “rubbing against the leaves” in “report from the angel of eden” (32.2). The angel reports that what it saw “seemed like dancing / as when we angels / praise among the clouds / but they were not praising You” (5-8). They were praising themselves, and their physical bodies as opposed to God, and so the angel (possibly Lucifer, though it is unclear) is now afraid of this act of sex because it seems to imply a deviation from God. There is fear that they can and will “do evil / with it” and the angel asks, “what now / of Paradise” (22-23, 27-28). For Clifton, as Holladay notes, “sex is a divine idea that manifests itself in human pleasure” and says that we must embrace sexuality in order to embrace life²¹. These ideas can be seen throughout all of the above-mentioned poems which, when taken together, tell the reader that sex, while incredibly powerful and something to celebrate, also has the potential for evil.

Of course this idea is something that is also represented by Milton in *Paradise Lost*. The reader’s first description of Eve is one of sexual language: “...Her unadorned golden tresses wore / Disheveled, but in wanton ringlets waved / As the vine curls her tendrils” (IV: 306-308). Fish points out the “innumerable associations of female hair with seduction,” and points out the moral implications we as readers are to surmise from the description²². Fish gives us another fascinating example by pointing toward the embrace we witness at IV.492:

with eyes
Of conjugal attraction unprov’d,
And meek surrender, half embracing lean’d
On our first Father, half her swelling Breast
Naked met his under the flowing gold



Of her loose tresses hid; he in delight...

Fish posits that in this passage there is a “steady progression of physically stimulating images” which again connects Eve’s hair with the idea of seduction and gives the reader an image of Eve as a sexual being, and indeed a seducer²³. This seems to be, however, a major problem in the text since that kind of sin cannot exist in Eden and despite being immediately told after this passage that this was a “conjugal” and innocent love, the image still remains in the reader’s mind. Eve’s sexuality, as the reader is supposed to see it, is not a reflection, therefore, of Eve but rather should be a reflection of the reader’s self. This is simply because Milton would have expected his readers to make sexual associations with Eve and the language that surrounds her, but these thoughts should in turn encourage the morally responsible reader to recognize that since lustful sin could not exist in Eden it must then solely exist in the reader’s sinful mind.

The images that Clifton introduces to us in “whispered to lucifer” seem to reflect the scene in *Paradise lost* when Satan is struck “stupidly good” by Eve’s beauty. Satan’s first reaction upon seeing Eve is that Satan is so overwhelmed by her beauty and “heavenly form” that he is described as having “...stood / From his own evil, and for the time remained / stupidly good, of enmity disarmed, / of guile, of hate, of envy, of revenge” (IX. 463-6). So were we to answer the angels’ questions in “whispered to lucifer,” we would be tempted to answer, Yes, Lucifer may indeed have left Heaven in order to “curl his belly” around her and to touch her “featherless arm.”

Clifton seems to have taken a cue from Milton here, except of course she shows us a contemporary version of the same idea. Instead of using the idea of a sexual Eve to produce morally responsible thoughts in her readers, she uses the idea of sexual empowerment to open her reader’s minds to possibilities that are less patriarchal than tradition typically allows. The connections that exist between Clifton and Milton’s writings of Eve are distinctly different, though they share some intrinsic similarities which, as we’ve seen, are significant to acknowledge. They both succeed in re-writing the character of Eve from their own specific perspectives. Both acknowledge Eve’s role in the fall of man; both play with the idea of an equality between Adam and Eve, and the idea that perhaps Eve was not entirely at fault; and they both explore Eve as a sexual being, one who has the power of sexuality within her, whether subtly or directly. The interesting differences are found in how each author does this, and as we have seen, how they come to similar, yet fundamentally different versions of this character. There is certainly an appropriation of Milton on Clifton’s part which seems to pay homage to the poet, while at the same time expanding upon and revitalizing his vision.



Conclusion

What Clifton has essentially done in her Biblical poetry, is taken Milton's *Paradise Lost* and made it her own text. She uses the character of Satan and turns him into Lucifer, a character which closely parallels the character she has created for herself. Like Milton, she uses Lucifer in order to confront God with her questions of justness. Like Milton, she fears this confrontation and so attempts to disguise herself while still clearly shining through as an integral part of her fallen angel. Both poets' explorations of God's adversary have allowed them to explore difficult questions of faith which otherwise may not have been able to be examined.

Their further examinations of Eve's character are equally as important, though on a slightly different note. By exploring Lucifer as she does, Clifton is able to question God, and only because of this can she therefore build upon Milton's Eve. In other words, Clifton has taken a cue from Milton in using Satan the way Milton does; with Eve she goes further than Milton. She takes a humanized version of Eve much like Milton's, but then she modernizes her, and makes her an Eve for contemporary readers. So while the explorations are along the same lines, Clifton contemporizes her Eve in a way which lets us ask moral questions of ourselves. We have to decide as readers whether or not Clifton's liberated Eve is acceptable to us. Can we as modern readers accept her in a way that pays homage to the fictional Eve of Milton? I think the answer has to be in the affirmative, because without Milton's Eve, Clifton's would probably not exist, and certainly would not exist in the same form. The influence is simply too strong.

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**The Battle to Breastfeed:
An Oral History & Review of Workplace Lactation Support,
1994-2016**

Ryan Bailey Patterson

Throughout the twentieth century the United States witnessed a remarkable increase in workforce participation by women due to shifting socio-economic needs, values, and expectations. By the 1990s, women with infants and children were the fastest growing segment of the U.S. labor force, and of these women, approximately seventy percent worked full time.²⁴ An increasing presence of women in the workforce proved to be a victory for feminist activism in the 1990s, but a largely unacknowledged problem for working women continued to linger: a discriminatory lack of appropriate facilities and inadequate time in the workplace for breastfeeding and pumping. Between late-1994 to 1996, my mother, Stephanie Patterson, opted to continue breastfeeding throughout my infancy. As a working mother she encountered unnecessary difficulties while trying to breast-pump during the workday, which is representative of the lack of institutional support for breastfeeding and working mothers during the period.

In 1997, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) released a revised policy statement that strongly supported breastfeeding and highlighted the developmental benefits yielded by human milk.²⁵ The statement also recommended that infants be breastfed for *at least* twelve months and that employers needed to “provide appropriate facilities and proper time in the workplace for breast-pumping.”²⁶ This statement pressured the federal government, state governments, and companies to create policies and legislation that would support working, breastfeeding mothers. Prior to the AAP’s statement, however, the conversation regarding breastfeeding in the workplace was muted. Very few employers had support programs and policies for workplace lactation and without substantial laws that protected lactating employees most companies were disinclined to implement such programs or policies.²⁷ Additionally, there was not significant research that documented the mutual benefits to employees and employers of lactation-friendly work environments.²⁸ These benefits could include employers reducing turnover, reducing rates of absenteeism, boosting morale and productivity, and reducing health care costs.²⁹ Therefore, the relative ignorance among employers and minimal legal protection unjustly put the onus on working mothers to create their own environments that met their basic needs to breast-pump at work. Feminist scholar Nancy Chodorow



summarized the issue by stating, “The dissatisfactions of contemporary women stems not only from their experience of social inequality, it [also] stems from their continuing sense of unmet...possibilities [and needs] as well.”³⁰ When women returned to work after maternity leave, they often abandoned breastfeeding altogether due to its assumed unfeasibility in a professional setting, or they were forced to breastfeed or pump in the bathroom of their workplace. This contributed to merely 46% of working mothers choosing to breastfeed their infants in the early 1990s.³¹

As a female computer scientist, my mother, courageously entered a male-dominated field in the early 1980s, an era when seeing women in science, technology, engineering and mathematics was extremely rare and hardly encouraged. During her pregnancy and throughout my infancy, my mother worked as a computer programmer and data analyst for a transportation company in Portland, Oregon, a company she described as a “good ol’ boys shop” that mandated a specific dress code for female employees. This dress code required women to wear nylon stockings and dress shoes, which came with the implication that women should only wear high heels. Once she became pregnant, my mother desired to wear more comfortable clothing and footwear, which needed to be approved by her male superiors. Apart from needing to request to wear more comfortable attire, and the overt policing of female employees’ bodies, my mother felt relatively supported at her company during her pregnancy. Overall, she was emotionally and financially prepared to give birth.

The federal mandate for maternity leave in the United States was determined in 1993 with the Family and Medical Leave Act. This legislation required covered employers to provide employees job-protected unpaid leave for qualified medical and family reasons, including pregnancy. This policy allowed employees to take up to twelve work weeks of unpaid leave. Twelve weeks was, and still is, typically considered too little time to properly breastfeed a child, especially when many mothers stopped breastfeeding once they returned to work. In the early nineties, the recommendations of WHO and UNICEF representatives culminated in the Innocenti Declaration on the Protection, Promotion, and Support of Breast-feeding, which defined optimal infant feeding as exclusive breastfeeding from birth through four to six months.³² When it came time for my mother to return to work at the end of her maternity leave she felt anxious and unhappy about being away from me. It also came time to make a decision about continuing to breastfeed or switching to formula feeding.

The pediatrician and lactation consultant my mother conferred with during



my infancy vehemently recommended continuing to breastfeed for *at least* twelve months. After that twelve month period they recommended to continue breastfeeding as long as my mother felt comfortable, and to adopt a “don’t offer, don’t refuse” method for breastfeeding until I no longer desired breast milk. Working mothers during the 1990s often found it difficult to continue breastfeeding once they returned to the workplace because of challenges including inadequate facilities for pumping and storing milk, as well as an insufficient break time for pumping.³³ My mother was aware of the potential inconveniences and lack of resources available to her for breast-pumping at work, but agreed with the medical advice given to her and elected to continue breastfeeding.

My mother’s experience with breast-pumping at work proved to be unnecessarily challenging. At my mother’s company there were no designated lactation rooms and she was forced to pump in the women’s bathroom. To pump in the bathroom my mother also required a chair to take with her and had to formally request to take it with her. In addition to the inconvenience of pumping at her company, my mother was expected to work longer days because extended breaks for breastfeeding mothers were not given at the company and my mother needed to take additional time during her lunch break in order to finishing pumping. Also, women vary in their needs for length and frequency of breaks to breast-pump. Therefore, my mother’s day-to-day working schedule varied widely, which did not allow for a relatively consistent schedule. This would be an annoyance to any working mother, but especially to a sleep-deprived, new working mother still trying to establish a foundation in motherhood. My mother recalled being forced to pump in the bathroom as a “degrading and demeaning experience” and she also loathed the “unsanitary conditions and uncomfortable environment.” As a new mother she feared retribution, specifically losing her job, if she raised any issues with the lack of lactation support at her company. At the time she was working for this company, there were not many women working there, particularly women who were pregnant or had been pregnant, so no one could share in the challenges my mother was facing. Without a suitable support system to raise any concerns to her superiors my mother begrudgingly accepted her situation and attributed it to “the culture of the company and the culture of society.”

Cultural attitudes regarding breastfeeding in the workplace have long been contentious, particularly since the reversion to breastfeeding as the preferential form of nourishment for infants in the late-twentieth century. Some considered breastfeeding or pumping in a public or professional setting to be distasteful, unappealing, and obscene. As a result,



breastfeeding mothers were often subject to harassment, humiliation, ridicule or expulsion,³⁴ which is unfortunately still commonplace in present-day America. When asked what the lack of professional and institutional support for breastfeeding mothers in the workplace represented in society during the 1990s, my mother quickly responded, “It was representative of narrow minded men not giving a damn about women’s rights, not respecting a woman’s right to do what she pleases with her body, and not comprehending the incomparable value in breastfeeding.” At the time of my infancy, my mother recalled breastfeeding and pumping in the workplace, and in public, becoming slightly more socially acceptable, but there was still little social and political discourse surrounding the issue. Legislative intervention could have shifted the national conversation and societal expectations regarding workplace and public breastfeeding, thus normalizing the practice.

The media portrayal of breastfeeding during the 1990s contributed to a further negative understanding and representation, thus fueling the negative cultural attitudes surrounding the practice. As with anything, media outlets had the enormous power and influence to positively sway the public and create a productive conversation about breastfeeding by framing it as healthy and normal. Instead the media reinforced perceptions that breastfeeding was too strenuous for the mother and potentially detrimental to both mother and child.³⁵ A startling representation of breastfeeding was the association of breastfeeding and dead babies. In 1994, the *Wall Street Journal* ran a story “depicting white mothers suffering from ‘insufficient milk syndrome’ and their babies as the victims of a medical establishment that encouraged breastfeeding at all costs.”³⁶ This story alarmed readers and affirmed that the media’s representation of breastfeeding would remain predominately negative. According to my mother, “People were definitely becoming somewhat more attuned to the idea of breastfeeding, particularly breastfeeding in public, but with all of the conflicting information in the news and media at the time, it was difficult for people to know which advice to take. Then, somehow, breastfeeding, one of the most natural bodily functions, became a topic of controversy again and the media was absolutely an instigator of that controversy.” A likely reason breastfeeding was rarely supported or purported as the cultural norm by the media is because breasts in media culture are sexual objects and their main function is to sell sex appeal, not infant nourishment. Because breastfeeding did not fit a profitable narrative, the media usually remained as an unreliable, biased mouthpiece for health education and held a considerable amount of unmitigated power in terms of shaping how the public viewed breastfeeding. This misrepresentation and misinformation significantly



contributed to the negative cultural attitudes that persisted toward breastfeeding at the time.

Although women could have reaped enormous benefits from greater accessibility to designated lactation rooms and stronger institutional support for breastfeeding during the 1990s, potential limitations of a culture reliant on lactation rooms arise. Lactation rooms could be viewed as symbolic enablers of the ignorant cultural attitudes surrounding breastfeeding and insufficient guarantors of labor equality. My mother argued, “Women should never feel constrained by their motherly duties and breastfeeding should be an unimpeded process. So, in my opinion, breastfeeding shouldn’t necessarily have been restricted to designated lactation rooms that were available, not then and not now.” While lactation rooms were preferential to some women for privacy reasons or comfort, to others they reinforced that breastfeeding is indecent and should be kept from public view. Many women, including my mother, who attempted to publicly breastfeed were often told, “Take *that* somewhere more appropriate,” alluding to a bathroom or lactation room. Essentially, a widespread availability of lactation rooms during the 1990s would have been beneficial to many women. Although, to the women who felt no shame or embarrassment from breastfeeding in public, lactation rooms may have been viewed as a means of forcefully concealing them and regulating where women could lactate. For example, those with the singular option of breastfeeding in private could be excluded from participating in a meeting that their non-lactating coworkers could easily attend. The option to breastfeed publicly without being confined to a lactation room would have helped equalize the professional playing field and combat negative notions surrounding breastfeeding.

Since the options for expressing milk in the workplace were limited for my mother and other mothers at the time, they needed to negotiate the intersection of feminized, reproductive labor, such as breastfeeding, and normatively masculinized professional work. My mother ardently believes, “motherhood and professional work should never be in contention with each other and working women shouldn’t sacrifice breastfeeding to succeed at work, or vice versa.” Society consistently juxtaposes professionalism and motherhood, often labeling them as incompatible, but with greater institutional support the two should function harmoniously.

When the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, more commonly known as the “Affordable Care Act” (ACA) or “Obamacare,” was signed into law on March 23, 2010, the federal statute amended Section 7 of the Fair



Labor Standards Act (FLSA). This amendment requires employers to provide “reasonable break time for an employee to express breast milk for her nursing child for one year after the child’s birth each time such employee has need to express the milk.”³⁷ The statute also mandates that employers must provide “a place, other than a bathroom, that is shielded from view and free from intrusion from coworkers and the public.”³⁸ The law only applies to nonexempt (hourly, or those exempt from overtime) employees covered by the FLSA, but if the federal law does not protect a worker they can contact their state or local breastfeeding coalition to determine if state or local law protects them instead.³⁹ While the new break time requirements stipulated by the ACA theoretically helps alleviate some of the undue burdens felt by working mothers, specifically lower-income working mothers, the sizeable gaps in the current federal law leave many women unprotected and vulnerable to workplace discrimination. According to research published in *Women’s Health Issues*, after the ACA’s implementation only 40% of women actually had access to adequate break time and private space despite the law requiring both.⁴⁰ This is primarily enabled by the ACA’s failure to stipulate a penalty for noncompliance.

In an attempt to extend coverage for breastfeeding working mothers, Rep. Carolyn B. Maloney [D-NY-12] and Senator Jeff Merkley [D-OR] introduced an identical bill, entitled Supporting Working Moms Act of 2015 (SWMA), on November 19, 2015 to their respective Chambers of Congress. The SWMA seeks to extend break time coverage for expressing milk to executive, administrative, professional capacity employees, or outside salespersons that are exempt from federal labor laws that limit the number of hours in a workweek.⁴¹ After being introduced the bills were immediately referred to appropriate committees and the House bill was referred to the Subcommittee on Workforce Protections on March 23, 2016. As of December 2016, the House bill had twenty-one cosponsors and the Senate bill had eight cosponsors. Unfortunately, since 2001, there have been seven similar bills introduced prior to the SWMA and all have failed to be enacted in their respective congressional sessions. While this provides little encouragement that more expansive and progressive legislation will be passed in a timely manner, especially with the impending change in administration, this cause never fails to find a political champion, and it will continue to be a cornerstone for workers’ rights and women’s rights activism.

In “We Should All Be Feminists,” Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie argues, “the positions of power and prestige are occupied by men” and the “higher you go the fewer women there are.”⁴² Many social factors play into the consistent



suppression of female advancement, but something as natural as breastfeeding should never be a deterrent for professional participation and never factor into a woman's perceived ability to hold a position of power. If women are to have a family and a career, then the workplace will need to expand its understanding of normal and acceptable practices *and* provide the necessary social infrastructure to support these aspirations. If working women truly desire to "have it all," then let them.

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- ¹ Ostriker, “Kin and Kin: The Poetry of Lucille Clifton,” 1993, 41.
² Lucifer is referred to as “son of the morning” in Isaiah 14:12-15
³ Holladay, *Wild Blessings, The Poetry of Lucille Clifton*, 2004, 131.
⁴ *Ibid.*, 131.
⁵ This is an earlier interview which took place in 1998.
⁶ Hull, “In Her Own Images: Lucille Clifton and the Bible,” 1997, 288.
⁷ Empson, *Milton’s God*, 1965, 13.
⁸ *Ibid.*, 17.
⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.
¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.
¹¹ *Ibid.*, 147.
¹² Fish, *Surprised by Sin*, 1997, 49-53.
¹³ Gross, “Satan and the Romantic Satan: a notebook,” 1988, 318.
¹⁴ Schwartz, *Remembering and Repeating: Biblical Creations in Paradise Lost*, 1988, 54-59.
¹⁵ Fish, 287
¹⁶ Hughes, *Ten Perspectives on Milton*, 1965, 74-77. Hughes is citing A.B. Chambers in parts of this argument.
¹⁷ Empson, *Milton’s God*, 71.
¹⁸ Hull, “In Her,” 291.
¹⁹ Holladay, *Wild Blessings*, 121.
²⁰ Hughes, gloss to 867-868.
²¹ Holladay, *Wild Blessings*, 121.
²² Fish, *Surprised*, 92-3.
²³ *Ibid.*, 104-5
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²⁸ *Ibid.*, 42.
²⁹ “Workplace Accommodations.”
³⁰ Nancy Chodorow, “Mothering, Object-Relations,” 155.
³¹ Donna V. Porter, “Breast-feeding: Impact on Health,” 6.
³² Anne L. Wright and Richard J. Schanler, “The Resurgence of Breastfeeding,” 423.
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³⁷ “Wage and Hour Division (WHD): Break Time for Nursing Mothers,” U.S. Department of Labor.
³⁸ *Ibid.*
³⁹ As of December 2016, twenty-eight states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico have specific laws pertaining to breastfeeding in the workplace. See: <http://www.ncsl.org/research/health/breastfeeding-state-laws.aspx/>.



⁴⁰ Katy B. Kozhimannil, et. al, “Access to Workplace Accommodations,” 6-13.

⁴¹ “S. 2321 — 114th Congress: Supporting Working Moms Act of 2015.”

⁴² Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, “We Should All Be Feminists,” 17.



Three Poems

R.P. Stiles

Wet Laundry

September chases me like an autumn in heat
as I walk home to the welcoming voice
of my air conditioner. But the thermostat
shimmies back up and cradles my irritation
as I see my ex filter his way into my path.

He trails after me like a stream of toilet paper
stuck to a shoe in a smoke-immersed nightclub
and the whole time my ear is falling off
because of his bipolar nonstop chatter
I can miraculously still hear the door
to my apartment unlatch and my a/c breathes
a hello and who the hell is this and why
did you bring him home with you
into my good ear. I roll my eyes,
turn its voice box up because I'd rather
hear its singing than the rattling of my ex.

I'm the park ranger who gives free
guided tours of new apartments
to men who slept with me at least
a year ago, and they will see a new growth
of vegetation rooted in my bedroom.
My clothes slither and coil in their nest,
a delta formed by the spring behind a closet door.

I suffer shamefully from amnesia,
because I can't remember why I left him
half a year ago. He is a baker, his hands
slide along my cookie cutter body,
spreading cream cheese frosting
along the crown of a lemon poppy seed cake.
His cream puff hat falls to the floor
as my crumbs wriggle from the baking sheet.
We molt our outer layers to create a jungle
at our feet and we mock the mess



of knitted cotton endangered habitat.
Our pants open their jaws
and swallow our ankles slowly
as his ship sinks in my bay.

Vignettes Written in 3/4" x 1 1/2" Calendar Slots

1a.

I fall in love at least once a week.
And I wish I could write down
the little things I hear.

2a.

I used to talk about sex with my partners—
usually before the act. I've modified
my standards, and now I have sex
with fat men.

I can't trust those whom I should,
or, I trust them too much.
I trust myself too little
but am afraid to tell anybody.

3a.

My gay friend made out with me at a party.
He was drunk. I pushed him away.
He's a great kisser and I'm
sexually attracted to him,
but I'm afraid of AIDS.

1b.

I've stayed in love with mostly one person
who is no longer in love with me.
He danced with a girl
that I wanted to dance with



and then I found out she's a lesbian.

3b.

I hit on another guy
and he told me to stop it—
his boyfriend would rip my head off.
They're a bi-racial couple
and one lives in New York.

Maybe I was supposed to be gay, too.
Or a guy. I like men too much,
gay ones especially.

Sometimes I feel I want to be sodomized,
but when it gets down to it,
I know I'll back out.
But I'll keep fantasizing
about how good it would feel
if I was with my gay friend.

I can't believe so many people are queer
and I never knew about it. I wish I was
more comfortable with my sexuality.
But I know I have a fucking problem.

1c.

I fell in love with a woman
a month or so ago and I still feel
pangs, but I can't stand her mostly
and I wonder why I don't like her.

4a.

I like glancing over at my classmate's notebook
to see what he's writing down.
Just like me, he's writing a list.
Our class is boring,
but I don't want to seem nosy
and look at what he needs to pack.



I wonder if he'll write down "condoms."

He looked over at my writing
and I probably inspired him to stop
paying attention to the professor,
who's talking about Nietzsche and some
"she," maybe Susan Sontag.
People are laughing at the student
who's a Derrida scholar and honestly
I can't stand his choice of philosophers.
But he danced at the party
and he was pretty good. He surprised me
when he let loose.

5.

I don't like the conditioner I use,
but I don't want to exchange it
for something better.

4b.

My classmate is drinking juice
that claims it's made from Fresh Ripe Fruit.
But I'm mad about the slogan's inaccuracy
because the juice is half carrot and carrots
are vegetables so the company is wrong.
But I like its opaque orange and want to try some
but he won't let me because he has a cold.

6.

Kilts originated in the 16th century.
I'm sure I'll never need to know this bit of trivia
ever in my life, but that's the beauty of grad school.
You learn things you'll never use, but if you know
them, then it makes you that much smarter.

4c.

Now I'm wondering if my classmate is gay



because he wrote on his list, “K. Coles”—
Kenneth Cole shoes.
Maybe he’s just metrosexual.
But he’s a writer too
and that makes me question his sexuality,
although the gay guy from the party
whose boyfriend lives in NY told me
that my classmate is straight and available.
But I’m not interested in him.

2b.

One of the guys I’m sleeping with
comes too quickly. The other guy
I’m having sex with doesn’t come at all
and can last for hours. And another guy
I’m fucking can come on demand.

The Etiquette of Lickery

He never washes his hands after using the bathroom.
He always washes his dick after using me.

She wrote a poem about a guy sucking her toes
and it reminded me of when I got mine sucked

after going home with a guy when the clubs closed
and he put his mouth around my mucky piggies.

Feet are dirty animals, just like butt holes
and if someone likes to put his/her mouth on either,

he/she needs to take a few lessons in hygiene.
A teacher once talked about mice’s mating techniques:

the males sing to the females when they smell her pheromones.
Can’t you imagine mice fucking like Catholics

chirping in octaves like a muted trumpet or flute?
Gathering in the halls, the students decide on a venue



for their margarita-inspired post-late-night-class outing.
There's always one girl who gets totally wasted and gets

a ride home with some random guy who's actually
not so random—everyone knows him from school

and everyone knows their secret, although it was no secret
and the secret was rumored by a jealous onlooking classmate.

Rule of thumb: never use your fingers. A girl can use her own.
She cannot, however, bend far enough to use her own tongue,

nor does she have what it takes to penetrate herself
(battery-operated toys are for pussies, and they're far from the real thing).

Compliment every millimeter of her body, excluding the cellulite.
You see it just as well as she does, even in the dark or the strip-club lights.

Spend as much money as possible on her.
Don't be offended if she leaves you for someone richer.

Always complain if she smells bad or tastes bad or is bad in bed;
you'll save yourself the trouble of her blaming you months later

when she finds out from another guy who leaves on the spot
that you never said anything and let her stay lazy and dirty.

She'll never get over it if you tell her she's not tight,
or, if another girl tells her the same thing.

If she has any piercing, don't complain or take it as a challenge;
she got it to impress you and every other guy she's sleeping with

so tell her how sexy it is and use your tongue
just as you would if she didn't have it.

Always shave or stay trimmed, even during dry spells.
She should do the same. No double standards allowed.

Always keep condoms around for the same reasons
and make sure you have KY, just in case you can't get her wet.



But if her body is not responding, then it is you and yes, you
should be paranoid, because your dick is too small

or your teeth are too crooked or yellow and your
cigarette breath probably turns her off.

Always make noise and let her know what she's doing right.
She'll want to keep you like a mouse and suck you back

while her voice reaches pitches so high the neighbors hear
and you'll need to water her down when you're done

because she's bathing in your profusely emitted sweat.
Always go for another round, and you'll both be set.



Mother of Sorrows

Helmi Ben Meriem

12 March 2016

“Attack! Attack! Attack!”

“Who is saying that? Come from where you are hiding!”

But there was no one with me in my empty apartment.

“Attack! Attack! Attack!”

It was coming from the TV set. But I had turned the voice down. It was only moving pictures. No voices.

“Attack! Attack! Attack!”

“Why do you assume that I want to attack? Just tell me!”

“Attack! Attack! Attack!”

I walked towards the TV set, shut it down and walked back to the sofa where I had been spending the previous days. This was the first night in two weeks where electricity reached this part of Damascus. And the TV set had to be possessed by the demons of war. No need for the company of strangers walking the streets of Damascus or Aleppo telling the world that they can still walk in Syria. A video shown over and over by state-run TV channels. Pure propaganda.

Ali died two months ago in a mortar attack on our holiest site—the Mother of Sorrows, Sitt Zeineb. Ali died holding our son. That day I lost my two special men. The shrine was targeted by Daesh, which has been in control of Hajar Aswad—Dark Stone. Daesh was throwing its hateful dark stones on everyone who dared oppose them. Ali died in the middle of the western courtyard with our son Hussein. They were enjoying the coolness of the floor against the heat of a summer afternoon. They were supposed to do their ablutions and pray the Maghreb prayer inside the mosque. Alas. Ali and Hussein died in the presence of Sitt Zeineb, daughter of Ali and sister of our Hussein and Hassan. They were among the greatest figures of our



sect. An honourable death. At the altar of loyalty and love for our sacred forefathers and foremothers.

That day I lost the last people I call family. My parents passed away long before the war started. I cried when they died. But I am now happy that they did not live to see neighbour turning against neighbour, brother killing brother, neighbour raping neighbour, and Syria turning into ruins. My two brothers died as martyrs of our Motherland. In Idlib they met the viciousness of Turkistani fighters—ones who have come all the way from China to liberate us from our so-called dictator. Syrian blood became cheaper and cheaper.

At times I think that people journey to Syria just so that they can satisfy their animalistic blood thirst.

I cannot forget Ali and Hussein. They were everything in my life. It is true that I did not marry Ali out of love. Our marriage was an arranged marriage, a traditional one. Despite my three degrees in English literature, I could not oppose my parents, I could not disobey them, I could not say 'NO' to them. All the literature I had read. My two theses on feminist readings of Arab-American literature. Liberation, voicing oneself, speaking one's mind. None of all that could stand the test of pleasing my parents. I was not able to put what I had learned into use.

I was in love with someone else back then, someone whom no family member would accept. It was my forbidden fruit. I did not tell anyone about that person. Why would I? In this part of the world, falling in love with the wrong person—what they consider wrong—is sin equal to blasphemy. It will sure hurt those in love with the wrong person. And death can be served on a cold dish of hatred from those one calls family.

25 May 2016

The transportation between Damascus downtown and the suburbs is getting worse. More checkpoints. Rising fees. More dangerous roads. Today the road is under the control of the government. Tomorrow, well, who knows? It could be cut, or occupied by Syrian militants. Or even worse, occupied by non-Syrians, Tunisians are notoriously famous for being sadistic.

I woke up as early as five a.m. praying to Allah that the day passes as peacefully as possible. I went to the kitchen, prepared myself a cup of coffee



and sat in the saloon immersed in my thoughts about the day ahead. Then I went to the bathroom for a quick shower—not really a shower. I was actually wetting a towel in a bucket of water and shampoo and then was passing it over my body. Water only comes once every ten days. Whenever it came, I—and all my neighbours—had to sit on the steps near the main entrance to the building filling buckets and every plastic container with water, fearing that it might not come again.

By half past six, I was walking towards the *servees* station where I got into a shared taxi and headed to Damascus. Before the war, the *servees* used to go through towns that nowadays are ‘enemy territories’. I had friends living there. I have lost touch with them as roads were closed by knife-like roadblocks cutting the veins of life, friendship and communities.

As usual, near Al Rawdha Hotel, we reached the newly-built checkpoint of the National Self-Defence Forces. Amjad, my Sunni neighbour, was there. When he saw me, he came and greeted me. He was all the while checking the identity cards of the other passengers. When he was done with that, he smiled at me and we were back on our way towards Damascus Airport Road. A few minutes later, we were at an army checkpoint—the last one before the *servees*’ tires hit the Airport Road asphalt. Finally, we were going north on the road—the one that everyone wants to control. Eventually, we arrived at the main intersection and the southern gate of Damascus where the main checkpoint was located before entering the Jasmine capital. Everything went smoothly and we were let into the heavily guarded city. When the *servees* was turning left towards Eastern *Ghouta Servees* Station, I asked the driver to drop me off by the Nidhal Club. I walked towards the bus station and was lucky to see the bus pulling by the crowded station.

In half an hour, the bus was driving on 17 April Street named after the day Syria got its independence from France. I, among many other teachers, students and workers, got off the bus in front of Al Assad University Hospital opposite to the Prime Minister’s Offices. There, the Syrian flag was reaching for the sky. Two green stars reminiscent of a lost unity. A much needed unity.

As I stepped on the pavement, I saw the tens of Syrians entering the hospital in hope for a cure or at least some pain killers.

“Why not bring the Prime Minister to the hospital! Maybe make him see the looks on these people’s faces! Maybe then he would work harder!” I thought to myself.



I walked towards the main gate of Damascus University. Walking by the Mezzah Highway, I arrived at the stairs of the Arts Tunnel—the famous tunnel, the one every student of arts and languages knows—and descended into a corridor with printing shops everywhere and vendors selling pens, books, and copybooks. I entered one of the shops and bought four red pens—for starting tomorrow I will be correcting exam papers. I would rather prefer using green pens. Colour of peace and safety. But the dean insists on red pens. Are we not already surrounded by the colour red!?

Once I was done shopping, I headed to the stairs leading back to the surface-level of Mezzah Highway. Suddenly, I stood frozen as my eyes could not miss Salma's eyes. Salma. Have I told you about Salma? I think I did. She was my forbidden fruit. I was her forbidden fruit. As I was frozen in my place, lines of poetry raced through my mind; and hate and mockery surrounding us, and everyone condemning us, and all the preachers threatening us with punishment and hell-fire, we were forever damned!

I stood there on the stairway unable to move forward. Salma stretched out her right hand. Left in mid-air, I was still engrossed in my old memories of her. Memories of stealing kisses in closed classrooms or behind trees in the faculty garden. Memories of us walking hand-in-hand inside and outside the university. Men whistling at us. "Aaala fin yaa helwiin?" they used to say. They never thought that we were together—two women in love. The idea of a woman falling in love with another woman was not something those men thought possible. Every Wednesday, Salma and I used to go to the university dorms where we would spend the afternoon inside the room of our friend Suzanne—a radical socialist and fierce member of the Communist Party. She knew we were together. She used to say: "My two lesbians. Keep the fire of love burning! Do not let it fade!"

Hugging on Suzanne's bed. Two women in love. Kissing passionately. Touching each other's bodies, we got hotter and hotter. We cuddled like two kittens. We took advantage of every minute we had together, for we had to wait a whole week for our next snuggling stolen-time.

Without warning I was brought back to reality when a helicopter flew over our heads, probably on its way to Mezzah Military Airport. For a second I thought it was going to drop its load of bombs on our heads. Fortunately, it did not.

As I was trying to reach for Salma's outstretched hand, several explosions blasted the road and the tunnel. I saw Salma as she was hit by flying pieces



of concrete. She fell to the ground. Blood. Her blood. My Salma's blood. Ambulances rushed to the scene. I was by her side as she took her last breath. Holding her hand, life yet again took another dear person from me.

“Attack! Attack! Attack! Attack! Attack! Attack! Attack! Attack! Attack!”

That moment I realized that it was me who was shouting “Attack! Attack! Attack!”

It was not the TV set. “Attack! Attack! Attack!” I have to defend myself against the barbarity of this war. I know whom to attack. “Attack! Attack! Attack!” For Ali. For Hussein. For my slain brothers. For Salma. “Attack! Attack! Attack!”



“My soul, my mate”

Sam Smith

Called dirty because I
defy the label given to me.
The monster discarded from society,
 quietly.
Oppressed secretly,
Yet so open,
 Bodies
 used
Conditioned to be silent.

Even now after
all
this
time
We are programmed to believe
 we
may never
be treated as him.
That does something to someone
without realizing it.

Funny how women give birth to the world,
Sweet
Kind

 Mother Earth.
She is connected to all things
And demonstrates this
by creating beautiful
experiences
 in nature.

A mother influences a child's progress
Women's powerful attributes
of nurture and love
Are also the same things
used against
Too emotional,
too connected to the tides,
Fighting binaries

Us.



thinking we aren't complete
within our
own
skin.
It takes a change from both of us
to demonstrate equality.

We are not broken
in search of something
Unless we pretend to be



Noelle

By Elizabeth West

I sit at my desk feeling the same way I felt when I was ten years old. I haven't been called a "swirlie" in years. I don't know how to respond to this angry old man. I haven't felt this small since I was a child. I thought that term was outdated. No one says that anymore.

"Sir, if you could please not call my employee names it would be greatly appreciated. Now if you come into my office I'm sure we can get all of this figured out," says Mr. Five, my boss.

I open and shut my mouth, staring at the wall behind the elderly man. I can't believe that just happened. Mr. Five gives me a look and takes the man away from my desk and towards his office. Feeling shocked, I get up and go to the bathroom, locking the door as soon as I slip in. I walk to the sink and look at myself in the mirror. I look at my light brown skin and curly light brown hair. I look at the scar above my eyebrow, remembering how I got it.

*

I look down at my torn up shoes, my tattered skirt, and shirt with holes in it. This isn't the outfit I went to school in, and Mama is gonna whoop me if I come home in these tattered clothes. I look down at the fresh and old bruises that cover the surface of my skin and finger my curl hanging out of my ponytail. Why did my Mama have to fall in love with a white man? And why did she keep me? I'd be better off dead than goin' to school here. Either way, Mama is gonna kill me. I start walking home, keeping my head down in case anyone from my class is around. I would hate for my skin color to offend anyone around me. I turn the corner to go down the road that my house is on, and I see him. John Quinn. He doesn't see me yet, so I hide behind the thorned bush. I close my eyes, knowing that he saw me, hoping he shows mercy that I know he's not capable of. I hear heavy footsteps coming closer; I hold my breath. I hope he just keeps walking. I look bad enough; Mama is already gonna be mad at me. My hair is yanked up, and I'm looking in the eyes of John Quinn.

"What 'er you doin' here, swirlie?" John Quinn asks with his meanest face.

I don't answer. I look down, refusing to answer his questions.



“Where’s yer daddy, girl? Oh yea, he went back with his *white* family, didn’t he?” He says with his meanest smile.

I remain silent. We both know my daddy left my mama.

“You gonna answer me, girl?” He yells.

“No,” I whisper still looking down.

“Is you gettin’ smart with me girl?” He spits in my face.

“No,” I say a little louder. I know I’m gonna get a beating. Maybe if I answer it won’t be so bad.

John Quinn looks at me, and pulls his arms back, punching me so hard in my face that I run into a tree. He keeps hitting me in my face; I can feel the blood trickling down. Maybe if I just lay here, he’ll leave...

John Quinn continues to beat me, from my face to my ribs, to kicking me in the stomach. He finally begins to lose his breath.

“I can’t believe I’m wastin’ my breath on a swirlie like you. You ain’t nothin’ and you won’t ever be nothin’,” John says, still huffing.

I hear him walk away. I wait until I can’t hear his feet or heavy breathing before I try to move. I try to move my arms and legs, but the pain is too much. I try to pull myself up by the tree beside me, but everything around me is spinning and won’t slow down. I slowly sit down, crossing my legs, I look behind me and see the thorned bush is only a few feet away. I pull myself up onto all fours, hoping I could at least crawl home. I’m only three houses down. I just need to keep crawling...

I open my eyes, and I’m lying in my neighbor’s yard. It’s dark outside. I try to get up and end up falling again. I get back on all fours and crawl to my house. I reach up and open the door, crawl inside and shut the door behind me.

“Noelle, is that you, girl? Getcho’ butt in here!” Mama yells at me.

“Yes ma’am,” I say back. I try to pull myself up using the wall and walk to Mama in the living room. She takes one look at me and shakes her head.

“Noelle, where have you been?” She asks.



“In the yard passed out Mama, sorry I’m late. John Quinn saw me walking down the street, and I guess my head wasn’t down enough...” I trail off

“Okay, girl. Go take a shower, and I’ll have some soup waiting for you,” Mama says back.

I go to the bathroom and look at myself in the mirror. I have bruises and blood all over my face. I take off my shirt and see bruises all over my stomach. I turn around to try to look at my back, but I’m too short. I take a shower, and the hot water feels good. I wash my hair, and twigs and leaves fall out as the water flows through. I finish washing my hair and get out, knowing Mama doesn’t want me using all the hot water. I wipe off the mirror and take another look at my face. I have a long, deep gash going from my hairline to the bottom of my eyebrow. It’s still bleeding so I get a couple of the special band aids Mama got me and put it on my face. If I were darker none of these bruises would show up. John Quinn’s words circle through my head. The image of him spitting in my face and calling me a “swirlie” appears. Maybe he’s right. Maybe I won’t ever be anything...

*

I finger my scar and feel the tears running down my face. I take a deep breath, wash my face and leave the bathroom.

“Ms. Johnson, can you step into my office so we can speak please?” Mr. Five says. I hope that old man left. I step into his office and take a look around. I let the breath I was holding go when I notice he is not here.

“Ms. Johnson, do you mind telling me what happened with Mr. Dixie?” He asks.

I look down and take a deep breath. “Well. Mr. Five, Mr. Dixie wanted to withdraw money that was not there. So I tried explaining that to him, and he became angry with me. He started cursing at me and calling me names, names I haven’t heard since I was a child. After he had called me a ‘swirlie,’ you came in and took care of the situation. I am sorry if I did anything wrong, sir,” I say looking down.

“Ms. Johnson, you did not do anything wrong. You did things the same way I would have done it. Some people in these parts have not caught up with the times. I want to apologize on his behalf if he said anything that offended you in any way, shape or form. If you need to, you can take off the rest of the



day. Whatever you need to do, I have no issues with it,” He says, looking upset that the elderly man called me out of my name.

“No sir, it is okay. I would like to continue working. Words don’t hurt me,” I say.

“Okay, well if that’s the case, you are dismissed,” Mr. Five says with a smile on his face. I leave his office and close the door. I sit back down at my desk and look at the picture on my desk of my little girl. She looks just like me, just a little darker. I’m so jealous of my daughter’s dark skin. If I had her beautiful dark skin, I would have never gotten beat up so bad. It’s a shame that her classmates make fun of her; saying she’s too dark and could never be beautiful. I hope she doesn’t grow up to be like me. I’m grateful that my daughter has no physical scars, but words hurt just as bad, and sometimes never heal. This cycle is never ending.



Review. Breeze Harper. 2014. *Scars: A Black Lesbian Experience in Rural White New England*. Sense Publishers.

Corey Wrenn

Dr. Breeze Harper's 2014 novel *Scars: A Black Lesbian Experience in Rural White New England* is a fictional addition to her larger body of work in food justice and Black feminism. Harper is best known for *Sistah Vegan: Black Female Vegans Speak on Food, Identity, Health, and Society* (Lantern, 2010) and is the leading activist-academic on pro-intersectionality praxis in the American vegan movement. Readers will be pleased to find her work offered for the first time in a short, jargon-free, nonacademic style. Both personal and relatable, *Scars* is a semi-autobiographical account of a young Black girl grappling with family trauma, sexuality, and structural oppression.

Although intersectionality theory can be complex concept for young scholars, *Scars* is an engaging read that both entertains and educates. The leading character, Savannah (Savi), is a young college student of color coming of age in a world that seems abrasive and unwelcoming. Uncertain about her future, Savi struggles to understand her past and present through a lens that is gendered and racialized. She does not let this marginalization hold her back. Savi is a hero of critical thinking as she boldly challenges privileged hegemonies she encounters. She courageously speaks out against post-racial ideologies and the micro-aggressions adopted by her more privileged peers, even as her friends and classmates aggressively resist. Savi is a little radical, and readers cannot help but love her for it.

But Savi is not a perfect superhero. She faces many structural barriers regarding her race, class, and sexual orientation. While brave in some situations, she is afraid and vulnerable in others. Here, Harper pulls on her own experiences as a Black youth. A mother of four herself, Harper's fears and hopes for her own children, which she shares candidly on her blog, surface in her characters as well. Savi's experience with racial slurs as a small child (a biographical account of Harper's) is heartbreaking; her brush with a sexual harassment at work brings chills. The debilitating concern for her mother's failing health coupled with the constant burden of bills and cold temperatures of New England reminds readers of the stark realities of difference in America. Savi is a strong Black woman, but not impervious to struggle. This theme is key. Harper, a Buddhist, advocates in her work the need to practice compassion and extend empathy for those resisting and surviving inequality.



There is also something to be said of the tension Savi faces when confronted with her lived oppression. At times, she is scrappy and outspoken, tackling challenges head on. Other times, however, unavoidable confrontation renders her helpless and weak. These contradictions are explored in a relationship Savi navigates with a white male classmate who seeks her counsel as he works to come to terms with his privilege, which stretches Savi's patience across several chapters. Savi's humanity is also evidenced in her struggle to come to grips with her lesbianism and the looming pressure to come out. Rarely does she feel comfortable admitting weakness and accepting help, but sometimes help is forced upon her through conversations with a transgender performer, her disabled single mother, and the music of Nina Simone. Their hardships become Savi's guidance.

The book's primary strength relies in its ability to carefully tackle the intricacies of oppression. Her best friend Davis, who is hearing disabled, often engages his male privilege, and abuses their friendship with near constant pressure for a romantic relationship. Savi also finds difficulty in owning up to her own privilege as a nonvegan and as a Westerner. She learns that the foods she loves to eat are linked with serious social and environmental injustices. Unable to give up these comfort foods, she creates rationalizations to distance herself from culpability, even when the ill effects become personal. She is lactose-intolerant, for instance, but continues to eat animal flesh and balks at the thought of giving up fast food. Here, Harper's theory of food addiction and its relationship with racialized colonial oppression surfaces. In a cruel twist, survivors of colonialism find themselves agents in their own bodily violence, influenced as they are by ideologies of domination that normalize toxic consumption. So, too, do they become agents in systems that colonize others by protecting oppressive commodity chains that terrorize, maim, and kill Nonhuman Animals, immigrant field workers, and third world inhabitants.

No character in *Scars* is perfect as they journey toward a social justice consciousness. This is a hallmark of Harper's theory; she resists cynicism and maintains hope that everyone is a work in progress not regress. Everyone is still learning, and this process is likely without endpoint. Harper is compassionate with her characters and the readers in this regard. There is no judgement, as characters proceed by trial and error. Some errors are left unidentified, suggesting that perfection may not be achievable. For instance, Savi holds true to her heavy use of sexist and ableist language throughout the book, and animal bodies are fetishized as food or clothing by most of the characters with no authorial acknowledgement. Oppression



is never straight forward, and *Scars* pushes readers to embrace these contradictions and discomforts.

Theories of intersectionality can make for heavy or bleak reading, but Harper is careful to identify the goodness and hope alive in the discipline. The characters of *Scars* are willing to learn and teach. Many commit to disrupt violence as best they can within their limited means. No character lives unburdened from some sort of systemic barrier or personal tragedy. Everyone has scars, but everyone also has the potential to heal. *Scars* is appropriate for young people interested in intersectional theory; undergraduate students studying feminism, critical race, and other social justice issues; and seasoned advocates and educators who use fictional interpretations of feminist theory in the classroom. I have assigned this book to my undergraduate Introduction to Gender Studies students who find it much more relatable and comprehensible than the more advanced works of Patricia Hill Collins, Angela Davis, Gloria Anzaldúa, and the like, although these theorists heavily influence Harper's own praxis and mentions of seminal works are peppered throughout the novel.

Full of colloquialisms and even a bit of cursing, *Scars* reads quickly and is not bogged down by heavy theory or dense composition. It is Black feminist fan fiction, an initiatory novel that highlights the works of the authors, activists, and musicians that most influence Harper's own academic career. *Scars* is not written as abstract theory. It is written as real life, and it is palpable to the reader. It is intersectionality in praxis.



END